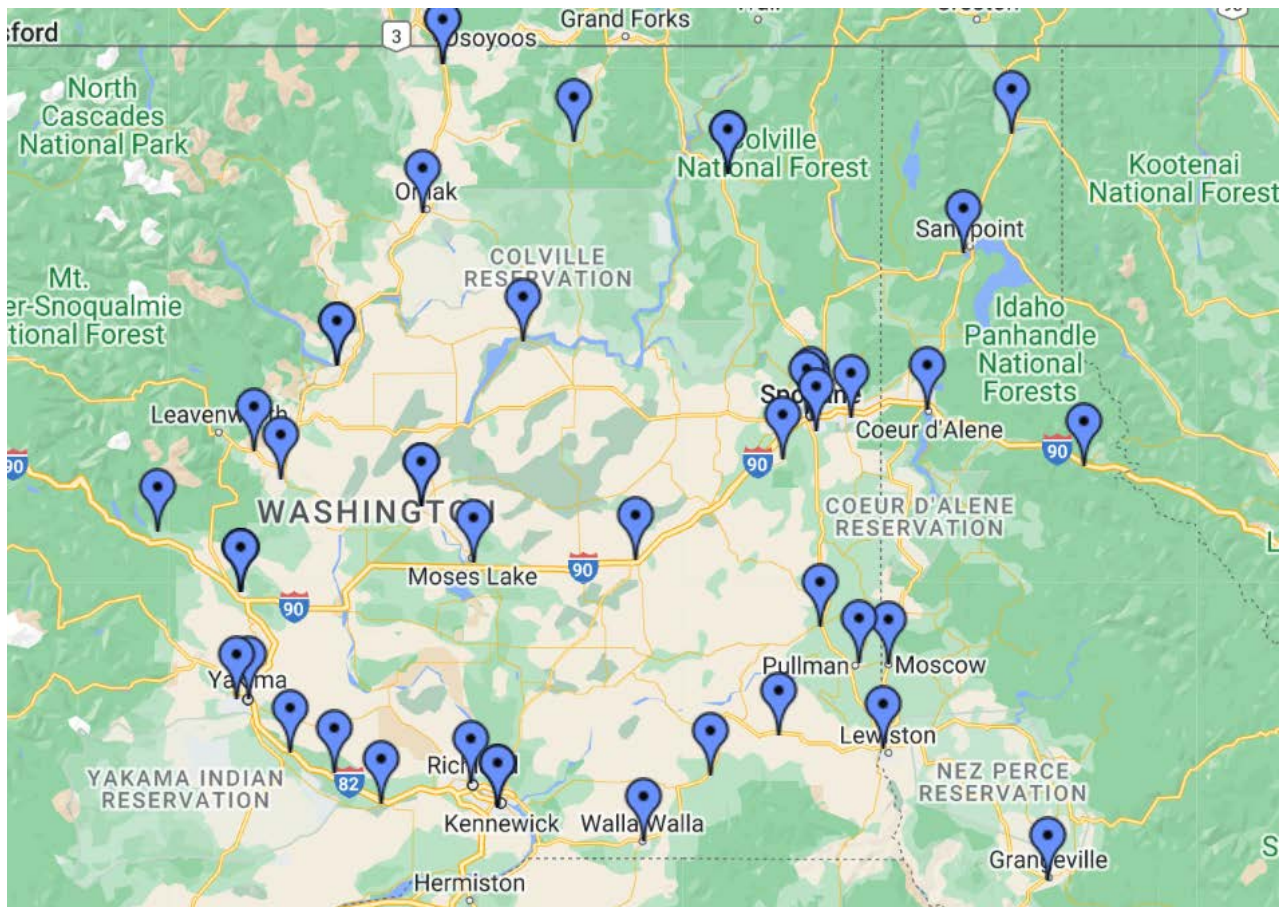




# Episcopal Diocese of Spokane

## Listening to God and Our Neighbors: Biblical Windows for Followers and Seekers of Christ

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,  
and you will be my witnesses  
in Jerusalem,  
in all Judea  
and Samaria,  
and to the ends of the earth.  
(Acts 1:8)



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*These materials are designed for times we gather to pray,- grounding ourselves in biblical stories of calling, listening, and responding so that we may fully love God and love our neighbors. They are designed as windows into the power of listening, holy curiosity, and courageous vulnerability, accompanying us as we follow and seek Christ together. As we read and pray these texts, listen for the voice and stirrings of God. What might God be saying today? How might we respond through our actions?*

*The scripture texts selected show encounters of listening for, hearing, and responding to God in many ways. The first several are directly about listening to the voice of God and responding. The passages that follow have us listen to voices that are close to us and that are distant from us. Some require us to break down barriers and overcome biases.*

*There are 19 different texts, organized into five sets. Each reading is preceded by a brief paragraph that provides context, and is followed by questions to consider prayerfully. Over the course of this year, spend time with at least nine of these texts. Start with the I Samuel and Isaiah passages in the "Listening and Responding to God" set. After dwelling with those two texts, in your next sessions choose at least two passages from each of the next sets.*

*It may be helpful as you read and meditate to put yourself into the setting. When you read of God speaking in a conversation, pay attention to what God is saying and ask yourself what this is prompting in you. When you read of tension, passion, or confusion in the conversation, listen and think about how you might respond in the same situation. What are the desires, purposes, and deepest concerns of each person in the passage?*

*For leadership groups in congregations and across the diocese, spend time with one of these passages at your regular meetings over the next nine months. Make time to hear God speaking to you and listening to you. Listen to the people in each text, and listen to one another as you discuss how the text stretches you in your listening, your holy curiosity, and your courageous vulnerability in responding.*

*Whether alone or in groups, pray before you begin each reading. Leave a time of silence for intimate personal reflection and prayerful conversation with Christ. Use the questions to help you move further into listening to God. In groups, open time for conversation with each other about 1) what the text invites you to be curious about, 2) how you hear the Spirit speaking to you, 3) what you might be invited to act upon as a community of faith.*

*Let these texts truly be windows for you into listening to God and your neighbor. Be creative as you read, listen, pray, and converse with these texts. Consider writing notes for yourself, walking in your neighborhood as you pray, responding with art or creative activity, incorporating music or singing, or gathering with others in intentional prayer.*

## Prayers as we seek to listen to God

*Creator of all, you speak life into being and call us into holy community. Open our ears to listen, enliven our curiosity to learn, and hasten our courage to respond. Teach us how to listen and love as you do, joining with all of creation as we proclaim and embody your Good News in all that we undertake. May the Spirit's breath empower us to live these words we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*(Diocesan Prayer, 2024)*

*Lord Jesus, as I read and listen to these beloved sacred texts, open my mind and heart to hear you speaking. May your words come through in the words on the page, the words in the lips of friends and strangers, and the words you put in my heart. Let me learn how to listen to you and my neighbor so that I might learn to love you and my neighbor as you call me to love. AMEN.*

*Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,  
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in the eye that sees me,  
Christ in the ear that hears me.*

*(From the Prayer of St. Patrick ("St. Patrick's Breastplate"), 5th century)*

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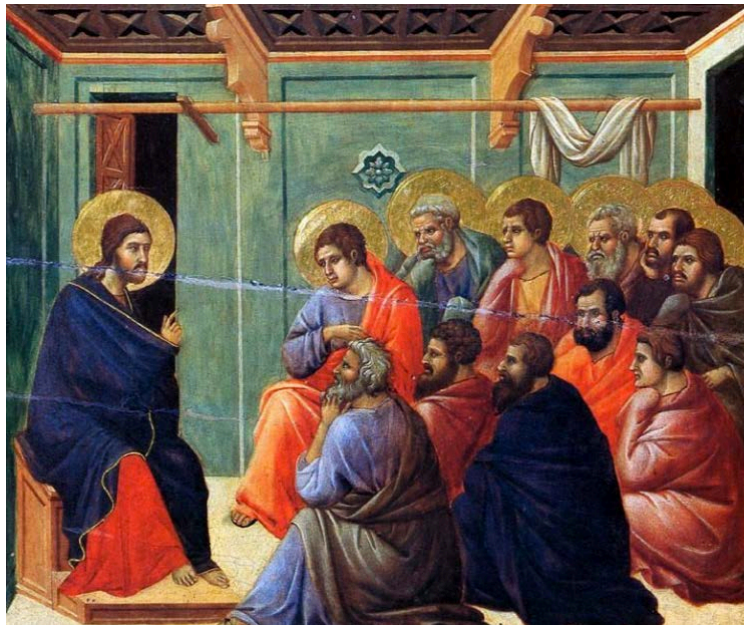
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## Listening and Responding to God

*Our capacity to listen to the world around us, and to others, grows and completely changes as we open ourselves to listen to God – and as God intrudes into our patterned ways of living and thinking by speaking to us and calling us.*

*The three passages from scripture in this section help us reflect on the ways that God speaks to us and calls us to act as ambassadors of God's truth and love. They also help us consider different ways that we as human beings respond – sometimes without understanding, sometimes with deep openness, sometimes with resistance, and even some resentment. Inevitably, when God speaks and we listen, we are changed.*

*As you read each of these passages, place yourself in the story – as Samuel or Eli, as Isaiah, and as Jonah. How do you find yourself responding to the voice of God speaking to you and calling you? When in your own life have you sensed such prompting, and how did you respond? How is God calling you, and your faith community, now – and where will God's call lead you?*



### **I Samuel 3: 1-10 – Samuel’s Calling & Prophetic Activity**

*In a low point in the history of Israel, God called out to a boy to become a prophet. Samuel was a gift given by God to his mother Hannah, and dedicated to God by her in thanksgiving for his birth. Samuel at this point does not know the voice of God, and does not recognize God calling to him. He needs his mentor to help him know who is calling. Hear now the story of the call of the prophet Samuel.*

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and he said, ‘Here I am!’ and ran to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call; lie down again.’ So he went and lay down. The LORD called again, ‘Samuel!’ Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call, my son; lie down again.’ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

Think about how God calls you by name. How might that impact your listening?

God calls Samuel three times, showing persistence in calling. If you were to hear God call you by name, what might be your initial response?

Who has helped you recognize God’s voice or movement in your life? Who has helped you learn to listen?

God’s call may come through the voice of others, or through the events and situations we witness. When have there been such times in your life, and how did you respond? When have you been more attuned to God’s prompting and invitation in your life, and when have you possibly missed or dismissed cues?

When have there been such times for your congregation and how did the congregation respond?

After Samuel asks God to speak, God gives Samuel hard words to speak to his mentor, Eli. When has listening to God led you into something challenging?

## **Isaiah 6:1-8 – A Vision of God in the Temple**

*The prophet Isaiah is given a vision of God which is both terrifying and energizing. In experiencing the Creator's magnificence and glory, Isaiah feels his smallness and unworthiness to be in God's presence. As Isaiah admits a clearer picture of himself and his culture, God's messenger declares the cleansing of his sin and guilt. He is freed – and then God's voice rings out with an invitation to be a messenger, to go and speak on behalf of God.*

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

Describe how you feel when God calls you. Wonder together about what Isaiah might have felt or experienced when God declared that "your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." How do you feel or experience it when God declares that your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out? What difference does that make in your life?

How do you hear the call to "go for us" today, in this time? How does your congregation together hear this call? Where might God be inviting you to go?

Being in God's presence and experiencing God's invitation directly and vividly can be intense, bringing a sense of shaking with what can seem like a mix of fear, wonder, and excitement. Share a time when you and your congregation experienced God's presence and God's call.

## Jonah 1, 3, and 4 – Jonah’s First Response to God’s Call; Jonah’s Second Response and People’s Response; Jonah’s Anger and God’s Response

*God desires for all people to find God’s grace, truth, and love – and so, God’s call may take us to places we would rather not go and to people we would rather not meet or help. These three chapters from the book of Jonah show how Jonah initially resisted God’s call, then responded in obedience, and then resented God’s choice of mercy instead of harsh judgment on the people that Jonah did not want God to save.*

*Jonah was resistant to God, and to bringing God’s saving word and call to repentance to the city-state of Nineveh. His resistance was deeply rooted in his own people’s prejudices, resentments, fears, and animosities toward them and other surrounding “foreigners.” (You can get a sense of this strongly held negative perspective from the nearby book of Nahum.) Jonah was deeply convinced that Nineveh deserved God’s judgment, and wanted to see the worst for the city because of their reputation. Jonah is all too human in his attachment to his own resentments. And God works through him in spite of himself.*

**Jonah 1.** Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’ But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, ‘What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.’

The sailors said to one another, ‘Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.’ So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, ‘Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?’ ‘I am a Hebrew,’ he replied. ‘I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’ Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, ‘What is this that you have done!’ For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

Then they said to him, ‘What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down for us?’ For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.’ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the LORD, ‘Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.’ So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

**Jonah 3.** The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the



word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

**Jonah 4.** But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' Then the LORD said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

Share a time when you experienced God calling you to do something for someone that you would rather not encounter. How did you listen to God in order to respond? How did you respond, and what happened?

When Jonah follows through with God's call, there is a different result than what Jonah expected. Describe how you feel when your expectations of God's actions are different than you expected.

Who are the "Ninevites" in your world, individually and as a congregation? How might God be prompting you to meet them and listen to their hopes and concerns?

## Being Sent

*We follow Jesus together, and this plays out in both individual and communal ways. Jesus sends seventy disciples out across the countryside to villages and towns. The Holy Spirit moved the disciples from their hidden place into the streets of Jerusalem. We often find the followers of Jesus moving in pairs or as households together, sharing in God's sending of them out into the world around them.*

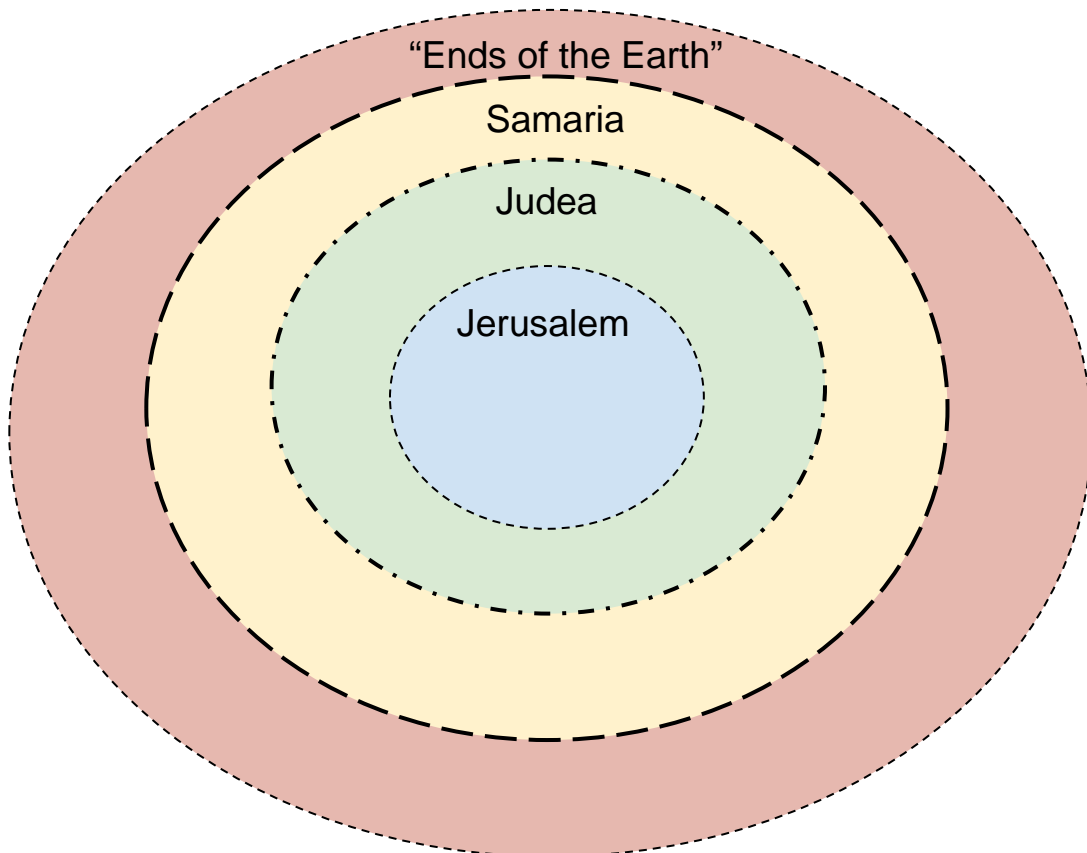
*Before Jesus ascends, he directs his followers to go, to preach, and to teach. He says to them, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:6b). At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, before he ascends, Jesus charges his followers to go, baptize, and teach.*

*What amazes the disciples is how receptive people are to them when they arrive on the scene. The Holy Spirit opens doors – and is at work in people's lives long before they arrive. When they go where they are sent, they are received with hospitality, with open hearts and minds, and with readiness to hear God's Good News.*

*Consider these questions individually, then communally:*

- *Where is your Jerusalem (the center of your world)?*
- *Where is your Judea (the surrounding familiar places of your world)?*
- *Where is your Samaria (the places where people a bit different from you are living and moving)?*
- *Where is your "ends of the earth" (places outside your familiar world – but perhaps not far away)?*
- *How might you adapt your way of being in order to share God's Good News in these places?*

*Use this diagram to write – for yourself and for your faith community – the places God may be calling and sending you. Where can you connect in new ways? Who can help you connect? How will you listen, and how will you share your own story and life of faith?*



## **Luke 10:1-12,16-21, 23 – Jesus Sends the Seventy**

*Jesus sends out his disciples in pairs (nobody is ever sent alone!) saying, “The harvest is plentiful.” The disciples are to go without power or extra provisions; instead, they are to rely on the hospitality of those in the towns. They are to offer peace and proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. The disciples have powerful experiences and come back rejoicing.*

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, “Peace to this house!” And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, “Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.” I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

‘Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.’

The seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’ He said to them, ‘I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.’

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.’...

Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!’

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

When Jesus sends the disciples, he doesn’t assign destinations. It seems like the disciples went where the Spirit led them. Where is the Holy Spirit leading and drawing us today to proclaim God’s Good News?

How do we go where we are sent, not as people with power and privilege, but as people who will rely on the hospitality of those we encounter?

## **Acts 2:1-21,37-47 – The Coming of the Holy Spirit**

*Consider the scene of the day of Pentecost, and its great miracle of communication. The disciples were still withdrawn from public eye, uncertain about the future. They were energized after seeing the risen Jesus and hearing his charge to carry God's Good News to everyone in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth – however they were uncertain how to move forward. Then came the Holy Spirit. When they find release and freedom to go to the streets, they are able to communicate across all sorts of boundaries of language and culture. Peter's words are bold and direct – and people respond.*

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*"In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."*

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.' And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

Name a time when you experienced being with another group who did things differently from your group, and had to find ways to communicate. What did you do to bridge gaps of understanding between you?

What do you experience as barriers and boundaries of language, understanding, and worldview in your surrounding communities? What can reach across these barriers and boundaries?

Peter's message is very direct, calling people to see something in the actions of their culture that is jarring. People could have rejected the message, however they heard and took it to heart. What is your hunch about why they took it to heart, turned, and changed?

This is a true "come to Jesus" kind of moment for people. Who for you, individually and as a community, has brought you face to face with a truth and a vision that changed your own path?

## Challenges, Confrontations, and Hard Conversations

*Not all conversations are easy, and not all interactions between people are “hearts and rainbows.” Jesus had many hard conversations and challenging confrontations during his public life and ministry. So did early followers of Jesus. These scriptures invite us to reflect on how we engage with people who challenge us. They also invite us to consider when and how to speak up and challenge things that are wrong, harmful, or that twist the truth.*



### **Mark 6:1-6 – The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth**

*Skepticism and disbelief are hard to face. In Jesus’ early ministry, people began to turn to him and seek him in other places in Judea. Jesus returned to his hometown to offer ministry that he had offered elsewhere. The people who knew him had trouble believing in him or accepting what he had to offer.*

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, ‘Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.’ And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

When was a time you felt misjudged or misunderstood? Share what it *felt* like during and after the event.

When have you been offended by something that someone else offered? What was it in you that reacted to what the person offered?

What cultural patterns of “the way we do things here” seem particularly difficult to break in your congregation? Generate a few hunches about why it seems hard for people from within a culture to change and do something new.

How do you discern when is it time to “move on” from a place or situation?

## **John 8:2-11 – Jesus in the Temple**

*In John's Gospel, Jesus returns again and again to the temple, the center of life for the people of Israel – first driving out the money-changers and merchants, and then coming back to heal and teach. He runs into confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees who were not willing to change and instead resented Jesus' depth of connection with the people. In John 7, there are a series of confrontations with leadership seeking to get Jesus out of the public eye, to denounce him, and to threaten him with force.*

*In this confrontation, the opponents of Jesus used the public humiliation of a woman (and not the man who was her lover) who had entered an adulterous relationship, as a way to try to force Jesus to join their righteous indignation or be identified as a sympathizer with sinners. Jesus' response holds up a mirror to their own lives and hands them back responsibility for their own actions.*

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

"Are you with us or against us in our righteous cause? Will you join us or oppose us in our holy anger against what we see as terrible sin?" What are ways that you have heard, or seen in print or on social media, such efforts to hook you and others into a way of thinking? When have people presented you with a "forced choice" that seems absolute? How have you responded – and how has your response been in harmony (or not) with how Jesus responds?

When is intentional quiet and non-response a powerful way of confronting and challenging? When is quiet and non-response a form of cowardice and attempted escape?

"Where are those who condemn you?" When have you offered release, relief, and assurance of non-condemnation and acceptance to another person? When have you received such release and assurance? What is the power of helping people find freedom from guilt and shame they carry?

## **Mark 11:15-19, 27-33 – Jesus Cleanses the Temple and Faces Confrontation**

*In Mark's Gospel, Jesus faces confrontations with others who oppose his way of teaching, healing, living, and proclaiming God's Good News. Jesus arrives in the center of religious life and finds things being done in ways that dishonor God and others. Infuriated, Jesus overturns the sellers' and money-changers' tables, and calls for a return to treating the house of God with reverence.*

*Even as his opponents are enraged against him and seeking to kill him, Jesus returns in the light of day to this center of life for the Judean people where he is confronted head-on by leadership. Their confronting questions such as "Who gave you the authority to do this?" or "You and whose army?" rely on the language of power, rights, and privilege. Jesus turns the question so they must face their own presumptions and anxieties.*

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers.'

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?' Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.' They argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say, "Why then did you not believe him?" But shall we say, "Of human origin"?'—they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

Jesus came back to the temple, a place of earlier confrontation and challenge. How are you, as an individual and as a faith community, affected when returning to places and people where there has been hurt feeling, conflict, division, or unresolved tension? Name possible ways to enter such places with an open heart, without defensiveness, neither avoiding nor seeking to restart a fight.

When have you found a wondering question or invitation to hear more, such as "say more about that," to be a compelling response to someone's confrontation or challenge? What kinds of questions or invitations to share more have stopped your own "express train" and opened new space in the conversation? What kinds of questions or invitations might you offer that could change the course of a conversation?



## **Acts 6:1-15 – Seven chosen to serve; Stephen arrested**

*Disagreement and conflict have been part of the life of the Church since the very beginning. We are, after all, human. Early unequal treatment of people in the faith community, based on their ethnic and cultural background, aroused some significant disagreement in the early Church in Jerusalem where people had come together and shared openly with each other. The apostles did not want to get involved, and so appointed the first deacons – many of them from among the class of people being neglected or under-served. Stephen was one of them, and he faced not only tensions in the early faith community of Christ-followers, but also among leadership of a synagogue of culturally different Jews from Greek and Roman lands. Stephen served and spoke well and with deep devotion. And still, opposition arose.*

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.' And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

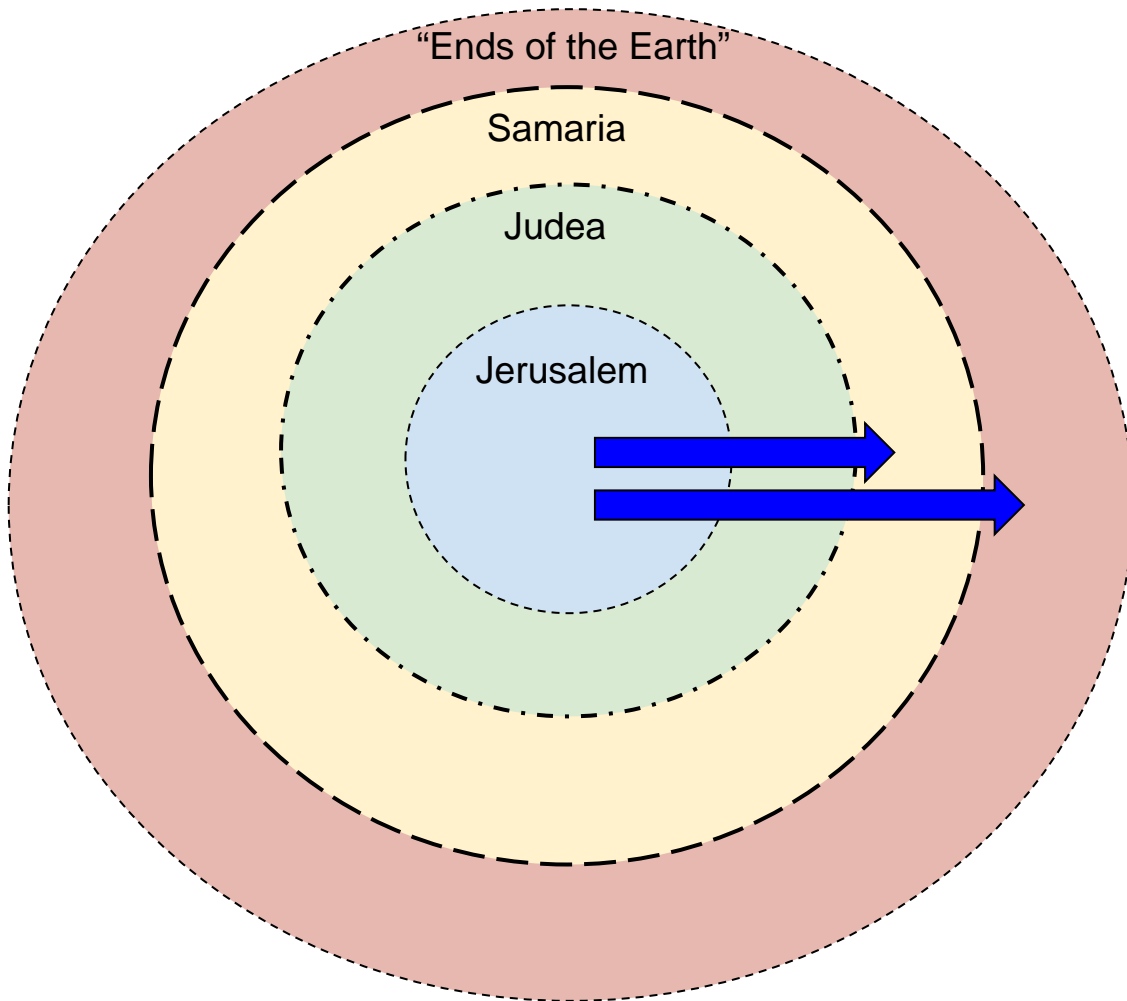
Discuss: Were the apostles avoiding or dodging conflict or were they exercising wise leadership by staying focused on "the big picture"? In order to move towards justice and resolution in challenging situations, how do you as church leadership discern when to exercise your leadership or invite others into ministry partnership?

Stephen was chosen to serve and lead in a way that corrected injustice, and to represent the under-served. How did Stephen stay centered in the overflowing love of Jesus? How do you stay centered in the overflowing love of Jesus while serving, even if conflict arises?

## New Ground, New Faces, New Perspectives

*It is in human interaction and conversation that new possibilities emerge, new ideas are born, new ground is broken, new faces enter the scene, and new perspectives open up new doorways and vistas. We don't get to new things on our own. We depend on each other and need each other as human beings in order to survive and thrive. These scriptures help us see how people boldly opened new spaces with others and willingly crossed cultural boundaries in order to bring Good News, healing, and release – and how these same people were themselves changed in their minds and hearts.*

*These scriptures carry us beyond our familiar territories of Jerusalem and Judea into Samaria and the “ends of the earth,” putting us into the mix with people we might, if left to our own habits, choose not to mix with. Where are opportunities for you to journey to your Samaria and the outside of your world, to hear people's stories, and to seek and serve Christ in the people you meet there?*



## **Luke 10:25-37 – The Parable of the Good Samaritan**

*The parable of the Good Samaritan is so familiar it has probably lost much of the shock that those who heard this story for the first time would have experienced. Jesus teaches us that it is in caring for our enemies that we are showing love of God and our neighbor. As you listen to God speaking to you in this passage, imagine yourself both being cared for and caring for one you consider an “enemy.”*

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

What are ways in which you and your congregation show love of neighbor in concrete terms – not simply in acts of charity, but in acts that reach beyond those who are like you, to love those who are deemed outsiders and enemies?

Showing love is demonstrated in this passage as showing mercy. How might the idea that love requires mercy challenge you and your congregation’s understanding of your outreach ministries?

How does this passage challenge your sense of how God is calling you to respond?

## **Matthew 15:21-28 – The Canaanite Woman’s Faith**

*In this passage Jesus treats a woman outsider in a way that many of us find troubling. The woman makes a direct request and, when refused with language that places her in a denigrated position, directly challenges him using his own culture’s presumptions. As a result, Jesus changes his action. As you listen to God in this passage, consider what it might mean to think about God changing.*

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

Does your understanding of God require that God never change? What might it do to your understanding of God to see Jesus changing in response to interactions with others, and consider that God also can change God’s mind in response to interactions with us?

Who challenges you and your congregation to act differently?

Jesus had gone to a different place and encountered someone who was different from him, who challenged him and his behavior. How often do you go elsewhere to be in conversation with those who are different from you? Do you avoid or seek out such experiences; why or why not?

## **Acts 8:26-40 – Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch**

*In this story we hear God sending Philip to proclaim Good News to one who would have been excluded from the gathering of the faithful. This one was triply an outsider – a Gentile, a foreigner, and a eunuch. Based on the laws of the time, eunuchs were not allowed in the temple. Who will be part of the gathering of followers of Jesus, and who will be excluded? Does anything keep one from being part of the body of the faithful?*

*Note in this exchange who leads the conversation. Philip arrives and follows God’s prompting to approach the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip asks the first questions. From then on, it is the Ethiopian eunuch who asks questions and opens the door for immediate action.*

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.’

The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

When in your life have you run up against rules and cultural patterns that excluded you from something you wanted to be part of or do? Has this ever happened to you in relation to your life of faith? If never, what was it that allowed you to be able to participate and be welcomed?

When Philip responded and dared to start a conversation, the gates opened. When have you dared to start a conversation with someone you did not know, and found the gates opening? Where did the conversation go?

How does this story give your faith community insight into how we share God’s Good News? How is it similar to or different from the way Philip shared God’s Good News with the eunuch?

## Acts 10 – Peter and Cornelius

*Peter's call by God to go the house of Cornelius dragged Peter across all sorts of internal borders and exclusions. He was being called to the house of a Gentile. More than that, he was being called to the home of a leader of hundreds of Roman soldiers, the people who held sway over his own people and who had executed Jesus. God leads this encounter, both with Cornelius and with Peter, in opening borders and exclusions that had been well established.*

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.' He stared at him in terror and said, 'What is it, Lord?' He answered, 'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.' When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.' So Peter went down to the men and said, 'I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?' They answered, 'Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.' So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, 'Stand up; I am only a mortal.' And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them, 'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?'

Cornelius replied, 'Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea." Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.'

Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

What are the places and groups to which you find yourself saying, "Never, Lord"? What helped Peter take the internal steps to become willing to go on this journey and meet people he would not have chosen to meet? What then helped Peter recognize the wideness of God's reach to these people, and all people?

How might a shift on one internal, unquestioned presumption open possibilities for shifts on other presumptions? When has this happened in your own life, and in your faith community?

It is a gift to be heard and honored, and to be able to share what has been life-giving about our encounters with God. When has someone surprised you by opening space for you to share something of the power of your own journey with God? How have you created space to listen to and honor your encounters with God within your faith community? How might we extend these spaces of listening when we encounter those we do not know?

## **Acts 17:16-34 – Paul in Athens**

*When we move into some new territories, we find that our language, images, metaphors, and basic ideas and assumptions seem quite foreign to those whom we meet in this new place. Just as the ones we meet sound foreign to us, we sound foreign to them. Even when we share a common spoken and written language, our ways of making meaning and connecting ideas may differ dramatically.*

*Paul goes to Athens, and finds challenges in communicating. And yet, Paul seeks ways to make connections and to find pathways into the thought-worlds of those around him, into the philosophies and convictions that orient their lives.*

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

When have you faced a cultural divide wide enough that people did not understand how you were thinking, and you did not understand how they were thinking – even when you share a language? What did you do, and what did they do, to build bridges across those differing thought-worlds?



Paul observed the Athenians were “extremely religious” after walking through their city and carefully looking at their objects of worship. Where have you observed connections between your faith and objects and/or places of worship, like the “temple to the unknown god” in another culture?

Name connections you have made between your objects of worship and another cultures’ objects of worship. How might God be speaking to you through these connections in order to bridge a cultural divide?

## Conversations That Change Us

*Our faithful work of conversation brings conversion of hearts and minds – and often, we are the ones converted and stretched as we listen. These scriptures help us see how conversations can change us, open us to seeing things in ways that we had not seen before, and show us the power of conversations no matter how brief or long.*



## **John 2:1-11 – The Wedding at Cana**

*There is a question posed to community organizers, as part of their continuing development: “What happened today because you were there but you were not leading or making it happen?” From the Gospel of John, this is the first of Jesus’ miracles. This miracle happens after a conversation that nudged, maybe even pestered, Jesus to act. Mary and Jesus are present at a gathering and Mary sees a need and notes the need to her son.*

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

When have you seen someone “lead from below” or “lead from the side” by helping leaders see a situation more clearly, and by appealing for action?

At first, Jesus does not seem willing to listen, but Mary persists and draws others into action with Jesus – further prompting Jesus to act. When have you seen inclusion of others in a conversation change the outcome?

What call of hospitality does your faith community have opportunity to respond to? How might you respond?

## **Luke 18:1-8 – The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge**

*Urgency is a powerful voice. Persistence is invaluable in the face of neglect. This parable by Jesus helps us see the value of boldness and directness in asking for what you need. While Jesus told this parable to help invite his hearers to understand the importance of praying with boldness and directness to God, this has implications for how we communicate with people who have power and authority to make change happen.*

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." ' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

Describe what it feels like when you encounter people who do not respond to appeals to values and beliefs that you think are central to everyone. How might you pivot in your approach after finding an appeal to ethics and values uncovers a disconnect?

How do you perceive people who are persistent in appealing for what they consider right? In what ways do your perceptions shift depending on who the people are and what culture, ethnicity, or background they come from?

When have you witnessed someone doing the right thing for less than noble reasons, and then changing their perspective as a result? When have you noticed this in yourself?

How is your community of faith being called to into persistence for the sake of justice, care, and truth?

## **John 1.38-51 – Andrew and Philip bring others to Jesus**

*Questions open opportunities for connection. They are direct – and, in Nathanael’s case, even a bit sarcastic. Questions are doors being unlocked and set ajar; they are gateways of opportunity and possibility of new connections being made.*

*Like questions, invitation opens opportunities for connection. “Come and see” is an invitation that pushes the door open for people to step across a threshold into somewhere they have not been before and discover something new that sets new realities and possibilities into motion. While “Come and see” is powerful, so is the experience of being seen for who we are. To be seen, known, recognized, named, and acknowledged lets someone know that they matter.*

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

What small things have you seen and experienced that began to open new possibilities for you? Looking back, what small new experiences were the start of bigger transformations in your life?

If you were to say, “Come and see” to someone about your faith community, what would you be inviting them to experience? What would you hope they discover?

## **John 3:1-17 – Nicodemus Visits Jesus**

*Some of the most significant conversations happen at night, and in quiet places. Opening space for private conversation allows people to take more time with each other, speak about deeper and more heartfelt matters, and explore things that really matter to each other.*

*Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Set yourself in Nicodemus' place. What questions do you want to come to Jesus with, that have been on your heart? What opens up in your own night-time private conversation with Christ Jesus?*

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

How might you respond to questions that seem basic, or even as misunderstandings of Christian faith? What aspects of our faith, worship, language, and ideas about God and life may be hard for others to understand? How can your faith community be more helpful in explaining and inviting others into Christianity, or helping to orient new folks to Episcopal faith and practice?

Many people say John 3:16 is "the Gospel in a nutshell." However, they leave out John 3:17, which may be even more important. How do you express to others the wide-reaching love of God? What are core verses, phrases, or quotations that summarize the Gospel for you?

## John 4:1:30,39-42 – Jesus and the Woman of Samaria

*Jesus did not just wander accidentally into Samaria. Jesus purposefully stepped into the place outside his own people's defined "right world." There, he purposefully opened opportunity for conversation with someone labeled in his own people's world as "less" or "worse" (woman, Samaritan, and serial monogamist). He placed himself in a public and accessible space. He spoke to her with a natural request. What follows is a beautiful, energetic conversation with someone with lots of personality. With each exchange, Jesus invites her into deeper reflection. This conversation changes her life, and by sharing her encounter with others, she brings transformation into other people's lives.*

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John'— although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

***Take a few minutes for this text to sink into your heart and mind.***

***Reflect on and discuss one or more of these questions:***

What doorways opened, insights awakened, and deep desires stirred for the Samaritan woman in her conversation with Jesus? When did she open doors, and when did she try to deflect or defend? How did Jesus respond each time?

When have you experienced such a conversation that keeps opening doors, awakening insights, and stirring deep spiritual desires? What moved or changed in you because of that conversation?

Several things that Jesus says to the Samaritan woman are direct – they are ways of saying "I see you, and I recognize and acknowledge you, and you need not hide who you are." How can you put this into practice with others?

Where can you – individually and as a faith community – cross a border and open conversation with others? When and how might you try this?

How can you recall and hold up for others your own moments of transformation, change, and growth as your own testimony of deep gratitude for God's work in your life? What transformative stories are ones you feel ready and willing to share? How might you offer space to hear others' stories, and to name the Holy in their lives?