Sacred Space: A Resource for Small-group Ministry

Year A

Focus: Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1–12 NRSV

Gathering
Welcome

Prayer for Peace

*Ring a bell or chime three times slowly.*
*Light the peace candle.*

Loving God, we believe all people have equal and inestimable worth as your children. Children we know and children we don’t know are equally and fully yours. We uphold children from backgrounds of wealth, privilege, and prosperity. May they know their worth in all challenges they face, and may they be raised as generous peacemakers who care for neighbors, near and far.

We uphold children born into poverty, disease, sickness, and various ailments. We hear their groans, and we know you weep for them. May we be aware of the systems that allow such suffering to continue. May we awaken from our complacency to see all children of the world as our own in the way that you do.

We pray for all children who are children of the Earth. As we continue down disastrous paths of greed and consumption, our Earth is scorched, desecrated, and destroyed. The Earth itself and all of its creatures suffer greatly, but our own children will be the ones who carry the burden and suffering of our choices. May we awaken from the illusion that our world will produce without limits. May we seek to create a better world for our children, grandchildren, and their children. For in their welfare resides our welfare, and in our actions resides their hope. Amen.

Spiritual Practice
Walking in the Light

During Epiphany and the season after Epiphany our spiritual practice will be Walking in the Light. Take a few moments to quiet yourself. When you feel a sense of calm, imagine you are walking on a path of light. As we pray, visualize the light surrounding you as you walk. As the prayer continues, offer the gift of light to those close to you, to friends and acquaintances, to those you dislike or with whom you are in conflict, and to your community at-large.
Invite the people to enter silence, close their eyes, release into a sense of calm, and imagine walking on a path of light. As you hear each sentence, offer the gift of light to those mentioned.

May my loved ones be embraced in God’s light.

*Pause 15 seconds.*

May my family walk in the light of Christ.

*Pause 15 seconds.*

May my friend receive the gift of love and light.

*Pause 15 seconds.*

May my acquaintances sense the presence of light through our interactions.

*Pause 15 seconds.*

May the one with whom I am in conflict be surrounded by the light of Christ.

*Pause 15 seconds.*

May my community be blessed by the eternal light of God’s love and grace.

*Pause 15 seconds.*

Amen.

At the conclusion of the prayer invite people to share, as they feel comfortable, any thoughts, emotions, or images they experienced during Walking in the Light.

**Sharing Around the Table**

*Isaiah 58:1–12 NRSV*

Shout out, do not hold back!   
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!   
Announce to my people their rebellion,   
  to the house of Jacob their sins.   
Yet day after day they seek me   
  and delight to know my ways,   
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness   
  and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;   
they ask of me righteous judgments,   
  they delight to draw near to God.   
“Why do we fast, but you do not see?   
    Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”   
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.

Today’s passage was written after the Babylonian exiles returned to Israel. They were wealthy and confident, with the authority of King Cyrus behind them. They found a poor remnant of the old Israel still occupying the war-ravaged land. Relations between the two groups often brought injustice, despair, and oppression.

The Israelites believed the Babylonian exile was God’s punishment because of this unjust treatment of the poor. The people began to believe fasting would prove their righteousness. Then God would restore their land and former glory. But in this passage, the people are bewildered. “Why do we fast…but you do not notice?” Why not?

The prophetic voice answers in clear, ringing tones. The people fight among themselves, violence erupts, and those who fast make a show of their righteousness and act in a spirit of self-aggrandizement. The rich oppress those who are poor. Such behavior defeats the spirit of fasting. The prophet defines true fasting. True fasting is practicing justice, freeing captives, and breaking the yokes that oppress people.

Those who “fast” in this way will bring light and healing to the world. They will pray and be heard. They will be like a watered garden, revitalizing the community. By fasting from oppression, injustice, pride, and self-aggrandizement, we will encounter the divine Presence more intimately and walk more closely in faith.

Questions

1. God calls us to fast—that is, refrain from—injustice, oppression, callous attitudes, and selfishness. What would this look like in your life?
2. When has an act of justice or compassion led you to a closer walk with the Divine?

Sending

Generosity Statement

Faithful disciples respond to an increasing awareness of the abundant generosity of God by sharing according to the desires of their hearts; not by commandment or constraint.

—Doctrine and Covenants 163:9

The offering basket is available if you would like to support ongoing, small-group ministries as part of your generous response. The offering prayer for Epiphany is adapted from A Disciple’s Generous Response:

Revealing God, May we always be generous. You have gifted each of us with boundless grace and unending love. May our response to that love and grace be humble service to others, and may generosity be part of our nature. Amen.

Invitation to Next Meeting

Closing Hymn

CCS 304, “Sometimes We Wait, Expecting God”

Closing Prayer

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY; Scripture: Isaiah 58:1–12 NRSV
Optional Additions Depending on Group

- Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper
- Thoughts for Children
Prayer for Peace

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May my community be blessed by the eternal light of God’s love and grace.

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Communion Statement

Choose one scripture to read from this selection: 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Matthew 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–39.

Invitation to Communion

All are welcome at Christ’s table. The Lord’s Supper, or Communion, is a sacrament in which we remember the life, death, resurrection, and continuing presence of Jesus Christ. In Community of Christ, we also experience Communion as an opportunity to renew our baptismal covenant and to be formed as disciples who live Christ’s mission. Others may have different or added understandings within their faith traditions. We invite all who participate in the Lord’s Supper to do so in the love and peace of Jesus Christ.

Let us celebrate the revelation of Christ in the world as we share in Communion as an expression of blessing, healing, peace, and community. In preparation, let’s sing from Community of Christ Sings 527, “Bread of the World.”
Thoughts for Children

Materials: basket of wooden blocks
Use half of the blocks to build two small structures 8–10 inches apart. Place the rest of the blocks in a basket or box.

Say: Here we have two buildings with a space between them. Using the blocks from the basket, how would you connect the buildings?

Give the children the basket of blocks and encourage them as they use the blocks to connect the buildings.

Say: The prophet Isaiah was speaking to the people who felt they were separated from God, similar to how the two buildings were separated from each other. The prophet Isaiah told the people what kinds of things help build connections between God and the people. Here are the things Isaiah said:

- Help others with their heavy burdens.
- Speak kindly of others.
- Feed the hungry.
- Heal the sick.
- Care about the poor, the hungry, and the homeless.

When we do these things we are like a light that shines in the darkness. We become a help to others. We build strong connections or what we call “healthy relationships” between God, ourselves, others, and the Earth.

In closing, offer a brief blessing for serving others and building healthy relationships.

Thank the children for participating. If it works in your setting, invite the children to take the blocks back to their seats for quiet play during the group discussion.