



Worship Resources  
*Lent to Easter*  
 2014

# Encountering God: What have we witnessed?

## INTRODUCTION

In the early centuries Lent was primarily a time for Christian converts to make their final, intensive preparation for baptism. All these years later it is still a season of renewal through reflection on the life of Jesus and, during Holy Week, on his suffering and sacrifice. In light of the triumph of the resurrection, which has already happened and which we celebrate at the end of this season, we invite you to encounter God this Lent and ask yourself this question: What have you witnessed?

The lectionary narratives for Year A are the most buoyant of the three-year cycle. They begin in the garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve meet God in judgment . . . but also experience God seeking them after they succumb to temptation. The Gospel stories show us people encountering Jesus, many for the first time: Nicodemus, who comes in the middle of the night; the Samaritan woman, who runs into Jesus at the well; the blind man, who is minding his own business; and Lazarus, who is called out of his tomb. All have experiences with Jesus that yield surprising results.

As our planning group reflected on the Scripture texts for the season and chose the theme “Encountering God,” we discussed at some length what the phrase means. Is encountering something *we* do? Or is the word an adjective describing an attribute of *God*? We think it is both—and we suggest the following questions, which highlight that dual perspective, as starting places for your own work with the Scripture stories. Both in our own lives and in the lives of the people in the Scripture texts, this season invites us to reflect on encounters with the encountering God who changes lives.

- What are the ways each of the characters looked for Jesus?
- What are the ways Jesus encountered them?
- When in your life have you gone looking for God?
- And when has God searched for you?

The second part of our theme, “What have we witnessed?” also has a double focus: both what we

have *seen* (been witnesses of) and what we have *told* others about (witnessed to). In the Gospel stories we see especially the Samaritan woman and the blind man testifying about what Christ has told them and what he has done in their lives. They encourage us to do the same: to notice what is happening in and around us and to share with others our encounters with God.

## GUIDELINES FOR WORSHIP PLANNING

In planning for an order of worship, we have divided the usual elements of worship into two movements that match our theme: encountering and witnessing. In our minds, the confession is the place where we recognize our humanness and receive the forgiveness that leads to new life. Thus it marks the hinge or transition between encountering God and witnessing to that encounter.

### *Encountering*

- Call to worship
- Opening prayer
- Praising
- (Old Testament reading)
- Confession

### *Witnessing*

- (Gospel reading)
- Drama
- Sermon
- Responding, including congregational sharing and offering
- Sending

#### Permission to photocopy

Subscribers to *Leader* are welcome to photocopy worship materials in this section.

It seems to us that the Old Testament Scriptures fit more closely in the Encountering section and the Gospel readings in the Witnessing section, though we have marked these placements in parentheses above to invite worship planners and leaders to consider which will best serve them. And while the order of worship above makes sense to us, we recognize that planners will need to adapt what they find here to take into account their congregation's patterns and traditions. The Holy Spirit has been generous in our own planning and we trust will continue to be generous as you use these resources as a starting point for your own planning and leading.

## VISUALS

To visually explore the idea of encounter with God this Lent, we are offering two visual "delivery systems." While they are very specific, both can be adapted to suit a range of congregations with varying materials, time, skills, and desires regarding visuals.

One of the things that struck us was the juxtaposition of the concrete imagery of stones and rocks in the Old Testament and Gospel stories and abstract concepts like "living water" and "breath." God meets us in the things we can touch and see and also in less physical ways, through spirit and thought. To represent the physicality of encountering God and Jesus in particular times and places, we suggest a worship table that uses cloth and rock in ways specific to the stories being told each week. For the less physically tangible concepts that are part of the God-human encounter, we envision a series of banners that abstractly explore each week's invitation to spiritual transformation. We encourage you to use both the more concrete and the more abstract visuals in your weekly displays to remind worshipers of the "both/and" rather than "either/or" nature of the ways this season, and its invitations, unfold.

The visual suggestions we provide are scalable. Church gatherings and buildings come in all different sizes, so the displays and banners can be adjusted to work for a variety of spaces, from a small display on a table in front of the pulpit to a large display on a raised stage; from the suggested 4'x8' banner on a large wall to a smaller (or larger!) hanging that can be seen easily by everyone in the congregation. Detailed color photographs of the lattice/cloth banners as well as the table displays are available at [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org).

A *Leader* subscriber may download these documents at [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org), click on the desired quarter, enter the username *Lent14* and the password (kdf5294). They are both case sensitive.

## MUSIC

Our planning group chose "I Sought the Lord" (HWB 506) as a theme song for the season because it helps us consider the dual movement of encountering and witnessing:

*I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew  
he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me.  
It was not I that found, O Savior true,  
no, I was found of thee.*

We also suggest a variety of other suitable songs for each Sunday from *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and the hymnal supplements, as well as some possibilities drawn from contemporary praise and worship music. In addition to these week-specific songs, the songs below relate to (an) encountering God and can work for any of the weeks in Lent.

### *Songs of encounter*

- STS 60 *Come to Me, Come to Us*
- STJ 3 *Jesus Calls Us Here to Meet Him*
- STJ 30 *Jesus Christ Is Waiting*
- STJ 31 *He Came Down\**
- STJ 42 *Listen, God Is Calling*
- STJ 91 *Like a Mother Who Has Borne Us*
- STJ 105 *Don't Be Afraid*
- STJ 107 *God Remembers*
- HWB 493 *I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say*

\* If your congregation avoids "hallelujahs" during Lent, this song is not for you.

### *Songs of confession*

- STS 59 *From Ashes to the Living Fount\**
- STS 62 *Create in Me a Clean Heart*
- STJ 23 *Slowly Turning, Ever Turning*

\* Appropriate for Lent Year A, except that it alludes to the healing of a different blind man from the one whose story appears in Lent 4.

### *Songs of sending*

- STS 57 *Go, My Friends, in Grace*
- STS 111 *For Me to Live Is Christ*
- STJ 78 *Sizohamba Naye (We will walk with God)*

## DRAMA AND CHILDREN'S TIME

We have provided a short drama for each Sunday in Lent online at [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org). The dramas focus on the role of the witness by imagining reports about Jesus as television news stories. We have included suggested children's time questions with each drama. We recommend that you invite the children to sit in the front row to watch the drama and then discuss with them what happened. The dramas also can be used in services without a children's time. They require few or no props, and each one has three or four actors. We intend for these dramas to explore the question: *What does it mean to witness God's works, and how do we respond to our role as witnesses?*

## PREACHING

Lent provides a natural time for reflection and introspection as we journey as individuals and congregations from Ash Wednesday toward the shadow of the cross and finally to the bright awakening of Easter morning. The preaching moment each week can assist the congregation in this important work of reflection. With the overarching theme "Encountering God: What are we witnessing?" our sermons can prompt worshipers to consider and be alert to ways we might encounter this encountering God, both in the Scriptures and throughout the coming week.

Since the theme asks a question, one approach in sermon preparation is to pay attention to the specific

questions (and there are many) that are asked in the stories themselves, and create sermons around one or a couple of those questions. We will be suggesting some additional approaches and thoughts for each week. We have chosen to focus only on the Old and New Testament texts, though alluding to and/or including the Psalm and Epistle companion passages should not be ignored.

One final note: Because the Lenten season of reflection can expose what we are ashamed of and prefer to keep covered up, it can be a sobering six weeks. But the goal for the sermon is to announce and enact the good news that new life is possible in our encounters with God. Since the biblical texts for Year A are laced with hope and new life even in Lent, don't hesitate to preach this new life before Easter! New birth is what God desires as we encounter and witness what God is capable of in our lives. May you be blessed as you preach each Sunday, knowing that the planning group has prayed for you and your use of these materials.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to the dramas and explanation of the visuals that have been mentioned previously, there are several extras that can be found at [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org). They include services for Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. You can find additional prayers of invocations, prayers for the people, offering prayers and benedictions, and a readers theater for Easter Sunday.



Rachel Miller Jacobs

*Lent worship planners from eastern Ohio and Allegheny conferences,  
left to right – front row: Kayla Berkey, Roveen Yoder, Derek Yoder, Alan Kauffman;  
second row: Norma Duerksen, Tim Zuercher, LeAnne Zook, Rachel Miller Jacobs*



*Lent 1 ~ March 9, 2014*  
**Encountering God: What have we witnessed . . .**  
*. . . in temptations?*

**Scriptures:** Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

**Focus statement**

We encounter God in times of temptation. We acknowledge our frailty and the ways we have closed our eyes to God. We witness Jesus resisting temptation, and we open ourselves to God's redemption and provision of strength.

**Song suggestions**

*Hymnal and supplements*

STS 36	<i>Jesus, Tempted in the Desert</i>	HWB 532	<i>I Am Leaning on the Lord</i>
STS 66	<i>While I Keep Silence</i>	HWB 551	<i>In the Stillness of the Evening</i>
STS 72	<i>We Are Often Tossed and Driv'n</i>	HWB 553	<i>I Am Weak and I Need Thy Strength</i>
STS 80	<i>Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley</i>	HWB 567	<i>How Firm a Foundation</i>
STS 81	<i>When We Are Tempted*</i>	HWB 575	<i>Precious Lord, Take My Hand</i>
STJ 100	<i>Here I Am</i>	HWB 585	<i>In Your Sickness</i>
HWB 439	<i>I Want Jesus to Walk with Me</i>		

*Praise and worship*

<i>Lose My Soul</i>	by Chris Stevens, Michael Ripoll, Toby McKeehan
<i>Open the Eyes of My Heart</i>	by Paul Baloche
<i>Letting Go</i>	by Judson van DeVenter, Todd Agnew, Winfield Scott Weeden

**ENCOUNTERING**

**Call to Worship**

Leader: Lord, we come before you veiled in weakness and frailty;

**People: grant us strength and instruct us in your ways.**

Leader: Lord, we stumble into your presence;

**People: grant us refuge from the raging storms of life.**

Leader: Lord, we want to witness your redeeming love and strength.

**All: Grant us pure hearts as we worship you now.**

**Opening prayer**

Merciful God, temptation not only stalks in the out-of-the-way, shadowy places but can be found even in Eden. It is all around us. We want to resist—we long to live righteous lives. But though our spirits are willing, sometimes our flesh fails. Keep temptation from us. And when it draws near, deliver us from the evil that entices us. Because you can, and do, forgive us, we worship you. We pray this in the name of our Lord, who resisted temptation. Amen.

**Confessing our sin**

Leader: I am the parent going to bed hungry so that my child can eat,  
the client at the food bank and not one of its volunteers;

I hold my plate in my hands at the refugee center,  
and fight in front of the Red Cross truck that brings the grain and the rice.

**Right:** The serpent says, “Turn this stone into bread.”

**Left:** Think of all the people we could feed!

Leader: I am one of the underemployed,  
the unemployed,  
a worker denied a living wage,  
an immigrant denied status,  
a prisoner denied a fair trial.

**Right:** The serpent says, “Let me give you all the power of the kingdom.”

**Left:** Think of all the injustices we could right!

Leader: I am one of those who have died too young,  
who died from violence on my street,  
in my city,  
in my school,  
in my marketplace,  
in my country,  
who died from fists and knives and guns and bombs and drones.

**Right:** The serpent says, “You have dominion over death.”

**Left:** Think of all the life we could protect!

Leader: We want to be wise,  
to have our eyes fully opened,  
to know all the secrets of the universe and of ourselves.

**Right:** The serpent says, “There is nothing that will be unknown to you.”

**Left:** Think of all the good we could do for the world!

*All: We fail to see the dark shadow.  
We do not recognize that our desire for abundance, power, and knowledge  
is a desire for ourselves, not for others.  
We are without understanding.  
Lord, hear our prayer. [Silence]*

### *Claiming our assurance*

Leader: The Lord is our hiding place;  
God preserves us from trouble  
and surrounds us with glad cries of deliverance.

*All: Steadfast love surrounds us;  
for we trust in the Lord.  
We are the blessed whose transgressions have been forgiven.*

## WITNESSING

*Drama:* (see [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org))

### *Preparing to preach*

“Encountering God’s Word prepares us for times of temptation” (Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; and Matthew 4:1-11).

The common theme this week is obvious: temptation. What is easier to miss is that before the temptation, explicitly in Genesis and implicitly in Matthew, is an earlier encounter with God’s word. God

spoke directly to Adam in Genesis; in Matthew, Jesus had been schooled in the word of God. Previous encounters of hearing God speak to us are meant to shape us and prepare us, provided we remember those encounters and respond in obedience. As the writer to the church at Corinth puts it: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to [all]. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:13 NIV). In our passages today, this “way out” that God provides is a previous encounter with the word of God that allows Adam and Jesus to “stand up” under temptation.

#### *Additional ideas*

- 1 *Explore or challenge the congregation to make Bible reading/studying/memorizing a priority.* Jesus’ victory over temptation lay in part in his ability to recall previous encounter(s) with God’s word. This might be a chance to tell a story or two about how Bible reading has shaped your life or been preparation for a challenge later in life. Perhaps a personal story of a previous or current temptation could provide a powerful entry into a time of confession for the congregation. Make sure God, and not you, is the hero of the story!
- 2 *Pursue the reality of temptation’s grip and what it looks like today.* You may want to remind people that temptation is not itself evil. Even Jesus was tempted. It is our response to temptation that matters. Most of us are capable of resisting bona fide evil when we see it. But most temptation (as is true in both stories today) is choosing good rather than choosing God’s best. Satan’s suggestions don’t look like terrible ones. What is so bad about knowing the difference between good and evil? But it was not God’s best for Adam and Eve and God’s relationship with them. Seen in this light, Lent can be a time to practice saying no to some good things so that we can say yes to the best.
- 3 *Invite the congregation to consider how they hear God speak to them—and how they distinguish God’s voice from other voices.* There are many voices vying for our attention, including Satan’s. In the Gospel story, Satan tries to sound like God as he quotes Scripture and masquerades as an angel of light. But we know Satan is the father of lies and has many children and grandchildren. How do we distinguish God’s voice?

#### *Responding* *Sharing/Offering*

#### *Sending*

We have encountered God’s provision of strength  
in times of temptation.

Let us go then as witnesses to God’s redeeming and steadfast love,  
on the lookout in the week ahead  
for how God is offering the blessing of grace to all people.



## *Lent 2 ~ March 16, 2014*

# *Encountering God: What have we witnessed . . .*

## *. . . in our blessings?*

**Scriptures:** Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

#### **Focus statement**

We encounter God in our blessings. Abraham met God through the promise of becoming a great nation: of being blessed and being a blessing. Nicodemus came face-to-face with Jesus’ offer of rebirth. We witness the gifts of grace and eternal life God offers to all people.

## Song suggestions

### *Hymnal and supplements*

STJ 34 *Loving Spirit*

STJ 35 *O Breath of Life*

STJ 61 *How Can We Be Silent?*

HWB 102 *To God Be the Glory*

HWB 167 *For God So Loved Us*

HWB 169 *I to the Hills Will Lift My Eyes*

HWB 299 *New Earth, Heavens New*

HWB 498 *He Comes to Us as One Unknown*

HWB 511 *God, Who Touches Earth with Beauty*

HWB 563 *I to the Hills Will Lift Mine Eyes*

### *Praise and worship*

*10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)* by Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin

*Who but You (Abraham and Sarah)* by Bernie Herms and Nichole Nordeman

*I Will Bless You* by Bryan Moyer Suderman ([www.smalltallmusic.com](http://www.smalltallmusic.com))

*Blessed Be Your Name* by Matt Redmon and Beth Redmon

*Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)* by John Newton, Chris Tomlin, and Louie Giglio

*Born Again* by Brad Avery, David Carr, Mac Powell, Mark Lee, and Tai Anderson

## ENCOUNTERING

### *Call to Worship*

Leader: We look to the hills and to the mountain tops;

**People: where does our help come from?**

Leader: We look to sun, the moon, and the stars above;

**People: where does our help come from?**

Leader: We look to the God of Abraham, maker of heaven and earth;

**All: our help comes from the Lord!**

### *Opening prayer*

Inviting God, how you love this world! We have encountered and witnessed that love in your sending your son Jesus not to condemn but to save us. As we worship, help us to receive your love—and to respond to your call to move to a place of even greater promise, so that our journey with you will not only bless us but also bless others. We pray this in the name of the One who was obedient to the end. Amen.

### *Confessing our sin*

Leader: We think that who we are makes us heir to God's kingdom:

**Left: the family we are born into,**

**Right: the name game we play.**

Leader: We think that what we have done makes us citizens of God's nation:

**Left: which school we went to,**

**Right: what agency we volunteered with.**

Leader: We think that what we look like will make us worthy of God's blessing:

**Left: the marks we do (or don't) put on our bodies,**

**Right: the clothes we wear.**

Leader: We think that what we believe will save us from death:  
Left: the laws we follow to the letter,  
Right: the certitudes we're confident we know because we've verified them.

*All: We want who we are,  
where we come from,  
what we have done,  
what we believe  
to be enough.  
Like Nicodemus, we do not understand how to be reborn.  
We speak only about what we know,  
testify only to what we can prove.  
Lord, hear our prayer. [Silence]*

### *Claiming our assurance*

Leader: Let go of who you are,  
let go of where you come from,  
let go of what you have done,  
let go of what you believe.  
Receive new birth;  
open your hands to God's gift of a transformed life.

*All: For the gift of Jesus Christ is the gift of rebirth as a child of God,  
an heir to the heavenly kingdom,  
and is ours through faith and not our works.*

## WITNESSING

*Drama:* (see [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org))

### *Preparing to preach*

"Encountering God invites us to new places" (Genesis 12:1-4a and John 3:1-17).

Connections between the stories of God's encounter with Abram and Sarai and Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus are not as immediately obvious as last week's Scriptures on temptation. If holding the two together feels like too much of a stretch for you, this may be a week to focus on only one text. Suggestions for doing so are laid out below.

However, if you want to tie both passages together, there are at least two possibilities. First, an encounter with God calls/invites us to new places. Abram and Sarai are called to go to a new land that God will give them. Nicodemus is invited to consider new birth. This leads to a second connection. Neither Abram/Sarai nor Nicodemus is sure what this invitation means or will look like. "Go to a land I will show you" (you will know it when you arrive there), and "The wind blows wherever it pleases" have a similar feel. The connection is this: Encounter with God moves control from us to God and leaves us in a position of needing to trust this God as we move into unknown or new places. The call is for blessing and new birth, but not without risk!

### *Additional ideas*

- 1 *If you are considering only the Genesis story, share the story of your own call to ministry or a call into an unknown realm. Again, make sure God is the hero and not you! Share honestly about the terror of giving up control, leaving the familiar and trusting God. Celebrate the ways God was faithful. In addition to the disadvantages, there are also advantages to not knowing everything about the journey ahead of time! You could also use focus on this text as a window into imagining God's call for the congregation, noticing how God has blessed the congregation and ways the congregation is/can be a blessing.*
- 2 *If your focus is only John 3, consider placing this story in the context of chapter 2, which becomes personified in Nicodemus. Nicodemus is like the jugs at the wedding banquet (filled to the brim with ceremonial law); he is outwardly remarkable (like the temple); and he is impressed with the miracles of Jesus (vv. 23-24). But note:*



Jesus has already changed the water to wine, cleansed the temple, and is not impressed with those impressed with him. Given chapter 2, it is not surprising that Jesus calls Nicodemus to new birth.

- 3 Genesis 12 is the only story throughout Lent without a question in it. Abram simply hears and goes. The story of Nicodemus is filled with questions, as Nicodemus's nighttime visit is probably both literal and figurative. *Perhaps a sermon could grow out of the many ways people encounter God, hear God, and respond to God. No one size fits all.*
- 4 Packing up and leaving is messy. Birth is messy. When we release the reins of our lives, giving God control, *ministry/life may become more messy than we would like.* Can we accept messiness as we live with unknowns and a wind that blows when and where it pleases? It makes a difference that the unknowns are held in the care of a God who blesses and loves.

**Responding**  
*Sharing/Offering*

**Sending**

Leader: We have encountered God's love and call.  
Let us go then as witnesses to that love,  
eager to call others to the generosity we've experienced,  
on the lookout in the week ahead  
for where God is meeting us—body, mind, and spirit.



*Lent 3 ~ March 23, 2014*  
**Encountering God: What have we witnessed . . .**  
*. . . through nourishment that meets our needs?*

**Scriptures:** Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

**Focus statement**

We encounter God through nourishment that meets our needs. The Israelites drank the water God provided from a rock in the desert, and the Samaritan woman received Jesus' living water at the well. In our thirst, we witness God's miraculous provision.

**Song suggestions**

**Hymnal and supplements**

STJ 28	<i>We Worship God the Rock</i>	HWB 493	<i>I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say</i>
STJ 65	<i>Let Justice Flow Like Streams</i>	HWB 495	<i>O Let All Who Thirst</i>
STS 64	<i>There Is a Well (Un Pozo Hay)</i>	HWB 515	<i>Jesus, Rock of Ages</i>
HWB 147	<i>Oh, How Wondrous the Grace</i>	HWB 530	<i>What Wondrous Love Is This</i>
HWB 149	<i>Great God of Wonders</i>		

**Praise and worship**

<i>Healing Rain</i>	by Michael W. Smith, Martin Smith, and Matt Bronleewe
<i>The Well</i>	by Mark Hall and Matthew West
<i>Come to the Water</i>	by Kristian Stanfill and Brett Younker
<i>Water Fall on Me</i>	by Jonathan Reuel
<i>Enough</i>	by Chris Tomlin and Louie Giglio

## ENCOUNTERING

### *Call to Worship*

Leader: Dry and thirsty, we look for a drink that will satisfy.

**People: God provides us with water from the spring of life.**

Leader: Lost and confused, we strive for direction and purpose.

**People: God leads us through the wilderness into a land of promise.**

Leader: Weary from the journey, we plead for restoration.

**All: God renews us and grants us new life;  
we make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.**

### *Opening prayer*

Refreshing God, as the deer pants for life-sustaining waters, so our souls long to drink deeply from the source that truly satisfies. We come parched, thirsty. We need you, God—without you, we will quickly die. Teach us to trust you to give each of us what we need. Quench our thirst. Quiet our complaining. Fill our souls to overflowing with the living water that never runs dry. We pray this in the name of the One capable of satisfying our every need. Amen.

### *Confessing our sin*

Leader: When will this journey be over?  
Where is the end of all our traveling?  
How long will we wander, thirsty and hungry,  
strangers in a strange land?  
Deliver us, Lord, from our misery.

You have said that you will give us water that flows from the rock;  
that you will quench our thirst,  
that never again will our souls be parched.  
But we do not listen to your voice.  
We ignore what we see around us, the evidence of your gift;

asking for new signs, we demand proof of your grace.  
We harden our hearts against you;  
we draw from wells that run dry;  
we sip on that which does not satisfy.

Lord, hear our prayer. [Silence]

### *Claiming our assurance*

**All: You have met us at the well  
and offered us a spring of water gushing to eternal life.  
Now we have heard for ourselves  
and we know that you are truly the Savior of the world.**

## WITNESSING

*Drama:* (see [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org))

### *Preparing to preach*

“Encountering God satisfies and sustains” (Exodus 17:1-7 and John 4:5-42).

The encounters with God in the Exodus and John passages revolve around water, which provides the opportunity for meeting and learning more about God. Water is a powerful metaphor in Scripture and

many in our congregations will likely have memories of encounters with God that are connected to water. As part of your sermon preparation, write down all the ways water appears in the Bible and the significance of each. What do you discover? Which do you most identify with? Are there additional ways water has been connected to encounters with God for you or your congregation? What have you witnessed?

If you are planning on using both Scriptures for this Sunday, notice that water provides the backdrop and proof of God's presence in each one. In Exodus, water becomes the answer to the question, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Having basic physical needs met confirms God's presence. In John, the living water Jesus offers and that the woman requests ("Sir, give me this water") answers the question, "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" Here, we see that spiritual growth and greater understanding in our lives are a testimony to God at work in and with us. Together, these stories suggest that both the provision of daily physical needs and the provision of spiritual awakening are evidence of God's loving presence.

### *Additional ideas*

- 1 The Exodus 17 story becomes critical memory in Israel and the early church. It is remembered in Psalm 95 (the lectionary Psalm for the day) and it is alluded to three times in two chapters in Hebrews 3 and 4. Complaining to God is not the caution. The Psalms are full of complaints to God, and Israel's salvation event of exodus was birthed in the womb of complaint (God heard their cries of suffering/complaining). Complaining in those cases is a form of trust, believing God hears and cares.
- 2 If you focused on John 3 last Sunday, consider contrasting the woman at the well with Nicodemus, since his story is fresh in the congregation's memory. Man/woman, Jew/Samaritan, powerful/powerless, encounter at night/middle of day, law-keeper/breaker, respected/rejected, tells nobody/everybody. People in your congregation likely will find themselves somewhere in between these two characters and probably some mixture of each extreme. The good news: Jesus meets/encounters us where we are and offers us new birth and living water. Nobody is outside the parameters of the offer of new life!
- 3 Another approach to John 4 grows out of the woman's request, "Sir, give me this water." God has acted first and made this living water available for all and for free. But it requires action on our part, admitting our thirst/need, and then asking. We can have a glass of water sitting beside us all day and die of thirst. We can stand in the rain or go swimming and not get our thirst quenched. The only way to quench our thirst is to admit we are thirsty and take a drink. This water Jesus offers never runs dry, even in the most arid times of our lives! But we must regularly drink. If you use this approach, you might want to conclude the time with offering cups of water to people. They could be already poured, or you could pour water into a cup. If you choose the latter, pour water in until it overflows and watch first the shock, then the smiles begin to develop as the reality settles into them.

### *Responding* *Sharing/Offering*

### *Sending*

We have encountered God through the waters of provision.  
Go as witnesses to the living water that Jesus offers to us all.  
In the week ahead, be alert to the surprising ways that  
God's work is being revealed all around you.

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*Lent 4 ~ March 30, 2014*  
**Encountering God: What have we witnessed . . .**  
*. . . through anointing?*

**Scriptures:** 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

**Focus statement**

We encounter God through anointing. God sent Samuel to anoint David, the unexpected youngest son, with oil, and Jesus anointed the blind man with mud. We witness the surprising ways God's work is revealed, and we respond to God's call for our lives.

**Song suggestions**

*Hymnal and supplements*

STJ 14	<i>Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song</i>	HWB 448	<i>Awake, Awake, Fling off the Night</i>
STJ 57	<i>Mayenziwe (Your Will Be Done)</i>	HWB 519	<i>Shepherd Me, O God</i>
STJ 95	<i>I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light</i>	HWB 355	<i>Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us</i>
STS 65	<i>Abre Mis Ojos (Open My Eyes)</i>	HWB 578	<i>The Lord's My Shepherd</i>
STS 99	<i>The Lord's My Shepherd</i>	HWB 589	<i>My Shepherd Will Supply My Need</i>
HWB 401	<i>This Little Light of Mine</i>		

*Praise and worship*

<i>I Am Free</i>	by Jon Egan
<i>You Are My Shepherd</i>	by Jennie Riddle and Jonathan McElhenny Lee
<i>Let the River Flow</i>	by Darrell Evans
<i>Famous One</i>	by Chris Tomlin and Louie Giglio
<i>Indescribable</i>	by Laura Story

**ENCOUNTERING**

**Call to Worship**

Leader: God, our gentle shepherd, you have chosen us by name.

**People: Lead us, your children, by the still waters.**

Leader: God, our gentle shepherd, your rod and staff bring comfort.

**People: Guide us, your people, through the darkest valleys.**

Leader: God, our gentle shepherd, you have prepared a great table.

**All: Restore us, your church, with goodness and mercy.**

**Opening prayer**

Mysterious God, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are your ways higher than our ways and your thoughts higher than our thoughts. So free us this day from the prison of our narrow-mindedness. Broaden the borders of our walled-in understandings. Help us cast aside all that limits us and you working in us. Continue to shape us, we who are made in your likeness, so we become more and more like you. In the name of the One who was the perfect reflection of you we pray. Amen.

### *Confessing our sin*

We walk in the vale of death's shadow.  
Our deeds are unjust and bear no fruit.  
Our disobediences are secret, hidden from sight.  
Darkness lies over your land and your people stumble.

Our hearts are beating but only for ourselves.  
We have only pity for those who have less.  
We have only anger at those who have more.  
We cannot spare compassion for those with whom we disagree.

Our eyes are open but we cannot see.  
We are blind to the neighbor beside us.  
Unwilling to look on those different from us.  
Refusing to lift our gaze beyond the ground at our feet.

We anoint the unworthy.  
We put our hope in the surface of things.  
We doubt and question those who speak truth.  
We blame others for what we cannot see.

Lord, hear our prayer. [Silence]

### *Words of assurance*

*All:       The Lord is our shepherd,  
              We shall not want.  
              In grass meadows, the Lord makes us lie down,  
              by quiet waters guides us.  
              Our life the Lord brings back.  
              The Lord leads us on pathways of justice.  
              Though we walk in the vale of death's shadow,  
              We fear no harm,  
              for you are with us.  
              Your rod and your staff—  
              it is they that console us.  
              You set out a table before us  
              in the face of our foes.  
              You moisten our heads with oil,  
              our cup overflows.*

## **WITNESSING**

*Drama:* (see [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org))

### *Preparing to preach*

“Encountering God opens our eyes to see in new ways” (1 Samuel 16:1-13 and John 9:1-41).

The stories of David and the man born blind contain many similar themes worthy of a sermon. So the suggestions for this week can be used for either or both Scriptures.

### *Additional ideas*

- 1 Blindness is one of the major obstacles. Samuel, Jesse, (his sons?), and David have varying levels of blindness to what God is up to in David's and Israel's futures. So too, in John 9, blindness seems to literally and figuratively envelop all eyes but those of Jesus. The disciples, the man born blind, the neighbors, the parents, and religious leaders experience blindness of tradition, self-preservation, and natural circumstances as the story unfolds. In both encounters, God gives opportunities for all involved to see in new ways.
- 2 Another intersection is anointing. Both David (with oil) and the blind man (mud and washing) are being called from their past and present identities (shepherd and blindness) to a surprising future full of promise and potential as witnesses among the people of God. If you choose this focus, consider offering anointing at some point during the service.
- 3 Both stories can be used to help us see the mysterious freedom of God. In 1 Samuel, had God "played by the rules" Jonathan (Saul's son) would have been the anointed heir to Israel's infant throne. With Saul's lineage rejected and Jesse's inserted, the eldest sons should be selected; but not here, nor in many instances in the Bible. (Isaac before Ishmael, Jacob/Israel before Esau, Joseph before his brothers, Ephraim before Manasseh; and this only represents Genesis!) Notice how in almost every case, the younger who was chosen has a problem when God does so again in the next generation. It is hard to accept God coloring outside our lines. In John, though this plays a less prominent role, it serves as the point of contention in the story. Jesus has healed on the Sabbath. God gets God's way (healing) even though rules are broken. Right relationships trump rigid rules. Sometimes God surprises us, and in doing so we have the chance to see old realities with fresh eyes and full of new possibilities.
- 4 Encountering God in our lives does not necessarily make our lives easier. David spent many years on the run from Saul; hiding under the shadow of the Philistines, he was leader of "all those in distress or in debt or discontented" (1 Samuel 22:2), all after his anointing. The man born blind seemed to become the center of controversy once his healing had occurred. Young Christians and seekers especially need to hear this message. They also need to be told that once they encounter God and God's call on their life, there is no other place they would rather be, trouble and all.

### *Responding* *Sharing/Offering*

### *Sending*

We have encountered the God who sometimes surprises us. So go as witnesses to this God who is bigger than us. And as you go, be alert this coming week to signs of new life God is bringing forth.

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## *Lent 5 ~ April 6, 2014*

# *Encountering God: What have we witnessed . . .*

## *. . . in our need for renewal?*

**Scriptures:** Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

### **Focus statement**

We encounter God in our mortality and our need for renewal. God replenished the "dry bones" of Israel, and Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. As we breathe, we witness God's breath, which restores creation. We wait with hopefulness for resurrection.

## *Song suggestions*

### *Hymnal and supplements*

STS 121	<i>Nothing Is Lost on the Breath of God</i>	HWB 234	<i>When Jesus Wept, the Falling Tear</i>
STJ 46	<i>O Breathe on Me, O Breath of God</i>	HWB 327	<i>Great Is Thy Faithfulness</i>
HWB 133	<i>Out of the Depths I Cry to You</i>	HWB 356	<i>Breathe on Me, Breath of God</i>
HWB 136	<i>From the Depths of Sin</i>	HWB 637	<i>When Grief Is Raw</i>

### *Praise and worship*

<i>We Come</i>	by Jim Croegaert ( <a href="http://www.roughstonesmusic.com">www.roughstonesmusic.com</a> )
<i>Alive Again</i>	by Matt Maher and Jason Ingram
<i>Dry Bones</i>	(traditional)
<i>Days of Elijah</i>	by Robin Mark

## ENCOUNTERING

### *Call to Worship*

Leader: Today we come before you God, dry and brittle.

**People: Lord, breathe new life into our aching bones.**

Leader: We come into your presence, fatigued and numb.

**People: Lord, breathe new life into our tired living.**

Leader: We come to the table, desperate and hurting.

**All: Today Lord, breathe into us a new hope!**

### *Opening prayer*

God of eternal hope, in this life, death surrounds us. There are skeletal remains everywhere we turn. At times, it is easy to feel hopelessness and despair. We sometimes wonder what chances remain for renewal and a fresh beginning. Lord, only you know. And we believe that you are the God who breathes life into death. So we wait for you, looking toward tomorrow with hope. We recall that you love us and are faithful. Your mercies are new every morning. In the name of the One who is the resurrection and the life. Amen.

### *Confessing our sin*

Leader: Out of the depths, we cry to you, O Lord.

**People: Lord, hear our voice.**

Leader: If you were to count our transgressions and number our sins, Lord, how could we stand before you?

**People: Lord, open your ears to our cries.**

Leader: We are nothing but bone and sinew and skin; our souls are empty.

**People: Breath, come to us on the four winds.**

Leader: We set our minds on the things of the body; we delight in the flesh.

**People: Spirit, dwell within us and make us whole.**

Leader: Our soul waits for you, more than those who watch for the morning.

People: **More than those who watch for the morning, our soul waits for you.**

All: *Lord, hear our prayer.* [Silence]

### *Words of assurance*

Leader: Our soul waits for you.

People: **In your Word, we hope for you.**

Leader: For in the Lord, there is steadfast love.

People: **For in the Spirit, there is eternal life.**

All: *And it is the Lord who will redeem us from our wrongdoing.*

## WITNESSING

*Drama:* (see [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org))

### *Preparing to preach*

“Encountering God can bring new life to what has died.” (Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:1-45).

If you enjoy preaching on Easter (who doesn't?), you should enjoy this Sunday. Resurrection rings powerfully from both passages. The utter hopelessness reversed is what provides the shock of good news that we never tire of repeating. The finality of death in both passages leaves no room for skeptics (a whole valley full of parched skeletal remains and Lazarus, who has been dead four days, past any hope that his spirit has lingered).

A question in each story serves to elicit a faith response. In Ezekiel, the question is, “Can these dry bones live?” Ezekiel wisely responds, “O Lord God, only you know.” Ezekiel seems content in knowing that God, and not mortals, is the author of life and possesses the power for any potential new life. The question posed in John comes from Jesus, who after the claim “I am the resurrection and the life, whoever lives and believes in me will never die,” then asks Martha, “Do you believe this?” This question has an Ezekiel 37 echo to it. Martha's stated belief response is based on her understanding of Jesus being the long-awaited Messiah.

### *Additional ideas*

- 1 A sermon on Ezekiel 37 should probably include some mention that the word for breath/spirit/wind is the same word used in the Genesis creation story. God is still in the creation business. Taking nothingness in Genesis and a whole valley of dry bones in Ezekiel, God creates something by the spoken word that results in “very good” in Genesis and resurrected life (likely Israel being rescued from the death of exile).
- 2 For a sermon on John 11, you may want to stop at verse 26, with Lazarus still dead. Many in our congregations are at some stage of waiting for new life to come. The pain of Mary and Martha is our pain. God's timing does not always match our expectations in our I-want-it-yesterday culture. For those stuck in the pain of death, in whatever form, two things are worth noting from this text. First, Jesus wept. Jesus is with us and knows our pain. Second, it was before Lazarus was raised from the tomb that Jesus asked the central question in the story, “Do you believe?” Our ability to believe is not based on God's performance review in our lives. Faith is hoping for what we do not yet see. Death is all around us in many forms. God is with us, even as we keep hoping for more. As we wait, do we believe?
- 3 Jesus said, “I AM the resurrection and the life” before Easter morning. Present tense exists in resurrection before ultimate resurrection. Even as Lazarus's resurrection foreshadows Easter, there are signs of new life in our congregations and individual lives. This may be a good Sunday to name some signs of new life that you see around you. It will be especially powerful if what you name has come about because some type of death has preceded it, allowing the new to come forth from the tomb.



*Responding*  
*Sharing/Offering*

**Sending**

We have encountered God, the source of restoration and new life. Go as witnesses—living, breathing, and renewed. As you go, be aware of how God's plan is unfolding and how God is showering you with immeasurable love.



*Lent 6 Palm/Passion Sunday ~ April 13, 2014*  
**Encountering God: What have we witnessed . . .**  
*. . . in jubilant praise and with broken bread?*

**Scriptures:** Matthew 21:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66

**Focus statement**

We encounter God in jubilant praise and with broken bread. The people of Jerusalem encountered Jesus' triumphal entry with celebration and hosannas—whether sincere or misguided. The disciples encountered Jesus in the act of breaking bread together. We witness the complexities of God's plan and how God's immeasurable love becomes revealed to us over time.

**Song suggestions**

**Lent 6a (Palm Sunday)**

*Hymnal and supplements*

STS 4	<i>Rejoice, Rejoice, the Savior Comes</i>	HWB 19	<i>Open Now Thy Gates of Beauty</i>
STS 73	<i>Jesus Is Coming</i>	HWB 237	<i>All Glory, Laud, and Honor</i>
STS 74	<i>Hosanna! Hosanna!</i>	HWB 238	<i>Hosanna, Loud Hosanna</i>
STS 75	<i>Heri Ni jina (Blessed Be the Name)*</i>	HWB 239	<i>Ride On, Ride On in Majesty</i>

*\*If your congregation avoids hallelujahs during Lent, this song is not for you.*

*Praise and worship*

<i>Hosanna (Praise Is Rising)</i>	by Paul Baloche and Brenton Brown
<i>Hosanna</i>	by Carl Tuttle
<i>This Is the Day</i>	(familiar chorus)
<i>Hosanna</i>	by Brooke Frazer

**Lent 6b (Passion Sunday)**

*Hymnal and supplements*

STS 76	<i>Prepare a Room for Me</i>	STS 85	<i>Lay Down Your Head</i>
STS 77	<i>Here Is the Bread</i>	HWB 246	<i>Why Has God Forsaken Me?</i>
STS 80	<i>Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley</i>	HWB 255	<i>Open Are the Gifts of God</i>
STS 81	<i>When We Are Tempted</i>	HWB 333	<i>Christ, Who Is in the Form of God</i>
STS 84	<i>So Much Wrong</i>	HWB 528	<i>I Stand Amazed in the Presence</i>

*Also consider the hymnal sections on Jesus' passion and death (HWB 237-60) and the Lord's Supper (HWB 449-78).*

*Praise and worship*

*Once Again*

by Matt Redman

*Jesus Messiah*

by Daniel Carson, Chris Tomlin, Ed Cash, and Jesse Reeves

## ENCOUNTERING

### *Call to Worship*

Leader: Look, our King is coming. Blessed is his name.

**People: Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good!**

Leader: With branches, cloaks, and loud hosannas we greet him.

**People: Give thanks to the Lord; his love endures forever!**

Leader: Rejoice! The son of David has arrived. Our Savior is here!

**All: Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good!  
His love endures forever!**

### *Opening prayer*

Savior God, we praise you for your power to save us. We believe nothing is impossible with you. But we also admit, often we want saved in a way that is our will and not your will being done. We want saved now. You may be asking us to wait for your glory. We want saved with ten thousand angels' worth of power. You come riding a humble donkey. We want to have the cup of suffering pass from us. You have chosen to drink it. We want saved *from*. You want to save us *for* something bigger and better. Help us understand your salvation for us. In the name of the One who comes in the name of the Lord to truly save us. Amen.

### *Confessing our sin*

Leader: How often we have met you, Lord.

Leader: We met you in the wilderness.

**Right: When our strength was tempted,**

**Left: you gave us power.**

**All: But we did not know who you were.**

Leader: We met you in the dark of night.

**Right: When we had questions,**

**Left: you gave us knowledge.**

**All: But we did not know who you were.**

Leader: We met you by the well.

**Right: When we were parched with thirst,**

**Left: you gave us water**

**All: But we did not know who you were.**

Leader: We met you at the pool of Siloam.

**Right: When we were blind,**

**Left: you gave us sight.**

**All: But we did not know who you were.**

Leader: We met you at the grave.  
**Right:** When we were at death,  
**Left:** you gave us life.  
*All:* But we did not know who you were.

Leader: We met you with palm branches.  
**Right:** When you were riding on a donkey,  
**Left:** we gave you loud hosannas.  
*All:* But we did not know who you were.

Leader: Lord, hear our prayer. [Silence]

### *Words of assurance*

Leader: The Lord God has given you the tongue of a teacher so you can sustain those who are weary with a word. Every morning the Lord awakens you and opens your ears so you can turn your back on those who strike you, so you do not hide your face from those who insult you. The Lord God rescues you, and your adversaries will not confront you. The Lord God knows you, and therefore you will not be put to shame.

## WITNESSING

*Drama:* (see [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org))

### *Preparing to preach*

“Encountering God in celebration and suffering” (Isaiah 50:4-9a and Matthew 21:1-11; 26:14-27:66).

There are many preaching options for week six. If your congregation is planning a midweek service on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday, then preaching from the Palm Sunday passage (Matthew 21) makes sense. If no service is planned before Easter, we recommend some sermon reference to Jesus’ suffering and death, so as to not step from “hosanna” to “hallelujah” and avoid the “hell” of the passion.

The passion text from Matthew is extensive; so a retelling of the story in some form could be one sermon option. If you prefer to preach from a shorter section, choose the section from Matthew that grabs your attention. Or consider looking at the Psalm 31 or Philippians 2 passages for a change of pace this week. This could provide a different perspective and new opportunities for encountering God in what is familiar scriptural territory in many congregations.

### *Additional ideas*

- 1 If your goal is to cover both Palm Sunday and at least part of the Passion Week account, a sermon about encountering God’s presence in the celebrations and sufferings of life would be one angle. Where have you or the congregation experienced God, and how have you experienced “God with us” in life’s high and low moments?
- 2 A Palm Sunday focus could point out that Jesus enters the city on a donkey (symbol of peace), while the crowd appears to be calling for Jesus to initiate an ousting of the Romans (Hosanna = Save us now!). What is startling is that Jesus seems to accept their worship, be it totally sincere or unintentionally misguided. This could be a Sunday to think about worship. Why do we do what we do? What motivates our worship? Are there “results” we expect? The good news is: God accepts our worship as we grow in our worship “practice.”
- 3 A sermon on Isaiah 50 could highlight the humanity of the text. Note all the references to the human body. The good news comes in the multiple God-verbs: God has given, God wakens, God has opened, God helps (twice), God vindicates. God clearly encounters us first so that we are capable of encountering any and all of life.

4 Matthew 26:14–27:66 also contains almost a countless number of body references. This is clearly a Jesus identifying with humanity. His suffering is real (not tempered by his divinity). Also, the trajectory of last Sunday is reversed (Lazarus's death to life; and today, life moving toward death). Death is able to be endured (even alone) because of what we have already witnessed and know to be true (death to life).

**Responding**  
*Sharing/Offering*

**Sending**

We have encountered the God who can save. Go as witnesses to that saving power in your life. As you go, be watchful this coming week for evidence that life is more powerful than death.



## *Easter Sunday ~ April 20, 2014*

# *Encountering God: What have we witnessed . . .*

## *. . . in Jesus' empty tomb?*

**Scriptures:** Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2; 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

**Focus statement**

We encounter God's triumphant power in Jesus' empty tomb. Mary Magdalene encountered the resurrected Jesus and shared this news with the disciples. We who God chooses to be witnesses are raised with Christ to the miracle of new life. We rejoice in glad song!

**Song suggestions**

Congregations will (and should!) choose songs that they love to sing on Easter. In addition, the following fit especially well with the theme of encounter and/or the gospel reading.

**Hymnal and supplements**

STS 88 *That Easter Morn, at Break of Day*

STS 101 *The Risen Christ*

HWB 269 *Thine Is the Glory*

**Praise and worship**

*10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)* by Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin

*Who but You (Abraham and Sarah)* by Bernie Herms and Nichole Nordeman

*I Will Bless You* by Bryan Moyer Suderman ([www.smalltallmusic.com](http://www.smalltallmusic.com))

*Blessed Be Your Name* by Matt Redman and Beth Redman

*Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)* by John Newton, Chris Tomlin, and Louie Giglio

*Born Again* by Brad Avery, David Carr, Mac Powell, Mark Lee, and Tai Anderson

## **ENCOUNTERING**

**Call to Worship**

**Leader:** Let us rejoice, for the tomb has been found empty.

**People:** **He is risen from the grave!**

Leader: Let glad songs of victory rise up this Easter day.

**People: He is risen from the grave!**

Leader: Let us sound the trumpets in the house of the Lord!

**People: Our Christ is not dead. He lives forevermore!**

Leader: Let us stand in awe at what the Lord has done.

*All: Share the good news: Christ is risen!  
Let us rejoice in glad song!*

### *Opening prayer*

Triumphant God, this resurrection morning has burst open with good news. It is the best news we could ever imagine hearing! The old world has been shaken to the foundation. And what once was shall never be again. Hallelujah! The tomb guarding death is empty. Death's power over us is now missing and is not coming back! Jesus, you are alive and you reign victorious. And because of what you have accomplished, we will sing your praises for all eternity, including this hour. In the name of the One worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise forever and ever. Amen.

### *Confessing our sin*

Leader: Acclaim the Lord, for the Lord is good!

**People: Forever is the Lord's kindness!**

Leader: Let all of Israel say:

**People: Forever is the Lord's kindness!**

Leader: Let those who fear the Lord say:

**People: Forever is the Lord's kindness!**

Leader: The Lord is our strength.

**People: The Lord is our might.**

*All: The Lord has become our salvation.*

Leader: Today there are glad songs in the tents of the just;

**People: For though we were chastised, we were not given over to death.**

Leader: The right hand of the Lord is valiant!

**People: The right hand of the Lord is exalted!**

Leader: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

**People: The Lord has answered our cries.**

*All: The Lord has become our rescue.*

Leader: This is the Lord's doing.

**People: This is the day that the Lord has made!**

*All: This is marvelous in our eyes.*

## **WITNESSING**

*Drama:* (see [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org))

### *Preparing to preach*

“Encountering God in resurrection . . . again and again!” (Matthew 28:1-10 and John 20:1-18).

The lectionary offers no Old Testament option, with the exception of a portion of Psalm 118. Instead, two Gospel resurrection stories are included. While attempts could be made to use both John and Matthew and reconcile details, it may be more helpful to focus on only one account. A more useful complementary passage could be Colossians 3:1-4, which describes a life that has been raised with Christ.

Also, if you have preached many Easter sermons, a temptation may be to find some new, never-heard-of-before slant. Resist! “Jesus is alive” is the core message of the Christian faith that begs to be repeated every year and never grows old. Be reminded and remind the congregation that we have seen resurrection before (Lazarus and dry bones) and shall see it again and again. God-encounters bring new life out of death! Rejoice in this day and be glad in it!

### *Additional ideas*

- 1 In both texts, God’s best news ever begins in the most unlikely of settings, in a cemetery. If our faith can be stretched enough to believe in a God who creates celebrations in a cemetery, surely it will be a faith expansive enough to trust God for whatever else happens in life. In this place of sorrow and hushed whispers, God declares, “No more!” The grave has received a makeover, and what is over is the power of death!
- 2 One Matthew sermon could pay attention to the two earthquakes, one on Good Friday and again on Easter Sunday. Earthquakes are the result of a seismic shift. Earthquakes shake our once-stable world and always grab our attention. God is trying to get us to see the significance of the life-altering change that is happening. On Good Friday and Great Sunday, the earth shook and rearranged reality forever. What has gotten our attention these past six weeks?
- 3 Another Matthew approach is to notice the response of the women. Matthew describes their emotion as they leave the tomb as filled with joy, which is what we might expect. Recall the prodigal son and Lazarus. When the dead are later discovered alive, parties and joy result. But a second emotion tags along with joy: fear. What is fear doing here? Recall your graduation or the birth of your child. Were emotions present? Were you full of joy, yet afraid? This is a common response when the past known reality is gone for good, and new, uncharted territory lies ahead. If God can raise the dead, imagine what God could do with the little I have to offer God! This could be a good opportunity for a “resurrection” testimony of God bringing amazing results from what was offered with joy, despite fear.
- 4 Notice all the running on Easter morning in John 20. Mary Magdalene is seen running from the tomb. Peter and John go racing to the tomb. Adults are not generally seen running. The older we get, the less graceful our running becomes. First-century adults running was even more rare. Pulling up garments to run literally could expose and humiliate. One did not run without good reason, often fear (running away) or love (running toward). The Calvary/Easter story is about God (like the prodigal son’s father) running toward us, willing to be humiliated on a cross. The reason: love, a love that has been running loose in the world ever since!
- 5 John’s telling of Easter calls attention to our Lent-long question, “What have we witnessed?” Notice the many instances people see but do not see. Mary Magdalene sees the empty tomb, but “sees” a missing body rather than resurrection. Later she sees two angels, but “sees” a possible source of information. Last she sees Jesus, but “sees” a gardener. John and Peter manage to see the same interior of the tomb; Peter “sees” nothing but the literal; John “sees” enough to stir some level of belief. The eyes of faith, implanted by resurrection encounters with God, allow us to see in new ways not previously possible. Angels, empty tombs, gardeners, and “ordinary” days can mean nothing, unless seen through faith’s eyes. What have we witnessed? To whom have we witnessed?

### *Responding Sharing/Offering*

### *Sending*

We have encountered the God who has power over even death. We are witnesses to what God has done. Go now, as long as God gives you breath, as witnesses to others, sharing the joy of what God can yet do in their lives and ours, through Jesus Christ, the risen Lord.