



Renewal

GOD'S STORY, OUR STORY

LENT FOR SMALL GROUPS



The Uniting Church in Australia
QUEENSLAND SYNOD

Lent Small Groups

RENEWAL: God's Story, Our Story

Join us for Lent 2025 as we reflect on God's ongoing story of renewal for the whole of creation, and how our story weaves and intertwines with God's story. Over the next few weeks, we will journey with people from past generations and hear stories of how God renewed their lives through transforming encounters, forgiveness, reconciliation, and faithfulness. As we hear and reflect on the stories of others, we will also reflect on how God is renewing our lives and our Church and what God is calling us to do in the renewal process.

Renewal: God's Story, Our Story

In everyday life, the word "RENEWAL" can cause dread — an insurance renewal will cost a lot of money, a passport or license renewal could mean lots of paperwork or time spent waiting in a line, and a lease renewal may raise the cost of living..

But the word RENEWAL can also bring a sense of hope, excitement, and thankfulness, especially when things change and improve.

Check out these definitions:

- “A process in which something improves or is improved after being in a bad condition” Cambridge Dictionary
- “Renewal of something lost, dead, or destroyed is the process of it growing again or being replaced.” Collins Dictionary
- “1. To make like new: restore to freshness, vigour, or perfection. 2. To make new spiritually.” Merriam-Webster

This Lent, we encourage you to take the time to reflect on where you have seen God's renewal in your life, and in the Church. What has been improved or restored? Where have you seen growth and freshness? Where have you seen God at work? As you look to the future, what areas of your life, or the Church, still need God's renewal? Let's share our stories, encourage and uplift each other, seek God, and together be part of God's renewal process here on Earth.

If you would like to, in the space below, you could draw or write what you think renewal is.

This material includes six Lent group studies and two Easter studies, which can be used individually or in a group. The QLD Synod Mission Accompanying team formulated this material. With special thanks to Katherine Ruhle, Scott Dowman, Jameson Ross, Paul Clark, Bruce Moore, Dominic Chan, Richard Moore, Jenny Potter and Josie Neuendorff.

Week One:

Assurance

Opening Discussion:

Can you think of a moment when someone assured you they would be there for you? What was that experience like?

Introduction:

God's story is one of forgiveness, hope, and faithfulness. Throughout the Bible, we constantly hear assurances that God is present, that God is at work, that God has a plan, and that God loves all people despite our failings.

What about our story? As we consider what renewal means for our Church and our lives, let's start by focusing on God's assurances to us. What has God already done in our lives, and where is God leading us?

Look up the meaning of the word 'assurance'.

- When has someone assured you about something?
- When have you assured someone or a group of people?
- What is something that happened in your past that gives you assurance for the future?

Read and Reflect:

Read each of the following bible readings, taking a moment after each reading to discuss it. You may use the questions below as a guide for that discussion.

- Deuteronomy 26:1-11
- Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
- Romans 10:8b-13
- Luke 4:1-13

Discussion Questions:

- What stood out to you in this passage?
- How does this passage contribute to your understanding of God's renewal?
- In what ways does this passage offer hope?
- What advice does this passage offer us around how we are called to live?

Going Deeper:

Luke 4:1-13

- In this story, Jesus spends time in the wilderness and experiences a time of trial. What link do you see between the hope of God's assurances and the lonely experiences of struggle?
- When we experience times of trial, God's spirit remains with us, as it did for Jesus. How do we experience the Spirit's guidance in difficult times?
- Jesus faced many temptations; what temptations do you feel we as a church face today and how are we responding to those temptations?

Everyday Assurances

This week marks the beginning of Lent and the beginning of a new series – RENEWAL: God's Story, Our Story. Over seven weeks, we'll reflect on God's ongoing story of renewal for the whole of creation, and how our story weaves and intertwines with God's story. During this series, we'll journey with people from past generations and hear stories of how God renewed their lives through transforming encounters, forgiveness, reconciliation, and faithfulness. Along the way, we'll reflect on how God is renewing our lives, and our Church, and what God is calling us to do in the renewal process.

To start the series, we are going to focus on the word 'assurance'. I wonder what images, memories, thoughts, and feelings come to your mind when you hear the word 'assurance'.

As I think about assurance, I remember a time when someone spoke with assurance to me.

Twelve years ago, something strange happened to my knee which caused it to stop bending and left me with extreme pain. One day, after four weeks of hospital care, a surgeon walked into my room and told me very matter-of-factly that I had something called Complex Regional Pain Syndrome and that my knee problems were basically 'in my head'. The surgeon told me to go home and read about it and that there wasn't anything more he could do to help me. I was shocked! How could this extreme pain be in my head? How could my un-bendable knee be all in my head? How could there be so little hope?

Thankfully, I didn't have a chance to wallow in the news. As soon as the surgeon left, a physiotherapist who had been in the room spoke to me with assurance. She said

clearly, “Don’t go home and look up CRPS. You will only read about horror stories. You are young, you are fit, you are healthy, you are resilient. We can come up with a plan to support you so that you have positive outcomes.” She then gave me websites filled with proactive therapy ideas and good news stories, and she organised a plan of action for my recovery.

At that difficult time, I needed assurance. Assurance to know there was hope. Assurance to give me confidence to tackle the challenges ahead of me. Assurance to know that I wasn’t alone. And that assurance made a massive difference to my ‘knee’ journey and outcomes.

Throughout the Bible, and in this week’s lectionary readings, we hear many assurances that God is present, that God is at work, that God has a plan, and that God loves all people, despite our failings. These assurances can give us hope and confidence. These assurances let us know that we are not alone on the journey. And these assurances can motivate us as we think about what renewal means for our Church and our lives.

PS. Of course, I did look up CRPS and it was awful! Thankfully, the physiotherapist’s words of assurance meant more than the words on the CRPS webpages. And today, after lots of hard work, I’m climbing mountains, dancing, and living a pain-free life.

Wonder and Discuss:

- When has someone spoken to you with assurance? What difference did that make to your life?
- When have you spoken to someone, or a group of people, with assurance?
- Which of God’s assurances are most meaningful for you?
- What is something that happened in your past that gives you assurance for the future?
- As you think about the renewal of the Church, what assures you?

Prayer Opportunity:

Take some time to, as a group, pray a breathing prayer.

Become aware of your breathing. If you can, slow your breathing down and enjoy the feeling of breathing deeply. As you breathe in, reflect on God's assurances. As you breathe out, thank God.

Breathe in: God's love and mercy endures forever

Breathe out: Thank you, God

Breathe in: God heals

Breathe Out: Thank you, God

Breathe in: God saves

Breathe out: Thank you, God

Breathe in: God hears and answers prayers

Breathe out: Thank you, God

Breathe in: God is a refuge and a fortress

Breathe out: Thank you, God

Breathe in: God is faithful

Breathe out: Thank you, God

Breathe in: God protects

Breathe out: Thank you, God

An Alternative:

Take time to pray for the others in the group, offering each other assurance of God's love and the support of this community.

Week Two:

Transforming Encounters

Opening Discussion:

When you think about transformation...

- What toys come to mind?
- What animals come to mind?
- What experiences or stories come to mind?

Introduction:

God's story is one of encounters. God doesn't stay distant. God doesn't love people from afar. Throughout the Bible, we hear of many encounters between God and humans – life-changing moments that inspired confidence and helped people/groups transform and renew their behaviour and lives.

What about our story? As we consider what renewal means for our Church and our lives, let's reflect on the times when we've had transforming encounters with God or with other people. As we focus on renewal, who in your life or in your neighbourhood needs a transforming encounter with God today?

Look up the meaning of the word 'encounter'.

- Who have you encountered in your life?
- When have you encountered God?

Read and Reflect:

Read each of the following bible readings, taking a moment after each reading to discuss it. You may use the questions below as a guide for that discussion.

- Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
- Psalm 27
- Philippians 3:17-4:1
- Luke 9:28-36 (37-43a)

Discussion Questions:

- What stood out to you in this passage?
- In this passage, what ways do you see the impact of encountering God?
- What takeaway advice does this passage offer?

Going Deeper:
Luke 9:28-36

- This story is ultimately a story of transformation, which is, in essence, the core hope of the church – the transformation of people into disciples and the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God.
 - How do you think this shapes the life of the church?
 - How evident is this hope in how the local church you know lives?
 - What changes might we need to make to be more effective partners in bringing about this transformation?
- What opportunities do you see to transform your church and community?

Hope in the Longing

In 2003, my wife and I met Naomi (not her real name) at a 'safe house' in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai. The house was part of the first anti-human trafficking ministry set up in Thailand in 1989, called the New Life Centre. At the centre, we were working as English teachers. During this work, we had a transforming encounter with Naomi, a courageous and faithful young follower of Jesus who challenged us deeply about the type of Christians we aspired to be.

Naomi's story was tragic. She was trafficked from her village in a remote part of Myanmar as a 14-year-old. She grew up in a Christian family and was an active member of her local church. An intelligent girl, she had completed all the schooling available to her in her village. But one day, a man came to her community and promised her work as a domestic helper in Thailand. Poor, and with few opportunities, her family agreed to allow her to go. But when she arrived, she was enslaved. For two years, she rarely left the room where she was held captive. Despite her situation, she told us she never gave up. She prayed each day that God would rescue her and use her to help the other girls, some of whom were only 10 years old.

She said she never believed God was not hearing her prayers.

Not long after her 16th birthday a man entered her room. But instead of wanting to harm her, he wanted to talk with her. He was an undercover officer with the Thai Government's anti-trafficking squad. He was the answer to Naomi's prayers. After several meetings a rescue operation was launched, and 20 girls were rescued. But as the social workers entered the room where Naomi had been held captive nothing

could have prepared them for what they found. Written in pen on the wall of her room were the words from Psalm 27:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?
When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh,
When my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall.
Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear, though war break out
against me, even then I will be confident.*

Naomi told us she had memorised the psalm at Sunday School and as she endured the horror of human trafficking, it sustained her, even when she thought she couldn't go on.

This encounter impacted us greatly. We learnt that just because we are Christians, we are not immune from suffering. Her faithfulness, in the worst of situations, showed us that God listens to our prayers and rescues us from the evil in this world. In Jesus, there is always hope.

Wonder and Discuss:

- God often brings people into our lives that impact us deeply. Can you think of a transforming encounter you've had? What was the impact of this encounter?
- God also uses the Scriptures to create transforming encounters. Can you identify a Bible verse that has been transformative in your life?
- Missionary Amy Carmichael once said: "One can give without loving, but one cannot love without giving". Jesus' death on the cross is the ultimate expression of love. How can we express transformative love in our own communities?

Prayer Opportunity:

Using play dough, take some time to pray.

Hold and squish some playdough and reflect on the times when you may have felt like a blob in desperate need of transformation. Think about who else may feel this way and pray that they may have hope.

Then, make a shape that represents hope or transformation. What may God be saying to you as you transform the playdough?

An Alternative:

Take time to pray for the others in the group, focusing on transformation and hope.

Week Three:

Seeking God

Opening Discussion:

What are some things you have spent time looking for this past week?

Introduction:

God's story is one of being present with humans. Throughout the Bible, we hear of people searching for and drawing close to God and seeking God's comfort, wisdom, and guidance. We also hear of people seeking God when they are desperate – desperate for God's mercy, forgiveness, and protection. Many generations before us have known and shared their stories of God being present when they draw close to God.

What about our story? As we consider what renewal means for our Church and our lives, let's reflect on what it means to seek God in our everyday lives. What might God be saying to us as we seek God this Lent?

Look up the meaning of the word 'seek'.

- When have you sought after something?
- When have you desperately tried to find/seek an item/object?
- What does it mean for you to seek God?
- What have you learnt or discovered when you've had a time of seeking God?

Read and Reflect:

Read each of the following bible readings, taking a moment after each reading to discuss it. You may use the questions below as a guide for that discussion.

- Isaiah 55:1-9
- Psalm 63:1-8
- 1 Corinthians 10:1-13
- Luke 13:1-9

Discussion Questions:

- What stood out to you in this passage?
- What, for you, is the main point of this passage?
- How do you feel called to respond to this passage?

Going Deeper:
Luke 13:1-9

- In this story, Jesus is asked to speak about political matters of the time. His response was not against that of Pilate's oppressive rule. Instead, it focused on the people asking the question and a call for them to repent. It is often said that true change begins within. How do you understand the significance of repentance?
- What connection do you see between seeking God and repentance?

More than Hide and Seek

I grew up in an American Christian tradition that didn't observe the season of Lent. Now, it's a period of the Church's calendar that does play a role in my Christian imagination, but the general feeling I have when it rolls around each year is mostly one of conflict. I think there are a couple of reasons for this: First, Lent asks participation: will I or won't I engage intentionally with the traditional rituals of Lent (ash on my forehead, fasting, confession, etc.)? That's a question I find difficult to resolve. Secondly though, my uncertainty stems from the complicated nature of Christian existence, a point of emphasis for these days of preparation leading to Good Friday and Easter.

What is this complicated Christian existence? Well, it might be described in reference to the theme for this week, namely, Seeking God. On the one hand, we are encouraged in the Psalms to seek God. On the other hand, though, we are told in Romans chapter 3:10-11, for example, that *"There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding; there is no one who seeks God."* It can sometimes feel like we are encouraged to think about seeking God almost casually, as if we were playing a game of Hide and Seek. Only a little reflection, however, makes it clear that this isn't quite right; there are both similarities and differences. Part of our inability to find God in this way is simply that God is not an object in the same way that another player in the game of Hide and Seek is while in their hiding place.

Things are more complicated still, though. We can only seek to find the thing we are looking for, which is to say that we need to know the thing itself in order to set out to find it. In the case of seeking God then, we have the challenge of both knowing and not quite knowing who it is we seek. One more: in the case of God, we can become convinced that the idea of seeking God itself is something of a myth. If we

are in Christ, we could wonder, then isn't the God-shaped hole in all of us already filled or satisfied, leaving us with little to seek after? Isn't "seeking" God simply a creative way of talking about something already accomplished for us?

One of the gifts of Lent might be this tension-filled dynamic. This is a time in the Christian year to attend to the challenges of the Christian life, challenges brought about by our very human limitations - our sin, our distractions, and our exhaustion. With respect to the idea of seeking God, we are forced to wrestle with the fact that even though we want to settle down with God in a personal relationship, we must recognise that God is not simply to be found as is a player in Hide and Seek. St. Augustine in his Confessions, described God as requiring us to run after him as he runs just out of reach in front of us. This isn't, of course, because God doesn't want to be known by us or satisfy us in the way the Scriptures often describe, but because we are encouraged to embrace our incompleteness by leaning forward into the infinite grace and love of God.

It turns out that, in the light of the Lenten tensions I've wrestled with, words like, *"Seek me and you will find me if you seek me with all your heart,"* (Jeremiah 29:13) are not so straightforward. There is no obvious or simple method that can be recommended for seeking God. It really isn't Hide and Seek. Instead, in the messy and complicated stuff of life, we might bring ourselves to the God who is always close by, opening ourselves to God's presence in all our very human frailties.

Wonder and Discuss:

- What has your experience of Lent been like up to this point in your life?
- Do you find Christian life to be primarily simple or complicated?
- How does the notion that tension could be a gift of Lent strike you?
- In what ways are you currently seeking God? How do you know?

Prayer Opportunity:

Take some dry sponges and a water bowl to help lead the group in prayer.

- Give all group members a dry sponge and encourage them to reflect on the areas in their lives or the church where they may be thirsty for God.
- Allow them to soak the sponge in water and imagine God filling them and the church with life-giving water.
- As you squeeze out the water, thank God.

An Alternative:

Take time to pray for the others in the group, especially that they may have open minds to hear God words, open hearts to experience God's love and open hands to respond with compassion.

Week Four: Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Opening Discussion:

Many of us have people who were in our lives for a season, but for whatever reason, we don't see them as often. Can you share an experience of reconnecting with someone from a different season of your life? What was that like?

Introduction:

God's story is one of forgiveness and reconciliation. Throughout the Bible, we hear of many people/groups rejecting and ignoring God and God's ways. And yet, we also hear powerful stories of God forgiving and bringing reconciliation, with grace and mercy, and the new life that springs up afterwards.

What about our story? As we consider what renewal means for our Church and our lives, let's reflect on our own shortcomings and the times when we've experienced God's forgiveness and/or reconciliation. Let's also reflect on who we may need to seek reconciliation with before renewal can occur.

Look up the meanings of the words 'forgiveness' and 'reconciliation'.

- How are the words similar? How are they different?
- What do these words mean to you?
- As you look around your community and the world, who needs to be reconciled?

Read and Reflect:

Read each of the following bible readings, taking a moment after each reading to discuss it. You may use the questions below as a guide for that discussion.

- Joshua 5: 9-12
- Psalm 32
- 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
- Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Discussion Questions:

- What stood out to you in this passage?
- What does this passage reveal about who God is?
- In what ways does this passage invite us to respond to God?

Going Deeper:
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

- This story is often called The Parable of the Lost Son. But we could ask which one is lost. In what ways are both sons lost?
- Often, we relate to one character when we hear stories and see something of ourselves in them. I wonder which character you most strongly relate to at this stage of your life. What about the character do you connect with?
- This story is left without a clear and concise resolution. What do you think happens next?

What to do with Regret and Shame?

I was a good kid growing up. I had heard the stories of Jesus and prided myself on being someone who looked out for the outcast, the forgotten, and who followed the rules.

So, I'm pretty ashamed of this story.

In year 6 a new girl arrived at our school. She happened to have a big nose. For some reason everyone in my grade started to tease her. It probably wasn't *everyone*, but enough that somehow, I was drawn into this. I'm not sure why, but it seems that in that moment, I gave up good sense for a chance to be a part of the in-crowd, who were feeling big by making someone feel small.

I knew it was wrong, but it was just fun, wasn't it? It wasn't long before we heard that this girl wasn't coming back to school. We had made her life so miserable that she had to move to another school. I lived in Tenant Creek. A new school meant leaving town.

It suddenly hit me. I did that to her! I chased her from town. How would I like that to be done to me? I suddenly saw the hatred and venom in my heart, and it made me sick. I wanted to find this girl and say I was sorry. I wanted to hold her so she would know someone loved her. I was the good kid! I was the kid who knew enough about God to know that Jesus was the friend of the outcast, not the cause of their outcast. I cried and wished and prayed I could turn back time. But she was gone.

The only thing I could do was plead for God's forgiveness, but I had a dilemma. How could God forgive me, when this girl deserved justice? This girl deserved to see someone squirm and suffer for all that she had gone through. If God forgave me, she would never see justice done.

That's when I realised, someone did suffer; Jesus. Jesus could forgive me, because he had suffered and squirmed and been called names for all the pain I had caused. Justice could be done and be seen to be done, with forgiveness also given.

This realisation undid me. My sins were real, but so was God's forgiveness. The Easter story wasn't simply a fairy tale from the past, but a story about my future.

"In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us." 2 Corinthians 5:19

Wonder and Discuss:

- Imagine being the young man in the story of the prodigal son, who walked away from his Dad and then was welcomed back. How would you feel?
- Have you ever felt terrible because of how you treated someone? What did you do?
- Has someone ever forgiven you for something when they really didn't need to? How was that?
- As you look around your community, and the world, who needs to be reconciled? What part might you play in bringing reconciliation?

Prayer Opportunity:

As a group, watch the Dung Beetle Video and then individually pray, asking God for forgiveness for any 'dung' you might be carrying around.

The video can be accessed - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNjytm6oCcQ>

An Alternative:

Take time to pray for the others in the group, encouraging each other to seek God's forgiveness and to accept even when we feel we do not deserve it.

Week Five: Abundance

Opening Discussion:

What would you do if you won 5 million dollars tomorrow?

Introduction:

God's story is one of abundance. Throughout the Bible we constantly hear of God's abundant love and blessings undeservedly poured out on humans.

What about our story? As we consider what renewal means for our Church, and our lives, let's reflect on the times when we have been showered with God's abundance. What did this look or feel like? As we look to the future, who, in your life, or neighbourhood, is in desperate need of experiencing God's abundance? What role can you play in sharing God's abundance with them, or others?

Look up the meaning of the word 'abundance'.

- What does abundance mean, or look like, to you?
- When have you had an abundance of something?
- When has someone given to you abundantly?
- When have you, or your Church, given abundantly to someone?
- When has God showered you with abundance?

Read and Reflect:

Read each of the following bible readings, taking a moment after each reading to discuss it. You may use the questions below as a guide for that discussion.

- Isaiah 43:16-21
- Psalm 126
- Philippians 3:4b-14
- John 12:1-8

Discussion Questions:

- What stood out to you in this passage?
- In what ways does this passage show God's abundance?
- How might God be prompting you to respond to this passage?

Going Deeper:
John 12:1-8

- There is a connection between our understanding of God and who God calls us to be and service to others. We are called to engage in acts of service out of our faith. How do you see these connected in your life?
- What are some things that can block us or detour us from serving others? How might God help us to work through those blocks?

When was the last time you did something for someone else without any expectations of getting something back in return?

Have you ever received a gift and felt obligated to return the favour, or at least sent a thank-you note? Even the best-intentioned gifts can leave the other person with feelings of guilt.

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, we read from the Gospel according to John and hear the story of Jesus sharing a meal with his good friends (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus) and his disciples. In this story John tells us how Jesus came to Bethany and stayed at the home of Lazarus. This was not that long after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. So, of course, Jesus's friends are delighted to host him for dinner. Can you imagine how awkward the dinner must have been? Certainly, they are all overjoyed to have Lazarus back, but we should remember that he had been in a tomb just a few days before. Now he's with them at dinner! This is crazy and almost beyond belief.

Mary is filled with gratitude to have her brother back. She is indebted and loves Jesus so much that she must express it in some crazy way. So, she takes some perfume that she has had stashed away that was the most valuable thing she owned. Without any explanation, she uses it all to anoint the feet of Jesus with her hair. John tells us that its value is equal to a year's worth of wages. Everyone knew it had to be good because the whole house was filled with the beautiful fragrance.

This is a story of abundance. It is a bewildering, extravagant and crazy act of love. This was no ordinary gesture. It was a heartfelt, sacrificial, profound declaration of love and a deep act of gratitude.

When it comes to love, how much is too much? Should we draw lines or place limits on love? Everything we know from scripture assures us that, for God, there can be no measure of how much God loves us. Jesus' sacrifice of himself, which is foretold in this story of Mary's anointing, is the ultimate expression of such exuberant and extravagant love.

Mary offered up to Jesus all that she had and did not hold back even though she was subjected to criticism about her thoughtless waste of something so valuable.

How often do we hold back, measuring our giving in terms of what it will cost us rather than pouring out our best in faith and gratitude? Do we give of ourselves to God without restraint, all that we have and all that we are?

Abundance is not meant to be hoarded but shared. Every act of giving, whether big or small, mirrors the love and generosity of all that God gave up for us in the giving of his son Jesus. The apostle Paul wrote “that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love” (Rom 8:38-39). God’s desire for all of us is that we might know and experience his deep love for us, that we might be transformed and renewed in him.

As we take time out in prayer and reflection during this period of Lent and as we commence these 40 Days of Prayer in preparation for our 38th Synod Meeting it is my prayer that you will know, experience for yourself and be transformed by the extravagant love of God. May your life be renewed afresh by the Spirit and may our church experience reflect God’s unlimited love for all people.

I am getting a sense that God’s extravagant love might lead us to do something so unexpected, so out of the ordinary, that our friends, and yes even our neighbourhoods and community, will think we’ve gone crazy... crazy with love!

Wonder and Discuss:

- When was the last time you did something for someone else without any expectations of getting something back in return?
- How do you think you would have reacted if you’d witnessed Mary’s outpouring of abundance?
- “Abundance is not meant to be hoarded but shared.” When have you shared your abundance? When might you have hoarded your abundance?
- How have you experienced the extravagant love of God? How might you share that love with others in your neighbourhood and community?

Prayer Opportunity:

Watch the video “God of Abundance” by Kat Mills Music as a group. The song is available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEkFF9yPrQ>

Take time to pray about all the gifts God has given you and ask God how you can share them with others.

Week Six:

Readiness

Opening Discussion:

Would you describe yourself as someone who is always early or always late? What does it mean for you to be ready?

Introduction:

God's story is one of being ready to act. Throughout the Bible we hear of God's readiness to forgive, comfort, guide, protect, and transform. We also hear many stories of people being ready to follow God's instructions and plans, and make changes, no matter what the cost.

What about our story? As we consider what renewal means for our Church, and our lives, let's reflect on our readiness – our readiness to follow God, our readiness for change, our readiness to praise God, our readiness to bring comfort and healing to others, our readiness to step out of our comfort zones. What might we have to change now to be ready for what God is going to do in the future?

Look up the meaning of the word 'readiness'.

- How are you getting ready for Easter?
- What is something you like getting ready for?
- What is something you don't like getting ready for?
- What does it mean to be ready for God?
- What might you need to do to be ready for what God wants to do in your life, in your Church, and in your community?

Read and Reflect:

Read each of the following bible readings, taking a moment after each reading to discuss it. You may use the questions below as a guide for that discussion.

- Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
- Luke 19:28-40

Discussion Questions:

- What stood out to you in this passage?
- What hope do you think this passage offers?

Going Deeper:
Luke 19:28-40

- This story of Jesus entering Jerusalem focuses our attention on Jesus and his importance, but this event unfolds not only because of Jesus but because his disciples were faithful. Following instructions and doing their part, they were the ones who carried out the plan. How does this perspective help us understand our role as Jesus' followers?
- The disciples may not have understood entirely what was happening, but in the moment, captured by what they were experiencing, shouted out praise to Jesus. Cheering for Jesus as their King – not because of his power but the promise of peace. How does this perspective help us understand our role as Jesus' followers?

Are We Ready?

The question of readiness is present throughout our whole lives: it can be raised as we are (trying) to leave the house in the morning, before a presentation at work or school, or maybe it's the question that is asked before church on a Sunday.

When you hear the question "Are you ready?" are you the kind of person who will usually say: "Yes!" or "Not yet"?

Being ready can be about our Skills, our Supplies, and our Spirit.

We can be ready by having the right Skills.

If you're ready for the pool then you usually want to be able to swim.

If you're ready to present then you want to speak clearly.

If you're ready to write a reflection then you want to be able to proofread.¹

As the church, there are so many different skills that people have that contribute to the mission of God in and through the church.

We can be ready by having the right Supplies.

When I was in high school we had a camp every year and the motto was "there's no such thing as bad weather, just poor preparation." We had to make sure we had the right clothes, the right food, and the right equipment. We had to ensure that our backpacks were lined with garbage bags so when it rained our stuff wouldn't get

¹ Yes this is intentional. I hope it makes someone giggle. I apologise to those for whom this causes distress

wet. We needed to be intentional about the kinds of things we brought with us and the things we left at home so that we reduced rubbish and weight.

We can be ready by having the right Spirit.

If we think about “spirit” as being similar to “attitude” then the wrong spirit would be like having a member of your team decide to not care about the team’s goals and do their own thing instead. As the church, having the right spirit is knowing that who we are and what we do are in line with God’s plan and purpose. Having the right spirit can help us on the journey of growing and learning the right skills, and making sure we have the right supplies.

We can also think about “spirit” as being the Holy Spirit which is the way God joins with us as we follow.

This week’s readings include the readiness to worship God, and serve God. The people are ready to welcome Jesus, praise God, and respond to the love of God which endures forever. The disciples are ready to serve Jesus: even when what they are being asked to do is a little unusual.

Wonder and Discuss:

- What kinds of activities do you enjoy getting ready for?
- What could be the skills needed for renewal in the church?
- What might be the supplies we need for renewal in the church and what might God be saying that we need to “leave out of the backpack”?
- What helps you to have the right spirit/attitude?
- When have you been aware of the Holy Spirit being at work?

Prayer Opportunity:

Offer each member of the group a piece of fabric (maybe even just a clean tea towel). Invite them to hold the fabric and to imagine the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem. Say: “As the disciples saw Jesus, they spread their cloaks on the ground and began to call out to Jesus. As we pray today, I invite you to, in silence, lay your fabric on the floor and think about what you would call out to Jesus.”

After an appropriate amount of time, conclude the prayer by saying, “We lift to you our thanks and praise, Amen.”

An Alternative:

Take time to pray for the others in the group, praying particularly for what is before them this week.

Additional Study One: Good Friday - Confidence During Dark Times

Opening Discussion:

There are some people in our lives that we can trust. I wonder who the people are, in your life, that you trust will always be there for you? What is the impact of those relationships on you?

Introduction:

God's story is one of light, hope, and confidence during dark times. Throughout the Bible, we hear of people who remain confident in God even when everything around them seems to be falling apart. These people know that God will forgive, restore, protect, and guide them even if they feel forsaken (or like a worm as the Psalmist David did!).

What about our story? As we consider what renewal means for our Church, and our lives, let's reflect on the dark times of our lives when there seemed to be no hope. How did you experience confidence or hope in God? As we look to the future, what gives you confidence and how might you share your confidence with others

Look up the meaning of the word 'confidence'.

- When have you felt full of confidence?
- Who or what gives you confidence during dark times?
- As you look to the future, what gives you confidence?

Read and Reflect:

Read each of the following bible readings, taking a moment after each reading to discuss it. You may use the questions below as a guide for that discussion.

- Isaiah 52:13-53:12
- Psalm 22
- Hebrews 10:16-25
- John 18:1-19:42

Discussion Questions:

- What stood out to you in this passage?
- In what ways can you see God's hope in this passage?
- How does this passage help you to trust God in difficult times of your life confidently?

Going Deeper: John 18:1 - 19:42

- In the story of Jesus' arrest and death, Peter denies and abandons Jesus, but never once does Jesus deny or abandon Peter (nor Judas). God's grace is inclusive and constant. As followers of Jesus, how might we be able to demonstrate this in the way we witness, worship and serve?
- In this story there are at least two truths (or perspectives) spoken. This provides an opportunity for us to think about whose voice we are listening to. How can we make sure we tune into God's truth and wisdom?

The Confidence of the Cross

Life has difficult moments. Terrible things happen in the world and we might feel sad. We might even wonder where God is? Isn't God meant to look after us, and make sure that things go well? Why does the world feel so dark and unsafe? Do you feel like that? Or have you ever had a time when you felt like that? It's ok.

When I think of this question, and wonder where God is in the dark and messy times, I think of Jesus on the cross. When we are in those dark moments we sometimes have an image of God as being far away and looking down on all that is going on. In those dark moments it's like he is deciding not to do anything, just letting the bad happen. But the cross reminds us this is not the case. In the cross we

see that God is not just sitting far off, watching on. Jesus was not just a great man, but as the carols remind us each Christmas, Jesus is Emmanuel, God come amongst us.

In the dark times, where is Jesus? This week, you might hear or read sections of John 18: 1-19:42. As you hear or read the words, think about where Jesus is. He is arrested and mistreated. He is betrayed by one friend, and denied by another (probably the friend that was closest to him.) He is slapped on the face, he is flogged. He is made to carry a heavy beam of wood. He is nailed to a cross. His clothing is stolen from him. He suffers from thirst, and he dies.

Can you imagine how dark this moment was for Jesus? Jesus went through so much. And ultimately, he died. And so when we are going through hard times, God is not just sitting back far away and unable to understand what we are going through, but rather, through Jesus, God has experienced the darkest times. He has suffered pain and rejection. He has been let down by friends. All those things that we feel, Jesus has been there, he has felt it. God is not far off, but he is in the mess, holding us tight and saying "I know what that feels like. I am here to be with you."

We can have confidence during dark times knowing the things which God has done for us. Yes, the cross, but also remembering the moments God has helped us in our life. And then trusting that God will continue to be there for us. Not sitting far away, but walking with us side by side, and as the old Footprints poem reminds us, sometimes carrying us.

Wonder and Discuss:

- In the past, what has helped you through dark times?
- How do you feel when you 'see' Jesus in the Easter Story?
- When have you felt that 'God was in the mess' with you?
- Have you ever experienced confidence during dark times? What or who gave you that confidence?
- How might you walk side by side with others living in darkness?

Prayer Opportunity:

Give each member a cross or a sharp nail to hold as the prayer is facilitated.

- Hold a cross or a sharp nail in your hand. Take a moment to notice what you feel.
- As you hold the cross or nail, recognise that you are sitting with God.
- Take a moment to reflect on the Good Friday story and be aware of the feelings, thoughts, pictures, and words that you experience.
- If possible, turn off the lights.
- As you sit in darkness (imagined or real) reflect on what it feels like to **be** in darkness.
- Take a moment to wonder about the dark areas of your life, your community, and the world.
- If you turned the lights off, turn them back on.
- Recognize that you are now sitting in the light.
- In prayer, thank God for the confidence, hope and love that Jesus brought us through his death.

An Alternative:

Take time to pray for the others in the group, praying that in what ever darkness or shadows they find themselves in that they will be able to hold with confidence to hope and love of God.

Additional Study Two: Easter Sunday God's Story, Our Story

Opening Discussion:

What traditions does your family have for celebrating Easter?

Introduction:

God's story, spanning all of time, is one of overwhelming love for God's creation. Throughout the Bible, we hear of people destroying, neglecting, and abusing God's perfect creation. We hear of people abandoning God's way and choosing their own way. There is death. There is destruction. There is pain. There is darkness. And yet, through it all, God upends, God challenges, God acts, and God renews in unexpected, unconventional and miraculous ways to bring healing and restoration to creation.

What about our story? As we focus on renewal of our Church, and of our lives, let's think about the ways that God has challenged us, healed us, restored us, and worked in unconventional or miraculous ways to bring healing and restoration to our lives? As we think about all that God has done for us, what is our response going forward? How might we act differently or share God's story with those around us?

Read and Reflect:

Read each of the following bible readings, taking a moment after each reading to discuss it. You may use the questions below as a guide for that discussion.

- Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26
- 1 Corinthians 15:19-26
- John 20:1-18

Discussion Questions:

- What stood out to you in this passage?
- How does this passage help you to understand the fullness of God's new life?
- How might God be leading you to respond to this passage?

Going Deeper:
John 20:1-18

- In a world dominated by men. The first person to notice and see the risen Jesus is Mary. In what ways is this important?
- Jesus instructed Mary to go; she went and proclaimed, “I have seen the Lord”. How are we called to respond to the Easter story? How has this looked in your life?

The Brightness of a New Morning

I was given a plant just before I left Toowoomba for Longreach, an Anthurium with glossy leaves and bright red flowers. It has produced no flowers since I got here, and over the summer I have watched as old leaves withered and new leaves never made it to maturity. As I look today it has three withering leaves left. It is not looking good.

BUT... I've moved it away from the drying breezes and we've had some cooler rainy weather. At the base of the plant are several new shoots, slowly emerging from the dead stalks that remain. There is hope growing.

There are times when we need signs of new life. I was ordained in December 2015, then life fell apart. Almost immediately my husband Chris was diagnosed with young onset dementia. In 2017 our town, Proserpine, was damaged by cyclone Debbie. By 2019 the better option was for Chris to go into residential care. Within three months he died suddenly, Mum helped me pack up, I started a new placement as a Hospital Chaplain in Toowoomba and bought a house. 2020 had to be a better year, right?

Not quite. I was a hospital chaplain during a pandemic, my Mum was diagnosed with lymphoma. She died within months. In May 2021 I dismounted from my new horse and destroyed my ACL. An abdominal mass diagnosed in 2022 (thankfully benign) required more surgery. In September 2023 I was told that public hospital chaplaincy would no longer be funded in the new financial year.

I look for signs of hope in a new placement. I see the green shoots of new life in a dry land. Shoots of resilience, trust, deepening spirituality, greater maturity and strength. Joy bubbles again.



We read John's gospel knowing the end of the story and so approach it with excitement. We can't wait to get there, we anticipate the empty tomb. I wonder if we really enter into grief and disillusionment with Mary Magdalen and the Twelve? I think it is time in the shadows that makes the brightness of new life shine more brilliantly.

Mary grieves. She goes to serve her Rabbi in the only way left to her - to anoint his life-less body. Then, panic - it is not there! No wonder she could not understand, only go and tell the bald facts to the others. How heartbreaking! Logic says a missing dead body must have been moved, who would do such a cruel thing? She cannot anoint him, cannot grieve alongside his remains. The others come, check the tomb, go home. She stays at the last place she saw him, she checks the tomb yet again - there are figures seated where Jesus had been.

Surely she didn't see these strangers go in? Still focused on finding Jesus, she turns away from their questioning and sees another figure. The gardener? He might know where Jesus' body is! And Jesus says her name. "Mary." Suddenly ... her full attention. "Rabbi!" Good news to share indeed!

Wonder and Discuss:

- In what ways do you relate to Jenny's story?
- How do you think you would have reacted to the news of the empty tomb?
- When have you noticed the brightness of new life after spending time in the shadows?
- If you could create a 'new shoot' in your community, what would it look and/or feel like?
- What new shoots may be emerging in your life, or in your Church?

Prayer Opportunity:

Give each member a flower. As the prayer is led, encourage them to hold the flower. Invite everyone to hold the flower, taking time in the quiet to notice all the details of their flower. You might even invite them to reflect on memories they have involving flowers. When the group is ready, lead this prayer.

Beautiful creating God, we thank you for the new life you are forming around and within us. May we be enriched and transformed by experiencing the beauty of hope and new life. In Jesus, loving name, Amen.

An Alternative:

Take time to pray for the others in the group, especially focusing on new beginnings and hope.