

Our Congregational Way



JESUS
top 40

**Journey
with Jesus**



The Congregational Church of *New Canaan*

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Dear Church Friends,

Last year, we produced a booklet similar to this one. We called it *Bible Top 40: Bible Stories Everyone Should Know*. We identified the Bible stories we would focus on each Sunday in worship and encourage our church families and individuals to spend time on Sunday evenings reflecting on those stories. We strongly encouraged, perhaps pushed, everyone to carve out some quiet time, to be together as family where possible, and to engage in Christian formation at home.

The response was overwhelmingly positive! Many individuals and families used the booklet throughout the year. Parents and children discussed the stories around the table. People took the booklet on vacation and business trips. It was a way for our members and friends to connect with each other and to stay connected with our church wherever they were on Sunday morning.

The year 2020 marks the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock. This anniversary provides us an opportune time to honor our religious and theological heritage. One of the foundational principles of the Congregational Way is the centrality of Jesus. Neither the pastor nor the Board of Deacons is the head of the church. That place belongs to Jesus.

Therefore, for the 2019-2020 year, we offer you a second booklet: *Jesus Top 40: Journey With Jesus*. It follows the same format as last year's booklet. We hope you will use it in the same way. This time the focus will be the life and teachings of Jesus. We hope this study guide will lead you and our church into deeper fellowship with one another and embolden you to be Christlike in your daily life.

Blessings,
Eric

September 8

Opening the Door

Read: Revelation 3:14–22

*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.
Revelation 3:20*

There are a seemingly infinite number of claims made about what someone needs to do to enter into a relationship with Jesus—you have to say specific words or believe a particular doctrine or behave a certain way. However, this passage in the book of Revelation indicates that it is Jesus who takes primary responsibility for the relationship. Jesus comes to the door. Jesus knocks. Jesus calls to us through the door. Jesus enters through the doorway. Jesus shares a meal with us. In this passage of scripture, Jesus does most of the work to initiate the relationship. All we need to do is open the door—open ourselves up to Jesus, and he will enter in. Maybe as Christians we need fewer rules and more openings for Jesus to work through.

Fact Questions:

- Who is the audience for this passage?
- Who is it that stands at the door and knocks?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What does it mean to call someone lukewarm in their faith?
- What would you do if Jesus knocked on your door?

Lord, I admit that I close a lot of my life off to you. Only when I am in need and at the end of my options do I turn to you. Which means that most of the time you are standing outside my life waiting to enter, like a visitor to a house who rings a doorbell that goes unheard and unheeded by the family inside. Lord, for all the times I have kept you out of my life, I apologize. Enter in today. Enter into my life every day. I want you to always feel welcome. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

September 15

Anna and Simeon

Read: Luke 2:22–38

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Luke 2:28–32

Simeon took the infant Jesus in his arms and proclaimed for everyone in the temple to hear that Jesus was special—destined for greatness. In Jesus, Simeon saw glory and light and salvation. How could Simeon have known all that the moment Jesus and his family entered the temple? Unless, somehow, that is the divine hope God has for every child born into the world. We were created to be light. We were born to glorify God. And we have within us the power to be a saving presence in the world. We cannot know the exact details for certain, and the text indicates that only Jesus received this particular acknowledgment, but what if every child brought to the temple was taken up in Simeon’s arms and hailed as special? What a gift that would be . . . It would be the kind of gift God would choose to give to all children and their parents.

Fact Questions:

- What rested on Simeon indicating God was with him?
- What did Anna do in the temple night and day?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What are the names of the parents of Jesus?
- What was special about Jesus? Do you feel special?

Lord, I worry about feeling special. When people feel uniquely gifted or blessed, that is often followed by a sense of superiority and arrogance. I do not want to be like that, so I often downplay my importance in the world. However, while you may encourage humility within us, you still love us and call us to great and important work that sheds light and glory and salvation throughout your world. Special or not, I want to be a part of that. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

September 22

Boy Jesus in the Temple

Read: Luke 2:41–52

Jesus said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

Luke 2:49

The story of Jesus in the temple as a boy is fascinating, because at one moment the account conveys an image of a child far wiser than his years, while in the next it demonstrates a youth’s careless disregard for his parents. As a boy Jesus was wise, but he was still very much a boy. From a young age we are told that Jesus appeared both human and divine. He understood that there were more expansive definitions of family than the ones traditionally held, while at the same time he callously worried his immediate family of origin.

This brief story ends with a hint of repentance. It says that after disappearing from the family caravan and causing his mother and father to frantically search Jerusalem for him, Jesus became obedient. He chose to follow the instruction of his earthly parents, and he grew in age and wisdom as well as divine and human favor. Jesus made a mistake, he needlessly frightened his parents, and he chose never to be that careless toward his family again. Jesus grew up.

Fact Questions:

- How old was Jesus in this story?
- Where did they find Jesus?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Have you ever caused your parents great anxiety?
- Does the church seem like a family to you? Why or why not?

Lord, I have this image of a perfect Jesus—a Jesus who was divine from conception. Is it not possible that divinity is something he grew into . . . as you encourage us all to grow up and grow closer to you? So many aspects of faith confuse me, but imagining Jesus dealing with some of the same flaws I recognize in my own life encourages me to believe that I can learn to be more faithful too. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

September 29

Jesus' Baptism

Read: Luke 3:21–22

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened.

Luke 3:21

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' baptism and heaven's pronouncement are more gradual than in the other Gospels. Matthew and Mark seem to indicate that just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, the heavens were immediately torn open for all to see, and the voice of God bellowed forth for all to hear. Luke's account, however, is quieter and more personal. According to Luke, Jesus had been baptized and was off praying. Then, for a moment, it was as if the heavens opened, a dove seemed to descend, and Jesus sensed God's affirmation of his life.

There are some people for whom coming to faith is an unmistakable thunderclap experience. But for many, many others, the experience of the divine is more subtle, mistakable, and something that requires continued faith. If Jesus was entirely certain about his connection with God, if he did not have moments of doubt, if he had conclusive proof of who he was, then he is entirely unlike most human beings. If Jesus' own religious epiphany was a bit more nuanced, however, then he is a more than able guide and savior for those of us who are less than certain about most issues in heaven and on earth.

Fact Questions:

- What descended upon Jesus after his baptism?
- Whose voice came from heaven?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Have you seen someone baptized in the church? What do you remember about it?
- Why did Jesus need to be baptized?

Lord, the great promise of our Christian faith is that you have walked the paths we walk, you have suffered the same fear and doubt and affliction that we endure, and you have grappled with the same questions and concerns that plague our own lives. Because you made your way through a life similar to ours, you have the power to lead us to a life that is similar to yours. Thank you for that gift and for your ever-present guidance. In your name, I pray. Amen.

October 6

The Temptation of Jesus

Read: Matthew 4:1–11

Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

Matthew 4:2–3

The tempter appeared only after Jesus has fasted for forty days and forty nights, which means that the tempter might have chosen a time of particular weakness for Jesus. Can you imagine not eating for more than a month, only to be tempted by food? However, after forty days of fasting, Jesus wasn't weak . . . he was strong. Think of the alcoholic who has been sober for forty days—day forty-one is much easier than day one. The tempter should have showed up when Jesus first entered the wilderness.

When we get serious about dealing with our addictions, our bad habits, and those private sins that are known only to us, we don't get weaker as the days are added to our recovery—we get stronger. We are able to endure even more temptation than when we began. What is difficult for us on day one is more manageable by day forty.

Fact Questions:

- How long did Jesus spend in the wilderness without food?
- Who did Jesus encounter in the wilderness?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Describe how it feels to resist the temptation to do something wrong?
- Do you believe in angels and why or why not?

Lord God, it almost sounds like an infomercial for a weight loss program—lose forty pounds in forty days. But it is true that the more committed we are, the longer we face our temptations, the less tempting they become. Push me to face the temptations that rule my life so that I can turn leadership of my life over to you. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

October 13

Call of the Disciples

Read: Mark 1:16–20; 2:13–17

As Jesus was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

Mark 2:14

Life with Jesus starts with an invitation. In our culture which values self-starters, people who take initiative, and those blessed with entrepreneurial spirit, we often forget the invitational nature of Jesus’ ministry with us. Jesus called the disciples away from the lives they had always known—and perhaps felt shackled to—to a new adventure that would prove to be the time of their lives. It is very possible that Peter, Andrew, James, and John mending their fishing nets and Levi at his tax booth were dying inside—wanting a life of deeper meaning where they could make a difference. However, the pathway to a new and enlivening existence did not commence as a result of the force of their own will. All they did was accept an invitation to take a walk with Jesus. Jesus made the first move, they simply responded.

Perhaps the way to a new and more meaningful life is not to suddenly decide to do something innovative and exciting that takes us in a different direction, but to simply accept invitations when they come our way. Living invitationally—accepting requests from others—may be the means by which Jesus himself welcomes us to walk in his ways.

Fact Questions:

- What did the fishermen use to catch fish?
- What did Simon and Andrew leave behind in order to follow Jesus?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Jesus said, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” What does that mean?
- Do you follow Jesus? How?

Lord, when I feel like I want to make changes in my life, I believe I must somehow take the initiative. I must assert myself—impress my will on a certain situation—in order to effect change. But what if the life you intend us to lead is a series of invitations you invite us to accept? What if the most faithful path forward in life is saying “yes” to the next invitation that comes my way? Perhaps an invitation is your way of calling me to follow you. In your name, I pray. Amen.

October 20

The Beatitudes

Read: Matthew 5:1–12

Then Jesus began to speak, and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 5:2–3

The message of the Beatitudes is as beautiful as it is simple. Jesus tells us that what God values and what we tend to value are often entirely different. We seek popularity, prosperity, prestige, and political power. We envy and admire people who possess such things. We want them for ourselves. Jesus lets us know that God couldn't care less about our high-profile desires. God values those who are poor and meek and hungry. God celebrates the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. God blesses those our world hardly notices. And, God's blessing lasts a whole lot longer than the world's admiration!

Fact Questions:

- Where did Jesus go to in order to teach?
- Did Jesus teach standing up or sitting down?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What kind of people do you admire and value?
- Have you ever been blessed by someone? How do you think it feels to be blessed?

Lord, you love the least—those people who are of little interest to us—the poor, the lowly, and the unremarkable. You remind us that those we often choose last are first in line for your kingdom. The people we think of as broken, you call beloved and blessed. Help me to learn to value what you value, to love as you love, to see as you see . . . and respond accordingly. In your name, I pray. Amen.

October 27

Greatest Commandment

Read: Matthew 22:34-40

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, ““You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.””

Matthew 22:36-37

This is the third in a series of conflict scenes between Jesus and the religious leaders of the time, the Pharisees and Sadducees. A lawyer was trying to test Jesus and get him to say something incriminating. Which of the 613 commandments in the Hebrew Bible is the greatest? Jesus quotes the first commandment from Moses in Deuteronomy 6:5. Then, he quotes Leviticus 19:18, a section of the Bible that offers a vision for a world marked by justice and compassion. Fortunately, we don't have to memorize all 613 commandments. Jesus narrowed it down for us. Love God and love your neighbor.

Fact Questions:

What was the occupation of the man who tested Jesus with a question?
How many commandments did Jesus name?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What things can you do to show your love of God and your love of your neighbor?
- Do you think Jesus passed the test?

Gracious God, help me to view your commandments, not as a burden, but as important ways to be in proper relationship with you and the people around me. Help me also to trust that if I am obedient to your commandments, my life will be more fulfilled and more peaceful. God, I want love to be the guiding and animating force in my life. Amen.

November 3

Generous Landowner

Read: Matthew 20:1–16

*Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?
Or are you envious because I am generous?
Matthew 20:15*

The laborers did not understand their employer’s motives, and they became disgruntled. They got the compensation they had agreed to, but after working all day long, they were displeased that those who worked only an hour received the exact same paycheck. How was that fair? How can the last to be chosen receive as much as the first to get to work?

It is the great complaint of teenagers and perhaps people of every age when preferential treatment appears to be given to others, “It’s not fair!” While we do not object to being privileged ourselves, we find it intensely objectionable when the balances seem to be tilted in favor of others. But do we really want God to be fair with us? Fair means that we get exactly what we deserve. Do we really want God to give us what we deserve, or do we prefer God to be generous with us? In truth, fair is not all that great a deal. In the end, it is not our choice. God has chosen to give all of us better than we deserve. God is not fair, God is far better than that... our God is generous. We should be too.

Fact Questions:

- What kingdom is Jesus trying to describe with this story?
- “So the last will be first and the first will be _____.”

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What are the gifts of God for which you are most grateful?
- How does it feel when you compare what you have with what others have?

Lord, I should just be grateful. Every day I should count my blessings and realize you have given me more than I need. When I see your favor poured out abundantly on the lives of others, I shouldn’t grumble—I should celebrate! You are so good to us all. Thank you. Your goodness inspires me to try to live by your example—which is yet another gift to be thankful for! In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

November 10

The Rich Man

Read: Mark 10:17–31

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Mark 10:17

The exchange between Jesus and the rich man is both heartwarming and heartbreaking. Jesus told the man to obey the commandments of God. The man said he had done that since his youth. Then the text reads, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” The story ends with the man leaving disappointed because he had a lot of stuff he didn’t want to part with.

What we often miss in this story is that Jesus’ answer to the request for eternal life was for the man to obey the commandments. If the man had not pressed Jesus for more, Jesus might not have suggested he sell all his possessions. We can only assume that living a good and faithful life still didn’t seem like enough for the man. He wanted an even more intimate and committed relationship with God. That kind of relationship, according to Jesus, requires even greater sacrifice. We don’t have to give everything away to be inheritors of eternity, but if we long for a closer walk with Jesus, we might have to do just that.

Fact Questions:

- What title did the rich man use to refer to Jesus?
- Did the rich man eventually follow Jesus?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Why did Jesus say it’s hard for someone who has many possessions to get into heaven?
- How would you feel about giving up your most prized possession to follow Jesus?

November 10

The Rich Man *continued*

Lord, all I need to do in order to lead a faithful life is obey your rules. But sometimes being a person who simply does the right thing is not enough. There are times when I long for something more—a deeper connection, a more passionate relationship, and a more intimate conversation with you. That might cost me more than I am willing to pay . . . but I know it would be worth it. Don't allow me to leave your presence disappointed. Please. In your name, I pray. Amen.

November 17

Lord's Prayer

Read: Matthew 6:5–15

*Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Matthew 6:9*

Jesus taught his disciples to pray. His instructions were clear and direct. Pray in secret. Don't practice your piety before others. Don't offer wordy, effusive prayers. Pray simply. Trust that God knows what you need before you speak, but pray anyway. Always pray for forgiveness, and put your prayer into action by forgiving others. For Jesus, prayer should be intimate and concise, and prompt us to deal with others as we have requested that God deal with us. This might all be a way of saying to his disciples—and to us all—don't over think, just pray.

Fact Questions:

Where did Jesus instruct the disciples to pray?

What title did Jesus instruct the disciples to use to address God in prayer?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- How do you pray? What title do you prefer to use for God when you pray and why?
- Recall a time when someone mistreated you. Do you find it difficult to forgive people?

Lord, let your will be done in my life and in your world. Provide for my needs. Forgive me, and help me to forgive others. Encourage me when I am tempted to falter in my faith. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

November 24

Rejection at Nazareth

Read: Mark 6:1–6a

“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judah and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

Mark 6:3

If you look closely at Jesus’ life and ministry, you will see a pattern of rejection. Herod tried to eliminate the baby Jesus by force, the scribes and Pharisees tried to denounce Jesus by utilizing Jewish law and tradition, the people of Jesus’ hometown who knew him best seemed to doubt him most, and, of course, in the end, Jesus was tortured and killed like a criminal by the Roman and Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. Jesus seemed to encounter rejection at every turn.

What the world and worldly authorities reject, however, God often uses to inspire and transform. As Jesus himself quoted, the stone the builders reject can wind up being the cornerstone that anchors an entire structure. The world may have rejected Jesus, but Jesus still saved the world. Maybe the next time we encounter rejection we should not become demoralized by it but assume it is but a prelude to an even greater work of God.

Fact Questions:

- What town is Jesus’ “hometown?”
- Did Jesus have brothers and sisters?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- When have you been rejected? How did it feel? How did you respond?
- Would you stand up for Jesus?

Lord, no one likes rejection, but it is part of life. Jesus experienced it, so why would we assume we would be able to avoid it? We can’t, but we can refuse to be deterred by it. Moments of rejection were not the end for Jesus but the beginning of something new and enlivening—resurrection occurred only after rejection! Help me to persevere when I experience obstacles and objections, trusting that what the world rejects you just might rejoice in. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen

December 1

A Child Born for Us

Read: Isaiah 9:1–7

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

Much of ancient Israel's history was defined by war, persecution, occupation, and exile. Throughout history, the land of Israel has sat at an unfortunate intersection between major world powers. When the Egyptian Empire wanted to conquer the world, they marched troops over Israel. When the Assyrians were bent on world domination, they charged through Israel. Israel was never the primary target of imperial aggression. It was just a frequent casualty in the continually shifting balance of world powers. Into this volatile land, a promise was made through the prophet Isaiah that a child would be born in Israel who would herald an everlasting age of peace and righteousness.

It is a wildly presumptuous promise to be sure. How can a child change the world for the better? What can an infant do to affect regional events? How can a new birth herald a new age? The answer is found in our experience with our own children. Children change everything! New parents find that the moment they see their newborn child, life becomes a more earnest endeavor. Self-interest is readily set aside in favor of taking care of another. Individual hopes and aspirations are no longer as significant as making sure that offspring have a chance to succeed. Who could have ever imagined that the great Roman Empire would one day come under the authority of a religious movement focused on the life and ministry of a man who was born in a stable in the little town of Bethlehem in Judea? Roughly eight hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah prophesied just that!

Fact Questions:

- What have the people who walked in darkness seen?
- Who does the child of which Isaiah spoke bring to mind for Christians?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Have you spent time with a baby? How does the presence of a baby change things?
- What do you think about the idea that Jesus grew up much like we do?

December 1

A Child Born for Us *continued*

Lord, you challenge us to believe that a world full of peace can begin with a baby in a manger. We struggle to understand how great movements of faith have their genesis in seemingly insignificant daily events. But that is how you work, and your work is wonderful, mighty, and everlastingly peaceful. In your name, I pray. Amen

December 8

The Annunciation

Read: Luke 1:26–38

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:38

Mary said, “I accept.” An angel of the Lord told Mary she would become an unwed pregnant woman in a culture that often condemned such women to death. The angel didn’t say she had a choice in the matter, but Mary’s willingness to play whatever role was assigned to her is impressive all the same.

When we are given assignments, we often accept them grudgingly, and perhaps even approach them halfheartedly. Mary was given a heavy burden to carry—a daunting chore—and the hymn of praise she sings in the following chapter lets us know she embraced her role with enthusiasm and even joy.

Fact Questions:

- What is the name of the angel in the story?
- What is the name of Mary’s relative?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Can you approach the chores and work you are assigned with joy—as if the work itself was a gift from God?
- Why do you think Mary would be afraid to be the mother of Jesus?

Lord, the work you set before me often seems like a burden. And yet, I have this feeling that if I approach my duties with the right mindset, the work itself might be a blessing and a joy. Thank you for the productive work you will offer me today. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

December 15

The Magnificat

Read: Luke 1:46-55

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

Luke 1:52-53

Upon hearing the news God would partner with her to bring Christ into the world, Mary broke out into song. The word Magnificat is the Latin word for “magnifies.” Mary’s song sets the stage for a recurring theme in Luke’s Gospel: reversal. The lowly will be lifted up and the mighty will be brought down. “Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last (Luke 13:30).”

Some people believe a growing baby in the womb can be influenced by exposure to music. Imagine Mary, at eight or nine months pregnant, resting her hands lovingly on her big belly and singing this song to her unborn baby. In just a few chapters, Luke describes Jesus beginning his ministry by teaching in the synagogue and speaking of such things as good news to the poor, release of captives and letting the oppressed go free. Did Mary’s song influence the direction of her son’s life? What is your song? What impact will you have on the next generation?

Fact Questions:

- Why did Mary’s spirit rejoice?
- How long did Mary stay with her cousin Elizabeth?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Can you describe a time you were so happy or so grateful to God you couldn’t contain your joy?
- What would you like God’s assistance in accomplishing?

Eternal God, you are like a mother and a father to me. It gives me hope to believe you care about me and you are actively engaged in the events of my life. Make it clear to me how you desire me to use my time, my abilities, my dreams, and my financial resources. Make me an instrument of justice and peace. Amen.

December 22

Joseph's Dream

Read: Matthew 1:18–25

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew 1:20

It is one of the most frequently offered commands in the Bible, “Do not be afraid.” “Do not worry.” “Fear not!” It is as if God is continually speaking to children saying, “Everything will be all right, just trust me.” But we are creatures prone to worry and mistrust. And yet, we have uttered the same words to our own children countless times. When a child runs to us with tears in her eyes having skinned her knee, when our teenager experiences his first relational breakup, when the first grandparent dies—without a moment of hesitation we tell our children, “It’s all right, everything will be all right, trust me.” It is as if deep down at the very core of our being we understand and believe the deep truth God speaks to us throughout the Bible. We don’t know the why or how of it, but we can’t shake this feeling that in the end, everything will be all right. God can be trusted. We have nothing to fear.

Fact Questions:

- What was Joseph doing when an angel appeared to him?
- What does the name Emmanuel mean?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What does it mean to trust someone? Do you trust God?
- Do you believe God uses angels to communicate with people today?

Lord, I try not to show it to others, but I am a deeply fearful person. I am scared by what I know, and by that which remains unknown to me. The world you created seems a dangerous and uncertain place. Left on my own, I do not know that everything will be all right. But you do not wish me to live alone, you desire my life to be yoked to yours so that I can rest in the trust that you are in charge when I am not . . . and I can trust that with you all things will be well. Help me, please. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

December 29

Flight to Egypt

Read: Matthew 2:13–23

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”
Matthew 2:13

We often think that faith is about courageously standing our ground. When challenged, faith should be an unshakable foundation from which we will not be moved. Jesus didn’t flinch when he was tested and tried, and neither should we.

We are told, however, that all creatures, ourselves included, have within us instincts that cause us to fight, as well as instincts toward flight. We seem genetically predisposed to choose between the two—sometimes it is appropriate to stand firm and other times it is best to run away. While it may fly in the face of the image of strength so many of us covet, our faith says that there may be times when fleeing is the most faithful act we can engage in. In the Bible, Abraham, Hagar, David, Elijah, Jesus, Paul, and many other faithful people encountered situations where they had to flee for their lives—and in running away, they were following God’s will for them. Our faith can be about standing up for what we believe in, but it can also be about running for the hills.

Fact Questions:

- Where did Joseph take Mary and the baby Jesus?
- What is the name of the hometown for Joseph, Mary and Jesus?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Did you ever run away in order to escape a dangerous situation? How did it feel?
- Imagine going to a strange country. How would you want the people to treat you?

Lord, sometimes we must run away in order to save our skin. It may strike us as cowardice in the abstract, but when we come face to face with forces that threaten to destroy us, sometimes you prompt us to run for cover. Lord, this is all very confusing. Help me to know when to stand my ground, and when to head for the hills. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

January 5

The Wise Men

Read: Matthew 2:1–12

Then Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

Matthew 2:8

According to this story, the wise men found Jesus, and Herod did not. Those who seek, find. Those who stand comfortably at a distance do not. The wise men left everything behind and followed a star, they held nothing back in their pursuit of a newborn king, and their investment was rewarded. Herod, who had evil intent, was interested in the Christ child, but unwilling to take the time to hunt for Jesus himself. We view this as good news, knowing that Herod’s interest was fueled by a desire to kill the infant. However, if Herod, like the Magi, had searched diligently for the child, perhaps he too would have returned home by a different road . . . his course forever altered.

Fact Questions:

- In what town was it believed Jesus, the Messiah, was to be born?
- What gifts did the wise men bring Jesus?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What’s the difference between being curious about Jesus and desiring to find him?
- What questions do you have about Jesus?

Lord, often my faith is no more than a flirtation—a mere curiosity with you that I try to satisfy only when I feel I have the time to spare. I rarely go all-in in an attempt to reach out for you. Perhaps that is why my life of faith often feels barren and unsatisfied. Show me a star this year, and give me the resolve to follow it until I find you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

January 12

The Centurion's Faith

Read: Matthew 8:5–13

*When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith."
Matthew 8:10*

It took a lot to impress Jesus. When we consider all that Jesus has done for us, it would be beyond presumptuous to assume that any of our actions might fill Jesus with amazement. Unless, of course, we find some new way to amaze Jesus with the depths to which we are willing to sink in our relationships with others and with God! It must be a very rare occasion when Jesus is pleasantly surprised by our actions.

However, we are told that a Roman centurion's willingness to believe, without much evidence to support his faith, filled Jesus with a degree of awe. The Gospels tell us that believing without seeing did serve to impress Jesus. Being able to trust God when you are filled with a world of doubt is an act of faith that is deeply moving to Jesus.

Fact Questions:

- What was a centurion?
- Was the centurion's servant healed?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Do you believe Jesus welcomes everyone to follow him? Why or why not?
- Can you describe a time when you dared to be different than others around you?

Lord, I like to have all the facts in front of me before I am willing to take a leap of faith. However, that is not faith; that is a desire for knowledge. I long for evidence while you request belief. Help me to set my needs aside so that I can pursue your desires . . . perhaps even to your amazement. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

January 19

Healing the Paralytic

Read: Mark 2:1–12

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Mark 2:5

This is an odd story. A paralyzed man had some friends who would stop at nothing to facilitate his healing. In order to get to Jesus, they dug through the roof of someone’s house to lower their friend into Jesus’ presence. They did this with the hope that Jesus might grant their paralyzed friend the ability to move about on his own. They pursued healing.

What Jesus offered, however, was forgiveness. It is true that in the ancient world physical infirmities were believed to be the consequence of less than faithful living. If you were not well physically, it was an indication that you were not well spiritually. Whatever the case, Jesus judged that the man’s true infirmity was spiritual in nature. The man was brought to Jesus for a physical healing, but Jesus responded first to his spiritual ailment. In truth, it is often our soul that aches more than our body. The wrongs we have committed, the harm we have done, the injuries we have inflicted on others trap us in a stasis of sin. We often find that we cannot take a single step forward in life unless we are willing to go back and deal with the infractions of our past. Soul healing is our most pressing need, and that is the need Jesus first responds to—get the soul right, and then we can get to work on the body.

Fact Questions:

- What prevented the friends from getting their sick friend to Jesus?
- How did they eventually get their friend to Jesus?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Describe a time when someone forgave you. How did that feel?
- Do you have reliable friends? How would your friends describe you as a friend?

Lord, I am too often paralyzed by my past. My sins of yesterday haunt my living today. I need healing if I am to truly move forward. Please forgive me. Call me from off my mat and send me forth into a new and more abundant life. In your name, I pray. Amen.

January 26

Ten Lepers

Read: Luke 17:11–19

*Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?
Luke 17:17*

On a road in Galilee Jesus was approached by ten lepers with their skin peeling off their bodies in the most disfiguring of ways. They were people we would likely cross to the other side of the street to avoid coming in contact with. But Jesus not only received them, he also healed them. After being healed, however, only one of the lepers returned to thank Jesus and to praise him for what he had done. Jesus asked the man, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?”

We bow head, heart, and knee when we are in need, but do we remember God when we are brought through our difficulties? We would like to picture ourselves as the one faithful leper returning to thank Jesus, but more often than not, we find ourselves among the other nine. Why is that? Why do only one in ten people respond gratefully to the blessings of God in their lives?

Fact Questions:

- How many lepers were there?
- Why did they keep their distance?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Can you think of ways to express gratitude to God? What would they be?
- Have you ever felt like you didn’t fit in? What was that like?

Lord, I think of me more than I think of you. I turn to you when I am in desperate need, but when all is well and good I turn away like a spoiled and ungrateful child. Help me to remember to return each week to give you thanks. In your name, I pray. Amen.

February 2

Jesus Stills the Storm

Read: Mark 4:35–41

A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion.

Mark 4:37–38

The disciples must have thought Jesus negligent. There was a storm. The boat was being swamped. And Jesus slept. Did he not understand the danger they were in—and not just their tiny boat but also the other boats that were with them? After spending hours by the seashore teaching the people, was Jesus going to allow the day to end in a mass drowning? Didn't Jesus care?

To be asleep at the wheel is negligent, but to be asleep in the stern is trusting. That was what the disciples failed to understand. Jesus wasn't at the helm at this perilous moment. Jesus was simply along for the ride. Jesus rested in the wind and waves of God, trusting that the God of heaven and earth and sea and storm would take care of him in this life and in the next. With faith like that, what is left to fear?

Fact Questions:

- What was Jesus doing on a cushion in the stern of the boat?
- What did Jesus say to calm the wind and the waves?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What are some things of which you are most afraid?
- What qualities give some people the ability to remain calm during a crisis? Can you?

Lord—storms make me anxious. In fact, the mere prospect of a storm can get my heart and my mind racing. Whether it be a storm in a relationship or on the job or in my finances, the worry of it all does not allow me to sleep. I spend my nighttime hours pondering possible destruction and peril. This means that I do not trust, I do not believe, and I do not have faith that all will be well whether I make it through the storm or go down with the ship. I so desperately need your help. Speak to me so that all that rages in my heart and mind might become peaceful and still. In your name, I pray. Amen.

February 9

Feeding 5000

Read: John 6:1–15

*When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for all these people to eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.
John 6:5–6*

Jesus asked a trick question as a teaching technique. How do you feed thousands of people? Philip and the disciples had no idea. How can we blame them? If we found ourselves in need of feeding five thousand people, we would be at a loss to know how to do it. Where do you find all that money? How do you provide for people out of your own meager resources? Five loaves of bread and two fish cannot possibly be enough!

Jesus’ test was a method of teaching. He wasn’t expecting Philip or the other disciples to have the answer. Jesus wanted to teach something new. Where can you buy bread for five thousand people on the shores of the Sea of Galilee? The answer is, you can’t! You can’t provide for all these people. You don’t have enough to get the job done. Your resources are not sufficient. To feed the crowd, to accomplish the goal, to take care of everyone is beyond your ability. A task like that requires something more, someone more—God . . . and God will not disappoint. The answer to Jesus’ quiz is that to meet the demand, God will need to supply the resources. Once the disciples and Jesus began dividing up what they had, that is exactly what happened—God provided!

Fact Questions:

- How many loaves of bread and how many fish did the boy have?
- How many people were fed?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What’s the best part of sharing food with others or feeding the hungry?
- Do you believe God provides enough for everyone? Why do some people go hungry?

Lord, you are always teaching us, instructing us, desiring to show us the way. You do not seem to be interested in our grades but in our learning. Thank you for that grace, and please continue our education. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

February 16

Walking on Water

Read: Matthew 14:22–33

So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

Matthew 14:29

We often think first about Peter’s failure in this story. Peter got out on the water, and the wind and the waves so rattled his resolve that he began to sink and he needed Jesus to save him. If Peter had more faith, perhaps he wouldn’t have needed a helping hand! What we often forget about are the other eleven disciples huddled in their little boat, unwilling to approach Jesus. Peter may have started to sink into the water, but the other disciples were not even willing to get out of the boat!

It has been said that if you want to walk on water, you need to be willing to get out of the boat. Peter certainly failed to make it all the way toward Jesus, but by taking a risk and stepping out onto the water he had an encounter with Jesus that affected the rest of his life. After reading this story, why would we assume that being saved by Jesus is a bad thing? It may just be the most important experience in the world! Walking on water would be a great achievement to be sure, but getting saved by Jesus is an even greater blessing.

Fact Questions:

- What did Jesus do when he went up the mountain?
- How did the disciples feel when they saw Jesus walking on the sea?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Have you ever taken a chance and done something risky?
- How would you begin to make the world a better place if you knew you couldn’t fail?

Dear Lord, I fear failure. I fear taking risks that have the potential to sink me. I prefer the safety of the boat I am in. So I never get out into the wind and the waves, I never move beyond my familiar environment, and I never throw caution to the wind in pursuit of you. Is it any wonder I don’t get caught up in you? Help me to step out of the boat and into the waves so that I can find myself finally and securely in your hands. In your name, I pray. Amen.

February 23

The Gerasene Demoniac

Read: Mark 5:1–20

*They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had the legion; and they were afraid. . . Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood.
Mark 5:15 & 17*

For the Gerasenes, the man possessed with a legion of demons was fearsome. He could not be bound or contained or controlled. The demoniac was a public menace, and a fearful presence in the Gerasene countryside. When Jesus cast the man's demons into a herd of nearby swine, however, the news was greeted with an even greater fear—a fear that prompted the people of that country to demand that Jesus leave their land. A man filled with demons was scary to be sure, but a man who could radically change your life in an instant was downright terrifying. If Jesus could transform the fearsome creature who lived among the tombs into an entirely different man, what might Jesus do the rest of the people living in that lakeside community? What might Jesus be able to do with us?

Fact Questions:

- What was the name of the unclean spirit?
- What kind of animals are swine? What happened to them in the story?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What would you name as the most pressing problems in your life and in our world?
- How do you want Jesus to change you or change your life?

Dear Lord, I choose comfort over conversation. I prefer dealing with the hidden demons of my life rather than the uncertainty that change might bring. I would probably choose to live amidst the tombs of past miseries rather than to step into the new life you invite me into. Which means, like the Gerasenes, I would likely shoo you away rather than invite you into my life. Please, please, please, Lord . . . break through my fears so that I can embrace the freedom and new life you are offering me. In your name, I pray. Amen.

March 1

The Transfiguration

Read: Luke 9:28–35

And while Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Luke 9:29

It has been said that our prayers don't change God but that our times of prayer have a way of changing us. That appears to have been the case in the story of Jesus' transfiguration as it is told in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus went up a mountain to pray, as was his custom. Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him. It was an act he had undertaken countless times before. But this time when Jesus prayed, something happened to him—he changed—he appeared to be in the company of the great luminaries of the Hebrew faith. For a moment Jesus appeared divine . . . Godlike. It was as if his true character was on display for anyone who happened to be around to see.

Who knows how many times Jesus went off to pray and nothing happened. There must have been plenty of times when God seemed silent, Jesus felt unmoved, and there were no dazzling visions to be seen. But Jesus persisted, and in time prayer changed him so much that he didn't even look like the same person to those who knew him best. That's what prayer can do—it can change us, it can illuminate us, and it can make our lives dazzling!

Fact Questions:

- Which disciples did Jesus take up the mountain?
- How many dwellings did Peter offer to make?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Are there certain places where you like to pray or where you feel closer to God?
- What are the ways that we listen to the words and teachings of Jesus?

Lord, I actually pray a fair bit, and I often wonder if it is working. By working, I tend to mean, are you working on my behalf? But what if the efficacy of prayer has less to do with you and more to do with me? What if the benefit of prayer is not that you change my life circumstances in favorable ways but that times of prayer have a way of changing me favorably? That would be a gift. I will pray for that today, in your name. Amen.

March 8

Jesus Blessing the Children

Read: Mark 10:13-16

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

Mark 10:15

In ancient times, children did not hold the same place in society as they do today. Child labor laws, like those in place in modern times, did not exist. There wasn't the modern emphasis on child safety. Children occupied the lower rungs of the social ladder. All this may explain why the disciples spoke sternly to those who brought their children to Jesus. The disciples did not yet understand. Jesus came especially for the least and the lost. He brought good news to the poor. He ate with sinners and outcasts. He touched lepers. Jesus spent his life among all those who occupied the lowest rungs on the social ladder, including children.

Not only did Jesus welcome interaction with children, he instructed his hearers that experiencing the kingdom of God requires receiving it "as a little child." In other words, it seems receiving the kingdom requires elements of vulnerability, dependence, weakness and trust.

Fact Questions:

- What did Jesus feel when he saw the disciples turning away children?
- What did Jesus do to the children?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What characteristics of young children do you think Jesus was affirming?
- How can the church be more receptive and inclusive of children?

Heavenly Parent, I am so grateful that I was invited to learn about Jesus and to have a relationship with him. I pray that I will never be a hindrance to someone else having such a relationship. Allow me to be vulnerable and open to new ways of being so I can experience your blessing. Amen.

March 15

Mary and Martha

Read: Luke 10:38–42

But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”

Luke 10:40

Martha felt neglected. She had been the one who had opened her house to Jesus and his friends, she had been the one who was serving as the hostess of this event, and it looked like she would be the one to clean up the mess when the evening drew to an end. This might not have been quite so irksome if her sister Mary were helping her out, instead of doing what Martha would have preferred to do—sitting with and listening to Jesus as he taught. Martha fumed as she began to do the dishes, and she wondered if anyone noticed, let alone cared about all she was doing. She let her work and her disappointment get the best of her. In the end, we learn Jesus would have preferred to have Martha do less and enjoy the company of her guests more.

Fact Questions:

- Whose home did Jesus visit?
- Where did Mary sit?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- If you ever felt alone in doing your chores, would it now feel good to help someone else when you see they are working alone?
- In those days, women weren’t allowed to sit at the feet of rabbis like Jesus. How do you feel about that? How do you think Jesus felt about it?

Dear Lord, if you were to come to my home, like Martha, I would have done all I could to prepare and provide for your visit. I’d clean the house, set the table, make the meal, serve the guests, . . . and when I saw my company enjoying themselves while I slaved away, I might get annoyed. Help me to enjoy providing for others, and if I can’t, grant me the resolve to let the dishes sit for a moment while I enjoy the party I chose to host. In your name, I pray. Amen.

March 22

Zacchaeus

Read: Luke 19:1–10

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

Luke 19:8

When we hear the word repent we might cringe. The word conjures up images of holier-than-thou preachers who seem to be saying, “You better change, or else.” “You better become like us, or else.” The story of Zacchaeus is the story of one of the most disliked men in Jericho being recognized and befriended by Jesus. Thus, in that moment, Zacchaeus became the most popular man in Jericho. Jesus said, “I must stay at your house today,” and everything began to change for Zacchaeus—one gracious act of acceptance and the little tax collector’s life began to turn around. Zacchaeus repented.

However we might choose to respond to the idea of repentance, Zacchaeus responded to the invitation to turn his life around with unbridled generosity and joy. You can sense Zacchaeus’s exuberance. “Look! Half my possessions, Lord. I will give to the poor!” Zacchaeus’s life had begun anew, and he leapt into it with generosity and enthusiasm. When we are lost, it is a joy to be found. When we are headed in the wrong direction, it is a blessing to have our course corrected. When we are not living as we should, it is a gift to repent.

Fact Questions:

- What did Zacchaeus do in order to see Jesus?
- What was Zacchaeus’ job?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Is there something about yourself you’d like to change? Talk about it.
- Why was Jesus willing to forgive Zacchaeus his wrongdoing?

Lord God, I know I am lost. I may not like someone telling me how I am headed in the wrong direction, but perhaps that is a form of defensiveness born of truth. I am not living as I should. I want to turn around. I imagine what a profound joy it would be to turn toward you. Please call me down from my perch. Invite yourself into my life so that I might be found in you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

March 29

Jesus Washing the Disciples' Feet

Read: John 13:1–20

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

John 13:14–15

We are repulsed at the thought of someone having to wash us. It might be the single greatest fear of aging—that we would not be able to care for or clean ourselves! It is through this most intimate and personal act of washing that Jesus chooses to demonstrate how we are to care for one another. We are to get down on our hands and knees to help people get clean. This means that as followers of Jesus no task is beneath us when it comes to tending to others. We wouldn't have believed it unless we had seen it for ourselves—Jesus, Lord and Savior, washing the dirt off of sweaty, smelly, and misshapen feet. Leading by example, Jesus tells us to take care of people according to his example. Get down on our hands and knees, get up close and intimate with others, and do whatever we can to help people out.

Fact Questions:

- What did Jesus tie around himself?
- What two terms did the disciples call Jesus?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Are there any examples of when you served another?
- Can you imagine washing another person's feet? How would that feel?

Dear Lord, truthfully, the only feet I willingly wash are my own. The thought of washing someone's feet is uncomfortable to me because it is such a personal, intimate, and culturally foreign act. But you, Lord, want me to get that close to people. You want me never to flinch at an opportunity to care for others. You want me to follow your example. You have served us all, and you call us to do the same. Help me to humble myself so that kneeling before others is a natural act for me. In your name, I pray. Amen.

April 5*

Jesus' Triumphant Entry

Read: Mark 11:1–11

Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Mark 11:8–9

This story seems to be a most imprudent display of celebration. This is the ticker-tape parade before the championship has been won, it is the victory lap before victory has been had, it is the celebratory headline printed in the paper in anticipation of an accomplishment that has not yet been achieved. The people along the road were celebrating Jesus as if he were a conquering hero, even though he had neither conquered anyone nor done anything particularly heroic.

Those who followed Jesus, however, were anything but prudent. They were grateful. They were hopeful. They were excited. They had an unquenchable sense that Jesus represented something new and different and wonderful entering the world. They felt that they were in the presence of a Savior, a God who would change history and establish heaven on earth. Right or wrong, they decided to celebrate Jesus in their midst.

Fact Questions:

- Jesus rode into Jerusalem on what animal?
- What did the people spread on the road?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Is there some aspect of your life in which you could use God's help?
- Why is Jesus important to you?

Dear Lord, I can't remember the last time I got excited about our relationship. I am sure there was a time, but it eludes my memory. I think about the people jammed along the roadside hoping to catch a glimpse of you, or hoping that you would catch a glimpse of them, and I can't help being a bit envious. I long for that kind of enthusiastic faith, but I have chosen a more placid spirituality. And, truthfully, I am bored . . . and I am not growing. I want to catch a glimpse of you that prompts me to throw my coat on the ground, wave palm branches in the air, and shout "Hosanna!" at the top of my lungs. Please, hear my prayer. In your name, I pray. Amen.

April 12

Mary at the Empty Tomb

Read: John 20:11–18

*Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.
John 20:14b & c*

We are in the hunt to know and understand how the world was created. We want to know upon what foundation the world is built. We want to know how the world works and how it runs. We look deep into the created order—into the cosmic and subatomic universe. We look into a world of neutrinos that move faster than light and unwitnessed matter that we call “dark.” We desperately want to unravel the mystery of life in this world, never fully wanting to consider that the mystery has already been revealed to us.

The veil of mystery momentarily parted when Mary encountered—or was encountered by—Jesus at the tomb on Easter morning. Mary didn’t recognize all that had taken place at first. She thought Jesus was the gardener, and she thought a body had gone missing, because up until that point she had no evidence on which to base a belief in the resurrection of the dead. However, the veil of this life was parted for a moment in time, and what was revealed was eternity—eternal love, eternal life, and eternal relationships.

Fact Questions:

- What day of the week did this story take place?
- How many angels did Mary see when she bent over to look into the tomb?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Do you think of Jesus as a figure of from the past or as mysteriously alive today?
- What would you say if you had to describe God or Jesus to someone?

Dear Lord, I want to believe in you. I want to believe that life and love and relationships are eternal. I want to believe that when I come to my end, life is just beginning for me. But I don’t really know. And I want to know. We all want to know. We don’t like mysteries where our lives and our future hang in the balance. However, mystery is what you offer us. You offer us a glimpse of a gardener, who underneath it all, turns out to be a Savior. In your name, I pray. Amen.

April 19

Doubting Thomas

Read: John 20:19–29

But Thomas said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

John 20:25b & c

We understand Thomas’s doubt. He needed proof like we need proof. For us, “seeing is believing,” and that was all Thomas was asking for—a little evidence. Resurrection is a wildly outlandish claim, and it strains even the most robust imaginations. This incident, however, branded Thomas forever as the doubter, an unflattering title we all could be shouldered with. Doubter can sound a little harsh, so we refer to ourselves instead as critical or practical or rational thinkers. But Jesus wants us to be called believers, so he returns. Jesus didn’t desert Thomas because of his lack of faith, and he won’t desert us in the midst of our skepticism either. And Jesus doesn’t rest until we come to believe and exclaim as Thomas did, “My Lord and my God!”

Fact Questions:

- What did Jesus say when he came and stood among the disciples?
- What did the disciples do when they saw the Lord?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Is it okay and normal to have doubts and questions about God and the stories in the Bible?
- Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Why?

Lord, if I demand proof, then what I am really looking for is knowledge, not belief. You desire us to have faith in you. You want us to trust, even when every fiber of our being is prepared to doubt. My Lord and my God, return to me, until I fully believe in you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

April 26

Jesus and Peter

Read: John 21

“Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” . . . After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

John 21:18–19

Peter’s story ends much like it began. Peter had been a fisherman, an outspoken disciple of Jesus Christ, and an absolute failure when he denied ever knowing his teacher. The specter of the cross seemed to bring out the worst in all the disciples as they abandoned Jesus, leaving him to face his adversaries on his own. However, Peter stands alone as the disciple who boastfully promised never to leave Jesus’ side, only to entirely disavow Jesus when the going got too rough.

Most people are familiar with this story of profound forgiveness. Jesus allowed Peter a threefold opportunity to profess his love for Jesus, thus undoing the guilt and shame of Peter’s threefold denial. What we might fail to notice is that this was also a moment of new beginning. The very last command Jesus issued to Peter in this Gospel was also the very first command extended to Jesus’ disciples: “Follow me.” The end of this Gospel points back to the very beginning. Not only does Jesus forgive Peter, he also says, “Okay Peter, let’s try this all over again . . . Start by following me.” What a joy it is to know that our Lord doesn’t only allow us to retake the tests we have failed, but Jesus is willing to review the entire course of study—from the very first lesson!

Fact Questions:

- Which side of the boat did Jesus instruct the disciples to cast their nets?
- What did Jesus prepare for breakfast?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Can you describe a time when you were given a second chance?
- If you could live your life over again, what would you do differently?

Dear Lord, thank you for your willingness to forgive us when we fail, and for allowing us to start all over again with the reassurance that you are still in the lead. In your name, I pray. Amen.

May 3

Great Commission

Read: Matthew 28:16–20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. . . . And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.
Matthew 28:19–20b

The mission of the Christian faith is nothing less than the transformation of the entire world. All nations and all people are supposed to be converted to a way of living and being that reflects the message of Jesus and the will of God. That is a grand and bold vision, and it must have seemed wildly unrealistic to that handful of fishermen, tax collectors, and women who stood with Jesus on a mountain in Galilee. However, the vision and mission came with a promise: “I am with you always.” The goal is the complete transformation of the world, but that is not work we will be left to do alone. Jesus will be with us. Jesus is our co-worker. Jesus will labor by our side until all that God wills is accomplished. The mission is grand, and our Savior is present!

Fact Questions:

- Where did Jesus direct the eleven disciples to go?
- How long will Jesus be with the disciples?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Is there a way for us to bring others to worship Jesus?
- Do you ever talk about God or about the church with your friends? What is that like?

Lord, you have dreamed big for us. In fact, the vision and mission you lay before us is one we are unable to accomplish on our own. We cannot even begin to imagine a world that overflows with love, peace, and justice for all. But you can and you have, and you promise to work with us until what you dream is what we experience. In your name, I pray.
Amen.

May 10

The Ascension

Read: Acts 1:6–11

It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But . . . you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1:7–8

There is a limit to what we can know about God. The disciples wanted Jesus to tell them about God's eternal plans, but Jesus said those plans were known only to God. The cosmos is too vast, time too expansive, and the workings of creation far too mysterious for us to grasp. Our call is not to know but to witness to our experiences of God. You can stand in awe of creation even if you can't fully understand it. Our lives can't always revolve around what we know; oftentimes we have to set our course based on what we believe. While ignorance may be one of the great evils at work in the world, dismissing the holy mysteries of creation might be equally unwise. Life without reverence for the unknown is careless and foolish. Jesus tempered our insatiable thirst for knowledge, encouraging us instead toward a holy awe for the divine mysteries of God. You don't have to be able to explain the beauty of the world; you just have to be able to appreciate it and celebrate it by sharing your experiences with others.

Fact Questions:

- What were the disciples to do in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth?
- To where was Jesus taken up?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- What do you like most about Jesus?
- What would you cite as evidence of God's existence?

Lord God, absolute knowledge of you and your creation is beyond our grasp. Every new scientific discovery seems to saddle us with a slew of additional unanswered questions. There is so much we do not know. Perhaps knowledge is too much for us to expect in this life. Maybe serving as witnesses to your presence in the world is our true calling. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

May 17

Parable of the Sower

Read: Mark 4:1–9

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Mark 4:3–4

Jesus told a story of a farmer who scattered seed on the ground. The seed fell on the hardened path, on the rocky ground, and among the thorns. Most of the seed failed to grow, but some seed fell on “good soil,” and that seed increased thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold! If we follow Jesus’ example, we might choose to toss our love out into the world, and to scatter the seeds of blessing everywhere. Spread good works throughout our families, our communities, and our world—and then wait and see what takes root.

Jesus encourages this kind of diversification because you just don’t know where your next good friend will come from. You don’t know how a kind word to a self-centered teenager today can transform their life years from now. You just don’t know how the faithful ministry of one person can unlock God’s eternal blessing in the world. After all, who would have thought that an obscure Nazarene prophet who was killed after three years of ministry could change the world? Jesus teaches us that abundant blessing comes from diversification. Invest yourself everywhere you can, and you will find you win more than you lose. And when you win, you will win big—thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold!

Fact Questions:

- What did the sower sow?
- According to Jesus, who should listen?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- With whom, or where, do you need to sow some love and generosity this week?
- What could you do to be more open to new ideas and new experiences?

Lord, I do not think of investing myself as much as I think of investing my money. As I open the stock index this week, as I do strategic planning in my workplace, as I debate what to do with my time, encourage me to think about how I can invest myself, my love, and my care broadly so that they take root and grow in the world and in the lives of those closest to me. In your name, I pray. Amen.

May 24

Weeds and the Wheat

Read: Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

The slaves said to him, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” But he replied, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.”
Matthew 13:28b–29

Many of us cannot tell the difference between weeds and good plantings. When weeding, we might be able to guess correctly most of the time, but an untrained eye or an unknowledgeable gardener threatens the whole garden. An unweeded garden may not be an ideal situation for good plants to thrive, but pulling up the good with the bad is even less preferable. Jesus’ admonition is clear: if you can’t tell the difference between the weeds and the wheat, stay out of the field. Leave the judgment of the garden to the one who planted it in the first place, which it to say: leave the judgment of the world to God.

Fact Questions:

- Who sowed weeds among the wheat?
- Where were the reapers to gather the wheat?

Discussion Questions:

- What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Is it fair to judge if we don’t know the whole story?
- How do you respond when people around you are mean or harmful?

Lord, if I try to separate the weeds and the wheat, I know I will make a mess of the field. I will do more damage than good. Help me to leave the judgment of the world to you, while I spend time trying to sort through the weeds and the wheat in my own life. In your name, I pray. Amen.

May 31

Pentecost

Read: Acts 2

*And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.
Acts 2:6*

When the Spirit of God breaks into the world, people become confused. When a successful businessperson chooses to leave their lucrative job to teach at an underperforming high school, the world doesn't understand. When a gifted doctor decides to leave a prestigious hospital to start a practice in a developing country, the world doesn't understand. When someone decides to cross a line of division to enter into community with a former adversary, the world does not understand. The ways of God are bewildering to those who are steeped in the ways of the world.

When God's Spirit is at work, disparate people come together in unity, people are prompted to learn and appreciate other languages and cultures, and old divisions give way to a new and wonderfully confusing world.

Fact Questions:

- What are some images used to describe the Holy Spirit?
- Which prophet from the Hebrew Bible is quoted in this story?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Who do you consider the most important people to listen to? Who are the least important?
- Are there things about God that are bewildering and hard for you to understand?

Dear Lord, allow your Spirit to break into my life like the rush of a violent wind. Set me on fire. Blessedly bewilder me. Shake me up so that new possibilities and opportunities might unsettle and then resettle my life according to your will. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

June 7

The Good Samaritan

Read: Luke 10:25–37

*But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.
Luke 10:33*

The hero of this story is a traveling Samaritan. Samaritans were not people held in high regard by Jesus' listening audience. Hebrew priests and Levites were the people who were granted honor and respect. However, in this familiar story, we are told that the professionally religious people could not be bothered to help someone in need.

Even today most ministry is done not by professional clergy but by lay people as they engage in their daily living. A traveling businessman offers to buy lunch for someone he meets who is in need of food. A doctor takes a few extra minutes to hear about the relational heartache one of her patients is experiencing. A teacher decides to mentor a student who is struggling with challenges at home. Ministry requires a whole host of good Samaritans.

Fact Questions:

- What question provided the impetus for this story?
- Who was the first person to walk past the hurting man on the side of the road?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Describe a time when someone went out of their way to be a big help to you.
- Would you like to have an opportunity to serve or help in a soup kitchen, or visit someone who is ill?

*Lord, we fail so often in life. We fail in compassion. We fail in recognition of need. We fail in our commitment to serve others. Create in us a Samaritan spirit so that no matter where we are or when we see a need, we can be moved by pity and offer assistance. In your name, I pray.
Amen.*

June 14

Sheep and Goats

Read: Matthew 25:31–46

*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.
Matthew 25:35–36*

The Bible indicates that our lives will be evaluated. Most of us don't like the thought of having our lives judged, but according to Jesus, our reluctance will not stay the evaluative process. The good news is that the standards that we will be judged against are very manageable. We will not be judged based on what we believe or what church we go to or how often we read the Bible. Our lives will simply be evaluated on what we do to and for the people our world often chooses to disregard. Did we feed the hungry? Did we offer a drink to the thirsty? Were we welcoming to people we did not know? Did we visit the sick and the incarcerated? Did we take time to be with the people Jesus came into the world to love?

Unfortunately, the answers to these questions may be “no.” The sick, the hungry, the lonely, the criminal element in our society are those we often choose to shy away from. However, they tend to be the people who are most readily available for relationship. Jesus sets the bar of evaluation low. All we need to do is take an interest in the people whom the world couldn't care less about . . . meaning the people most ready to accept our company. According to Jesus, the bar is low, but the stakes are high.

Fact Questions:

- To whom does the term “Son of Man” refer?
- According to the story, what two animals does a shepherd separate?

Discussion Questions:

- What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- Can you describe a time when you encountered a poor or homeless person?
- How would it change your behavior to know God judges the way we treat people?

Lord, homeless people are all around me when I make my way to work. The hungry and thirsty are always ready to accept assistance. Those suffering illness and incarceration want nothing more than a friendly visit. Why am I such an infrequent companion to those you call me to serve? Help me to get my priorities straight so that your desires might be mine and your evaluation of my life might be pleasing to both of us. For this I pray, in your name. Amen.



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