



# TOWARD TRANSFORMATION

## A Lenten Discovery

Written by  
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In the darkest months of the year, move toward the possibility of rebirth not just as some nice words that are said on Easter morning but something that happens in your own lives.

This year, you are invited to move toward transformation.

Move toward transformation by choosing one thing – just one thing – in your life that you want to change.

This invitation comes with some frustrations. After all, change is not easy. It takes effort and sometimes it just seems easier to give up. But,

you won't be alone. As you share in this possibility of transformation, you'll covenant with other pilgrims in the faith that our lives might be changed if we change our practice. Take on a practice that allows you to move toward the possibility of Easter.

## Overview

*Toward Transformation: A Lenten Discovery* is an opportunity to wander through the Season of Lent with a group of fellow pilgrims who want to experience Easter in their own lives. In this six-week study, following the readings from the Book of Psalms in Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary, the participants will move through the wide array of human emotion in the Psalms. They'll find moments of connection with both Scripture and each other as they work toward transformation.

In the concluding session, there is a space to reflect on what has changed – if anything. It is not expected that each participant will realize the change they hoped would come six weeks ago. It is the hope of this small-group experience that some change will come, even if it wasn't what was expected. This may indeed be how Resurrection is discovered.

## How to Use this Resource

*Toward Transformation: A Lenten Discovery* is a resource for a small-group experience to claim the mystery we sing about in *Christ the Lord Has Risen Today*:

*made like him,  
like him we rise.*

Use this resource within a group of people who wants to understand how we might claim the mystery and power of Resurrection in our own bodies. This is an invitation to make the Resurrection come alive in your own life – but don't do it alone!

This entire resource wants you to find the mysterious power of community in the midst of your transformation. For as many times as we talk about change, it's so important to know that you're not the only one that is seeking for things

to be better. Gather a group together before Lent begins so that you might find the nurture and compassion of these fellow pilgrims as you seek to transform yourself.

It begins with choosing a personal discipline in *My Journey Toward Transformation*. Each participant will have the opportunity to choose one thing in which they wish to focus their hope of Resurrection. The group – or perhaps by covenant partners as described in *The First Group Discovery* – will witness to the personal practice of each person as the group moves together *Toward Transformation*.

Each week, there are four components to guide your group through this shared experience of transformation.

- **Daily Discovery.** Each participant has the opportunity to broaden their experience with this shared daily practice. There will be opportunity for reflection each week upon this shared practice. It is not intended to overwhelm – but allow for a common, centering experience.
- **Personal Discovery.** This reflection upon the weekly Psalm is to be read by each participant before the group meets.
- **Discovery Reflections.** To conclude each reading, there are questions for which each participant is invited to find their own answers.
- **Group Discovery.** When the group comes together for their weekly meeting throughout the season of Lent, there is a unique small-group exploration that picks up upon themes from the Daily Discovery and the Personal Discovery from that week.

## Who Should Lead

Each participant will have a copy of the material. There is no separate guide for leaders. All of the

questions will be before the group. So, perhaps, it seems there's no need for someone to lead. That may be. It truly depends upon your group. If the group can facilitate itself – without one person keeping the group on task – then, you may not need someone to lead.

However, this is likely only true if this particular group – including the exact same group of people – has gone through multiple small-group experiences together.

Whether you know each other well or not, it can put some people more at ease to know who is "in charge." This person doesn't need to have a firm hand – but can be the one that reminds the group when and where the meets are and is the "it person" for steering the conversation back on track if it wanders too much.

If you decide to have a person – or team of people – who lead *Toward Transformation: A Lenten Discovery*, here are some qualities to look for:

- a desire to engage fully as a participant
- a longing to seek transformation in themselves as a fellow pilgrim
- a posture of unknowing which allows them to ask questions more than provide answers
- an eagerness to understand the experiences of other people
- a gentle humility
- an engaging and active spiritual life

It might be the pastor who can do this best. It might be a retired member of your church family. It might be someone who is just really good at bringing a group of people together.

The person – or team of people – who might lead *Toward Transformation: A Lenten Discovery* will bring that tender curiosity into their leadership of the Group Discovery. Each week, they'll facilitate the Group Discovery wherever conversation might lead. They will be the ones to always offer

the reminder that this group seeks to be open to how the Spirit moves. They will model listening with an open heart. They will do their part to lead the group toward transformation.

## How to Prepare

*Toward Transformation: A Lenten Discovery* requires some advance preparation for the participants. So, you'll want to begin with gathering the group early. Start in January. No matter when Easter comes, it will not be too early.

If you are offering an invitation within your congregation or community, use the overview or the description on the cover page to promote the opportunity at least six weeks ahead of time. In the promotion, be sure to communicate when and where the gatherings will happen through the Season of Lent. Each session will be approximately two hours long.

If you are gathering a group of friends, you may choose to use the same tools – but your own enthusiastic words will probably be more inviting.

As each participant expresses their interest in participation, you'll want to make sure that they know about these expectations, including:

- commitment to seek transformation through a personal or social discipline
- weekly readings and reflection questions
- commitment to attend weekly gatherings for six weeks of Lent
- an open heart and a desire to listen for the movement of the Spirit

It's best to make sure that each participant knows that they are expected to make a commitment toward change – and has some time to think about what that change might be. In addition, they will need to have experimented with the Daily Discovery and read the Personal Discovery in *When I Keep Silence* before *The First Group Discovery*.

Before *The First Group Discovery*, provide copies of the whole resource for all participants. Direct each participant to the following A Note to the Participant so that expectations are extra clear.

## How to Set Up

In the space you create for each gathering to share in the Group Discovery each week, be mindful of creating a comfortable space where all can participate in their own way.

Comfortable chairs are vital. Find a quiet place to meet in your church or community where there is a comfortable chair for each and every person. Keep in mind that some of the participants will share intensely personal stuff as they seek transformation. The space – as well as the individuals – should honor that confidentiality.

Once you have found the comfortable chairs, there is an additional caution. This one is commonly overlooked. But, I'll say it anyway. Try to avoid sitting at a table. It's natural and tempting – but it puts up an automatic barrier among the participants. It's best to create a space without any barriers.

Arrange the chairs in a circle so that each and every person can be seen. When there is no table, your body is put in a vulnerable position. There is no table to hide behind. There is nothing but you. Believe it or not, it changes how people engage in the conversation – even if their arms are crossed in the beginning.

You may choose to offer some simple hospitality like a pitcher of water and cookies. This also sets the mood, but don't let the snacks be a distraction from the engagement of the participants. The conversation is really what matters here. Snacks are just gravy.

## The First Group Discovery

Once the comfortable chairs are arranged in a circle for your first meeting, there are a few things

you'll want to remember to insure the comfort of each participant within the group.

When the group gathers, there is an important introduction that is missing from *Finding Ourselves in the Silence*. Before reading Psalm 23 as a group, you'll want to take a few moments to make sure that you each know each other's names. It is recommended not to simply offer each participant's name going around the circle – but instead, invite each participant to offer their name and something else about them, such as:

- what they gave up/took on last year for Lent
- their personal rationale whether or not the Easter Bunny is real
- the best candy that should appear in their Easter basket
- the one thing they learned in the last small-group experience they shared
- why they decided to begin this journey this year
- what they hope will be different this year

Allow this introduction to provide some connection and build some trust over silly and honest claims about themselves. This is important for the whole experience – but will make a difference when commitments are made. There will be some who hesitate and don't want their journey to be witnessed and signed. Try – as best as you can – to encourage the group to use this opportunity to witness to each other's transformation with their pen.

If it enhances your group experience, you may choose to use the covenant partners agreement found in the back of this resource. It is the hope that the whole group will partner in this manner – but you may choose to have individual covenant partners to enhance the experience and build stronger one-on-one connections.

## A Note to the Participant

This is your time to explore and grow toward your own renewal. No matter what you seek to

transform in your life, we hope that you will rely on the support of your church family during this time – in prayer and in study. All of the tools gathered here so that you can find the possibility of Easter. We hope that you'll use them all as you seek transformation.

On the next page entitled *My Journey Toward Transformation*, you'll find a list of suggestions of things you might want to consider doing. There may be something that immediately jumps out at you – or you might read through the first week's reading *When I Keep Silence* for some inspiration.

Before you come to the First Gathering, you may find it helpful to read through these weekly meditations called Personal Discovery. These readings are meant to focus each of us in our steps toward transformation. Each Personal Discovery focuses around a Psalm and offers some insights to help explore the passage within your own personal story. Please find your favorite Bible and read the Psalm. You may also want to try other translations like New International Version or The Message to hear the Psalm differently. Inspired by these weekly meditations, our group will follow the Group Discovery which concludes each chapter. You are encouraged to introduce the weekly Daily Discovery into your daily faith practice. This may seem like a lot with the commitment you'll make to yourself. However, the invitation is to experiment.

Try out the Daily Discovery. See if it works. If it doesn't, that's part of your journey too. This is all about finding a spiritual practice that works for you. And so, you are encouraged to trust your own voice and your own needs this Lent.

The only request we will make of each other is to be open to how the Spirit moves among us. In this awareness, we'll ask each other to always be ready to listen with an open heart.

We hope this resource is a gift to you during this season and the days beyond it. May God guide

you gently toward your transformation. Blessings for a Transformative Lent.

## About the Author

The Rev. Elsa A. Peters is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. She studied studio art at Skidmore College and received a Masters of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

Elsa has served churches in New York City, Maine and Washington. She believes in the power of community, that poverty can end in our lifetime and that everyone needs a little more love.

Elsa also loves a good book, an excellent cup of coffee and an afternoon in the kitchen.

## Giving Credit Where Credit Is Due

During my ministry in Maine, I was honored with the privilege of prayerfully reflecting on what had been and what could be in the congregation I served.

Every three or four months, the Adult Faith Formation Committee would meet so that we could discern how we would deepen our faith. This usually meant that we would realize there was a particular spiritual matter that we wanted to explore – and we would go looking for an appropriate resource to purchase.

This resource was created after we made a bad choice. We hated the last resource we had chosen and were determined not to let it happen again – so we made our own. I am indebted to the wisdom of that committee – including Betsy Keiter, Scott Berry, Betty Deschenes, Gretchen Reynolds and Mike Kasputes – who helped me imagine, create and lead this resource for the very first time.

I could not be more grateful for their presence in my ministry.





## My Journey Toward Transformation

Moving *Toward Transformation* is your invitation this Lent. There are endless possibilities available to you, including some listed below. Choose something that works for you. Write it how you will choose to observe this Lent on the lines below in full sentences. At our First Group Discovery, we'll have an opportunity to share these commitments together.

### Inward and Personal Disciplines

- Spend time in solitude each day.
- Read a book for inner growth.
- Read twice through the Gospel of the Lectionary Cycle you are in. (Luke in 2010)
- Begin to keep a journal of prayer concerns, questions, reading.
- Focus on thanksgiving, rather than on asking, in prayer.
- Write a letter of affirmation once a week to yourself.
- Give yourself the gift of 3 hours each week to do something you never make time to do.
- Reclaim a hobby that you've neglected.
- Find a way to go to bed earlier or sleep in so you get enough rest.
- Heal the wounds of a broken relationship either with that person or by yourself.
- Take the time to inventory your priorities and plan how I will reorder them.
- Give up a grudge for something in your past.

### Outward and Social Disciplines

- Take on act of love through a particular mission project.
- Plan to visit a "shut-in" neighbor or church member weekly.
- Write a letter of affirmation once a week to a person who has touched your life.
- Go to coffee or dinner with someone I want to know better.
- Begin to recycle waste from my home and workplace.
- Decide to become a member of the church and speak to a pastor or lay leader.
- Recall the vows of my Baptism by doing something every day that I promised in that action.

This Lent, I will move toward Easter by \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_.

I will be accountable to myself and to God by sharing my intentions with the group I'll journey with this Lent in ways I feel most comfortable. During Holy Week, I will share with the group how I experienced of Lent and how I understand Easter now.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## While I Keep Silence

Focus Scripture: Psalm 32

### Daily Discovery

Each day this week, wake up and read Psalm 32. Keep your Bible by your bedside so that you read these words before even getting out of bed.

When you get out of bed, as you go through the day, from waking to sleeping, be aware of your body. Feel how it moves when you're cleaning, moving and eating. Notice when parts of your body ache. Feel the groaning as your body stretches during exercise and rest. Speak loving words to your body in every movement that it makes.

### Personal Discovery

How often do we keep silent? There are things that we keep to ourselves. We label them as private matters. We keep quiet. We don't say anything to our senators who issue the laws, to our neighbors who might have differing opinions or even at our own dinner tables within the family that loves us. We assume that we should just keep these things - whatever those things may be - to ourselves.

Where does this come from? Why do we do this? Too many seem to assume that keeping silent is what Jesus would do. After all, in the Gospel Lesson that begins the season of Lent, Jesus goes alone to the wilderness to be silent (Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13). In each version of the story in the Gospels, this is what Jesus does after he's baptized. He goes away to be silent. Instantly, after John dunks him in the River Jordan, Jesus retreats to the wilderness in search of silence. None of these accounts explains why. Instead, we only know that he goes and when he goes, he's tempted by the Evil One.

We have told ourselves so many times that Jesus retreats to find rest and renewal. Jesus goes to the wilderness to find clarity for the work that he will go onto do. Super. That sounds really nice. Most of us would love to have that sort of luxury where we might be lucky enough to find forty days to think about who we are and where we are going. It sounds ideal, but that's not the story these three gospel stories tell. Instead of some idealized retreat, the whole time that Jesus is there in the wilderness, he's bothered by the Evil One. Bothered might not be the right word. Perhaps it better illustrates the scene to say that Jesus was annoyed or pestered by the Evil One. It may better fit our own experiences to say that Jesus was distracted by the Evil One. No matter which word fits your understanding of this interaction, for forty days, the Evil One challenges Jesus. The Evil One tests Jesus' relationship with God. The Evil One pushes Jesus to the limit. Or at least, the Evil One *tries* to push him.

The Evil One starts this mischief with focusing Jesus' awareness on his own body. He hasn't eaten. There's no food around and the Evil One wants Jesus to turn stones into bread so that Jesus can satisfy his hunger.

Does this happen to you? When you try to find a quiet space, is this what happens to you?

It's exactly happens to me. When I sit in silence, and try to focus my energy on God, I think about what I'm going to eat. I think about my stomach. I think about what I'm going to make for dinner. Mentally, I start making my shopping list. Now, I

don't think that's entirely evil. I'm just not very good at sitting in silence.

Jesus doesn't seem to be very good either. He has great intentions when he tries to sit in the wilderness and focus all of his silent energy on God. He tries but the same thing that happens to me happens to Jesus: his stomach growls. And so, Jesus' thoughts turn from God to food.

It's not that Jesus' hunger is evil. He needs food in order for his body to thrive. We all do - but it's not always where we focus our energy. We eat at certain times of the day. We eat with other people. Sometimes, we even eat on the run without really thinking about what it is that we're putting into our bodies. No matter how we feed ourselves, we're all hungry. We all have that that fundamental need to be satisfied. Think about that for a second.

What does your body need to survive? Make a list if you like. Name all of those things that allow your body to function - including nutrition, medicine and even intimacy. Think about all of the things that you require to feel healthy and balanced. Certainly, you require more than a good salad to feel completely balanced. There are other things that you need to feel healthy. What are those things for you?

Even if we can name those things that keep us in balance, it seems that it's not until something is wrong that we begin to focus on that hunger - as Anne Lamott was forced to do. Before she had to really focus on her hunger, Anne did what is familiar to many of us. She "ate, starved, binged, purged, grew fat, grew thin, grew fat, grew thin, binged, purged, dieted, was good, was bad, grew fat, grew thin, grew thinner."<sup>1</sup>

And then, something changed.

She developed an eating disorder which ended her up in the office of a specialist she found in the Yellow Pages. After a couple of visits, this specialist asked what Anne had for breakfast.

Anne thought this was a trick question as she explains:

To make a long story ever so slightly shorter, she finally asked me what it felt like when I was hungry, and I could not answer. I asked her to explain what it felt like when she was hungry, and she described a sensation in her stomach of emptiness, an awareness of an appetite.

So for the next week, my assignment was to notice what it felt like when I was hungry. It was so strange. I was once again the world's oldest toddler. I walked around peering down as if to look inside my stomach, as if it was one of those old fashioned front-loading washing machines with a window through which you could see the soapy water swirling over your clothes. And I paid attention until I was able to isolate this feeling in my stomach, a gritchy kind of emptiness, like a rat scratching at the door wanting to be let in.<sup>2</sup>

The Psalmist names this gritchy kind of emptiness differently than Anne does. Psalm 32 begins with praise and joy because something is shifting. Something is changing and so there is reason to be happy. But before that praise, there was silence - silence that made the body waste away. The Psalmist is totally out of balance and feels the heaviness of the hand of God in that moment when all strength is gone. There's no growling stomach. Instead, there is silence - that silence that doesn't dare speak what's wrong.

Lent is an invitation to break that silence. It may not mean that you turn to the person next to you in church and tell them all about your problems, but Lent offers an invitation to feel that shift beginning to shift toward the hope of Easter.

Lent is a time of awakening and emerging to whatever that gritchy kind of emptiness is within you. It's a time to transform that rat scratching at



the door into something that won't waste your body away but will instead give you life.

Historically, Lent emerged from its Jewish roots in a ritual celebration of the Passover through the lens of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. On Easter, we tell those stories that demonstrated God's faithfulness to the chosen people from the time of Creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4) to the Flood (Genesis 9:8-13) to the Testing of Abraham (Genesis 22:1-18) to the Deliverance of the Israelites (Exodus 15:1-21) and beyond. Historically, the church reserves those joyful stories for the end of this celebration. To begin the journey toward that celebration, the church has talked about fasting (Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21). From these stories that focus the human heart on a new sense of purpose, Lent has been a time to focus on sacrifice – a sacrifice that focuses on the Good Friday story which leaves most of us feeling completely worthless. In this traditional observation, Lent is a season where if we didn't feel badly about ourselves already, we end up feeling far, far worse.

That's not the point of this Psalm. Certainly, there is room for this interpretation if we focus too much of our energy on the fifth verse. There is guilt and sin in the lyrics, but it does not have the last word.

Instead, the Psalmist hopes for "glad cries of deliverance" that signals that change has finally come. Or in other words, transformation has occurred. Resurrection has come.

This is the good news in which we center our hope. Our challenge is to make space for that hope. We faithfully recall what the Gospels relate about this marvelous event, but we rarely know how to interpret that event for our own lives. We want to be renewed. We want to discover for ourselves the promise of God's faithfulness – most obviously in the Easter story of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Resurrection is our hope. It's the metaphor of our Christian faith. It's the particular perspective that we offer when we look at the world. We believe that there is always the possibility of renewal. Even in the most final event, as death surely is, we believe in that there is renewal.

There is *always* Resurrection.

We just don't know how to talk about it. We know when it's preached. We know when we've heard that good news – but we struggle to explain it in our own words. We know the Biblical account of how Jesus moves from the silence of the tomb to speaking to the disciples. We know that a transformation happens – but it doesn't really sound like what is described in Psalm 32. So, what is this transformation that happens at Resurrection?

The writer and pastor Frederick Beuchner defines Resurrection as immortality. In his perspective, Resurrection is something that happens in the body. It's not simply something that just happens to Jesus but can happen to anyone. He explains:

All the major Christian creeds affirm belief in Resurrection *of the body*. In other words, they affirm the belief that what God in spite of everything prizes enough to bring back to life is not just some disembodied echo of human beings but a new and revised version of all things which made them the particular human beings they were and which they need something like a body to express: their personality, the way they looked, the sound of their voices, their peculiar capacity for creating and love, in some sense their *faces*.<sup>3</sup>



We know when it's preached. We know when we've heard that good news – but we struggle to explain it in our own words.



This bodily event recalls the language of the Psalmist. It speaks to the feeling that the “body wasted away” as surely as it hopes for something to change. It requires us to give voice to what it is that we have kept silent about for far too long. More than just paying attention to what hurts. More than the awareness of the aches or groans in our bodies. Lent invites us to make that transformation our own. It invites us to resurrect our whole selves over the slow process of six weeks.

During the six weeks of Lent, this is your invitation. You are invited to resurrect. Rather than giving something up, you are invited to practice Resurrection by choosing something in your life that needs to be renewed. Recalling the hope of the Psalmist, while you kept silence, you lost something. Your body wasted away or you’ve felt a gritchy kind of emptiness. Your invitation is to fill this emptiness and restore your body. Let this year be different. Practice your own Resurrection, as Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan so eloquently describe as the center of our Christian experience. In their words:

Good Friday and Easter, death and Resurrection together, are a central image of the New Testament for the path to a transformed self. The path involves dying to an old way of being and being reborn into a new way of being. Good Friday and Easter are about this path, the path of dying and rising, of being born again.<sup>4</sup>

This Lent, discover your humanity in musing on how you could possibly be born again. Allow yourself to be changed. Allow yourself to discover a new way of being in the world so that the joy of Easter becomes a story you have truly experienced. Allow yourself to move ever so slowly toward transformation.

<sup>1</sup>Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor, 2000), 190.

<sup>2</sup>Lamott, 195.

<sup>3</sup>Frederick Beuchner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 51.

<sup>4</sup>Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 210.

## Discovery Reflections

As you’ve read the Psalm every morning this week, what did you notice about these ancient lyrics? Were there particular words or lines that echoed with your daily experience?

What have you noticed about your body this week?

How do you relate to Frederick Beuchner’s definition of Resurrection? How does this definition resonate with your evolving understanding of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ?

What in your life have you kept silent? As you consider this question, you may find it helpful to reflect (again) on *My Journey Toward Transformation*. As you consider how you might claim the hope for transformation this Lent, what is that you are hoping will start to speak in your life?



## Group Discovery

Finding Ourselves in the Silence

### Materials

- Scraps of paper
- Copies of *My Journey Toward Transformation* for those that didn't print this resource
- Candles (and accompanying tray to gather ashes)
- Bibles

### Centering Silence

Light a candle in the center of the group. Allow 3 minutes for communal silence.

### Communal Sharing

From this silence, allow a time for those who desire to share to reflect aloud about their experience of the Daily Discovery, the Personal Discovery or the Discovery Reflections. This may also be a time to share about joys and concerns after the past week.

### Biblical Exploration

Read Psalm 32 as a group. Discuss the following questions as a large group.

- What does this passage reveal to you about silence?
- Has your experience of silence changed this week? How so?
- Does the text hold a new meaning for you after keeping silence this week?
- How does this Psalm speak to your body - both as you moved through the week and as you sit here now?

### Activity

On the scraps of paper provided, write down that thing that you've decided to change this Lent. Most likely, this is the same thing that you've written down on *My Journey Toward Transformation*. It is not required that you share this decision aloud but you are invited to discuss in pairs what it felt like to focus on that "gritzy kind of emptiness" and ultimately choose to change it. We'll share insights as a large group and even sign each other's covenants.

### Blessing

As a blessing, we'll burn the papers upon which we've just written our Lenten focus. After everyone has burned theirs, while watching the smoke climb toward God, we'll recite this blessing in unison.

Gracious God, we take comfort in the assurance that even those things that are hidden from memory, or too deep for words, are not beyond your love. God, who knows us completely, bless us in our hope to be born again, in Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



## My Help Comes

Focus Scripture: Psalm 121

### Daily Discovery

Read Psalm 121 each morning. As you move through the rest of your day, consider how this passage informs your relationship to the natural world around you.

### Personal Discovery

The Psalmist begins by looking at the world. He looks at the hills and dares to ask for help as if the layers of rock and soil can answer her question.

This strange behavior fits into the Biblical account where natural phenomena have been offered as evidence of God's faithfulness. You remember how God used the waters of flood to wash away the first attempt at human creation (Genesis 7) and after the waters have dried up, a rainbow appears in the sky to remind Noah and his family that God will never behave so badly again. It happens again when the waters bend in the deliverance of the Israelites out of slavery (Exodus 14). Another ancient song finds comfort in the still waters that God leads him to which "restores [the] soul" (Psalm 23:3).

These observations of the natural world continue into the Gospels where Jesus points to the fig tree's new leaves as sign of transformation (Luke 21:29-33; Matthew 24:32-35; Mark 13:28-31). An earthquake comes when Jesus dies on the cross (Matthew 27:51).

While we might find this strange behavior in a modern person, it happens all the time in the Bible. The renowned preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor observes that this strange

behavior is exactly how faithful people learn about God. She explains:

When people want to know more about God, the son of God tells them to pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to women kneading bread and workers lining up for their pay.

Whoever wrote this stuff believed that people could learn as much about the ways of God from paying attention to the world as they could from paying attention to scripture.<sup>1</sup>

It's not just "whoever wrote this stuff" that believes this to be true. It's something that we affirm in every moment that we marvel at God's creation. After all, who hasn't mused as the sun sets about God's creative energy? Who hasn't seen a hint of God in a purple crocus peeking through the snow? Consider the last time you stood in the middle of a field or even stood in on top of a mountain in the middle of a sheltered forest. Didn't you find the presence of God there? Didn't God surprise you somewhere in that landscape? Surely, it can't just be something beautiful. We want to see God in the beauty that nature reveals. We want to believe that it has to be God telling us something - if not answering a particular question we've thrown to the wind.

Of course, when we read about the Psalmist here, it seems odd to look toward the hills for help. It's all well and good to talk about that hunger we're feeling. In certain company, it's fine to talk about that one thing that we're individually trying to change about our lives this

Lent. However, it's highly unlikely that any one of us is going to run outside to turn our ears to the hill for an answer for our transformation. We may believe that the hills are alive with the sound of music, but our rational minds insist that the hills won't talk back.

We might be completely clear on this fact, but the Psalmist has other ideas. He turns to the hills. He listens for their wisdom. You might think he's crazy, but he explains himself. His faith comes from God "who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:2) so that it almost seems as though he believes that God is actually inside the hills. That alone might be enough of a reason to put faith in the hills.

But, his song doesn't end there. He keeps singing to God as his "keeper" (Psalm 121:5) who will protect him and to whomever he might be singing this song. The sun won't burn either one of them. By day and by night, God will keep them. They'll be kept safe with a God that doesn't sleep (Psalm 121:4) because his God is always alert. And so, he won't be moved until he finds that answer that will most certainly come from the hills – from that place where he lifts his eyes.

The Psalmist may sound stubborn but he is not alone. Many writers, artists, poets and mystics have explored the ways that the world around them reveals the mysteries of God. Through their various art forms, these wise people have shared their experiences. Like the Psalmist, the mystic Hildegard of Bingen believed that

God's Word is in all creation, visible and invisible. The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity. All creation is awakened, called, by the resounding melody, God's invocation of the Word. This Word manifests in every creature. Now this is how the spirit is in the flesh—the Word is indivisible from God.

Hildegard wrote about these manifestations of God's word in beautiful hymns that pay attention to the natural world to observe the ways of God. In a strikingly similar fashion, in her poem *When Roses Speak, I Pay Attention*, the poet Mary Oliver heeds Jesus' advice to the flowers as the Psalmist listens to the hills.

As long as we are able to  
be extravagant we will be  
hugely and damply  
extravagant. Then we will drop  
foil by foil on the ground. This  
is our unalterable task, and we do it  
joyfully.

And they went on. "Listen,  
the heart-shackles are not, as you think,  
death, illness, pain,  
unrequited hope, not loneliness, but  
lassitude, rue, vainglory, fear, anxiety,  
selfishness."

Their fragrance all the while rising  
from their blind bodies, making  
me spin with joy.<sup>2</sup>

In this poem, we learn that the poet finds echoes of the rhythms in nature that she needs to hear for her own life. She finds the affirmation that things are not what she thinks. She can go on loving in the same way that the fragrance of the roses will continue. It may have been something that she already knew. She may have already known of the power of love within her heart. And yet, the poet needed to see this in nature to remember that it is indeed true.

Jesus urges us to pay attention to these things so that we might learn more about God from them (Matthew 6:24-35). During Lent, our focus may be so centered on a particular question of our own transformation that every conversation, every interaction, pile of slush and bitter cold breeze seems to offer an answer. No matter how crazy it may seem, we look for those

answers that God might be offering in all kinds of places. The problem arises when the thing that you discover in that pile of slush is not what you expected. What do you do then? What happens when that pile of slush surprises you? Does it awaken you or alarm you?

That is the question only you can answer.

You may not write a poem like Mary Oliver. You may not be so quick to see God's Word in all creation – but you may have found yourself alarmed. You may have discovered a new awareness. Some might even call it an awakening.

In that moment, you learned more about yourself and more about your God. In that walk in the woods or neighborhood stroll, you learned something that changed everything. You learned about what you could do and what you hoped you could do. Like the Psalmist, you learned about where your help comes from. You found that source in that moment in the trees, by the flowers or even on the shore. The question is: how does that knowledge help you now?

<sup>1</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 13.

<sup>2</sup>Mary Oliver, *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 9.

## Discovery Reflections

For many, Psalm 121 is a familiar and beloved Psalm. As you read this Psalm, this week, what did you hear in these perhaps familiar words that surprised you?

What have you noticed about the natural world around you this week? Did you learn anything about your self or about God from the natural world around you this week?



## Group Discovery

Our Help Comes

### Materials

- Coats, hats and flashlights to venture outside (as needed)
- Bibles

### Opening Prayer

Adapted from the Iona Community

One: Let us pray.  
Because the world is beautiful,  
And beauty is a tender thing,  
And we are all stewards of creation.

**All: We need you God, We need you.**

One: Because human knowledge seems endless,  
And we do not know what we do not know.

**All: We need you God, We need you.**

One: Because we cannot live without you  
And are free to go against you,  
And could worship your wisdom alone.

**All: We need you God, We need you.**

One: Because you came among us,  
And sat beside us,  
And healed our pain and let us wound you,  
And loved us to the end.

**All: We need you God, We need you.**

### Centering

The reading this week explored different moments that the natural world has taught us. and concluded with an invitation to consider that moment where you had this kind of experience in nature. Share this experience you remember with a partner.

### Communal Sharing

From this centering, allow a time for those who desire to share to reflect aloud about their experience of the Daily Discovery, the Personal Discovery or the Discovery Reflections. This may also be a time to share about joys and concerns after the past week.

### Biblical Exploration

Read Luke 21:29-36 as a group. Discuss the following questions as a large group.

- What does passage relate to what you've seen this week in the natural world?
- What does this passage illustrate about your own personal transformation?

### Activity

Being outside allows us to experience creation first-hand and to pray and commune with God in solitude. Together, bundled up in our warm coats, we'll go for a silent 10-minute walk outside before we come back inside to offer each other a blessing.

### Blessing

We'll bless each other by taking turns offering thanks for the blessings of the natural world that we saw both during the week and on our walk tonight. After each person offers his or her prayer, s/he will conclude "We need you, God." The congregation will respond "We need you."





## A Joyful Noise

Focus Scripture: Psalm 95

### Daily Discovery

Each day this week, as you read, watch or skim the news, notice the people and places that need help. Print articles off the internet which are particularly troubling for you or cut out those stories from the newspaper where you wish you could offer help. Tuck these news items in your Bible.

Before you go to sleep at night, read Psalm 95. Keep your Bible by your bedside so that it's the last thing you read before you fall asleep.

### Personal Discovery

It seems a little rushed to move so quickly into making noise – joyful or otherwise – even if we've found a way through the silence. We've only just learned to start talking aloud. Must we really make a joyful noise? It seems naïve and a bit obtuse. After all, the headlines are so awful. They are so terrible. There truly seems to be no good news. How could we possibly make a joyful noise?

It doesn't matter to the Psalmist. He wants to sing to the Lord with gratitude (Psalm 95:1-2). He wants to praise God anyway. Of course, after observing the natural world all last week, it's no surprise that the Psalmist finds reason for praise in nature. He observes that God is good and greater than all other gods. (Remember that the Hebrew Scriptures were written within the context of a polytheistic world.) And yet, there is nothing the Psalmist can point to. There's no proof – not in the news or in the crocus popping up in the snow. No.

Instead, the Psalmist observes that God did long, long, long ago. God created the world from the depths of the sea to the heights of the

mountains (Psalm 95:4-5). This is the reason that for praise. There is depth and height in God's wondrous world. God created this world in joy and so we should be making lots and lots of joyful noises, but joy doesn't come easily to all of us.

In his dictionary for the spiritually curious, *Wishful Thinking*, the writer and pastor Frederick Beuchner defines joy through Jesus Christ (John 15:11). His point in this citation is that joy is more than happiness. In Beuchner's understanding, what separates happiness from joy is how each appears. In his words,

Happiness turns up more or less when you expect it to – a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this understanding begs the question: what if we don't like surprises? Or worse, what if we can't figure out how to overcome the bad news that surrounds us?


Certainly, when we pick up the newspaper or watch the news, we are aware of the many things are going wrong in our world. Even if we're not thinking about our own personal problems, it's difficult not to feel swallowed up by the headlines that insist upon poverty, war, violence and destruction. There is no joy in the complete lack of emotion from the news anchor reading a teleprompter announcing the death toll in Iraq or the number of people without adequate health care. The emotional reaction is left for us. On the other side of the television screen, we are left to gasp with shock and dismay. The newspaper doesn't talk back to our

newsprint-covered  
hands smudging away  
the tears rolling down  
our face as we read  
more bad news in the  
fine print of the local  
paper. So, where could  
we possibly find joy?


More often than not,  
when we are  
confronted with local,  
national or global  
headlines, we feel  
immobilized. Joy  
seems impossible and  
foreign. Joy is not  
something that we can claim in that moment  
staring at the screen or the newspaper. Instead  
of joy, we feel stuck. We can't imagine how this  
world will ever change for the better. We may  
even place blame on those that we feel are  
responsible for the way things are. But the truth  
is: all we can really do is lament. And so, we  
complain and complain and complain and  
*complain some more* about what is not working  
in this world that we believe God created with  
wonder.

Or at least, that's what we want to believe. We  
want to believe that this is the rock of our  
salvation where God is present in all things.  
Even if we can't choose joy in that moment, we  
still want to affirm these words of praise where  
all of creation begins with God.

In her book, *Acedia & Me*, the writer and poet  
Kathleen Norris doesn't skirt around this  
contradiction. She explains that acedia "is  
understood as the rejection of a divine and  
entirely good gift."<sup>2</sup> It's not a rejection of God  
that she learns from the ancient Christian desert  
mothers and fathers but a realization that her  
frustration toward the world is actually a spiritual  
struggle. With "so many choices" around her,  
Norris finds that the early monastic idea of  
acedia best describes her indifference to having



Even if we can't  
choose joy in that  
moment, we still  
want to affirm  
these words of  
praise where all  
of creation  
begins with God.



choices at all. Acedia is how she yearns for the  
right choice but feels too immobilized to  
choose.<sup>3</sup> When pushed to conclude if this  
understanding is enough, Norris concludes that  
acedia is:

A way where there is no way; this is what  
God, and only God can provide. This is  
salvation, which in Hebrew means widening  
or making sufficient. As we move from death  
to life we discover grace, a force as real as  
gravity, and are reminded of its presence in  
the changing of the seasons, and in the  
dying of the seeds from which new life  
emerges, so that even our deserts may  
bloom. It permeates the very language we  
use, and we are fortunate indeed that our  
words are far wiser than we are. Any poet  
knows that they can spark new meaning,  
even years after we have written them, and  
tell us what we most need to know. Poetry  
might not seem like much in an unjust and  
violent world, in which acedia tempts us to  
give up on the fight for something better.  
But poetry - Psalms and hymns - can be a  
remedy for the human tendency to take  
refuge in indifference.<sup>4</sup>

The question is: can we change our attitude  
toward this overwhelming bad news? Is there a  
way for us to process the violence, war, poverty  
and destruction in such a way that allows us to  
truly find joy? How can we possibly struggle  
with the human tendency to take refuge in  
indifference?

It means we can't get stuck. We can't be  
immobilized. We can't feel inadequate. Instead,  
we have to find a way to realize that we truly do  
have all it takes to make a difference. As a poet  
and a writer, Norris finds strength in words. She  
finds evidence of possibility and renewal in the  
common language we use. This is what allows  
Norris not to succumb to acedia. Instead of  
allowing it to consume her, Norris allows acedia  
to be her companion in the same way that the  
contemporary Benedictine Mary Forman finds

comfort in “godly sorrow.” In this monastic rule, the individual comes to this spiritual state “when a person recognizes that she is at fault or in need of forgiveness, and at the same time realizes that forgiveness is possible.”<sup>5</sup>

In the monastic rule and in *acedia*, there is no escape from the reality of what feels broken. You can't just decide that it will be over and have that be so. It's still there. In our case, it's the thing to which we've fallen silent. That thing - whatever it is that causes the grumpy kind of emptiness - is still there. It may make us numb and unfeeling but it doesn't necessarily mean that we separated from joy. Instead, the joy in both *acedia* and the monastic rule is the wonder that there is still possibility. This feeling we have right now won't be all that we know. There will be something else. Even if we can't quite imagine how we'll emerge from this state of frustration and tedium, there *will* be something else. There is some other possibility that will finally give the wholeness and peace for which we so long. It's out there. Even if we can't see it, the joy comes in realizing that it will be.

To Beuchner's point, this kind of joy is not the same thing as being happy. It's not filled with smiles and laughter. It is far more persistent. It is adamant that change will come - just as God is always there. There may be no proof that God is there but the Psalmist bows down before God anyway (Psalm 95:6).

He is so adamant in this faith that he wants others to realize God is there. Even though they feel pushed and tested, even when their hearts were hard, God was there (Psalm 95:7-10). No matter how the people reject the workings of God, the Psalmist sings that God will still be there because God has never left any of us alone. Instead, our God is the one that makes a way where there is no way.

This is far easier to believe when you're in trouble. When you're feeling pushed and tested, when your heart is hard, you want more than

anything to believe that God will make a way where there is no way. Or God might make a way. It's possible, anyway.

Our indifference appears when we're confronted with the more mundane aspects of life. When we don't feel anything shifting or anything really significant on the horizon, we don't really think about God.

Things aren't so bad. There's nothing really wrong. We are less likely to mutter prayers of lament or praise. When things aren't so bad, we don't think we need salvation.

But, is that ever true? Don't we always need salvation? Don't we always need to know that God is there?

How can we possibly become so aware of this salvation that we never singing to the Lord with gratitude (Psalm 95:1-2)?

Or is that this joy - the joy of God's salvation - is just so hard to come by? We don't notice it because we're looking for the wrong signs - and joy is unpredictable. Or could we find that joy, as Norris does, in our common language? Could it just be in our words?

There's an early church custom that illustrates this disconnect that seems so common to Christian life. In the early church, the season of Lent began by burying the alleluia where congregations would literally entomb this word alleluia. It's a verbal fast from allowing these words to escape our lips. During this period of six weeks, since the fifth century, Christian communities have refrained from uttering this word of praise until Easter Sunday - not just in church but everywhere else. The custom dictates that you're not supposed to say alleluia in church or at home.

They changed their common language ever so slightly. By not saying this one word, at church or at home, Christians let the alleluia rest so that

when it reappeared on Easter Sunday, it had new meaning for us as a truly joyful noise.

It may not be an alleluia that you bury but perhaps there is some slight change in your words that you can make. Be it the omission of a word or the addition of some phrase. Whatever it may be in the ordinary way you converse, you might find joyful noise as unpredictable as the words you choose.

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Beuchner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 58.

<sup>2</sup>Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks and a Writer's Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 23.

<sup>3</sup>Norris, 125.

<sup>4</sup>Norris, 285.

<sup>5</sup>Norris, 280.

### Discovery Reflections

Reread the headlines you've gathered this week. What do you notice about the headlines you've clipped? Is there some common theme you can find in them? How do they relate to the words of Psalm 95?

How do you differentiate between joy and happiness?

Does Kathleen Norris' definition of acedia describe your experience of feeling stuck? What more would you add? Or instead, what would you take away to better describe your own experience of being stuck?

Turn back to *My Journey Toward Transformation* on page 5. How do you feel about this now? Is there a change you'd like to make? Is there something you've already learned from your chosen transformation?



## Group Discovery

Our Joyful Noise

### Materials

- Headlines from the past week
- Candles
- Bibles

### Centering

Mingled between silence and candlelight, we'll read today's headlines together. In this time, we'll listen together for a joyful noise.

### Communal Sharing

From this centering, allow a time for those who desire to share to reflect aloud about their experience of the Daily Discovery, the Personal Discovery or the Discovery Reflections. This may also be a time to share about joys and concerns after the past week.

### Biblical Exploration

Read Philippians 4 as a group. Discuss the following questions as a large group.

- How does this passage speak to the headlines we've just heard?
- Where is joy for you right now?

### Activity

We'll take a few moments in silence together to consider how we've found joy personal movement toward transformation. Ask yourself: have I found joy yet? Look back at the *My Journey Toward Transformation* and particularly your answer to the final question for the *Discovery Reflection* this week.

After this silence, you will be asked to share whether or not you've found joy. We'll divide into three groups based on our answer to this question: the "yeses," the "nos," and the "no but yeses." In these small groups, we'll ask each other the following questions so that we can learn from each other.

- How do you know you have/have not found joy?
- What particular experience or moment best illustrates your experience of joy so far? Be as specific as possible.
- What's missing from your joy?
- What else do you want to learn from this joy?
- As you listen to others share, what have you learned about joy?

As each individual shares, take notes on the important things that you notice. Jot down ideas of things you want to try or even things that you hope for in the next three weeks. After this group experience, we'll have another moment of silence before blessing each other.

## Blessing

Adapted from the Art and Liturgy Seminar, Brazil, January 1993<sup>1</sup>

One: Now we are leaving.

**All: Everyone will go once again in his or her activities,  
some of them important, others, not.**

One: We leave something here.

**All: We leave very beautiful people,  
visible and invisible, who have helped us.**

One: We take large suitcases back, full of things,

**All: and we take ourselves, not always something easy to do,  
and we take Jesus' presence who never leaves us alone,  
and we take this beautiful greeting: May God bless you.**

<sup>1</sup> Maria C. Tirabassi and Kathy Wonson Eddy, eds. *Gifts of Many Cultures: Worship Resources for the Global Community* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995), 59.



# The Lord is My Shepherd

Focus Scripture: Psalm 23

## Daily Discovery

As you focus your attention on how transformation will occur in your life, take 10 minutes every night this week to consider *who* and *what* gives you comfort and support. You may want to journal these thoughts or muse over them as you reread Psalm 23.

## Personal Discovery

Shepherds appear in the story of Jesus' birth. They are the poor ones working at night in the fields tending their sheep when suddenly angels appear and tell them there is good news coming in Bethlehem (Luke 1:8-20). However, we don't tend to think of them at other times of the year. They stay there in the beginning of the story of Christ.

They certainly aren't the people that we think about here in the middle of Lent. Instead, this week in the Revised Common Lectionary, the Gospel tells a story about the certainty of faith. Each Gospel Lesson in each year of this cycle of readings goes to this place of certainty (John 9:1-41, John 3:14-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32). No shepherds to be found. Not even a hint of nurture or guidance as a shepherd might.

In all of this certainty, is the Lord a shepherd?  
Can we claim such a thing?

In his little book that considers the depth of meaning in the familiar words of Psalm 23, Rabbi Kushner begins to explain the first line by recalling its authors.

The earliest ancestors of the Hebrew people who gave us the Bible were nomads, owning no property, bound to no one location but traveling with their flocks and herds

wherever there was pastureland for the animals to graze on. Sometimes this involved a journey of a few miles, sometimes it meant longer trips from drought-plagued areas to well-watered neighboring countries. Generations later, their descendants would become farmers and learn to see life in partnership between the hard work of the farmer and the grace of heaven sending the rain in its season. Later still, some of them would be artisans and merchants. Their understanding of religion would expand to include the ethics of honoring contracts and relating to workers and customers fairly. But they never forgot their origins, telling stories of Abraham, Moses and David tending their sheep. Long after they stopped being shepherds themselves, they retained the mind-set of the shepherd guarding his flock with love for every tender lamb, dedicated to protecting them from the world's dangers. And in their poetry, they pictured God as a shepherd.<sup>1</sup>

With this fantastic imagery lifted right out of the every day experience of ancient people, it's no surprise that God is a shepherd in these ancient lyrics. For us, thousands of years later, it's a metaphor. No matter how often we find this metaphor in the Biblical text (Numbers 27:16-17; Ezekiel 34:5-6, 11-12, 31; Isaiah 40:11; Matthew 10:16; Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:4-7; Acts 20:28-29), this metaphor is not one that emerges from our own experience as easily as we can turn to the hills for answers. Instead, it takes some digging for us to understand the ancient shepherd's experience of their own lives and their God – even if we can relate to the uncertainty of caring for a flock and the

overwhelming challenge of trying to anticipate every need.

Shepherds of ancient Israel didn't know where their flocks might lead. They didn't know what to expect. And yet, they followed the flock, kept them safe and searched with them for the food and water so that the sheep needed to survive.

To understand this, Rabbi Kushner uplifts the story of Jacob in Genesis 29-31. Jacob becomes a shepherd when he discovers the well that satisfies the sheep's thirst (Genesis 29:1-3). Jacob quickly learns that these shepherds work for Laban (Genesis 29:4-5) and gets to work. In the midst of this story, Jacob meets Rachel and they instantly fall in love and get married. Ignore the fact that they're cousins. It's not pertinent. In the Biblical story, this wedded relationship isn't concerned about their familial relationship. It's a good thing actually, but don't worry too much about this detail. Instead, focus your concern on the complicated matter when Rachel's father Laban tricks Jacob into consummating the marriage with his other daughter Leah (Genesis 29:21-25). Laban insists this is an ancient custom and Jacob gets talked into working for another seven years on top of the seven to which he's previously committed. And so, we learn that Laban isn't the nicest guy.

Jacob is the exact opposite. He wants to do the right thing even if his father-in-law doesn't think very much of him. Push comes to shove so that Jacob must justify his loyalty.

To proclaim such loyalty Jacob declares what Rabbi Kushner identifies as the "Shepherd's Creed" in Genesis 31:38-41. Jacob recalls and defends his right as a shepherd to return the flock that remains after part of the flock has been attacked.<sup>2</sup> Such defense may not seem like loyalty – but it definitely is. He didn't take the meat for himself. He was not negligent to his task. He tried to protect the flock – but something went wrong. As Rabbi Kushner explains,

The shepherd was expected to do his best to fend off the predators during the day, but could not reasonably be asked to do so at night, when he was entitled to his sleep and when predators were harder to see.<sup>3</sup>

Jacob can protect the flock and himself during the day, but at night, he can't be alone. It's impossible for him to see the predators that may surround him. The night is too dark. Besides the fact that Jacob needs to rest so that he can work the next day.

Jacob needs a shepherd. We all do. We all need someone who cares for us as much as we care for the rest of the world. For many Christians, the shepherd that instantly appears in our mind's eye is Jesus our Christ. After all, Jesus gives himself this title. He calls himself the "good shepherd" (John 10:11) so it seems we should believe him.

But, Jesus doesn't sound much at all like the shepherd Jacob. Instead of valuing his own safety, Jesus seems more determined to risk his life. Jesus insists again and again that a good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep (John 10:11, 15b, 17, 18). Though Jesus is certain in these words, it's difficult to stomach. It's uncomfortable for us to imagine any healthy person of sound mind willingly going to die such a brutal death. In the way that we most often tell this part of the story, when Jesus approaches the cross, we comfort each other with the assurance that Jesus died for a greater good.

It is the mystery of our faith. If transformation is going to emerge in our personal lives, something must come to an end. Something must die so that we can emerge anew. There must be a greater good through this horror.

Good Friday and Easter, death and Resurrection together, are a central image of the New Testament for the path to a



transformed self. The path involves dying to an old way of being and being reborn into a new way of being. Good Friday and Easter are about this path, the path of dying and rising, of being born again.<sup>4</sup>

Whether or not Jesus knew that he was going to die, scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan want to recall that God does not demand for Jesus' death.<sup>5</sup> The same God that the ancient Israelites found to be their protection when they can't see in the dark would not later require the death of Jesus or anyone else. Instead, Jesus dies because of the way he lived. He died because he lived a life filled with intense passion. Jesus ate with people that others didn't think to be human. He taught the disciples to be humble leaders. He had some harsh words to say about the structures of power that existed in the Roman Empire. In these lessons, Jesus didn't teach us to die. He taught us to live.

We need a shepherd so good. We all need such a shepherd that will remind us that the greater good is in this life. Even in the darkest valleys, the good shepherd is there. He is loyal. He is present. He leads us back to the right path so that surely goodness and mercy will follow.

This is why we call Jesus our Lord.

Because he is the Lord of our life. The lessons this poor, wandering man taught us are more important than any of the other lessons that the world can tell us. We want what he taught us to govern our lives.

He is the shepherd that helps us to see the greater good even on the darkest night when we're so tired that we can't see what evil might be lurking. Like Jacob, we know we can't see as clearly in the darkness and we know that we need a good night sleep. When we fail to get those things, whether we're overtired or just scared, we trust that someone will see us through. Whether we call that someone Lord or

God or Jesus or Mother, we know that we will be protected our hearts and that somehow we'll be led through the darkness.

This is why Jesus is our shepherd.

<sup>1</sup>Harold S. Kushner, *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 14-15.

<sup>2</sup>Kushner, 21.

<sup>3</sup>Kushner, 22.

<sup>4</sup>Borg and Crossan, 210.

<sup>5</sup>Borg and Crossan, 161.

### Discovery Reflections

If you were to create a metaphor for God from your own daily life, what would it be?

Who have you found to be a guide, support or protector as you've looked toward transformation in your life this Lent? How has this relationship changed your experience?

If you haven't relied on a family member, a loved one or a friend during this transformation, how might you seek out those relationships so that you can live more fully?



## Group Discovery

Shepherds in Our Midst

### Centering

Lakota Teachings, USA<sup>1</sup>

One: Everything as it moves,  
now and then, here and there,  
makes pauses.

**All: The bird, as it flies,  
stops in one place to make its nest,  
and in another to rest in its flight.**

One: In the same way,  
God has paused as well.

**All: The sun, which is so bright and beautiful,  
is one place where God has paused.**

One: The moon, the stars, the winds;  
God has been with them too.

**All: The trees, the animals, are all places where God has stopped,  
leaving the touch of the holy on these things.**

One: We, too, have had God pause in us.  
We, too, have the Holy touch in our beings.

**All: Let us now pause ourselves,  
and listen for the voice of God on our hearts.**

### Communal Sharing

From this centering, allow a time for those who desire to share to reflect aloud about their experience of the Daily Discovery, the Personal Discovery or the Discovery Reflections. This may also be a time to share about joys and concerns after the past week.

### Activity

In pairs, we'll experiment with what it feels like to have someone close by and far away. To start, stand facing each a comfortable distance apart. Then you'll be asked to move a little closer. Then we'll ask each other to increase the distance apart. After we return to our seats, in the same pairs, discuss how the various distances felt to each of you.

### Biblical Exploration

Read this translation of Psalm 23 in unison.

You, LORD, are my shepherd. I will never be in need. You let me rest in fields of green grass. You lead me to streams of peaceful water, and you refresh my life. You are true to your name, and you lead me along the right paths. I may walk through valleys as dark as death, but I won't be afraid. You are with me, and your shepherd's rod makes

me feel safe. You treat me to a feast, while my enemies watch. You honor me as your guest, and you fill my cup until it overflows. Your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life, and I will live forever in your house, LORD.

Discuss the following questions as a large group.

- What do you hear in this translation that you perhaps did not hear before?
- How do these ancient lyrics remind you that God is close?
- What do these ancient lyrics remind you to find in this life?
- Where have you found relationships like this divine relationship?

### Blessing

As a group, after a shared silence, we will close this gathering by celebrating one relationship in our lives that matters. You may offer aloud a name, a story or anything else that feels appropriate to the experience of this relationship.

For our next gathering, please bring something from nature with you.

<sup>1</sup>Maria C. Tirabassi and Kathy Wonson Eddy, eds. *Gifts of Many Cultures: Worship Resources for the Global Community* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995), 8.



# Out of the Depths

Focus Scripture: Psalm 130

### Daily Discovery

This week, take your Bible outside and read Psalm 130 to any part of nature that will listen. When you go back inside, focus your energy on the transformation that is taking place in your life.

Consider the sentence you wrote in *My Journey Toward Transformation* on page 5. Revise that sentence here so that it best articulates where you are now in the transformative process. You may write several revisions over the week as you practice proclaiming Psalm 130 to nature.

This Lent, I will move toward Easter by \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

### Personal Discovery

So, it's almost over. There are more weeks behind us than there are before us. Now is typically when to freak out because, for whatever reason, it hasn't worked out. It hasn't happened yet.

Easter is so soon – and you may be feeling that you're not really sure what you've gained anything on this journey. You may feel no closer to Resurrection than when we first began.

You are not the only one.

It is the desperate cry in this song. And it is so familiar. It's not only familiar to our own experience on this earth, but what we hear most in the songs sung from our Bible (Psalms 3-7,

12-13, 17, 22, 25-28, 31, 35, 38-40, 42-43, 51, 54-59, 61, 63-64, 69-71, 86, 88, 94, 102, 108-09, 120, 130, 137, 140-43).

Each of these songs gives voice to the "human tendency to turn to God for help and rescue in moments of trouble and distress."<sup>1</sup> It's just one voice singing in this Psalm – but we're all part of this congregation.<sup>2</sup>

The Psalm sings for our trouble and distress. Even if we can't sing these words ourselves, this song cries from the depths on behalf of an unknown and unnamed congregation that includes each of us.

We're all there in the depths. We're all feeling that overwhelming burden that makes us feel that there is nothing but death so that we can only feel lost and disoriented.<sup>3</sup> We can't seem to make our way out of this pit of guilt and shame. But, we're not alone.

There are others there with us. Each of us calling out the same frustrated cry because we all feel so broken and so imperfect. There are so many iniquities to be counted that it doesn't seem a single one of us will be able to stand upright at any time soon (Psalm 130:3, NRSV). We all long to be better. We may even be working hard to change what is broken and imperfect.

Indeed, as we seek transformation, we've been doing just that. We've recognized the depth of despair and agreed that we don't want to be there any more. We want to change. We want to believe that we can reach that perfection. Somehow it might be possible. Somehow we could realize such perfection. We wait for the Lord in this hope. But, no one is perfect.

This is good news. Believe it or not, this is such good news that it's worth saying again. No one is perfect. Kathleen Norris explains:

The good news about the word "perfect" as used in the New Testament is that it is not a scary word, so much as a scary translation. The word that has been translated as "perfect" does not mean to set forth an impossible goal, or the perfectionism that would have me strive for it at any cost. It is taken from a Latin word meaning complete, entire, full-grown. To those who originally heard it, the word would convey "mature" rather than what we mean today by "perfect."

To "be perfect," in the sense that Jesus means it, is to make room for growth, for the changes that bring us to maturity, to ripeness. To mature is to lose adolescent self-consciousness so as to be able to make a gift of oneself, as a parent, as teacher, friend or spouse.<sup>4</sup>

See? This is good news! Too often, when we attempt to understand how we might live like Christ, we trip over his divinity. We're not divine and so we can easily get stuck thinking that there is no way that we can possibly be as perfect as Jesus. As Norris explains, this is not what our faith calls us toward. Instead, in reaching perfection, we're invited to make room for growth which it seems is exactly what this Psalmist is trying to do in this ancient song.

Even though these words are sung long before the life and ministry of Jesus, the Psalmist seems to embody this teaching Norris understands about Jesus in turning away from the iniquities to the possibility of forgiveness (Psalm 130:4, NRSV). Reaching toward forgiveness allows for hope because our iniquities will not last forever. They may not disappear. They may not suddenly go away – but in time, we will ripen in them. For Norris, this means that she doesn't have to define herself by some definition of perfection

that leaves her feeling like she has to be Martha Stewart.<sup>5</sup> For the Psalmist, it means that there is more to come. There is a way out of the depths of despair. It's not clear what that way is but because of the hope of more to come, there is reason to revere (Psalm 130:4, NRSV) and wait for the Lord (Psalm 130:5-6, NRSV).

It's the same prayer that Jesus offers near the end of his life. With the disciples gathered in the garden, he tells them how sad he is and asks his friends to simply stay awake with him (Matthew 26:38, Mark 14:34, NRSV). Jesus prays alone. But, there is a whole congregation that surrounds him when he needs them most. Even though they can't stay awake and most certainly aren't listening to what Jesus might be praying, Jesus knows that they are there. He is not alone in his prayer. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan beautifully articulate the complexity of this moment just before Jesus is arrested.

Jesus prays for deliverance. He prays that this hour might pass from him, that this cup might be removed. Both "hour" and "cup" refer to his impending torture and cruel death. Not surprisingly, he would rather not go through with it. Yet he hands himself over: "Yet, not what I want, but what you want." An older English translation is more familiar to many of us: "Yet not my will, but thy will be done." It is important to add that this does not mean that Jesus' death was the will of God. It is never God's will that the righteous suffer. It was not God's will that Jesus died, any more than it was the will of God that any of the martyrs before and after Jesus were killed. Yet we may imagine them handing themselves over in the way that Jesus did, from Peter and Paul to Thecla and Perpetua to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the nuns in El Salvador. The prayer reflects not a fatalistic resignation to the will of God, but a trusting in God in the midst of the most dire of circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

As you move toward transformation, can you find that same trust in God? In the depth of your despair, in your imperfect brokenness, can you trust in the steadfast love of God?

Because you have a choice. We all have a choice. When we find ourselves in the middle of the most dire of our own circumstances – as all change is – will we choose to pull ourselves out of the depths while singing our own song of the forgiveness of God? Or will we can stay there in the depths to be defined only by our broken imperfections?

We can stay there in the depths or we can come out. We can stay with those impossible expectations or we can forgive ourselves for whatever we've failed to do.

Will we be quick to name all that is wrong? Will we fail to noticing the possibility of hope that might be staring us in the face?

Long after she started listening to her stomach like a toddler, the writer Anne Lamott made such a choice when she noticed such a possibility staring her in the face. In her own words:

In a fairy tale, you often have to leave the place where you have grown comfortable and travel to a fearful place full of pain, and search for what was stolen or confront the occupying villain; it takes time for the resulting change to integrate themselves into the small, funky moments that make up our lives. All that mess I had made, all that love and damage, all those connections, those ghosts and children who were parents to the children on the swings – all of this was part of the lava lamp inside me, inside my life. It was like finding a long-lost heirloom.<sup>7</sup>

At a familiar lagoon where she'd been mere months before when she'd been particularly frustrated with the state of the world. At that time, She'd been here before. Mere months before, she's been to this same lagoon. She'd

been so frustrated with the state of the world – and felt so hopeless to change it. Here, by that same lagoon, at that moment, she was able to see the change she hadn't seen before.

We may not discover what we expected to find, but we always have a choice.

It may not be an obvious choice. We might be uncertain. But, it is a choice. It is a choice to find that long-lost heirloom deep within us, that hidden hope that we've recently ignored. As we emerge from the depths and wait for our God, we're trying to claim the gurgling noises of the lava lamp within us all.

<sup>1</sup>Anthony R. Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 292.

<sup>2</sup>James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 405.

<sup>3</sup>Mays, 405.

<sup>4</sup>Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 55-56.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 55.

<sup>6</sup>Borg and Crossan, 123.

<sup>7</sup>Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 145.

### Discovery Reflections

How did it feel to rewrite the sentence that you first wrote on *My Journey Toward Transformation*? What changed? What hasn't changed?

Have you felt the presence of a whole congregation surrounding you in prayer – even when you know that in that moment you were technically alone? How did this awareness change your attitude?

When have you struggled to make a choice?  
How did you finally come to a decision?

What do you think about Kathleen Norris' faith-filled definition of perfection? How does this definition fit in our life?

Can you recall a time where you have looked back upon your life and discovered some part of you that you had perhaps forgotten was within you? How did that happen? How did it feel?



## Group Discovery

### Finding Our Lava Lamp

#### Materials

- Objects from nature
- Candles
- Bibles

#### Centering

As we gather in silence, we'll make an altar of the natural objects we've brought from the natural world today. Arrange your object wherever the Spirit moves you. Collaborate with others through gesture and smiles to create something that seems almost nearly "perfect." When it seems complete, we'll join in this prayer.

One: O God, we are not "perfect"

**All: so we will not set forth impossible goals.**

One: We will not strive to be "perfect" at any cost.

**All: O God, we will be complete, entire and full-grown.**

**We will be transformed as we make room for growth with you.**

#### Communal Sharing

From this centering, allow a time for those who desire to share to reflect aloud about their experience of the Daily Discovery, the Personal Discovery or the Discovery Reflections. This may also be a time to share about joys and concerns after the past week.

#### Biblical Exploration

Read Mark 14:32-42. Discuss the following questions as a large group.

- Do you relate more to Jesus or to the disciples? Why?
- How do you hear Jesus' request to the disciples?
- How do you hear Jesus' request of God?
- Where do you find transformation in this narrative?

#### Activity

In groups of three or four, remembering that we do not need to be "perfect," take time to talk about what's working in your transformation. Share the changes that you've noticed in your spirit and what you still hope to realize as you become resurrected.

#### Blessing

As a group, after a shared silence, we will bless each other by uplifting the transformations we've noticed in each other. You may offer anything about anyone else in this group that blesses them as we each go into this last week. Please conclude each blessing with "This is my lava lamp" to which the response is "Find your lava lamp."





## I Shall Not Die, But Shall Live

Focus Scripture: Psalm 118:5-9, 15-29

### Daily Discovery

This week, recount all of the ways that you have chosen to *live* in these six weeks of Lent. Do this when you wake up in the morning or as fall asleep at night, but be careful to choose the time that best compliments your body's internal time clock.

As these things come to mind, even if they are the same things every day, find ways to celebrate these big (and small) ways that you have chosen to *live* toward transformation.

### Personal Discovery

Have you been transformed? Have you noticed something change within you? Have you given yourself permission to truly choose life in these six weeks?

For most people, it's natural to start with those things that didn't work out. We are most accomplished at listing our faults - who we didn't recognize as our shepherds, how we still find ourselves in the depths, and how we failed to make any kind of noise at all. More often than not, we are quick to assert how we're still silent. We may be able to identify what the "gritchy kind of feeling", but nothing has changed. Nothing has resurrected. Easter will be the same as always.

Or at least, that's true for some of us. For others, the list of faults and errors rushes forward simply because we're from New England or from the Midwest or from the South and we feel compelled toward humility before anything else. Before we can pat ourselves on the back, our stubborn humility insists that we can't just proudly clap our hands for all that we've accomplished personally. No. No. We must

first start with the fact that it didn't *all* work out. It didn't go exactly as we thought. We didn't meet all of our expectations. Maybe we skipped a day or two. Maybe we never wrote down any of our thoughts. Maybe we didn't transform a darn thing.

It's OK. It's only natural.

Take a deep breath.

It's as natural as spring emerging from winter. It comes that quickly. Ironically, when that first crocus appears, we don't protest. We don't list all that didn't work out, but instead, we're filled with joy. We didn't have a darn thing to do with that little purple flower peeking through the cold, hard ground but we're so thrilled to finally see it. This Lent, you've challenged yourself to bring about that change yourself. Instead of merely waiting and hoping for the possibility of Resurrection, you've pushed yourself to experience it. You've attempted to practice it. You've taken your faith in the Christian creeds hope for Resurrection of the body and tried to make it happen within your own skin. Sure, there are things that didn't work out but even if it wasn't perfect, in this season, you've attempted to celebrate who you are as God's created image.

Easter is all about this celebration. No matter what failures there may have been, this moment of Resurrection is filled with celebration. We celebrate knowing that we're still on the "path of dying and rising, of being born again."<sup>1</sup> Borg and Crossan add to this understanding of the path in the simple reminder that

Easter is not about an afterlife or about happy endings. Easter is about God's "yes" to Jesus *against* the powers who killed him... Easter affirms that the domination systems of this world are not of God and that they do not have the final word.<sup>2</sup>

In this reminder, we recall that it's not about the end result. Things may not be perfect. Things may be far from perfect but the Easter story reminds us that transformation isn't really about the happy ending. It's a reminder that that perfection continues far, far beyond the Resurrection. It continues in each of us every day simply because "Jesus continues to be experienced after his death."<sup>3</sup> Our experience of the Risen Christ is not the same as it would have been two thousand years ago. We experience Jesus

in a radically new way. He is no longer a figure of flesh and blood, confined to time and space, but a reality who can enter locked rooms, journey with followers without being recognized, be experienced in both Galilee and Jerusalem, vanish in the moment of recognition, and abide with his followers always, "until the end of the age."<sup>4</sup>

That's what we want. We're looking for that "radically new way" to experience this life. Logic tells us that we won't be entering locked rooms and be in two places at once. We want to be changed but not like that. That would be too much. Instead, we hope that our transformation will continue just as Jesus' transformation does. We want our transformation to change our daily lives. We want it to change how we relate to others. It might not be perfect. We may still need a little more practice. And yet, the "radically new way" of our transformation pushes us not to accept the systems that tell us that we can't change, that we can't improve ourselves or even experience life differently than we do now.

It's not nearly as simple as jumping up and down for the joy of a purple flower peeking through the snow. It's not quite the stone rolling away from the tomb.

For us, change happens far more slowly. It will take longer than six weeks. It will probably take longer than the season of spring. It'll keep going into summer and maybe even to fall. Our transformation will continue as the natural world transforms itself over and over and over again. We will continue to change as the world around us changes.

On Easter morning, we praise God by signing about bulbs becoming flowers. We wait for spring to emerge so that Christians (at least, those Christians that live in the Western hemisphere) can experience new life in those hints of spring that can focus our attention in the transformation we celebrate on Easter Sunday.

We weren't at the tomb. We didn't get to see it with our own eyes. We want to experience that "figure of flesh and blood" in our own bodies. It's not enough to know that we experience Jesus in a "radically new way." We want to see it for ourselves. We want the miracle. We want so much to see that Resurrection somehow revealed in our midst. So, we look for signs of spring.

This is no accident. As the renowned preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor reflects in her reflection, *The Unnatural Truth*, the moon sets our celebration of Easter so that we don't celebrate until the "first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the spring equinox."<sup>5</sup> It seems only natural.

And yet, as Taylor points out, what happens on that first Easter morning in the Gospels (Matthew 28:1-20, Mark 16:1-20, Luke 24:1-53, John 20:1-19) is totally unnatural. We can comfort ourselves all we want with the new life of spring from what was deadness of winter. We can hunt for as many signs of Resurrection in the

natural world as much as we want, but that's not what we know to be true about life. It might happen in nature year after year after year but we know that most of the time, when life ends, life ends. Taylor explains:

Resurrection ... is entirely unnatural. When a human being goes into the ground, that is that. You do not wait around for the person to reappear so you can pick up where you left off – not this side of the grave, anyhow. You say good-bye. You pay your respects and you go on with your life as best you can, knowing that the only place springtime happens in a cemetery is on the graves, not in them.<sup>6</sup>

And so it may be for us. We may not have had enough time to say goodbye. We may still be paying our respects. We may still be too bewildered from the journey of these six weeks to know how we might go on or even notice the possibility that we already are experiencing life in a "radically new way." Even with the bold exclamations that are familiar to our Easter celebration, we may find that the only hint of Resurrection we can grasp is the realization that all hope is not lost.

This is where the ancient song begins. It does not begin with the certain faith that good news is abundant. Instead, the Psalmist calls upon God "out of distress" (Psalm 118:5) which is to say that everything is *not* perfect. There is something amiss. There is something troubling.

And yet, even in distress, it is the possibility that lies ahead that ultimately offers comfort. All hope is not lost. She does a tremendous job of talking herself into the assurance of what is to come. She urges herself to believe that if only she can "take refuge in the Lord" (Psalm 118:8), there will be nothing to fear (Psalm 118:6). She only needs to trust in God.

She doesn't stop there. Her personal pep talk goes a step further than merely talking about

what God can do. She pushes herself to ask, "What can mortals do for me?" (Psalm 118:6).

She wants to believe that where humanity is narrow, God will give her a "broad place" (Psalm 118:5). And really, who can blame her? When humanity fails, even when that humanity is you or I, we want to be able to find salvation in someone or something that will literally pull us back from the edge of death and into life.

The question is: will humanity help or will God be the one to come to the rescue? How do we know what is God's doing and what is the work of humanity? There are forces in this world – in each of our lives – that insist on power and domination. This is what mortals can do, will this be the last thing? Is this all there is? Or can God rescue us from power and domination?

It's this question the Psalmist asks. How can we affirm God's "yes"? Where do we find it? What does it look like? Does it look like Moses on the other side of the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1-18)? Or is this "yes" too complicated by the Egyptians armies that were just destroyed in the freedom of the Israelites? Does God's "yes" be found in blessing Abraham with the angels of God? Or is it too hard to overcome that this father actually attempted to kill his son (Genesis 22:1-18)? Is it any easier with Noah? We want to celebrate every time we see a rainbow because we remember the promise that God made after the flood (Genesis 9:1-17), but we can't help the grumpy feeling that a truly righteous man wouldn't let all those people die in a flood. We try to sing the faith of these stories but they are complicated by the things that don't seem divine. They are not perfect stories. They don't always have happy endings. So, how can we ever know how to live in this "radically new way"? How do we dare to live in God's "yes"?

No matter how boldly this Psalmist sings, we're not so sure that we can really claim these lyrics because we're not sure if we've truly changed. We can't help the fact that we're still thinking

about what didn't work out. After all, it's only natural.

The challenge in reading these ancient lyrics is to "recount the deeds of the Lord" (Psalm 118:17). It's all about finding those moments when God has been good to us.

Sure, things have been bad. We've made mistakes. We've messed up. It hasn't been all sunshine and roses during this season of Lent or last spring or in all of the years of our lives, but there have been moments when we've caught a glimpse of what God has done that is indeed "marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118:23). Something has shifted. Something has changed. We found life when everything felt dead. It felt like nothing would ever change – but something did. And it is marvelous.

Instead of paying her respects and saying goodbye to the life that could have been, we found life again. Transformation happened. It is *still* happening as we grow and mature into this "radically new way." It doesn't negate what has been. It doesn't mean everything has changed – but *some thing* has. Some thing is different.

It might not be all that we hoped to accomplish and achieve. We might not be able to forget our failures and mistakes, but we will exclaim with the Psalmist, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24). Easter comes every time we say these words. Every time we rejoice in the awareness that transformation is never ending. God will never tire of saying "yes."

<sup>1</sup>Borg and Crossan, 210.

<sup>2</sup>Borg and Crossan, 205-206.

<sup>3</sup>Borg and Crossan, 204.

<sup>4</sup>Borg and Crossan, 204.

<sup>5</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Unnatural Truth," *The Christian Century*, 20 March 1996.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

### Discovery Reflections

When during this season of Lent did you feel God doing something that you couldn't do for yourself?

Where did you praise God and yourself this week? How might these moments of praise shape your celebration of Easter?

How will you move toward transformation beyond the moment of Easter celebration? How will you continue to live life in a "radically new way"?



## Group Discovery

We Shall Not Die, But Shall Live

### Materials

- Bibles
- Oil for anointing

### Centering

Easter has almost come – so begin this last time together with a little rejoicing. As we closed our time together last week, we will begin by uplifting our praise. Share something that causes you to jump up and down for joy – whether it’s something that happened this week, in the news or in your prayers. Please conclude each praise with “This is the day that the Lord has made” to which the response is “We will rejoice.”

### Communal Sharing

From this centering, allow a time for those who desire to share to reflect aloud about their experience of the Daily Discovery, the Personal Discovery or the Discovery Reflections. This may also be a time to share about joys and concerns after the past week.

### Activity

We began this journey by recognizing a “gritzy kind of emptiness” within us that we ultimately hoped to change. In groups of 3 or 4, recall *My Journey Toward Transformation*. Explore together how you’ve found the fullness of life in this practice of resurrecting yourself.

### Biblical Exploration

Read John 20:1-19. Discuss the following questions as a large group.

- How does Jesus choose life? Is it a natural or unnatural choice?
- How does Mary choose life? Is it a natural or unnatural choice?
- How does this unnatural story help you to choose life?

### Blessing

As a group, as we each feel comfortable, we’ll share how we’ll continue to seek to move toward transformation beyond our Easter celebration. We’ll share in a blessing by anointing as we go into the world filled with rejoicing for all that God has done with us.



## Our Covenant Toward Transformation

Moving *Toward Transformation* may need more than witnesses. It may require one person within your small group who promises to hold you in prayer and make you accountable. A covenant is a written agreement to share in this sacred task. Write it how you will share in this relationship below in full sentences. If your small group so chooses, in addition to signing the *My Journey Toward Transformation*, these covenant partner relationships will be witnessed.

Covenant Partner Name \_\_\_\_\_

I will move toward Easter by \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Covenant Partner Name \_\_\_\_\_

I will move toward Easter by \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

We will be accountable to each other and to God in these ways. During Holy Week, we will share with that each other how I experienced of Lent and how I understand Easter now.

**We will treat each other with** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**We understand that the best way that we can be accountable to each other is** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**We expect these things from each other** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**We may have left something out. If so, we will also** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**We will communicate in the following ways and frequency** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_