

*Holy Spaces*  
*A Creative Arts Lenten Retreat*

*Based on Readings from the Revised Common Lectionary*

*Material developed by Joanna Harader*

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## *Introduction*

Welcome to this Creative Arts Lenten retreat. It has been a privilege for me to develop this material, and I look forward to entering into holy space with you as we journey toward the cross . . . and resurrection.

"Holy Spaces" are physical places where we are aware of God's presence with us; moments when our spirits know their connection to the Holy Spirit. I pray that through contemplating the holy spaces in scripture and life, you will find yourself more alive to the holiness that dwells within each place and each moment. I pray that as you use your creative gifts, you will be drawn into deeper relationship with your loving Creator.

In Peace,  
Joanna



### ***Session Schedule***

This retreat is based around the scriptures assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary. Below is a suggested schedule for when to use the material for each session. This is the schedule that I will be using for myself and the emails I send; it allows us to contemplate the scriptures for the *upcoming* Sunday (except for Easter). Feel free to use the materials according to whatever schedule works best for you.

Now-February 22: Session 1, Ash Wednesday  
February 23-February 26: Session 2, Lent 1  
February 27-March 4: Session 3, Lent 2  
March 5-11: Session 4, Lent 3  
March 12-18: Session 5, Lent 4  
March 19-25: Session 6, Lent 5  
March 26-April 1: Session 7, Palm Sunday  
April 2-7: Sessions 8 & 9, Maundy Thursday & Good Friday  
April 8-15: Session 10, Easter

### ***Session Contents***

Each session is designed as a worship service, with a focus on a particular type of holy space. The lectionary texts for the week are listed at the beginning, and you may read them as you wish in the flow of the session. The elements of worship for each session include:

- *Opening Prayer*--The prayers are primarily written using "I;" groups might choose to shift to "we" as they pray together. You are also welcome to use these prayers in your congregational worship. (See title page.)

- *Song Suggestions*--For each week I have listed at least one traditional hymn and one Taizé hymn as options for those who want to include singing in their time of worship. I have chosen traditional hymns that are familiar to me from my Baptist/Methodist/Mennonite church experience. You may think of others that feel more appropriate to you. The Taizé songs come from the book *Songs & Prayers from Taizé*.
- *Scripture Meditation*--You have several options for scripture meditation. This is a place to do the creative prayer experience or the creative writing exercise given for the session. You could also read the scripture reflection material. You might simply choose one or more of the assigned scriptures to read meditatively, perhaps using the practice of lectio divina.
- *Confession of Sin and Assurance of Pardon*--Again, these prayers are written with "I," and can be adapted for group use.
- *Response*--Some sessions include specific ideas for the response time and others do not. You should respond in any way you feel led. You might pray a prayer, make a phone call, send a card, donate money, take a walk . . . maybe even take a nap! What is your encounter with scripture leading you to do right now?
- *Blessing*--Breathe in these words of blessing as you transition from your time of worship to whatever is next for you.
- *Creative Prayer Experience*--There is at least one visual arts project suggested for each session. Needed supplies are listed, and if you ordered the retreat kit, you will have the supplies you need to do all of the suggested projects (minus perhaps scissors and glue).
- *Creative Writing Exercise*--You can use your sketchbook for the writing exercises as well as for artwork. The writing suggestions are a mixture of poetry and prose; some are scriptural explorations while others are more personal. With both the creative prayer and writing exercises, I have tried to give enough guidance to get you started without determining where you end up. Feel free to adapt and go off in any direction that seems good to you and to the Holy Spirit!
- *Reflections*--These are simply a few thoughts that I have about the given scriptures, particularly in relation to our theme of holy spaces.

### ***Suggestions for Use***

This retreat material can be used by individuals or groups, and is adaptable for a variety of meeting frequencies and lengths. Here are a few suggestions to help you consider the way this material might work best for you:

- *Weekend Retreat (group or individual)*--You could use one or more sessions to develop a plan for a weekend retreat. For example, you could use one session on Friday night, one on Saturday morning, and another on Saturday afternoon. Worship time could be communal with plenty of quiet time for individuals to work on the creative projects as they desire.
- *Weekly Group Meetings*--You could go through the order of worship together, allowing at least half an hour of individual play time for group members to work on the creative prayer or writing exercise. The response time at the end could involve people sharing their creations.

- *Weekly Individual Spiritual Practice*--Set aside at least a one hour block each week to read the scriptures, pray through the worship service, and engage in whichever creative exercise most appeals to you.
- *Daily (or multiple times a week) Individual Spiritual Practice*--You can repeat the order of worship for that week's session as many times as you like, doing something different for the "Scripture Meditation" each time.

However you use the material, I encourage you to set aside a specific place and time for engaging in the retreat practices. Allow yourself to rest in God's presence before you begin the opening prayer. Offer the prayers slowly and meditatively. You may find you want to repeat a prayer or scripture reading more than once to allow the words to settle into you.

### ***Online Support***

Each Monday, you will receive an email newsletter with a brief note of encouragement and a list of links to helpful internet pages. When available, I will provide links to recordings of the suggested hymns. I may also include links to other material that relates to the themes and/or activities of the current session.

I have also set up a private Facebook group in which you can participate as much or as little as you like. Only other retreat participants will be able to view posts to this group. You are welcome to share insights, pictures of your artwork, questions, and whatever else comes up along the way. (To join this group, you can "friend" me--Joanna Harader--and I will add you; or you can find "Creative Arts Lenten Retreat" **group**, and click the "join group" box at the top of the page.

In addition, you are welcome to email me directly with any insights, questions, or struggles that come up for you during the retreat: [jharader@gmail.com](mailto:jharader@gmail.com).

## *Session 1: Ash Wednesday*

### *Holy Space~Humility*

Scriptures: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10;  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

#### **Prayer of Releasing** (*sit in a comfortable position; pray slowly*)

Holy, holy, holy God,  
I place myself in your presence.  
I rest in the promise of your grace.  
My mind and my spirit are cluttered;  
My attention is tugged, tugged away from you.  
Let me unclench my fists and release these things:  
(*you may hold your hands open, palms up*)  
I release all that I have done recently--whether for good or for ill.  
I release all that I feel like I should have done, but did not do.  
I release all that I need to do soon.  
I release my fear.  
I release my anxiety.  
I release my impatience.  
I release my pride.  
Everything that pulls me away from you, O God, I release.  
(*Allow some silence; offer to God any specific concerns that threaten to pull your attention away from God's presence; when you have released what you need to release, place your hands on your heart and continue the prayer.*)  
Holy One, fill me now with the joy and the peace of your deep, abiding presence.  
I offer all of myself to you, my One God: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Amen

#### **Scripture Meditation** (see introduction)

#### **Prayer of Confession** (*using Psalm 51:10-12*)

God of Compassion,  
I turn toward you now. I rend my heart.  
Forgive my pride and forgive my insecurities.  
Forgive my self-absorption and forgive my self-destruction.  
Forgive my doubts and forgive my confidence.  
Forgive my longing for attention and forgive my desire to hide.  
Forgive each step I take away from you.  
"Create in me a clean heart, O God. And renew a right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence. Do not take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of my salvation, and grant a willing spirit to sustain me."

**Assurance of Pardon** (using 2 Corinthians 6:2)

God says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" You are in a holy space, this place where you know that in Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. May the peace of Christ be with you.

**Song Suggestions**

Amazing Grace (Newton)

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing (Robinson/Wyeth)

Taizé~Kyrie: 4, 5, 6; Nothing can Trouble: 29

**Response** (see Creative Prayer Experience below)

**Blessing** (from Psalm 51:10-12)

God welcomes you into the Holy Presence. God fills you with the Holy Spirit. May you live into the joy of your salvation. May your spirit be willing to inhabit each holy space that you enter. Amen.



**Creative Prayer Experience**

*You will need: a piece of paper, glue or Modge Podge, foam brush, collage materials, scissors, colored pencils or pastels.*

The Hebrew Scripture readings for Ash Wednesday have a lot of "heart" language. Joel tells us to rend our hearts and not our clothing. The psalmist writes: "teach me wisdom in my secret heart;" "create in me a clean heart, O God;" "the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." If the imagery of the heart seems a bit trite right on the heels of Valentine's Day, it is good to remember that the Hebrew term used for heart literally translates as "gut." We're talking here about the deepest place inside you.

In your sketch book or on a sheet of card stock, create a collage that represents what is inside your heart--or your gut--right now. Note that if you create the collage on a page from your sketch book, you can glue the collage onto the cover of the sketch book if you like.

In creating the collage, you can use pictures, words, and shapes. You can create your own images and/or use images from the collage material provided and any other collage materials you might have. The ModgePodge works well for creating collages. Use the foam brush to apply it as a glue and to cover the entire project when complete as a sealer. It will dry clear.

On this Lenten journey, we seek to be in a holy space; a space where we are aware of our connection to God. Choose a dark colored pencil or pastel and use it to circle, shade, or otherwise indicate that stuff in your heart that keeps you from inhabiting holy

space. Use a light colored pencil or pastel to highlight the stuff that helps draw you into holy space.

*Response suggestion:* Choose one dark part of your heart to try to diminish this week and/or choose a light part of your heart to nurture.

### **Creative Writing Exercise**

Consider the list Paul gives us in 2 Corinthians 6:4-10:

" . . . through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

Which of these phrases grabs you? Write about a time when you have remained in a holy space despite afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, or hunger. . . despite dishonor, ill repute, disrespect, death, punishment, sorrow, or poverty. Or, if you prefer, write a short story about a fictional character who perseveres through struggles.

### **Reflection**

We begin our Lenten journey into holy spaces with the observance of Ash Wednesday; with a reminder that we come from dust and we will return to dust. The black smudge on your forehead. The ashy grit under your fingernails. It is a holy space, yes. And an uncomfortable space.

To receive the words into your heart and the symbol onto your flesh requires a deep humility: "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." Surely there are many freedoms we enjoy in between our time as dust; many ways we can exercise choice and initiative and even a bit of control over our lives. Ultimately, though, it all comes back to dust.

One of my most poignant moments as a pastor came a couple of years ago during an Ash Wednesday service. I was offering the imposition of ashes. Sketching the black crosses onto the offered foreheads as those who came forward pulled their hair out of the way and bent towards me. "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." I spoke the words to each person.

Then I looked up and saw my 12-year-old daughter. Suddenly the ashes were heavy and hot on my fingers. The words stung and stuck in my mouth. I did not want to say them. I did not want them to be true. Not for her. But I did say them because they are true.

The words are true and good and right. But it takes humility to trust God's truth and God's love over our own. Trusting God takes a humility, a relinquishment of control, that can prove very hard for a mother, for a pastor, for a lover, for a deep friend.

Humility is difficult, and it is necessary if we hope to inhabit a holy space. If our own ego--our own pride, our own sense of self, our need to be the one in control--is too big, there is not room for God. If our focus is on ourselves, we will miss seeing God's presence around us and within others.

The readings from Joel and the Psalms indicate the human need for confession and repentance. They happen in that order. First we must admit to the sin our lives. Name it within ourselves and before God. Then we are able to receive God's grace; to turn from our sin toward God.

For Joel, this call for confession and repentance is communal. The faith community as a whole has turned from God. The people are called to come together; to confess their sins together; to fast and weep and mourn; to turn together toward God. The psalmist's plea is more personal: "Have mercy on *me* O God." As we enter into Lent and confess our sins, it is important that we consider both individual and corporate sin. It is important that we humble ourselves not just as individuals, but also as families and churches and communities.

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6 urges humility in our religious practices. We should not give money or offer prayers as a way to show other people how spiritual we are. This is a good lesson to hear at the beginning of Lent, because this is a season when there is an emphasis placed on spiritual practices. Many people give things up for Lent or they take things on--like this retreat. And there are appropriate times and places to share about our spiritual commitments as a way of encouraging others and receiving encouragement for ourselves.

There is also a danger of turning Lenten practices into a sort of spiritual Olympics: "The bronze goes to Fred for giving up red meat. The silver goes to Susan for giving up Facebook. And the gold medal for Lenten deprivation goes to Mary who gave up caffeine--including coffee and chocolate!"

The reward for our spiritual practices comes from God, not from other people. We give things up or take things on in order to be more aware of God's presence in our lives--not so that other people will think that God is more present with us than with them. One of the reasons I like the term "spiritual practice" so much is the sense of privacy that it invokes. You do not practice in front of an audience. You practice by yourself, or with a gifted teacher, or with a group of other people who are trying to master the same skill. We all need a lot of spiritual practice. There is very seldom a call for spiritual performance.

So if giving up caffeine increases your awareness of God's presence in your life, by all means deprive yourself of chocolate for forty days. Just don't expect a medal. Instead, expect an encounter with God; the God who knows you deeply; the God who loves you deeply; the God who dwells within you and around you, whether you recognize this space you inhabit as holy or not.



## *Session 2: Lent 1*

### *Holy Space~The Waters of Baptism*

Scriptures: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

#### **Opening Prayer**

Creator of pond and ocean, brook and river, drizzle and downpour,  
I seek your presence because of your promises,  
Promises made with water and Word:  
The bow in the clouds--a promise of protection;  
The voice from the heavens--a promise of salvation.  
So I come to you with confidence,  
Not because of what I have done,  
But because of who I am--your beloved child,  
Washed in the baptismal waters  
And brought to you through Jesus Christ. Amen.

#### **Song Suggestions**

Wade in the Water (spiritual)  
Rain down (Cortez)  
Taizé: Ubi Caritas 49

#### **Scripture Meditation**

##### **Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Pardon**

Holy, living, loving God,  
Where sin has soiled my soul, . . . wash me clean. . . .  
Where my spirit is dry and brittle, . . . rain down your life-giving waters. . . .  
I humble myself before you, O God.  
Teach me your way of steadfast love.  
To you I lift up my soul.  
In you I trust.  
I trust in your promise through water and word--  
In Jesus Christ my sins are forgiven,  
My life is saved.  
Thanks be to you, now and forever.  
Amen.

#### **Response Suggestion**

In your journal, write out a brief statement of the promises you made at your baptism or confirmation. Prayerfully consider if these are promises you still wish to uphold. If so, sign your name and write the date on the journal page.

## **Blessing**

Do not fear flood or drought, but remember the waters of baptism. Through these waters God cleanses you, God claims you as beloved child. Amen.



## **Creative Prayer Experience**

*You will need a sketch book and colored pencils or pastels.*

*Old Testament Reading:* On a page in your sketch journal, draw a rainbow with colored pencils or pastels. As you apply color to paper, you can think about what it means to be in a covenant relationship with God: *How have you seen God's faithfulness? When have you doubted God's faithfulness? In what ways have you upheld your part of the covenant? In what ways have you broken promises?* You can include words or phrases from your musings as part of your rainbow picture if you wish.

*Gospel Reading:* The Gospel of Mark is the shortest, most abrupt of all of the Gospels. Within the span of seven verses we see Jesus baptized in the Jordan river, tempted in the wilderness, and preaching in Galilee. Jesus inhabited many different types of spaces, each of them holy because he was there. It is comforting to think that whatever type of space you find yourself in, God can inhabit that space with you.

In your sketch journal, draw a scene that represents a space you inhabit. Maybe the river, the wilderness, or the town of the scripture feel like a space that you inhabit right now. Or maybe you want to sketch your house, your office, or the room that you are sitting in right now. The point is not to draw a life-like scene, but to get down on paper the sense of a space that is significant for you. Once you have drawn the scene, place yourself in that space; then, somehow, indicate God's presence in that space as well.

## **Creative Writing Exercise**

Choose six words related to baptism. Use these words as a basis for a poem. You can write a free form poem, or perhaps use the words to inspire a few haikus. (A haiku is a 3-line poem where the first line has five syllables, the second line has 7 syllables, and the third line has 5 syllables.)

If you love a poetic challenge, try writing a sestina. A sestina consists of six stanzas with six lines each and one final stanza of three lines. The same six words serve as the final words in each line for every stanza--with the exception of the last stanza where each of the three lines contains two of the "end words." The order of the end words in each six-line stanza is as follows: ABCDEF; FAEBDC; CFDABE; ECBFAD; DEACFB; BDFECA.

This poetic form is challenging and will push you to consider your end words in fresh ways. I will send out internet links to one or two examples of this type of poem with the email for the first week of Lent.

## Reflection

When I was in college, I spent some time with my future husband and his family at their lake house in Illinois. One day they got out the boat and the water skis--and I was a little worried. I'm not particularly athletic, and I had never skied before. But somehow I seemed to have a knack for staying up on the skis. And I loved it. I loved sitting in the water behind the boat, leaning back onto my life jacket, legs out, skis sticking up from the water. I loved the tug on the rope as the boat took off. I loved skimming and bumping along the surface of the water. I loved it until I lost my balance and hit the water. This water that I thought was fluid and warm had somehow turned solid, hard. My neck ached for a week and I never again looked at water quite the same way.

We all know, of course, that water can be destructive and life-giving. We've seen floods and droughts. We've, unfortunately, heard of waterboarding, and we know people can die of thirst. This ambiguity is part of what makes the water imagery in the Bible so powerful. Images of flood and wells; water from the rock and storms at sea.

I think it's no coincidence that this ambiguous, powerful, image of water is at the heart of baptism. While baptism is a symbol of forgiveness and new life, we also know that questions surrounding baptism have divided the church through the ages. As a Mennonite, I hear stories of my ancestors in the faith being executed for refusing to allow their children to be baptized. And I hear stories of arguments within my own tradition about *how* to baptize. I nearly created a scandal when I brought in a large tub and baptized two people by immersion. Distinct lines are drawn between those who sprinkle, those who dunk, and those who pour. (At least those traditions that practice infant baptism generally agree that sprinkling is the appropriate method of baptizing babies.) How is it that this symbol of Christian commitment and unity has been so divisive?

The ambiguity extends to the personal level as well. Through baptism we find freedom in Christ, yet it is a freedom that confines. In her book *The Soul Tells a Story*, Vinita Hampton Wright notes that as baptized believers we commit to living within certain parameters. For writers and visual artists and actors and musicians, our baptismal commitments mean that we will not write or paint or act or sing just anything. The limits for artists aren't as clear and harsh as some Christians suggest, but they are there. Our commitments to follow Christ push us to create in ways that nurture rather than degrade life; in ways that lift up rather than tear down other people.

The paradoxes within baptism (or confirmation) are many. We are at once freed and bound. We make a deeply personal decision that connects us in often uncomfortable ways to a whole bunch of people around the world. We humble ourselves and accept our identity as a beloved of the Holy One. We promise to walk a life path that we can barely begin to understand.

The space of baptism is indeed a holy space. And it is not a comfortable space. This is an important realization for me. Sometimes I imagine that a holy space will be calm and beautiful--like Monet's garden or a mountaintop monastery. When I find myself--as I often do--in places of ambiguity and discomfort, I often do not even consider that maybe these spaces, too, are holy. Maybe my life is pushed most abruptly up against the Divine in these places of tension and uncertainty.

It is the tension, of course, that allows the rope to pull us along behind the boat. It is the uncertainty of our balance that keeps us paying attention.

## *Session 3: Lent 2*

### *Holy Space~Covenant*

Scripture: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

#### **Opening Prayer**

O God,  
In this time, in this place, I reach out to you.  
I who am named \_\_\_\_\_;  
I who am called \_\_\_\_\_ (*i.e. daughter, mother, wife, sister, pastor . . .*)  
I offer all of myself to you--  
All of what I am; all of who I am--  
And I receive my identity as your beloved child.  
You who are named Yahweh.  
You who are called Father, Son, Holy Spirit,  
Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer,  
Mother, Savior, Breath of Life,  
(*add other names for God that are meaningful for you*)  
Holy One. . . .  
May I know your presence with me now in this holy space. Amen.

#### **Song Suggestions**

Obey My Voice (Nowacki)  
Standing on the Promises (Carter)  
Taizé: Bless the Lord 9

#### **Scripture meditation**

#### **Prayer of Confession**

God, I humble myself now in confession:  
I want to be a follower of Jesus,  
but I do not always want to follow Jesus.  
I don't even want to listen when the conversation turns toward darkness and death.  
I am eager to put down my cross  
so I can be free to grasp at worldly rewards.  
I cling tightly to my life. . . .  
Holy and loving God, forgive all of my thoughts and actions  
that would protect me from the path of Christ.

#### **Assurance of Pardon** (*using Matthew 11:30*)

As you take up the cross, know the truth that Jesus spoke: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Know the deep promise of God: in Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Amen.

**Response Suggestion:** Offer to God a promise that you feel called to make this day.

**Blessing** (*using Romans 4:17*)

Go now to serve the God who calls you and names you and keeps the Divine promises. Take up your cross with joy. Live in this world with confidence. For you are a child of the Holy One, the One who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist. Amen.



**Creative Prayer Experience**

*You will need a piece of brown paper; pen, colored pencils, or pastels; collage materials if desired.*

Cut or tear a cross shape from the piece of brown card stock. On one side of the cross, write, draw, or collage the burdens that you feel you are carrying. On the other side of the cross, write, draw, or collage the promises of God that will support you as you bear those burdens. As you create, offer your burdens to God; receive God's promises with joy.

**Creative Writing Exercise**

Write a scene parallel to the one found in the reading from Genesis 17, placing yourself in the place of Abram:

"When           (name)           was        years old, the Lord appeared to           (name)          , and said to her/him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you. . . . Then           (name)           fell on her/his face; and God said to her/him: "

What would God say to you today? What new name would God give to you?

**Reflection**

As spiritual descendants of Abraham and Sarah and as followers of Jesus, we live within the holy space of covenant--of God's promises to us and our promises to God. It might seem on the surface that this holy space of covenant is restrictive. We cannot step outside the boundary of the covenant. We must be careful of what we say, what we do. But Paul argues in Romans that the covenant is actually spacious, freeing. When we live within the covenant, we live according to faith and not according to law. We live within the comfort of grace and not the fear of punishment.

It is by our faith and through the grace of God that we claim our identity within the holy space of covenant. God gives Abram and Sarai new names to reflect their new identity when they accept the promises of God for their lives. I love that Sarai becomes Sarah-- "princess." She is the daughter of the sovereign God. Her name change is a reminder that we find our true identity as children of God.

Ours is a culture more accustomed to contracts than covenants. The covenant

agreement most familiar to us is probably marriage. When we marry someone, we make and receive promises. In the marriage covenant, both partners promise to be sexually faithful to each other, to care for each other, to love each other, to live life together. As anyone who has been through divorce knows, there is certainly a legal, contractual, aspect to marriage. But the heart of the marriage is the promises that we make. And in making these promises we take on a new identity as the wife or husband of our beloved. Sometimes there is a name change involved as well.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we receive the cross as the ultimate symbol of our covenant relationship with God. The cross marks the center of the holy space where we dwell within the promises God has made to us; where we are called to make promises in return.

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus predicts his suffering, death, and resurrection. This suffering and death are manifestations of God's deep and abiding love for us; God's passion for being in intimate relationship with us. The resurrection confirms God's promise of eternal life.

Yes, taking up the cross does place some limits on what we will do. The cross does not fit through the threshold of selfish pursuits, hateful attitudes, destructive actions. If we want to go through certain doorways, we will have to lay the cross down.

Yet in picking up the cross, we follow the way of Jesus. We take life seriously and hold it loosely. We focus on other people, not just ourselves. We commit ourselves to truth, however inconvenient. In taking up the cross, we make a deep promise to God.

And in taking up the cross, we receive the promises of God: abiding love, relationship, abundant and eternal life. We stand, with our crosses, in a truly holy space of Divine covenant.

*Session 4: Lent 3*  
*Holy Spaces~The Mountain and The Temple*

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

**Opening Prayer**

*As you begin your time of worship today, read aloud the words from Psalm 19:14. Read slowly, meditatively, pausing between each translation.*

Let the words of my mouth  
and the meditations of my heart  
be pleasing to you,  
LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (CEB)

May the words from my mouth and the thoughts from my heart  
be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my defender. (GW)

And the speeches of my mouth shall be *such*, that they please; and the thinking of  
mine heart *is* ever[more] in thy sight. Lord, mine helper; and mine again-buyer.  
(Wycliffe)

Let my words and my thoughts  
be pleasing to you, LORD,  
because you are my mighty rock and my protector. (CEV)

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy  
sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer. (KJV)

May my words and thoughts please you.  
LORD, you are my Rock—the one who rescues me. (ERV)

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart  
be pleasing in your sight,  
LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. (NIV)

Let the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be pleasing in Your eyes,  
O Lord, my Rock and the One Who saves me. (NLV)

These are the words in my mouth;  
these are what I chew on and pray.  
Accept them when I place them  
on the morning altar,  
O God, my Altar-Rock,  
God, Priest-of-My-Altar. (Message)

## **Song Suggestions**

Holy, Holy, Holy (Heber)  
Taizé: My soul is at rest 38

## **Scripture Meditation**

### **Prayer of Confession**

Have mercy on me, O God.  
You draw me to holy spaces,  
and I fail to look for you.  
You speak to me holy words,  
and I fail to listen for you.  
In Jesus, you walk the path of life before me,  
and I fail to follow.

### **Assurance of Pardon** (*from 1 Corinthians 1:18*)

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to **you** who are being saved, it is the power of God." So dwell in peace, knowing that you are forgiven.

### **Response Suggestion**

Commit yourself to setting aside a sacred space--in place or in time--that you will enjoy for the remainder of Lent. If you wish to create a sacred *place*, perhaps you will create a prayer corner in your home or simply place a sacred marker in an already beloved spot--indoors or out. Maybe you feel led to commit to spending sacred time. What would sabbath look like for you? How can you honor the 4th commandment?

### **Blessing** (*from Psalm 19*)

As you go forth to live within the loving law of our God:  
May your soul be revived;  
May your foolishness be wisdom;  
May your heart rejoice;  
May your eyes be enlightened.  
And may Christ, the power of God, go with you.



### **Creative Prayer Experience**

*You will need clay.*

Think about aspects of the Church that seem to go against God's teachings through Christ. Use the clay to mold one or more shapes that represent for you some of the defiling elements of the Church.



Now consider those aspects of the Church--as it is or as you imagine it could be--that honor the will of God as shared through Christ. Transform each of the defiling elements into something holy and life-giving by remolding the clay into new shapes.

### **Creative Writing Exercise**

Read Exodus 20:1-17 and re-write the ten commandments in your own words. Prayerfully choose one commandment that seems most compelling to you and write a letter to God about that particular commandment. How do you understand it? How do you live it--or not? What challenge does this commandment present? What promises does it hold?

### **Reflection**

In the Celtic spiritual tradition, people refer to "thin places"--spaces where the veil between the Divine and the earthly is especially thin; places where you can easily have a sense of the holy, a feeling of connection to God. There are places commonly recognized as thin, as holy. The places where Jesus is said to have been born and to have died. Places where our ancestors in the faith are buried. Magnificent cathedrals. Ancient forests. People seek out such places. They embark on pilgrimages to experience these sacred spaces.

Certainly one place noted as holy is Mt. Sinai. In this week's scripture from Exodus, Moses is on this mountain for the express purpose of talking with God. And in Jesus' day, the Temple was *the* place to go if you wanted to connect with God. Both Sinai and the Temple were places supposed to facilitate Divine-human interaction. So it seems ironic that in the readings from Exodus and John this week, these supposedly holy places are actually sites where the people separate themselves from God and God's will.

As Moses receives the commandments on the mountain, the people waiting below witness "thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking." God has drawn near, and the people are scared. They say to Moses, "You speak to us and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Mt. Siani proves so "thin" that people run in the opposite direction.

In Jesus' day, some people did not take the presence of God in the Temple seriously enough. They had lost the holy fear of encountering the Divine and instead had commodified the sacred space of the Temple. They tried to sell access to God, charging exorbitant rates for sacrificial animals and currency exchanges. Jesus boils over with anger when he sees the sacred space profaned by the merchants who exploit the people's longing for connection to God.

The Bible affirms the existence of sacred places, the idea of holy ground. Yet is also cautions that it is not the place itself that is holy--it is the Divine presence in the place. The scriptures affirm the omnipresence of God, the potential for us to experience anywhere, everywhere, as a thin place. Psalm 19 proclaims that the heavens and the firmament declare the glory of God; "their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." The poet of Psalm 139 asks the beautiful, rhetorical question: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" In the words of one of my favorite benedictions: We cannot go where God is not.

Beyond thinking about holy places, the ten commandments also suggest to us the

concept of holy time. "Remember the sabbath and keep it holy." There is one day a week set aside for honoring God through rest and worship. In my life, it often feels like holy spaces in *time* are more difficult to come by than holy spaces in *place*.

Whether we are considering holy place or holy time, we hold in balance the truths of scripture and the truths we experience in life. There are certain places, certain times, when God seems particularly close, where the veil between heaven and earth appears especially thin. We must honor and protect these spaces, making sure they are not defiled.

And yet it is also true that God is present everywhere, at all times. We do not need to wait until Sunday or travel to a different place in order to connect with our Creator. God can and does speak in a myriad of places, and our ears and hearts must be always open.

## *Session 5: Lent 4*

### *Holy Space~Wilderness*

Scriptures: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

#### **Call to Worship** *(can be read individually or responsively)*

When I am lost in the wilderness,  
*God's steadfast love endures forever.*  
When I complain about my problems,  
*God's steadfast love endures forever.*  
When I ignore abundant provisions,  
*God's steadfast love endures forever.*  
When I sneak around in the dark,  
*God's steadfast love endures forever.*  
When questions loom and faith falters,  
*God's steadfast love endures forever.*  
In this time of worship, God, may I release my failures and rest in your love.  
Amen.

#### **Song Suggestions**

Lead on O Cloud of Presence (Duck)  
Taizé song: Our darkness 14

#### **Scripture Meditation**

##### **Prayer of Confession** *(from Ephesians 2:1-3; Message version)*

God of the wilderness; God of the cross,  
Sometimes I feel mired in the stagnant life of sin.  
I let the world tell me how to live.  
I fill my lungs with polluted unbelief  
and I exhale disobedience.  
I do what I feel like doing, when I feel like doing it.  
Forgive me, O God, and restore my life. . . .

##### **Assurance of Pardon** *(from Ephesians 2:4-5; Message version)*

In immense mercy and with an incredible love, God embraces you. God takes your sin-dead life and makes you alive in Christ!

#### **Response Suggestion**

Make a monetary and/or time donation to an organization that serves people in wilderness places: foster children, pregnant teenagers, people in poverty, people living in conflict zones, people with various types of injuries and illnesses . . .

## **Blessing**

Go forth to live in the light of Christ's salvation. Whether you wander in the wilderness or rest safely at home, know that God's steadfast love surrounds you always. Amen.



## **Creative Prayer Experience**

*You will need colored pencils or pastels. For the "challenge project" you will need a sturdy piece of cardboard or matte board, an internet connection, a pencil, colors/markers, and Crystal Effects or fabric paint (Elmer's glue will do in a pinch).*

There is a double finger labyrinth on page 21. You might like to decorate the labyrinth page with your colored pencils or pastels. Alternately, you could color in the paths as you "walk" them.

If you are feeling ambitious, the "challenge project" is to draw your own labyrinth on a piece of heavy cardboard or matte board. Trace over the lines with a marker and decorate the labyrinth as you wish. For a textured effect, trace the lines with Crystal Effects, fabric paint, or glue. Allow to dry.

There are many ways to use a finger labyrinth. In general, you place a finger at the entrance and trace the path through to the center and then back out. With a double labyrinth, you can use both hands at the same time. Remember that a labyrinth is not a maze. There are no wrong turns. As your finger traces the path, settle into God's presence. Offer to God whatever prayers you wish.

*A suggestion: As you move toward the center of the labyrinth, offer your burdens to God. What aspects of your life feel like wilderness? How do you feel lost? Who do you know that needs God's healing, God's guidance, in their life? When you get to the center, rest in God's presence. As you move back toward the entrance/exit of the labyrinth, give thanks for the many ways you have experienced God's healing, deliverance, and salvation. What in your life brings you joy? What relationships do you celebrate? Rejoice in God's life-giving love through Jesus.*

## **Creative Writing Exercise**

Psalm 107 assures us that God's "steadfast love endures forever;" God saves, heals, and delivers people from the deadly consequences of sin. Free write for at least five minutes about the ways you have witnessed and/or experienced God's salvation, healing, and deliverance. (Free writing means that you just keep writing without self-editing or judging your words. If you can't think of anything, write: "I can't think of anything to write.")

At the end of Psalm 107, the psalmist urges us to tell of God's deeds with songs of joy. As a challenge exercise, use your free writing as inspiration for a song about God's steadfast love. If you, like me, don't know how to compose music, write words to fit a familiar hymn tune.

## Reflection

I am notoriously bad with directions. My ability to get lost has amazed and astounded my friends throughout the years. Some of them have found out the hard way that just because I've been somewhere before does not mean I know how to get there again. For that matter, just because I've gotten somewhere does not mean I know how to get back to where I started.

Once, as a high school student, I went to some sort of nature trail with my youth group. Somehow a friend and I managed to get lost *on the nature trail*. We knew that the other group members could not be far away. We knew that we were close, oh so close, to a marked trail. And yet there we stood in the middle of a Kansas prairie, unable to see anything but tall grass and distant tree lines. And even though we *knew* we couldn't really be that lost, even though there was no real danger of harm, panic began to set in.

That's the thing about wilderness. It is a frightening space whether it's actually dangerous or not. Wilderness is a sort of anti-space where we can't figure out where we are in relationship to anything that we know. As the ancient Israelites could attest, even a miserable place can seem preferable to this no-place, this unknowing space.

In the midst of the physical wilderness, this lack of direction for forty years, the Israelites also experienced a spiritual wilderness. They could not figure out who they were in relationship to those things that they knew most intimately--particularly, they couldn't figure out their relationship to God. They praised God and then cursed God. They asked Moses to receive a message from God on their behalf and then they proceeded to make their own god out of melted jewelry.

Where was God? What was God like? How were they supposed to be in relationship with God? And what did their covenant with Yahweh mean for their relationships with each other? In this week's brief story from Numbers, we see God portrayed as provider and denier; as murderer and savior. The ancient Israelites did not know where they stood--literally or figuratively.

Centuries later, we have another Jewish wanderer named Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee who comes to Jesus by night. Since this story is in John's Gospel, we can be pretty sure that "night" here does not refer merely to the time of day--there is spiritual darkness in his life. Nicodemus is looking for a path, a sign, anything to show him where he stands in relation to God. And apparently he thinks that Jesus can help him get his bearings.

In the song "Hard to Get," Rich Mullins cries out to God: "I can't see where you're leading me unless you've led me here, where I'm lost enough to let myself be led."

That is the holiness of the wilderness spaces in which we find ourselves. When all we can see is sand or prairie grass; when there is nothing familiar, nothing comfortable; when no directions seem right but none seem necessarily wrong either; when we are utterly and absolutely lost, we might wander for awhile. We might walk in circles for days, or years, or decades. Eventually, though, by God's grace, and out of sheer exhaustion, we will let ourselves be led.

Eventually we will rest in God's steadfast love.



## *Session 6: Lent 5*

### *Holy Space~Heart*

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12 (also Ash Wednesday); Hebrews 5:5-10;  
John 12:20-33

#### **Opening prayer**

Holy One,  
Dwell within me;  
Whisper in my ear;  
Glimmer in my vision;  
Write upon my heart.

I wait with  
ears, eyes, heart  
open.

Amen

#### **Song Suggestions**

Obey My Voice (Nowacki)  
Taizé: Kyrie 4, 5, 6; In God alone 19; Nothing can trouble 29

#### **Scripture Meditation**

##### **Prayer of Confession**

Holy Author of Life,  
So many people have written on my heart--  
The texts of so many projects,  
Words of worry,  
Scribbles in anger,  
Doodles in boredom.  
My heart is heavy with the writings.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
So that only your law,  
written in your hand,  
remains inscribed on my inmost part.

##### **Assurance of Pardon** (*from Jeremiah 31:34*)

Hear the promise of God: "They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

#### **Response**

## **Blessing**

May your heart rejoice to live within the holy space that is your life. Know that the Holy One dwells with you; the love of the Holy One dwells within you. Amen.



## **Creative Prayer Experience**

*You will need a sketchbook page or piece of card stock and colored pencils or pastels; collage materials, scissors, and glue are optional.*

*Old Testament Reading:* Choose one of the beautiful sentences or phrases from the Jeremiah or Psalm passage. If you want to stay in keeping with the worship theme, you might use: "I will write it on their hearts," or "Create in me a clean heart."

In your journal or on a piece of card stock, prayerfully write out the words you have chosen. Write the words as large or as small as you like. Write in a straight line, or in circles, or randomly around the page. Write them as many times as you like in whatever color(s) you desire.

After you have written the words, continue reflecting on them as you add in drawings and patterns with your colored pencils or pastels. You could also add some of your remaining collage materials.

*Gospel Reading:* In your journal or on a piece of card stock, create a drawing or collage of a growing plant--possibly a wheat stalk. Show the "dead" seed within the earth and the living plant above. If you would like, you can add words to your collage. Within the earth, write words that represent "deaths" you have experienced--deep disappointments, things you have given up, parts of the Jesus-path that are most difficult for you. Above the ground, write words that express the life you have in Christ--the joy and grace you have found along the way.

## **Creative Writing Exercise**

*Poetry:* For a fun exercise, write a poem in the shape of a heart. Think about what you believe God desires to write on your heart in particular, or consider the law of God that is written on each of our hearts.

*Prose:* For a more serious exercise, consider Jesus' statement in John 12:27: "Now my soul is troubled." Jesus speaks these words after his entry into Jerusalem in anticipation of his arrest and crucifixion. If Jesus were talking with his closest friends or praying to God, what might he say about his troubled soul? Why is his soul troubled? What does he most desire at that moment? How does he grasp for peace in the midst of the anguish?



## **Reflection**

While we can inhabit holy spaces, scripture reveals that the holy inhabits us as well. God puts the holy law within us. God writes on our hearts. God cleans us from the inside out. As we consider holy spaces along this Lenten journey, we must recognize that our very bodies are holy spaces because God promises to be within them. Paul acknowledges this truth when he writes to the church in Corinth that "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you. Don't you know that you have the Holy Spirit from God, and you don't belong to yourselves?" (I Corinthians 6:19).

Leave it to Paul to point out the flip side of God dwelling within us--it means that we do not belong to ourselves. Or, as Jesus put it: "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). To claim something as holy is to assert that it is set apart, that it is wholly other. To acknowledge the holy is to admit that, as the saying goes, there is a God, and I'm not her.

When we are in a holy space, we are in the presence of something beyond us. Something more than us. Something that calls for sacrifice, for service. We carry our covenant with God, our commitment to follow Christ, within us. Every day. Every step.

It is, perhaps, not particularly surprising or offensive to claim that the holy calls for service and sacrifice on the part of us mere mortals. But we see in this week's readings that the cross is the culmination, the transformation, of God's covenant with the people. And this shocking cross stands as witness that the Holy One is also willing to sacrifice and serve. God does not ask of us anything that God was not willing to do in Christ.

The One who is wholly other is also one of us. It is the divine mystery of the incarnation. A mystery that is deepened and darkened as we move closer and closer to the crucifixion. A mystery that holds us warm and secure in the darkness, like a seed hidden in the soil, dying, dying, in anticipation of spring.

## *Session 7: Palm Sunday*

### *Holy Space~In the Crowd*

Scripture: Psalm 118:1-2; 18-29; Mark 11:1-11

#### **Call to Worship** *(from Psalm 118)*

This is the day that God has made.  
This is a space in which God dwells.  
This is a body that God has formed.  
I will rejoice and be glad,  
for God's steadfast love endures forever.

#### **Song Suggestions**

All Glory, Laud, and Honor (Theodulf)

Hosanna, Loud Hosanna (Threlfall)

Taizé: Blessing and praise 27; Stay with us 21

#### **Scripture Meditation**

#### **Prayer of Confession**

*This is the "Jesus Prayer" from the Eastern Orthodox tradition; pray these words several times, synchronizing the words with your breath if you wish:*

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

#### **Assurance of Pardon** *(from Psalm 118:21)*

I thank you God, that you have answered me; you have become my salvation.

#### **Response**

#### **Blessing**

May the light of Christ shine within you, even as you enter into the darkness of the coming week; even as you walk with Jesus from the praises of today through the accusations, betrayal, and torture to come.



#### **Creative Prayer Experience**

*You will need paper and colored pencils or pastels. Paper, hole punch, and glue are optional.*

A crowd is a collection of many people into one group. Create an artistic representation of the many forming one by making a picture (representational or abstract)

with dots. You might choose to draw the dots or use a hole punch to make lots of paper dots and glue them onto your picture (or use a combination of drawn and punched dots). As you place the dots on the page, know that the time you spend surrounded by people can be just as holy as the time you spend alone. Offer prayers for the people whose lives touch yours--however briefly.

### **Creative Writing Exercise**

Think about the people who would have been in the crowd outside the city of Jerusalem. (See the written reflection for some ideas.) Choose a person who sparks your imagination. This might be a specific character--someone we have met earlier in the Gospel narrative--or a general character--a *type* of person who might be there. Give your character a name (if s/he doesn't already have one) and write a monologue from that character's perspective as s/he participates in the events of Palm Sunday.

### **Reflection**

I think it is natural to imagine that our holy spaces will be quiet, private. Places where we can be still and alone. Or maybe with a few intimate friends.

Yet if we define a holy space as a space inhabited by God, then the Gospels affirm crowded places as distinctly holy. Jesus was often with crowds--more often than he would have liked. He was with friendly crowds, pleading crowds, confused crowds, hopeful crowds, hostile crowds. And each crowd was made holy by his presence.

It is interesting to think about this crowd of people gathered just outside Jerusalem as Jesus comes riding up on a donkey. It must have been an incredibly diverse group of people. The twelve were there of course, and other committed followers like Joanna and Susanna. In addition to these followers, there were probably fans--people who Jesus had healed, people who had found wisdom in his teachings. Some of these fans might have even been Pharisees and Sadducees, skulking around, trying not to be seen. Many in the crowd were simply pilgrims coming into Jerusalem for the Passover celebration; people who didn't know who Jesus was and didn't understand what all the fuss was about.

This motley collection of people, this crowd, is holy. Because there sits Jesus in the midst of it, riding along on a loping donkey. This crowd is holy, because it is not just any crowd. This is a crowd under the sway of Jesus. And this procession, this celebration, is also a protest. A satirical protest (quite appropriate to April Fools' Day) that pits the Kingdom of God against the kingdom of Caesar; the donkey of Jewish prophecy against the warhorses ridden by the Roman officials; the rag tag disciples of Jesus against the stately entourage of Empire.

This display of religious fervor must have seemed ridiculous to the Roman citizens. Yet it struck a chord of fear as well. In explaining the process of nonviolent protest, Ghandi said, "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

This rejoicing, protesting crowd outside the city of Jerusalem is a bit hard to ignore. And so there was likely some derisive laughter going on.

The fighting is yet to come. And also the victory.

## *Session 8: Maundy Thursday*

### *Holy Space~At the Table*

Scripture: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; John 13:1-17, 31b-35;  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

#### **Opening Prayer**

O Humble and Humbling God,  
My body is here, in this place,  
But my mind . . . my mind is on things I have done today, things I need to do.  
My body is here, in this place,  
But my spirit . . . my spirit is with absent loved ones, sick friends, my own grief.  
Still, I bring my body to you in this place right now.  
May your Holy Spirit move within me  
and draw my mind and my spirit into this place—this moment with you.  
May I be fully present with you on your journey to the cross,  
Just as you, God incarnate, were fully present with your friends  
as you knelt to wash their feet.  
All glory and praise are yours, O God,  
Our eternal Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

#### **Song Suggestions**

Jesus took a towel (Waddell)  
Let us break bread together (spiritual)  
Taizé: Ubi caritas 49

#### **Scripture Meditation**

#### **Prayer of Confession**

God of all people,  
My faith is weak. My ego is strong.  
Forgive me. *[silence]*  
My energy is low. My patience is short.  
Have mercy on me. *[silence]*  
My prejudices are real. My compassion is limited.  
Heal me. *[silence]*

#### **Assurance of Pardon**

O taste and see that our God is good! Through the limitless compassion of Christ, you are forgiven of your sins. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, may you be energized for God's work of justice and peace in the world. Amen.

**Response:** As we think about the communion table, consider making a donation to a local food bank or a national hunger-fighting organization such as Bread for the World.

## **Blessing**

Go forth to be Jesus' disciple, following him even as he moves toward the cross. Even as he wraps a towel around his waist. Even as he kneels to wash the filth from the feet of his friends.

Go forth to be Jesus' disciple, longing to be faithful even as the night grows dark. Even as betrayers loom. Even as the powers that oppose the way of Christ press in around you.

Go forth to be Jesus' disciple, struggling to love others even as Jesus loves you.  
Go forth into the darkness in peace.



## **Creative Prayer Experience**

*You will need a blank card, colors, paper and other collage material, glue, and scissors.*

Create an invitation to the meal in the upper room. If Jesus had sent handmade invitations, what would they have said? Address the invitation to yourself as a reminder that you are Christ's chosen guest each time you share in the communion meal.

## **Creative Writing Exercise**

Write an interior monologue for Judas as Jesus begins washing the disciples' feet. What is Judas thinking as he realizes that Jesus will wash--is washing--his feet? How does he feel?

## **Reflection**

Imagine the scene of a family meal. Perhaps Thanksgiving or Christmas. There's a big table with all the leaves put in, and Aunt Betty's tablecloth doesn't quite reach the ends. Chairs are crowded around the table—six nice wooden ones, a few wobbly chairs brought up from the basement, a couple of metal folding chairs, and, of course, the piano bench where the two smallest have to sit and share the curved end of the table.

It's supposed to be a nice meal. The food smells good. Grandpa says “Amen.” You say, “please pass the jello salad.” But then uncle Herman says, “Can you believe those anti-family kooks up in Washington, letting gay people get married.” And your cousin Frank, who's still in the closet, looks intently at his mashed potatoes.

Or maybe all is pleasant until Aunt Cindy whips out the brochures for the new product she is selling and encourages everyone to place an order. “Just don't get gravy on the order forms.” Or maybe the doorbell rings; it's your sister's ex-husband here to see the kids. Or Grandma says, “Now you kids know the radiation isn't really working. Glenn has a copy of the will. Pastor knows how I want the service. When the time comes, please don't fight over the china.”

That's often what things are like around the table--awkward, uncomfortable, disconcerting. Even around the holy table, the sacred space of the last supper. The mood

in the upper room must have been incredibly tense that night. Jesus and his disciples knew that Jerusalem was a risky place for them to be. Jesus had been making strange statements about death all week. The authorities could break into this upper room and bust up the party at any moment.

And then Jesus, the master, the teacher, strips down, kneels, and performs the task of a common servant. How embarrassing.

It can only get worse as Jesus calls the bread his body; the wine his blood. Suggesting Jews drink blood, well, it's not Kosher. And it is a vivid reminder that he will soon die a violent death.

The communion table is a sacred space, a holy place, to be sure. But it is not always comfortable. All sorts of people crowd around the table and argue about who should be there and what should be said and how things should be done. The history of communion in the Christian church is spotted with pain and schisms.

And yet the table remains a holy place, where the power of God surges among us in amazing, grace-drenched ways.

The former archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, used his position of influence to speak out against the oppressive practices of land owners. He also stood at the holy table often. In March of 1980 he was leading the people in the mass--“This is my body”--when the bullet went right through his heart.

They also practice communion at the United Methodist Church in Liberia—a country ravaged by civil war. Michele Hovey, a Mennonite professor, writes of celebrating the Lord's Supper with the people of Liberia<sup>1</sup>. Passing the bread to one whose hands had been cut off during the war.

The challenge and beauty of the Eucharist table is that it brings together people who do not really know how to live together. Paul's letters attest to the struggles of the earliest church to share the meal among rich and poor; slaves and free; men and women; and, most notably, Jews and Gentiles.

Over time, of course, some of the categories of division change. Most of us are no longer concerned with distinctions of Jew and Gentile. But there are still plenty of divisions to overcome: Catholics and Protestants; Americans and Russians; blacks and whites; Israelis and Palestinians; Hutu and Tutsi; Crips and Bloods; liberals and conservatives.

The categories change. The nature of the conflicts change. But our human need for reconciliation remains. The table is a holy space not because everyone around the table agrees with each other, but because it brings together those who disagree. In bringing people together, the table holds out the hope of peace.

We must come to the table with the understanding that it is not the external environment that makes this a holy space. Sometimes we gather on calm, sunny days, surrounded by beautiful green trees and chirping birds and people we love. Sometimes we gather in places of deep oppression and violence, or in the wake of devastating floods, or with people we would rather avoid.

Yes, there was fear and tension in that upper room. But the presence of Jesus brought a peace that reached beyond the turbulent circumstances. We are told that Jesus and his friends sang a hymn before they went out into the night.

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<sup>1</sup> See her article "Holy, Healing Madness" in *Sojourners* magazine, December 2006.

Yes, Romero was killed at the communion table. But the words he said to a reporter a few days before his murder have proven true: “A bishop will die. But the church of God—which is the people—will never perish.”<sup>2</sup>

Yes, Michele Hovey sat around the table with both victims and perpetrators of horrible violence in Liberia. The violence of that place was carried in the bodies of everyone who lived there. But around the table, all partook of the body of the one who came speaking peace.

The table is a holy space, though not necessarily a comfortable space. It is a place to which God draws us; a place in which we allow Christ to become a part of us; a place from which the Holy Spirit leads with transforming power.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/romero.html>

## *Session 9: Good Friday*

### *Holy Space~The Cross*

Scripture: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42

#### **Opening Prayer**

My God, my God,  
Have you forsaken me?  
Have I forsaken you?  
Holy One,  
Deliverer,  
Do not be far away!

#### **Song Suggestions**

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? (spiritual)  
Taizé: Stay with me 8; When the night becomes dark 25; By night 46;  
By your cross 22 (Sections A, B, C, and D only); We adore you, Jesus Christ 39

#### **Scripture Meditation**

#### **Prayer of Confession**

Holy Christ,  
Two thousand years after your crucifixion,  
We still betray you,  
Still deny you,  
Still forget your resurrection promise.  
Two thousand years after your crucifixion,  
Our world still clings to fear,  
still disregards justice,  
still resorts to violence. . . .  
Have mercy on us, O God.

#### **Assurance of Pardon** *(from Hebrews 10)*

My friends, we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the new and living way that Jesus opened for us through his flesh. Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for God, who has promised, is faithful.

#### **Response**



## **Blessing**

As you stand in the shadow of the cross, may the darkness guard your heart with love; may the chilled air fill you with holy breath; may you rest in the peaceful uncertainty of knowing that things are not as they seem. Amen.



## **Creative Prayer Experience**

*You will need a sketchbook page and black and gray colored pencils or pastels.*

Choose one specific scene from John 18-19. Use a page in your sketchbook to reflect that scene--through a realistic drawing or simply with shapes and possibly words. Consider using only black, white, and gray in this piece of art.

## **Creative Writing Exercise**

Make a list of the most memorable characters for you in John 18-19 (besides Jesus). Briefly write about how each character is feeling and/or what they are thinking at the end of this story. If one character particularly grabs you, you might want to develop a monologue (poetry or prose) for that character.

## **Reflection**

It is a testament to the incomprehensible power of God that a device of torture has become a symbol of ultimate love. The foot of the cross is holy space because it speaks deep truth about humanity and deep truth about God.

The cross reminds us that we, as humans, are capable of pettiness, of injustice, of violence. We grasp for power in ridiculous and dangerous ways. We let fear control our actions and our interactions.

The cross assures us that God desires intimacy with us so deeply that God became human. God did not just look human. God did not just hang out as a human for as long as it was convenient. God, in Jesus of Nazareth, became really, fully human--so human that he died on the cross.

And so it is at the foot of the cross that we can most clearly see our need for God. It is at the foot of the cross that we can gaze most intently upon God's love for us.

Holy, holy, holy . . .

## *Session 10: Easter!*

### *Holy Space~The Empty Tomb*

Scripture: Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; John 20:1-18

#### **Opening Prayer**

Holy, Risen Christ,  
Gazing into the empty tomb, I am full of joy.  
I give you thanks this day for the truth revealed in your resurrection:  
    The power of life has overcome the power of death.  
    The light of love has shattered the darkness of fear.  
    The way of peace has prevailed against the violence of empire.  
Hallelujah!  
Thanks be to you, O God, forever and ever. Amen.

#### **Song Suggestions**

Christ the Lord is Risen Today (Wesley)  
Alleluia, the Great Storm is Over (Frank)  
Taizé: Let us praise your name 13; This is the day 17

#### **Scripture Meditation**

#### **Prayer of Confession**

Holy, Living One,  
Sometimes I live as if Mary found you that morning  
still dead in the tomb.  
Forgive me.  
In your mercy, let me come to the empty tomb each morning,  
that I may know again:  
the fear, sorrow, darkness, and hopelessness of the grave  
are an illusion.  
Christ has risen!  
So shall we!

#### **Assurance of Pardon** (*from 1 Corinthians 15:1-2*)

Remember the Good News that has been proclaimed to you, which you also received and in which you stand. You are being saved through it! It is true: in Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Thanks be to God.

#### **Response**

**Blessing** (from Romans 8:38-39)

Go forth and rejoice in the Good News of the Resurrection: that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Creative Prayer Experience**

*You will need a sketchbook page, collage materials, Modge Podge, colors, and scissors.*

Tear out a page from your sketchbook to use as a base. Create a collage as you contemplate Mary's proclamation: "I have seen the Lord!" You might choose to incorporate these words into the collage in some way. You can give the finished collage a good coat of Modge Podge and glue it onto the back cover of your sketch book. (Or the front if you did not glue your Ash Wednesday piece there.) I encourage you to continue using the sketch book for artwork and journaling as you journey into the Easter season.

**Creative Writing Exercise**

Read several Easter-themed poems. (This week's email will contain links to some poems on-line.) Choose a poem or even a line that you love and write about it in your sketch book. Alternately, you can write your own Easter poem.

**Reflection**

Finally we have come to the end of our journey--which is also its beginning: the empty tomb. This tomb that is not as it should be--with the stone rolled away and the body disappeared.

This is not a holy sight for Mary so early on that first day of the week. It is a troubling sight, a panic-inducing sight. She races to the other disciples to tell them that someone has stolen the Master's body. This situation is the opposite of holy--it is a sacrilege. Jesus' body has been moved and quite possibly desecrated.

And what else is Mary to think in her grief-ridden, sleep-deprived state? She watched Jesus die; saw the blood and water pour out of his side. He was wrapped and buried in *this* tomb. This tomb that now contains no body. And so she weeps. She weeps because she will never see her friend again. She weeps for the holiness that has been lost from the world. She weeps because she cannot even mourn his death properly--the tomb is empty. There is no body.

As Mary weeps, she bends over and peers into the tomb. I wonder why. What is she looking for? What does she expect? Peter and the other disciple have already been inside the tomb. She knows there is no body, just some neatly folded grave clothes.

Yet when she peers in there are two bodies--angelic figures seated where Jesus' body should be. One might think this would be a clue for Mary that things are not as they seem. Yet she keeps on crying; so the angels ask her why she weeps. "They have taken

away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him," she says. *And then she turns around.*

Did you catch that? She is having a conversations with angels! They ask her a question, she answers, and then she turns around without waiting for a response. She remains blinded to the holiness of the tomb by her grief.

Even when she comes face to face with the risen Christ, she does not recognize him as holy. She thinks he is the gardener, and she repeats her sad tale. It seems that she is only looking for the emptiness; she keeps talking about and weeping over the emptiness.

Until Jesus speaks her name. "Mary."

Suddenly, weeping is transformed into a shout of joyful recognition. The common gardener is her beloved Rabbi. The empty tomb is a testament to Jesus' exaltation, not his desecration. The dew-drenched grass upon which she stands is transformed into holy ground.

I urge you to peer into the tombs that linger across the landscape of your life. Perhaps these tombs are holy spaces as well. Peer into the tombs and see whether death has really has the final word. Cry if you need to. Talk to any angels that show up. And listen. Listen intently for the sound of your name.