

***Growing with God* Introduction**

The intent of this program is to offer participants a path to a deeper relationship with God. As their relationship deepens, they are, in turn, able to invite others into a deeper relationship. The program will invite participants into a more disciplined and focused prayer life and a willingness to trust God's guidance and direction in their lives. Topics will include contemplative prayer practices, traditional spiritual practices, and discernment. We will use scripture that will focus attention on Biblical stories of hearing and seeing God and how each narrative unfolded as the individual sought to be obedient to God's invitation.

Each lesson will begin with a brief time of worship that will focus on the scripture for that lesson. The scripture will be offered in its Biblical context to provide a deeper understanding of the specific scripture. A spiritual practice will be introduced each time; we will explore its history and heritage and its practice within the context of the Christian faith.

Participants will be encouraged to bring a study Bible and a journal or other appropriate materials that can be used to record their reflections each time.

The course leader/s will need copies of *The United Methodist hymnal* and *The Faith We Sing*.

Format for class (allow 75-90 minutes)

Brief overview of the class (3-5 minutes); week one only

Introductions (important if you have more than one church participating) (3-5 minutes); week one only if participants are from a single church

Gathering time/introduction to the scripture (10 minutes)

Questions/reflections on scripture

-share reflections as a group (10-15 minutes) (this element is within the structure of the gathering time)

Introduction to spiritual/prayer practices (5 minutes); review each week

Introduce practice (5 minutes)

Lead the practice (15 minutes)

Journal (5 minutes)

Share reflections/experience (15 minutes)

Closing (3-5 minutes)

LESSON 1

Gathering time

Opening words:

“Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal.” (Psalm 106:1)

Bless the Lord My Soul-TFWS#2013 (Introduce very briefly the contemplative nature and style of Taize; you will be invited to use a different Taize piece each week)

Introduction to the Scripture:

God has just created woman from man; they are both naked but not ashamed; they are also innocent. The snake however is introduced to us as “shrewd,” “crafty,” and “clever;” his intent is to tempt the woman and, in turn, the man. His question to the woman is intended to trick her and he succeeds in enticing her to eat the fruit of the tree. She then offers the fruit to the man who eats as well. They now have a degree of knowledge that they did not previously have, but with this knowledge comes shame and a loss of their childlike innocence. And so, they hide from God; they are ashamed that they are naked, but they also feel guilt, for they have been disobedient.

When God asks where they are, the man acknowledges his fear because of his nakedness. The man blames the woman for giving him the fruit and even blames God for giving him the woman. The relationship between God and humanity has been broken.

Read Genesis 3:8-9: They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. The Lord God called out to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”

-Jewish Study Bible

Lead the group through the questions below:

Read through the following slowly leaving time in between each question. As you move through the lessons, you will be able to allow more silence between the questions.

The man and woman had no problem hearing God, but they chose to hide from God; they were ashamed, guilty, and afraid.

Do you sometimes hear God calling, “Where are you?” and choose to hide as well? What are you hiding from; what is the broken piece that separates you from God?

Or have you already wandered too far away to hear God? What were you afraid of that you chose to wander far from God?

Or are you filling the empty space with your own words and thoughts so that there is no room for God; no quiet space in which to hear God?

Allow time for silent reflection

We are inviting you in this time and space and in the weeks to come to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and his words to you, his deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Invite group discussion about scripture, responses to questions

Introduction to Spiritual Practices

What is a spiritual practice? As the name suggests, it is something we 'practice' to grow and nurture our spiritual life. Jesus made an invitation to the disciples and he continues to make that invitation to us today;

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

The Message, Matthew 11-28:30

A spiritual practice allows us to 'get away' with Jesus, to learn from Jesus. It is a way of placing ourselves before God so that God can transform our lives. They are a way of opening us to the presence of God so that we can better hear God's deep desire for your life.

Introduce Spiritual Practice

Lectio Divina

This practice originated in the 3rd and 4th centuries with the desert mothers and fathers; it was formalized by Benedict of Nursia in the 6th century. This was a period of time when monastic life began to grow and flourish; religious individuals gathered together in this form of community. Lectio Divina became a well-established practice in monastic life. There are four classical steps:

-lectio	read
-meditatio	exegete
-oratio	pray
-contemplatio	union

This practice was originally used with the Psalms. It can be used with any scripture, but poetic books (Psalms, Prophets, John, Revelation) and Gospel narratives are a good place to start. It is helpful to have multiple translations available.

Lectio—read the scripture slowly. Consider reading it out loud to help slow the process and help you hear every word. Receive the words as though they were written for you. Listen for a particular word or phrase that speaks to you in your particular situation. What might God be trying to communicate?

Meditatio—reflect prayerfully on what you have read. Meditate on the particular word or phrase that resonated for you. Listen for God’s invitation to you today.

Oratio—allow a prayer to emerge as a result of hearing God’s word to you today. Be honest with yourself and with God.

Contemplatio—simply rest with God; this time of union is a time when the Holy Spirit prays in you and through you. Give thanks.

Leading the practice

The first step of the process is to read the scripture slowly 3-4 times inviting the participants to listen for a word or phrase that ‘speaks’ to them; something that seems to stand out from the rest of the scripture for them. The next step is to meditate/reflect on the word or phrase and to listen for God’s invitation to them in that particular word or phrase; to what might God be drawing their attention.

The next step is to be prayerful with God about what they sense God’s invitation to be; allow the prayer to be as interactive as possible (be honest with God about how you are feeling about the ‘invitation’ and also listen carefully for God’s response). The last step is to simply sit with/rest in God’s presence; allow the Holy Spirit to pray with/for you. Give thanks for this time with God.

Participants are then encouraged to journal about their experience.

The process should be as seamless as possible, so you should explain the steps and then explain that once you begin, you will allow them to move through the steps at their own pace. (It would be helpful to put the steps up on a whiteboard/flipchart/screen.) If this is a first time for many, I suggest you encourage them to move on to the next step if they have not already done so. As a first practice, give them 8-10 minutes for steps 1 and 2. Allow another 5-8 minutes for step 3 and then step 4 can lead into journaling as they are led, but encourage them to start journaling in another 3-5 minutes.

Draw this time to a close with a prayer expressing gratitude for the ways in which God ‘showed up’ and invited them to something deeper.

Large group

Invite participants into a discussion of the practice; who has experienced this practice before? Did the practice open them to a place where they could 'hear' God's invitation? Invite a general conversation about the scripture, the experience.

CLOSING

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from *Come and Find the Quiet Center-TFWS#2128*; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

"Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, 'Amen'. Hallelujah."
(Psalm 106:48).

LESSON 2

Gathering Time

Opening words: “Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal.” (Psalm 106:1)

Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying-TFWS #2193

Introduction to the Scripture:

God came to Abram and told him to go to a new land; one that God would show him. And in that land God would make Abram the father of a great nation and they would become a blessing for all the earth. Abram heard God and was obedient. He took all that he had and set out to the place where God would lead.

But their journey leads them through some difficult places and Abram’s faith is challenged. Sarai is old and remains childless and Abram begins to wonder if perhaps he should ‘adopt’ someone to become his heir. God comes to Abram to reassure him that God’s promise remains and that his heir will be his own son. Abram’s faith in God’s promise is renewed.

Read Genesis 15:5-6: He took him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He added, “So shall your offspring be.” And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit.

-Jewish Study Bible

Lead the group through the questions below:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

Abram exhibits extraordinary faith in God in this passage. Sarai is old and no longer able to bear children; this is the reality that confronts Abram. Yet in spite of this ‘reality’, Abram trusts in God and the promise that God has made to him. And because of that faith, Abram did indeed have offspring as numerous as the stars.

Does God’s ‘voice’ come to you with such clarity that you are able to believe in spite of the circumstances? How do you hold onto that clarity when challenges emerge?

Do you trust in God’s promise when the ‘reality’ you are confronted with would tell you it is not possible?

Do you become impatient with God’s promise and seek to find your own way? Do you think that perhaps it is your job to provide a solution for God? How do you trust in the sometimes, slow work of God?

Allow time for silent reflection

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Invite group discussion about scripture, responses to questions

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The Message, Matthew 11-28:30

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Introduce Spiritual Practice

Jesus/Breath prayer

The prayer that became known as the Jesus prayer evolved out of the desert communities in the 6th century; it was originally called the heart prayer. Over time it was primarily associated with the Eastern Orthodox Church and reached its widest use in 19th century Russia. The intent of the prayer is to invoke the presence of Jesus and to be present to Him. The breath prayer is a variation on the Jesus prayer. It is called a breath prayer because it focuses attention on one's breathing but also because in Hebrew the word for breath and spirit is the same (ruach). The use of this prayer helps us to experience what it means for the Holy Spirit to pray in and through us.

Original form of Jesus Prayer

- lower your head on your chest angled toward your heart
- close your eyes, imagine you are looking into your own heart
- carry your mind and all its thoughts and place them in your heart

Dibelius

- repeat the phrase frequently
- sit in silence; be calm, be patient, be in the presence of Jesus

Current form of Jesus Prayer

- close your eyes and get comfortable; take some cleansing breaths; fill your lungs with God's breath of life
- gently place all your other thoughts in your heart and let them go; rest in silence briefly
- as you inhale, "Lord Jesus Christ"
- as you exhale, "Son of the living God"
- as you inhale, "have mercy on me"
- as you exhale, "a sinner" (someone who is separated from God)
- feel free to move your lips silently as you repeat the phrase
- repeat slowly as you breathe in and out
- be in the presence of Jesus

Breath prayer variations involve the use of sacred words that first, address God, and then identify a desire/wish. It should be a short phrase that has a comfortable rhythm.

Sample ideas:

Inhale

Jesus
 Spirit of the living God
 Holy Spirit
 Eternal Divine

Exhale

remember me (Taize hymn)
 fall afresh on me (hymn)
 flow through me
 baptize me with love

Leading the Practice

Start first with the original form of the Jesus Prayer. Slowly lead participants through the steps:

- Lower your head onto your chest and tilt toward your heart
- Close your eyes, imagine that you are looking into your heart
- Gather all the thoughts in your mind and gently place them in your heart
- Invite each person to slowly repeat the phrase softly to themselves (for participants who may not be familiar with this practice, allow 30-60 seconds)
 - o Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner
- Invite the participants to sit in silence and simply be in the presence of Jesus (allow 3-5 minutes)
- Invite the participants to briefly journal about their experience
- Encourage participants to practice this prayer both with and without incorporating the structured breathing

Move into a time of brainstorming ideas for breath prayers that would be meaningful to the participants. Come up with a list of sacred names (be sure to include God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit including ideas that express the roles of the Trinity, i.e., creator, parent, redeemer, sustainer). Then create a list of desires/wishes; what would you ask of the Holy.

Encourage the participants to create their own breath prayer for the weeks ahead and to practice it regularly.

Large group

Invite participants into a discussion of the practice; who has experienced this practice before? Did the practice open them to a place where they could 'hear' God's invitation? Invite a general conversation about the scripture, the experience.

CLOSING

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from ***We Walk by Faith-TFWS #2196***; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

"Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, 'Amen'. Hallelujah."
(Psalm 106:48)

LESSON 3

Gathering Time

Opening words:

“Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal.” (Psalm 106:1)

Come and Fill Our Hearts-TFWS#2157

Introduction to the Scripture:

After many years, Jacob is returning to his homeland (a place he left under dark of night to escape his brother’s wrath for having taken Esau’s birthright). He is now a wealthy man with wives, slaves, and livestock, yet he is fearful of the reception he will receive from his brother. On this night before he expects to meet Esau, he leaves his family and all that he has brought with him, crossing back over the river, to spend the night alone. As Jacob prepares to meet his brother, he first encounters a divine being who wrestles with him and who then gives Jacob a new name.

Read Genesis 32:24-30: Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob’s hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.” But he answered, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” Said the other, “What is your name?” He replied, “Jacob”. Said he, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” Jacob asked, “Pray tell me your name.” But he said, “You must not ask my name!” And he took leave of him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, “I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved.”

-Jewish Study Bible

Lead the group through the questions below:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

Despite his enormous wealth, Jacob’s life is incomplete. He has been living in a foreign land away from his family; his decision to return home has left him fearful of the reception he will receive from his brother. As Jacob struggles with his fears, he struggles with God as well and as a result of that struggle, God gives Jacob a new name; a name that continues the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham.

Have you found yourself at times, like Jacob, separated from ‘home’; what were the fears that kept you in a ‘foreign land’? What prompted you to return home despite your fears?

As you struggled with your fears, did God seek to enter in? Did you, like Jacob, choose to struggle with/against God? Were you also seeking a ‘blessing’ in the midst of your fears?

Did God offer you a 'new name'? Did you continue to struggle with God, or were you able to accept the 'new name', knowing God was fulfilling God's promise within you?

Allow time for silent reflection

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Invite group discussion about scripture, responses to questions

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The Message, Matthew 11-28:30

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Introduce Spiritual Practice

Entering the narrative/Guided meditation

Guided meditation was formalized by Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. This practice is also referred to as *entering the narrative*; it encourages use of the imagination, feelings, senses, reason, will and memory as you enter into the experience. You are invited to become a participant in the Biblical narrative; to experience Jesus in a personal way. It is often best to begin with a Gospel story that is familiar to you. The intent is to hear God's invitation to you today in the scripture. Ignatius wrote a number of meditations based on specific Biblical narratives which are included in his *Spiritual Exercises*; you might begin by using one of these. There are also a number of books which offer guided meditations as well as a number of online resources.

In this practice, a Biblical narrative is read. The narrative is then re-phrased in such a way that you are invited to be part of the story. Reflection questions are offered at intervals in the narrative; at the close of the reading, you are invited to be present to God and listen for God's words to you.

Leading the practice

As you prepare to guide the participants through this narrative, be aware and share with them that this narrative differs from most Ignatian narratives because it is scripture from the Old Testament and Ignatius primarily focused on scripture from the Gospels. It is helpful for participants to understand that this practice can be used with any scripture where an individual has an encounter with God.

Let them know that you will guide them through the scripture, pausing to give them time to reflect and 'see' themselves in the story. Invite them to spend time with the invitation and then when they are ready, to begin journaling about their experience. If this is a first experience for most of them, you should plan to allow 8-10 minutes after you finish reading and then gently encourage them to begin journaling.

I have indicated appropriate places in the narrative to pause to allow them to enter in slowly; the times indicated are intended to be a guide...

You have been traveling for several days with your family and entire household. It has been a hot and dusty journey. (pause 10 seconds)

You have lived far from your home for many years after running away from your home because you angered your brother by taking something that rightfully belonged to him. Now that you have gotten close to home, you are fearful of your brother's reaction to your return; will he still be angry? (pause 10 seconds)

Perhaps he will come and forbid you to return; perhaps he will come prepared to fight. (pause 15 seconds)

You have already sent others ahead with gifts for your brother so that he will know you come seeking restoration of the broken relationship. As you ponder the nature of your brother's reception, you send your family ahead of you so that you can spend the night alone. What does it feel like to be in familiar surroundings; places you have not been for many years? (pause 10 seconds)

What are the feelings within you as you are fearful that you may never be able to return home? (pause 10 seconds)

As you lie awake struggling with your fears, a man comes along and begins to wrestle with you. Now you are fearful for your physical well-being and you put all your strength into wrestling with this stranger. Feel the tiredness in your body as you struggle. (pause 15 seconds)

As dawn begins to break, the stranger injures your hip in an attempt to get away. But you seek first to receive a blessing from this stranger; for you, a reminder of the blessing bestowed by your father; the stolen blessing that has brought you to this place. As you feel the physical pain in your hip, you also feel the emotional pain of this reminder of the stolen blessing that caused the break in your relationship with your brother. (pause 15 seconds)

“What is your name?” the stranger asks. And then the stranger, the divine being, the presence of God offers you a new name, a name that will reaffirm God’s promise for your life. Listen carefully as you are present with God; what is the new name that God offers you?

Draw this time to a close with a prayer expressing gratitude for the ways in which God ‘showed up’ and invited them to something deeper.

Large group

Invite participants into a discussion of the practice; who has experienced this practice before? Did the practice open them to a place where they could ‘hear’ God’s invitation? Invite a general conversation about the scripture, the experience.

CLOSING

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from *Grace Alone-TFWS #2162*; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

“Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, ‘Amen’. Hallelujah.”
(Psalm 106:48)

LESSON 4

Gathering time

Opening words:

“Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal.” (Psalm 106:1)

O Lord, Hear My Prayer-TFWS #2200

Introduction to the Scripture:

Upon fleeing from Pharaoh, Moses settles in Midian. There he comes to the rescue of seven young women, all the daughters of a man named Reuel (also called Jethro). When they tell their father of the young man who came to their assistance, Jethro invites Moses into his home. Moses has been living with this family, has married Zipporah, one of Jethro’s daughters and now has a son. While Moses has been living with Jethro and his family, the plight of the Israelite slaves in Egypt has grown worse. The slaves have called upon God to rescue them and God has heard them.

Read Exodus 3:1-5: Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?” When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.” And He said, “Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.”

-Jewish Study Bible

Lead the group through the questions below:

Moses had been tending his father-in-law’s flock for years and perhaps had shepherded them to this particular location in the past. But this day, Moses notices the bush that appears to be on fire, yet not burning up. This day, he takes time to stop and look. How often had Moses passed by this bush before and hadn’t noticed because he was preoccupied with his own concerns. How often are we so consumed by our own concerns that we pass by the “burning bush’?”

The scripture says that “when God” saw that Moses noticed and took time to stop and see, then God spoke to him. How patient must God have been waiting for the day when Moses would notice and take time to stop and look? Do you think God is patiently waiting for you to notice; for you to take time to stop and look and listen?

When God called his name, Moses responded, “here I am.” When God calls your name, do you respond; do you listen for God to invite you to stand on holy ground?

Allow time for silent reflection

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

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Introduce Spiritual Practice

Praying the Psalms

This practice began in the earliest centuries of the Christian Church with the communities of the desert mothers and fathers. One of the most well-known practices of many of these desert communities was reciting the psalms (all 150) as a form of worship; the practice we are going to explore today emerged out of reciting the psalms as part of worship. They would select specific verses or phrases to take into prayer, to lead them into a holy place where they would encounter God. Over the centuries this practice was used with scripture other than the psalms; scripture of a poetic nature lends itself well; the writings of the prophets or Proverbs for example. The psalms were the most commonly used because the writers of these prayers brought their most honest, authentic, vulnerable selves to God; their language expressed a bold confidence and they trusted this God to hear all of who they were, including the angry and fearful places in their lives. We might occasionally take a lesson from the psalmists and remember that God is big enough to hear and hold all of who we are; God, perhaps better than we, understands our humanity.

The intent of this practice is to enter into prayerful, holy space and encounter God and hear God's deep desire for you. Start by reading through a single psalm or section of scripture listening for a particular verse or phrase that seems to speak to you. Moving through the scripture slowly pausing after each repetition, repeat the verse or phrase and each time you do so, drop the word at the end until only one word remains. Listen carefully for what is new or different each time you drop a word; how does the meaning change for you. Reflect on that newness; what might God's invitation to you be as new understandings emerge. When you are left with only one word, take time to reflect on the many ways in which that may be speaking to you; take time to be in prayer with God and then journal about your experience.

Leading the Practice

A good psalm to use for those who have not practiced this before is Psalm 46; focus on verse 10. Read the psalm all the way through, pause, then read the single verse slowly. Pause briefly. Read through the verse, dropping one word from the end of the line each time; pause for at least 10 seconds between each reading. Read each line as though it were a new sentence. Invite the participants to listen for how the meaning changes each time; invite them to listen for God's invitation in the newness. Invite them to move into a time of reflection when you have read the final word and to journal about their experience. Allow 8-10 minutes for reflection and 5-8 minutes to journal.

Be still and know that I am God...

Be still and know that I am...

Be still and know that I...

Be still and know that...

Be still and know...

Be still and...

Be still...

Be...

Large group

Invite participants into a discussion of the practice; who has experienced this practice before? Did the practice open them to a place where they could 'hear' God's invitation? Invite a general conversation about the scripture, the experience.

CLOSING

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from ***Walk with Me-TFWS #2242***; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

“Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, ‘Amen’. Hallelujah.”
(Psalm 106:48)

LESSON 5

Gathering Time

Opening words:

"Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal." (Psalm 106:1)

Bless the Lord, TFWS #2013

Introduction to the Scripture:

The young Samuel has been dedicated to the service of God and now resides in the Temple with Eli, the priest in charge of the Temple. Although hearing the voice of God and being directed to prophesy the words of God had been more common in Israel in the past, at the time of Eli and Samuel it has become quite rare. So Samuel does not recognize God's voice and assumes that it is Eli. Initially Eli, who has been asleep, is confused when awoken by Samuel. It takes several interruptions before Eli realizes that it is God who is calling to Samuel and then Eli instructs Samuel how to respond to God's call.

Read I Samuel 3:4-10: The Lord called out to Samuel, and he answered, "I'm coming." He ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But he replied, "I didn't call you; go back to sleep." So he went back and lay down. Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" Samuel rose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But he replied, "I didn't call, my son; go back to sleep." Now Samuel had not yet experienced the Lord; the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time, and he rose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli understood that the Lord was calling the boy. And Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down. If you are called again, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" And Samuel went to his place and lay down. The Lord came, and stood there, and he called as before: "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel answered, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

-Jewish Study Bible

Lead the group through the questions below:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

God called Samuel, but Samuel didn't recognize God's voice. We are told that was because Samuel did not yet know God and so the voice was not familiar to him. God calls to each of us; sometimes we too fail to recognize God's voice. Where are you in your life with God; is God's voice familiar? Do you recognize God's voice when God calls?

At last Eli realized that it was God who was calling Samuel. Eli had lived a long life serving God and he is able to give Samuel guidance. Have you had or do you have an Eli in your life? Individuals who have perhaps journeyed longer and further with God who have recognized God's call in your life. Or perhaps you have been an Eli for someone.

So Samuel went and waited for God to speak again. How are you waiting? Do you sometimes get impatient for God to call your name? And when Samuel knew it was God's voice, he answered, "Speak for your servant is listening." When God calls yet again, do you listen and offer yourself up to God?

How do you respond to God? Do you recognize God's voice? Are you open to others in your life who may recognize the voice that is not familiar to you? Do you wait? Do you listen? How do you respond?

Allow time for silent reflection

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Invite group discussion about scripture, responses to questions

Introduction to Spiritual Practices

What is a spiritual practice? As the name suggests, it is something we 'practice' to grow and nurture our spiritual life. Jesus made an invitation to the disciples and he continues to make that invitation to us today;

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

The Message, Matthew 11-28:30

A spiritual practice allows us to 'get away' with Jesus, to learn from Jesus. It is a way of placing ourselves before God so that God can transform our lives. They are a way of opening us to the presence of God so that we can better hear God's deep desire for your life.

Introduce Spiritual Practice

Prayer beads

Prayer beads were first introduced in the 3rd century by the desert mothers and fathers. There were 150 beads originally; one for each psalm. These 'beads' were made of pebbles, seeds, shells, and other commonplace materials. They were often worn as necklaces, belts, and bracelets. Making the beads themselves was considered a spiritual practice. They were first introduced as a formal act of devotion in the 6th century by Benedict of Nursia. During the Middle Ages, they were in common usage in all of Christian Europe as well as the Eastern Orthodox Church. The form of prayer beads known as The Rosary

was introduced by St. Dominic in the 15th century. Protestant prayer beads are much more contemporary and began in the Episcopal Church. The intent in using prayer beads is that they occupy our 'busy minds' so that we can be open to a deeper place. They offer a discipline that helps us pray even when we don't feel like it. We don't pray to accomplish something, but to offer ourselves to God so that God might do something in us. Most important; don't worry about whether something happens; God is at work when we open ourselves to God.

There are a number of liturgies that have been written for contemporary prayer beads. However, I would suggest that, over time, you consider writing your own liturgy. The beads include a symbol bead which is intended to provide a theme or focus for the prayers that you will use; then a bead for the prayer of invitation, four large beads, and four sets of seven smaller beads. Think about a scripture that would serve as a guide for your prayers; be creative as you choose a symbol bead; for example, a cross is often used to represent repentance or forgiveness, a dove represents the Holy Spirit, angels often represent compassion and mercy, a butterfly is often used for transformation. Let your prayer of invitation flow out of the scripture. The large beads, after a form of address to God, might have a more general petition; the small beads in turn, would be more specific. Consider the sample liturgy:

Prayer of invitation: "transform my life, renew my mind so that I might discern God's deep desire for me" (Romans 12:2)

Large beads: Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. (Hymn #393)

Small beads: Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

I would suggest that hymns make a great resource for creating prayers if you are uncertain; I do want to remind you that although we do create prayers for the beads, the underlying intent is to make our hearts and minds more available to God for God's movement in our lives.

Leading the practice

Given a somewhat limited amount of time for creating the prayer beads, the participants will be invited to make a variation on the more traditional circler; they will make a prayer 'strand'.

Explain to the participants that variations on the more traditional form have developed; since some participants may have already made and used the circler form, this will give them the opportunity to explore something slightly different.

You will need:

- A focus/symbol bead
- An invitatory/or bead of invitation
- A single large bead
- 7 smaller beads
- 3 different beads to serve as separators
- 12 seed beads

Dibelius

- A small metal ring
- Wire

The focus bead will go on first; loop the wire through the bead and tie a knot at the top of this bead with one length of wire long enough for all the remaining beads.

The sequence of beads is as follows:

- Seed bead
- Separator bead
- Seed bead
- Invitatory bead
- Seed bead
- Separator bead
- Seed bead
- Large bead
- Seed bead
- 7 smaller beads each separated by a seed bead
- Separator bead
- Seed bead
- Small ring

Tie another knot once the ring has been attached.

These beads can then be used in a similar manner to the circlet beads. Open with a prayer for your focus; then the invitatory prayer, the large bead prayer and the small bead prayer (the separator beads are simply to provide some additional space). The liturgy for the invitatory, large and small beads would follow a similar format to the liturgy for the same beads in the circlet form.

Draw this time to a close with a prayer expressing gratitude for the ways in which God 'showed up' and invited them to something deeper.

Large group

Invite participants into a discussion of the practice; who has experienced this practice before? Did the practice open them to a place where they could 'hear' God's invitation? Invite a general conversation about the scripture, the experience.

CLOSING**Reading from hymnal:**

Read the words from *The Summons*, TFWS #2130 (vs. 1 & 5); read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

“Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, ‘Amen’. Hallelujah.”
(Psalm 106:48)

LESSON 6

Gathering Time

Opening words:

“Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal.” (Psalm 106:1)

Come and Fill Our Hearts, TFWS #2157

Introduction to the Scripture:

King Ahab and his queen, Jezebel, have been worshipping Baal; Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel; God prevails and the prophets are killed. Ahab and Jezebel are angry and threaten to kill Elijah. Elijah then, fearing for his life, flees into the wilderness of Judah. There he encounters angels who provide food and water before sending him on the long journey to Mount Horeb. When he arrives at Horeb, he hides in a cave, still fearing for his life. God comes to Elijah and asks him what he is doing hiding in a cave; Elijah explains that he is in fear of retribution by Ahab. But God calls Elijah out of the cave.

Read I Kings 19:11-13:

“Come out,” He called, “and stand on the mountain before the Lord.” And lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire—a soft murmuring sound. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his mantle about his face and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then a voice addressed him, “Why are you here, Elijah?”

-Jewish Study Bible

Lead the group through the questions below:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

God calls Elijah to come out of the cave; in spite of his fears, Elijah obeys God. When you find yourself hiding in the cave, what is the fear that has caused you to hide? What is God’s invitation to you? Do you hear God’s call? Are you willing/able to set aside your fears and come out?

Elijah is expecting God to be in the spectacular; the wind, the earthquake, the fire; do you seek God in the form of power and might? Elijah hears the still small voice and knows it to be God; he waits in the silence. Do you allow yourself time and space to wait in the silence; to listen for and hear the still small voice of God?

When God asks Elijah what he is doing hiding in this place for the second time, Elijah is ready to accept God's call to him to return, to anoint a new king. How often does God come to you in your fears and challenge you to return to what you are fleeing? Are you able to hear and accept the challenge and trust in God?

Allow time for silent reflection

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Invite group discussion about scripture, responses to questions

Introduction to Spiritual Practices

What is a spiritual practice? As the name suggests, it is something we 'practice' to grow and nurture our spiritual life. Jesus made an invitation to the disciples and he continues to make that invitation to us today;

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The Message, Matthew 11-28:30

A spiritual practice allows us to 'get away' with Jesus, to learn from Jesus. It is a way of placing ourselves before God so that God can transform our lives. They are a way of opening us to the presence of God so that we can better hear God's deep desire for your life.

Introduce spiritual practice

Examen

The Examen is a highly structured practice that originated with Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. The practice has two specific steps. The first step is known as the Examen of Consciousness; the second step is known as the Examen of Conscience. The intent of this practice is to notice the ways in which God has been present in your life to help you become more sensitive to those moments and more aware of the invitation God may have for you in those moments. As you focus your attention on the 'God moments' in your life, you will become more aware of those moments as they are occurring and more present to God in all of your life.

In the first step you will focus on your awareness of God throughout your life; do you recognize God in the moment. As you become aware, reflecting back, of the moments that you did not recognize God, what was happening within you at that time? How was that different from the times you were aware of God?

Leading the practice

The first step in this practice is to choose a period of time starting with the present moment and moving backwards through the time period. It is easiest to begin this practice with a relatively short period of time; I would suggest starting with 24 hours.

Invite participants to quiet themselves and take a few deep breaths. Close your eyes and take a few moments to appreciate the silence. Invite God to be present with you.

Look back over the last 24 hours beginning with the present moment; let each hour gently pass by your awareness, pause between each hour. As you move backwards, try to notice the presence of God in the day and your own way of participating in, missing or resisting God's presence. Then ask yourself: What am I noticing that I have taken for granted during the time period? What feelings and thoughts are emerging?

When you are ready, journal about your insights noting what happened (or didn't happen) at specific times of which you are now aware but were not at the time. Allow 10-15 minutes for participants to reflect on the last 24 hours; then another 5-8 minutes to journal.

Large group

Invite participants into a discussion of the practice; who has experienced this practice before? Did the practice open them to a place where they could 'hear' God's invitation? Invite a general conversation about the scripture, the experience.

CLOSING

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from *Faith is Patience in the Night*, TFWS #2211; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

"Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, 'Amen'. Hallelujah."
(Psalm 106:48)

LESSON 7

Gathering Time

Opening words:

“Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal.” (Psalm 106:1)

Bless the Lord, TFWS #2013

Introduction to the Scripture:

It is believed that these words from Isaiah were written shortly after the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon. The prophet sought to restore faith in the one true God and God’s universal kingship, the coming of the messianic era and the future restoration of Jerusalem. The prophet emphasizes the covenant between God and Israel and that it is important that the people abandon their sinful ways so that God will again bless them as a people.

Read Isaiah 55:2b-3: Give heed to me, and you shall eat choice food and enjoy the richest viands. Incline your ear and come to Me; hearken, and you shall be revived. And I will make with you an everlasting covenant, the enduring loyalty promised to David.

-Jewish Study Bible

Lead the group through the questions below:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

God invites the Israelites to heed God’s words; God then promises to provide good, even rich, ‘food’. They need encouragement to trust in God after their years in captivity. Do you, at times, doubt God’s promise of rich ‘food’ because of the struggles and challenges you have encountered? Who encourages you at such times in your life?

God tells the Israelites to listen, to come to God, and God will comfort and restore them. Do you listen for God in the midst of difficulties? Do you trust that God will comfort you? Do you trust that there will be restoration in your life?

God renews the covenant of commitment to the Israelites and promises them a place in God’s kingdom. After the fall of David’s dynasty, it was difficult for them to understand how God would fulfill this promise. Do you, at times, have your own expectations and fail to see and understand the promise God is making?

Allow time for silent reflection

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Invite group discussion about scripture, responses to questions

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The Message, Matthew 11-28:30

A spiritual practice allows us to 'get away' with Jesus, to learn from Jesus. It is a way of placing ourselves before God so that God can transform our lives. They are a way of opening us to the presence of God so that we can better hear God's deep desire for your life.

Introduce spiritual practice

Examen

This week we will explore the second step in this practice. As I indicated last week, the Examen is a highly structured practice that originated with Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. Last week we explored the Examen of Consciousness.

The second step is known as the Examen of Conscience and is a time of prayerfulness when you place the God moments you identified in step one before God. There are five movements to this prayer time.

- The first act is acknowledgement and gratitude; recall all the blessings you have received over the time period; acknowledge those blessings as gifts from God and give thanks.

- The next act is petition; pray for the grace to see yourself clearly and honestly (your true authentic self); pray for clear vision to see yourself as God sees you and as others see you; empty yourself of self to make space for God.
- Then, admit; consider the times in the period when you have lapsed in faith, resisted God's action, or become alienated from God, recognize a specific area of your life that needs healing or attention.
- Next, repent; humble yourself and ask for forgiveness, say to God "I'm sorry."
- And finally resolve; to accept God's grace and love. Determine now, with God, to be open to new ways of being in the world, to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

When you have completed the practice, journal about your feelings and insights noting, in particular, what needs attention and what you need to entrust to God's care.

Leading the practice

For a first time through this practice, it is best to read through the steps first so they know what to expect; then it is helpful if you move them through each step. Invite them to resume a prayerful attitude and posture. Then move them through the following steps:

-acknowledge; recall all the blessings you have received over the time period, accept all as gifts from God and give thanks (allow about 5 minutes for this)

-ask; pray for the grace to see yourself clearly and honestly (your authentic self), pray for enlightenment to see yourself as God sees you and as others see you; empty yourself of self (allow 3-5 minutes)

-admit; consider the times in the period when you have lapsed in faith, resisted God's action, or become alienated from God, recognize a specific 'sin' or area that needs healing or attention (allow 3-5 minutes)

-repent; humble yourself, repent and ask for forgiveness, say to God "I'm sorry" (allow 3-5 minutes)

-resolve; assent to grace, determine now, with God, to be open to new ways of being in the world, resolve to accept God's love, follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and live by Christ's truth (allow about 5 minutes)

Invite them to write about their feelings and insights and, noting in particular what needs attention and what they need to entrust to God's care. (Give them 5-8 minutes to write.)

Draw this time to a close with a prayer expressing gratitude for the ways in which God 'showed up' and invited them to something deeper.

Large group

Invite participants into a discussion of the practice; who has experienced this practice before? Did the practice open them to a place where they could 'hear' God's invitation? Invite a general conversation about the scripture, the experience.

CLOSING

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from ***When We Are Called to Sing Your Praise***, TFWS #2216; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

"Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, 'Amen'. Hallelujah."
(Psalm 106:48)

LESSON 8

Gathering time

Opening words:

“Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal.” (Psalm 106:1)

In The Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful, TFWS #2195

Introduction to the Scripture:

Jesus has very recently returned to Galilee to begin his ministry. He has been rejected in his hometown, has cast out a demon, has healed Simon's mother-in-law as well as many others. And now Jesus goes to call the first of the disciples. He is walking along the lakeshore and he sees Simon and James and John mending their nets after a night of fishing; he gets into Simon's boat and asks him to push him out from the shore so that he can speak to the crowd that has gathered.

Read Luke 5:4-10: When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

-NRSV

Lead the group through the questions below:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

Jesus asked Simon to put out his nets even though he and James and John had fished all night and caught nothing. Do you remember a time when Jesus asked you to trust him in spite of the ‘reality’ you knew? How did you respond?

When Simon saw the large catch of fish, he was afraid; he recognized his sinfulness in the presence of Jesus. Are there moments when you are struck by your own sinfulness? Are you fearful?

Jesus said, “Do not be afraid”. He invited Simon to follow him; scripture tells us that Simon “left everything and followed him”. What is your response when Jesus invites you to follow? How difficult is it to “leave everything”?

Allow time for silent reflection

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Invite group discussion about scripture, responses to questions

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The Message, Matthew 11-28:30

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Introduce Spiritual Practice

Discernment

The word discernment comes from the Latin, *discerno*, meaning to separate, mark off, divide; to keep apart; to distinguish between. The word has to do with separating and sorting; separating one thing from another, separating ourselves from the world. And then sorting through the many things that may be calling to us, to distinguish that which is foremost, that which God is inviting us into.

Discernment is one of the spiritual gifts that Paul articulates in his letter to the church in Corinth. This gift is defined as "a special ability to distinguish between truth and error, justice and injustice, what is authentic and genuine and what is phony. You are able to 'see through' people or circumstances to know what is real and what is an illusion, and you have the wisdom and courage to speak or reveal the truth."

Although we may not all share in the gift of discernment, there are practices that help us discern a particular decision or choice in our lives. When confronted with a decision that may have multiple choices, how do we listen for God in the midst of it?

*Hearing with the Heart*¹ by Debra K. Farrington and *The Way of Discernment—Companions in Christ*² are both excellent resources for discernment practices. You are going to be invited today into a practice that is described in Farrington's book. This is not intended to be the only practice, but to help you begin to explore the practice of discernment.

Leading the practice

This particular exercise involves visualization; seeing the decision in the presence of God.

The exercise invites you to lift your choices up to God so that you might gain a better understanding of God's desire for you. Explain the practice briefly and then lead them through a step at a time.

First consider a decision that you may need to make, then find an image that would represent God's love for you. For example, you might picture God's love as a bright light, an open hand, something in nature; something that will be authentic for you and your relationship with God (allow 3-5 minutes). Then be clear about the decision you are trying to make and the choices that are before you (allow ~3 minutes). Then, using the image you have chosen, imagine the decision that needs to be made being held in God's loving presence; lift the decision up to the image you have chosen. Hold that image for several minutes. Then imagine each of the possible choices being held in God's love. Place them in God's presence, see them, spend several minutes with each choice (allow 8-12 minutes). When you have lifted each of the choices into God's presence, express your gratitude to God.

Then take time to reflect on what you saw. As you reflect on what you 'saw', do you have a sense of God's response to each of the choices; do you have greater clarity with regard to God's deep desire for you? (Allow ~5 minutes)

Take time to journal about this experience. (Allow 3-5 minutes).

Draw this time to a close with a prayer expressing gratitude for the ways in which God 'showed up' and invited them to something deeper.

Large group

Invite participants into a discussion of the practice; who has experienced this practice before? Did the practice open them to a place where they could 'hear' God's invitation? Invite a general conversation about the scripture, the experience.

¹ Farrington, Debra K., *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life*, San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 2003, pg. 64.

² Doughty, Stephen V. and Thompson, Marjorie J., *Companions in Christ: The Way of Discernment*, Nashville, TN, Upper Room Books, 2008.

CLOSING**Reading from hymnal:**

Read the words from *Would I Have Answered When You Called*, TFWS #2137; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

“Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, ‘Amen’. Hallelujah.”
(Psalm 106:48)