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# Introduction

## General Goals

- To encounter and explore Scripture in order to make connections with our daily lives
- To learn the confessional content of the Reformed tradition so as to profess our faith with understanding
- To become aware that God has gifted each one of us with unique abilities
- To encourage active participation in the worship and service life of the church
- To provide a foundation for practicing the love of God and love of neighbor through our actions and words

## Components of the Lesson

To reach these goals we use the following format, which is firmly rooted in the Reformed tradition of worship: Assemble, Bible Study, Claim, Depart, Evaluate, and Future.

### 1. **Assemble:** God Calls Us Together

- a. **Getting Ready.** This portion of the session is a reminder to look at the main idea, the faith statement, and the Scripture lesson well ahead of time so that the creative part of the brain can be doing its subconscious work with it during as much of the week as possible. This section also contains an alert about any *preparation* that is called for in the session plan.

- b. **Coming Together.** All knowledge of God and ourselves is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In prayer, we ask for awareness of God's presence and power in our midst. We recognize the joys and concerns of those present and those who may be absent. We *pray* that our learning might be pleasing to God.

### 2. **Bible Study:** We Hear God's Word

- a. **Remembering Our Stories.** *Human experience* is valued as a locus of the work of the Holy Spirit. God loves us precisely for who we are as unique individuals with all different kinds of experiences. Although our faculties are marred by sin, God continues to be present in each of us by the grace we receive from Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is by the illumination of the Spirit that each of us receives the Word revealed in Scripture.
- b. **Encountering the Word.** The Reformed tradition asserts that the Holy Spirit makes God's Person and will known through *Scripture* as it reveals Jesus Christ. Apart from Scripture, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, we cannot have saving knowledge of Christ. Scripture is, in this sense, a manual for our faith.

### **3. Claim:** We Respond to God's Word

#### **a. Reflecting on Our Tradition: What Do Presbyterians Believe?**

Reformed theology has a *great history of interpretation*, which we find in the Confessions, and our own interpretation joins this great cloud of witness. Donald K. McKim states, "Individuals can and do confess their own personal faith, which is important, but church confessions take on a communal character when individuals join with others in the household of faith and say, 'We believe.'"<sup>1</sup> In this step each person is encouraged to understand the way that his or her faith resides in the context of that of the larger faith community.

#### **b. Responding with Our Lives.**

We are called by Christ to be ambassadors of the Word and to be intentional in how we live. Faith is not just a matter of the mind and the inner heart or soul. Faith also calls us out into the world to respond to the grace that has been so freely given us in Christ. Because the Reformed tradition understands *discernment* of our response as communal, in this concluding step we consider the ways in which we are called together to go out into the world. Each participant is provided with an Adult Participant Sheet to facilitate the discernment process. See the reproducible pages at the end of each session.

### **4. Depart:** God Sends Us into the World

We close with *prayer*, lifting up to God what has come into our hearts and our minds this hour and asking that we allow God to guide us in the week ahead.

### **5. Evaluate**

We assess the effectiveness of the learning process in presenting God's message for the day.

### **6. Future**

We look ahead to the next session and set aside time to prepare for the lesson. You will not be able to include **all** the materials provided for each session in an hour. You may want to skip one part of a section, or maybe move back and forth among the sections "Remembering Our Stories" and "Encountering the Word" in Bible Study and "Reflecting on Our Tradition" in Claim.

#### **When to Use This Material**

*We Believe: God's Word for God's People* for adults is for use by all adults as they prepare to lead intentional educational settings. These settings include Sunday morning church school as well as others. For this reason, the sessions are not dated.

1. Donald K. McKim, *Introducing the Reformed Faith: Biblical Revelation, Christian Tradition, Contemporary Significance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 4.

# Leader's Overview and Background

## Unit 1: God's Purposes

- Session 1. God's Purpose for Humankind
- Session 2. God's Purpose for People of the Covenant
- Session 3. God's Purpose for Me (in Community)
- Session 4. God's Purpose for Creation
- Session 5. God's Purpose for the Future

## Unit 1: God's Purposes

### Introduction

Unit 1 explores themes from Scripture and tradition that open windows on the very mind and heart of God. Narratives of Advent and Christmas invite us to look into such windows, for they remind us that God has visited this planet in Jesus Christ, who revealed God's redemptive purpose for both the planet and its inhabitants. This unit's objective is to lead participants toward an understanding of the New Testament concept of "new creation" as it relates to God's purpose for us and for the rest of creation.

The image of God in us and in creation reflects God's purpose. We study this reflection in the words of the biblical writers. We recognize the confessional statements that affirm for us the truth of these lessons found in Scripture. We follow spiritual practices in which God's truth is realized in our daily world. We pray daily, trusting that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us (see Romans 8:26–27).

Think about the participants in your group as you prepare, trusting them to understand and appreciate the material for themselves. If you will be teaching in the Advent and Christmas seasons, consider your group and congregational customs of observance and celebration. Note for yourself ways in which these can be added to or included in plans for each session. If your cultural setting is different from that of the majority culture, lift out unique treasures of your faith tradition for special recognition in class.

Continue now to read the information provided here. It is especially for you, in your vitally important leadership

role. In this first unit you are asked to lead the participants for five weeks in discovery of God's purpose for themselves as individuals, as a faith community, and as a part of God's good creation.

Advent and Christmas readings from Scripture are woven in with others (from the Old Testament, Romans, and Revelation) that focus on God's purpose for us and for all creation. Sessions 1 to 5 proceed through different aspects of the unit theme, giving participants a developmental opportunity to explore these as they see glimpses of God's purpose in the five areas (humankind, people of the covenant, the individual in community, creation, and the future).

Note that although this unit is designed for adults, the seasons of Advent and Christmas are times when experiences of and with children are often central to our lives. As you, the leader, plan each session, consider whether or not there are opportunities to share the sessions in some way with children. Invite children to visit your meeting area, especially if you create the Advent worship center described in Session 1. Encourage participants to share their weekly experiences with family or loved ones. Be selective, and take the responsibility for determining whether including children and families is appropriate and possible for your particular group.

### Faith Statement

The selections from A Brief Statement of Faith are arranged to reflect the theme of each session; they are not in sequential order. Be sure that you have read through the entire Brief Statement

of Faith before beginning to use any of its parts, because the overall trinitarian design is central to the theology it expresses. Here, however, quotations from A Brief Statement of Faith echo Scripture and theme selectively. The quotations are all from A Brief Statement of Faith because it is the most contemporary confession in *The Book of Confessions*, providing a focus on our faith as we are living it in the twenty-first century. If your class is familiar with other creeds (for example, the Apostle's Creed), it is always appropriate to invite research into those and comparisons for discussion. Be sure that all participants understand that the entire *Book of Confessions* is the officially adopted collection of standards of faith for our Presbyterian denomination.

## Background for Leaders

Help your group members see the importance of finding time for reading, prayer, and journaling. Set an example by setting aside your own time for this work daily. Do all of your study and preparation for this unit with the understanding that God has a purpose for you as the leader of this class at this time. Remember in each session the unit objective: to discover God's purpose in all walks of life so that our lives can anticipate the coming of the new creation.

You can depend on the Leader's Lesson Plans to provide all the help that you need for any given session. You will also find enrichment for your own spiritual life and your knowledge if you gather additional resources such as a Bible dictionary, scriptural commentaries, a copy of *The Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church

(U.S.A.), other confessional materials (especially if you are teaching in a different denominational setting), and resources providing help with spiritual practices.

You can find trustworthy help in identifying and locating the most reliable of these resources from the Presbyterian Distribution Service in Louisville, KY, and from the Internet address of [www.cokesbury.com](http://www.cokesbury.com). For example, if you are looking for help with the prologue to John's Gospel in Session 1 of this unit, you will find excellent PC(USA) material in Frances Taylor Gench's *Women and the Word: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Horizons Bible Study, Presbyterian Women, 2000–2001). On the Cokesbury Web site you will find the most recent commentary on the Gospel of John from an established, mainline publisher—*John*, by D. Moody Smith, Jr., in the Abingdon New Testament Commentaries series (Abingdon Press, 1999). *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Abingdon Press, 1994–present) always provides extensive and accurate information on any biblical text. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV)*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford University Press, 2001), is one essential reference tool that you should own; it is available in paperback.

Use all of these tools as aids to finding and fulfilling God's purpose for yourself as group leader, a covenant calling that is your sacred trust and privilege.

Session 1

# God's Purpose for Humankind

Psalm 8; John 1:1–5, 14

**Materials:**

- Bibles
- Copies of the Participant Sheet
- Table or other location for an Advent worship center or centerpiece
- Greenery, symbols, natural materials, or decorations to contribute to creation of center
- Bible dictionary
- Newsprint or markerboard; markers
- The Presbyterian Hymnal*

**Faith Statement**

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image . . . to live as one community.

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 7–8, 29–30, 32)

**Main Idea**

God's purpose has been revealed most fully in the incarnation of God in Jesus. We are called to participate in praising God, who has given us a role of responsibility in creation. In Jesus, God has given us the light of grace and truth by which to live out this role.

**Getting Ready**

Read an introduction to the Gospel of John in an annotated edition of the NRSV, such as *The HarperCollins Study Bible* or *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. (If time allows, read commentaries on Psalm 8 and John 1.)

If you are using this unit during Advent, you will want to learn about the meaning of this season and the practices historically associated with it. Use a dictionary of theology or spirituality to look up *advent*.

Participants are invited to bring natural materials to contribute to the creation of an Advent worship center or centerpiece in the meeting space. Alert participants to it the Sunday before Advent begins. Be prepared by bringing enough materials (greenery, symbols, natural materials) of your own to for the rudiments of a worship center, and be sure that an appropriate table, cabinet, or window ledge is available for this.

## *A*ssemble: God Calls Us Together **Coming Together**

Greet the participants and, if this is the First Sunday of Advent, wish them a happy new year! Explain that the church's liturgical calendar historically began with Advent, the beginning of the Christian story. Invite them to enter the time of Advent with awe, ready to celebrate its mystery, ready to respond to God in praise for the revelation of God's purpose for humankind in the birth of Jesus. Lead an opening prayer of praise.

If you are teaching in a different season of the church year, present this unit as an opportunity to explore "God's Purposes" in light of New Testament texts about God's incarnation in Christ, which include the Nativity narratives usually associated with Advent.

## **Bible Study: We Hear God's Word**

### **Remembering Our Stories**

The incarnation is the historic moment in time when God adopts us, in spite of the fall of humankind in Adam and Eve and the subsequent generations of people falling away from God. Made in the image of God, and adopted again as God's own through Jesus Christ, we have God-given responsibility for the rest of creation, as Psalm 8 has said. Having seen God's glory in Jesus, we respond with praise and commitment to the way of life that Jesus showed us. We are called to reflect that glory (John 1:14).

God created the universe and placed human beings within it purposefully. Of all creatures, humans are the ones most like God. We are therefore responsible for behaving like God as we relate to the rest of creation. Creation was birthed through the Word of God, who then came to live as one of us in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the Living Word, the Light of the World, whose life shows us how to be truly human in the world.

Psalm 8 is a hymn of praise on the subject of God's glory. The psalmist celebrates the sovereignty of God over all of creation and marvels at God's choice of mortals to represent God on earth. Psalm 24 expresses similar and beautiful sentiments of praise for the God of creation.

Help your group understand the importance of the historical context in which the Gospel of John was written, and the uncertainty of evidence about its author's identity. Help them to value the uniqueness of both texts for today, especially in that both express crucial theological concepts as lyrical hymns of praise to God.

John 1:1, "In the beginning," seems deliberately to echo Genesis 1:1 and thus to connect John's impending announcement of the incarnation with God's purpose in creation. As the psalmist of Psalms 8 and 24 praises God for humanity's reflected and representative glory, so the Gospel writer praises the full revelation of God's glory in "the Word made flesh."

The same Word by which the universe was created became human in Jesus, choosing to live among humanity, revealing the glory of God to us in full. The related Scripture in Genesis 1:26–28 reminds us that God's original intention in creation was also to create all humankind in God's own image.

### **Encountering the Word**

Psalm 8 depicts human glory as representative of the glory of God, Creator of the whole universe. In early Christianity the psalm came to be viewed as a messianic prophecy because verse 4b, in Hebrew, refers to mortals as *ben adam*, literally meaning "son of man." With or without that perceived reference to Christ, the psalm is a remarkable hymn of praise to God's glory, and an expression of wonder at our human image of God. Ask the participants to share their responses to the psalm. Do they agree with its expression of God's purpose for humankind?

The famous and beautiful opening verses of John's Gospel (1:1–5, 14) describe the full revelation of God's glory in Jesus, who is at once co-eternal with God and at the same time God incarnate in humankind. These verses are used each year as lectionary readings for Christmas Day, but they serve well as an introduction also to the meaning of the Advent season, and are indispensable to a study of the doctrine of the incarnation. What does the group believe about the incarnation? Could Jesus have been with God from before the beginning of time, yet be the same human child born to Mary? What does the term "Word of God" mean in John's context?

The wonder is that God grants to human beings a share in God's glory, and gives us ruling powers over God's works. Even the cries of human infants praise God's name and reflect God's glory (Psalm 8:1–2).

In a contemporary Bible dictionary, look up *word* and *wisdom* and consider the connections between them in John's Gospel. Why have some theologians neglected the concept of the "wisdom" of God, while in recent times others have reexamined its importance? Do you think the writer of John's Gospel considered wisdom to be important in creation and incarnation?

## **Claim:** We Respond to God's Word

### **Reflecting on Our Tradition: What Do Presbyterians Believe?**

Read the Faith Statement for today, selections from A Brief Statement of Faith (ll. 7–8, 29–30, 32). Ask this: How does our belief in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ help us to understand God's purpose for humankind? Jot down ideas on newsprint if you wish.

## **Depart:** God Sends Us into the World

Break from the discussion to create the Advent worship center, and then to look at it with admiration and praise. Recall for the group your congregation's annual Advent customs, such as lighting Advent candles or decorating with chrismon ornaments, and discuss the relationship between these rituals and the Christmas story.

The Scripture texts in this session may be divided into parts for choral reading. The result can bring out the beauty and meaning of the passage, especially as various voices give different emphases, together or as "solo" readings. Consider this practice for use with all the Scripture in this unit, especially if you are using it during Advent.

Close by singing "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, nos. 31 or 32) and note its reflection of the text. The second verse is especially expressive of John 1:14, while Verse 3 echoes John 1:4–5.

## *E*valuate

Consider the experience of this session from the perspective of the participants. What did you learn? What stood out? What would you have done differently?

## *F*uture

The next session focuses on Scripture from Luke 2 and Isaiah 42. Read these passages thoroughly and become familiar with their connection to this unit's theme.

## Faith Statement

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image . . . to live as one community.

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 7–8, 29–30, 32)

## Main Idea

God's purpose has been revealed most fully in the incarnation of God in Jesus. We are called to participate in praising God, who has given us a role of responsibility in creation. In Jesus, God has given us the light of grace and truth by which to live out this role.

In Psalm 8, the psalmist questions God's purpose for humankind, and this question is full of awe and wonder at humanity's perceived place in the universe. As the King James Version translates the Hebrew, God made us "a little lower than the angels" and placed us over all the works of nature. The psalmist praises God for this tremendous honor and responsibility and invites us, across the centuries, to join in a response of praise.

In the light of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, we can see God's purpose for humankind. The prologue to the Gospel of John helps us to see this. The writer was answering questions raised in the community of Christian Jews who, by the end of the first century A.D., had come into conflict with other synagogue members who did not believe that Jesus was God.

John explains the mystery without taking away its glory. Jesus was and is the Wisdom of God, present with God even before the universe was made, and coming into the world as a full-fledged human being, the human child called the Son of God.

The Christmas story is appropriately full of light and glory, because it is the story of revelation, the showing to us of who God is really. This gives us a story to live by, helping us to live up to our role as God's responsible representatives on this planet, in this part of God's universe, at this time in the history of the world (and in the story of salvation history).

Our contemporary community of faith can actively participate in the hymns of praise for this session (Psalm 8; John 1:1–5, 14) when we read them aloud in community. The psalmist's praise-poem to "O LORD, our Sovereign" includes us, who are today still marveling at the wonders of nature and still held responsible by God for their care. The Gospel writer includes us as readers in his claim that the life that came into the world in Jesus "was the light of all people" (John 1:4). By reclaiming these texts for ourselves, we too can say that in the incarnation story, "we have seen his glory" (v. 14), the full glory of God's self revealed in Jesus. Our response is worship and praise, in the context of our roles as God's representatives in creation.

The first chapter of John's Gospel (also called the Prologue) is like a psalm, celebrating God's wonderful work of creation. God's Word was present before the universe was even formed, and was the source of all life and light.

## Responding with Our Lives

Try writing your own hymn or poem during the week and bring it in next week to share with the class. If time permits, look at additional hymns, especially "O Word of God Incarnate" (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, no. 327). Reflect on the importance of God's "Word" having "become flesh and lived among us."

## Session 2

**God's Purpose for People of the Covenant**

Isaiah 42:5–9, 14–16; Luke 2:25–38

**Materials:**

- Bibles
- Copies of Participant Sheet
- Newsprint or markerboard; markers
- The Presbyterian Hymnal*
- Bible dictionary
- Advent worship center from last session

**Faith Statement**

The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture . . . .

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 58–60)

**Main Idea**

God's purpose is to bring salvation to all people. Our faith and life today should be about the fulfillment of that purpose.

**Getting Ready**

The Advent worship center continues to be central for group worship in this session. Liturgical focus on the theme of covenant is important today and for individual spiritual reflection in the coming week. A covenant litany for Advent provides a liturgy for a closing worship with the group and for use as a supplement to the participants' daily prayer (see Depart).

You might want to suggest other ideas for disciplined emphasis on covenant, such as daily journaling specifically on the theme "Covenant is . . ." or "Covenant to me means. . . ."

*Assemble:* God Calls Us Together**Coming Together**

Greet the participants with the question "What are you waiting for?" Encourage discussion of current hopes and expectations. Explain that both of today's Bible narratives are about hope and expectation, prophecy and promise. Ask for examples of these from the words of God in the Isaiah text and from the words of Simeon and Anna in Luke.

*Bible Study:* We Hear God's Word**Remembering Our Stories**

The prophet-writer of Isaiah 40–66, the faithful believer Simeon, and the prophet Anna are interconnected as spokespersons for God's covenant people. They speak to us through the two biblical narratives to offer a new perspective on the birth of Jesus as the One who has come to open God's covenant to all people. Class members have the opportunity to experience their connection with covenant history as they renew their commitment to the God of our salvation, who is the same God who created the world and whose purpose in the birth of Jesus is nothing less than the world's salvation.

Last session we opened our hearts and minds as we considered God's purpose for humankind. This session we focus on what Scripture says about God's purpose specifically for people of the covenant, including ourselves and all the nations of the world. The prophecy in Second Isaiah and the responses of Simeon and Anna to the birth of Jesus help us understand this.

The God worshiped by the people of Israel is the God revealed in the little child born in Bethlehem's manger. This same God, the Creator of the heavens, the earth, and all its people, has already included all peoples of all ages of the world in a covenant intended for the world's redemption. God's purpose for us as covenant people is that we share this story and, with it, share God's promises. Our job is to open the covenant to all who will come to the manger, see, and believe.

Remembering and renewing this covenant liturgically will reinforce our faith and make us ready to share it with others. Think especially about inviting people who are not churchgoers but who might be open to coming to church or church school during the Advent season as visitors. Consider how we can offer to them the covenant promises of God.

The traditional Christmas story in Luke 2:1–24 is far more familiar to us than the subsequent story of Jesus' presentation in the temple in Luke 2:25–38. Pay special attention to the link between the two texts as explained in verses 21–24. Imagine the awesome responsibility that Mary and Joseph undertake as they fulfill the law of the "old covenant" in order to prepare the Son of God to bring the "new covenant" to the world. Discuss with your class your understanding of "old covenant" and "new covenant," researching these terms in a Bible dictionary if you can. Jot down ideas and responses on newsprint.

The Second Coming of Christ can be a popular but controversial topic for class discussion. For yourself as you prepare this lesson, and in your comments during class, try to focus on exactly what today's Scripture texts say on this subject. Why does the church today acknowledge that Advent is the season to consider our expectation of Christ's return? Why do we often ignore that aspect of Advent and focus only on the coming of this year's Christmas Day instead?

1. Why are Isaiah and Luke such beloved sources of Advent hope and story? How are these two texts related? How do they point out to us, as contemporary covenant people, our place in the story of Jesus' birth? Do you know anyone in your faith community who might have responded to the baby Jesus in the Jerusalem temple as Simeon did? Do you know anyone like Anna?
2. Ask participants to read their favorite verses from Isaiah and Luke, from today's narrative or related stories. Ask if any participants wrote any hymns or poems this past week, which was suggested on their Participant Sheet from Session 1. Take time to share these now, and/or plan to include them in today's closing (see Depart). The purpose is to connect our experiences of God with those of the characters in Scripture, and our role as covenant people with their role.

## Encountering the Word

Chapters 40—66 in the Old Testament book named Isaiah are generally agreed by scholars to be written in the sixth century B.C., some two hundred years after chapters 1—39 were written. Often the (otherwise unknown) writer is called “Second Isaiah” or “Deutero-Isaiah”; some scholars identify in chapters 56—66 a third prophetic strand, attributable to a “Third Isaiah.” Second Isaiah is famous for four servant songs (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12), interpreted as messianic prophecies for the suffering and exiled people of Israel. See the Introduction to Isaiah in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (NRSV) and any contemporary commentary for more information.

A recurring theme in Luke’s Gospel is that the church of Christ is the true Israel, not only God’s people of the “new” covenant but even more so: God’s “true” or “real” covenant people. This perspective on God’s covenant people is balanced by Luke’s declared conviction that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament (the “old” covenant) and brought salvation to all people, Gentiles as well as Jews.

The infancy narratives in chapters 1 and 2 of Luke have won the hearts of the church as telling the “true” or “real” story of Christmas, even though they are unique to Luke and differ in detail from Matthew’s account. Luke 2 is read for this session; Luke 1 is the text for Session 3. Jesus’ birth in a manger stall (Luke 2:7) to a young “lowly” woman (see Luke 1:48) announces God’s purpose of outreach to the poor and the outcast, and Christ’s welcome of penitent sinners among God’s covenant people.

Ask: What did God intend, then and now, for God’s people called to a covenant faith in Jesus as Lord?

Gather as a group around the Advent worship center or centerpiece that you prepared during Session 1. Be sure to welcome and seat comfortably any visitors, and review for them the meaning of the season’s symbols you have arranged.

Read aloud together these key verses from today’s Bible texts:

- “I am the LORD, I have called you . . . I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations . . .” (Isaiah 42:6).
- “Simeon took [the child] 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).

## Claim: We Respond to God's Word

### Reflecting on Our Tradition: What Do Presbyterians Believe?

Read the Faith Statement, a selection from A Brief Statement of Faith. If our faith and life are ruled by the Scriptures we've read for today, how does that affect our image of ourselves as a covenant people? And what is it for which we now wait in hope?

Call attention to Second Isaiah's images of God in chapter 42. Invite the class to identify God's characteristics in each verse ("creating" in v. 5, "calling and giving" in v. 6, "liberating" in v. 7, "birthing" in v. 14, etc.). Why are these images important to our understanding of God's covenant promises to us?

Review the concept of *covenant*, which in Hebrew originally meant "bond" (*b'rith*). The Greek translators of the Hebrew Scriptures chose as its equivalent their word (*diatheke*) for "will," or "testament," which in Latin was then literally translated *testament* (*testamentum*). This word reflects the idea that God made the covenant and that God's people are heirs to the covenant, receiving it and being bound by its terms. Notice what Isaiah 42:6b emphasizes as one of those terms. Does Luke's Simeon see Jesus as the embodied fulfillment of the covenant? Is Anna's understanding different from Simeon's?

The Song of Simeon (Luke 2:29–32) has three different musical settings in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, all short, lovely, and singable! Try one or all three with the group; they are hymn nos. 603, 604, and 605. If the group has been reluctant to sing, invite someone from your church choir to lead you or to present these hymns as solos.

## Depart: God Sends Us into the World

### Closing

Lead the class in closing worship, using *Covenant Litany for Advent*<sup>1</sup> and the Advent worship center or centerpiece created in the classroom in Session 1. Following this litany you may wish to invite students to read their poems or hymns if they wrote any (see *Remembering Our Stories*, #2).

### Covenant Litany for Advent

*Leader:* Christ came, as the prophets promised, to bring us salvation. Christ has promised to come to us again. Let us pray that we will be true to our covenant promise and welcome others to this faith.

***People:* Come, Lord Jesus; open our hearts to love others as you have loved us.**

*Leader:* May the light of Christ penetrate the gloom of sin, in us and in the world.

***People:* Come, Lord Jesus; you are the symbol of all our hopes.**

*Leader:* We are your covenant people, Lord; be present to us now in the power of your Spirit as we reaffirm our commitment to you.

***People:* We are no longer our own; we are yours. Give us your work to do. Light up our lives with hope and joy that we might be for you a light to the nations.**

*Leader:* Give us your Spirit's presence and blessing that we may reach out in love to those who do not know you, and bring them to the knowledge and love of your salvation.

***People:* We are yours, O glorious God, our Creator, Savior, and Holy Spirit.**

*All:* Let the covenant which we renew in this Advent hour be ratified for all eternity. In the name of the Christ-child we pray. Amen.

## Evaluate

Lift up each class member in prayer, thanking God for his or her presence. Think about the experience of the session for each person. What seemed to be the high points and which activities were more difficult?

## Future

Next week, the Advent worship center from Sessions 1 and 2 will continue to be a focal point of the session. Make plans to save or recreate this important space. Hazelnuts, or filberts, will be a necessary addition to the Advent worship center for the next session.

1. Written by Betsy Lunz.

## Faith Statement

The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture . . . .

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 58–60)

## Main Idea

God's purpose is to bring salvation to all people. Our faith and life today should be about the fulfillment of that purpose.

Scholars do not know many details about the writer, or writers, of chapters 40–66 in the Old Testament book titled "Isaiah," except that the text is written about two hundred years after Isaiah 1–39 and is a prophecy of hope for Israelites living in Babylonian exile. The writer of this portion of the biblical book Isaiah is often referred to as Second Isaiah.

All of the prophecies in Isaiah were a source of much comfort to God's covenant people, cherished from the time they were written through the time of Christ. Early Christians saw in them predictions that the coming of Christ fulfilled. Christians today continue to cherish Isaiah's prophecies, especially as songs of hope and praise in our season of Advent.

Luke's infancy narrative tells of the presentation of Jesus in the Jerusalem temple by Mary and Joseph. There Simeon quotes Isaiah 42:6 as he praises God for showing him Jesus, the Savior of all people. He also warns Mary of the pain that the world's reception of her son will bring to her: "and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35b).

Anna, identified by Luke as a prophet who was present daily in the temple, sees Jesus, and in him the long-awaited fulfillment of God's promised redemption. Anna's prophecy is connected with Second Isaiah's in that she sees the Christ-child as the answer for "all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38b). The exiled

people to whom Second Isaiah writes his words of hope and comfort were looking and longing for the redemption of Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

At the time of the Babylonian exile, prophets (especially Second Isaiah) remembered God's covenant promise and wrote about their hope that it might still be fulfilled, even though Jerusalem and its temple had been destroyed by invaders and God's people carried away from their promised land. At the time of Christ's birth in Bethlehem, faithful keepers of the covenant saw in the holy child the salvation for which they had been hoping and praying. *Salvation* for Anna meant redemption for Israel; for Simeon, it included the revelation of God to Gentiles.

For us as God's present-day people of covenant, our Advent time of waiting and expectation can give us an understanding of salvation and of God's purpose in accomplishing it. Think about your own understanding of what it is for which Christians are waiting and hoping.

## Responding with Our Lives

Take time this week to consider your answer to this question raised in 2 Peter: "What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?" (3:11–12).

## Session 3

**God's Purpose for Me (in Community)**

Luke 1:26–56

**Materials:**

- Bibles
- Copies of Participant Sheet
- Newsprint or markerboard; markers
- Hazelnuts (also called filberts), purchased from any produce source, one for each participant (see Depart)
- Advent worship center from previous sessions

**Faith Statement**

God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 48–51)

**Main Idea**

As recorded in Luke, Mary's song of praise for God's unique claim on her as an individual is inseparable from her commitment to partnership with God in the salvation of the whole world.

**Getting Ready**

Review the session plan, paying particular attention to the hazelnut meditation in Depart. Silent meditation surrounds the tactile experience of the hazelnut, both in the session and as a spiritual practice for use by the participants at home. Avoid making any jokes on the subject, because the tactile object is an important focus for the other senses, supporting the participant in a time of silence and spiritual freedom.

Write the questions listed in Remembering Our Stories on newsprint or markerboard and place them in an area of the meeting space that can be seen by all the participants.

*Assemble:* God Calls Us Together**Coming Together**

The theme of incarnation is intimately relevant to the purpose of God for the individual Christian in community. Mary's response and song show us how to receive the word of God into our own lives. Our response can make a difference in our community.

To begin the class, ask for volunteers to comment on the meaning of *incarnation*. Encourage exploration of what it meant to Mary in the context of the biblical narrative. Lead up to a reading of Luke 1:26–56, with each individual in the group reading a verse sequentially.

## **Bible Study: We Hear God's Word**

### **Remembering Our Stories**

Ask the following questions, which you have written on newsprint or markerboard (see Getting Ready): “What do Mary of Nazareth, Elizabeth, and Esther have in common?” “How is the mission of the prophet in Isaiah 61 like the vision described by Mary in Luke 1:46–55?” “What is God’s purpose for each of these individual biblical characters, and how does that individualized purpose connect their lives with the covenant community of God?” Then read Psalm 119:17–19, 33 aloud as a prayer for guidance in seeking God’s purpose for the individual lives of class members.

What individuals in the history of the world have attempted to enact the prophecy of Isaiah 61 and of the Magnificat? Has this worked for the betterment of the social order in their communities? Is God’s purpose as described in Luke 1 and Isaiah 61 realistic for our way of life in the world? Remind the group that Jesus quoted Isaiah 61 as an announcement of the purpose of his ministry (see Luke 4:16–21).

### **Encountering the Word**

Gerard Manley Hopkins, a nineteenth-century English poet, believed that one consequence of the incarnation is that the modern-day Christian can participate in Mary’s experience. Indeed, the daily life of the Christian at its best reiterates Mary’s response to God. Of course, we are free to choose to say yes or no, but God’s purpose for us is that we in the church continue the fulfillment of what God began by coming into the world in the flesh. Discuss Hopkins’s view.

The following true story could lead into further discussion of the Magnificat. It is about an experience that enlarged my own understanding of God’s mercy and incarnational presence, while leaving open the question of how the church does incarnational justice.

*One Christmas Eve a homeless man came to the church where I was serving. He smelled of a lot of alcohol and he was coughing badly. He had come to the church for help before, and so he called me by name this time, though I could not remember his name. He asked if he could eat at the noon Christmas lunch being served at that time to senior citizens in our church. With a terrible sense of failing both him and God, I told him he could not participate in that fellowship hall luncheon. I did not tell him the reasons why—that he was drunk, possibly infectious, and not in any shape to sit among our already vulnerable senior citizen lunch group. Handing him a brown-bag lunch instead, I said, “I’m sorry, but the answer is no. I’m sorry.”*

*He replied: “You’re sorry? Why should you be sorry? It’s Christmas Eve. Why should anyone be sorry?”*

1. Does this story illustrate the reversal of Luke 1:53? Why or why not?
2. What real-life experiences of your own relate to this biblical story?

## **Claim:** We Respond to God's Word

### **Reflecting on Our Tradition: What Do Presbyterians Believe?**

God's purpose for us as members of the church is to participate in the fulfillment of Mary's vision: to help lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things (Luke 1:52–53). We can only try to do this (to fulfill God's purpose for our own lives) believing, like Mary, that God's mercy "is for those who fear him from generation to generation" (1:50), and believing also that "God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, . . . God is faithful still" (A Brief Statement of Faith, lines 48–49, 51).

Early in church history, the liturgical year became based on the life of Jesus, so "the church year" began with reading the biblical stories of Jesus' birth. Especially in the Middle Ages, Christian education at Advent was highlighted by dramatic presentations of scenes such as those in the first chapter of Luke, with the angel Gabriel's annunciation to Mary, Mary's meeting with her relative Elizabeth, and her song of praise for God's promises. For contemporary Christians, these same stories offer a vision for our own future, and for the future of our church.

How do these stories reveal God's purpose for you, for your life, and for your faith community?

## Depart: God Sends Us into the World

Julian of Norwich lived in England in the fourteenth century. She believed that God gave her visions to explain the incarnation, the Trinity, and God's infinite love. (Her visions are published in English in *Revelations of Divine Love*, introduction by Clifton Wolters [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966].) Her first vision was of something round, like a hazelnut, in the palm of her hand, representing the whole creation.

Give a hazelnut to each participant and invite them to hold it in the palm of their hand. Ask them to imagine that it contains the whole of creation. Usually the kernel can be felt and heard if you shake the hazelnut gently. Lead the group in a meditation on the hazelnut as a symbol of incarnation, creation, and the love of God as you recite the following:

*Close your eyes to imagine an Englishwoman of the fourteenth century, living cloistered in a hermitage, receiving from God a vision of a hazelnut (like the one you are holding) representing the whole universe. Saint Julian of Norwich believed that God had showed her Jesus, in his mother's womb, as the saving center of the universe. Yet Jesus himself represented the infinite God, being born in human flesh. So God's infinity was enclosed within the finite universe, in order to save all humankind. As you continue to hold the hazelnut in your hand, meditate on the mystery of God's infinity becoming incarnate in Mary's womb.*

Close with prayer. Invite each person to keep this small, seemingly insignificant object as a means for remembering Mary's stories in Luke 1. Add any extra hazelnuts to the Advent worship center.

## Evaluate

Not all groups are accustomed to practices of meditation during their group gatherings. Think back on the experiences of the group members. If this practice was received in a positive way, consider adding an aspect of meditation in future sessions.

## Faith Statement

God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 48–51)

## Main Idea

As recorded in Luke, Mary's song of praise for God's unique claim on her as an individual is inseparable from her commitment to partnership with God in the salvation of the whole world.

Mary's response to God's amazing message is: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Is it too much to say that Mary's story is my story? our story? The meaning of Gabriel's message to her is that God chooses to enter human life in an empowering partnership of Holy Spirit and servant. God's incarnational purpose is to accomplish those works that Mary describes in her Magnificat.

God's purpose for you and for me is not that different; it is part and parcel of God's incarnational purpose. God depends on our response and waits to see if it will be the same as Mary's.

Sometimes our role is more like that of Elizabeth: to recognize, welcome, affirm, and bless the one who (like Mary) comes to us with a challenge from God. At different times in the community of faith some are called to be Mary and others are called to be Elizabeth, yet we all share the call to fulfill God's purpose in the world.

The role of God in relationship to us is described by our Brief Statement of Faith. God is to us "like a mother" and "like a father"; God is faithful, keeping God's part of the covenant. What is our response?

The biblical text raises other questions as well. Some are what scholars call "text-critical" questions, such as: Where did Luke get this material, which appears only in his Gospel? Did Mary tell her story to some of the early disciples, or did Elizabeth? The source of the Magnificat is 1 Samuel 2:1–10; did Mary quote this text herself, on purpose? Or did the writer of Luke's Gospel borrow it to express his understanding of the power of Mary's response to God? How is Hannah's song and story related to Mary's? to Elizabeth's?

Other questions are theological: What should we make of Gabriel, and of Luke's assumption that angels existed and functioned as messengers of God? (See also Luke 1:1–19; 2:8–15.) Theologians have for two millennia debated the meaning of Luke 1:27 and 1:34–35. Whenever we recite the Apostles' Creed, which dates from the fourth century A.D., we say that we believe in "Jesus Christ . . . conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary . . ." Yet nowhere else in Luke or Acts is this mentioned, nor does it appear as an article of faith in the early sermons preached by the disciples. Paul makes no mention of the story in his letters. Nevertheless, Matthew 1:23 quotes Isaiah 7:14 ("Look, the young woman [Greek: virgin] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel") as a sign of the Messiah's birth. Why does this story both capture and trouble our imaginations?

**God's Purpose for Me (in Community)** Luke 1:26–56

Luke's stories and the poetry in them invite the reader to share the experience of Mary, dramatically. If we do this, we find inspiration in our search for an answer to the ultimate question of faith: What is God's purpose for me? Our spiritual practice can put this question in the context of God's purpose for all creation.

**Responding with Our Lives**

Today's English Version of the Bible translates Psalm 119:18–19 into a prayer for the discovery of God's purpose in the individual person's life: "Open my eyes, so that I may see the wonderful truths in your law. I am here on earth for just a little while; do not hide your commands from me." Use this prayer as your own this week. Listen for God's response.

## Session 4

**God's Purpose for Creation**

## Romans 8:18–25

**Materials:**

- Bibles
- Copies of Participant Sheet
- Advent worship center from previous sessions
- New greenery, etc. for the Advent worship center
- The Presbyterian Hymnal*
- Newsprint or markerboard; markers

[We] threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God's condemnation. Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 38–40)

**Main Idea**

Paul's image in Romans of both creation and Christians groaning as if in labor pains while we wait together for redemption and new birth echoes the story of Mary giving birth to Christ.

**Getting Ready**

Refresh the Advent worship center constructed on the first Sunday with additional natural greenery or other natural objects and symbols.

From silent meditation to acts of advocacy for creation is a big change, especially as Christmas Day approaches. The spiritual practice of acts of commitment to environmental health and justice is an important part of the session theme. Again, as leader, don't trivialize the suggestions or joke about them. (Humor is an excellent attribute for a leader, while joking about the lesson is not!)

## *Assemble:* God Calls Us Together

### Coming Together

Explain as you begin the session that the story of Jesus' birth is intimately connected to God's purpose for creation, especially through the biblical text in Romans 8:18–25. Open the gathering by singing an Advent hymn together. Advent hymns in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* that help us make this connection are "People, Look East" (no. 12) and "Rejoice! Rejoice, Believers" (no. 15), with the latter being appropriate for other seasons as well as for Advent. Christina Rossetti's "In the Bleak Midwinter" (no. 36) echoes Romans 8:18 and the Christmas Eve narrative.

A connection between the care of creation and Sabbath rest can lead into an opening prayer and discussion of God's purpose for us and for creation on this particular Sabbath day. Remind the group that everything needs to rest in order to grow. Our own Sabbath rest can include cutting back on overuse of natural resources in favor of simplicity and respectful contemplation of creation's rhythms. Invite your class to remember the Sabbath as the culmination of creation, one of God's gifts put into our responsible care.

## **Bible Study: We Hear God's Word**

### **Remembering Our Stories**

Ask one class member to read aloud Romans 8:18–25; or ask three members to read in sequence verses 18–21, 22–23, 24–25. Consult *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (NRSV), if available, and share the information in its footnotes to verses 21–23 with the class. Then lead the class in a unison reading of Luke 2:1–14. Ask for comments on connections between the texts.

The coming of Jesus into the world brought hope of redemption not only to humanity but to all of fallen creation. The coming of the Holy Spirit to the church gives us the “first fruits” (Romans 8:23) of redemption. We ourselves have already received this taste of our ultimate redemption, which strengthens us in times of suffering and helps us to wait in patient hope.

The Holy Spirit does not leave us alone with this mere foretaste, but continues to help us (v. 26), communicating with our spirits in prayer. Words are not necessary for this communication, nor is strength. The Spirit of God helps us in our weakness, and intercedes for us “with sighs too deep for words.” This is good news for us who are still earthbound, hoping for “what we do not see” (heaven?) and waiting for it with patience (v. 25).

The bad news is that the death of our planet is possible. Humanity has damaged an already imperfect ecological system. We can choose to continue this careless damage, or we can recommit ourselves to the care of creation. God’s purpose for creation is redemption.

To illustrate Paul’s words to the Romans, think of December 21, the longest night of the year. The date is less than a week away from Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Sorrow, suffering, and gloom are represented by the longest winter night. However, if we wait in hope, joy will come to us again in just a few days. Some churches hold evening services on December 21, especially for those members of the congregation who have experienced the loss of a loved one during the year.

### **Encountering the Word**

The word *ecology* is linked to the word *ecumenical*. The Greek root for both words is *oikos*, which means “household.” Creation is the household of God; the church around the world is also God’s “ecumenical” household. Using newsprint or markerboard, share this word study with your class and invite them to journal during the coming week on their own experiences of this connection between creation and church. God’s redemptive incarnational presence continues to dwell in both houses!

Refer to Genesis 1:1–2 as the introduction to the Bible’s first creation story, and invite discussion of God’s purpose for creation as it is reflected there. What does the story of God’s incarnation as a human child, born of a woman, in Luke 2:1–14 tell us about God’s purpose for creation?

Church groups might groan at practices that challenge our modern lifestyle. If we focus on what Paul terms the “groaning” of creation, however, we can see that an ecologically friendly lifestyle is part of our Christian responsibility. Keep your perspective, however: The connection between the care of creation and the Christmas story should not shift our focus away from the joy of that season to anxiety about our planet’s future. The hope of Christmas is the same hope in which we wait for the time when the planet (and we as children of God) will experience freedom from sin and destruction.

Here are some actions we can take while we wait:

- If you have decorated a Christmas tree in your home, make plans now to recycle it and, if possible, to plant a new tree in your yard or neighborhood to replace it.
- In a letter (preferably on recycled paper) to the local news media, to an individual, or to a politician, you could describe the connection between spirituality, Christmas, and creation. Offer a protest against pollution, or a plan for better waste disposal or water conservation.
- Consult the Internet regarding environmental conditions, areas of risk, and ways you can help.
- A spiritual experience is available to us through more intimate contact with nature. A starlit night (even if it is the longest night of the year!) helps us to imagine the unimaginable. Find a way to include an experience of nature in your prayers or in worship this week.
- “Use it over or do without” is an excellent motto for your meditation during Christmas. Can you give someone a plant, a tree, a promise to help them with cleaning up waste and recycling, instead of a last-minute gift made of plastic? Can you persuade your family to recycle gift wrappings or “do without”?
- Choose one natural element (water, for example) that you wish to clean up or save. Concentrate on changing one daily habit that would help accomplish this. Look for other people in your neighborhood or in your local newspaper who are committed to this cause, and join them.
- Many denominations have published resources to help congregations care for the environment. To obtain PC(USA) material on this subject, call PDS at 1-800-524-2612.
- Share with the group any conservation practice that you have discovered. If every class member offered a new suggestion to other participants, and all recommitted to practice them together, they would bring their corner of creation closer to freedom from decay (Romans 8:21).

## **Claim:** We Respond to God's Word

### **Reflecting on Our Tradition: What Do Presbyterians Believe?**

We have inherited suspicions about the value of "nature" (God's creation) in the Calvinist doctrine that the "original sin" of Adam and Eve caused creation's fall. We imagine that the goodness of Eden is forever lost, and we question celebrating or caring for nature, thinking this is a project less important than caring for, or saving, human souls. Yet human life on this planet is linked to the life of the planet itself. Scripture gives us abundant evidence that God continues to care for all God's creation as a vital part of God's eternal purpose.

Explore the theme of hope as it relates both to environmental problems such as global warming and to God's covenant promise of redemption.

What is our connection to God's creation as it exists beyond our own planet, in the enormous expanses of the universe; and what might "universal" redemption mean?

While we are in this Advent cycle of waiting, God calls and challenges us to be in solidarity with the environment, in sympathy with its suffering. We can participate actively by making commitments that will bring health to the planet and contribute to its hoped-for redemption.

Lead the group in a discussion about possible Christmas gifts that would be acts of commitment to environmental health and justice. These might include recycling, replanting trees, preventing pollution and waste, seeking information on local environmental conditions, conservation, and so on. Discuss the participants' suggestions in some detail so that individual persons, or the group, can select commitments to make and fulfill them in the coming week(s).

## **Depart:** God Sends Us into the World

Lead the group in a guided meditation through the realities of suffering toward hope in God's redemptive purpose for creation. Use a method of reading interspersed with silence. Begin with scriptural references to suffering and then with references to hope, pausing between each for a time of reflection. Conclude this time with a reading of Psalm 98:4–9.

## **Evaluate**

What issues were raised that need future exploration? Consider what could have been done differently to spur more theological thought and discussion.

## **Future**

Session 5 celebrates the promises of God by using the act of creating resolutions. Students will write their own resolutions (see Session 5, "Reflecting on Our Tradition" in Claim).

**God's Purpose for Creation** Romans 8:18–25

[We] threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God's condemnation. Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 38–40)

**Main Idea**

Paul's image in Romans of both creation and Christians groaning as if in labor pains while we wait together for redemption and new birth echoes the story of Mary giving birth to Christ.

*Renewal* is both a popular concept and a natural human longing. To devote ourselves to acts of commitment on behalf of creation's renewal connects us with our own deepest spiritual longings for renewal. Imagining the work of the Spirit in creation and redemption as birthing gives us new insight into the meaning of incarnation, of humanity, and of God's purpose for creation.

We become aware of problems in our environment in times of drought, flood, or other natural disasters. The church at its best recognizes Earth Day on the secular calendar and encourages awareness of Christians' appropriate response to environmental concerns. Sometimes churches honor creation only on that one day of the year. Sometimes churches or groups within them continue to engage throughout the year in special acts of commitment to care for the environment.

Native American members of churches claim their ancestral heritage of care for the earth, and recognize the harm done in the United States as a result of the exploration and exploitation of natural resources for the past five hundred years. The PC(USA) Brief Statement of Faith acknowledges human sin across the centuries and around the globe, while holding out hope of God's mercy and redemption both for us and for nature.

The Advent message of God's coming to earth in Jesus Christ restores our hope. Sometimes we think that Jesus came into this world only to save individual believers, redeeming each of us personally for eternal life in the next world. Paul's letter to the church in Rome describes creation as a

part of the redemption process, too. The whole creation groans in labor pains while waiting to be "set free from its bondage to decay" (8:21–22).

We can recommit ourselves to justice for creation while we also wait in hope for the coming glory of God. We can celebrate in Advent the coming again of Christ, believing the biblical promise that he will return to redeem the earth itself.

In Genesis 1:2, the NRSV translates the creative agent of the story as "a wind from God." A footnote tells us that the Hebrew can also mean "the spirit of God." While we are celebrating the glorious advent of the Second Person of the Trinity (Jesus Christ), this is a good time to reflect on the eternal presence of all three Persons (Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit) in our concept of God in whose hands the whole world is held—past, present, and future.

Psalm 98:4–9 gives a joyful Advent vision of the whole world welcoming the coming of the Lord. In Hebrew, we know that LORD means "Yahweh," yet we appropriately use *Lord* as a name for Christ as well. So God has already come into the world and will also come again. Read aloud the verses of Psalm 98 that help us to celebrate this mystery and hope.

**Responding with Our Lives**

Make a commitment this week to follow our Christian responsibility of maintaining an ecologically friendly lifestyle. Make one small change during this time while committing to make several over the coming weeks and months.

## Session 5

**God's Purpose for the Future**

## Revelation 22:1–7

**Materials:**

- Bibles
- Copies of Participant Sheet
- Artists' renderings of scenes from Revelation 21 and 22, and students' drawings based on Revelation 22:1–5 (*optional*)
- Advent worship center from previous sessions (*optional*)
- Recording (with player) of Stephen Adams's "The Holy City" or of the traditional spiritual "Oh! What a Beautiful City"; or a soloist to sing them (*optional*)
- The Presbyterian Hymnal*
- Paper and pens for writing resolutions (see Claim)
- Offering plate to collect resolutions (see Depart) (*optional*)

**Faith Statement**

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 72–76)

**Main Idea**

From Revelation's vividly imagined future we can learn more about the purpose of our present daily lives, seen (and celebrated) in the light of our shared hope for new and eternal life.

**Getting Ready**

The practices of celebration and of writing resolutions develop this session's theme of "God's Purpose for the Future" while linking Christmas and New Year's Day. Here celebration includes not only the Christmas celebration but also the celebration of the promises of God. Writing resolutions is no longer a societal convention, but is a spiritual activity set in the context of covenant commitments. One suggestion is that you as leader collect the resolutions (written during Claim) to use as a part of the group's closing worship, keep them, and return them later in the year, during Lent or Pentecost, as a point of reference for participants' spiritual growth.

The study of any part of Revelation often brings up stereotypes about the end of the world, or about the book and its author. Expect to spend a little time on these, but rely on group discussion and the specific Bible verses to be studied (as well as related passages), rather than trying to discuss the entire book of Revelation, or hypotheses about it.

If you wish, look in a library collection for artists' renderings of scenes from Revelation 21 and 22, and display those in the meeting space. Consider asking class members ahead of time to create and bring their own drawings based on Revelation 22:1–5. If your Advent worship center is still within the meeting space, pictures representing God's future could add a new centerpiece to it. (Be sure to dismantle the center or centerpiece and recycle its contents after this session.)

*Assemble:* God Calls Us Together**Coming Together**

If a member of your group (or a friend, colleague, member of your church) sings, especially baritone, invite that person to open the session by singing Stephen Adams's solo piece "The Holy City," or the traditional spiritual "Oh! What a Beautiful City" (the latter is available in *Lift Every Voice and Sing II: An African American Hymnal* [The Church Publications, 1993]). Use recordings if this is more feasible than arranging a soloist).

In such a setting, especially at Christmas, celebration will happen if you let it. Lead the group in traditional or innovative movements and signs of celebration, such as raising hands to God while saying “Alleluia,” or offering expressions of joy such as hugs or smiles or even dance steps. Use the words to “Joy to the World!” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, no. 40) as the celebration theme.

## **Bible Study: We Hear God's Word**

### **Remembering Our Stories**

Romans 8:18–25, last session’s Bible narrative, is a related passage that you could reread or reference this session, because it connects the yearning of nature for redemption with the hope of that redemption in God’s future. God’s purpose for the future includes all peoples and all creation. Revelation 22:2b (“and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations”) suggests another connection between nature and redemption. See the booklet *And the Leaves of the Tree are for the Healing of the Nations: Biblical and Theological Foundations for Eco-Justice*, by Dr. Carol Johnston (available from Presbyterian Distribution Service, item #7243306001, \$3.00).

We saw in Session 4 that *ecology* refers to the household of God. A word relevant to today’s lesson is *eschatology*, which simply means “study of last things.” It is often associated with the term *apocalypse*, and might come up in class. *Eschaton* is the Greek term meaning “last things” or “end” or “end-time.” Certainly that is the setting of the vision in Revelation 21 and 22, with the emphasis being that in the end God will come to live and dwell with those who worship God.

In the early church, scholars already debated whether or not “John,” cited in Revelation as its author, was the apostle John, son of Zebedee. The right of Revelation to be placed in the New Testament canon was also disputed. Although the date and place of its writing remain uncertain, persecution by Rome at some period during the latter part of the first century surely forms the background for this message to the endangered churches.

Remember that this vision is attributed by John to an angel sent from Christ himself. It is a vision of God’s future, but different from a prophetic blueprint of coming events. As you lead the group today as they consider God’s purpose for the future, you can help them distinguish between imaginative vision and literal prophecy. You might lead a discussion also of the difference between a *plan* (a set of step-by-step guidelines laid out to be followed) and a *purpose* (in this case the intention or will of God as conceived from the beginning of creation).

God’s future is promised to us as a new creation, which people of the covenant can both experience now and expect in the future. Through the study of Unit 1, you and your group have drawn closer to living into this present and future reality. Although the term *new creation* has not appeared in our Bible narratives, references to it can be found in Scripture, commentaries, or a theological dictionary. For example, see 2 Corinthians 5:17: “So if anyone

is in Christ, there is new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Compare this image to that of the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21:1–5.

### **Encountering the Word**

The word *revelation* is the English translation of the Greek word *apokalypsis*. In English, *apocalypse* and *revelation* are synonyms. Other synonyms are *disclosure* and *unveiling*.

Are these our usual interpretations of the word *revelation*? Why or why not?

We do not know exactly who the writer "John" is. Scholars identify the probable time of his writing as late first century. Tradition teaches that the revelation was received and written by the John who was one of the twelve disciples ("the beloved disciple") of Jesus. Most scholars believe the text was composed too late for an original disciple's lifetime, however.

God's purpose for the future is that God's own goodness will prevail over evil. Christ will come again to live among believers, who will in turn live forever with Christ in God's presence. Believing this revelation, Christians of any era (no matter how far their time seems to be from Christ's promised return) can live in hope, trusting the future to God and imagining God's purpose fulfilled at the end of time.

The prophecy of Jeremiah had already stated our reason for hope and celebration: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11).

## **C**laim: We Respond to God's Word

### **Reflecting on Our Tradition: What Do Presbyterians Believe?**

We profess to believe (as in A Brief Statement of Faith) that we are watching for God's new heaven and new earth, and praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Are we? Do we believe that time will end in the fulfillment of God's purpose for us and for all creation? Recall your study of Romans 8:18–25 last session.

How would our understanding of time change if we saw it as temporary, provisional, prefatory to the coming reign of God and not as an end in itself? The word *temporal* means "timed." Life itself is a "timed" event. If we believe in God's purpose for the future, then we can be empowered to live in the time given to us. We can "strive to serve God in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives" (A Brief Statement of Faith, lines 73–74), anticipating Christ's return and celebrating that hope.

Celebration is based on trust in God. Trust in God gives us reason to celebrate the still hidden future, and it helps us to recognize God's hand in the joys of the present. Celebration frees us to relate to God and to others as if God were present among us—"present at the party," so to speak. The Christmas story tells us that we can celebrate and rejoice because, indeed, "the Lord has come"

(see *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, nos. 39 and 40, and consider using one or both in your time of celebration).

1. What does celebration mean in your family, your faith tradition, your private life? Do we avoid celebration as something secular or frivolous?
2. How can our celebration be centered on God?
3. How can Christmas joy be expressed this Sunday, this week, and every day?

As answers are shared, show one another how to celebrate! Consider that celebration might for Presbyterians be an actual discipline, something we must learn to do as disciples of the Christ who calls us to celebrate. Let's not drag our feet!

At times like the beginning of a new year, resolutions are often a humorous topic of conventional conversation rather than a serious spiritual practice. In this lesson, however, you are invited to resolve that in the coming year your life will reflect your faith in God's future. You can use the familiar form of writing "New Year's Resolutions" in the context of God's coming reign on earth.

Distribute paper and pens. Invite the group to write down their resolutions—their hopes and intentions for the immediate future—as an exercise in imagining eternal life in God's presence. Ask them to commit to this spiritual practice as a community of the redeemed who will one day meet again in the holy city of God. In this context, one's personal resolutions are not just private plans for change, but rather pieces of God's larger plan and purpose for the future. They will remind you later of the church's confessional resolve to keep watching and praying (*A Brief Statement of Faith*, lines 75–76). Have the group members hold onto their resolutions so they can be collected during the closing worship.

## Depart: God Sends Us into the World

Lead the group in a closing prayer to conclude this session as you provide a blessing of the New Year's resolutions that you collect from the group (see Claim). (You may wish to collect them in an offering plate.) Remember that you or a succeeding leader will be responsible for keeping the resolutions and returning them at an appropriate time, perhaps during Lent or on Pentecost Sunday of the coming year.

## Evaluate

Think back through this unit. What were the highlights? What would you have done differently? What practices will you continue for the next unit of sessions?

## Future

The next unit of study includes Scripture related to encounters with God. Review the main Scriptures for this coming unit.

## Faith Statement

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"  
—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 72–76)

## Main Idea

From Revelation's vividly imagined future we can learn more about the purpose of our present daily lives, seen (and celebrated) in the light of our shared hope for new and eternal life.

For many centuries Christian worship services concluded with the prayer "Come, Lord Jesus," the prayer with which Revelation concludes (Revelation 22:20). One contemporary Bible study group at my church considered the question "If you could ask Jesus one question, what would it be?" They decided they would ask, "Why did it take you so long to come back?" How do you think Jesus might reply?

We remember to hope for Christ's return whenever we celebrate a Communion service. The communion liturgy says that as often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we "proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*" (1 Corinthians 11:26b, italics added). In the ecumenical eucharistic prayer, the congregation affirms their faith that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." In the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper we celebrate God's gifts of faith and salvation as we remember these promises.

The last book in our Bible, titled "The Revelation to John," is famous both inside and outside of Christian churches. Modern-day novelists have spun best-selling tales of terror out of its apocalyptic prophecies. Revelation's images of the future are fascinating yet mysterious because they defy literal interpretation, although such interpretation is often attempted. Christians can best understand this vision of God's future in the

context of the hope expressed by lines 72–76 of A Brief Statement of Faith (above), and by studying the actual biblical testimony with other believers such as those in this class.

The final chapters of Revelation are among the most vivid biblical descriptions we have of God's intentions for the future. Revelation 21–22 provides a glimpse of "a new heaven and a new earth" for which we are to be watching now, even as we study this lesson. This promise from Scripture invites us to celebrate our future, enhancing our celebration of the present Christmas season. Especially if this study comes at the end or beginning of a year, you are invited to connect your hope for the immediate future with this biblical vision of God's future.

This unit's focus on God's incarnation in Christ connects with Revelation's vision of God's future reign with Christ on earth. The purpose of each is the same: that God might live with humankind, who along with all creation can and will be redeemed through the intimate experience of God's presence and self-revelation.

## Responding with Our Lives

Reflect on the resolutions made during this session and the ways in which they are pieces of God's larger plan and purpose for the future. Offer a prayer to God.

# Leader's Overview and Background

## Unit 2: Encounters with God

- Session 6. Encounter God: Search! Follow!
- Session 7. Encounter God: Repent! Behold!
- Session 8. Encounter God: Listen! Learn!
- Session 9. Encounter God: Trust! Obey!
- Session 10. Encounter God: Pray! Praise!

## Unit 2: Encounters with God Introduction

Encounters with God engage us fully. We encounter God with our whole selves, or not at all. These encounters cannot be planned or staged; they occur on the way, on our life journeys from faith to faith. God, the sovereign One, is in charge of them, and not we.

The journey of the Wise Men, the subject of Session 6 of this unit, is a metaphor for our own encounters, and for this unit's expectations. The Wise Men were, for starters, wise. They had already been using their God-given gifts of intellect, spirituality, and stamina when the star appeared on their horizon. Their willingness to give up life as they knew it in order to search for the One whose birth the star foretold, in order to follow the star into unknown and risky territory, describes the right approach for us as we begin this unit called "Encounters with God." The Wise Men never expected to encounter God in the humble Bethlehem baby. They were looking for a king (hence the kingly gifts they brought in tribute). Our encounters with God are also unexpected, and will continue to be unexpected. The unit helps us prepare ourselves for divine interruptions of the dailiness of our lives.

All participants, and especially you as their leader, are encouraged to share these encounters as witness to God's graceful revelations and entrances into human life. A Presbyterian minister commented in conversation with me once that "witness" means "telling the story." This unit gives you great stories to tell, and to lead your class in telling, as they experience (encounter)

God again in Bible narrative and in their own lives.

Think about the participants in your class as you prepare, trusting them to understand and appreciate the material for themselves. If you will begin teaching the unit on Epiphany Sunday, at the end of the Christmas season, consider your class and your congregation's customs of observance and celebration. Note for yourself ways in which these can be added to or included in plans for each session. If your cultural setting is different from that of the majority culture, lift out unique treasures of your faith tradition for special recognition in class. Note for your class the connections with Unit 1 in this study, especially if you have just finished studying it together.

The information provided here is especially for you, in your vitally important leadership role with the class. You are asked to lead your class for five weeks through nothing less than encounters with God. Use the following information for your own background study, and adapt it in whatever ways are helpful to your specific teaching situation.

The Scripture for Sessions 6 and 7 of Unit 2 are New Testament texts for Epiphany and for the Baptism of the Lord. In Sessions 8 and 9, we turn to the Old Testament for examples of encounters with God by Samuel and Jonah. In Session 10, we study a psalmist's praise for God's encounters with him, and a prophet's admonition to his people to continue praising God and expecting encounters even in the most difficult times and circumstances.

Scripture readings for this unit are compatible, but not necessarily identical, with lectionary readings listed in the *Revised Common Lectionary* for Epiphany Sunday (the Sunday nearest the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6), Baptism of the Lord Sunday (the Sunday after Epiphany Sunday), and the next three Sundays that fall in January and/or February of Ordinary Time. If your congregation's tradition emphasizes use of the lectionary texts, provide them for your class on newsprint or printed handouts, and point out those that overlap with these unit texts.

## Faith Statement

The selections from A Brief Statement of Faith are arranged to reflect the theme of each session, and are not in sequential order. Be sure that you have read through the entire Brief Statement of Faith before beginning to use any of its parts, because the Statement's overall trinitarian design is central to the theology it expresses. Here, however, A Brief Statement of Faith quotations echo Scripture and theme selectively. The quotations are all from A Brief Statement of Faith because it is the most contemporary confession in *The Book of Confessions*, providing a focus on our faith as we are living it in the twenty-first century.

If your group is familiar with other creeds, especially, for example, the Apostles' Creed, it is always appropriate to invite research into those and to make comparisons for discussion. Be sure that all participants (especially the Presbyterians among them) understand that it is the entire *Book of Confessions* which is the officially adopted collection of standards of faith for our denomination.

## Background for Leaders

Help your group members see the importance of finding time for reading, prayer, and journaling. Set an example by setting aside your own time for this work daily. Do all of your study and preparation for this unit with the hope and expectation that you will encounter God in the process. Remember in each session the unit objective: to learn about biblical encounters with God, from both Old and New Testaments, so that we might understand our belief that this is possible, because God is a real presence in our lives.

You can depend on the Leader's Lesson Plans to provide all the help that you need for any given session. But you will find enrichment for your own spiritual life and your knowledge if you gather additional resources such as a Bible dictionary, scriptural commentaries, a copy of *The Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as well as other confessional materials, and resources providing help with spiritual practices.

*The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Abingdon Press, 1994 to present) always provides extensive and accurate information on any biblical text (for Jonah in Session 9, for example, go to Volume VII). *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (NRSV), ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford University Press, 2001), is one essential reference tool that you should own; it is available in paperback.

Use all of these tools as aids to fulfilling your role as class leader, a covenant calling from God, which is your sacred trust and privilege.

## Session 6

**Encounter God: Search! Follow!**

Matthew 1:23; 2:9–12, 16–18

**Materials:**

- Bibles
- Copies of Participant Sheet
- Newsprint or markerboard; markers

**Faith Statement**

With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 77–79)

**Main Idea**

Although they were Gentiles, the Wise Men searched for the King of the Jews, and followed his star until it stopped in Bethlehem. God leads us today.

**Getting Ready**

Review the provided materials as you prepare for this unit of study. Read through each of the participant handouts and the information included in the leader's lesson plan. Familiarize yourself with the Scripture passages and do any additional study that may be necessary.

Because it is the start of a new unit, consider making an outline of this unit's forthcoming sessions on newsprint or markerboard and sharing it with the group.

*Assemble:* God Calls Us Together**Coming Together**

Welcome participants with acknowledgment (including an opening prayer) that today is a new beginning, whether because it is Epiphany Sunday (the first of a new year) and/or the start of a new unit of study.

*Bible Study:* We Hear God's Word**Remembering Our Stories**

Isaiah 7:14 prophesies the birth of a child to a young woman. The Hebrew word for "young woman" is translated "virgin" in the Greek language. This prophecy is offered to Ahaz in the eighth century B.C. when the Syro-Ephramite War threatened the continuation of the line of David, from whom Ahaz was descended. Isaiah gives encouragement to Ahaz by this sign from God, which promises "God with us" to the kingdom of Judah even in time of war.

Genesis 35:16–20 tells us that when Rachel died while giving birth to Benjamin, she was buried near Bethlehem. This is part of the context for the story in Matthew 2:18. You will find more background information in Jeremiah 31:15.

Consider the narrative of Matthew 2:1–18 as a whole. Its narrative movements are as follows: the birth of Jesus, the arrival of the Wise Men in Jerusalem, their meeting with Herod, the visit of the Wise Men to Bethlehem, the appearance of the angel to Joseph in his dream, the flight of Joseph with Mary

and Jesus into Egypt, Herod's killing of all small children in Bethlehem. Is each narrative movement equally important?

Explore the righteousness of Joseph (Matthew 1:19), which is the context for his decisions. Note that Joseph had to discern and then obey messages from God in Matthew 1:20–21 and 2:13–14. Be ready for discussion of dreams and angels as messengers: Are these the same as our modern concept of encounters with God? Why or why not?

Seeing is an important theme in the narrative, as is rejoicing. The Magi's journey focuses on their visual sighting and following of the star, which they accomplished with little, if any, supportive technology. Their joy grows when they see the newborn King. Discuss the physical and emotional sensations of sight and of joy experienced by the Magi: How does this relate to our experiences at Epiphany?

### **Encountering the Word**

Consider the role of Gentiles in Matthew's Gospel. Like all the Gospels, it is written not during Jesus' lifetime but sometime after and in light of his resurrection. At the end of Matthew (28:19–20), Jesus commissions the eleven to make disciples of all nations. In our text for today, the writer begins the Gospel with references to this inclusive intention of Jesus.

The Wise Men represent a Gentile and pagan world—a foreign, Eastern world where astrology is trusted as a way to encounter God. The Matthew text in no way discounts this religion or the Magi themselves. Their reading of the star as a sign of the newborn King is accurate both astrologically and theologically. Their search is successful. They recognize Jesus, and kneel joyfully to pay him homage. Discerning God's will and Herod's evil plan, the Magi participate in saving Jesus' life by refusing to report to Herod as requested (2:12).

The first chapter of Matthew has already set the stage for this affirmation of non-Jewish participation in the story of salvation. In the genealogy account of 1:1–17, Gentile women Tamar (a Canaanite), Ruth (of Moab), and Rahab (of Jericho) are listed as Jesus' ancestors. During Matthew's subsequent account of his life, Jesus will commend the faith of a Roman centurion (8:5–13) and a Canaanite woman (15:21–28), and include them in his healing ministry. The Magi are a part of the larger record of encounters with God experienced by the Gentile faithful.

1. Who are the "Gentiles" of our church today?
2. Does the church include "all nations" equally among the ranks of Christ's disciples?
3. Or do we keep our designated Gentiles at arm's length, suspecting the soundness of their faith, and the validity of their encounters with God?

One thing that we do not know is what happened to the Wise Men after verse 12 of chapter 2? When "they left for their own country by another road," were they Christians? Did they go home to spread the news of their encounter

with God in “Emmanuel”? Did they make it home? We have no evidence at all of the end of their story. Poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Samuel Wadsworth Longfellow, William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams, to name a few) have written different versions of the Magi’s journey. Imagine the effect on the Magi of their encounter with God in Bethlehem.

Our imaginations are impacted with horror if we allow ourselves to keep verse 16 as a part of Epiphany’s story. We prefer to leave it out, because it spoils the “joyful journey following the star” theme with which we like to conclude our Christmas celebrations. Matthew 2:17–18 explains why, from the writer’s point of view, verse 16 is essential to the whole narrative scene. What does the death of all those children mean in the light of the salvation that Jesus brought? Jesus’ own life was saved by the wisdom that the Wise Men received in the dream, telling them to go home by another way instead of reporting Jesus’ location to Herod as he had made them promise to do. Yet Herod’s response to their wise trick was the massacre of all the other children. What does this part of the story mean to you, in your own search for God?

## **Claim:** We Respond to God’s Word

### **Reflecting on Our Tradition: What Do Presbyterians Believe?**

Lines 77–79 of A Brief Statement of Faith remind us not only of the fact that we cannot be separated from God but also that we are in unity with those who came before us and with those who will come after us. As a way of making this connection and listening for God’s specific word to each of us, join in a time of discernment, a process that can lead each participant on his or her own journey to encounter God in this season of Epiphany.

The verb *discern* in its dictionary definition means “to perceive by the sight or other sense or by the intellect,” as in “to discern right from wrong.”<sup>1</sup> In Christian tradition, discernment refers to the practice, by groups or by individuals, of making decisions by prayerfully seeking the will of God. The object of this spiritual practice is “to identify the presence or absence of God in . . . human activity.”<sup>2</sup>

Psalm 139:23–24 gives us a prayer with which to begin our time of searching for God:

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.  
See if there is any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Before we begin searching for God, we pray for God to search us, to examine our motives in this search (could they possibly be wicked, as Herod’s motives were?), to lead us so that it is indeed God whose “star” we are following on our way to encounter God.

As we begin this unit, “Encounters with God,” Epiphany reminds us that God is already present in the world, revealed to us in the stories of Jesus, revealed even

1. *The New Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Random House, 1997).
2. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), p. 115.

to people who do not know Jesus, such as the Wise Men. It is not that God is “out there” to be sought in the stars, though indeed the entire universe is filled with the presence of God. God is here and now. The spiritual practice of discernment is a way to open yourself to the real and present God who is already and always with you.

Invite participants to consider: What work might God be calling me (or us) to do? Where might God be leading me (or us) in these days? What direction should I (or we) take on my (or our) immediate future “journey”?

### **Spiritual Practice of Discernment**

Imagine the Magi trying to discern what the star meant, and whether or not they should follow it. Their story indicates a conviction of a divine message from the star and from their studies. Did that message come from God? What did it say to them?

Then, read the Bible passages in this session and choose a word or short phrase that attracts your attention. For example, Matthew 1:23b promises, “ ‘they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means ‘God with us.’ ” What does that mean to you? How does it relate to your life? to the life of your group or congregation?

Silently repeat your chosen phrase or word, sensing God’s presence as you do. Become aware of this presence by imagining words that God might be saying to you—or images, feelings, insights that God is trying to convey. What does this encounter with God lead you to do, or to want to do? How does it illuminate the concern you thought of before beginning this practice?

### **Depart: God Sends Us into the World**

Ask a participant to read (or have the group read in unison) lines 77–79 from A Brief Statement of Faith. Encourage comments on its meaning to individual participants. Finally, use Psalm 139:23–24 as a closing prayer:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.  
See if there is any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.  
Amen.

### **Evaluate**

Consider the reactions of the group during this session. Is there anything that you would do differently?

### **Future**

The focus of the next session is on the encounter with God through baptism. If the Sacrament of Baptism is something that you would like to learn more about, consider researching the Presbyterian beliefs about the sacrament or meeting with your pastor.

## Faith Statement

With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 77–79)

## Main Idea

Although they were Gentiles, the Wise Men searched for the King of the Jews, and followed his star until it stopped in Bethlehem. God leads us today.

The biblical narrative of God's covenant relations with God's people describes encounters with God, many of which are close encounters. We believe that this closeness is possible to us today. In Christ's revelation to us of who God is, we encounter the love that will not let us go, and the God from whom we need never be separated. The Wise Men in Matthew's Epiphany narrative encountered God when they searched, followed, and found Emmanuel, "God with us."

In modern times the search for one's ancestors is called *genealogy* (literally, the study of one's gene pool!). The Gospel of Matthew begins by giving the answers to such a search for Jesus' genealogy, tracing Jesus' lineage through Joseph's line back to King David, and before him back to Abraham. The first verse in this lesson's Bible study, Matthew 1:23, quotes Isaiah to show that Jesus is the one prophesied, since at least the time of David, to be coming into the world as the Messiah of God. Jesus is the one named "Emmanuel" because Jesus is "God with us."

The wise men "search" for "the child who has been born king of the Jews," because their study of astrology had led them to believe that they had seen his star. They have followed the star from the time it rose in the east (where they lived) to the time that it stopped in Bethlehem over the house where Jesus was. Meanwhile they passed through Jerusalem, asking directions, and inadvertently alerting Herod to the birth of the King. This

resulted in Herod's massacre of all children under age two in the vicinity of Bethlehem.

The story of the Wise Men and the star has a special Christmas glow to it, embellishing the manger scenes of our memories with the light of the star shining on a dramatic scene of the Wise Men presenting their gifts to the Christ-child. If you are studying this lesson on or near Epiphany Sunday, select some manger-scene figures or pictures to study, and compare them to the information in Matthew 2:1–12. What do we really know from that text about these strange visitors? If they were from the Orient, were they Chinese? Might one have been African, as tradition sometimes indicates? What do we know about the star they followed?

The Gospel of Matthew was probably written around A.D. 90, possibly in Antioch of Syria, but modern scholarship doubts that the actual author can be identified. This is the only one of the four canonical Gospels to use the word *church* to describe the Christian community (Matthew 16:18; 18:17). The writer frequently quoted Hebrew Scripture in keeping with his message that Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfillment of the hopes and prophecies of God's covenant people through the ages. The writer describes the contemporary (first-century) church, made up of both Gentile and Jewish believers in Christ, as the continuation of the covenant community.

In Matthew's theology, then, Christ is present to and in his church throughout its life and history. This perspective makes today's Bible narratives appropriate to us in our spiritual practice of discernment of God's presence and will. We are encouraged to search for God even as God searches and encounters us continually in Christ.

Matthew 1:1 in Greek begins with the words *biblos geneleos*, "book of genesis," translated in the NRSV English as "An account of the genealogy . . ." The writer might well have intended a connection between his narrative and the Genesis account of creation.

### **Responding with Our Lives**

Consider creating a spiritual journal. Use the discernment exercise used in Claim in this session to experience an individual process of discernment. Suggested Scriptures to use for this process include Psalm 139:23–24; Isaiah 7:14; and Genesis 35:16–20. Write about the experience in your journal.

## Session 7

**Encounter God: Repent! Behold!**

Mark 1:4–11

**Materials:**

- Bibles
- Copies of Participant Sheet
- Selected liturgy from the PC(USA) *Book of Common Worship* for the group's use in reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant (see Depart)
- Bowl or font filled with water

**Faith Statement**

The same Spirit . . . claims us in the waters of baptism . . .  
—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 58, 62)

**Main Idea**

The encounter with God described in Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, including John the Baptist's preaching of repentance and the revelation from heaven of the Spirit descending upon Jesus, has meaning for our own baptism and our own encounters with God.

**Getting Ready**

If you have spent time in the prior session on information about the background, date, and authorship of the Gospel according to Matthew, you will want to research similar information about the Gospel according to Mark. For background information, use *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VIII (containing commentary on both Matthew and Mark) or any other good contemporary study of Mark.

This session will close with a service of reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant (see Depart). Familiarize yourself with the directions for its use by securing and reading the *Book of Common Worship* of the PC(USA).

*Assemble:* God Calls Us Together**Coming Together**

Begin the session by praying one of the prayers found on pages 198–199 of the PC(USA) *Book of Common Worship*. Explain that these are provided for the Sunday of the Baptism of the Lord (which is the day of this session if you use it on the Sunday after Epiphany). Then raise the question of the connection between Jesus' baptism and our own.

*Bible Study:* We Hear God's Word**Remembering Our Stories**

Note the connection between last session's narrative of the Wise Men, this session's narrative of Jesus' baptism, and the contemporary baptism of individual Christians. One common thread through these experiences is *revelation*, which is a synonym for *epiphany*. Encounters with God for the participant are part of God's ongoing revelation to the church, for the church is the contemporary vehicle for God's presence in the world. Help your group grasp and claim their role in revelation, especially in terms of their responsibility of sharing it with the world (the "Gentile," or "pagan," world represented by the Wise Men in the previous session).

Focus on this session's narrative. Mark's emphasis is on the public ministry of Jesus and his message of salvation. The Gospel writer seems to have been recording it so that Christians could become knowledgeable enough to share that message of salvation with the whole world. Help your group to recognize this rationale in the writer's choice of an opening chapter that starts with the baptism story, skipping any reference to the baby Jesus.

Invite the participants to link their lives with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, through reaffirmation of their baptism. Sometimes it is difficult for us to claim this participation in Christ. The key is God's claim on us and God's grace received once and for all in our baptism. If any member of your class has not been baptized, this is an opportunity to explore the meaning of the sacrament invitationally, without being overzealous or exclusive in your approach.

Expand the discussion on baptism by reading the following: "In baptism, we are named as God's children, incorporated into the Body of Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit for ministry. Thus today we worship [and encounter] a God whose Word names us into being; we acknowledge the Word Incarnate into whose Body we are being grafted; and by the power of the Holy Spirit we proclaim the gift and the responsibility of being the bearers of the Word in the world."<sup>1</sup>

### **Encountering the Word**

Discuss Paul's view of baptism, as seen in Galatians 3:27–29. Twentieth-century New Testament scholars have identified this related Scripture passage as a probable piece of early church baptismal liturgy. Contemporary theologians quote this text to illustrate the inclusivity of first-century baptismal practice, as well as to demonstrate that Paul, in writing to the Galatians, affirmed equality in Christ for both genders, all races, and all socioeconomic statuses.

It is also important to personalize the experience of one's own baptism. Encourage your group to share their memories of the event, or stories told to them by family members.

## **Claim:** We Respond to God's Word

### **Reflecting on Our Tradition: What Do Presbyterians Believe?**

Our Brief Statement of Faith expresses the connection between our own baptism and the experience of Jesus. God's claim on the life of the baptized Christian comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit in baptismal experiences related to that described in Mark's narrative about Jesus' baptism. Often in everyday Christian life we ignore this connection, and so we miss opportunities to live out of the power of continuing encounters with God's presence. "You are my Son, the Beloved" can be translated "You are my chosen one." We can claim for ourselves those words heard by Jesus in the Gospel text, because the same Spirit claims us as the ones baptized in Christ's name.

In the mid-1990s, Presbyterian Women of the PC(USA) planned their triennial Gathering around the theme "You are my beloved, therefore . . ." Inspired by

1. Linda L. Clader, "Baptism of the Lord (Ordinary Time 1)," in *The Abingdon Women's Preaching Annual: Series 1-year B*, eds. Jana L. Childers and Lucy A. Rose (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 41.

the Gospel account of Jesus' baptism, the theme selection committee understood that by baptism into Christ, we all participate both in the blessing which God's voice pronounced on Jesus at his own baptism, and in the responsibility to continue Christ's ministry as his disciples. Each day of that Gathering addressed this responsibility, which resulted from participants' baptismal encounter with and claim by God. At the end, Presbyterian Women's Gathering participants shared a closing worship service titled "You are my beloved; therefore—celebrate!" (If you or someone you know participated in that 1994 Gathering in Ames, Iowa, find a program book or other way to share that experience with the class.)

## Depart: God Sends Us into the World

Some denominations allow, encourage, or even require "rebaptism" for those seeking denominational membership. If a person encounters God, or seeks to encounter God, in a new faith community that practices rebaptism, then a new experience of baptism becomes the sign of acceptance in the new denomination. However, for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other mainline denominations such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the United Methodist Church, and most Anglican communions, baptism is considered a once-and-for-all sacramental event in a person's life, no matter how many times one might choose to transfer membership between denominations.

Renewal of the vows made at baptism is a way to reaffirm our original baptism without "doing it over." While not required for a transfer of membership, a service of baptismal renewal can be included in a variety of worship opportunities, for everyone in the congregation.

The closing for this session should be an extended experience of worship using a service for Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant such as the one found in the *Book of Common Worship* (see pp. 478–484). Provide a baptismal font of some sort. A simple bowl on a table, filled with water, is appropriate.

Although this is certainly a good occasion to invite a pastor from your church staff to visit your group and lead the closing worship, you or anyone can lead this liturgy yourself because it definitely does not (and should not) involve administration of the Sacrament of Baptism.

## Evaluate

This may have been an emotional session as the group engaged in a reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant together. What was the reaction from the group members?

## Future

Read 1 Samuel 3:1–21 to prepare for the next session. Make some notes about what impacted you as you read the narrative. Keep these reflections before you as you prepare to lead the group.

## Faith Statement

The same Spirit . . . claims us in the waters of baptism . . .  
—A Brief Statement of Faith (lines 58, 62)

## Main Idea

The encounter with God described in Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, including John the Baptist's preaching of repentance and the revelation from heaven of the Spirit descending upon Jesus, has meaning for our own baptism and our own encounters with God.

In the previous session, we studied the search of the Wise Men for Jesus, and our own responses to that story. Now we find ourselves a long way from Bethlehem, which is not mentioned at all in Mark's Gospel. Instead, Mark begins with John the Baptist, the prophet and forerunner of the Messiah, at the river Jordan. Jesus is seen for the first time when John baptizes him as an adult. Yet the connection between the Epiphany narrative and the baptism of Jesus is this: Both stories reveal who Jesus is as a child of God. The baptism of every Christian is linked to this revelatory event. Each of us, no matter how young or old, is a child of God, called to repent and to believe in God's forgiving love.

Baptism is a central sign and symbol for God's covenant people. The church's understanding of the triune God developed along with the understanding of baptism in the years following Christ's time on earth.

We believe that the Holy Spirit, who was present at the baptism of Jesus, the beloved Son of God, also claims us when we are baptized in the name of Jesus into a covenant relationship with God. Our baptismal relationship, or covenant, is with the same God who created the universe and offered the original covenant to Abraham. Therefore we believe that baptism is not a private encounter with God, but rather a community encounter requiring the presence and support of other people of the covenant.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he assures the Gentiles of that church that baptism is the only sign they need of belonging to God. The church had been conflicted about requiring circumcision of new male Gentile converts prior to, or along with, baptism. Galatians 3:27–29 promises full equality to all baptized Christians, with no need for circumcision as a prerequisite. Once they belong to Christ and receive baptism as a sign of this belonging, then they are also "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (3:29). Baptism in Christ renews the original covenant with Abraham and extends, to all children of God, full inclusion within the covenant promise.

In our struggle to understand God as three Persons in one, we can recognize the unique status of Jesus as Son of God, and at the same time accept our inclusion in Christ by our baptism in his name. This is not necessarily a lofty privilege, because the early church understood that baptism included baptism into the death of Christ. The power of the Holy Spirit resting upon and within us, however, is the power of life eternal, promised to us in the Scriptures of this session. "The same Spirit . . . claims us in the waters of [our] baptism"; that is, the same Spirit who descended upon Jesus as a dove at his own baptism.

## Responding with Our Lives

Continue to contemplate the meaning of your baptism during the coming week. This is an excellent way to understand the meaning of Jesus' baptism, and a way to renew your encounter with God also.