



General Assembly  
**Preaching Resource**



 **BEYOND**

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**57 2025 General Assembly**



Ephesians 3:20-21,  
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1 Corinthians 1:25-27 (28-30),  
Isaiah 55:8-9,  
Hebrews 8:5-7,  
and Luke 4:16-21

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Resource

# Introduction

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## **Beyond: A resource for Disciples congregations preparing for General Assembly 2025**

When the General Assembly convenes in Memphis in July 2025, Disciples from around the world will gather to worship, learn, and work together. Guiding our time together will be the theme “Beyond,” inspired by Ephesians 3:20-21:

*“Now to the one who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work within us, to them be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen!”*

In inviting the church to the General Assembly, First Vice Moderator Liza Miranda said, “these verses invite us to step beyond our comfort zones, beyond our limitations, and into the vast expanse of God’s infinite power and love which is at work in us.”

This congregational resource has been designed to help you and your congregation prepare for General Assembly by exploring this and other scripture passages through Bible study, preaching, and worship.

***“This divine invitation calls us to go beyond what we can see, beyond what we can understand, and into the awe and wonder of God’s presence.”***

***- Liza Miranda***

## Resource

# Introduction

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### How to use this resource

Here you will find materials for use in a six-week sermon series, a small group Bible study, or both. This resource includes:

- Scriptural reflections on six texts related to the General Assembly theme
- Discussion questions for each text, for small groups or individual study
- Six weeks of sermon starters for preachers
- Liturgy suggestions for worship planners
- Poetry and visual art inspired by the texts
- Graphics for social media, worship slides, and bulletin covers

The materials are designed to be flexible so you can adapt them to work in your context.

The scriptural reflections and discussion questions could be used in a small group Bible Study or Sunday school class. They will also be helpful to preachers in sermon preparation.

The sermon starters will prompt preachers to apply the text to their own setting as well as connect to Disciples ministries beyond the local church. Liturgy resources, including prayers, calls to worship, and interactive worship ideas, will help worship planners engage the text and theme. Poetry and artwork, created by Disciples and inspired by the scripture texts, can be used for individual meditation or shared in worship. Included graphics can be used for publicity on social media, on slides in worship, or printed on bulletin covers.

These materials were created by a team of faithful, talented Disciples who sought to bring these texts to life. We pray that you and your congregation will find this resource helpful as you listen for God's call. Whether you will be present in Memphis, joining Assembly worship via livestream from home, or simply surrounding the church in prayer, you are invited to go beyond, into the presence of God.

# About the Contributors

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**Lizette Acosta** serves as the Director of the Center for Lifelong Learning at Brite Divinity School. According to her mother, Lizette expressed a desire to be a pastor at the young age of four. It would take 20 years for Lizette to finally begin pursuing that call. She completed dual bachelors in Philosophy and Religion, followed by a Master in Divinity. In 2019, she completed a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies. In 2008, Lizette had the honor of being ordained through the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). For 13 years, as the Director of the Latino Ministry Formation Program, Lizette served as a pastor, a mentor, and a teacher to her students. As a chaplain, she provided the ministry of presence to patients and staff. As a professor, she cares for both the mind and the heart/spirit of her students. Lizette also served as interim pastor in a Disciples congregation in Florida. She remains actively involved in teaching biblical studies in a Latinx setting as well.



**Ashley Dargai** is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). After teaching high school English for a number of years, Ashley enrolled in seminary and followed the call to Christian ministry. She has served in parish ministry and now serves full-time as a hospital chaplain at Cook Children's Medical Center in the oncology unit. Ashley resides in Texas (bless her heart), where she enjoys playing outside and reading with her spouse and two kids. She writes on Substack at Everything Is Crumbling about theology and existential dread. Check out her writing here: <https://ashleydargai.substack.com>

# About the Contributors



**Shannon W. Dycus** is a pastor and an educator who has spent her career working in learning communities and ministry settings. She leads the Student Life and DEI divisions as the Vice President for Student Affairs, Equity, and Belonging at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, VA. Before this role, she was co-pastor at First Mennonite Church in Indianapolis, IN. Before congregational, her ministry was in secondary teaching and after school program leadership. Shannon holds a degree in Secondary Education from Butler University, received her Master of Divinity from Christian Theological Seminary, and a Doctor of Ministry from United Theological Seminary pursuing the role of public theology in faith-based education. With passion for our sacred journeys, Shannon is also a trained spiritual director. Her writing can be found in the advent devotional *The Holy in the Night* and the women's bible study entitled *Every Time I Feel the Spirit*, both with Herald Press.



**Rae Karim** is a creative thought leader and visionary with a gift of words who pours lived experience into her work. This gift allows her to be an Amazon best-selling author, sought-after writer, poet & speaker. She is a two-time history maker, as the first woman & person of color to pastor non-Black churches in Indiana & Honolulu, HI. Rae is also a certified grief coach and founder of Good Grief Now!™ a national 501c3 and full-service grief support organization that helps grieverers successfully navigate their grief journey and helps grief supporters be effective and efficient in their efforts. In all she does, Rae empowers & transform lives, and is committed to ensuring she ignites courage on purpose for purpose.



**Héctor J. Hernández Marcial** has been doodling throughout his life. As a kid, he filled up any loose sheet of paper, countless sketch pads, and notebooks with all kinds of characters and illustrations, allowing him freedom in the realms of his imagination. He holds an associate degree in Graphic Arts and a bachelor's degree in communications with a minor in Visual Arts from universities in Puerto Rico. His work included developing illustrations and designs for Marvel Comics, Disney, Lego, Graceland, and Universal Studios. In addition, his artwork exploring the broken United States immigration system has been featured in art exhibitions. Héctor also serves as Director of Community Engagement for the 6 National Benevolent Association of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

# About the Contributors



**Bekah Krevens** began serving as the Senior Pastor of Foothills in January 2015. Originally from the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex, she left Texas to study at Bethany College and returned for her Master of Divinity at Brite Divinity School. After ordination, she completed a certificate in Ecumenical Studies from Bossey Ecumenical Institute, a program of the World Council of Churches in Geneva Switzerland. Prior to moving to Phoenix, Bekah has served churches in Texas and Kentucky. Bekah and her husband Frank have three daughters, two in elementary school and one infant. In her free time she paints and enjoys spending time outdoors (when it's not too hot).



**RJ Robles** (they/he) is an Afro-Puerto Rican Disciples minister who enjoys supporting families and connecting people to mental health community-based resources while encouraging their recovery. RJ is the first ordained transgender Disciples minister in the region of Tennessee. They are a scholar, community organizer and a faith leader based in Nashville, TN. He currently serves as an Associate Minister at his home church New Covenant Christian Church.



**Eric C. Smith** is Associate Professor of Early Christian Texts and Traditions at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, where he also works with DOC students through the Disciples Seminary Foundation. He is the author of four books and several dozen articles and chapters, and writes about biblical interpretation weekly at [ericcsmith.substack.com](http://ericcsmith.substack.com).

# Ephesians 3:20-21

## Week 1

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Shannon W. Dycus

### **Focus Scripture:**

*Now to the one who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work within us, to them be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

### **Bible Reflection:**

Amen! This passage finds us at the end of a powerful prayer highlighting power, glory, and abundance across generations – at work within us. We've been, and likely voiced, prayers just like this. Ephesians 3 is an early Sunday morning prayer spoken by folks who walk a bumpy road and know the steadiness of God. It speaks of a God that moves in and through us even when we waver along that bumpy road. There is trust in the receiver of this prayer, that what we knowingly and unknowingly need, across people and time, will be heard and held. This is a prayer of leaders who wake with the sun and are relying on God to shepherd them and people they love with grace and love. These are the final words of an intimate conversation, the kind where we open our teary eyes and recognize we have not been alone. So again, we say Amen!

How do we arise from a prayer we are certain we have prayed in the fullness of God? What if God has heeded the depth of our needs? What if we are indeed filled with a power at work in us that has abundance and imagination? What do we do after an answered prayer?

In all the significant and important words of this chapter, I cling to the first word of verse 20 as the most powerful. Now. In the concluding words of this unbounded conversation that has traveled through generations, we hear this clear and specific temporal marker. This one word adds an important pivot acknowledging a readiness to live the hope of this prayer.





# Ephesians 3:20-21

## Week 1

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*Now* draws us in from what God has done for our ancestors and calls us to our presence to God today. *Now* is a statement of faith and belief about the power that is actively living within us. *Now* amplifies this benediction and affirms it as a clear call to action.

The beauty of this passage lies in this invitation to us – what if we acted like we have the power we pray for? Sometimes the familiarity of our spiritual practices, both personally and as congregations, makes our acts of faith routine and ordinary and we miss the power in them. If we linger in this invitation, we give ourselves permission to see beyond our regular expectations and welcome sacred imagination into our belief and actions. Like the voice of prayer in our passage, we are invited to receive the presence of God that is far more than we ordinarily anticipate.

As we consider our practices of faith, I believe we often miss opportunities to embody our words and our hopes. Our logical and spirited words don't always get to be lived out through our physical beings. I wonder how we might invite our bodies to respond to an Amen that we believed had power in it. Raising our hands or standing in belief, expressing laughter of joy or releasing tears of burden – these actions connect our prayers and our belief in *Now*. How do we act, with our spirits and our bodies, like believers who pray bold and answered prayers?

# Ephesians 3:20-21

## Week 1

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### ***Discussion Questions:***

1. Where can you affirm God's presence in your life - right now?
2. Consider God's "power at work within us" (v.20). What could this mean for you? Your congregation? Your community?
3. Sometimes there are real barriers to our prayers to God, and we faithfully continue to pray them. How do we live and pray holding both challenges and hope?
4. Lean into the prayer of Ephesians 3 and your presence to God. What words stand out for you and how you are aware of the Divine?
5. What is your prayer for the Church? Write, share, and pray it - personally or in community.
6. Alongside your prayers, what are other scriptures or prayers that help you carry hope in God's power in us?

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

# Ephesians 3:20-21

## Week 1

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*Ashley Dargai*

### ***Consider This:***

1. How does one balance faith that God will provide abundantly with the suffering present in the world without falling into a prosperity gospel faith?
2. What role does prayer play in a believer's faith?
3. What does it mean to live as if our prayers have been answered?

### ***Disciples at Work:***

#### Disciples Center for Public Witness

Disciples Center for Public Witness seeks to influence public policy advocacy among all people of faith through various avenues such as workshops, conferences, internships, internet advocacy, activism, and meetings with policy makers in order to help bring about justice in the world. As we focus on what it means to pray as if God will answer, we remember that often we ourselves are the answers to the prayers.

### ***In Your Own Context:***

Consider the type of prayers your congregation prays. Does your church lean heavily on prayers of supplication? Prayer of thanksgiving? Intercessory prayers? How does that shape your congregation's posture toward the work God is doing within you? What might it look like if you prioritized time to pray prayers of adoration and acknowledging the abundance already in the midst of you?

### ***For All Ages and Abilities:***

Children's Moment activity: Flashlight Faith

Items needed:

- Flashlight without batteries in it
- Batteries

Show the flashlight without batteries. Ask, "Is the flashlight most useful without batteries in it? Why not?"

Put batteries in the flashlight and turn it on.

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

# Ephesians 3:20-21

## Week 1

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### ***For All Ages and Abilities:***

Explain: We are like flashlights and faith is like batteries. It helps to turn the flashlight on and shine a light on things we couldn't see before. Sometimes, we just need help to see what God is doing, and faith helps us see. Talk about how this week's scripture invites us to consider what it means to trust God to do what God says. How would that change the way we see the world? Our lives? God's own self?

### ***Call to Worship:***

**One:** Now to God, whose power is at work within us now.

**All:** Now to God!

**One:** Now to God, who is able to accomplish abundantly more than we can imagine.

**All:** Now to God!

**One:** Now to God, we give the glory in the church and in Christ.

**All:** Now to God!

**One:** Now to God, now and forever.

**All:** Now to God! Amen.

### ***Prayer:***

Glorious God, we confess that we often pray prayers we don't really expect to be answered. We proclaim Your glory and power and yet we subsist on breadcrumbs, pretending we are content. But God, we ask for a faith of answered prayers. We pray for a faith that You really are more than we can imagine, for a faith that trusts You will provide in abundance all that we need. Help us to trust You now, here, today. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

# Ephesians 3:20-21

## Week 1

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***God is able!***

***Abundantly so.***

***God's got the ability to do more than can be imagined***

***How do we re-imagine our approach to God?***

***Approaching God with a humble heart.***

***Trusting that through their mighty power at work within us,  
God works within our people.***

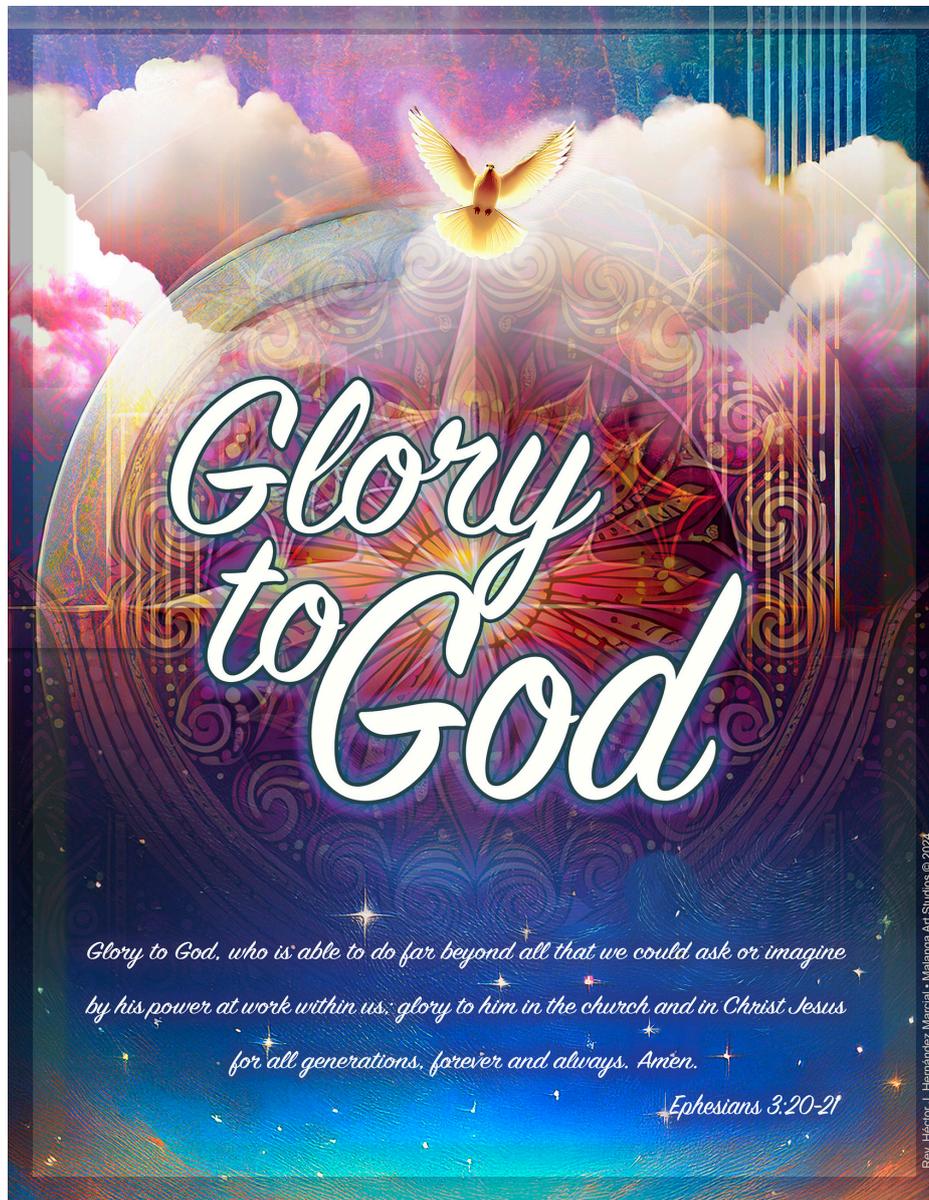
***May we trust in Christ Jesus throughout all generations.***

***Forever and ever more.***

***Amen. Amen. Amen.***

**Poetry by Rev. RJ Robles**





*Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine  
by his power at work within us: glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus  
for all generations, forever and always. Amen.*

*Ephesians 3:20-21*

Rev. Héctor J. Hernández Marcial • Malanga Art Studios © 2024

This digital artwork combines religious imagery and contemporary design elements to create an uplifting spiritual composition. The piece centers around the text "Glory to God" rendered in elegant white script, surrounded by an ornate circular mandala pattern featuring swirls and decorative elements. The background transitions from vibrant purples and pinks in the upper portion to serene blues at the bottom, creating a sense of heaven meeting earth. A glowing white dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, soars above the text against a backdrop of ethereal clouds. The artwork includes a biblical quote from Ephesians displayed in a flowing script, while scattered stars and light effects enhance the celestial atmosphere. The overall design combines modern digital art techniques with traditional religious symbolism to create a contemporary and timeless piece. The artist's use of color gradients, layered textures, and luminous effects helps convey a sense of divine presence and spiritual transcendence.

**Artist: Héctor J. Hernández Marcial**

# 1 Corinthians 1:25-27

## Week 2

Lizette Acosta

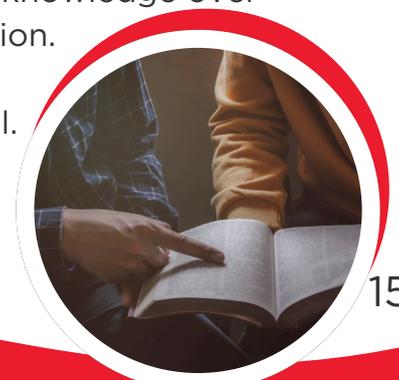
### **Focus Scripture:**

*For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong...*

### **Bible Reflection:**

Written to a church torn apart by divisions of every sort, First Corinthians addresses many of the tensions common in our congregations today. This portion in particular (vv. 25-27) is part of a greater section that introduces the letter to the Corinthians. In his commentary on this section, Richard Hays uses terms and phrases that indicate Paul's call to a radical change from the status quo, phrases such as turning our worldview upside down, experiencing "an epistemological revolution," "all human standards...are overturned," needing "a conversion of the imagination," and "overturning expectations." Paul is not simply suggesting a change, but a ground-shifting transformation that will spill into their core understanding of every aspect of life, including civic, relational, worship, social, spiritual, etc. Paul begins this process of deconstruction with their understanding of salvation, namely through the cross of Christ. This means of salvation Paul calls the foolishness of God.

In vv. 17-31, there is a concentrated use of the words wise/wisdom (13x) vs. fool/foolishness (6x). Paul develops the idea of God's foolishness by comparing it to human wisdom, not that God truly is foolish but that to the Corinthians, God's ways seem foolishness. The central point concerns the cross as God's means of salvation. The human tendency (not just in Corinth but in every place and throughout the ages) is to exalt power over weakness and knowledge over ignorance, which is why we insist on adding merit to salvation. That God would stoop so low as to display God's love for humanity through the weakness of the cross seems illogical.





# 1 Corinthians 1:25-27

## Week 2

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### ***Bible Reflection:***

Yet, with ultimate power, God chooses to humble Godself in Christ through the shameful death on a cross. The juxtaposition of God's power and the cross is what Paul describes as foolishness in the eyes of the Corinthians.

Paul insists that salvation is not by merit. The wise do not have greater access to salvation through their wisdom. The rich cannot purchase it. The strong cannot, by their strength, attain it. God's salvation was solely the work of Christ on the cross. How else would the Corinthians have known God's salvation? They were not exactly the model of power, nobility, and wisdom. But God's ways are not ours. God enacted this salvation through the most unlikely way so that no one can claim merit of any sort. If we are going to boast, we can only boast in God's amazing love!

If the God of ultimate power, wisdom, and strength enacted this salvation through the meekness and shame of the cross, then wisdom and knowledge have no role in the gift of salvation. The question then remains: how can anyone make claims on having the true wisdom or knowledge when God's ways seem like foolishness to us? How can we look down upon our siblings because they do not believe how we believe? Moreover, that God's display of love is through the cross has life-changing implications for how we live and relate to one another. This is the central idea behind Hays' "epistemological revolution," and is the shift to which Paul is calling the nascent church in Corinth. The call is to a deep love that is sacrificial, one that may even seem illogical. Paul is calling the church to set aside our differences and instead, be "knit together in the same mind and same purpose" (v. 10). It is not that we are to think the same; diversity, after all, is inherent in God's design of humanity and nature. Instead, Paul is calling us to have the same mind and purpose of God, whose strength, power, and wisdom are displayed on the cross of Christ.

# 1 Corinthians 1:25-27

## Week 2

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### Discussion Questions:

1. At the beginning of this section (v. 10) Paul makes an appeal to the Corinthian church. What three things does he urge the church to do?
2. Paul indicates that the Corinthians were quarreling about to whom each belonged (v. 11 and 12). What do you think this means? What might this “quarrel” look like today?
3. How might “eloquent wisdom” (v. 18; lit. “wisdom of words”) empty the cross of Christ of power?
4. In v. 19, Paul quotes Isaiah’s sobering warning to Israel (and to us) that God will destroy the wisdom of the wise. How do you see this idea evident in this section?
5. Consider the frequent use of wise/wisdom vs. fool/foolishness in vv. 17-31. How might you define wisdom and foolishness according to the section?
6. In what sense has God chosen what is foolish and weak to shame what is wise and strong?
7. Wisdom and knowledge were values of the highest regard in Corinth. If Paul were writing to today’s church to demonstrate God’s great reversal, what values might Paul seek to turn upside down?

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

# 1 Corinthians 1:25-27

## Week 2

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*Ashley Dargai*

### ***Consider This:***

1. Wisdom, knowledge, and strength were important values in Paul's culture. Consider your own context: what are the important values that God might be subverting? (e.g. individualism, capitalism, independence, etc.)
2. How is wisdom explored in other parts of scripture? In the New Testament? In the letter to the Corinthians? How might those explorations expand or challenge this text?

### ***Disciples at Work:***

#### Disciples Peace Fellowship

This Disciples ministry is dedicated to the Biblical principles of peace and justice, including the elimination of war by equipping individuals and congregations to pursue peace and justice work, connecting those already in the work of fighting injustice, and advocating for positive change in the world. This ministry employs peace interns who help provide education to church-related assemblies about peace and justice issues. Disciples Peace Fellowship is a member of the interfaith peace fellowship, Fellowship of Reconciliation USA. This ministry is the definition of God using the weak to shame the strong.

### ***In Your Own Context:***

Take a look at the important documents for congregational life: mission statement, yearly budget, and governance. What values stand out in where money and time are allocated? Whose voice is prioritized (for example, long-standing members or people without small children)? Take a few minutes to imagine what turning some of these values upside down would look like for your congregation. The point of this imagining exercise is not to upend everything about your congregation, but rather to create some imaginal space for what could be.

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

# 1 Corinthians 1:25-27

## Week 2

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### ***For All Ages and Abilities:***

Children's Moment/Reflection Activity: Drawing Upside Down

Items Needed:

- Enough paper for all participants to have a sheet
- Pencils
- Large or projected photo of a simple object upside down that can be covered/uncovered bit by bit

Show the picture of the simple object (example: upside down unicorn). Explain that we will be drawing the unicorn upside down, starting from the top section moving downward, focusing on small sections at a time. You can split the drawing into three sections. Explain that the purpose of drawing upside down is to help us see things as they really are and not just what we think it looks like. Drawing upside down makes us focus on every detail.

Begin with uncovering the first section at the top and instruct participants to only draw what they can see. Once everyone has a chance to draw that section, uncover the next section. Repeat once more for the third section.

Give participants a chance to show off their drawing and compare it to the original picture.

Explain that today's scripture is about how God turns everything on its head: using the foolish to shame the wise, the poor to shame the rich, the weak to shame the powerful. In a similar way to our drawing exercise, this turning upside down allows us to see the world in a completely different way.

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

# 1 Corinthians 1:25-27

## Week 2

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### ***Call to Worship:***

**One:** Where are the wise and the knowledgeable?

**All:** God chose what is foolish.

**One:** Where are the powerful and the strong?

**All:** God chose what is weak.

**One:** Where are the rich and the noble?

**All:** God chose what is low and despised.

**One:** How will we receive righteousness and redemption?

**All:** Through Christ Jesus, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

### ***Prayer:***

Foolish God, we ask for a conversion today and every day. When we decide to follow Jesus, we realize that it is not one moment of decision, but a lifetime of moments. May our hearts be open to a turning upside down of the world. May our imaginations be transformed to see your visions for the world. May we remember our baptism, that reminds us that all is being made new. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

# 1 Corinthians 1:25-27

## Week 2

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*Beyond what makes us think we know  
Beyond what makes us believe we can do  
Are the mysteries of God, revealed in ways that...  
sometimes leave us wondering  
sometimes leave us wandering for answers*

*Questioning the hows and whys of God's choices  
But it's not meant for our understanding  
It's meant for us to trust God's plan is always in order  
God always thinks bigger and goes farther in the Divine Strategy*

*Yes! Yes! God chose you and God chose me  
Regardless of what the world thought of it  
God chose you and God chose me  
Knowing we'd be good for the part  
Good for not simply playing the role  
But being the role,  
We...the ones who put the powerful to shame  
We...the ones who disconnect the lights of notoriety & acclaim  
We...the ones who remember God called and calls our names  
Not for us to boast in the Presence as if we made it on our own  
But to indeed boast about the Presence  
That transforms and renews  
That redeems and sanctifies  
That is and will always be...wiser.*

Poetry by Rae Karim



"God's Strength" is inspired by 1 Corinthians 1:25-27, which reminds us that God's wisdom often appears as weakness to the world, yet it is stronger than human strength. This painting depicts a dandelion pushing through a crack in concrete—a symbol of resilience, transformation, and God's power at work in unexpected places. Though fragile in appearance, the dandelion thrives where it seemingly shouldn't, just as God chooses what is weak to shame the strong.

**Artist: Bekah Krevens**

# Colossians 3:12-17

## Week 3

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*Eric Smith*

### **Focus Scripture:**

*Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

### **Bible Reflection:**

The people who coalesced into the movement that became our modern church did not agree on everything. They held diverse understandings of ecclesiology, they differed on theology, and they often disagreed on how religion ought to be lived in the world. They held sharply conflicting attitudes about the roles of women, the practice of slavery, and the status of Native peoples, just to name a few of the questions they argued over most fiercely. From our perspective in the 21st century, there are things we wish they had said or done differently, and we wish that we could rewrite some of the most shameful chapters. But one of the things that remains most inspiring about their lives, and the movement they have inspired, is their insight that unity, and therefore community, was and is at the heart of Christianity.

Colossians 3:12-17 speaks to the question of how to live in unity and how to live in community. Colossians was probably written during the second generation of Jesus-followers, in the generation after the first apostles, when the church began to settle into some of its long-term forms.





# Colossians 3:12-17

## Week 3

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The earliest church had been animated by the excitement of a new movement and apocalyptic expectations about Jesus' immanent return. By the latter half of the first century when Colossians was written, it was becoming clear that Jesus wasn't going to return immediately, and that the church would need to endure for a while. That meant investing in community, and it meant investing in unity—in the bonds that hold a people together and make them a distinctive presence in the world. The questions and concerns of Colossians, then, are not so different from the ones that preoccupied the earliest members of our movement, and they are not so different from the ones that preoccupy us in our own place and time.

How do we get along? How do we live together, even when we don't agree? How do we still be the church, when we have conflict or cause each other pain? What does reconciliation look like, and how do we get there? What does God have to do with the messy business of everyday life?

When you read Colossians 3:12-17, you can see those questions under the surface, giving urgency to the writer's words. But in that same passage, you can also begin to see the answers to those same questions—the way the author of Colossians wanted the church to go about the difficult work of unity and community.

In Colossians, unity and community do not come from believing the same things. Nowhere in this passage are the Colossian Christians commanded to be on the same page about everything—though they are commanded to “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom,” which suggests that all of us have things we can learn from each other. Instead of focusing on common belief, this passage focuses on communal practice, much in the same way that the early figures in our own movement did. “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,” it says, and “bear with one another...forgive each other.” As a way of summing things up, Colossians suggests that Christians “clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” It sounds simple, though it's harder to do in reality: the fastest way to unity and community is to practice love.



# Colossians 3:12-17

## Week 3

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If it worked for the early Christians in Colossae, it's probably a pretty good idea for us too: centering our communities of faith on practices of mutual respect, addressing of hurt and wrong, and being patient, kind, and forgiving toward each other. Maintaining unity is rarely easy and it's never automatic. Unity requires hard work and mutual respect. The good news is that the things that build strong unity and community are precisely the things that Jesus came teaching: forgiveness, compassion, kindness, and above all love. The author of Colossians knew that, and the church in Colossae did too, just like we know it today. All that we sometimes need is a little reminder.

# Colossians 3:12-17

## Week 3

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### Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the most difficult things about being part of a community like a church?
2. What are some of the most satisfying things about being part of a community like a church?
3. Colossians uses the metaphor of “clothing” in 3:12 and 3:14. What kind of metaphor is that? How is the command to “clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” different from a command to always be compassionate, kind, humble, meek, and patient?
4. If you were going to make a covenant or a set of policies for your church or community based on this passage, what might be in it?
5. Notice how much this passage focuses on what we should do rather than what we should believe. What do practices like singing together (verse 3:16) contribute to our unity?
6. As we move into the future, what forms of unity and community are we being called to leave behind?
7. As we prepare for General Assembly, what new forms of unity and community are we being called into?

# Sermon Starter & Liturgy

## Colossians 3:12-17

# Week 3

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*Ashley Dargai*

### ***Consider This:***

1. The concepts of “unity” and “community” are often co-opted by groups to minimize diversity and dissension. How can this portion of the epistle to the Colossians avoid this co-opting and instead be guidelines for engaging diversity and dissension?
2. What are some concrete ways your congregation can practice love? Just as the letter to the Colossians was written to a specific church in a specific time and place, so is your sermon. What are some ways congregants can put these teachings into practice this week?

### ***Disciples at Work:***

#### Disciples LGBTQ+ Alliance

The Disciples LGBTQ+ Alliance seeks to transform the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) into a just and inclusive church that welcomes persons of all gender identities and expressions and sexual orientations into full life and leadership of the church through congregational trainings and events. Their vision is affirmation, love, and liberation for all. As we seek to live in community, we remember that true unity involves diversity of all kinds, beckoning us to open our arms wider and wider to understandings different than ours. Disciples LGBTQ+ Alliance reminds us of the persistence of that commitment and gives us a framework for how to do so with both ferocity and grace.

### ***In Your Own Context:***

Use the reflection activity (below) to construct your own rules for communal living for your congregation. In essence, write your own epistle! Invite members to read it aloud during a worship service or in small groups/Sunday School classes. What stands out? What themes repeat? What is surprising? What would you add?

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

# Colossians 3:12-17

## Week 3

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### ***For All Ages and Abilities:***

Reflection Activity: Collective Letter to the Church

Items Needed:

- Strips of paper (cut a 8.5x11 sheet of paper in 3 sections long-ways, make enough for each member to have 1-2)
- Writing utensils
- Writing prompt on the screen, on the strip of paper, or in the bulletin
- A place to put the strips when congregants finish (a bulletin board, a poster, etc.)

Talk about how Colossians is a letter written to a church in a specific time and place. The passage we read today is the best advice the author has for the church to live in a community that is devoted to Christ. Invite congregants to contribute to a church-wide letter with the same intent by submitting a sentence or two to the prompt.

Writing Prompt: If you had to give ONE piece of advice to our congregation, what would you say?

### ***Call to Worship:***

**One:** How do we live in this world where fear and hate preside?

**All:** We clothe ourselves with love and live in community.

**One:** How do we live as one body in a divided world?

**All:** We practice love and community.

**One:** How do we seek unity while honoring our differences?

**All:** We tend to one another in love and community.

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

# Colossians 3:12-17

## Week 3

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### *Prayer:*

Holy and Beloved God, if there is one priority in our lives, in Your word, and in this world, it must be one another. We are, as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” Our lives and histories are bound up in one another. And it is through loving and serving each other that we love and serve You. Bring to light the ties that bind today as we consider our community both in the particular and in the universal. In Christ’s name we pray, amen.

# Colossians 3:12-17

## Week 3

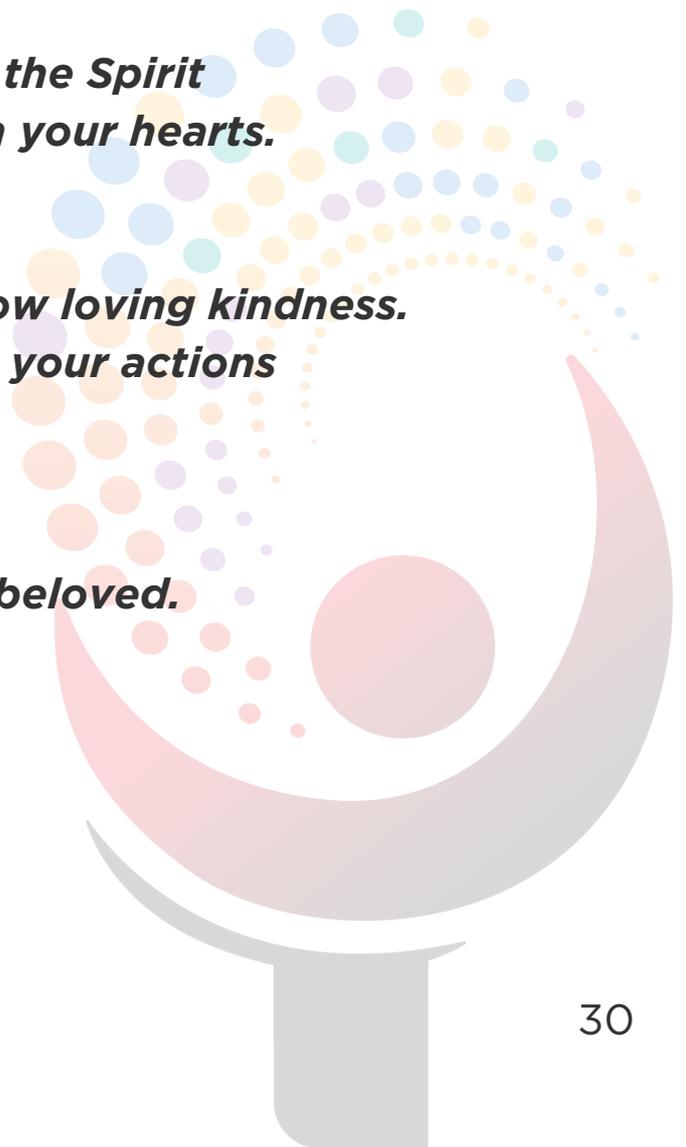
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*As God's chosen people,  
(W) holy and dearly beloved  
Clothe yourself with compassion, humility, and gentleness.  
Please forgive one another.  
Forgive as the Lord forgave you.  
God wants us together.  
Imperfect and perfect unity.*

*Let the message of Christ  
Be impressed by each of you.  
Through hymns and songs from the Spirit  
Singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.*

*Sing to the Lord with grace,  
Show mercy, show patience, show loving kindness.  
Both in your words and through your actions  
Giving always thanks to  
God the Father.  
And his (w)holy Son.  
Go forth and be (w)holy dearly beloved.*

Poetry by Rev. RJ Robles





This digital illustration explores the timeless virtues found in Colossians 3:12-17, bringing them into a contemporary light through vibrant, flowing forms and modern design elements. Two women stand in mirrored poses, their bodies adorned in harmonious teal and orange hues, jointly lifting stylized hearts against a backdrop of ethereal botanical elements. I sought to create a sense of connection and shared purpose through their positioning, while bold typography overlays emphasize the spiritual qualities of kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Through this piece, I wanted to bridge the ancient and the modern, making spiritual teachings accessible through contemporary artistic expression. The flowing dresses, serene expressions, and collaborative gestures symbolize how these virtues flow between and connect us all.

**Artist: Héctor J. Hernández Marcial**

# Isaiah 55:8-9

## Week 4

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Shannon W. Dycus

### **Focus Scripture:**

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

### **Bible Reflection:**

The prophet Isaiah offers this chapter with the heading of “An Invitation to Abundant Life.” Throughout its thirteen verses, we hear characteristic of God and our relationship with God, for us to be drawn in. He speaks of practical provisions of God like water and bread as well as intangible ones like the covenant God’s people make with God. Isaiah’s invitation includes references to listening and forgiveness – other key elements in sacred relationship. To the people of the Hebrew scriptures and those who echoed this in the early church, this passage is a reminder of what we know of God.

Different from this known God, our passage of verses 8 and 9 reveal a different element of God shown through mystery, or things unknown. Separating our thoughts and ways from God introduces some uncertainty and elements of our relationship with God that we cannot predict or command. When considering this spectrum of knowing in our relationship with God, Father Richard Rohr says “The Bible, in its entirety, finds a fine balance between knowing and not-knowing, between using words and having humility about words. The ensuing Christian traditions have often not found that same balance. What I’ve called ‘Churchianity’ typically needs to speak with absolutes and certainties. It thinks it has the right and the obligation to make total truth-claims and feels very insecure when it cannot.”[1]

<sup>1</sup><https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-inadequacy-of-words-2021-01-31/>





# Isaiah 55:8-9

## Week 4

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While I believe there are many aspects of our lives that are unknown, or without clear answers or understandings, we don't spend much of our spiritual lives there. The prophet's invitation to consider mystery is not new - we are aware of the parts of our lives without clarity. We are invited, then, to bring the mystery in our lives in conversation with our faith. Where can we be more honest about the known and unknown parts of our lives? How do we navigate them in our personal and communal spirituality?

Growing up, a familiar song in our Disciples congregation was "Over My Head," one of the many songs that connected enslaved Americans with the presence of God through their lives of suffering. In church, we sang:

Over my head I hear music in the air.  
Over my head I hear music in the air.  
Over my head I hear music in the air;  
There must be a God somewhere!

In repetition, the word music would be replaced with singing, trouble, or glory. The lyrics of this song were adapted to this version during the Civil Rights movement by Bernice Reagan Johnson during a 1961 Georgia demonstration. She sang "Over my head, I hear freedom in the air." Before Johnson's version that continues in Black Church and advocacy traditions, the song was called "Up Above My Head... There's a Heaven Up There." A well-known version of this is recorded in 1947 by Rosetta Tharpe, a Black woman and an accomplished musician in the rock-n-roll and gospel genres.

Not only does this song weave together an affirmation of God's presence in an unknown space beyond our awareness, but the story of this song also narrates its importance. With people longing for safety and dignity on American plantations, protest sidewalks, or racialized music stages this melody of mystery insists that God is in relationship with us...in ways that are not our ways.

# Isaiah 55:8-9

## Week 4

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### Discussion Questions:

1. In reflection, what is an example of God's thoughts or ways that exceeded your imagination?
2. Isaiah 55 conveys relationship with God that is both comfortable and uncomfortable while referring to this chapter as an invitation to abundance. Are there experiences in your faith story where growth or abundance were also uncomfortable?
3. Use a digital resource to find either song "Up Over My Head" or "Over My Head" for listening. How are you welcomed into mystery from these songs?
4. Global movements have often relied on advocating for change that is birthed from faithful imaginations but practically unseen. What examples come to mind when you consider these movements?
5. What are other songs and prayers that affirm God's presence during seasons of mystery for you?
6. When trying to overcome logical challenges, the arts like music, dance, theater or visual arts bridge our understandings in different ways. Have arts bridged mystery in your journey? How might this be incorporated in your congregational sharing?

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

Isaiah 55:8-9

# Week 4

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*Ashley Dargai*

## ***Consider This:***

1. As preachers, we are tasked with bringing the good news, which often feels like having an answer to life's questions. With this week's text, consider the questions that haunt you. Invite your own uncertainty into the sermon.
2. Consider presenting a few different theological models as a way of illustrating how difficult it is to truly talk about God. You can start with metaphors presented in Scripture and move on to Sallie McFague's book, *Models of God*, or John of the Cross's concept of "Nada", or Paul Tillich's "Ground of Being."

## ***Disciples at Work:***

### Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry

Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry seeks to collaborate with ecumenical and interfaith partners to create a more just and peaceful world through building community across religious and ecumenical traditions and seeking peace in community, in marketplace, among peoples, and with the earth. This mission grows out of the Disciples' commitment to unity at God's Table by recognizing that those around the Table are many and diverse, bringing their own distinct understandings of God and the world. As we explore the mystery of God, we remember that our Disciples' vision of God is just one perspective (and a diverse perspective within our own denomination!).

## ***In Your Own Context:***

Invite congregants to share their big questions about God, the church, faith, etc. Set up a question box and explore common themes together. You may not come up with any answers, but you will find community in the questions.

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

Isaiah 55:8-9

# Week 4

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## ***For All Ages and Abilities:***

Reflection Activity: God of Mystery Group Collage

Items Needed:

- Poster board(s) or butcher paper
- Deconstructed magazines
- Scissors
- Glue sticks

Discuss how this week's scripture reminds us that all of our descriptions and understandings of God are merely humanity's best guesses. Because scripture is humans' testimony of God, we are all helping each other understand the God of Mystery. Invite congregants to choose a magazine page and cut out an image or shape or color they feel helps describe the God of Mystery and then glue it on the poster.

When congregants leave worship, invite them to study the poster that they made together and consider what others are saying about who the God of Mystery is.

## ***Call to Worship:***

**One:** So says the Lord,

**All:** "My thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways."

**One:** Instead of worshiping certainty,

**All:** May we worship God.

**One:** Instead of trusting what is known,

**All:** May we embrace the mystery of God.

**One:** "My thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways."

**All:** So says the Lord.

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

Isaiah 55:8-9

# Week 4

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***Prayer:***

God of mystery, we know You only through metaphor. We lean on the descriptions wrought by our ancestors in faith when they said You were like a monarch, and a shepherd, and also a Lamb, and a parent, and a mother hen, but also a tabernacle, and a person, and a presence. Our language seems to be at once too much and not enough to describe You. O Indescribable God, creator and energizer of the cosmos and loving person closer to us than our own breath, may we stand in awe of the ways we cannot grasp You, and may we trust in the promise that You hold onto us. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

Isaiah 55:8-9

## Week 4

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*God's ways and thoughts are not like ours  
That's a reason to say hallelujah  
Especially when we start to think with our feelings  
Or move in our emotions  
To know that God has so much more in store  
Than what our minds can imagine  
To trust that the ways of God will lead to not only blessings for  
our hands to receive  
But additionally, blessings within of wisdom, strength and  
peace  
Those intangible necessities for maturing our souls and  
increasing our faith*

*God's ways and thoughts are not like ours  
That's a reason to say hallelujah  
Because God goes the extra mile to ensure us with holy  
assurance  
Of God's limitless capabilities  
Of prospered plans and ordered steps  
Of exceeding abundantly above realities*

*God's ways and thoughts are not like ours  
That's a reason to say hallelujah  
God always knows what's next and what's best and what's for  
our good  
Let's keep leaning on and trusting in the One who'll never fail*

Poetry by Rae Karim



"The Heavens Are Higher" is inspired by Isaiah 55:8-9. Each church in the painting represents a season of my faith journey—places where I have learned, grown, and encountered God in unique ways. Yet, the vast sky above serves as a reminder that God's wisdom and presence extend far beyond any single church or stage of faith. The six churches depicted include two from my childhood and youth—Northway Christian Church and First Christian Church of McKinney—one from my college years, Bethany Memorial Church, and three where I have served as a pastor—Irving North Christian Church, First Christian Church of Owensboro, and Foothills Christian Church. Between each church stands a plant native to its region: Live Oak, Sugar Maple, Cedar Elm, Sassafras, and Saguaro—each a rooted witness to God's presence in every chapter of the journey.

**Artist: Bekah Krevens**



# Hebrews 8:5-7

## Week 5

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Lizette Acosta

### **Focus Scripture:**

*They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one, just as Moses was warned when he was about to erect the tent. For, God said, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain." But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on the basis of better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.*

### **Bible Reflection:**

Cognitive dissonance is the conflict between what we believe to be true and what is true, the difference between expectations and reality. Cognitive dissonance is what we experience when our circumstances contradict what we anticipated. The community to which this document is addressed was experiencing cognitive dissonance. Written likely between 60-70 CE (a generation after the first believers), the book appropriately called the Letter to the Hebrews was written to address the concerns of Jewish Christians who were being persecuted for their belief in Jesus as Messiah. Adherence to Jewish Law and practices was critical, especially in the midst of conflict with the Roman Empire. Add to this reality the delayed return of Jesus, whom the early church expected to come right back.

And so, this community is experiencing a crisis of faith: the promised return of Christ has not happened and Jewish Christians are being persecuted. In the midst of this crisis, the principal temptation was to return to what they had known before (cf. Numbers 14:4). The author writes to assure this community that Jesus is the perfect culmination and fulfillment of all they had known. Jesus is higher than the angels, a greater prophet than Moses, a high priest from a different lineage (Melchizedek), the perfect tabernacle, the only sufficient sacrifice, the new covenant with better promises.





# Hebrews 8:5-7

## Week 5

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In this section (8:1-6), the author begins with a summary of what has preceded, namely, Jesus as a high priest. The author has spent substantial space in describing Jesus in this role (see, for example, 4:14, 6:19, 7:3, 24-27). In 8:1, the author adds a critical description: Jesus sits at the right side of the Majesty in the heavens. With this statement, the author conveys two significant truths about Jesus as high priest. First, that Jesus is seated at the right side of the Majesty indicates that Jesus is equal to this Majesty. Second, given that the high priest only sat down when his work was done, this statement indicates that Jesus's work has been completed. Jesus's work was not in the temple that Solomon built nor in the second Temple, but in the tabernacle that God Godself built in the heavens, the model of which was revealed to Moses to copy. To be sure, Jesus is not a priest according to Jewish Law since he was not a Levite. Thus, Jesus is a priest of a different sort.

Here's where the author is leading the readers: if Jesus dwelling place is in the heavens at the right hand of the Majesty; if Jesus is high priest, not by inheritance but because of his work; if Jesus's sacrifice is once and for all; and if Jesus's work has inaugurated a new covenant, then anything other than Jesus is but an imitation, a shadow of God's best. Despite how things might seem, it is always and only Jesus, who has already completed for humanity what no other human could do.

The author continues that argument through chapter 10, which ends with the anticipation of a call to endurance, a call to hoping against hope, as so many before had done. This is where the author has been guiding the readers, to endurance. When we experience cognitive dissonance, when what is contradicts what we hoped and believed should be, Jesus is still the source of our hope. Jesus is the sustainer of all things, and the image (or reflection) of God's glory (1:3). Yet Jesus fully understands our humanity. Therefore, when our circumstances seem hopeless, we must not abandon our faith but must believe in the one who is at once like us (2:17-18) and like God; the one who is both with us and above us. Jesus is still the originator and the completer (or the alpha and omega) of our faith (12:2). We do not run this race alone. So, let us stay the course.

# Hebrews 8:5-7

## Week 5

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### Discussion Questions:

1. This section begins with a phrase that indicates a summary of what has preceded, thus making a clear connection between ch. 7 and ch. 8. What is the central topic of that connection?
2. The author has been describing Jesus as a high priest since ch. 4. Based on the following passages, make a list of the characteristics we find about Jesus as high priest: 4:14, 6:19, 7:3, 24-27. Based on these characteristics, what is the general sense the author is seeking to convey about Jesus as a high priest?
3. In stating that Jesus “is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens,” what is the author implying about Jesus?
4. Why does the author indicate that if Jesus were on earth, he would not be a priest? (Hint: read v. 7:14.)
5. How does Exodus 25:40 (see also Acts 7:44) relate to this section, especially v. 5? How is this connection significant?
6. In v. 6, the author explains that Jesus has obtained (or attained) a more excellent ministry (or service; lit. leitourgia). How might you describe this excellent service?
7. What does it mean to be a covenantal people? How does this passage help you understand God’s covenant?
8. How does Jesus’s superiority, excellence, and perfection speak to you today?

# Sermon Starter & Liturgy

## Hebrews 8:5-7

# Week 5

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*Ashley Dargai*

### ***Consider This:***

1. Too often, texts like this one from Hebrews can morph into supersessionism—that somehow the Christian faith has completed or superseded the Jewish faith. How can you engage this text, meditating on the centrality of Jesus for Christians, while also respecting and honoring Judaism as its own equal and valid entity?
2. Consider the Biblical literacy of your congregation as you proceed. How familiar are they with the story of Moses and the covenant? How does worship differ from Moses' time to Jesus' time to our time?

### ***Disciples at Work:***

#### Proclamation Project

The Proclamation Project is an initiative from the Office of the General Minister and President that exists to equip and empower Disciples preachers to proclaim the good news. This initiative hosts online and in-person events for Disciples preachers throughout the year to discuss the changing landscape of congregations and help preachers imagine new ways of preaching. This project helps preachers and congregations alike dream of a different way of being, of engaging in worship, of engaging in community with one another.

### ***In Your Own Context:***

Hebrew 8:5 says, “They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one...” (NRSVUE). We can also assume that our own places of worship are a sketch and shadow of the coming reign of Christ. Invite congregants to dream a little—how do they imagine worship in the kingdom/kin-dom of God? In what ways are there areas for expansion beyond what we experience now?

# Sermon Starter & Liturgy

## Hebrews 8:5-7

# Week 5

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### ***For All Ages and Abilities:***

Sensory Activity: I Was Wrong

Items Needed:

- Big bowl of water
- Markers
- Dissolving paper cut into 4 pieces, enough for all congregants to have one piece

Explain that this week's scripture reminds us that humans have a long history of being so sure about things, particularly when it comes to God. Invite them to write on the dissolving paper something they have been wrong about. What is something they have believed about God, the church, people, or scripture that they now know was wrong (or not life-giving, liberating, or loving)? Once they write it, invite them to put the paper in the dissolving water and remember that God is always making us new.

### ***Call to Worship:***

**One:** We build our sanctuaries and our tables,

**All:** But they are merely a reflection of You.

**One:** We share our money and our time,

**All:** But we are merely emulating You.

**One:** We give our hearts and lives,

**All:** But we are merely following Your example.

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

Hebrews 8:5-7

# Week 5

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***Prayer:***

Most High God, in our shadowed understanding of You, we have held our theologies and grievances closely, believing them to bring us certainty, membership, and safety. We confess that there have been seasons in our life, perhaps even now, in which we have not seen You well. So today we unfurl our hands from around that which makes us feel safe and powerful and certain, and lay our palms open. We want to know You, God. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

# Hebrews 8:5-7

## Week 5

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*The intent of God all along.*

*To use rituals to symbolize his plan of salvation.*

*These rituals were shadows of the plan of God.*

*sacraments and ceremonies acting as a (w)holy picture.*

*And all that takes place in the holy realm.*

*The plan is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.*

*The Christian Church is not an earthly inheritance.*

*We are people with a permanent Tabernacle*

*in heaven and the eternal.*

*Where Jesus serves as*

*Our holy Father.*

Poetry by Rev. RJ Robles





The artwork illustrates the biblical passage from Hebrews 8:5-7, which speaks of the transition from the old covenant to the new. The contrasting colors of the hands - one rendered in earthier tones and the other in luminescent greens - suggest a duality or transformation. The white dove, a traditional symbol of the Holy Spirit, appears to emerge from where the hands nearly meet, its wings spread dramatically against the energetic background.

The artist employs a painterly digital style that gives the piece a fluid, almost mystical quality. The swirling background suggests both divine fire and cosmic energy. At the same time, the text is nestled within a softer, pink-tinted space that provides a moment of contemplative calm within the dynamic composition. The overall effect is one of spiritual awakening and divine connection, with the human gesture reaching upward, met by divine presence descending in the form of the dove.

**Artist: Héctor J. Hernández Marcial**

# Luke 4:16-21

## Week 6

Eric Smith

### **Focus Scripture:**

*When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to set free those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

*And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

### **Bible Reflection:**

What is church for?

It’s a question that a lot of us are asking these days. Many of us live in a time, a place, and a cultural context that no longer values church the way it once did, and many churches are facing questions about their purpose. In a world that’s obsessed with the newest thing, the flashiest thing, the cheapest thing, or the easiest thing, church can feel like an artifact from another era—something that’s no longer as useful or as valuable as it once was. And sometimes, the more a church tries to be those things that the culture values—new, flashy, cheap, easy—the less valuable or useful it feels.





# Luke 4:16-21

## Week 6

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Although we sometimes forget it, the gospels describe Jesus as a fully-formed person. He could be tired, hungry, irritated, or surprised. He could change his mind or get locked in cycles of debate with other people. And in this passage from the Gospel of Luke, we get a glimpse of a remarkable part of Jesus' personhood: Jesus had a past and a tradition. In one sense, this is obvious; Jesus was a part of a family, a people, and a nation. But we sometimes act as if Jesus was a timeless and universal person without the same kinds of attachments and peculiarities that all human beings have. In Luke 4:16, we are given three bits of information about Jesus that fill in our understanding of him as a person.

First, we are reminded that Jesus had been raised in Nazareth. He was young once, the same way all of us were young once, and his formative experiences all happened in a particular time and place, the same way ours did. Second, in that same verse, we are told that Jesus had a "custom," that he had a habit, of going to synagogue on the sabbath. It's funny to think about Jesus as someone with customs or habits. Did he bite his fingernails or always chew on the left side of his mouth? We don't know, but we do know that he went to synagogue on the sabbath. Finally, in 4:17, we learn that Jesus knew and valued a sacred text of his tradition (and ours): the prophet Isaiah. Rather than being an abstract person from nowhere with no history or past, Jesus appears in the Gospel of Luke as a regular person with roots in a place, a people, a community, and a faith.

That leads us back to that first question: What is church for? This passage from Luke shows us that Jesus' formative traditions and customs mattered to him, and that the rich context of his life came alongside him in important moments. The book of Isaiah was already centuries old by the time Jesus read it in the synagogue, but it provided him with new energy and new wisdom at a pivotal moment of his life. Standing in the synagogue he grew up attending, speaking to the people among which he became himself, Jesus' tradition gave him the words and the Spirit to describe his life's purpose. Jesus often talked about old and new things: new wine and old wineskins, new fabric and old garments, old bodies and new life. And he points out, elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke, that old wine is usually preferred to new.

# Luke 4:16-21

## Week 6

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It seems that Jesus thought a lot about the relationship between old things and new things, and in this moment in the synagogue at Nazareth, he found himself speaking the old words of an old prophet to describe a new moment in his own new life.

Whether church is popular or not, whether or not the world views our traditions as new or flashy or easy, there is wisdom and value in keeping and remembering the traditions that formed us. If you're reading these words, there's a good chance that you agree. You're probably a part of your faith community because there's something about its hundreds-of-years-old or thousands-of-years-old ideas that have helped you along your way, even if not all those ideas have made the journey with you. If, like Jesus, you ever find yourself in an important moment or a time of decision, notice how the Spirit arrives, taking the form of old things and the traditions that formed you, giving you words and wisdom to speak into a new moment.

# Luke 4:16-21

## Week 6

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### Discussion Questions:

1. What traditions, communities, places, and experiences have made you who you are today?
2. What is your relationship to those formative traditions, communities, places, and experiences? Have you always felt the same about them, or have you understood them differently in different times of your life?
3. What will people who are being formed in your church or community right now remember from their early days? What do you think they might take with them, what might they leave behind, and what wisdom and words might come to them in important moments in their lives?
4. Jesus finds meaning in the passage he read from Isaiah 61:1-2. What parts of your tradition have given you meaning?
5. Imagine the scene described in Luke 4:20: “And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” What meanings were held in those eyes? Were they excited, scandalized, astonished, afraid, sleepy, suspicious, or something else? Were the eyes rolling, shining, squinting, smiling, or narrowed? What might those different reactions tell us about how the same parts of tradition might mean different things to different people in the present?
6. Although we have no way to know for sure, what do you think Jesus remembered when he stepped into his hometown synagogue? Spend a few moments writing or imagining (if you’re reading by yourself) or discussing (if you’re reading in a group) what kinds of things Jesus might have been thinking in that moment. Was he noticing that the room was smaller than he remembered it as a child? Did it smell familiar in a comforting way? Was Jesus remembering the time someone snuck him a sweet treat when his parents weren’t looking, or the time he and a friend tried to make each other laugh by making faces when the attendant was turned the other way? What do those possible memories tell us about Jesus, and the ways our communities and our traditions form us into the people we become?

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

Luke 4:16-21

# Week 6

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*Ashley Dargai*

## **Consider This:**

1. There are multiple perspectives in this text: the Gospel writer's perspective, Jesus' perspective, those in the synagogue's perspective, the perspective of the Isaiah text. Consider approaching this story from multiple perspectives—how does the emphasis change as the focal point changes? Is there a perspective that feels more familiar? Or one that feels more uncomfortable?
2. Is there a Gospel story that is poignant for your congregation that may parallel the significance of this moment for Jesus and the synagogue? In other words, if there were one text to present to your church, what would it be? How does your text interact with the text Jesus reads?

## **Disciples at Work:**

### Disciples of Christ Historical Society

The Disciples of Christ Historical Society preserves and promotes the story of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) within the broader context of the Stone-Campbell movement by not only by celebrating the past, but also by telling its hard truths in order to shape a future that is faithful to God's dream for unity and justice. As we tell stories from Scripture as well as our own congregation, we also remember that our stories exist within the context of our denomination, and even more broadly, the church universal.

## **In Your Own Context:**

We are shaped not only by stories from scripture, but also by stories from within our own church community. What is a story that is told over and over again? What does that story illustrate about your congregation's values? If you're feeling brave, consider stories that not only highlight the strengths of your congregation, but also that highlight the growing edges.

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

Luke 4:16-21

# Week 6

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## ***For All Ages and Abilities:***

Children's Moment/Reflection Moment: Stories that Shape Us

Items Needed:

- None

Invite folks to share a story from the Bible that is meaningful to them in small groups or as a whole group. Ask why they think the story is meaningful to them? What does the story tell us about God and ourselves?

Share that Jesus grew up hearing stories from the Hebrew scriptures. If this was a passage from the scriptures that was important to Jesus, what does he seem to care about? What do we learn about the focus of his ministry? What does it say that we should care about?

## ***Call to Worship:***

**One:** Today, Christ comes to proclaim good news to the poor.

**All:** And release to the captives.

**One:** And revelation for those ready to receive.

**All:** And liberation to the oppressed.

**One:** And to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

**All:** Today, and every day, Christ comes to proclaim this good news.

Sermon Starter & Liturgy

Luke 4:16-21

# Week 6

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***Prayer:***

Liberating God, we live in a paradox of faith: in which we are being made new all the time and in which we move from a great ancestry of faith and stories. May we draw from what has been given to us in order to move forward. And may we be ready to drop everything at a moment's notice to follow the Spirit's movement. And as we engage in this dance of faith, may we trust in the good news proclaimed today and every day. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

Luke 4:16-21

## Week 6

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*Lord we need Your Spirit to renew us afresh  
Lord we need Your anointing to go with us  
We know that just like You, we too have been sent  
To teach and preach the good news, in hard times  
To pray and stand watch, even when the walls around us crumble  
To hold space and to make room, for all our sisters and brothers*

*We know that just like You, we too have a call  
To proclaim freedom and the favor of the Lord, when oppression  
reeks from every side  
To take the keys of the Kingdom and unleash the waves of healing  
and hope*

*We may not have a scroll, but we have words written on our  
hearts  
And with every breath and every blink  
We want to yield the best return on the investment of the life You  
give us daily  
We want to fulfill the assignment, so all eyes can always be fixed  
on You*

*Not to us, but to Your name be the glory  
You who is faithful to finish what You began in us,  
You who will help us until our work is done*

Poetry by Rae Karim



"Proclaim Good News" draws inspiration from Luke 4:16-20. Four vibrant ribbons emerge from the scroll, symbolizing Jesus' proclamation: 1) Preaching good news to the poor, 2) Proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, 3) Setting free the oppressed, and 4) Declaring the year of the Lord's favor.

**Artist: Bekah Krevens**



# GET READY TO GO BEYOND!

*Join us at General Assembly  
July 12-15, 2025, in Memphis, TN*

With the theme BEYOND, rooted in Ephesians 3:20-21, we'll unite for:

- Uplifting worship
- Dynamic workshops
- Thought-provoking Keynote Speakers
- Meaningful mission projects
- Fun and fellowship for all ages



*Register today!*

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