



APRIL 16-MAY 14

**EXPLORING
THE DEPTHS**
OUR FAITH IN PROGRESS

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

Week 1: Who Is God?

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. How does discussion about who God is make you feel? Do such discussions make you feel afraid, anxious, excited, inspired or any other emotion? Why do you think you feel this way; what's the backstory?
3. Some of the means through which we attempt to "know" and understand what is real are scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Which of these have been most influential in your own life, and why? How have they helped you, and in what way might they have been a hindrance? Could any of the other means be more helpful to you in this regard?
4. Read Exodus 3:13-15. What about this story suggests God is personal (a person or a being)? What about this passage suggests God is a force or presence (being or existence)? How might each of these perspectives help us understand and experience God more? What are their limitations? In the story, God self-names as a verb rather than a noun. What insight might this give about the nature of divine reality?
5. The 19th century theologian Rudolf Otto described God as a "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*" meaning an awe-inspiring mystery that is both intimidating and yet one we long for. How do you relate to this concept? In what ways does the mystery of God take courage to pursue, and how have you experienced this? In what ways could the mystery of God be beautiful and satisfying, and how have you experienced this?
6. On Sunday, the speaker shared that God's "Being" is the depth we experience in reality through love, loss, pain, joy, suffering, emotion, beauty, horror, etc. (the "ground of our own being"). How have some of these kinds of experiences impacted your own spiritual growth?
7. Read 1 John 4:7-8. If "God is Love," how does this reconcile with the "depth of being" in the previous question? How is it contradictory; how is it affirming?
8. Take some time to do this week's prayer practice (see below) together as a group. Afterwards share how you experienced it, and then spend some time praying for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to quietly and honestly reflect on the experience yourself.

Prayer Practice for the week: A Practice of Being

This is a practice of simply "being." There is no need to stress or strain, no need to perform or prove ourselves. Because God is Love, we can relax and just "be." Center yourself by sitting comfortably in silence with your back straight, feet planted on the ground, arms relaxed, and hands supported in your lap. Close your eyes and relax your shoulders. To begin, focus on your breathing, allowing tension to flow away from your body, and your spirit to be at peace. We will slowly and consciously walk through 4 stages in this exercise. Just relax and go with the flow.

Stage 1: Acceptance

Take a moment to consciously accept that God is present to you right now—present in all your reality. You can't make this any more real or any less real—it's all God. So just relax and accept it. God just "is"—and God is love. Let's take a minute to accept this.

Pause for 1 minute

Stage 2: Letting go

Let go of any evaluative thoughts. These could be thoughts like "Is God really here?" or "Would God really want to be with someone like me?" or "Why on earth am I doing this?" Don't analyze yourself or God. Just choose to ignore evaluative thoughts and let them go. Let's take a minute to do this.

Pause for 1 minute

Stage 3: Resonate

Consciously choose to absorb God without reservation. Ease your way into this: relax, be aware of your breathing, and with each outbreath sink deeper and deeper into God's love. Let's do this for a minute.

Pause for 1 minute.

Now begin to reflect that love back to God. Imagine you are in a constant cycle of receiving God's love and reflecting it back. As you breath in, receive God's love. As you breath out, pour out your love to God. Consciously feel that you are part of this same vibration with God, and let it resonate and grow with every breath. Let's take a minute to do this.

Pause for 1 minute.

Stage 4: Just be

Remain in this posture of giving and receiving love. Let go of any worries about who, what or how you are. Just be conscious that you are... just "be." Let's take a few moments to just "be."

Pause for 2 minutes.

Now return to consciousness of your breathing. Open your eyes and be aware of your surroundings—and give thanks that God is in you, and you are in God in all of this reality you experience.

Week 2: What Is God Like?

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. During this series we have been exploring various metaphors we use to try to explain, understand, and relate to God. Some of these describe God as a person, whereas some are more abstract and describe God like a force, energy, or presence. What have been some metaphors that have helped you? How might regarding God as a person be helpful, and in what ways could it be a hindrance? Discuss the same question for other less personal metaphors for God.
3. Read Genesis 1:1-2, Genesis 1:26, and Genesis 3:21-24. The ancient Hebrew creation myths often narrate God as self-describing in the first person plural and having implied internal dialogue. Why do you think the authors do this? What might it tell us about what God is like? What are the implications for how we relate to God?
4. Read Mark 1:10-11. Most Christian traditions see three manifestations of God in this passage, giving rise to the concept of Trinity. How would you describe the theological metaphor of Trinity to someone hearing about it for the very first time? Which aspects of your explanation describe God as “plural” and how could this help us relate to God? Which aspects describe God as “one” and, again, how could this help us? Which of the three manifestations in the passage do you relate to most naturally?
5. How could God be interpreted as vulnerable and inclusive in the above passage? How do these qualities or properties of God resonate with you? How might divine power look different if viewed through the lens of vulnerability vs. the lens of control? In what ways do you find either of these lenses helpful? How do they help inspire and ground your faith?
6. God is love (1 John 4:7-8) and love is always both beautiful and risky (vulnerable). If you are discussing these questions as a group break up into smaller groups of 2 or 3 to share ways in which you are currently experiencing the beauty of God’s love. Then share ways in which you are struggling to experience love or finding it hard to be vulnerable to love. After sharing, spend some time praying for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to reflect on these issues and then quietly open your heart to God’s love.

Prayer Practice: Examen

Jesus taught us that we are one with God. So God is always present, and we are always present in God. But sometimes we feel isolated, alone, and abandoned—God can seem distant or absent. At times we may feel acutely aware of this, while at other times we might not be conscious of it. This week take some time each evening to reflect on your day, seeking to be aware of times where you were living out of a sense of divine presence or absence.

The ancient Ignatian practice of Examen is a helpful technique for this. Sit quietly alone and take a moment to center yourself. Then “relive” your day in your imagination by allowing your thoughts to guide you through the day’s events. As you do this, focus particularly on your interactions with others—in your family, at work or school, in your neighborhood or online. These “interactions” might be your

internal thoughts or attitudes, or they could be actual conversations and encounters. Do this without judging yourself but simply notice and ask the following two questions:

At what times during your day were your thoughts and actions grounded in God's presence with you?

- What happened?
- How were you grounded and what empowered you in this way?
- Were you aware of this grounding, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it?
- What was the outcome?

At what times during your day did you feel God to be absent?

- What happened and in what way were you ungrounded?
- Were you aware of this lack of grounding, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it?
- What were your feelings or beliefs about the situation and any person(s) involved, including yourself and God?
- Are there ways you could have been more consciously grounded in God's presence? How would this have made a difference for you?

When you have finished reflecting on your day, continue to sit quietly without self-judgment. Allow yourself to sink deeply into God's presence and total acceptance. Let this consciousness pervade your awareness and embrace it.

Try to do this exercise on each of the following days and notice whether you observe any changes or evolutions over the course of the week.

Week 3: Who Is Jesus?

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. Take a few moments to share your own views of Jesus. What do you think and feel about Jesus? Is your connection to Jesus more experiential (like experiencing a presence) or more rational (like following Jesus' teachings)?
3. Why do you think there are so few extra-biblical references to Jesus in literature from the first and second century? What does this say about Jesus? How does this encourage or challenge your faith?
4. Why do you think the Christian tradition included more than one account of Jesus' life (gospels) in the Christian bible? How could this be a help or a hindrance to our understanding of Jesus?
5. Read Mark 8:27-37. What does Peter understand, and how do you think he came to understand it? What does the term "Messiah" mean to you? In what ways can you relate to how Peter reacts to Jesus in this passage? Have you ever felt like this? Why do you think Jesus is so sure his Messiahship will mean his own suffering?
6. Read John 1:1-14. How does this passage describe God in some of the ways we looked at last week: plural and community, vulnerable and inclusive? How do these qualities relate to what Jesus says about Messiahship in the passage from Mark above?
7. Take some time to read and reflect on the following passages:
 - Colossians 1:15-20
 - Philippians 2:1-11
 - Ephesians 1:17-23For each one, take the following approach:
 - Have someone read the passage slowly followed by a minute of silent reflection.
 - Read the passage again with a minute of silence.
 - Then considering the reading and reflection, discuss the question: Who is Jesus?
8. To close, do this week's prayer practice below.

Prayer Practice: Breath Prayer

Take a few minutes each day to sit in silence and sink into the mystery of God through your breath. 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 and chest as you gently inhale and exhale. With each out-breath let go of any tension in your body and mind. Relax and allow yourself to sink into the presence of God all around you. With each breath just relax more and sink further into the mystery of God. Don't try to rationalize it, just allow yourself to sink into the ocean of God's love. When you feel relaxed, imagine you are immersed in God. Now with each in-breath, breathe in God's love. Let it fill you; absorb it, saturate yourself in it—like a sponge in the ocean. Let go and stay in the rhythm of breathing God's love in and out for a few moments until you feel ready to stop.

Week 4: What Is Faith

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What resonated with you? Was there anything with which you disagreed?
2. How have you related to this series as a whole? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
3. Read Ephesians 1:17-23 and John 14:12. How do these two different passages relate? What do you find inspiring about them? What do you find troubling and why? What are the implications of these passages for you personally and for humanity as a whole?
4. The speaker on Sunday shared a personal story to illustrate their own way of trying to understand what faith is. What stories (fact or fiction, biblical or non-biblical) help you understand the bigger picture of faith "in the depths"?
5. Read John 3:1-21 and discuss the following:
 - What do you think Jesus means by the term "born again" (literally "born from above")?
 - How does Jesus distinguish between religion and spirituality in this passage?
 - What are some ways you have heard John 3:16 interpreted in the past? What interpretations fill you with most hope and love?
 - What do you think Jesus means by "save" and "perish" in this passage?
 - How might translating the word for "believe" as "trust" change how we view this passage?
 - How might v.17 influence the way we interpret v.16, and the passage as a whole? How do Jesus' words indicate inclusion versus exclusion?
6. If you are discussing these questions as a group, break up into smaller groups of 2 or 3 to share ways in which you are currently experiencing being "saved" (made whole). Then share ways in which you feel you are "perishing" (areas of your life that need more light and new creation). After sharing, spend some time praying for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to think about these issues and then quietly open your heart to God's love.

Practice for the week: Sacred Reading of Scripture – John 3:1-21

This is a way of praying with scripture that has been used for centuries by followers of Jesus and is often called *Lectio Divina* which is Latin for sacred or divine reading. A regular practice of *Lectio Divina* cultivates the ability to listen deeply to scripture and allow God's presence to open our lives. It helps us listen for the still, small voice of God speaking to us personally here and now, and to grow in awareness of God's presence with us, in us, and around us. We interact with the text of scripture, but unlike Bible study we do not analyze or dissect it. We listen and allow the words to settle into us, as we quiet our thinking to receive them deeply into our hearts.

There are many ways to engage with *Lectio Divina*, but four steps are commonly used: read, meditate, respond, and rest. The scripture is printed below, and you might prefer to listen to it rather than read it (there are some great apps and websites for that such as www.biblegateway.com).

Read: Read the passage of scripture. This is best done slowly and intentionally with an awareness of God's presence speaking through the text. Simply listen for God's voice in this moment. Don't search or seek out the meaning on your own, but rather wait, and listen for something to emerge. When a word or phrase seems to settle on you, take it in and just sit with it in the silence.

Meditate: Read the text again for the purpose of "hearing" or "seeing" God in it. This is a deep searching of the heart. Ponder it, reflect on it, ask how this is applicable to your own experience, your own life. How is God reaching you right now, speaking to you in the word or phrase?

Respond: The third reading is for the purpose of responding back to God, expressing honestly whatever is happening in your heart and spirit as a result of listening. There may be joy, tears, awe, reverence, even confusion—give any emotion or thought that arises freely to God at this time. And listen for how God might want you to turn, move, or act because of what you've heard.

Rest: Finally, let your mind and emotions settle to rest in silence, and simply seek to love and be loved by God. Anytime distracting thoughts arise, just return to the word that stood out in the reading, and repeat it, and allow other thoughts to fade. Allow this "sacred word" to symbolize all your love for God, and your willingness to give God all your attention. Sit in the presence of God and use the word as a window through which to gaze upon God and to allow the light and love of God to stream into your heart and spirit.

John 3: 1-22 (New International Version)

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.