Sacred Space: A Resource for Small-group Ministry

Year A

Focus: Fourth Sunday of Easter

Scripture: Psalm 23

Gathering
Welcome

Today is the fourth Sunday of the Easter season. The Easter season continues for 50 days and concludes with the Day of Pentecost.

Prayer for Peace

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

God of wonder and grace,

We can’t begin to comprehend your love, a love that made you willing to come among us in flesh and bone to endure the hardship of humanity. To move among the persecuted and marginalized so we might learn new ways to be in relationship with you and one another.

Open our eyes and hearts to your message, to the opportunities you provide us each day to reach out to others and to live your love and compassion—to truly see our neighbor and extend your hands.

We pause, Lord, that we might listen. Listen to your promptings, guidance, and desires for our lives, so we can bring peace, so we might hear your voice and respond.

Pause for one to two minutes of silence.

In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Spiritual Practice
Centering Prayer

Read the following to the group:

We continue with the season of Easter and the theme of resurrection. Today, as we prepare to practice centering prayer, ask yourself: How is God being resurrected in me? How has the divine presence been renewed within me?
During centering prayer we choose a focus word. We sit in silence, breathing the word in and out. For today’s prayer our word is renewal.

Centering prayer is a method of meditation used by Christians to sit in silence with God. This prayer helps us experience God’s presence within us.

Slowly read the following instructions:

Sit with posture relaxed and eyes closed. We will spend three minutes in centering prayer. We will breathe in a regular, natural rhythm. As you breathe in and out, you will say the word renewal in your mind. You will continue breathing in and out, focusing only on your prayer word.

At the end of the three minutes, I will ring a chime, and we will sit for two minutes in silence, eyes closed, listening to the silence.

Begin the practice together, modeling the centering prayer as instructed above.

Say: Become aware of your natural breathing in and out. (Breathe a few times in and out.)

Say: Now silently add your prayer word. (Model breathing in and quietly saying renewal. Breathe out and say renewal quietly. Continue the centering prayer in silence. Discontinue saying the prayer word out loud after you model it the first time.)

After three minutes, ring a chime.

Sit quietly for two minutes.

When time is up, share these closing instructions: Silently offer a brief word of thanks to God, take a deep breath, and open your eyes when ready.

When everyone’s eyes are open, share the following: I encourage you to use this spiritual practice at home during the week.

Sharing Around the Table
Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. 
He makes me lie down in green pastures; 
he leads me beside still waters; 
he restores my soul. 
He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, 
I fear no evil; 
for you are with me; your rod and your staff— 
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me 
in the presence of my enemies; 
you anoint my head with oil; 
my cup overflows. 
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me 
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

One need not look hard to find examples of the good shepherd in the Bible—they are sprinkled from beginning to end. An early example is in Genesis 49:24, where Jacob blesses his sons and names the hands of God that have acted as a good shepherd for the people. The final example is in Revelation 7:17 where the lamb (Christ) will be the shepherd and lead the people to springs of living water.

No scripture passage is better known for its description of the good shepherd than Psalm 23. This psalm was written by a skilled poet. It is beautiful and easy to remember. However, it also is comprehensive when it comes to the characteristics of a good shepherd.

The good shepherd provides everything the flock needs. The good shepherd provides good food, calm drinking waters, safe places to rest, and safe passage.

The shepherd’s rod and staff give comfort. A shepherd’s rod could be used like a club. The shepherd’s staff was a tool to prevent his animals from coming to harm; it was used to clear the path of snakes or scorpions and fight off predators. Some staffs have been depicted as having hooks used to lift sheep out of precarious circumstances by hooking them behind their front legs. The use of these tools brings the speaker comfort because of the shepherd’s fierce loyalty. The psalmist expresses total dependence on the shepherd and thanksgiving for the shepherd’s protection and leadership.

Why is the theme of the good shepherd so widely used in the Bible? Shepherding was a common role for the people of Israel. Livestock was an important part of daily life as a source of food. The people were closer to the land than many in today’s world; they understood that livestock and their caregivers were interdependent.

Questions

1. Which characteristics of a good shepherd listed above do you excel at? With which do you struggle?

2. Has a person in your life served as your shepherd—your provider, protector, and guide?

3. How do you feel you are a good shepherd to others in your life?

Sending

Generosity Statement

Note: If you are using “Thoughts for Children” today, make time for the children to show their coloring pages to the group during this time.

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. This offering prayer is adapted from A Disciple’s Generous Response:
God of rejoicing, We share with joy-filled hearts in response to the presence of your Son. May the offerings we share bring joy, hope, love, and peace into the lives of others that they might experience your mercy and grace. Amen.

Invitation to Next Meeting

Closing Hymn

CCS 259, “The Lord’s My Shepherd”

Closing Prayer

Optional Additions Depending on Group

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

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

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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.

This Easter season let us experience the resurrected Christ as we share in Communion as an expression of blessing, healing, peace, and community. In preparation let’s sing Community of Christ Sings 528, “Eat This Bread.” We will sing it through three times.
Thoughts for Children

Materials: shepherd coloring pages, crayons, or washable markers

Often Jesus is called a shepherd. What is a shepherd?
A shepherd is a person who takes care of a flock of sheep. What do you think a shepherd might do to care for sheep? If the children are unsure, ask them how to care for a pet.
Shepherds make sure the sheep have food and water. Shepherds find comfortable places for the sheep to sleep. They keep the sheep safe.
If Jesus is a shepherd, who are the sheep? We are!
That means Jesus cares for us. Jesus loves us and encourages us to love others. Jesus showed us how to do kind things and how to share what we have with others. Jesus offers us peace and gives us hope.
Hand out the coloring pages and crayons.