

Teresa Stewart

Call—Listening for
God's Voice in
Everyday Life
4-Week Worship Series

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Teresa Stewart

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Dedicated with thanks to the leadership of the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church, whose passion and innovation unleashed this work.

God calls to us.
Right here in ordinary life.
Are we listening?
Will we join the conversation?
What might happen next?

What Will You Find Here?

These resources facilitate complete, coordinating worship preparation for small congregations. They are specifically designed to encourage lay involvement. Who could you invite for this 4-week commitment?

Series Resources:

Introduction & Overview

The big picture theme and each weekly focus. Include these in bulletins and on websites as a teaser for each week.

Communion

A coordinating celebration of The Great Thanksgiving in a shortened form.

Spiritual Practices

A month-long spiritual practice for worshipers to explore at home.

Weekly Resources for Clergy:

Summary

The scriptural and thematic narrative for each week. Include previous weeks' summaries in bulletins and on websites to review and build the experience.

Monday Morning Notes

The starting point for pastors each Monday morning to nourish their souls and prepare for the worship week ahead. Also appropriate as a small group discussion guide.

Worship Ways & Words

Preparation notes with coordinating prayers, litanies, offerings, blessings and benedictions.

Sermon Starters

Simple ideas to help you connect the scripture to your community.

Weekly Resources for Laity:

Recruit and encourage a different lay member to lead each of the following areas for this 4-week series. These coordinating resources provide simple, handoff-ready instructions.

Children's Worship—Handoff-ready for Lay Leadership

A different kind of children's sermon where young ones lead the congregation in worshiping.

Altar & Visual Arts—Handoff-ready for Lay Leadership

Easy, lavish ideas for decorating the altar and worship space.

Dramatic Arts—Handoff-ready for Lay Leadership

Simple, coordinating dramas to deepen weekly worship.

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INTRODUCTION

All of us yearn for lives that matter. We want connection to something significant—a purpose that’s meaning-*full*. For our work, our relationships, our activities. For Christians, this yearning finds its expression in the language of “call” or “vocation.”

The two terms are basically interchangeable, but somewhat unclear today. The word “call” may sound official, like it belongs only to clergy or comes with some kind of divine megaphone moment. “Vocation” may sound more like a kind of training. Our tradition, however, has something far bigger in mind. Here are its enormous, life-changing basics: All persons are called by God. In all dimensions of their lives. And God has lots of ways of calling besides megaphones. Most of them occur right here in ordinary life.

Are we ready to listen?

OVERVIEW

Week 1: Called to Conversation—Listening for the Question

Focus: Pursuing our call begins with simply starting a conversation with God.

Exodus 33:7-9

John 1:14

In Exodus, Moses shows us the great miracle of call. And it's not the burning bush or the epic escape from Pharaoh. It's the humble meeting tent where God met with Moses, speaking *with* him, not merely *to* him. In John, the tent shows up again, this time as a savior who comes to pitch a tent or dwell among us. Can we hear the staggering invitation to have a conversation with the Lord of All Heaven and Earth?

Week 2: Called to Work—Partnering with God

Focus: All are called by God to work. And God calls us in a great variety of ways.

Genesis 2:1-3

From the beginning, God shows up as a worker who wants creation to flourish. God also hands out work assignments so that we can help. Each of us is called to a job. Imagine that! We're invited to partner up with the Author of Life! But how will we recognize our vocation? (Includes additional scriptures for seven models of call.)

Week 3: Called to Culture—Everyday Sacramental Living

Focus: Our call extends beyond work to every dimension and every moment of our lives.

Luke 10:25-28

Jesus lays out a sacred way of life. Love God with all your being. Love each other with the same passion and commitment. Then go and *do*. Right where you are. Over and over again. What might happen if we heard this call to everyday sacramental living?

Week 4: Called to Table—Listening in Seasons of Change, Confusion & Crisis

Focus: Our call comes with uncertainty. Fortunately, it also comes with a seat at the table.

Exodus 16:14-18

John 6:35

There will be difficult times when we don't feel God's presence, when we can't hear God's call or when the call we thought we heard runs headlong into trouble. How will we live in these seasons? We are invited to the table again. For daily bread. For living bread. To give thanks. To renew our bodies. To rehearse our magnificent hope for all creation. To re-member the heavenly banquet right here among us! And somehow, when we turn from this table, we see how to take that next step.

Week 1: Called to Conversation—Listening for the Question

Focus: “Pursuing our call begins with simply starting a conversation with God.”

Exodus 33:7-9

John 1:14

In Exodus, Moses shows us the great miracle of call. And it’s not the burning bush or the epic escape from Pharaoh. It’s the humble meeting tent where God met with Moses, speaking *with* him, not merely *to* him. In John, the tent shows up again, this time as a savior who comes to pitch a tent or dwell among us. Can we hear the staggering invitation to have a conversation with the Lord of All Heaven and Earth?

SCRIPTURE

The Miracle of the Meeting Tent

Exodus 33:7-10

Moses took the tent and pitched it outside the camp, far away from the camp. He called it the meeting tent. Everyone who wanted advice from the Lord would go out to the meeting tent outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand at the entrance to their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the column of cloud would come down and stand at the tent's entrance while the Lord talked with Moses. When all the people saw the column of cloud standing at the tent's entrance, they would all rise and then bow down at the entrances to their tents. (CEB)

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and made his home among us. (CEB)

SUMMARY

So what does it mean to be called by God? What exactly are we called to? And how, absent a burning bush or divine text message, will we know it?

The answers to these questions begin in an unlikely place: a tent. Specifically, the meeting tent set up just outside of camp by Moses and wilderness-wandering Israelites. The tent looked perfectly ordinary on the outside. Inside, however, was something staggeringly extraordinary. In this tent, God would meet with Moses and the congregation. The High Holy beyond time, space, and anyone's imagination came to their camp.

And these weren't simply meetings where unilateral marching orders were handed out. God came to the tent to speak *with* Moses, not just *to* him. The great I Am could have worked more efficiently with this disobedient bunch by being a dictator. But, for some reason, God chose to work in a different way. By calling to them. By meeting with them. By offering not simply a divine lecture, but an exchange. God sought conversation because conversations grow relationships. To be clear, this was not a meeting of equals, but it became a meeting of intimates.

This call to conversation must be an important strategy for God because the meeting tent shows up again in the New Testament. John describes Jesus as "the Word [who] became flesh and made his home among us." (1:14) (CEB) In Greek, the word home or dwelling means tent. John's telling us that Jesus became human to pitch a tent among us. With us. Jesus came to be the new meeting tent.

Given this divine desire for conversation and relationship, it should not be surprising that one of Jesus' favorite tools in ministry was the question. The gospels are thick with them. Jesus uses these questions to prod, cajole, beckon, encourage, teach—and always to call for a further response. A list of these questions reveals the kinds of conversations that the Lord of Heaven and Earth calls us to—the kinds of conversations that reveal purpose and meaning right here in ordinary life.

This month, the Spiritual Practice is to reflect on a list of questions that Jesus asks. Let your soul soak them in. See which ones delight or trouble you. Listen for which ones resonate. Discuss them prayerfully together. In reading these questions, you may even have some questions of your own. So ask them.

The starting point for understanding call is simple: Come to the tent. Listen for the question asked of you. See what conversation unfolds.

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MONDAY MORNING NOTES

The starting point

This week begins with a simple idea: From unfathomable depths of love, God calls us to conversation. God longs for relationship with us. Take time early on Monday to read the scriptures. Look for the reverence in Exodus. The Israelites' rising, standing and bowing underscores that something profound is occurring. Reread the scripture from John with the same reverence. How might you return to a sense of awe in approaching a conversation with God?

Seeking the who, not the what

All of us long to know that our lives matter. We want purpose, hope, direction. In addressing these yearnings, however, Christianity works differently from the dominant culture. We start with the *who* instead of the *what*. Rather than asking *what* we are called to, we start with *who* calls us. Who is God? This one question has the remarkable ability to transform all questions that come after it. Ultimately no search for meaning makes sense without returning to this as our starting point. We are invited back to the source of meaning to get things right. We start with God because all things start with God.

Compassionately observe how your community seeks meaning in life. Do you see people anxiously leaping to self-help books, career websites or despair? Do they feel led, lost or somewhere in between? First, love them as they are. Then prayerfully imagine how you can offer this compass question to them: “Who is God?” How could this question reorient their seeking?

What is it about tents?

Both scriptures this week suggest that the divine presence has something to do with tents. For Moses and the Israelites, the meeting tent was set up on the outside edge of camp. It seemed to be a tent like all others, a simple, ordinary dwelling place for a people wandering without a home. Except that God met with them there. Later, God would provide instructions for the Tabernacle—a more elaborate tent that provided a portable place of worship until King Solomon built the temple. The Hebrew word for tabernacle means dwelling place. John describes Jesus as the divine plan to once again pitch a tent or dwelling place among us. What is it about tents?

Linger in this good news. God came to live with us. God came to dwell in tents to show that ordinary tent dwellers are lovable company. God came to start conversations and relationships right where we are.

We are a tent people . . .

Where should your congregation be pitching tents? The Bible makes clear that we are a tent people. This means pulling up stakes and going where we are needed—to dwell among people in need. As you walk and drive in your community, look for tent opportunities. Who could your congregation dwell with? In solidarity and love. Be specific. Write down an address. Prayerfully imagine the tent and all those who would pass by and through. Physically put yourself in this place this week. What would it mean for your congregation to dwell here? What’s stopping you? Could the Lord of All Heaven and Earth help remove these barriers? Who in your congregation could help you in this discernment? Call them.

The vulnerability of asking questions

Throughout the Bible, God has a peculiar pattern of asking questions. See if you recognize some of these: *Who told you that you were naked? Hagar, why are you crying? Where is your brother Abel?* See how many others you can find throughout the Hebrew Bible. The pattern is peculiar because surely the Author of Creation—the Great I Am—knows the answers! So why ask? Perhaps because questions differ from other kinds of communication. Questions invite a response. They seek an exchange and a relationship. Questions are a form of communication that says *you matter*.

But there’s a risk. Questions also make the asker vulnerable. The one asking *will* be affected by the one being asked. And the response is at the other’s exclusive control. The responder might lash out. Or ignore the question (and questioner) entirely. Or need time and make the questioner

wait. Asking a genuine question—starting a conversation—always opens the questioner to both a new connection and the possibility of rejection. God is ready for this. Are we?

This week, start conversations. Even risky ones. Observe what happens when you ask genuine questions of those around you. Practice talking *with* and not just *to*. Listen for what could happen next.

Listening for the questions Jesus asks

The Spiritual Practice of this worship series asks your congregation to reflect on questions that Jesus asks in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). If we are unclear how to have a conversation with the Lord of Heaven and Earth, these are great places to start. In a culture of endless distractions, this is a method of returning to the stuff that matters. The stuff that offers purpose, hope, direction.

Throughout this month, prayerfully linger over these questions. Which ones resonate with you? Which ones do you resist? Find one that speaks to your very being. Write it down. Keep it with you. Return to it. Discuss it with a spiritual mentor. Continue the conversation with God. Then invite your congregation to do the same.

Ongoing nature of call

Take some time to remember in detail your call to ministry. Each experience, person and transition. Even the ones that may have come with uncertainty. Have you told this story to your congregation? Offer it as a gift to someone this week.

We are called to an ongoing conversation through all the seasons of our lives. What are you being called to in this season of your life?

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WORSHIP WAYS & WORDS

SPECIAL PREPARATION: Spiritual Practice Guide & Invitations

First, review the Children's Worship and the Spiritual Practice resources. Prepare a copy of the Spiritual Practice Guide to be handed out to each person at the beginning of worship. During the Children's Worship each person will also receive a beautiful invitation with the following language:

*My precious child:
You're invited.
Please come away and meet with me.
Just as you are.
Let's talk.
Will you join me?*

The Children's Worship resource introduces these invitations and allows the children to hand them out to the entire congregation.

As a response to the sermon, ask the worshipers to consider their RSVP to the invitation. Encourage them to write (perhaps on the back of the invitation) when they will meet God in prayer each day. Or how they will continue their conversation with God. They could also identify a question from the Spiritual Practice Guide. Provide adequate quiet reflection time for

this task during worship. Remind them to place these invitations and RSVPs in a place that will get their attention over the next four weeks.

REFLECTION

What if God calls us . . .
not to a task, but to a conversation?
What if God calls us . . .
not to a destination, but to a relationship?
What if God calls us . . .
not to an achievement, but to a table?
What if we answered: "Here I am,"
and pulled up a chair,
ready for whatever happens next?

CALL TO WORSHIP

The Dramatic Arts resource for this week serves as the Call to Worship. In it, a cell phone, hidden on the altar, is left ringing while the following reflection is read:

What if God longs for us?
For a conversation. A relationship.
What if God has been dreaming
Of a future with us. And for us.
What if God called
To hear our voice.
To say *I miss you*. And *let's make plans*.
Would we answer?
Even if answering just might change everything?

CONFESSION & ASSURANCE

Holy One, sometimes we treat you like a butler rather than our most intimate, life-long friend. Forgive us when we would rather summon and dismiss you according to our needs, instead of sitting down for a conversation with the Lord of All Heaven and Earth. Forgive us when we prefer offering our own answers over hearing your questions. We are sorry. And we are ready to listen.

(In a time of silence, deepen your confession before God.)

Hear these words of assurance to us from Isaiah:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. (from Isaiah 43)

COLLECT, COMMUNITY PRAYER & LORD'S PRAYER

Add in specific prayers from your community and the world. Following each category of prayer, allow for a time of silence, then lead the congregation in a response.

Holy One, you are beyond time and space and comprehension, and still you call us each by name. You pitch a tent right where we live. In your mercy, beckon to us again. We are here. Call to us again. We are your people. Speak to us again. We are listening, ready to follow.

(In the times of silence, offer your own prayers.)

For all those listening for God's call and for all those still yearning for purpose and meaning.
(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the specific aches and joys of this community.
(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the wounds and wonders of the world this week.
(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the work of your church, holy and universal, here among us and around the world.
(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

We join our voices with all our brothers and sister in Christ by praying—

The Lord's Prayer

OFFERING PRAYER

Our gifts continue a conversation with the Lord of Heaven and Earth. Yes, we want a relationship! Yes, we want your dream for the world! Yes, we want to make plans! Even if this relationship might change everything! Count us in! Amen.

BENEDICTION

The phone on the altar should begin ringing again.

Ready to answer?

Go in the name of the One who invites you just as you are.

Then see what happens next!

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SERMON STARTERS

- Share the story of your call to ministry. Be sure not to tidy it up too much. Our congregations need to hear how uncertainty and faith can go together. Let them hear the moments of challenge as well as assurance. How has God started conversations with you?
- Unfold the story of a conversation that you started with someone this week. Explain that asking a genuine question of someone can make you a bit uncomfortable or vulnerable. The response shapes whatever happens next. It affects you. And it's out of your control. Reflect on the fact that questions are a risky strategy for God, who could easily and efficiently just speak in booming unilateral pronouncements. What in the world is God up to?
- The two tent scriptures of this week point to God's purposes. Unfold each scripture with care. The Israelites were weary wanderers. They could still remember their grand escape from Egypt, but also their recent mistakes with worshipping other gods. These were people who needed clear instruction wherever they were. But they also needed

something more. An ordinary tent was set up on the edge of camp. Incredibly, the Great I Am came to meet with them there. Point to the profound reverence they must have experienced—all rose, stood and bowed at the comings and goings. God was present with them! God spoke *with*, not just *to* Moses.

- Remind them that John recognized this same strategy in Jesus, who is the tent or dwelling pitched among us. We meet God in him. He becomes the new meeting tent. Ready for conversation right where we live. And conversations are important because they create relationships.
- Remind the congregation that the church is called to take over this work of Jesus. Ask where this congregation needs to pitch a tent. Share your story of visiting one place this week. Offer a vision of what tent living in this place might look like. Start the conversation with the congregation.
- End by returning to the invitations given in the Children’s Worship. We are called to conversation. We are invited to meet with the Lord of All Heaven and Earth. Ask them to write their RSVPs to the invitations they received. Perhaps it can include specifics of when each day they will come before God in prayer. Perhaps it can include a question from the Spiritual Practice Guide. Perhaps it can name a question they feel God is asking them right now.
- Allow time for reflection and writing.

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CHILDREN'S WORSHIP

Handoff-ready Resource

Week 1: Called to Conversation—Listening for the Question

Focus: Pursuing our call begins with simply starting a conversation with God.

Exodus 33:7-9

THE TITLE

“You’re Invited”

THE POINT

The children will remind the congregation of how special it feels to receive an invitation. We are invited into conversation by God!

THE WISDOM

Children are especially good at reminding us how things really feel. Their uninhibited reactions can awaken the congregation’s emotional responses. Today’s scripture is not simply information for our brains, but inspiration for our hearts. By leading us in holy play and imagination, children can lead us into experiencing anew the marvel of our invitation to talk with the Lord of all heaven and earth.

By the way, if you suspect that some of your children have never received a personal note in the mail, send them something this week. As you prepare the notes, pray for each child. Know that God uses your hands to reach out in love.

THE PROPS

Prepare enough invitations for all worshipers. The congregation will be encouraged to write an RSVP to the invitation later in the service.

*My precious child:
You’re invited.
Please come away and meet with me.
Just as you are.
Let’s talk.
Will you join me?*

Make the invitations as lavish as possible. Nice stationery. Sealed envelopes. Perhaps with “My Precious Child” written by hand in beautiful script on the outside of the envelope. Place all the invitations, tied with beautiful ribbon, in a basket. Place this basket on the altar before worship to create some curiosity—*what could that be?*

THE BEGINNING

Adapt this introduction to fit your congregation:

Central Church, will you let your children lead you in worship?
(Welcome and greet the children.)

Today we get to remind the congregation of something important. We’ll need your imaginations to help lead us.

THE ACTION

Have you ever received an invitation? Maybe to a party, or a wedding or a graduation? Someone wrote it and sealed it in an envelope and addressed it and put a stamp on it and gave it to the Post Office to bring to your house. To you! *(Let the children share about the invitations they've received.)*

I'm going to give each one of you a special invitation. When I hand it to you, I want you to show everyone how it feels to receive it. Remind them with your faces and your bodies. *(One at a time, hand an envelope to each child. If possible, call each child by name. Let each one linger in the moment of attention directed just to him/her. You may need to remind them that their job is to show how it feels. Pleased? Surprised? Thrilled? Ask the adults if they remember how it feels, too.)*

This is a special invitation, because it comes with some words from God. Let's read it. "Please come away and meet with me. Just as you are. Let's talk. Will you join me?"

In today's Bible story, we learn that after the Israelites were set free from slavery, they lived in the wilderness in tents. And they set up a special tent on the edge of camp. And they called it the meeting tent, because God would come here to meet with Moses and the people.

God didn't stay far away. God came to where they lived. And God wanted to talk *with* them, not just *to* them. God invited them to come to the meeting tent for a conversation.

I know that God wants to have a conversation with you, too. And God would like to have a conversation with all of them, too *(gesturing to congregation)*, **but sometimes they forget. Or get busy. So we need your help.**

First, would you deliver these invitations to everyone in the congregation? Then come back here so we can lead them in a reminder.

<Children deliver the envelopes and return. They line up facing the congregation. Instruct them to repeat each line after you. Speak quietly to them, but encourage them to speak loudly for the congregation to hear their voices.>

Remember:

<Children repeat.>

You are God's precious child.

<Children repeat.>

Yes, you!

<Children repeat.>

Just like you are.

<Children repeat.>

And God invites you.

<Children repeat.>

God calls to you.

<Children repeat.>

God says, "Let's talk."

<Children repeat.>

Will you?

<Children repeat.>

ALTAR & VISUAL ARTS

Handoff-ready Resource

Week 1: Called to Conversation—Listening for the Question

Focus: “Invited to the Tent”

Exodus 33:7-9 & John 1:14

THE POINT

This week’s scripture takes us to the “meeting tent,” the place where God met with the Moses and the Israelites during the wilderness years. An ordinary tent was set up on the edge of camp where the Holy One—beyond all space, time and human understanding—came to talk. Not *to* them, but *with* them. Because conversations grow relationships. Later, in John 1:14, Jesus is described as the tent pitched among us. Our discussion of God’s call starts with an invitation to conversation.

THE PREPARATION

The anchoring symbol for this series is the meeting tent. Subsequent weeks will explore our calls to work, everyday life and communion table. All of them start with the tent and the call to conversation. So, the first task is imagining how to set up the suggestion of a tent on or around your chancel area. Simpler is better. This tent will stay through the entire unit with other objects added to or around it. Here are options for adapting this symbol to your space and resources.

- Start with a long piece of plain fabric (20 feet of muslin or burlap works nicely). Drape the center point over a support to create a simple A-frame.
- If you don’t have fabric that long, consider tying different fabrics together to drape over a support. Remember, it doesn’t have to function like a tent, just suggest one.
- You could also use a canopy (like those used for picnics or camping) and place it over the altar.
- Keep the look simple for now. At the end of the series, the tent can be dressed up with additional drapes, ribbons and lights to highlight the communion table.
- Of course, you could set up an actual tent. Just remember, for the symbol to work, the tent needs to be large enough that people could meet in it to talk. A pup tent won’t work.
- Want to do more? Set up an actual tent in the meeting area or narthex of your building. Leave it up for the entire worship unit. Let people walk through it into worship. Or set up the inside of the tent as a prayer and meditation center. Perhaps you can post a large printed invitation on the outside, using the language from the Children’s Worship.

My precious child:

You’re invited.

Please come away and meet with me.

Just as you are.

Let’s talk.

Will you join me?

- Want to do even more? Include art supplies in one or more tents throughout your building. Let people come to pray while they paint or knead clay or string beads or color. Make sure that children can be safe and successful in or around them.
- Want to make a buzz in your neighborhood? Set up tents (of any size) around your building. Perhaps you can post a sign that says, “We are a tent people. Find out why.”

DRAMATIC ARTS

Handoff-ready resource

Week 1: Called to Conversation—Listening for the Question

Focus: “Invited to the Tent”

Exodus 33:7-9 & John 1:14

THE TITLE

“The Call”

THE POINT

God yearns to have conversation and relationship with us. This is the starting point for understanding call.

THE ORDER

Call to Worship

THE COORDINATION

Check with the pastor and musicians about the timing of the ringing phone. The phone call that starts this monologue should interrupt the service and even feel a bit uncomfortable for the congregation. Don’t worry. These are holy feelings. Some of God’s best work is done with surprise.

THE PREPARATION & PROPS

A cell phone is hidden somewhere on the altar. Its ringtone should be simple, recognizable and loud.

THE ACTION

In a moment of quiet, the phone should begin ringing. After three rings, the following reflection is read aloud. Let the phone continue ringing through the entire reading.

What if God longs for us?

For a conversation. A relationship.

What if God has been dreaming

Of a future with us and for us?

What if God called

To hear our voice?

To say *I miss you*. And *let’s make plans*.

Would we answer?

Even if answering just might change everything?

(Allow a few more rings to continue after the reading.)

Week 2: Called to Work—Partnering with God

Focus: “All are called by God to work. And God calls us in a great variety of ways...”

Genesis 2:1-3

From the beginning, God shows up as a worker who wants creation to flourish. God also hands out work assignments so that we can help. Each of us is called to a job. Imagine that! We're invited to partner up with the Author of Life! But how will we recognize our vocation?

(Includes additional scriptures for seven models of call.)

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 2:1-3

The heavens and the earth and all who live in them were completed. On the sixth day God completed all the work that he had done, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work that he had done. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work of creation. (CEB)

SUMMARY

Once we start a conversation with God, we shouldn't be surprised if the talk turns to work. For Christians, work talk is always God talk. We believe that God calls us not just to faith, but to jobs. The Bible tells the story of a God who works and who hands out work assignments. The first words of the Bible describe God as a worker, holding back chaos and creating. By the second chapter, people are given jobs, too. Adam and Eve are called to work in the garden. They partner with God so that all creation might flourish.

Ours is not a God who operates in abstraction. Ours is a God who toils in the world. In case we miss this point, the climax of the creation story underscores it, referencing God's work three times in three short verses. Labor is used to express meaning and purpose. Both God's and ours. Work is not punishment for the fall, but part of our very being. We have been made in the image of the Divine Worker. We are called to work.

To be clear, God isn't simply interested in calling preachers and churchy types. All persons are called to their work: farmers, teachers, homemakers, carpenters, janitors, business owners, managers, bakers and bankers. All participate in what we call the "priesthood of all believers." In doing their jobs, all persons become priests, using their gifts for the good of creation. Each job can be a ministry. And God does not see hierarchy in them. One is not more valuable or important than another. Many kinds of work are required for creation to flourish.

So how do we know what kind of work we are called to? Scripture provides a great variety of ways that God calls us to work. This week will explore seven models of call in the Bible. Seven ways that God calls us to jobs. Listening to these stories may help us recognize the sound of God's call.

Once we start a conversation with God, we will hear our invitation not simply to make a living, but to make a life, in partnership with the Lord of All Heaven and Earth. Right here in our everyday, working life. This is the stuff of vocation.

Ready to hear, explore or affirm your vocation?

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MONDAY MORNING NOTES

The starting point

Start by reading the first creation story. Genesis makes clear that creating and caring for creation is God's work. In two short, climactic verses at the end of the first creation story, the word "work" is used three times to refer to all of the drama in the first chapter (Gen 2:2-3) (CEB). Scripture makes clear that work is the language of God's loving purposes for the world. Work reveals the nature and identity of God, who yearns for life to flourish.

Throughout this week, gently contemplate this question: Does my work reveal God's loving purposes for the world? Don't jump to answer. Just listen.

There is a goal

Our work assignments are not simply random. There is a goal to our labors. Like God, we seek the flourishing of creation. This means that in seeking our call to work we must look at the impact of our work on other persons, locally and around the world, as well as the earth itself. We also have to look at the social conditions of other workers. This makes discerning a call to work a

messier process than simply checking for the highest salary. But it's a process that God's voice can help guide if we allow the conversation to continue—together.

Observe the workers in your community. Where do you see conditions that don't allow their flourishing? Can you learn to tell the story of just one person? How could your congregation be called to respond? Don't worry about immediately developing a 5-point plan. Just ask and listen for God's guidance.

The good news of worth and status

There may be times when persons can't do the work they feel called to. Perhaps because of a personal transition, disability, economic downturn or family crisis. Sometimes people feel stuck in jobs that simply allow them to survive. It's important to remind them that God sees no hierarchy in our labors. The temp worker is as valuable as the CEO in the economy of the Kingdom of God. Where do you see persons in your congregation or community who need to be reminded of this good news: their worth is not defined by their socio-economic status. They are priceless and loved. Could this news be liberating for high wage earners as well?

Models of call

Scripture provides great diversity in the ways people are called to work. This week you will explore seven different models of call. There are likely more. Some may overlap. And there is not a once-and-for-all guarantee in our call to work. Sometimes it changes over a lifetime. Read over the list of these models (Bonus Resource: Models of Call). See which ones feel familiar or surprising. How can you offer these to your congregation? How can you invite worshipers to recognize these patterns in their own lives?

Do you see some or all of these patterns among your congregation? Pray for each person whom you recognize among the patterns. Ask for God's guidance in supporting each call.

5 cups of coffee

Discerning a call to work is not a simple computation. Discerning requires time and community. How well does your community help? A terrific tool has been developed by Rev. Ashlee Alley: 5 Cups of Coffee (available at greatplainsumc.org/5cupsofcoffee). In it she suggests 5 topics of conversation and specific questions to be shared over 5 (or more) coffee-optional meetings. Each set of questions deepens the conversation with God and explores gifts and possibilities.

Who do you need to have 5 cups of coffee with? Who else in your congregation could use this tool to help others? Make the calls today.

Work + Rest = Identity

Here's an important caveat. Work alone does not give us our identity and purpose. It's the cadence of work and rest that provides those. God did not simply work. God worked and rested. And resting is not just a good idea. It's a commandment (Exodus 20:8-11) (CEB) and fundamental to God's own being. Our labors are an essential part of our life in Christ, but only when practiced alongside Sabbath. Rest provides a necessary correction to our everything-all-the-time culture.

Where do you see the need for this correction in your community or your own life?

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WORSHIP WAYS & WORDS

SPECIAL PREPARATION: Altar Arts symbols & candles

First, review the Altar Arts & Dramatic Arts resource. This week will offer seven different ways that people are called to their work in the Bible. Each is expressed by a symbol that may be placed around the altar (e.g., lightning bolt, plant, tool box, etc.). Introduce these symbols early, then explore them throughout worship. The sermon could tell each of the seven suggested Bible stories.

Allow reflective time for worshipers to consider how God is calling them. As a response to the sermon, persons could bring forward a votive candle to place by the symbol that best expresses their call to work. Invite them to say “here I am” as they place the candle.

REFLECTION

Perhaps the voice calling us ahead
Is not a separate sound, outside of ourselves,
But a part of us—
The part that bears the family resemblance to our Creator
And can't help but sing along with the melody of creation.

CALL TO WORSHIP

The Dramatic Arts resource for this week serves as the Call to Worship. It sets up the seven symbols representing seven models of call.

CONFESSION & ASSURANCE

Holy One, you call us to the same work that you take on: laboring so that all creation might flourish. We confess that this goal both delights and overwhelms us. Forgive us when we are willing to settle for anything less.

(In a time of silence, deepen your confession before God.)

Hear these words of assurance to us from Isaiah:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you. When you walk through the fires, you won't be scorched and flame won't burn you. I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior. (from Isaiah 43) (CEB)

COLLECT, COMMUNITY PRAYER & LORD'S PRAYER

Add in specific prayers from your community and the world. Following each category of prayer, allow for a time of silence, then lead the congregation in a response.

Holy One, you are the author and artisan of all life. You speak worlds into being and toil for creation as a laborer with dirt-packed fingernails. Not distant, but here. You ask us to labor with you so that all life might flourish. Apprentice us—so that we might know our holy purpose and join our work with yours.

(In the times of silence, offer your own prayers.)

For all those listening for God's call and all those still yearning for a life with purpose and meaning.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the specific aches and joys of this community.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the wounds and wonders of the world this week.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the work of your church, holy and universal, here among us and around the world.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

We join our voices with all our brothers and sister in Christ by praying—

The Lord's Prayer

OFFERING PRAYER

Our work matters to you. Our lives matter to you. Our gifts matter to you. Because you invite us to become partners to care for all creation. Imagine that! Partners with the Lord of All Heaven and Earth! What a job! Alleluia! Amen.

BENEDICTION

Go. Get to work.

Not to make a living,

But to make a life.

In the name of the Author of All Life.

Amen.

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SERMON STARTERS

- Start with some interesting facts. The average American works around 1,800 hours/year. By comparison, Europeans work closer to 1500 hours/year. Workers in Russian federation countries log about 2,000 hours/year. Workers in Mexico average 2,200 hours/year. For an American, over the course of a 50-year work life, this means about 90,000 work hours—about 35% of waking hours. See stats.oecd.org and the Census Bureau for more data. Our patterns of work are also shifting. Millennials (those born 1977-1997) expect to stay at a job about 3 years and change jobs 15-20 times over the course of their working lives. Bottom line: Work time is a big part of our lives!
- Today's scripture comes at the very pinnacle of creation. And it makes clear in three short verses that God is a worker, too. Explain that for Christians, work talk is always God talk. We worship a God whose very identity is revealed through work—first creation then its care and redemption. God works and expects us to work. Garden tending assignments were handed out to Adam and Eve—not for punishment, but for purpose. Work risked becoming drudgery after the fall, but before the apple tasting, working was simply part of being made in the image of God. Scripture tells the story of a God who works and who hands out work details. God calls us to work.

- Unfold a few important caveats about God’s calls to work:
 1. There is no hierarchy in God’s approach to work. All work can be equally valuable—because each worker is precious and priceless. One is not more important than another.
 2. Martin Luther proclaimed “the priesthood of all believers.” We are not all called to be church workers. Many kinds of work are required. And each can be a sacred calling. Farmers, bankers, teachers, field hands, cooks, clerks, stay-at-home parents.
 3. The goal of our work together is nothing less than the goal of God’s work: the flourishing of the world. When we listen for our call to work, we are listening also to the world’s needs.

- Ask: So how do we hear God calling us to work? There’s not a single way. Scripture is filled with different ways that God calls to people. Invite them to listen with prayerful hearts to these seven stories and seven models. Do you recognize a pattern of God at work in your life?

- Use **Bonus Resource: 7 Models of Call** to unfold the various ways God calls us to work. After you tell each story, light a candle from the Christ candle and place it beside the coordinating symbol around the altar. At the end, offer a time of quiet reflection and invite the worshipers to light a candle and place it beside one of the symbols. Ask them to say, “**Here I am,**” as they place the candle. If they do not recognize their call among these symbols, invite them to place a candle in front of the altar and say, “**I’m listening.**”

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CHILDREN'S WORSHIP

Handoff-ready Resource

Week 2: Called to Work—Partnering with God

Focus: “All are called by God to work. And God sees all workers as precious.”

Genesis 2:1-3

THE TITLE

“The Blessing of God’s Partners”

THE POINT

The children will lead the congregation in celebrating the work of all persons. God uses all kinds of labors and blesses what Martin Luther called the “priesthood of all believers.” Whatever our jobs, we are all called to be partners with God.

THE WISDOM

Children should experience what it means to be blessed and to bless one another. They are able to convey God’s blessings to this congregation. Model for them how to hold up a cupped hand as a gesture of blessing.

THE PREPARATION

You will need at least 3 helpers: the pastor and 2 other persons with very different kinds of jobs. Prepare them to come to the front with the children. You should be able to describe each of their jobs in a few words.

THE BEGINNING

Adapt this introduction to fit your congregation.

Central Church, will you let your children lead you in worship?

(Welcome and greet the children.)

Today we are going to offer a blessing for people called to work by God.

THE ACTION

Let’s start with our pastor. Pastor Trevor was called by God to serve this congregation. That’s a big, important job, isn’t it? It’s like being God’s partner! Wow! Would you like to know what kind of blessing God offers to this kind of worker? Hold up your blessing hands to help me bless Pastor Trevor:

Precious child,

Your work is important, because you are important.

You are God’s partner in the world!

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May God’s face shine upon you.

Amen.

Now Mrs. Mitchell has a very different kind of job. She teaches grade school students how to play the violin. She doesn’t preach on Sundays. She doesn’t marry or bury people. She teaches. So what kind of blessing do you think God would have us offer for her work? Hold up your blessing hands to help me again.

**Precious child,
Your work is important, because you are important.
You are God's partner in the world!
May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May God's face shine upon you.
Amen.**

What did you notice about the blessings? Were they the same? Yes, you're right! Let's try another. Mr. Hubbard is a farmer. He doesn't preach or teach. He grows food and drives a tractor. So let's see what God might think of this work. Hold up your blessing hands.

**Precious child,
Your work is important, because you are important.
You are God's partner in the world!
May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May God's face shine upon you.
Amen.**

Did you recognize it again? The same blessing! That's because God calls us all to work. And no job is more important than another to God. A pastor is not more important than a teacher or truck driver—or student. All of us can be partners with God.

THE TURN

Will you help share this marvelous truth? Sometimes adults forget the worth of what they do. Sometimes they forget that God calls to them. Sometimes they forget that their work matters. Let's remind them. Hold up your blessing hands once more. Repeat each line after me to tell them that they are blessed.

**Precious child,
<Children repeat.>
Your work is important, because you are important.
<Children repeat.>
You are God's partner in the world!
<Children repeat.>
May the Lord bless you and keep you.
<Children repeat.>
May God's face shine upon you.
<Children repeat.>**

Amen.

ALTAR & VISUAL ARTS AND DRAMATIC ARTS

Handoff-ready Resource

Week 2: Called to Work—Partnering with God

Focus: “Called to Work in Different Ways”

THE POINT

God calls to us in a great variety of ways. Your work will allow people to explore seven ways that God might be calling to them. Which ones resonate with your soul?

THE PREPARATION & COORDINATION

Keep the basic, simple tent from last week. Coordinate with the Dramatic Arts leader to find or make the following seven symbols, representing seven ways that God calls us. Identify where each should be placed around the altar.

Large, cardboard **lightning bolt**

Small potted **plant** (perhaps a seedling in a big pot)

Tool box

Large cardboard **plus sign**

Megaphone (can be made from a rolled and taped piece of cardboard)

Long **bungee cord**

Hiking boots

THE WISDOM

Not enough people? One person could carry the symbols forward while another reads.

No rehearsal time? Hand the reading and a symbol to seven willing members of the congregation. In worship, participating is more important than performing.

THE ACTION

Reader 1 (Lightning Bolt):

Sometimes God’s call comes like a lightning bolt: forceful, clear and out of nowhere. And you know that things will never be the same again. (*Looking relieved.*) **Alleluiah, things will never be the same again!** (*Places symbol by altar.*)

Reader 2 (Plant):

Sometimes God’s call comes like a seed. Slowly growing over time. Almost unnoticeable. (*Thoughtfully admires the seedling.*) **But somehow you know that the bloom will come.** (*Places symbol by altar.*)

Reader 3 (Tool Box):

Sometimes God’s call just feels like the right fit. The job just matches your skills, talents and passions. It just makes sense. (*Places symbol by altar.*)

Reader 4 (Plus Sign):

Sometimes God gives a “plus call.” The work God assigns to you is in addition to your regular job. Sometimes you’re even called to do it for free. Your vocation and occupation are different. (*Places symbol by altar.*)

Reader 5 (Megaphone):

Sometimes God mediates the call and uses another person—or even a group—to reveal your vocation. *(Smiles amusedly.)* **Sometimes the voice of God can sound an awful lot like your neighbor.** *(Places symbol by altar.)*

Reader 6 (Bungee cord):

Sometimes God calls us to leap. To jump into something that we're not equipped for. Or doesn't fully exist yet. Without a safety net or thorough plan. *(Shakes head and smiles.)* **Just because God says so.** *(Places symbol by altar.)*

Reader 7 (Hiking Boots):

Sometimes God calls you and simply says, "Belong to me. Completely. Love me. Entirely. Then do what brings you delight, and I will go with you." *(Looks at boots with an expression of awe and gratitude.)* **Imagine that!** *(Places symbol by altar.)*

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BONUS RESOURCE: 7 MODELS OF CALL

Remember to light a candle and placing it beside the coordinating symbol after offering each model.

1. Lightning Bolt: Paul (Acts 9)

Symbol of a lightning bolt

Maybe your call to work is like a Lightning Bolt. Powerful. Clear. Decisive. Can't be missed. You're stopped in your tracks. And changed forever. There's no mistaking this kind of call. It's how God came to Saul. Saul's job was protecting the faith from a rag tag group called "The Way." They were followers of Jesus who had a ridiculous story about him not really being dead. Saul was efficient at his job. He traveled with letters from the high priest authorizing him to arrest any followers of The Way. Imprisonment and execution were the tools of his job. That is, until he was traveling to Damascus. An intense light stopped him. He heard a voice saying "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" It was Jesus, who then gave him instructions. He couldn't see, eat or drink for three days. He had to be led by the hand. But with the help of some faithful followers of The Way, he miraculously regained his sight. And got his new job: as God's "chosen instrument to proclaim [God's] name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel." (Acts 9:15) (CEB). Pretty powerful. Pretty clear. No wonder this is the model of call that most people imagine. Maybe you recognize it in your own life.

2. Seed: Nicodemus (John 3 & 19)

Symbol of a seedling plant

Or maybe God's call to you is more like a Seed. It gets planted and watered over time. And somehow, slowly, it grows. This is how God came to Nicodemus. Remember him? He's the Pharisee who came to see Jesus in the night. Intrigued, but not understanding. Probably hiding from public scrutiny, too, as he asked questions in the third chapter of John. We don't have any lightning bolt story about Nicodemus. In fact, we don't see him again until the nineteenth chapter of John. But there we see him taking on a job that would get him in vastly more trouble than sneaking around at night asking questions. He comes forward with a hundred pounds of burial spices to receive the body of his Lord, the crucified Jesus. In the daylight. For all to see. We don't know exactly what happened. But something did. Over time, something grew. An awareness. A longing. A confidence. Maybe you recognize this pattern in your own life. What awareness is growing in you?

3. Right Fit: Bezalel (Exodus 31:1-6) and Deborah (Judges 4:4-5)

Symbol of a tool box

Or maybe God's call comes like it did for Bezalel or Deborah. The work just matches your gifts and abilities and passions. It's the right fit. Bezalel was the head artisan for the Tabernacle. God simply told Moses that Bezalel had what was needed. He was filled with spirit and knowledge of how to make art with gold, silver and bronze. He could cut stones and carve wood. His gifts and abilities just fit. Deborah was a judge for Israel. She would sit under a tree in the hill country. The people recognized her gifts and wisdom and came to her for judgment. They even recognized her as the right fit for military leadership for Israel. There was no lightning bolt appointing either Bezalel or Deborah. Maybe you recognize this pattern: you just seem to have the skills that are needed at the time.

4. Plus Call: Simon the Tanner (Acts 9:43; 10:6, 32)

Symbol of a plus sign

Or maybe God's call to you is like addition. It comes on top of your usual job. Sometimes our occupation and our vocation are different. And we do them both. Like Simon the Tanner. Simon clearly had an occupation. Not one that made him popular or smell particularly good. He worked with dead animals, skinning and preparing their hides. This was his living, even though it made him ritually unclean. But he also had a plus call. In addition to this work, the author of Acts notes three times that Simon provided lodging and hospitality to Peter. He was not a professional, money-making innkeeper.

But this was an additional job to support the work of the apostles. Maybe your work call is something you're asked to do for free. Do you recognize this pattern of call in your life?

5. Megaphone: Esther (Esther 4) or Samuel (1 Samuel 3)

Symbol of a megaphone

Or maybe your call to work comes to you through the voice of someone else. Sometimes other people mediate God's call to us. They provide a divine megaphone to us. Esther receives her call through the voice of her cousin Mordecai. Samuel doesn't recognize the voice of God until Eli does first and tells him how to respond. For both, their call to work was not apparent to them. It was apparent to someone else. The call required the pointing, nudging, revealing of another person. Do you recognize this pattern in your life?

6. Leap: Moses (Exodus 3-6)

Symbol of bungee cords

Or maybe your job assignment comes as a call to leap, unreasonably, into something new. Without having all the skills you need or even a clear job description. Maybe without a safety net. Leap, just because God says so. Moses experienced this call to work. Moses had to veer from a beaten path to see a strange burning bush. And God gave a massive, ridiculous assignment to this runaway shepherd hiding in the hills. He was to win the Hebrews' release from Pharaoh. Without leverage, speaking skills or youthful enthusiasm on his side (he was 80, at the time). But he leapt anyway. Reluctantly at first. Just because God called. And somehow, that was all the safety net needed.

Maybe you're being called to take a leap? Remember that God also provided a helper in his brother Aaron. Do you recognize something about this pattern?

7. Belong, Delight, Trust: Mary, sister of Martha (Luke 10:38-42)

Symbol of hiking boots

Or maybe your call to work may come in the quiet pattern of someone like Mary, the sister of Martha. Sometimes our call simply asks us to be entirely connected to God. Then do what brings us joy and delight. And trust that God will be with us. Mary, against all social convention, chose to sit at the feet of Jesus like the men and become a disciple. There were certainly other important, necessary things that she could have done. But she chose this thing. Now, this model of call is the least discussed, so we need some help from theologian Barbara Brown Taylor who describes it in her own life. After becoming a Christian as an adult, she implored God to tell her what she was supposed to do. She wanted a clear vocation. Instead, as she opened herself entirely to God, she heard this message: "Do anything that pleases you... and belong to me."

Belong to God. Entirely. Then do what brings you delight. Perhaps you recognize something about this pattern. The trick, of course, is belonging to God. Are you ready for this call? Where do you want to go?

Remember to invite the worshipers into a time of quiet reflection. Encourage them to light a candle and place it beside one of the symbols. Ask them to say, "Here I am," as they place the candle. For those unsure of their call, invite them to place a candle in front of the altar and say, "I'm listening."

Week 3: Called to Culture—Everyday Sacramental Living

Focus: "Our call extends beyond work to every dimension and every moment of our lives."

Luke 10:25-28

Jesus lays out a sacred way of life. Love God with all your being. Love each other with the same passion and commitment. Then go and do. Right where you are. Over and over again. It's a call to create a culture of everyday sacramental living. What would happen if we heard it?

SCRIPTURE

Luke 10:25-28

A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to gain eternal life?” Jesus replied, “What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?” He responded, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.” (CEB)

SUMMARY

Here's the truly great news about our call. As Christians, we are not simply called to a particular job. We are called to a way of life. This way of life includes our relationships, our activities, and our play as well as our work. God's call to us is always larger than a particular job. It exceeds any one assignment. It spills over into every dimension of life.

That's because our ultimate call is to create a *culture*—a pattern of thinking, behaving and interacting that reflects our ongoing conversation and partnership with God. In each moment of everyday life. This culture supports our *Everyday Sacramental Living*. We live each moment recognizing that we are connected to God. We live each moment dedicating our gifts, thoughts, delights and struggles to the honor and glory of God. We live each ordinary moment as though the sacred can be encountered in it. Because it can.

So what does this really mean? How do we live an everyday sacramental life? By bringing a sacred awareness to each ordinary moment. With the love of God and neighbor permeating everyday life. Jesus gives us this answer in his exchange with a legal expert. First, love God. Entirely. With everything you have and are. Second, love your neighbor. With every bit as much passion and commitment. Our faith's culture is defined by these two rules. To make sure the expert understood the requirements of this culture, Jesus told the story of the Godly Samaritan. Jesus also added this simple sentence: "*Do this* and you will live." (Luke 10:28) (CEB) And at the end of the story, just in case anyone missed it, he repeats: "*Go and do likewise.*" (Luke 10:37) (CEB)

The doing of love that Jesus refers to is not about special moments, but all moments. Walking to Jericho. Shopping for groceries. Attending a meeting. Washing dishes. Feeding cattle. Waiting on a customer. Being a customer. All of them can reveal and embody God's presence. All of them call for our partnership. And somehow, God can use all of them.

Don't worry. We don't have to fully understand how it works. Just remember this: all of each of our lives matter. And God can be present in each gesture, thought and motion. All we have to do is practice the two-step together: love God, love each other. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. In cars. In conference rooms. In barns and DMV lines. In life.

There's something about the doing. It continues the conversation. It grows the relationship. It connects the holy to the here. How can you love right now, right where you are? How are you called to create this culture?

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MONDAY MORNING NOTES

Recognizing Cultures

A culture is a distinctive way of thinking, behaving and working among a particular group of people. It includes their arts, language, social interactions. This week compassionately observe the cultures of your community. What are the distinctive patterns and practices that define the group? Could you lovingly tell the stories of your congregation so that it could recognize its own culture?

Everyday Sacramental Living

The culture of doing love reveals the sacred in each everyday moment. Acts of loving God and neighbor aren't the stuff of special occasion. They are meant to be present in ordinary moments.

God shows up in ordinary moments. And God chooses ordinary stuff to reveal divine purposes in the world. Bread becomes salvation. Water becomes a promise of new life. God is present in everyday life. And it's our job to recognize that presence.

Find a dozen things around you today that point to the holy. Pay attention to them. Living this way requires choice. And practice. We choose to live in faith rather than face value. When we do so, it changes how we engage the world around us—which changes us. And the world. Observe the sacred-ordinary around you. What delights you? What bothers you? What might happen if your congregation lived this way every day?

Sanctification and the Love of God

Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite monk in the seventeenth century, was known for his intimacy with God. In a book of reflections gathered after his death, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, he marvels that our sanctification depends little on changing activities. It depends far more on simply doing *everything* for the love of God. Imagine that! Instead of laboring over what to do next, what would happen if we simply pursued how to fill each moment with more love for God. No matter what the task. Could this be liberating for you? How could each task this week be filled with loving God? What worries might get replaced?

Over the next several days, observe how this practice transforms ordinary moments of your life. Could it transform any parts of your congregation's ministries? Could planning, meeting and cleaning tasks be filled with love of God? Take time to imagine.

Knowing as Doing: The Christian Two-Step

The Great Commandments don't require intellectual assent. They require action. Our actions likewise depend on knowing these requirements of love. The doing can't be separated out from the knowing. The knowing depends on doing. This was Jesus' challenge to the legal expert. We can't fully understand the Great Commandments without doing them. They are linked together. Like two legs for walking—or dancing.

What is one ordinary way that you could invite the congregation to dance?

Not a Game of Solitaire

Creating a culture can't be done alone. Discernment is not a solitary sport. The Christian life always requires community. It can't be practiced in isolation, even if that *would* be less messy and . . . irritating. Jesus unfolds the call to culture not in a divine memorandum, but in a conversation with someone who may not seem particularly likeable. How can you encourage messy conversation in your congregation? Prayerfully consider where you see calls that are being discerned in isolation? What should happen next?

The Eyes of Christ

Over and over again, Jesus demonstrates the ability of seeing people—really seeing people. Just as they are and with deep compassion. This week, try consciously putting on the eyes of Christ. See, really see, each person you encounter. With love. Pray for their wholeness and well-being, even if your contact is only momentary. Set aside time to walk the neighborhoods or drive the region around your congregation. What do you see?

The Eyes of Christ . . . for You

Pastors are often practiced at turning the eyes of Christ onto others around them. Can you see yourself through these same lenses? What happens when you experience the gaze of love and compassion for you—just as you are at this moment? Take note if this feels uncomfortable. This

week we are reminded that we are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves. We can't just do the first part. The first part is calibrated with the second part. Our love of others is inextricably connected to our love of self.

Take some time this week to slowly review all the dimensions of your life through the eyes of Christ. Is there any piece of caretaking you need to do for this precious child—you?

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WORSHIP WAYS & WORDS

SPECIAL PREPARATION: Art supplies

This week invites worshipers to encounter the sacred in the ordinary. A powerful way of encouraging this kind of encounter lies in an arts-based engagement. Worshipers may paint, draw, sculpt, knit, and doodle their way through the Sunday liturgy. Set up an art station in the back of the sanctuary where people can select supplies. Give them options. Invite the sense of delight and play. Include a variety of materials. Ask the congregation to answer this question in their art: Where do I see the sacred in the ordinary? Alternatively, you could invite the worshipers to simply respond to the entire worship event with their art.

Above all, invite the congregation to worship with these art supplies. They will imagine and create something that responds somehow to the experience. Just before the closing hymn, ask them to bring these gifts forward to display around the altar. Give thanks for them!

Is there an Art Ambassador among your congregation—that is, someone who could set up the supplies, invite people to participate and help display the works around the altar? Possible supplies include: play dough, plain paper on clipboards, small canvases (or large ones!), water colors, paint brushes and cups of water, crayons, pastels, clay, sets of beads and string. You may also want some small easels for displaying the art at the end of worship. Coordinate where and how they should be displayed with the laity leading your Altar & Visual Arts.

Unleash the full awareness and giftedness of worshipers in approaching God. Because the Kingdom of God always includes children, pay special attention to including their artistic gifts.

REFLECTION

Do this to live:

Love God. Love each other.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

In cars and barns and conference rooms.

In every ordinary moment of life.

Until each step dances the holy all around you.

CALL TO WORSHIP

The Dramatic Arts resource for this week serves as the Call to Worship. In it, a variety of ordinary items are placed at the altar while the following prayer (based on Psalm 139) is read and the Christ candle is moved to the floor or a small table to sit among the items.

O Lord, you are inescapable.
You have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I stand up.
When I come and when I go.

Your presence goes with me everywhere.
In grocery stores. And corn fields. And laundromats. And parking lots.
Even church pews.
O Lord, you are inescapable.
Holy and here.
Thanks, thanks, thanks.

CONFESSION & PARDON

Holy One, we confess that sometimes we like the idea of being a Christian more than the practice of following Jesus. Forgive us when we separate the idea of your love from the practice of loving people who are different from us. Forgive us when we call you Our Father, but fail to recognize all those who would be our brothers and sisters.

(In a time of silence, deepen your confession before God.)

Hear these words of assurance to us from Isaiah:

Do not fear, I am with you. From the east I'll bring your children; from the west I'll gather you, everyone who is called by my name. (from Isaiah 43)

COLLECT, COMMUNITY PRAYER & LORD'S PRAYER

Add in specific prayers from your community and the world. Following each category of prayer, allow for a time of silence, then lead the congregation in a response.

Holy One, who calls us to a way of life. Not simply in special moments, but all moments. You are as close as our next breath and as present as the neighbor we do not yet know. Call us deeper into the mystery of your love, so that each decision, thought, reaction and gesture finds its source in you.

(In the times of silence, offer your own prayers.)

For all those listening for God's call and for all those still yearning for a life with purpose and meaning.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the specific aches and joys of this community.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the wounds and wonders of the world this week.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the work of your church, holy and universal, here among us and around the world.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

We join our voices with all our brothers and sister in Christ by praying—

The Lord's Prayer

OFFERING PRAYER

Your son taught us that the ordinary is not separate from the sacred. Water can become a promise. Bread can become salvation. And our dollars can become songs of pure praise. We sing thanks for your goodness!

BENEDICTION

Go: Love the Lord. Entirely.

Go: Love each other. Completely.

And do. Make this your way of life.

In the name of the One who is both holy and here!

Amen.

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SERMON STARTERS

Imagine a Culture of Call: Everyday Sacramental Living

- Start with defining culture: a pattern of thinking, behaving and interacting distinctive to a particular community. Use humor and love in describing the distinctive patterns and practices of your community. Are they casserole artisans? Do they demonstrate spring planting fever? Invite them to name practices with you. Enjoy and celebrate these practices!
- Suggest that in this scripture Jesus is giving the blueprint for a Christian culture. Walk them through the pieces of it. Love God. Entirely. Love each other. With every bit as much passion and commitment. Then do this love. This pattern is the mark of the Christian culture. Introduce it as the Christian Two Step (from the Monday Morning Notes).
- Ask: How would this pattern change other parts of our culture? Imagine possibilities with them. Who might be invited or fed? What other activities might be declined in favor of community life?
- Ponder with them about the religious leader who approached Jesus. Nearly all of our religious truths in the Bible show up in community. We need each other to practice Christianity and to create this culture. What if we substituted the phrase “life-long Methodist” for “lawyer” in the story? Can we see ourselves in this conversation with Jesus? This is not a scripture meant to push other people, it’s meant to call us forward.
- Invite them to explore other gifts of our tradition that show how to live this culture. How do we love God and neighbor?
- Offer the wisdom of Brother Lawrence: our sanctification depends more on loving God in each activity than it does in trying to change our activities. Observe the life of your congregation and community over the course of a week. All the busyness. All the funny, inconvenient, ordinary stuff. Narrate it back to them, matter-of-factly. Then introduce Brother Lawrence’s observation. Without changing any particular activity, what could change if your congregation simply loved God fully and completely in each ordinary act?

- Would the tone and content of meetings change? What about the bus ride to school? Would the persons responsible for setting up tables get caught whistling and smiling? Could doing laundry, cooking dinner and filling out expense reports become spiritual practices? What might someone say to the clerk at the grocery store or the UPS driver? Don't be afraid to use humor. Laughter and delight can help us break into new realities. Help your congregation imagine a new reality—a new culture of Every Day Sacramental Living.
- The doing of love in the Great Commandments changes how we see the world. This kind of love is not for special moments. But all moments. Each person, each conversation, each event is an opportunity to experience something holy. God calls us to see the sacred worth of each loaf of bread and each neighbor. We are asked to practice our faith in cars, barns, conference rooms and DMV lines. All places call for love of God and each other.
- Ask: How do you practice the Christian Two-Step? Where have you taken on the eyes of love to help you see the sacred in the ordinary all around us?
- Allow for a time of quiet musical reflection. Invite the congregation to bring forward their works of art to display around the altar.

CHILDREN'S WORSHIP

Handoff-Ready Resource

Week 3: Called to Culture—Living Sacramentally

Focus: “Our call extends to every dimension and every moment of our lives.”

Luke 10:25-28

THE TITLE

“The Big Two and What to Do”

THE POINT

The children will remind the adults of the two great commandments of our faith: love God and love each other. These provide the bedrock commitments of Christianity. In today's scripture, Jesus pushes these commitments even further. It is not enough to recognize them. We are called to *do* them. The children will also remind the congregation how to respond to this call.

THE WISDOM

Human beings have a special ability to experience things anew as we watch someone else experience them. That means the uninhibited play of children can be an especially holy thing in worship. As children interpret the words of scripture with their own bodies, they can lead the adults in responding anew emotionally to the words. Treated respectfully as worship leaders and not comic relief, children can invoke something beyond the expected, familiar, intellectual engagement.

THE BEGINNING

Adapt this introduction to fit your congregation.

Central Church, will you let your children lead you in worship?

(Welcome and greet the children.)

Today we are going to remember the two most important things we are called to do by God.

What do you think those two things could be? *(Let the question linger for both adults and children.)*

Jesus tells us that everything else about our faith depends on the Big Two. Would you help teach them to the adults? Then we're going to remember what Jesus tells us should come next.

THE ACTION

Jesus says that the first important thing is loving God in a special way. A really big way. With all your heart. And with all your being. And with all your strength. And with all your mind. That's a lot of love. That means every bit of you loves. Could you show me with your bodies what you think it feels like to love this much? *(Read through the list again as the children face the congregation. Let them play with interpreting.)*

(Slowly.) **Love God. With all your heart. With all your being. With all your strength. With all your mind.**

(Respond genuinely and with encouragement.) **Wow! That's a lot of love.**

Would you repeat this to the adults so that they remember?

Love God this much! *(Throw your arms open wide.)*
<Children repeat.>

(Slowly repeated so they can interpret.) **Jesus says that the next important thing is loving other people. As if their lives depended on it. And as much as you love yourself! That's lot, too.**

**Would you show me with your bodies what you think it feels like to love like this?
Love each other. As if their lives depended on it. And as much as you love yourself.**

(Again, respond with earnest encouragement.)

Would you repeat this to the adults so that they remember?

Love each other this much! *(Throw your arms open wide.)*
<Children repeat.>

Now there's one more thing that Jesus tells us about the Big Two. Jesus says to go and do these things. Don't just think about loving God and each other. Don't just know that it's important. Do it!

What would happen if we took all of that love for God and each other, and instead of just feeling it, we did something about it? What kinds of loving things could you do? *(The children may answer, but it's also fine if everyone simply ponders the question for a moment.)*

THE TURN

The rest of the congregation needs to think about this, too. Could you lead them in remembering this challenge? Just repeat the words after me to the congregation. *(Speak quietly to them, but encourage them to speak loudly to the congregation to lead.)*

Hear these important words!

<Children repeat.>

Love God!

<Children repeat.>

Love each other!

<Children repeat.>

Completely!

<Children repeat.>

Like it's the most important thing ever!

<Children repeat.>

Because it is.

<Children repeat.>

Then go and do it.

<Children repeat.>

This is how Christians live!

<Children repeat.>

Remember?

<Children repeat.>

Amen.

(Thank the children quietly and earnestly for their help.)

ALTAR & VISUAL ARTS AND DRAMATIC ARTS

Handoff-Ready Resource

Week 3: Called to Culture—Living Sacramentally

Focus: “Our call extends to every dimension and every moment of our lives.”

Luke 10:25-28

Note: This week, in addition to the following experience, the congregation will be invited to artistically engage the entire worship service. That means painting, drawing, sculpting, knitting and doodling their way through the liturgy. Coordinate with the pastor to set up an art station in the back of the sanctuary where people can select supplies. Give them options. Invite the sense of delight and play. They will be encouraged to interpret this question: Where do I see the sacred in the ordinary?

Possible supplies include: play dough, plain paper on clipboards, small canvases (or large ones!), water colors, paint brushes, and cups of water, crayons, pastels, clay, sets of beads and string. Include children’s artistic gifts, too.

Toward the end of worship, the congregation will be asked to bring these works forward to place around the altar. Coordinate where and how they should be displayed.

THE TITLE

“Holy and Here”

THE POINT

As Christians we are called to a way of life. Not just in special moments, but all moments. God can be present in each gesture, thought and motion. No matter where we are. Our call is greater than a particular job. We are called to create a culture that recognizes the holy in the right here.

THE ORDER

Call to Worship

THE COORDINATION

Various items representing everyday life will be brought forward and placed on a small table between the altar and congregation. After each has been placed, the prayer is read.

THE PREPARATION & PROPS

Keep the set up from the first week, but clear the altar area of the props from last week (i.e., sign, plant, boots, etc.). Consider placing them in the narthex or along the kneeling rail. The goal is to keep these symbols in the ongoing worship conversation without making the altar area too cluttered.

If you don’t already have one, add a large Christ candle on the altar. Set up an empty, small table closer to the congregation.

The following props will be set on this table during the Call to Worship:

- a laundry basket filled with unfolded clothes
- a big bag of groceries
- a lap top or computer screen
- a stack of books and newspapers
- a large cooking pot
- a set of car keys

Adapt these items as needed to represent the everyday life activities of your congregation.

THE ACTION

Recruit a volunteer to carry each item, one at a time, to place on the small table. You can encourage the person to embody how that item makes him/her feel. Allow a brief pause between each for the congregation to imagine their own ordinary activities with that item.

After the last one, someone takes the lighted Christ candle from the altar and slowly carries it down to set among the items—while the prayer is read.

THE PRAYER

The following prayer (based on Psalm 139) is read while the Christ candle is being moved to sit among the items on the smaller table.

O Lord, you are inescapable.
You have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I stand up.
When I come and when I go.
Your presence goes with me everywhere.
In grocery stores. And corn fields. And laundromats. And parking lots.
Even church pews.
O Lord, you are inescapable.
Holy and here.
Thanks, thanks, thanks.

Week 4: Called to Table—Listening in Seasons of Change, Confusion & Crisis

Focus: “Call comes with uncertainty. Fortunately, it also comes with a seat at the table.”

Exodus 16:14-18

John 6:35

There will be difficult times when we don't feel God's presence, when we can't hear God's call or when the call we thought we heard runs headlong into trouble. How will we live in these seasons? We are invited to the table again. For daily bread. For living bread! To give thanks! To renew our bodies. To rehearse our magnificent hope for all creation. To re-member the heavenly banquet right here among us! And somehow, when we turn from this table, we see how to take that next step.

SCRIPTURE

Daily Bread, Bread of Life

Exodus 16:14-18

When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface were thin flakes, as thin as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” They didn’t know what it was.

Moses said to them, “This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Collect as much of it as each of you can eat, one omer (two quarts) per person. You may collect for the number of people in your household.’” The Israelites did as Moses said, some collecting more, some less. But when they measured it out by the omer, the ones who had collected more had nothing left over, and the ones who had collected less had no shortage. Everyone collected just as much as they could eat. (CEB)

John 6:35

Jesus replied, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (CEB)

SUMMARY

We remember this worship journey: God reaches out for conversation, for relationship. All persons are called by God. In all dimensions of their lives. And God's call reveals the sacred right here in ordinary life. Alleluiah! Right?

But also know this: there will be times when we don't feel God's presence, when we can't hear God's call or when the call we thought we heard runs headlong into crisis or confusion. Sometimes life is hard. Especially hard. Jobs end, or never really begin. The path forward changes. Or disappears into darkness. Surviving seems more important than sacramental living.

Bottom line: Call does not come free of uncertainty. Our faith doesn't sugarcoat this truth. The Bible is thick with these stories. Christianity's truths aren't just for fair weather, happy times. They are for all times. They hold up to storms and adversity.

So how does this work? How do we listen for God in times of change, confusion and crisis?

Return to the basics. Come to the table. Gather around daily bread. Give thanks. Together. Remember whose world it is. Remember the stories—*our stories*—that God goes with us through deserts, despair, even death itself. Give thanks again. Remember that in whatever mess or difficulty we find ourselves, we are fed, forgiven and precious. God doesn't forget or give up. God keeps calling. And providing daily bread, what we need for that day. Come back to the table in thanksgiving.

The Israelites lived for forty years in this pattern. Just when hungry bellies and anxiety were ready to overtake them, manna appeared. It couldn't be stockpiled into a source of security. But there was enough for each day. Enough for each person. One day at a time. They could remember their dependence on God and take the next step, each day—even when they could not see the final destination.

Jesus took the miracle of manna one step further. He became living bread, giving himself to accompany each new generation of wilderness wanderers. This table is essential for our call. It nourishes us for another day. It allows us to see that God is laboring to provide a heavenly banquet for all creation. Here on earth as in heaven. In communion, we take this promise into our very bodies. And somehow, when we turn from this table, we see how to take that next step.

Give thanks. Then ask *what is one step I could take—for now?*

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MONDAY MORNING NOTES

The Starting Point

In our culture, bread is often an add-on to the meal. Something extra on the side. In Hebrew, however, bread is the same word as life. Recall the meals that have been life-giving to you. Share these scriptures and your reflections with a loved one over a meal.

Called to what is not here . . . yet

The doctrine of call isn't a simple formula that provides easy answers. Many persons can't find jobs. Or can't find work with a living wage. Still others around the world work in conditions that in no way affirm their dignity or worth. Millennials in the United States can expect to change jobs every three to four years! Did these persons not respond appropriately to their calls? Please make clear to your congregation that the answer is a resounding NO! We live in a broken world, one that God yearns to heal and redeem. And we live in a time of enormous change. Even as God calls us to jobs that actually exist, God is also

calling us to a reality that doesn't yet exist. We live in an in between time. Part of each person's call must go beyond the question of *what am I called to do now?* We must also ask *what am I called to move toward?* For all creation.

This week, take time to observe honestly the challenges, crises and uncertainties of your congregation and community regarding their calls to work and live. Don't gloss over them with cheap grace. Name them. Specifically and concretely. Offer them in prayer. God hears our laments and cries.

Distortions of Call

We are called to be partners with God toward the flourishing of all creation. There are numerous cultural distortions of call, however, that can make discernment difficult. These distortions are a crucial reason why the task of discernment belongs in community. We need the accountability. We need the anchors of the Church Universal, interpreting and being interpreted by scripture for thousands of years. We need the wealth of spiritual practices in our faith tradition. We need Wesley's categories of reason and experience. We need something larger than ourselves to answer the larger-than-life distortions.

This week, prayerfully consider the following distortions. Where do you see them in your congregation and community? How do we speak back to them in compassion and truth?

- In answering call, you will look and feel successful.
- In pursuing call, you will be richly compensated for your efforts in material wealth.
- Once you answer call, nothing will change.
- Once you get it right, things won't get turned upside down.
- Call is all about your personal happiness and fulfillment.
- Periods of difficulty mean you must not know your calling.

A Return to the Early Church?

Theologian William C. Placher suggests that we are in the middle of an enormous transition regarding call. The Early Church understood its calling as simply living a Christian life in the middle of a complicated, diverse, threatening world. As Christianity became more popular and accepted—even becoming a way to fit in and get ahead—call shifted. By the Middle Ages, religious vocations emerged as a response to the need for deeper practice of faith, set apart from the larger culture. The Reformation began another shift, treating every job as a vocation. Martin Luther declared each person's trade or profession a calling included in the "priesthood of all believers."

Today, however, amid increasingly complex social and economic forces, some theologians are calling for a return to the Early Church's understanding of call. Surrounded by new options and distorted messages of success and material wealth, perhaps we are not called to particular job, but to a far more difficult task: "Simply living as Christians." (William C. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005).

Do you see this transition occurring in your community? Does this make the doctrine of call more difficult or easier to discern?

The “For Now” Method of Pursuing Call

So how do we talk about call amid so much uncertainty? The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously encourages us: “You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.” During seasons of confusion, crisis and change, we return to this pattern of living. One step at a time. Theologian Steven Garber describes this as “living proximately.” Proximate means the next, or closest thing. When we can’t see the ultimate goal, we take a step to the next closest thing. When we can’t reach for perfect mercy, justice and living conditions, we choose the next, imperfect step toward them. *For now*, what is one thing I can do to pursue some justice? *For now*, what is one step I can take to participate in God’s hope for the world? *For now*, what can I do until the fullness of call becomes clearer?

Who could this “for now” method help in your community? How could you challenge your congregation to step into new places and challenges with this method?

(See Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices on Resistance, Reform, and Renewal--An African American Anthology*, Eds. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999) and Steven Garber, *Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good* (IVP Books, 2014)

For the honor and glory of God

A friend shared his experience of losing a job and working in a department store to provide for his family. It was a time in which he felt utterly lost. The hours were long. The work seemed meaningless. The customers saw him as little more than a thing. Then he experienced a transforming awareness: he could nonetheless offer each working moment to the honor and glory of God. He began asking God to use his ordinary interactions to bless each customer. For each shirt he tagged or floor he swept, he consciously dedicated his labor to the honor and glory of God. He asked, “How could you use even this, Lord?” Work practices became spiritual practices.

What tasks this week do you need to simply offer for the honor and glory of God?

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WORSHIP WAYS & WORDS

SPECIAL PREPARATION: Communion elements & paper footprints

First, review the Children’s Worship, Communion Resource and Bonus Benediction.

Prepare paper cutouts in the shape of a footprint or shoe. Each worshiper should have one. Insert them into the bulletins or hand them out before worship. You can vary the sizes and colors if you’d like. After the Call to Worship, in a time of reflection, invite the worshipers to write on these cutouts: **one step they can take toward the Kingdom of God**. During the Children’s Worship, the children will collect these steps and help place them on the floor surrounding the altar area. The footprints should be turned so that they appear to be leaving the table and heading into the world. Once we have been nourished at the communion table, all we have to do is take one step.

After collecting and arranging these footprints around the altar, the children will lead the invitation to communion.

The Bonus Benediction is in the style of a poetry slam. It’s meant to be read forcefully and expressively. And it will require preparation and practice. Who could you ask to offer this benediction?

Note: This week's theme invokes experiences of uncertainty, crisis and confusion. Don't be afraid that worship will somehow be a downer. Or that you need to cheer it up. Name the difficulties honestly and fully. And trust our faith stories and symbols to answer them. Worshipers don't need cheap cheerfulness; they need the priceless truths of God's love and care for us during difficult seasons.

REFLECTION

What if God is calling us . . .

not to what *is*, but what *will be*

When the banquet is laid out on earth as it is in heaven,

And all creation pulls up a chair to the table.

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: In seasons of difficulty,

All: Give thanks and take one step.

One: In times of crisis, confusion or uncertainty,

All: Give thanks and take one step.

One: When you can't see the destination and there is no map.

All: Give thanks and take one step.

One: When darkness surrounds, but you remember the light,

All: Give thanks and take one step.

One: Because in each one step, we are not alone.

All: Give thanks and take one step.

One: Because in each one step, we are one step closer

All: Give thanks and take one step.

One: To the heart of hope and help and God, who says

All: Give thanks and take one step.

In a time of reflection after this Call to Worship, invite each person to give thanks and write one step that we could take toward bringing God's kingdom on earth as in heaven. During the Children's Worship, these will be collected and arranged around the altar.

INVITATION TO COMMUNION

The Children's Worship resource sets up the invitation to communion.

If you're happy and joyous, you are invited!

Children: Come to the table. Just as you are.

If you're sad and uncertain, you are invited!

Children: Come to the table. Just as you are.

If you need daily bread or forgiveness or hope . . .

Children: Come to the table. Just as you are.

There's a seat with your name on it: Child of God!

Children: Come to the table. Just as you are.

CONFESSION & ASSURANCE

Holy One, there are times when we do not know the path ahead. Forgive us when fail to notice the miracle of daily bread all along the way.

(In a time of silence, deepen your confession before God.)

Hear these words of assurance to us from Isaiah:

Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it? I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness. (Isaiah 43) (CEB)

COLLECT, COMMUNITY PRAYER & LORD'S PRAYER

Add in specific prayers from your community and the world. Following each category of prayer, allow for a time of silence, then lead the congregation in a response.

Holy One, you are our nourishment, our hope, our strength.

Call us again to daily bread. Give us this bread of life. Gather us at your table to remember again this great good news: Nothing—not deserts, despair or death itself—can keep us from you. We are ready to hear your call. We are ready to see the new thing that you are doing among us. We are ready to take another step with you by our side.

(In the times of silence, offer your own prayers.)

For all those listening for God's call in seasons of change, confusion or crisis. And all those still yearning for a life with purpose and meaning.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the specific aches and joys of this community.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the wounds and wonders of the world this week.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

For the work of your church, holy and universal, here among us and around the world.

(Time of silence.)

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

We join our voices with all our brothers and sister in Christ by praying—

The Lord's Prayer

OFFERING PRAYER

For each step with you, we give thanks. For each day's bread, we give thanks. For each glimpse of the journey ahead, we give thanks. May our gifts express our greatest commitment and dearest hope: to see your Kingdom's feast come on earth as in heaven. Amen.

BENEDICTION

See Bonus Resource: Benediction for this benediction, in the style of a poetry slam. Be sure to allow adequate preparation time for the person offering it.

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SERMON STARTERS

- Begin by remembering the significant moments of the last three worship weeks. Then share these quotes about call:

“Vocation or call is what holds together both the most remarkable joy and sorrow of life.” N.T. Wright, *Reflecting the Glory: Meditations for Living Christ’s Life in the World* (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1998)

Call is “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” (Fredrick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993)

“Work, whether it involves plumbing a sink or plumbing the depths of the cosmos, in the hands of a Christian is ministry.” (Ben Witherington III, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011)

“ . . . it’s possible to see a connection between our time and the earliest centuries of Christianity, when Christians were outsiders in a world dominated by non-Christian values and assumptions. Simply living as Christians could be our calling too.” (William C. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005).

- Ask: How do you describe call? How is your conversation with the Lord of Heaven and Earth unfolding? If appropriate, share stories that have emerged from the Spiritual Practice through this worship series.
- Explain that one of the great strengths of the Christian story is that it doesn’t just make sense in good times. It also anticipates seasons of difficulty and speaks to those as well. We can talk about tough things honestly before God.
- Offer a compassionate list of some of the challenges faced by your community. Narrate how this may be a season of change, confusion or crisis for some (or many). Review some of the worldwide headlines in the news. How have these things affected our sense of being called by God? How do we hear God’s voice?
- Suggest that the distortions of call in our culture may make it even more difficult to listen for God’s voice. Explain those distortions that affect your community most powerfully:
 - In answering call, you will look and feel successful.
 - In pursuing call, you will be richly compensated for your efforts in material wealth.
 - Once you answer call, nothing will change.
 - Once you get it right, things won’t get turned upside down.
 - Call is all about your personal happiness and fulfillment.
 - Periods of difficulty mean you must not know your calling.
- Remind them that our hope is not in accumulating material stuff. And while change or difficulty may come, God promises to stay with us. We are given the miracle of manna and the bread of life. Just what we need! As a community. The promise of daily bread even when we are in wilderness. The promise of an intimate relationship with the Lord of Life no matter where we are.
- Offer William Placher’s description of the change occurring right now. Perhaps in this time of complex social and economic and cultural change, we need to return to the basic question of call: *How do we simply live as Christians?* Offer the following strategies to

listening for call in difficult seasons. For each share your stories and reflections from the week.

1. Offering each action to the honor and glory of God (from Monday Morning Notes). Share your stories.

2. “For now” (or proximate) living, where we don’t wait for the perfect path or clear destination, but take one step at a time toward God’s purposes. This method requires discernment *together*. Share your reflections of how this might work in your community.

3. Returning to the communion table. Over and over again. Suggest that sometimes confusion or uncertainty occurs because we are called not only to what currently exists. We are also called to what might exist, what will exist when the Kingdom comes as fully on earth as it is in heaven. The communion liturgy looks forward to this time. It practices it right here among us. So that we rehearse its truths and remember them. We give thanks and receive. We give thanks and take one more step into the Kingdom. We give thanks and listen again for the God who comes in everyday life and ordinary bread. Ready?

- After a short time of reflection, begin the coordinating communion liturgy.

CHILDREN'S WORSHIP

Handoff-ready Resource

Week 4: Called to Table—Listening in Seasons of Change, Confusion & Crisis

Focus: “Call comes with seasons of uncertainty. Fortunately, it also comes with a seat at the table.”

Exodus 16:14-18

TITLE

“Come to the Table, Just as You Are”

THE POINT

The children will collect the footprints from the Call to Worship and arrange them around the altar. Then they will offer the invitation to communion. Let them reassure the worshipers that a seat at the communion table is not earned. And the table etiquette does not exclude those who can't come forward with cheerful faces and pleasant conversation. God invites us all to come as we are. And once fed, we are ready to take another step toward bringing God's kingdom here on earth.

THE BEGINNING

Central Church, will you let your children lead you in worship?

(Welcome and greet the children.)

Today we get to remind the congregation of something important about this communion meal.

THE ACTION

What kinds of faces are you expected to make when you come to church? *(Pause for them to consider this.)* **Do you think we are always supposed to have on a happy, joyful face at church? Show my your happy, joyful faces.** *(Most children will agree that these belong in church.)*

But I want to tell you some really good news. So listen carefully. It's a fine thing to bring your happy faces to church. But it's also okay to bring your confused, or sad or hurting faces here. In fact, this is one of the best places to come if you're feeling confused or sad or hurting. Show me these faces. Those belong here, too.

In fact, we celebrate a meal where we remember that God loves us just as we are. Sometimes happy and sometimes sad or hurt. We are always invited to this table. It helps us remember that God provides what we need. And once we've been fed, we can take the next step that God wants us to.

Would you help me collect all of those footprints that the congregation wrote on? Would you bring them to me? We'll place the footprints around the altar together, and then invite everyone to come for communion a little later in worship.

(Send the children out to collect and bring back the paper footprints. Arrange them on the floor around the altar so that they appear to be leaving the table and heading into the world. Once complete, help the children face the congregation to give communion invitation.)

THE TURN

Do you think it's okay with God if the grownups come here with tears? Do you think it's okay with God if they come here afraid sometimes? Let's remind them. Would you line up and hold out your blessing hands? I'm going to say some worship words. And after I finish each line, would you say

this: “Come to the table. Just as you are.” Let’s practice with our confident faces and voices.
(Practice pointing to them and repeating their response.)

If you’re happy and joyous, you are invited!

Children: Come to the table. Just as you are.

If you’re sad and uncertain, you are invited!

Children: Come to the table. Just as you are.

If you need daily bread or forgiveness or hope . . .

Children: Come to the table. Just as you are.

There’s a seat with your name on it: Child of God!

Children: Come to the table. Just as you are.

Amen!

ALTAR & VISUAL ARTS

Handoff-ready Resource

Week 4: Called to Table—Listening in Seasons of Change, Confusion & Crisis

Focus: “Call comes with uncertainty. Fortunately, it also comes with a seat at the table.”

Exodus 16:14-18

THE POINT

This week’s scripture is the miraculous story of manna in the wilderness. In a time of hunger and uncertainty, God provided daily bread. Just what they needed to take the next step on the journey.

THE PREPARATION

This week, each worshiper should receive the cutout of a paper footprint. They can vary in size and color. During worship, the congregation will be invited to write on it one step that they could take toward God’s kingdom. During the Children’s Worship, the children will collect them and place them around the altar.

From last week, set up the small table and symbols (i.e., laundry basket, grocery bag, keys, etc.) in another area of your church, perhaps along a hallway or entrance. Keep the Christ candle in the middle. You could add a sign, “Called to Everyday Sacramental Living: Are you listening for God right here?” You could also group all of the symbols from Week 2 in another area, along with additional copies of the Called to Work handout. Help your congregation remember this entire 4-week worship journey.

The anchoring symbol for this unit has been the meeting tent. Keep the drape of the tent directly over the altar or table. This week, however, decorate the tent lavishly. The simple natural fabric should be dressed up with additional drapes, ribbons and candles to highlight the communion meal.

If you’ve set up other tents for prayer and meditation, be sure to include them in this transformation.

The table should be set for communion. Against the backdrop of the simple tent, use your most ornate chalice and paten.

THE COORDINATION

The Children’s Worship also provides the invitation to communion. The Dramatic Arts resources provide a responsive benediction. Check with your pastor for any additional set up instructions.

DRAMATIC ARTS

Handoff-ready Resource

Week 4: Called to Table—Listening in Seasons of Change, Confusion & Crisis

Focus: “Call comes with uncertainty. Fortunately, it also comes with a seat at the table. And after we’ve been nourished, we are ready to take that next step.”

Exodus 16:14-18

THE TITLE

“Ready!”

THE POINT

Having been nourished at table, we turn out to the world. Ready to respond. Ready to serve. Ready to be sent. Even into a world full of uncertainty.

THE ORDER

Benediction or Response to the Sermon

THE WISDOM & THE CHALLENGE

This resource is written in the style of a poetry slam. It’s meant to be read quickly and forcefully. High energy! And its rhythmic patterns and internal rhymes will require some practice. The congregation’s response should be included in the bulletin or on screens. The poet should point to the congregation when it’s time for the response. Practice the response once before starting the slam. Can you imagine sending the congregation out with this challenge!

THE SLAM

In this time of refugees, drones, dollars, bombs, and hunger quietly hiding in homes.

In crisis and confusion, when we wander again, the desert and then feel more sand than certainty in each searching step.

In seasons of silence, when we no longer hear God yearning for us, urging us, disturbing us.

Remember your call. And remember to say:

All: Here I am. Ready.

When change comes and cancels out schemes that used to work, dreams we expect to work; blaming, complaining.

When the screaming facts of the world shout the reminder that rewards of work and systems of worth are more often rooted in privilege, not blessing

When we are told to chase achievement and succeeding instead of whatever it takes to live in the Kingdom of God

Remember your call. And remember to say:

All: Here I am. Ready.

Because we, the beloved, have met the One who turns things downside up and outside in.

Because we, the beloved, know that this One will not rest, forget or give up until all creation flourishes

Because we, the beloved, are expected to call every least, last, lost, left-out brother, mother, father, sister, precious child as beloved as well.

Remember your call. And remember to say:

All: Here I am. Ready.

We cry out to the One beyond politics, place and privilege

To call to us again.

Each one of us again.

All of each of us again.

Make the next step clear.

Take the next step, clear?

Just one

Just for now

Boldly

Even in sand.

Even upside down.

Even now.

As we remember we are called and remember to say:

All: Here I am. Ready.

Amen.

COMMUNION RESOURCE

THE PREPARATION

These resources work best as the culmination to the series on Week 4. This Eucharistic prayer is designed to follow the sermon, after a short time of reflection.

THE GREAT THANKSGIVING (SHORTENED VERSION)

Lift up your hearts.

Give thanks to the God of tent conversations and daily, living bread!

Holy One,

In the beginning, you labored to hold back the chaos and create.

You, beyond all time, space, and comprehension, worked to make a home for us.

And while we left your garden in shame to travel the wilderness,

Still you could not stay away.

You longed for us.

And sent manna to our hungry, anxious bellies.

You loved us. Imperfect us.

And left the garden to camp out with us.

To meet with us.

To have a relationship with us. Just as we are.

When we distorted your call,

When we turned away again and again from the meeting tent,

You came to camp out among us once more.

Not in a secure dwelling,

But in the frail human skin of your son Jesus Christ.

So that we would know you wanted conversation,

So that we would know you understood the challenges of change, confusion, crisis

So that we would know you would follow us even into desert, despair and death itself.

And that none of these would be the final word!

Your love was greater!

And nothing could keep us from it!

On the night before meeting with death,

Jesus called to his imperfect disciples,

And he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread and gave it to them, saying:

“Take and eat. This is my body given for you. Do this and remember me.”

And when supper was over, he took the cup, and gave thanks to you, gave it to the disciples,

saying “All of you, drink from this. This is a new covenant. For the forgiveness of sins. Do this and remember me.”

In remembrance of the way he defied the distortions—in celebration of the way he stayed with us in difficulty, even death—we offer ourselves. With great thanksgiving! As a holy and living sacrifice. We join in the work of Jesus in this everyday world.

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us and on these gifts.

May we know you in the bread and cup.

May we be redeemed and renewed for the next step of our call.

Toward the heavenly banquet: your Kingdom here on earth just as it is in heaven. For all creation.

Through Jesus, and with the power of the Holy Spirit,
We offer all these things for the honor and glory of you, almighty, all-loving God.
Amen.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES GUIDE

Listening for God's Voice in Everyday Life

Jesus asks his followers lots of questions. Listen to them again. Let them soak in. See which ones resonate, delight or trouble you. Discuss them prayerfully. These are the kinds of conversations that God calls us to—the kinds that reveal purpose and meaning in ordinary life. Reading them, you may have questions of your own. Ask them. Continue the conversation.

- If salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? (Matt 5:13; Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34)
- If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? (Matt 5:46-47; Luke 6:32-34)
- Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothes? (Matt 6:25)
- Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? (Matt 6:27)
- Why do you see the splinter that's in your brother's or sister's eye, but don't notice the log in your own eye? (Matt 7:3; Luke 6:41)
- Why are you afraid? Where is your faith? (Matt 8:26; Luke 8:25; Mark 4:40)
- Who among you has a sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath and will not take hold of it and pull it out? (Matt 12:11; Luke 13:15-16)
- Can people go into a house that belongs to a strong man and steal his possessions, unless they first tie up the strong man? (Matt 11:29)
- How can you speak good things while you are evil? (Matt 12:34)
- Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? (Matt 12:48; Mark 3:33)
- Have you understood all these things? (Matt 13:51)
- Why did you begin to have doubts? (Matt 14:31)
- Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your traditions? (Matt 15:3)
- How much bread do you have? (Matt 15:34; Mark 6:38)
- Why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you don't have any bread? Don't you understand yet? (Matt 16:9-10; Mark 8:17-18)
- Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives? (Matt 16:26; Mark 8:36-37; Luke 9:25)
- You faithless and crooked generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? (Matt 17: 17; Mark 9:19; Luke 9:41)
- If someone had one hundred sheep and one of them wandered off, wouldn't he leave the ninety-nine on the hillsides and go in search for the one that wandered off? (Matt 18:12; Luke 15:4)
- Can you drink from the cup that I'm about to drink from?" (Matt 20:22; Mark 10:38)
- What do you want me to do for you? (Matt 20:32)
- Why do you test me? (Matt 22:18; Mark 12:15)
- Which is greater, the gold or the temple that makes the gold holy? . . . Which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift holy? (Matt 23:17-19)
- Why do you make trouble for this woman? (Matt 26:10; Mark 14:6)
- Couldn't you stay alert one hour with me? (Matt 26:40; Mark 14:37; Luke 22:46)
- Do you think that I'm not able to ask my Father and he will send to me more than twelve battle groups of angels right away? (Matt 26:54)
- My God, my God, why have you left me? (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34)
- Why do you fill your minds with these questions? (Mark 2:8)
- How can Satan throw Satan out? (Mark 3:23; Luke 11:18)
- Does anyone bring in a lamp in order to put it under a basket or a bed? Shouldn't it be paced on a lampstand? (Mark 4:21)
- Don't you know that nothing from the outside that enters a person has the power to contaminate? (Mark 7:18)
- Why does this generation look for a sign? (Mark 8:12)
- How many baskets full of leftovers did you gather? (Mark 8:19-21)
- What are you arguing about? (Mark 9:16, 33)
- Why do you fill your minds with these questions? Which is easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up and walk"? (Luke 5:22-23)

- A blind person can't lead another blind person, right? Won't they both fall into a ditch? (Luke 6:39)
- Why do you call me "Lord, Lord" and don't do what I say? (Luke 6:46)
- Which of them will love the lender [who forgave the debts] more? (Luke 7:42)
- Do you see this woman? (Luke 7:44)
- Who touched me? (Luke 8:45; Mark 5:30)
- Who do the crowds say that I am? (Luke 9:18; Matt 16:13; Mark 8:27)
- And what about you? Who do you say that I am? (Luke 9:20; Matt 16:15; Mark 8:29)
- What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it? (Luke 10:26)
- What did Moses command you? (Mark 10:3)
- What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves? (Luke 10:36)
- Which father among you would give a snake to your child if the child asked for a fish? If a child asked for an egg, what father would give the child a scorpion? (Luke 11-13; Matt 7:9-10)
- Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? (Luke 12:51)
- How is it that you don't know how to interpret the present time? (Luke 12:56)
- If one of you wanted to build a tower, wouldn't you first sit down and calculate the costs, to determine whether you have enough money to complete it? (Luke 14:28)
- What woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won't light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? (Luke 15:8)
- If you haven't been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? (Luke 16:11)
- Weren't ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? No one returned to praise God except this foreigner? (Luke 17:18)
- Won't God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? (Luke 18:7)
- Why do you call me good? (Luke 18:19; Matt 19:17; Mark 10:18)
- What do you want me to do for you? (Luke 18:41)
- Then what is the meaning of this text of scripture: the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone? (Luke 20:17; Matt 21:42)
- So which one is greater, the one who is seated at the table or the one who serves at the table? (Luke 22:27)
- When I sent you out without a wallet, bag, or sandals, you didn't lack anything, did you? (Luke 22:35)
- Judas, would you betray the Human One with a kiss? (Luke 22:48)
- What are you talking about as you walk along? (Luke 24:17)
- Wasn't it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and then enter into his glory? (Luke 24:26)
- Why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts? (Luke 24:38)
- Do you have anything to eat? (Luke 24:41)

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