



Cedar Ridge Community Church
Spring 2016 Discipleship Series
crrc.org



Community Church

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Introduction

At Cedar Ridge, we want to be a community that celebrates our relationship with God and our own distinct perspective on what it means to follow Jesus, and at the same time makes room for and embraces doubt, uncertainty and mystery. Through this series we will explore what God is like as revealed through scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Building on our Fall series, "The Big Picture—Gospel, Kingdom, Church," we will focus on the significance for our lives of the Trinitarian view of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At the same time, we will consider how our understanding of God is limited and evolves over time. Our hope is that through this series we will develop a more passionate, loving and worshipful relationship with God, a greater acceptance of each other's spiritual journey, and a stronger commitment to partner in God's work of healing and reconciliation in the world.

Overview

The eight weeks of the series will cover the following themes:

- *April 3: How do we Understand God?*
Holding in tension the view of God as a "person" and as a "force." Determining what is true and real through scripture, tradition, faith and reason.
- *April 10: Faith as a Process*
Seeing faith as a journey. How our collective understanding of God has changed over the course of history; and appreciating how our personal understanding moves through various stages.
- *April 17: God as Trinity*
Recognizing God as Mystery. Three in One: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- *April 24: Spring Day of Service*
Engaging in various practical projects to demonstrate love, service and community.
- *May 1: God as Father*
God embracing and transcending both masculine and feminine. Divine fatherhood expressed in unconditional and boundless love.
- *May 8: God as Son*
The Word made flesh. Jesus as fully human and fully divine. Implications of the identity and roles of Jesus.
- *May 15: God as Holy Spirit*
Celebration of the Pentecost story—the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in and to the first followers of Jesus. The role of the Spirit in our lives.

- *May 22: Living with Mystery*
Celebration of our diversity and unity as a church body. Surrendering in awe and wonder to the mystery of God. Living with doubt and uncertainty, and letting it drive us deeper into God.

Our prayer is that through this series, as a community we would gain a deeper understanding of and passion for God as one who is so much bigger than our concepts, and who is eminently worthy of our love, worship, and discipleship.

Practicalities

- In this packet you will find the discussion questions for each week. Each of them assumes you have heard the message for that week, so if you were not able to be at Cedar Ridge that Sunday, **please listen or watch the message online** (www.crc.org/messages/).
- **Week 1 (April 3)** is an introductory week. There are no discussion questions for this week. However, there are introductory comments that provide a foundation for the series as a whole (together with Appendices 1 and 2, which provide additional information). Groups may wish to reconnect socially following the Easter break.
- **Week 4 (April 24)** is our Spring Day of Service. In the Trinitarian view of God we see a rich, mutually encouraging, and interdependent relationship between the Father, Son and Spirit. The community we see in God through Trinity should lead us into greater engagement and servanthood in society. We will meet at 9 AM for breakfast and a brief time of worship before heading off to various service projects.
- **Week 8 (May 22)** is the final week of the series. In place of discussion questions based on that week's message, there is a reflection exercise related to the series as a whole. We encourage you to think through the reflection questions during week 7 and come prepared to discuss your responses at the discipleship group meeting in week 8.
- In all discipleship series we encourage you to leave ample time to **pray together** as a group. The final discussion question is designed to facilitate a transition into a time of prayer.
- Each week, the materials include a **prayer exercise or activity**. These exercises and activities are intended to deepen reflection on and application of the message theme, and to build good spiritual practices in our lives. A journal is helpful for recording thoughts and feelings related to these exercises.

- We are all God’s children—whatever our age! Older children and youth will be covering similar, age-appropriate material during their Sunday morning groups. We encourage you to find creative ways to incorporate **children and youth** in your discipleship group meetings, and to engage with them on the topic throughout the week. To support this, each week contains an exercise or activity that is suitable for children.
- None of us fully understand what and who is God. This series will attempt to explore partial answers through metaphors and mental concepts, but God remains a Mystery to be worshipped and pursued. This series is likely to surface questions, concerns and doubts related to the reality of God, God’s nature and God’s character. For those interested in so doing, **questions can be submitted** to questions@crcc.org or placed in the drop box in the sanctuary, and we will attempt to explore some of these questions each week throughout the series. Additional questions will be addressed at the workshop on May 17, as described below.
- Appendix 3 contains suggestions for **additional reading** on the themes covered in this discipleship series.

Additional Activities

- There will two workshops to accompany this series from 11:45–1:15 on April 17 and May 15. These are open to all, and childcare as well as light snacks will be provided. Please sign up in the commons for the following:
 - **Helping Children in their Quest for God (Sunday April 17):** This will be a supportive time when parents and other caregivers can share their frustrations and lessons learned with communicating about God to their children. We will discuss helping children grow in their understanding of and love for God, and we will pray for one another in this area.
 - **Embracing Doubt and Q&A (Sunday May 15):** This will be a safe space to share doubts and questions concerning God’s nature and character without fear of judgment or pressure to accept any “answers.” There will be open discussion, as well as time to pray together in the midst of our uncertainty.
- The message on week 8 (May 22), “Living with Mystery,” will include the theme of celebrating our diversity and unity as a church body. After the service we will celebrate with a **Community Potluck**. Please bring your favorite savory or sweet dish to share. Sign up online or in the commons.

Spring Discipleship Series 2016 Mystery, Meaning, and the Quest for God

Week 1: How do we Understand God?

This is an introductory week without any discussion questions (these begin next week). But during the message on this Sunday we will explore some key issues that will most likely come up time and time again throughout the series. We will ask ourselves questions like: How do we know what we know? How can we trust what we know? How can we understand God? What are the mechanisms through which we can gain such an understanding, and can we really trust those mechanisms?

At first this may sound very complicated and philosophical—in fact this kind of subject has a complicated sounding philosophical name: epistemology. But we will take a fairly straightforward approach centered around four fairly universal ways we all make up our minds about what is real—including our understanding of God. These are Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.

What is interesting is that very religious people may think their understanding of God is determined exclusively by scripture (that is the Bible for Christians). But in fact, no matter what our convictions about scripture, we all bring our own traditions, reasoning, and experience of life to its interpretation. So all four of these are at work. Likewise very non-religious people may consider their view of reality to be based purely on their reasoning. But we all carry a huge weight of personal and cultural tradition to our reasoning in the form of presuppositions, and much of that has been influenced deeply by religion and scripture—whether we consider ourselves religious or not.

So we will take a look at all four of these as honestly and openly as we can. Annex 1 (How can we Understand God?) and Annex 2 (How can we Approach Scripture?) might be helpful here, so we recommend reading these before the series begins.

We will also consider the nature of mystery, and how this is not just an inevitable part of religious life, but of life in general (including science). There are some things we just can't or don't seem able to understand, and might never. Rather than force us into some kind of ignorant faith where we are pressured to "just believe it," we want to acknowledge this mystery and make room for uncertainty and doubt as a normal part of faith. At the same time we want mystery to inspire us, not paralyze us. This "unknowing" can drive us deeper into the mystery, motivate our quest for meaning, and draw us into an experience of wonder and inspiration that leads to worship.

Activity with children¹

Using the quadrilateral is like making baking powder biscuits. There are multiple ingredients and we use different quantities of each.

Baking Powder Biscuits

2 cups flour

3 teaspoons baking powder

1 teaspoon salt

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup shortening

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup milk

Flour is the primary ingredient. It provides the bulk and nutrients of the biscuits. Scripture is like flour: it tells the story of God's work and relationship with the world through the Hebrew people, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the witness of the apostles and the early church. The Bible contains God's word of love, healing, and hope for a world that is hurting. Scripture is like the flour in the biscuit recipe because, as flour provides the "stuff" of the biscuits, the Bible provides the foundation for understanding Christian faith and life.

The shortening and milk bind the flour together. They also add protein and fat that contribute to flavor, texture, and nutrition. Tradition is like milk and shortening: it helps us to understand scripture. Through tradition we learn from those who have gone before; who have read, struggled with, and prayed scripture. Tradition also teaches that the church is the body of Christ in the world. We are all called to play our part in God's story.

The baking powder gives life to the biscuits by making them fluffy and light. Reason is like the baking powder: it allows the light of God to bring life to Christian faith. God gives us the freedom to question, think, and teach one another. Reason helps us to see God's presence at work in the world, and to be aware of God's majesty and mystery.

The salt works with the baking powder to make the biscuits fluffy. It also enhances the flavor provided by the shortening, milk and flour. Experience is like the salt: it is our real-life encounter of God-with-us in our ordinary, every-day life. Experience is the Holy Spirit's work in, with, and through us that gives life and meaning to the good news of God for the world in Jesus Christ.

Like the ingredients in biscuits, the four components of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (scripture, tradition, reason and experience) are all needed, and all work together to help Christians grow more like Jesus.

¹ Adapted from: <http://accountablediscipleship.blogspot.com/2009/07/teaching-quadrilateral.html>

Spring Discipleship Series 2016
Mystery, Meaning, and the Quest for God

Week 2: Faith as a Process

None of us would deny we have changed our views about many things throughout life. This is because over time we change; we have experiences and acquire information that challenges our status quo. The same is true for our culture as a whole: whether in science, sociology or politics, our collective viewpoints are very different from a hundred years ago, and different still from five hundred years ago. Yet as human beings, we often cling to our present-day understanding as if it were the only way to see reality—as if it were some kind of absolute we have finally discovered, once and for all. The same is true (perhaps even more true) in religion. We use all kinds of metaphors, models and language to try to describe God and our own reality. These are our best attempts to understand, and at some level we know they do not do justice to the reality they seek. But we quickly become attached to these models and want to set them in stone; to some extent we want to make them God. The danger is we see faith as something static—an arrival rather than a journey of love, adventure and possibility.

In this week's session we will explore how it is perfectly normal and indeed healthy for our convictions about God (as well as the universe and everything else!) to change over time. We will look at faith as a dynamic process by considering how the understanding of God evolves throughout scripture, and how Jesus reinterpreted and renewed the old traditions to bring a different understanding still. We will look at our own lives and recall how we have changed, and consider various stages of faith and understanding that seem common to us. The intent is that we would be open with our theology and convictions (ready to accept those who differ from us and willing to embrace change ourselves) while at the same time deepening our passion and commitment to God as we push further on this exciting spiritual journey.

This week's discussion questions

1. What struck you about the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
2. Read Numbers 23:19-20 and Exodus 32:14. How do these passage differ in how they describe the "changeability" of God?
 - Which one gives you most comfort, and why?
 - Which one challenges you most, and why?
3. Read Exodus 20:3 and Isaiah 45:5. How do these verses differ in the way they describe God?

- Do they both assume the existence of only one God (monotheism)?
 - The speaker on Sunday said that the Bible presents a continuously evolving understanding of God. What do you think about this? How is this relevant or not to our own understanding of God?
4. Have you changed your mind about issues of faith, theology or God over time? Share an example of this with the group.
 - What caused you to change?
 - What was that process like? Was it sudden or slow? Was it peaceful or disruptive for you?
 - How did other people respond to your change?
 - How does it affect your life now?
 5. The speaker on Sunday shared some common “stages of faith” that we all seem to pass through: simplicity, conflict, openness and convergence. These were obviously generalizations but did you identify with any of them?
 - Could you see some of your own story in those stages?
 - What kind of stage are you generally at now?
 - Are there aspects of your faith and life that are at other stages?
 6. How could appreciating these stages and the nature of faith as a journey help us accept ourselves more? How could it help us accept others and be less judgmental?
 7. Break into smaller groups of two or three. Share briefly with one another where you feel you are currently on your spiritual journey. Then take a few minutes to pray for one another. This might mean prayer for support in a current struggle or thankfulness and celebration.

Personal reflection

The ancient Ignatian exercise called “Examen” has been practiced by followers of Jesus for centuries. It involves taking a moment at the end of the day to look back over the day’s events and notice moments where God seemed very present (or we were very aware and responsive to that presence), and moments where God seemed absent (or we were very unaware and unresponsive to God’s presence). This week set aside an hour to do a “Life Examen” by looking back on significant moments in your whole life. Obviously you will not be able to go into daily detail, but begin with your childhood and trace your spiritual journey through life considering the following:

- What were moments or seasons where God seemed very close?
- What were moments or seasons where God seemed far off?
- What were significant turning points in your life and why?

- Which people have had a significant impact on your life and how?
- How are you different now? What about that is good? What about that is not so good?

Make notes in your journal as you do this exercise and then reflect on the following:

- Are there any things from the past that you have lost and need to regain? How can you regain them?
- Are there any belief systems, people or influences from your past that you resent? How can you leave those things behind and let go of resentment?
- Give thanks to God for your journey, the people in it and for where you are now.
- What are the next steps you feel God wants you to take on your journey?

Reflection with children

Take time to review with your child(ren) the highs and the lows of their young life. Children typically love to hear stories of when they were infants—their birth story, first words, early illnesses, funny stories, etc. Tell them about times when you felt God close to you and your child, as well as times which were hard for you and your child. Ask them about the highs and lows they remember.

Celebrate the highs with your child and remind them that God was with you both, even in the lows. Pray together, thanking God for being with you, and asking God to help you be more aware of God's presence.

Spring Discipleship Series 2016 Mystery, Meaning, and the Quest for God

Week 3: God as Trinity

The concept (and doctrine) of the Trinity has been central to Christianity and important to followers of Jesus for centuries. The traditional orthodox Christian view of God is Trinitarian: a view that holds God to be one being who exists simultaneously and eternally as a mutual indwelling of three persons—three persons, one substance. This week we will explore this concept with the goals of appreciating the richness of our Trinitarian heritage, deepening our sense of awe at the mystery and wonder of God, and being drawn into a more passionate pursuit of God.

Today the notion of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are quite familiar, but for the first followers of Jesus this was quite problematic. It caused all kinds of debate and conflict, culminating in the establishment of doctrinal creeds in the first few centuries after Jesus. Disagreement was not always handled well, and our purpose in this session is not to define a stance to which everyone has to agree. A thorough historical and philosophical exploration of the theology of the Trinity is beyond the scope of this series, but we do want to explore how we can experience God more fully as Father, Son, and Spirit. We will look at a number of models and metaphors to help us engage, but ultimately we will try to surrender the need to rationally understand everything and let the mystery of God inspire and transform us.

This week's discussion questions

1. What was your experience with doing a "Life Examen" this week? What thoughts or insights do you want to share with the group?
2. What struck you about the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
3. In the message on Sunday, the speaker described certainty as a myth.
 - In what ways do you agree or disagree with this statement?
 - Do you find it troubling or comforting? Why?
4. Are mystery and uncertainty easy for you to embrace? Do you tend to favor rational thinking and explanations rather than mysterious ones? Why is this?
 - In what way could you benefit from a more rational approach to God and life in general?
 - In what way could you benefit from a more mysterious approach?

5. How comfortable are you with the concept of Trinity?
 - Does it make sense to you?
 - Do you think it is important?
 - What is difficult or challenging about it?
 - What is inspiring or empowering about it?
 - What metaphors or models have you found helpful to appreciate it?

6. God as Trinity suggests mutual love, deference, acceptance, and community within God. What does this mean God might be like when engaging with our reality?
 - How might this concept affect how we view and act toward ourselves?
 - How might this affect how we view and act toward others?

7. God is Father, Son, and Spirit: to which of these do you most easily relate and why?
 - How do you think your background, family of origin, and life experience might have affected how you view each of these ways of experiencing God?
 - How could we develop a more positive approach to some of these ways of seeing God?
 - How could focusing on God in some of the ways that come less naturally to us, help us grow?

8. Take a few minutes as a group to sit in silence and try to enter into to the mystery of God through breath prayer. Set a timer to go off after 5 minutes so you can all participate without having to check the time. Start by quietly asking God's Spirit to fill you and make you aware of God's love. Sit comfortably with your back straight, feet planted on the floor, arms relaxed and hands supported in your lap. Close your eyes and relax your shoulders. To begin, listen to your breath as you breathe. Feel your breath in your nostrils, chest and abdomen, inhaling and then exhaling fully and deeply—hold your exhale a bit longer than usual to completely expel air. This has a very soothing, cleansing effect. Breathing accompanied by prayer will also help you to "wake up" and "breathe in" the love of God as you calm your mind, heart and body.

As you breathe, imagine the room filled with God's love for you. Take a few moments to get used to this. Allow yourself to imagine God's passionate affection for you. As you breathe in, breathe in God's love. As you breathe out, relax into this love. With each in-breath imagine yourself being filled more and more with God's love. With each out-breath relax deeper and deeper into this love. Don't resist it but surrender to it. If your thoughts stray or you begin to feel unloved, just become aware of your breathing again and focus on breathing in God's love.

Personal reflection

This week set aside 5 minutes every day to practice the above breath prayer. Try to do this at the beginning of the day if you can. Follow the same guidelines and set a timer for yourself. After each time you practice, write down your reflections about the experience in your journal. In what ways did you experience God in this practice? Also write down any ways in which you notice differences in how you experience your day.

Reflection with children

Help your child(ren) create their own breath prayer. A breath prayer should be short enough to say in one breath, and easy to remember. It has two parts: something to say while breathing in, and something to say while breathing out.

First, help your child(ren) pick a name for God that is special to them, such as:

Loving Lord...

Heavenly Father...

Jesus, my friend...

Mighty God...

Next, help your child(ren) think of a need/request, or prayer of thanks such as:

...help me be calm

...thank you for loving me

...let me know you are with me

...I love you

Encourage your child(ren) to say this prayer throughout the day, particularly when they are anxious, sad, or feeling far from God.

Spring Discipleship Series 2016
Mystery, Meaning, and the Quest for God

Week 5: God as Father

The traditional Trinitarian view of God is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This week we will focus on God as Father—a notion of God that is often deeply impacted by our own experience of human fathers. The description of God as Father is used sparingly in the Old Testament, and—while God is never referred to directly as Mother—feminine imagery associated with giving birth and nursing is also employed. In the gospel accounts we read that Jesus referred to and addressed God as his Heavenly Father; and the significance of this relationship was something with which the New Testament writers and early church leaders wrestled.

While clearly God is not male and is not a man, the concept of being sons of the father evocatively expresses the intimate and empowering relationship that God desires for each of us. To be a son in first century Palestine was to be a recipient of the father's blessing, an heir to the father's inheritance, given authority, and a place in community. Unlike any human father, however, God's love is totally unconditional and boundless. God the Father delights in his children, is always present and attentive, and is unfailingly trustworthy. As God's children, we are created to bear God's likeness, partner in God's work, and grow ever more like our Heavenly Father.

This week's discussion questions

1. What was your experience with the breath prayer this week? What feelings or insights do you want to share with the group?
2. What stood out to you in the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
3. *"God is spirit, neither male nor female. All our language of God is metaphorical. Metaphors are tensive images. That means that they all simultaneously need to be upheld and negated. God is our father and God is not our father; God is our mother and not our mother. If we forget the "is not," then we create an idol—that is, we make God into the image of a creature. By keeping our metaphors of God active simultaneously, we keep ourselves aware that none of them is to be taken literally and that none of them is adequate for the Holy Mystery who is God." —Sandra Schneiders*
 - Do you agree with the writer's understanding of God as Father?

- In what ways do you find it helpful to think of God as Father? In what ways do you find it unhelpful?
 - Has your experience of father figures or other males in your life impacted your approach to God? If so, how?
4. Read Luke 15:11-31. This story is often referred to as “The Prodigal Son.” (Prodigal is defined as “spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant.”)
- Why might this story be retitled “The Prodigal Father”?
 - In what ways does the father in this story act in a surprising way?
 - Which brother do you most identify with, and why? What might this reveal about how you view God as Father?
 - What does this parable reveal about how Jesus viewed God as Father?
5. In 1 John 4:8 we read, “God is love.” Substituting “God” for “love” in I Corinthians 13:4-8 results in the following:
- God is patient, God is kind. God does not envy, God does not boast, God is not proud. God does not dishonor others, God is not self-seeking, God is not easily angered, God keeps no record of wrongs. God does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. God always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. God never fails.*
- In what ways does this help you to understand the love of God?
 - Which of these aspects of love do you most associate with God as Father? Why?
 - Are there any aspects of love in this passage that you find difficult to associate with God as Father? Why?
6. Read I John 3:1-2.
- In what way do you feel yourself to be a child of God? Are there times or ways you struggle to see yourself as a child of God?
 - What do you think the writer means by “the world does not know us”?
 - How will we be “like Christ” one day?
 - The writer calls on those who are waiting for Christ to appear to “purify themselves.” What do you think this means?
7. Read Matthew 5:43-48. Loving our enemies and praying for those who seek to do us harm can be very difficult. How might understanding that we are children of the Father help us in such circumstances?

8. Are there areas of your life where you need to experience more of the Father's unconditional love? Are there situations in which you need to show this kind of love to others? Spend sometime praying for each other to experience and live out the love of the Father this week.

Personal reflection²

Sit quietly for a few minutes thinking about your own image of God the Father. When you think about God as father what thoughts come to mind? Make a list of your impressions in your journal.

Now imagine yourself sitting on God's lap, held in a loving embrace. Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (New Living Translation) below:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

Make a second list of the nature of love. Compare your two lists. Sit quietly again in the presence of God, allowing God's love to wash over you. What images that you have of God the Father need to change? Note these in your journal. Pray that God may lead you into a deeper awareness of God's love for you.

Reflection with children

The exercise above can also be done with children. Talk to your child(ren) about what ideas come into their minds when they think of God the Father. In what ways is God like their human father? In what ways is God different?

Encourage your child(ren) to imagine curling up on God's lap. What does this feel like? What are some things that God might say to you, God's much-loved child?

² Adapted from <http://godspace-msa.com/2015/06/08/meditation-monday-the-father-heart-of-god/>

Spring Discipleship Series 2016 Mystery, Meaning, and the Quest for God

Week 6: God as Son

Jesus Christ is the most defining issue to Christianity; it is Jesus and our beliefs about him that make Christianity unique. In some ways this is ironic since Jesus never seemed to be trying to start a new religion, and both his teaching and practice were always inclusive and community building rather than separatist. In this session we will look at the person of Jesus, beginning with his place in Trinitarian thinking. In fact it was the appearance of Jesus that first caused the movement towards a concept of Trinity as his followers attempted to reconcile Hebrew monotheism with the prevailing cultural Greek (Platonic) thinking and the emerging realization and assertion that Jesus was divine. Before Jesus, no one was philosophically and abstractly trying imagine a concept of Trinity, let alone define the second person of the Trinity.

We will explore the question, nature and implications of Jesus' divinity, and then consider the different ways in which Jesus is viewed. We will consider Jesus as the historical human figure called Jesus of Nazareth and the various claims made about his identity (usually made about him rather than by him). We will consider the identity of Jesus existentially (who he was and is) as well functionally (what he does, i.e., how these roles affect us). We will engage with Jesus as

- *Messiah*: Jesus as liberator of humanity at the most profound and cosmic sense
- *Son of God*: Jesus as the beloved of God—God lovingly made flesh and born to us
- *Son of Man*: Jesus, the servant of God, the human who most fully expresses the divine and makes a way for us into the heart of God
- *Savior*: Jesus as the one who reconciles us to God and brings healing to the universe
- *Lord*: Jesus as the King of the Kingdom of God who rules through love, humility and servanthood bringing justice and peace

This week's discussion questions

Most of the questions this week are discussions of passages in the Bible. For some of the reading it is specifically suggested to read from a modern translation called "The Message."

1. What was your experience with meditating on God as Father this week? What feelings or insights do you want to share with the group?
2. What struck you about the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
3. Some people say, "I like Jesus but not Christianity." Others say, "I am okay with God, but I am not sure about Jesus." What are your thoughts and feelings about Jesus? Share with the group your own personal perspective.

4. Read John 1:1-14. The Greek word "logos" is translated as "the Word" here. The speaker in the message on Sunday inferred that this is a Greek philosophical term for the ultimate force of reason and wisdom in the universe.
 - What does this concept mean to you?
 - If Jesus is the logos, how is this relevant to our lives?
5. The doctrine of the Trinity adopted by the church in the first few centuries after Jesus infers Jesus to be divine: a "hypostatic union" of divinity and humanity. In other words, Jesus is fully human and fully divine, and his humanity and divinity are inseparable.
 - What do you think about this?
 - In what ways is it important whether or not Jesus is divine?
 - What are the implications of divinity?
6. Another inference of the doctrine of the Trinity is that, in Jesus, humanity is inseparably connected to the Trinity. This notion has caused followers of Jesus over the centuries to consider Jesus as one who paves the way towards deification for humanity. In other words, humans can take on attributes of divinity and become more like Jesus.
 - What do you think about this?
 - What might such a process of deification look like?
 - In what ways is this realistic for us?
7. In the message on Sunday we reviewed various spiritual and theological titles and roles that have been ascribed to the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. Review the list below and discuss what each of these mean to you. Which ones sit most comfortably with you? Which are more difficult to accept? Why is that?
 - Messiah (the Christ): read Mark 8:27-30
 - Son of God: read Mark 1: 9-11
 - Son of Man: read Mark 8: 31-32
 - Savior: read Luke 19: 9-10
 - Lord: read Philippians 2:5-11
8. At Cedar Ridge we talk a lot about following Jesus (we call this "discipleship"). How might what we have explored in this series affect our practice of discipleship?
9. Take a few moments to sit in silent prayer as a group. Focus on the aspect of Jesus that most inspires you from the content this week (Messiah, Savior, Lord, etc.). Try to picture Jesus this way in your imagination and spend some time focusing on this. Then give thanks for the gift of this particular way in which Jesus comes to you. You could pray this silently or some may want to pray out loud.

Personal reflection

This week set aside 5 minutes at the beginning of each day to pray the “Jesus Prayer,” a prayer that has been prayed by followers of Jesus for centuries. It is very simple and goes as follows: *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner.*

This is not a prayer to try to make us feel guilty about ourselves as sinners. Rather it is an acknowledgment of our frailty and imperfection, and a movement towards a loving, merciful God. This is a journey into the loving heart of God expressed through Jesus where we find self-acceptance and the acceptance of others.

Set a timer for 5 minutes. Sit comfortably with your back straight, feet planted on the floor, arms relaxed and hands supported in your lap. Close your eyes and relax your shoulders. To begin, listen to your breath and focus on it for a few moments. Then begin to say the prayer. Repeat it slowly over and over again. You can pray out loud or silently. Whenever you get distracted, return to your breathing and begin the prayer again.

After each time you practice, write down your reflections about the experience in your journal. In what ways did you experience God in this practice? Also write down any ways in which you notice differences in how you experience your day.

Reflection with children

Help your child(ren) to use their imaginations when they pray. Use the following meditation exercise, adapting it as needed to suit your child(ren)’s age.

Imagine you are in a safe, peaceful place. This could be in your bedroom, sitting by a stream, laying down in the soft grass, or some other place that makes you feel calm.

Imagine Jesus coming towards you, and sitting down beside you.

What would you like to say to Jesus? Maybe there are things that are worrying you, things that are making you sad, or perhaps you are disappointed about something. Maybe you are excited about something, or feeling happy, or want to say thank you for a good thing that has happened recently. Tell Jesus all about these things—either out loud or in your mind.

Be still for a few minutes and allow Jesus time to speak. What might Jesus be saying to you?

Close by thanking Jesus for being with you always, for loving you, and for caring about everything that matters to you.

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Week 7: God as Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the third person in the ancient concept of God as Trinity. This week also coincides with Pentecost, which is a celebration of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in and to the first followers of Jesus as recorded in the book of Acts. This event was described as a “baptism” in God’s Spirit—a soaking, a deluge, an outpouring. The implication is that God’s Spirit is present everywhere and freely accessible to us all.

We will explore the reality of God as Spirit through the lens of this story. We will look at the story in its historical context, and trace the longing and desire of God to be present in and to God’s people (that’s everyone) from the beginning of and throughout the biblical narrative. We will look at the consequences and impact of the presence of the Spirit in the lives of Jesus’ followers, and explore what the Spirit does in us today. We will celebrate the radical good news that God is with us—in our reality, right here, right now—setting us free from evil and darkness, and empowering us to live lives of love, peace, and joy. God’s presence through the Spirit in the whole world (present both in God’s followers and despite them!) is healing, reconciling, and bringing everything and everyone back to a state of love and beauty.

This week’s discussion questions

Most of the questions this week are discussions of passages in the Bible. For some of the reading it is specifically suggested to read from a modern translation called “The Message.”

1. What was your experience with praying the “Jesus Prayer” this week? What feelings or insights do you want to share with the group?
2. What struck you about the message on Sunday? What did you find most helpful? What was most difficult or challenging?
3. Read Acts 2:1-21. How is the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit described in this story?
 - What impact does the Holy Spirit have on the people in this story (the disciples, onlookers, Peter, etc.)?
 - Would you like to have been a player in this story? Why or why not?
 - How might this story be significant today?

4. Read Jeremiah 31: 31-34 and John 16:12-15. The festival of Pentecost is based on the Jewish festival of Shavuot, which among other things is a celebration of Moses receiving the Law of God on Mount Sinai.
 - What do the passages you read suggest about the differences between “law” and “spirit”?
 - In what way does law help us live well?
 - In what way does spirit help us live well?
 - What does it mean in Jeremiah where God says *“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts”*?

5. Read Luke 4: 14-21. What does Jesus imply the presence of God’s Spirit will look like?

6. Read Romans 7:14 – 8:4 in The Message version.
 - In what ways do you identify with the writer (Paul) in this passage?
 - What does this passage claim sets us free from evil? How does that work?
 - How might this apply to our lives personally?

7. Read Galatians 5:16-26 in the Message version.
 - In what ways do you identify with this passage?
 - What are some of the traits of a life filled with “self-interest”?
 - What are some of the traits of a life filled with God’s Spirit?

8. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-20.
 - What are the implications of us all being part of “one Spirit”?
 - How might this affect how we view one another, and especially those with whom we disagree?
 - What are the implications for our church community?

9. Go around the group and have everyone share any specific needs they have at the moment. These could be physical, emotional, social ... anything. Then take some time to pray together as a group. Invite the Holy Spirit into all these issues generally, but pray for each situation specifically as well.

Personal reflection

Look back over each week of the series so far. Reflect on the messages, the group discussions, and your personal thoughts. Look back at your journal entries, and your experiences in the weekly practices. Consider the following questions and then come to the next group meeting ready to share your responses:

1. How has this series affected the way you think about God and your spiritual life? What has changed or what do you think needs to change? What were some “aha” moments for you? What are the implications of a new way of thinking for you?
2. How has this series affected the way you feel towards God and your spiritual life? Where has passion been stirred up? Where have you been troubled? What “heart” response do you feel God is seeking from you?
3. How has this series affected what you do and how you live? What specific practical change is being challenged in you? What should you stop doing? What should you start doing? What former habits, practices or actions do you need to get back to?

Reflection with children

Encourage your child(ren) to think back over what they have learned during this series—this may include age-based groups on Sunday mornings, as well as involvement in the discipleship group, and/or weekly reflections.

Ask your child(ren) to think of three or four different words that describe God. Talk to them about why they chose those words. Share with them the three or four words you would chose, and why they come to your mind when you think about God.

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Week 8: Living with Mystery

Over the past few weeks, we have explored many challenging issues and concepts. Some of these have been quite “heady,” abstract, metaphysical concepts about God. Others have been more personal and practical. In the final session this past Sunday we celebrated the journey we have been on in two main ways. We embraced the mystery of God, recognizing that we will never work everything out, accepting uncertainty and doubt as a normal and healthy part of faith. We also allowed the mystery of God to draw us into awe, wonder and worship, and we committed ourselves more passionately to the quest to follow Jesus.

With this in mind, in this final week, we will look back over the series and reflect on the messages, the group discussions, and our personal thoughts.

This week’s discussion questions

1. How has this series affected the way you think about God and your spiritual life? What has changed or what do you think needs to change? What were some “aha” moments for you? What are the implications of a new way of thinking for you?
2. How has this series affected the way you feel towards God and your spiritual life? Where has passion been stirred up? Where have you been troubled? What “heart” response to you feel God is seeking from you?
3. How has this series affected what you do and how you live? What specific practical change is being challenged in you? What should you stop doing? What should you start doing? What former habits, practices or actions do you need to get back to?
4. What is one thing you intend to be different in your life as a result of this series? Go around the group and pray for each person and what they shared.

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Appendix 1: How can we Understand God?

At Cedar Ridge we strive to be devoted followers of Jesus who live out our faith with conviction and passion. We are also very aware of our frailty and imperfections, and how they can muddy the way we perceive reality and understand God. How then do we determine what is real about God, life, the universe and everything, in order to pursue it all so passionately?

We all have different views and perspectives that result in us holding certain convictions about what is real and true. No matter how convinced we are that our way is the right way or that our view of God is the most accurate, we have certain lenses through which we look at the world and through which we build a picture of reality.

As followers of Jesus we place high value on the Hebrew and Christian scriptures—what we now call the Old and New Testaments in the Bible. We cherish the Bible and believe that God speaks to us in unique ways through it. In all we say and do, we seek to be instructed by the rich resources given to us in the Bible: stories, poetry, letters, histories, and more.

Another lens we look through is our cultural traditions. Our upbringing, family life, and religious background significantly influence how we see the world. Likewise, what we have experienced in life firsthand has a significant impact and creates another lens. If we are used to having a lot of control over outcomes in life we will likely have a different view of the universe than if we were very poor or had little control over circumstances. Our rational thought also plays a big part. We often deem something to be untrue if it does not “make sense.”

Rather than seeing these “lenses” as negative, we recognize them as a normal and healthy part of the human experience. But we also recognize that it can be helpful to be aware of them, so we can understand how they may have played a role in determining our own unique view of reality, and so we can apply them in creating a balanced view of what we believe to be true.

We are not alone in this way of viewing reality; John Wesley took a similar approach. Wesley was an Anglican priest in 18th century England who experienced significant spiritual renewal and eventually founded the Methodist movement, which became an important denomination throughout the world and especially in North America. Wesley described a four-fold approach to understanding reality, which later, after his death, was termed the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (the term was actually first used by Albert C. Outler, a 20th century American Methodist). Wesley maintained that, as followers of Jesus, we look through four important lenses to determine what is real and true: Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason.

This is not a unique perspective. The famous Enlightenment philosopher John Locke in his *Essay on Human Understanding* described a similar fourfold set of lenses through which we perceive what is real: "Experience of our senses" (experience), "Experiences of our intellect" (reason), "Human authority" (tradition), and "Divine authority" (scripture). Enlightenment philosophers like Locke were by no means trying to defend religion, but they clearly saw how influential religion ("Divine authority") was in forming our view of the world, whether or not we believe in God or validate as "holy" a certain set of scriptures.

So these four ways of looking at the universe (or experiencing the human reality) may get called different things and may not be perfect descriptors, but are at least somewhat helpful in breaking down the complex process of understanding reality and (for us) seeking to understand God. At Cedar Ridge we have not in any way set out to try to "follow" the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. But upon reflection we have found it to be a helpful way to describe how we see truth and reality. We are also encouraged to know that we are not alone in taking an approach like this. Let us look at each element of the quadrilateral for a moment.

1. Scripture

As stated earlier, we cherish the Bible. Scripture has a huge, central role in our spirituality and the way we follow Jesus. Through scripture we can form an understanding of God as we engage with its deep teaching, history, and poetry. Through scripture we encounter Jesus' life and teaching, and we center our spiritual thinking and practice around it. However, we do not take a literal, fundamentalist approach. We recognize it as ancient writing and respect it so much that we take great care in its interpretation and application. But the Bible does not replace Jesus as the center of our faith. We are followers of Jesus and we see Jesus as the center of scripture. Jesus is the Word of God, and no writing could ever replace that. We don't worship the Bible or our own interpretations of it. We all view the Bible through various lenses and perspectives to determine our own interpretation. That is why there have been so many different views about scripture through the ages. Rather than considering this a problem, we view it as part of the richness of the Bible. It is clear we all bring the other "lenses" of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to bear on our interpretation of the Bible.

2. Tradition

Wesley placed great value on the traditions of the church, and the truths, practices, and understandings passed down through the generations. Cedar Ridge is a multi-denominational church that greatly values church traditions of the past two thousand years. We can perhaps view tradition in three ways, as described below.

- a) **Historical tradition:** Ever since the time of Jesus, spiritual understanding has been passed on through relationships. This is the way Jesus operated. He didn't write a book to capture the truth in his message; he gathered people and lived it out through relationships. The Apostles "caught" this message and likewise passed it on through their relationships and influences; those they influenced passed it on, and so on. Over the early centuries some of this understanding about the way of Jesus was written

down. Some of this became scripture and was included in the biblical canon. Some of these writings did not become part of the Bible, but can be read in ancient manuscripts like the “Early Church Fathers” (writers such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, etc.). Much of this understanding was not written down but passed on in the traditions of the church. Over time different churches emphasized different ways of expressing this understanding, and hence the diversity of expression we have today. That is why we look back throughout church history and embrace ancient traditions and practices that have been tried and tested over time to aid us in our spiritual understanding and development. In this way we have a family connection, generation by generation, all the way back to Jesus himself. That is an incredible thing!

- b) **Cultural tradition:** Whether we have a religious background or not we have all been hugely influenced by the cultural milieu in which we grew up and now live. In fact, to a large extent, we are products of our culture and it has a huge impact on how we see life. Someone born and bred in Baltimore, Maryland, will have a very different view of life to someone born in an Amazonian tribe. If you are a slave in 18th century United States, the story of the Exodus will have a sharply different meaning than for a 21st century Sunday school student in the white middle class suburbs of Chicago. Women will generally have a different understanding of Mary (the mother of Jesus) than men.
- c) **Local tradition:** Not only do the larger forces of history and culture influence our perception of reality, but so do the more specific ones of our local situation. The fact that we have certain friends, that we belong to a certain church community, that we read certain books and listen to certain podcasts, radio or TV shows, all influence how we see life. All of us in one way or another are where we are today (including spiritually) because of relationships to other people who have helped, developed, and supported us. Each of us can point to at least one person in our lives who helped pass on the reality of Jesus to us. Someone passed it on to them, and likewise to that person, and so on right back, generation by generation to Jesus himself. As we saw with historical tradition, this is a wonderful family connection.

When we consider all these forms of tradition (historical, cultural, and local) we endeavor to respond in two ways. Firstly we want to celebrate them and acknowledge how enriched we are by them. Part of this is a realization that we do not have a single thought or understanding in isolation; all of our greatest thoughts about God, all of our most profound understandings and experiences have been influenced by the presence of others in our lives. Moreover, in being aware of this connection to others (both historically through time and locally through our relationships) we are led away from independent thinking and begin to value the thinking of others. We might have a particular view about spiritual truth, but we should always weigh that against scripture and also tradition—the historic traditions of the church and also the local traditions of our relationships. If our understanding seems to differ with ancient traditions we should be careful. That does not mean we are wrong; it does not mean we shouldn’t challenge

anything. Many of the great spiritual reformers and leaders throughout history have challenged traditional belief. Jesus himself challenged the religious establishment of his day but remained deeply connected to and respectful of its tradition, and so too we ought to be respectful and careful. Likewise, the opinion of those around us matters and we should not disregard it. This is the safeguard of community. We don't have to all agree, but through respectfully listening to one another, our understanding and experience of reality can be enriched and deepened. This is particularly true when it comes to interpreting scripture.

Our second response to tradition ought to be one of careful awareness. Not all tradition is good—and clearly the church has developed some particularly harmful ones throughout the ages. Becoming more aware of how we have been influenced can help us to unravel some of the confused, unhelpful or destructive ways we view life and spirituality as religious people.

3. Experience

Wesley also maintained that faith has to be practical: It has to work in the real world. We too value the human experience. We bring our own experience to bear on what we believe to be true. For example, the reason most of us feel comfortable walking or driving across a bridge is not necessarily because we have a deep understanding of the engineering of the bridge, but because we have done it time and time again and found it to be reliable. We have also seen others do it (perhaps as children) and learned from their experience.

That does not mean our belief cannot contradict our experience—that is the very challenge of transformation. In one sense Jesus came to challenge our experience of life, but he also helps us make sense of our experience. For example, on one hand Jesus validated the experience of injustice that many groups experienced (slaves, lepers, ethnic groups, women, etc.), and he helped his followers reinterpret scripture and tradition in light of that experience. Scripture and tradition were being used as “truth” by the religious establishment (such as the Pharisees) to justify the unfair way some people were being treated. People experienced this as fundamentally wrong but their adherence to a certain interpretation of scripture and tradition overrode this experience.

But Jesus took that experience, validated it, and from that basis helped people to see scripture and tradition in a different light. A great example of this is found in Matthew 9:

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew 9:9-13 (New International Version)

Jesus' religious tradition held that it was wrong to eat with sinners and unclean people like tax collectors. But Jesus validated the injustice of this and reinterpreted scripture (quoting the Hebrew prophet Hosea 6:6) in a new light.

Jesus also taught us that the deeper, most real and fulfilling aspects of life are experienced in giving up one's power, control, wealth, and right to success. In that sense he challenges our experience that being an insider, being popular, powerful, and influential are important:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:19-21 (New International Version)

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Matthew 16:24-26 (New International Version)

In these instances Jesus (through the scriptures) challenges our experience.

Another way in which experience is important spiritually is in our devotion to Jesus in the here and now. We are not just following the teachings of Jesus or his example. We believe Jesus is actually present to us now through the Holy Spirit. We can encounter God through a direct present relationship, not just through the Bible or tradition.

4. Reason

Wesley emphasized that faith should engage our whole being, including our mind. That is not to say that we can understand everything: mystery is an important part of our understanding of God, and we do not espouse a purely rational approach to reality. But we all apply reason in determining what we believe to be true, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. Some people have used scripture and tradition to explain some very bizarre things—like the sun revolving around the earth, or slavery and racism, for example. But our reason has caused us to challenge such "reality." When the scripture says:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.

1 Timothy 2:12 (New International Version)

This just doesn't seem reasonable. We bring other factors to bear on this such as other parts of scripture, the tradition of our own community, and our own experiences, and we use reason to work through it all. This is not an attempt to create our own truth, or to avoid the challenge of scripture, but rather an honest endeavor to truly understand.

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Appendix 2: How can we Approach Scripture?

The Bible has been very influential in the history of the world (especially in the West), and hugely formative in the development of Christianity. At Cedar Ridge we cherish the Bible; the points below summarize our approach to scripture, and the place it holds in our community.

1. We deeply cherish the Bible

We hold the Bible to be real, relevant, and true. Scripture plays a huge, vital role in our spirituality and the way we follow Jesus. Through scripture we can deepen our understanding of God as we engage with its teaching, history, and poetry.

2. We approach the Bible with humility

We recognize that the scriptures are several millennia old, written in ancient languages and in totally different cultures to ours. The Bible has multiple authors, all kinds of genres of literature, and is often not easy to understand. We approach it carefully, both in interpretation and application, recognizing that we may not always fully understand either. As a practice, we don't expect to be able to just open it, pick out a few verses, and understand immediately what it means. We need a lot of help to understand—from historic traditions, from others we respect, and most of all from the Holy Spirit. This is a process, and we patiently give it time by making a practice of reading scripture and allowing it to challenge us.

3. We believe the Bible to be inspired by God

Our conviction is that God has inspired the scriptures, both the Hebrew (Old Testament) and Christian (New Testament) texts. But we recognize that these scriptures did not just fall out of the sky, nor did God just hand them over to us directly and already written. In that sense we have a very different approach to scripture than, say, the Islamic tradition, which teaches that the Islamic Scriptures, the *Qur'an*, were dictated directly to the Prophet Mohammed while he was in a trance-like state by the angel Gabriel, and he recited these (*Qur'an* means "recital") to be written down. The Christian approach to scripture (to which we adhere) is that the creation of the Bible was a much more complex and subjective process involving people, their thoughts, opinions, strengths, and weaknesses.

4. The Bible is a human book

The beauty and majesty of the Bible is that it was, through God's inspiration, written by normal limited human beings, with their human grasp of language, their human imagination and understandings. It was edited by humans; manuscripts were copied by humans and passed form generation to generation. It has been protected by humans over centuries, and both

translated and interpreted by humans. This does not take away from its splendor or special place. Rather it takes on greater beauty in its stories, poetry, history, and teaching. It is also a literary wonder; a human one, in which we can see ourselves. All this means that we do not equate scripture with the direct voice of God. Rather, it is in reading scripture that we can hear God's voice. This may seem a subtle distinction, but if we equate scripture to God's voice then we fail to recognize the human vessel through which it has come, and we could use scripture in unhelpful and oppressive ways. The fact that it was written through humans means that it has the human elements of time, culture, language, and social setting (to name but a few). We recognize that at times the Bible seems prejudiced, sexist, and even violent in ways that do not seem congruent with the way of Jesus. Rather than blame this on a prejudiced, sexist, violent God, we see the limits of humanity in this. That is why we approach scripture with care, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to truly hear God's voice.

5. The Bible is part of the community of God

We cannot see the Bible as independent from the Christian (or Jewish) tradition. It is a product of our story, and of our community over centuries. As followers of Jesus we have accepted the Hebrew scriptures, passed onto us by the historic Jewish community, and we have the Christian scriptures (New Testament) today because of difficult decisions made by the Christian community centuries ago. In fact different Christian traditions have different views of what should be included in the Bible, i.e., different views about whether certain writings are inspired by God or not. Most of these writings are related to the Hebrew scriptures and are known as the Apocrypha. Books like 1st and 2nd Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh, have been included by the Roman Catholic tradition but rejected by Protestants. The Eastern and Slavonic Orthodox traditions have tended to include them as scripture but choose different combinations of writings to the Roman tradition.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, most of the content was written in the 1st century and circulated widely among the early church in the 2nd century. These writings included those of the Apostles and Early Church Fathers that did not make it into the final canon of the New Testament, and in the 3rd century there was more debate and deliberation about which writings were inspired by God. By the end of the 4th century, a series of councils of early church leaders (such as the Council of Hippo in 393 and the Council of Carthage in 397) resulted in the 27 books of the New Testament becoming canon. Certain books were left out, such as the Gnostic writings; and other books have been found since, such as the Gospel of Judas. All these decisions about what is canon and what is not were made by human beings who were seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the reason we say the Bible is inspired by God is because the community of Christ, through a careful process over several centuries, deemed that it was inspired.

This was not done randomly; writings were evaluated on three main criteria:

- a) Written by apostles or close associates (i.e., authority given by Christ)

- b) Content is in accordance with teachings of all other books in the New Testament (i.e., internal consistency)
- c) Used by the churches since written, and proven valuable in life and worship

In applying these three criteria, tradition, reason, and experience (the other three elements of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral) were lenses through which the early church looked in determining inspiration. We do the same today in interpreting the Bible.

Whatever way we look at it, the Bible we love and cherish today came to us through a very human community process. It is not hard to see how God could inspire that process, but action was carried out through human beings like us. This does not detract from scripture for us, but rather roots scripture in our historic tradition and in our spiritual community. It makes us value our tradition and God even more, as we recognize the way God has chosen to involve human beings in integral ways in creating, assembling, and preserving scripture. We see ourselves as interwoven into the fabric of scripture, and we see interpreting scripture as a community enterprise, where we don't just make it mean what we want it to mean but we listen to other parts of the community.

6. We take a narrative approach to the Bible

We don't see the Bible as primarily a rule book, statement of doctrine, text book, scientific thesis, or operations manual. Rather we see it as a narrative; the story of God's incredible redeeming love for humanity. All kinds of different genres of literature are used to tell this story (history, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic, gospel, letters, etc.), all of which require different approaches, and different means of interpretation, but all of which are ultimately interpreted in the light of this theme of love and redemption.

7. We see Jesus as the center of the Bible

Jesus is the center-point of this story and is the ultimate authority for how we interpret scripture. This is an important issue because often the Bible is seen as the ultimate authority and Christ is only someone we see through the Bible. At Cedar Ridge, as followers of Jesus we see Jesus as the ultimate truth and authority, and the Bible is something we see through and in light of Jesus. The Bible itself ascribes ultimate authority to Jesus:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Matthew 28:18-20 (New International Version)

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:9-11 (New International Version)

Jesus himself encouraged us to see him as giving ultimate meaning to the scriptures. Jesus is what causes the story of scripture to make sense: Here's what he said to the Pharisees:

You diligently study the scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

John 5:39-40 (New International Version)

In this last passage, Jesus seems to be cautioning us about thinking we can obtain "life eternal" (the deep, real, true life of God) from scripture. That can only come from Jesus himself.

John seems to go even further by saying Jesus is the Word of God.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:1-5 & 14 (New International Version)

8. We read the Bible as a practice

We see reading the Bible as a vital part of our spiritual practice and an essential part of our transformation. We read it as a story of God's love, bearing in mind the historical setting, and we consider ourselves as an integral part of this ongoing story. We read with the whole context in mind, looking at larger sections as a whole rather than picking a verse here and there, to ensure that we catch the larger flow as well as the specifics. We study the Bible, not just academically or scientifically, but rather, in our reading we seek to interact with the Spirit of Christ: we look for Jesus to be revealed. We do this through various traditional practices such as Lectio Divina ("divine reading" where we read slowly, meditate on, and listen to God speaking through the text) and Ignatian reading (using our imaginations to put ourselves in the story), Bible study, as well as reading devotionally and meditatively.

We place particular emphasis on the gospels because they teach us so much about Jesus, and through them we hear Jesus' own words. The rest of the New Testament is the story of the early community of followers living out the teachings of Jesus, and commentary on the teachings and way of Jesus. The Old Testament is the history and context that gives much more meaning and depth to our understanding of Jesus. We take those parts very seriously, but we are careful to interpret for instance Paul's writings and the Hebrew Law and prophets in the light of Jesus. We don't see the Bible as a black and white list of dos and don'ts, but a beautiful love story inspired by God through which we encounter the living Christ. What is so remarkable is that in all Jesus' efforts to share his love and life with the world, he chose not to write a book. It seems that greater than his desire to give us the written word was his desire to give us the Living Word... Jesus himself.

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Appendix 3: Suggested Reading

The Quest

- "Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning" by James W. Fowler
- "The Different Drum" by Scot M. Peck
- "Integral Spirituality" by Ken Wilbur

Trinity

- "Rediscovering the Triune God" by Stanley J. Grenz
- "Trinity and Society" by Leonardo Boff
- "The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology" by John Polkinghorne
- "The Trinity (Milestones in Catholic Theology)" by Karl Rahner

Jesus

- "Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time" by Leonardo Boff
- "Simply Jesus" by N. T. Wright
- "The Jesus I Never Knew" by Philip Yancey
- "Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth" by Reza Aslan

Spirit

- "The Holy Spirit" by Stanley Hauerwas
- "The Holy Spirit and You: A Guide to the Spirit Filled Life" by Dennis J. Bennett and Rita Bennett
- "How to Be Filled with the Holy Spirit" by A.W. Tozer

Mystery

- "The Myth of Certainty" by Daniel Taylor
- "Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty" by Gregory A. Boyd
- "Beauty Will Save the World: Rediscovering the Allure and Mystery of Christianity" by Brian Zahnd
- "Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation" by Thomas Keating
- "The Mystery of God: Theology for Knowing the Unknowable" by Steven D. Boyer and Christopher A. Hall

Spring Discipleship Series 2016
Mystery, Meaning, and the Quest for God

Notes: