A Time to Mend

In Matthew 4:21, Jesus notices two men in a boat mending their fishing nets. Cleaning and mending nets are necessary tasks for people who fish for a living. Nets catch not only fish but also debris in the water that can damage the net. Mending requires carefully checking for weaknesses in the net, retrying knots, and replacing worn or torn sections with new rope. Taking time to check and mend the nets after a long day of fishing can seem like a meaningless task, but that simple routine prepares the fishers for another day of work.

If you are regathering after a time apart, take the needed time to mend the fabric of your life together that has been frayed by separation and loss from the pandemic. As you prepare to teach, think about practices and routines that will help build and strengthen relationships. It can be as simple as an opening greeting and sharing, or a blessing that you repeat each week. While not specific to the pandemic experience, here are some ideas to help you set a positive and nurturing tone with your group as you regather this fall.

Welcome. Be present at the beginning of a session to welcome children and youth to the space, just as you might when welcoming guests into your home. If you have last-minute preparations as your guests are arriving, make sure to have something for them to do, such as listening to music or coloring a picture, and engage them in conversation as you complete your preparations.

Build relationships. Your relationship with the children is very important, more important than any planned activity. Young children learn best when they are with adults who genuinely like them. Children are observing and learning from you, even if it doesn’t always seem like it! They are affected by the way you pray and the enthusiasm you show as you tell a story, sing a song, or lead a game. When you talk about your favorite Bible story or name things that you’re grateful for, this is a model for the children. When you smile at a child and say something kind, this conveys the love of God.

Form community. Your warmth and care are key elements of building community with elementary-age children. At this stage in children’s lives, friendships are taking on more importance. Children are beginning to realize how their actions affect others—both positively and negatively. Nurture your time together as one of kindness and acceptance. Create a space that gives children confidence to work out and develop their relationships as they grow in the church.

Junior youth may at times feel invisible, forgotten, or lost. They worry about belonging and being noticed, so building community is extremely important for this age group. The community of faith should be different from the other groups to which youth belong. Work at creating a place where relationships are built on equality not superiority, cooperation not competition, and vulnerability rather than bragging. And don’t forget to have some fun! Show your enthusiasm for and genuine interest in the lives and experiences of youth. Laughing together is good for the soul!

Respect and honor differences. Make space for different experiences, remembering that each person comes with a unique story. This means different socioeconomic backgrounds, church experiences, educational contexts (including homeschooling), racial and ethnic identities, family structures, physical abilities, and so on. It can be helpful to consider that we, like the disciples, are a diverse group of people who act from our own personal stories. Yet all of us are welcome in Jesus. Learning to know everyone may take some time, but as children’s stories unfold, be inspired by the blessing that each one brings.

Encourage participation and leadership. Look for opportunities for your children or youth to work together and help. They can help prepare the room, set up chairs, and distribute supplies. Each person’s contribution demonstrates care for the other people in the group and helps create a positive space for worship and learning. They can also lead during prayers, songs, and readings. People of all ages thrive when they know that they have a place and that their participation and leadership is valued and desired.

Our world right now seems broken and in need of mending. Our children and youth are watching to see how we respond. Model what it means to mend as you teach: listen carefully to each other’s stories and experiences, attend to those who need special care, encourage kindness, strengthen relationships, and try something new when the old unravels.

Blessings as you engage your children and youth in routines and practices that mend and inspire hope for the future.

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A Blessing for Teachers and Learners

One: God, you sent Jesus into the world to show us how to live as God’s people.

Children: Who will tell us about Jesus?

Teachers: We will tell you about Jesus! We want to share the story of Jesus so that you may choose to love him and follow in his way. As we worship, pray, and share the Bible story, may you be inspired to love Jesus and live like him every day.

All: As we hear and share God’s story together, may our hearts be opened to love Jesus.

One: We are all created, known, and loved by God, and each person’s faith journey is unique. The Bible offers guidance for this journey, revealing God’s work in the world and how to be part of the ongoing story of the people of God.

Children and youth: Who will guide us on this journey of faith?

Teachers: Along with your family and this congregation, we will guide you! We will lead you in practices of prayer and worship that will help you develop a relationship with God that will sustain and encourage you throughout your life. Faith is not only a personal connection to God; it grows within community. We will learn from each other and discern together how to faithfully follow God.

All: As we discern God’s will together, may we grow in faith.

One: Beyond these walls lies a hurting world. God, your love transforms us so that we can participate in the healing of that world.

Youth: There are so many problems. Where do we start?

Teachers: As we seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, together we make God’s kingdom a reality here and now. We will study God’s Word together and talk about how it connects to our lives. We will challenge you to share God’s love and peace with everyone you meet.

All: Seeking God’s kingdom together, we can change the world.

SONG SUGGESTIONS:
- “Jesus, Be the Center” from Everybody Sing: Worship Songs for Children, track 8
- “Longing for Light” from Everybody Sing: Worship Songs for Children, track 12
Seize the Day
Missional Opportunities Post-Covid

Nelson Okanya

Mission is an activity that transforms reality.
—David Bosch

One of the great opportunities the current crisis has given the church is to once again ask the purpose questions: Why does the church exist in the first place? What difference does it make in the world?

Mennonite mission historian Wilbert Shenk writes insightful about these questions: “The church is true to its nature—and thus possesses integrity—when it understands itself to be God’s missionary presence in the world.”¹ Therefore, the question of missional opportunities must be preceded by the question of missional identity.

In Recovering the Full Mission of God, Dean Flemming writes, “Mission involves both who we are and what we do.”² The true identity of God’s people is essential if we are to live out our calling in the world.

In Scripture, God historically called a people, saying, “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6a). God designated this priestly kingdom a “treasured possession” (Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2; 26:18). The God who called this priestly kingdom also established a covenant with the community, and the stipulations of that covenant were to form and guide their living. It all begins with God as the initiator; therefore, the called people are God’s people on a mission for God. The church is molded after this initial covenant community, a community that God liberated from the Egyptian bondage (Exodus 3:9-10). In the same way, the church is a covenant community that is created by the Holy Spirit to serve as God’s agents, embodying God’s liberation from the bondage of sin and death through faith in Jesus Christ.

This church calls the repentant and gathers them into a new world-transforming community for nurture and sending into the world as God’s missionary presence. What is essential is the essence of that community and not the form that covenant community takes.

the subject of mission, but rather should inspire new opportunities especially in terms of population concentration and people movement.

2. **Globalization.** Integration among the people, companies, and governments of different nations and its key agents—information technology and ease of transportation—has revolutionized the world and altered its functioning. Just about anyone can easily connect online to anywhere around the globe, an unprecedented opportunity for engaging the globe.

3. **Missions from the Majority World.** The days of a benefactor approach to missionary witness where the Western church was the subject of mission while the rest of the world, urban and poor communities, was object to mission are long past. Reciprocity and partnership in mission are growing, and the church must adapt and thrive in God’s missionary witness.

4. **Pluralism and secularization.** Belief that all religions are equally true and good and lead to God/ heaven is on the rise, even within the church. North Americans increasingly identify as atheist, agnostic, or spiritual but not religious. The church’s narrative of hope that God’s redemptive mission is made real in the world through Jesus ought to be a viable narrative amid the competition (Acts 17).

5. **Ineffective leadership.** Most of the world’s pain is caused by poor and ineffective leadership. Underneath the surface, visible problems—including poverty, injustice, violence, greed, and human subjugation—are caused by ill-suited or ill-prepared leaders who fail to deliver promised outcomes. Jesus’ model of serving leadership is an answer to this dire situation.

6. **Congregational sending.** Mission agencies are increasingly taking on more of a role of advising, resourcing, and screening and equipping workers, rather than primarily sending workers and giving ongoing worker care and program oversight.

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Practical, effective, Anabaptist resources from MennoMedia and Leader magazine. Find more at MennoMedia.org/what-now.

Profound Disorientation to Radical Reorientation

A Three-Part Worship Series with the Psalms

April Yamasaki with Derek Suderman

The realities of COVID-19 have been profoundly disorienting. The new disease has run rampant, sickening and killing many. The grief has been compounded by social restrictions, with family and friends not able to gather to mourn together. Others have lost their jobs or faced the gut-wrenching decisions to lay off employees or even shutter their business; food pantries have faced unprecedented demand. Cell phone videos have provided a window into the violence committed against African Americans and people from other marginalized groups, often from members of law enforcement. Our context seems so far removed from the comprehensive shalom we dream of and pray for.

Yet even in this context, we are called to worship. We need to worship: to be reminded of God’s presence with us at all times, to lament the losses and give thanks for daily mercies, to seek God’s kingdom where everything wrong will be made right, to offer praise and renew our hope and trust in God.

That’s a lot to expect from our Sunday worship! But how else are we to move from our settled past through the confusion of the pandemic into our still-unfolding new reality? How else are we to take that journey but with God and with one another? To assist pastors and churches along the way, this three-part worship series follows the arc of the Psalms from orientation to disorientation to reorientation. We hope you’ll find this a useful guide in planning worship as we come before God with our experience before COVID and during the chaos of the pandemic, and as we find a new way forward.

BACKGROUND TO THE PSALMS

Though we often see the Bible as a source of inspiration, guidance, and comfort, we forget that both Old Testament and New arose in contexts of profound disorientation. The sacking of Jerusalem, destruction of the temple, and forced captivity shattered the Israelites’ expectations. Before exile in Babylon, the Israelites believed that they would be safe and Jerusalem was untouchable because the Lord was with them; this calamity forced them to reconsider this theological pillar and to take greater account of the broader world.

For followers of Jesus, watching their beloved leader and teacher torturously hang from a Roman cross was a profound shock (the road to Emmaus story in Luke 24 attests to their disorientation). Making sense of Jesus’ death and resurrection prompted a fundamental rethinking of the nature of the Messiah, from one who would conquer (Psalms 2, 18) to one who suffered (Psalm 22). For both Israelites and followers of Jesus, the jolt of radical disorientation prompted a profound transformation, providing the seeds of what became the Jewish and Christian traditions.

The book of Psalms presents a microcosm of this dynamic. Like other wisdom and torah (instruction) psalms, Psalm 1 sets out an optimistic orientation where the righteous prosper and the wicked blow away like chaff in the wind. This confidence quickly unravels, as a series of laments starting in Psalm 3 cry out from situations of distress. Though they often receive little attention in our corporate worship, these psalms that...
insist that “things are not right” (Brueggemann) and something needs to change prove to be the most numerous, with over 50 individual laments alone.

The repeated expression of lament dominates books 1–3 of the Psalms (Psalms 1–89), climaxing with the utter disorientation of personal anguish (Psalms 88) and the end of the Davidic monarchy and exile (Psalms 89:38–52). Book 4 then provides a radical reorientation, insisting that the Israelites should depend not on a human king but on their divine one: “the Lord is king” (Psalms 93, 95–99).

While the militaristic overtones and role that judgment plays in that image may cause some discomfort, the conviction that the Lord is king proves foundational to the Gospels too. For instance, recall the wording of the Lord’s Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount (‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done,’ Matthew 6:10); the constant reference to the “kingdom of God” in the Gospels, including Jesus’ parables; even the Lord’s Supper, which builds on Jesus’ celebration of the Passover (and so God’s revelation in the exodus) with his disciples. Facing yet another foreign empire, this time the Romans, Jesus and his followers dared to claim that God was king—and not Caesar!

We are not alone. This is not the first time that the world seems to have shifted; where former perspectives, commitments, and practices have been challenged; when people have felt traumatized and disoriented. What is the “new song” that we are called to sing?

As Jesus said, “every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matthew 13:52). As those tasked with sharing the gospel in this strange new world, I hope this series helps you rediscover and draw from the treasure of Scripture in your own time and place.

Note: For relevant and engaging work on the Psalms, I highly recommend Walter Brueggemann. He is a brilliant Old Testament scholar committed to discerning the Bible’s theological message for the church, and his Spirituality of the Psalms and Psalms and the Life of Faith are both excellent resources. For studies that explore each psalm in turn, see commentaries by Brueggemann (New Cambridge), James Luther Mays (Interpretation), and James Waltner (BCBC).

HOW THIS SERIES IS ORGANIZED
Three psalms were selected for this worship series:

- Psalm 1: “Planted in Good Ground,” a psalm of orientation to reflect on our life and faith before COVID-19.
- Psalm 13: “How Long?” a psalm of lament and disorientation to express the disorientation of the pandemic.
- Psalm 98: “Singing a New Song,” a psalm of reorientation to accompany us into the future.

For each Sunday, this resource includes a focus statement and visual elements, song suggestions and a prayer from Voices Together, a call to worship, words of confession and assurance, children’s time, sermon notes on the psalm, a ritual act of worship, and a benediction.

Visual elements
Psalm 1:3 describes “a tree planted by streams of water,” and this will serve as a visual focus for the series, with unique elements added for each Sunday.

Begin by arranging bare branches in a large vase to serve as a “tree” in your worship space. Set it on a table covered with a deep brown cloth to represent the good ground where the tree grows and to symbolize the stability and security of the past and of our faith in God. Add a strip of blue fabric or a wide blue ribbon to represent the river. Please see the outline for each Sunday for the unique elements to add each week.

Rituals
For each Sunday, this resource includes a suggested ritual to engage the body in worship along with heart, mind, and soul. But the ritual changes from week to week, and appears at a different point in each service.

On the first Sunday, a gathering ritual welcomes everyone back to corporate worship. On the second Sunday, a ritual of silence honors those who lost their lives to COVID-19 and those who have served sacrificially to care for others, and allows space to mourn the many other losses of the pandemic. On the third Sunday, a sending ritual concludes the series.

Children’s time
The children’s time for each Sunday focuses on praying with the children, but the prayers are also well suited for intergenerational participation. On the first Sunday, everyone in the congregation can learn to pray the Lord’s Prayer with actions. On the second Sunday, everyone in the congregation could be given a button for the button prayer. On the third Sunday, everyone in the congregation could use a small instrument, clap, or snap their fingers. So while these prayers are listed for the children’s time, feel free to include the whole congregation in your preparation and as you lead in prayer.
Psalm 1

**Planted in Good Ground**

**Scripture**

Psalm 1

**Focus**

As we consider life before COVID-19, in what ways were we rooted in the good ground of faith and in God’s Word? In what ways did we flourish and experience God’s blessing?

**Visual elements**

Set up the worship display with a large vase of bare branches as described in the overview, and leave it in place for this series. For this first Sunday, cut out leaves from green construction paper, and punch a hole in each one so it can be hung on one of the tree branches during the gathering ritual. Make enough leaves for everyone in the congregation, and scatter them across the tablecloth along with a few markers. Or for a less labor-intensive approach, purchase pre-strung merchandise tags that can be hung on the branches.

**Song suggestions**

**Voices Together**

In addition to these song suggestions, consider singing favorites from the life of your congregation before COVID as a reminder of the good ground of your faith.

**Songs of seeds and trees:**

98 Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise
297 You Are Salt for the Earth
514 I Saw a Tree by the Riverside
550 God Who Touches Earth with Beauty

**Songs of God’s Word:**

197 God’s Glory Fills the Heavens
204 Praise to the Living God
398 Thy Word Is a Lamp
571 O God, We Read the Holy Law
592 How Firm a Foundation

**Songs of God’s leading:**

124 For the Fruit of All Creation
533 Quietly, Peacefully
570 When We Walk with the Lord
793 Siyahamba (We Are Marching)
815 Sizohamba naye (We Will Walk with God)

**Call to worship**

One: Come worship the God of creation who has planted us like a tree in good ground.
Many: We worship the God who has grounded us in faith and in the Word.
One: Come worship the God who is with us in Jesus Christ, the Word of God who has saved us.
Many: We worship the God who continues to save us in the storms of life.
One: Come worship the God who tenderly watches over us and sustains us by the Spirit.
Many: We worship the God who guards us from danger and guides our way.
All: All praise and thanks to God!
**Gathering ritual**
As people gather for worship, invite them to write their name on a leaf or tag and hang it on the tree. This may be done before the service begins as people enter the worship space. Or immediately after the call to worship, invite people to come forward during a time of instrumental music or congregational singing. The tree with all the names is a visual representation of the church planted in faith and in God's Word. Leave the tree with the name tags as the visual display for the rest of the series.

**Prayer**
*Voices Together* 869 is a responsive reading for gathering as a covenant people. Its affirmation of being “renamed, reborn, renewed” seems especially appropriate for when churches are able to resume worship together in person.

**Confession and assurance**

All: We confess that God has planted us to be the church in this time and place, yet how often we have failed to live into our calling. Instead of delighting in God’s Word, we have been distracted by the things of this world. Instead of remaining grounded and flourishing to bear good fruit, we have been pulled in many different directions. Instead of seeking God’s path for us, we have gone our own way. Forgive us, Lord, watch over us, guide us, and grant us the courage to follow you.

One: Hear now these words of assurance from Hebrews 4:15-16: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

As we have now made our confession, let us receive God’s forgiveness and mercy. By God’s grace, may we live as forgiven people and walk the path of faith that God has set before us. May we flourish and bear good fruit in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**Children’s time: The Lord’s Prayer with actions**

**Prepare**
The Lord’s Prayer is an ancient prayer, grounded in the past and in God’s Word, first taught by Jesus, recorded in the gospel of Matthew, and prayed for centuries in many places and in many languages. Learn the Lord’s Prayer with actions, and practice until you are able to pray it without referring to notes or to the video (https://youtu.be/SkR6icVDwtA). If your church regularly prays the Lord’s Prayer by saying “holy” instead of “hallowed” or “your name” instead of “thy name,” or with other changes, feel free to adjust the wording as needed. If you and the children already know the Lord’s Prayer with different actions, feel free to use the actions that are already familiar to you.

**Share**
Introduce the Lord’s Prayer by telling the children that when Jesus’ followers asked him to teach them to pray, Jesus taught them a special prayer that’s been prayed in many places and in many languages. Invite them to join you in praying the Lord’s Prayer with actions. If this is new to the children, encourage them to watch once, then join in on the second time. Pray the prayer with actions for a third time as you feel led.

**Pray**
Lead the children in the Lord’s Prayer with actions.

**Sermon seeds**
Psalm 1 begins the book with an optimistic tone, moving from a negative counter-example to a positive depiction of one who follows divine instruction. The psalmist is confident that God’s favor rests on the “righteous,” and does not extend to the “wicked.”

Often obscured in translation, the verbs of the opening verse suggest increased permanence. The psalmist warns not to walk with the wicked, stand with sinners, or sit (even “dwell”) with scoffers. The next verses shift to a positive depiction of someone who “delights in the law of the Lord.” This wording provides a delicious ambiguity, since “torah of the Lord” can refer to either Scripture itself (cf. Ezra 7:10; study the Bible, everyone!) or God’s “instruction” more generally—or both. While the exact referent is ambiguous, the effort involved is not. Where the negative counter-example becomes more and more static (walk, stand, sit), the psalm seeks ongoing effort and constant commitment, where “delight” translates into meditating “day and night.”

The psalm’s literary artistry continues with the metaphor of a tree that merges with the positive depiction of one committed to God’s instruction. The wordplay here is wonderful, since both humans and trees can “flourish” (prosper) in the Old Testament. The
tree image proves powerful for those in an arid climate. This image also reflects wisdom terminology, and may even allude to a “tree of life” that appears briefly in Genesis and prominently elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern literature and iconography.

The psalm ends with the contrast of the two ways; both the term way and the contrast between the “righteous” and the “wicked” prove characteristic of wisdom material. The “wicked” are short-lived, while God watches over the “righteous.”

For someone unaware of the book to come, this psalm could easily be cited in support of “prosperity theology,” where one’s success or even bank balance reflects signs of God’s blessing.

**Benediction**
Planted in faith and grounded in God’s Word, receive these words of blessing from Numbers 6:24-26:

“The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” Amen.
Psalm 13

How Long?

Scripture
Psalm 13

Focus
As we consider life during the pandemic, how has that been a hard time for us personally and as a church? What and who have we lost? How have we grown in trust and confidence before God?

Visual elements
Collect large rocks to represent the hard experiences during the pandemic: the serious illness and loss of life, the loss of jobs and businesses, the challenges of schooling, the restrictions that kept some families crowded together at home and others isolated and alone, the toll on mental health, the racial violence and other ongoing injustices, the uncertainty and worry. Add the rocks to the worship display, and leave them there for the rest of the series.

Song suggestions

Voices Together

Songs of lament:
140 Out of the Depths I Cry to You
623 What Comfort Can Our Worship Bring
691 How Long, O Lord
692 Kyrie eleison
694 Tears of Suffering

Songs of God’s grace:
167 Your Grace Is Enough
682 Lord, Listen to Your Children
693 Khudaya, rahem kar (Have Mercy on Us, Lord)
703 Rain Down

Songs of trust in God:
419 Great Is Thy Faithfulness
564 What Wondrous Love Is This
588 We Walk by Faith
621 My Hope Is Built

Call to worship
One: Come gather to worship the God of steadfast love and generous mercy, who hears us when we call.
Many: We come with our questions, with our sorrows and joys. We come in faith that God is here and hears us.
One: Come gather to worship the God who accomplished our salvation in Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again and now reigns over all.
Many: We come, depending on Jesus who has borne the penalty of sin and death, depending on the Spirit who sighs with us in our sorrows.
One: Come gather to worship the God who holds us close, who offers comfort and healing, who is our rock and refuge in times of trouble.
Many: We come with joy even in the midst of trial, for God is love and light and life.
All: All praise and thanks to God!
Prayer

*Voices Together 1044*, “Response to Community Crisis,” names doubt, fear, anger, and other responses that may have surfaced for us during the pandemic and ends with a prayer for God “to guide our feet in the way of peace.”

**Ritual of silence**

Introduce this time of silence by inviting everyone to reflect on the pandemic in light of Psalm 13. What questions do they have for God? What pain and sorrow do they carry? What names are missing from the tree in the worship display? What sacrifices have people made to serve others during this time of pandemic? Invite those who are able to stand for a moment of silent reflection, with hands extended palms up to offer their lament to God, or folded together in prayer.

To end the silence, read *Voices Together* 728. These excerpts from Psalm 13 may be read responsively as printed, or may be read by a single voice either from the front or from the midst of the congregation.

**Confession and assurance**

*All:* We confess that God is love and is ever present with us, yet how often we forget and feel forgotten and alone. We act as if God is hiding from us—when we are the ones who have turned away. We act as if we must bear the pain and sorrow of this world on our own—when God in Jesus Christ has already shouldered our burdens and invites us to come and rest. Forgive us, Lord, for our fear and worry. Forgive us for the part that we have played in the racism and injustice of our world. Remind us that you prevail over every sin, over every injustice, over every wrong that needs to be made right.

*One:* Hear now these words of assurance from Romans 8:1-2: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”

As we have now made our confession, let us receive God’s forgiveness and freedom. For if God has set us free, we are free indeed! So let us live according to the Spirit, confident of God’s steadfast love even amid questions and uncertainty, renewed in our commitment to love kindness and do justice. May we walk in faith, love like Jesus, and hold on to hope. Amen.

**Children’s time: Button prayer**

**Prepare**

Psalm 13 is a psalm of lament that expresses both sorrow and trust in God. “How long?” asks the psalmist. Think of a time during the pandemic when you asked “How long?” that you could share with the children (e.g., How long before schools would have regular classes again? How long before everyone could come to church?). What were some of the hard things and some of the more encouraging things that happened during the pandemic? Gather buttons of different sizes, shapes, and colors, enough to give each older child a button to hold during the prayer time. For younger children, cut cardboard button shapes of different colors, complete with one or more holes in the center of each cardboard button.

**Share**

Read Psalm 13:2 to the children: “How long will sorrow fill my heart?”. Share briefly with the children your own experience of asking “How long?” Let them know that when we are sad, we can share our sad feelings with God. When we are happy, we can share our happy feelings. Whatever we feel, we can trust God. Then hand out the buttons, and invite the children to hold them and join you in a button prayer.

**Pray**

Lead the children in the following prayer, inspired by the Flame Creative Kids button prayers².

Let’s all feel how hard our button is. While you do so, think of some of the hard things that make us sad, like people getting sick and missing our friends.

(Pause briefly)

God, hear the cry of our hearts, and hold our sad feelings.

Buttons can hold clothes together to keep us warm, like the buttons on a sweater. Let’s think about people coming together for worship and coming together to help each other.

(Pause briefly)

2. See http://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/2017/07/button-prayers.html
God, bless our families and friends, our church family and our neighbors. Help all those who are hurting, people who are near to us and people around the world.

Look at the number of holes in your button. Think of that many things that you can thank God for.

(Pause briefly)

Thank you, God, for all your gifts: for creating the world and everything in it, for food and fresh air, for water and trees, for our homes.

God, we trust you with all our feelings: sad, happy, thankful. We trust you even when we're not sure how we feel, because you always love us. Amen.

Thank the children for praying with you, and either collect all the buttons or encourage the children to take them home as a reminder to pray.

**Sermon seeds**

Psalm 13 builds on a characteristic question that underlies lament: “How long?” Immediately repeated four times, this question epitomizes a situation where things are simply not right, a situation from which the psalmist pleads for a dramatic shift. The sense of abandonment is palpable; the traumatic sense that God has forgotten the psalmist or is hiding from her echoes Jesus’ psalmic cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). Along with illness (Psalm 6), the sense of being surrounded by enemies (and malicious speech) reflects a dominant concern in laments.

Often translated as “soul,” the Hebrew term *nephesh* denotes one’s entire self or being (v. 2), not the body/soul dualism we often associate with the English term. Similarly, having “sorrow in my heart” may not reflect an emotional concern but a cognitive one, since “heart” (Heb. *lebab*) represents the place of the will and is regularly employed for thought processes or decision-making (cf. Solomon asking for an “understanding heart” in 1 Kings 3). The psalmist is not immune to the ruminating thoughts and catastrophic thinking prompted by pain and abandonment.

After describing the negative situation, the psalmist employs a series of imperatives, asking God to act in forceful language: Consider! Answer me! Give light to my eyes! Perhaps strange to us, laments commonly insist that helping the petitioner poses a benefit for God too: with no intervention, what will the enemies think? These psalms do not just list issues, but seek to convince and compel God to act.

As is common in laments, the end of the psalm reflects confidence in God. In contrast to the enemies who rejoice in her calamity, the psalmist trusts in God’s “steadfast love” (*hesed*) and expects “salvation” or “deliverance” (*yeshuah*)—like *nephesh*, the latter term does not distinguish between spiritual and physical well-being, but instead implies both. While the situation hasn't changed, expressing herself to God has already reoriented the psalmist's perspective.

**Benediction**

May the steadfast love of God
guide your path in the week ahead.
May the sure presence of Jesus
be your comfort and joy every step of the way.
May the Spirit see you through every challenge,
and grant blessed rest at the end of every day. Amen.
Psalm 98

Singing a New Song

Scripture
Psalm 98

Focus
As we consider life post-COVID, what do we hope for? How will we seek God’s righteousness and reign as we enter into a new reality? What new song will we sing?

Visual elements
Gather together some small flowering plants to represent new life, freshness, and hope. Add the flowers to the worship display under the tree and among the rocks. Even in times of hardship, there is hope, for God is at work bringing new life. Consider leaving the worship display in place for several Sundays after this series as a celebration of God’s work in the life of your church.

Song suggestions

Voices Together

Songs of God’s goodness:

33 You Are Good
66 Alleluia/Make a Joyful Noise (Psalm 100)
70 Praise God (Dedication Anthem)
76 Holy, Holy, Holy!
177 All Things Bright and Beautiful
747 We Plow the Fields and Scatter

Songs of joy:

80 We Sing to You, O God
93 Nyanyikanlah nyanyian baru (Sing to God a New Song)
113 Cantai ao Senhor (O Sing to the Lord)
240 Joy to the World
611 Lift Every Voice and Sing
847 You Shall Go Out with Joy

Call to worship

One: Come sing a new song of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness.
Many: We sing our joy and gratitude for all the good things that God has done!
One: Come sing a new song with sea and earth, with rivers and hills, with all creation longing to be made new.
Many: We sing God’s reign and righteousness, already but not yet in our beautiful and broken world, already and coming soon in the fullness of time.
One: Come sing a new song of God’s saving power and victory, a song of love and faith and hope for all God’s promises.
Many: We sing with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, for God’s steadfast love and faithfulness.
All: All praise and thanks to God!

Prayer
Voices Together 963, “For Congregational Transitions and Anniversaries,” is a responsive reading that also speaks to this post-COVID transition. It expresses gratitude for God’s leading in the past with a prayer for God to “open us to the future you promise.”
Confession and assurance

All: We confess that God is righteous and has already won the victory, yet how often we take matters into our own hands and fail to trust God. Instead of joining creation in praise, we have too often done harm to the earth and its creatures. Instead of respecting others, we have too often failed to recognize them as made in the image of God. Forgive us, Lord, for our hard-heartedness and willfulness. Create in us a new resolve to follow you in doing what is right.

One: Hear now these words of assurance from Ephesians 2:8-10: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

As we have now made our confession, let us receive God’s gift of forgiveness and grace. May we sing a new song of God’s goodness in the way we live each day. May we live the life that God has prepared for us, a life of humility and good works. Amen.

Children’s time: Make a joyful noise prayer

Prepare
Psalm 98 begins with the affirmation that God has done wonderful things. Think of some of the wonderful things you are thankful for that you could share with the children (e.g., God’s love, sunshine, a fun family time). Gather together shakers, wooden blocks, triangles, and other small instruments, enough so that each child will have one to use during the children’s time. Keep a shaker for yourself to lead the prayer, and be prepared to use your free hand for a sweeping gesture to signal when to still all the instruments.

Share
Read Psalm 98:1 to the children, and share briefly with them one wonderful thing that God has done. Ask the children to think about the wonderful things in their life, and invite them to share. Then ask them to join you in a joyful noise prayer to give thanks for all these things. Hand out the instruments, and tell them you will let them know when to make some noise. Show them the gesture you will make to signal when to stop.

Pray
Lead the children in the following prayer, with wording from the New Revised Standard Version and the Good News Translation.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth, let’s everyone make some noise! (Make noise for a time, then gesture to stop.)
Sing praises to the Lord with bells and shakers and whatever else we hold in our hands.
Let’s everyone make some noise! (Make noise, then gesture to stop.)
Roar, sea, and every creature in you; sing, earth, and all who live on you!
That means all of us here, so let’s everyone make some noise! (Make noise, then gesture to stop.)
For God loves us and does wonderful things: ________________ (briefly list the things you and the children shared before the prayer).
Amen.

Thank the children for praying with you, and collect all the instruments.

Sermon seeds
The context of exile underscored at the end of Psalm 89 (see section “Background to the Psalms”) raised basic questions: Where do we go from here? Where does hope lie? Psalm 98 signals the need for a “new song” (note parallel in Isaiah 42:10). Rather than celebrate the victory of a human king (Psalm 18), Psalm 98 employs language from the exodus (right hand; holy arm; in sight of the nations) to extol the Lord. The psalmist also redeploy the two key words from Psalm 89 to speak of God’s commitment to the people rather than the king: “He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel” (v. 3).

Psalm 98 invites the people and all of creation to celebrate the Lord as king, including God’s role as judge; God’s character ensures this judgment is just and upright. Where we often link “righteousness” with personal piety and “justice” with social action, the term tsedeq breaks down this dualistic perspective (neither translation encompasses its full meaning).

Similarly, “victory” (yeshuah; vv. 1, 2, 3) refuses to split social and spiritual realities, and can also be translated as “salvation” or “deliverance.” Was the exodus liberation from physical slavery? Yes! Was it freedom from spiritual bondage? Of course! (Note: the name Jesus also derives from this term!)
Faced with the profound crisis and disorientation of exile, Psalm 98 calls the community to reclaim a key perspective that sees the Lord as the king who delivers/saves Israel and sits as a trustworthy judge. As Moses admonished the people while Pharaoh’s army charged against them: “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance [yeshuah] that the Lord will accomplish for you today. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still” (Exodus 14:13-14).

The temptation to adopt a nationalistic theology, trust in military might, and give ultimate allegiance to a human leader has never gone away. But hope in the Psalms—and today—lies in our trust in the Lord, our refuge and our king.

**Sending ritual**

Instead of printing out or projecting this litany, ask the congregation to repeat each line after you with the same rhythm and including the claps. Say the words rhythmically, getting louder with each verse.

One: Sing praise (clap once)

Many: Sing praise (clap)

One: Sing justice (clap, clap, slowly and deliberately)

Many: Sing justice (clap, clap)

One: Sing vic-to-ry (clap, clap-clap, the second and third claps quick and closer together)

Many: Sing vic-to-ry (clap, clap-clap)

One: Clap praise (clap once)

Many: Clap praise (clap)

One: Clap justice (clap, clap, slowly and deliberately)

Many: Clap justice (clap, clap)

One: Clap vic-to-ry (clap, clap-clap, the second and third claps quick and closer together)

Many: Clap vic-to-ry (clap, clap-clap)

One: Shout praise (clap once)

Many: Shout praise (clap)

One: Shout justice (clap, clap, slowly and deliberately)

Many: Shout justice (clap, clap)

One: Shout vic-to-ry (clap, clap-clap, the second and third claps quick and closer together)

Many: Shout vic-to-ry (clap, clap-clap)

**Benediction**

And now as we have clapped and shouted together, may we leave this place to live out God’s praise and justice and victory. May we move forward in faith, hope, and love, with Jesus as our guide and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Amen.
How do we show love and compassion in the face of growing political division and conspiracy thinking? Understanding how very strong attitudes work in our lives is as important for helping others as is understanding the beliefs themselves.

**ATTITUDES AND ATTITUDE CRYSTALLIZATION**

Beliefs are ideas that a person trusts to be true. Attitudes, on the other hand, are the beliefs together with the feelings we hold about those ideas. Attitudes can range from being fairly neutral, like preferences for one soda or another, to being very strong and cherished, as with beliefs about faith or politics. Beliefs and cherished values are a good and important part of faith, as Scripture affirms. When religious beliefs are strengthened by feelings such as love, joy, peace, and other fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), a Christlike attitude bears witness to God’s life-giving presence in the world.

Jesus showed a particular attitude—beliefs together with feelings—when he was moved with compassion. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is moved from deep within to heal the sick, feed the crowds, and even raise the dead. His belief in restoration and wholeness, together with his compassion, led him to respond with action.

Like Jesus, people base their actions on attitudes and beliefs. Very strong political beliefs and conspiracy thinking are also based in attitudes and are made stronger by them. You may have noticed that people’s cherished beliefs and attitudes are linked together, like super highways. The close relationship between attitudes makes them much stronger and also harder to change. Sometimes an attitude becomes so strong that it becomes rigid and does not respond to important new information. This is known as “crystallization.”

Imagine you always took the same route home from work but one day encountered a “Road Closed” sign and a sign reading “Detour.” Crystallization is a bit like ignoring the road signs and taking the old route despite the signs and flashing lights.

God continually seeks to renew and transform humankind in life-giving ways. When our attitudes become crystallized, we may be closing ourselves to the movement of God’s Spirit. Attitude crystallization can block us from being transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2).

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Strong attitudes are different from crystallized attitudes. When a person’s attitudes are crystallized, the person may respond to information that doesn’t match those attitudes in the following ways:

- The information is seen as not accurate.
- The source is seen as not credible.
- The information is seen as biased against the person’s attitude, even when the information is presented in a neutral way.
- The person may feel attacked by the information.
- The person’s attitude may be strengthened, rather than softened or changed, by information that challenges the person’s beliefs.

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WHO IS VULNERABLE TO ATTITUDE CRYSTALLIZATION?
A number of factors tend to make it more likely that a strong attitude will shift into a crystalized one. Here are a few:

- When the belief is linked to a cherished value, like stability in the face of fear of a changing society
- Holding a lot of knowledge about the attitude (both factual and false information contribute to crystalized strong attitudes)
- Spending a great deal of time thinking about the attitude or belief
- Spending a great deal of time with people who share the same or similar beliefs

HOW TO HELP
Crystalized attitudes related to political beliefs are very hard to change, and our efforts to change people’s minds can make matters worse by alienating them or leading to defensiveness.

What to do now:

- Strengthen connection: Avoid trying to challenge or change the problematic belief. Instead, connect in an area of shared values, like love or community.
- Cultivate loving compassion by understanding that anyone can develop very crystalized attitudes that create barriers to connection.
- Understand that it is very difficult to recognize when our own attitudes are creating barriers to connection or are the source of mistakes in our judgment.
- Understand that while conspiracy theories and political polarization are hurtful, they are often grounded in fears, a desire for justice, or even worry for others. Connect to these life-affirming beliefs and values.
- Encourage others to give time and energy to local actionable efforts rather than to online research and private worry.
- Nurture Christlike attitudes such as humility and the fruits of the Spirit. In Philippians 2:5-8, Paul calls for Jesus-followers to take on an attitude like that of Jesus, serving and caring for others instead of being preoccupied with self-preservation.

What to do in the long term:

- Make connection and inclusion your priority. Remember that being deeply steeped in conspiracy thinking is time-consuming and isolating. Outreach to parishioners and family members who are apt to otherwise spend a great deal of time on the Internet or other media is important. Identify avenues to value and highlight their areas of knowledge and skills so that you can tap into their desire to contribute to a better world.
- Emphasize a culture of love of people and community over political views. Help generate a community that welcomes all people. Remember that Jesus welcomed people who held different views from his, sharing fellowship by eating in their homes and showing them love and compassion.
- Highlight the importance of mental health. Anecdotal evidence suggests that conspiracy thinking, polarized attitudes, and their consequences may have a two-way relationship with mental health. These beliefs seem to attract those who are more likely to feel anxious and depressed. Endorsing these views seems to also create depression and anxiety (or make them worse). Help parishioners find skilled mental health services when they become isolated, depressed, or anxious, and cultivate a culture of understanding and acceptance of mental health needs.

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Cultivating Awareness as We Come Back Together

Laura Funk

We are emerging from a major global event. What a range of thoughts and feelings we are all going through! As we reconnect in person, cultivate awareness in several areas:

PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES
Some people are huggers, while others might be reticent to touch (especially after this year!). Some are introverts and need time to process, while others are bursting at the seams for big parties.

• Always ask for and wait to receive consent before initiating physical touch.
• Be gentle. Remember that the trauma of the pandemic affected us all in different ways. Healing will take time and will look different for each of us.
• Let the other person lead. Look for clues that can help you pick up on what a person needs to talk about and what the person really doesn’t want to talk about.
• Ask invitational questions like “How can I connect with you and support you as you go through this?” Then follow through! Imitate Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35): ask simple, gentle questions (“What things?”) and listen as people talk.

RELATIONAL CIRCUITS
God created humans as relational beings. God also wired us for survival. When we feel threatened or overwhelmed, we can switch from relational mode to survival mode. Think of a person who is drowning—because a drowning person might use a rescuer as a flotation device, lifeguards never swim out to a drowning person without also bringing a flotation device.

• Make sure you are not in survival mode when you approach someone to offer care. Ask yourself, “Do I see this person as a child of God or as a resource to be used?” If you struggle to see the person as a child of God, one way to reorient your circuits is to focus on gratitude. What can you be grateful for?
• Cultivate personal relationships outside your work environment where you can find emotional support. Do not lean on the people you care for in order to meet your own relational needs.
• If you feel as if you are drowning, take a break! Call a friend or mentor. Take some time to pray.

THEOLOGY
How do your beliefs about death/mental health/divorce/God affect how you interact with others? Examine your own fears and beliefs before teaching them to others. What do you believe about God’s role in this pandemic? Did God send this to punish an errant humanity, or does God walk alongside us in the mystery of pain and suffering?

• Take some time to journal and reflect on what you believe. How do those beliefs line up with the loving character of Jesus found in Scripture?
• How will those beliefs help your community heal from the pain and anxiety of this past season?
• Connect with other spiritual leaders to talk about how each of you views God’s role in the pandemic. Listen with love. Learn together.

SPIRITUALITY
Jesus sometimes withdrew to pray alone (John 6:15). At other times, he drew his inner circle in close (Mark 9:2).

• Spend some time reflecting, either with others or in your journal, about how you feel about this pandemic and all that it has brought up for you.
• What do you need in order to walk toward deeper wholeness? Consider spending time talking with a counselor, a spiritual director, or a wise friend.

• Cultivate spiritual practices that feed your spirit so that you have something to give others.

COMMUNITY GRIEF
People need places and rituals for lament, to acknowledge the loved ones, opportunities, and milestones lost. Grief may be complex, and may include a range of emotions: relief, guilt, shame, gratitude, anger, joy, remorse, pain, bewilderment. Welcome them all. All emotions are gifts from God. Remind people that Jesus experienced them all, too.

• Provide rituals/services/symbolic actions to help people process the losses. Invite people to bring symbols of their losses. Display them with compassion.

• Invite people to write down losses and offer them to God in a ritual involving fire, water, or both.

• Have a box of tissues handy. They communicate, “Your tears are welcome here.”

• Meditate on verses in Scripture that demonstrate the range of human emotions we can see in Jesus and express in prayer, such as Matthew 21:12-17; John 11:35; Luke 19:41; Ephesians 4:26; Psalms 27, 56, 62, 147.

JUSTICE ISSUES
Tough issues we face as a society—such as racism, sexism, and classism—were very present in the public sphere over the last year and a half.

• Pay attention to those in your congregation who are experiencing the impact of these issues.

• Inform yourself and offer support where you can. Don’t expect the people who are suffering to inform you.

FURTHER RESOURCES
This book leads you through important recognition of and resources for working with complex emotions. Greenspan’s website (https://MiriamGreenspan.com) is full of good resources for emotional healing.

Dr. Karl Lehman (https://KCLehman.com)
Lehman is a Christian, psychiatrist, and leader in the field of faith-based emotional healing. He and his wife Charlotte Lehman, MDiv, along with others, created a website provide helpful resources for Christians working in the area of emotional healing and for those to whom they minister.

A free guided meditation focused on healing from the stress and other effects of the pandemic.

Excellent resources for those wishing to create new perspectives that involve holistic approaches to liturgy.

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Strategies for Pastoral Resilience

Sarah Ann Bixler and Hyacinth Stevens

Faith leaders sometimes reach a point of feeling that their energy is burning out. Their sense of connection to God, themselves, and others is waning. We might imagine Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome in this position in Mark 16, when they go to visit Jesus’ burial site. Were they depleted of energy, perhaps feeling hopeless, disconnected from themselves or God? Yet in the midst of this, they did the one thing they knew to do—enact the spiritual practice of anointing Jesus’ body. And as they were faithful in this practice, they found Jesus waiting there to meet them.

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Burnout occurs when people experience chronic emotional and physical exhaustion, plus a growing sense of depersonalization in their work—feeling distanced from themselves and those they minister to. Pastors experiencing burnout have reduced work effectiveness, difficulty making decisions, decreased creativity, and more difficulty adjusting to changes. Over time, burnout can have serious physical and psychological effects.

When we are in the midst of a crisis, when we are stretched to our emotional, psychological, and spiritual limits, we can easily become fatigued and overwhelmed and feel burned out. Pastors are already more susceptible than the general population to burnout because of being in a caregiving profession. If not addressed, burnout can lead to more serious reactions that jeopardize pastors’ long-term health and wholeness.

Studies suggest that spending five minutes a day in a contemplative spiritual practice can help resist burnout and build resilience.

RESILIENCE

To be resilient implies not only surviving and coping but thriving in times of adversity. It involves maintaining one’s ability to live with hope and joy. Resilience also means to bend; it is an engineering term. It is rooted not in a previously known strength but rather in a sustaining grace that draws us into nimbleness amid adversity without breaking. The circumstances surrounding and testing our resilience may alter us and create a pathway for transformed living and thinking. We are not deformed by our experiences but instead are transformed.

The season in our life that requires resilience can also be identified as “journey space” traveling into the unknown.

- Consider creating some personal journey questions as you navigate your experience, such as, Where is the hope? What has become clear? What is not clear? What is the path forward?
- An aspect of thriving in adversity is trusting God in our challenge (Isaiah 43:19); the parts of us that are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14) are ignited, and our capacity is expanded to continue in purpose, practice, and destiny despite difficulties.

According to clinical psychologist Karen Carr, personal resilience is “staying fixed on a higher purpose, motivated by the love of God, our neighbor and the world, and supported by friends. Strength is built when we believe and receive God’s unconditional love deeply and [as well as God’s] promise never to abandon us as we day by day follow Jesus, listening to Him even as the Holy Spirit Comforts, Counsels, and Guides.”

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• **Joining or starting a care network with ministerial colleagues** can be helpful. During times of gathering, invite people to share personal best practices that support emotional resiliency.

  Using resources like the Spiritual Resilience Checklist from *Trauma and Resilience: A Handbook* (Condeo Press, 2012; available online at www.TraumaResilience.com) is an excellent way for ministerial colleagues to support each other.

• **A body scan** is a five-minute spiritual practice that can help you build resilience and resist burnout. Begin with slow, deep breaths that remind you of the sustaining breath of God. Focus your attention on each part of your body, one at a time, moving from toes to head and back down again. Close your practice by bringing your attention back to your breath, releasing any tension you noticed in your body and giving thanks for God’s presence around and within you.

  As we pay attention to our bodies, we may notice tension or that we are breathing in quick or irregular patterns. Another strategy for resilience is to calm and relax our bodies and minds by taking control over our breathing until our exhales are longer than our inhales. Try breathing out for five seconds and in for three. This literally calms our sympathetic nervous system, which is aroused in states of effort and stress.

Renewal is possible as we are faithful to those spiritual practices that anchor us. Spiritual practices can help us build resilience that carries us through times of crisis and fear.

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