



seeking:
honest questions
for deeper faith

sermon planning guide

FOR LENT-EASTER: YEAR A

*Featuring biblical commentary by
Rev. Danielle Shroyer & Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow*

Guide developed by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

introduction

how to use this guide

We hope this guide is your starting point for shaping your sermons, worship services, and scripture study classes. For each Sunday in Lent through Easter, we have included theme connections, biblical commentary, guiding questions, and links to further reading and materials.¹ We hope these offer a few ways of approaching and thinking about the texts in light of our theme and weekly sub-themes. We encourage you to use this guide as a companion to the poetry, visual art, devotional, and other materials in the bundle—allowing all of the words, images, and ideas to cross-pollinate. You can find full-length artist statements inspired by each of the focal texts listed in this guide in our Visual Art Collection. Consider mapping out your ideas in our accompanying Sermon Planning Grid. Additionally, you might use this guide to facilitate adult education sessions or small groups. You could absorb and discuss some of the articles and materials noted in the “Further Reading and Research” with a small group. You could also adapt or use the guiding questions as discussion prompts.

about the theme— *seeking: honest questions for deeper faith*

The lectionary for Year A offers us many stories of Jesus encountering people who are seeking: Nicodemus comes to him in the veil of night, he approaches a Samaritan woman at a well, he heals a man born without sight. In these stories, each person is seeking a new beginning, a different life, a deeper faith. What unfolds is an exchange filled with questions and exploration. Often, an unveiling occurs—assumptions are disrupted, a new perspective is revealed, mystery grows.

And so, we’ve crafted a Lenten series founded on questions. Many of our weekly questions feel restorative (“Can these bones live?”). Some feel like a charge or challenge (“Who will you listen to?”).

¹ Under the “Further Reading and Research” sections, we direct you to the work of authors, scholars, thinkers, and writers who might inform or enhance your sermon message. We do not own the rights to these works. We encourage you to patronize and support these authors and creators.

introduction *(continued)*

about the theme—

seeking: honest questions for deeper faith *(continued)*

Some questions are hopeful and curious (“How do we begin again?”). Our questions won't necessarily lead to answers, but they can help us find clarity and a new perspective. Ultimately, we pray they lead to a new beginning, a restoration, a wider grace.

Like the characters in our Lenten scriptures, we are also seeking many things: clarity, connection, wonder, justice, balance. We are seeking our calling, the sacred, and how to live as a disciple. Throughout the turbulence of the past few years, many of us are asking big questions about our lives and our faith. If you are returning to church, you are probably returning with more questions and a critical lens. We hope this series will help us unpack some of those big questions in ways that are honest and faithful. Throughout this season, we hope you will continually ask yourself: what am I seeking? What is God seeking?

This Lent, we invite you to engage in the spiritual practice of seeking. We encourage you to stay curious, open, and nimble. We hope you will soften your assumptions and expand your perspectives. We pray that these questions will create a safe space to explore—to be drawn more deeply into the fullness of life, into the heart of God.

theme reflections from the sanctified art creative team

“Brainstorming for this Lent’s theme was especially frustrating for me. I spent weeks trying to get a grip on words or phrases that encapsulated the energy of these profound questions from the texts. At first glance, some of the questions seem very simple, but once you peel back a layer, they turn into those kind of life-long existential questions. In some ways the questions are forward-thinking and in other ways they are retrospective. The questions are introspective and individual while at the same time outward-facing and collective. I found myself in a kind of confusing dance trying to figure out a perfect way to neatly package this sense of reaching out, poking holes, lamenting, feeling the edge of clarity, missing the point... etc. The word ‘seeking’ surfaced pretty early on in our planning—but seeking what? I wanted to know what we were searching for. However, it became clear that the object of the seeking wasn’t the point; it was the journey of seeking that we were trying to grasp. This theme is about being raw and honest in our questioning, our doubts, our fears, our confusion, our discoveries—and in that process, unveiling a more authentic, rooted faith. It is in our seeking that we journey alongside the Man of Sorrows, and ultimately, find the sunrise”.

— Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman, Founding Creative Partner, Director of Branding

introduction *(continued)*

theme reflections from the sanctified art creative team *(continued)*

"This Lent, we are invited to seek in the present continuous tense. This tense is active. It is also unending, never quite attained, an opportunity. We choose to be grounded in seeing and seeking in new ways. In this way, I strive toward a hopeful understanding of cyclical human behavior, now more than ever before. How can such ancient writings still be relevant? How have we not yet fixed the problems of the world? Why must we be forever attaining the new heaven and the new earth you speak of, God? The naivete of my youth has worn off, and so I must not give up. I find in God an illogical hope and seek to live into it. Hope ripples out, one by one. Hence, it is with a reverent mind that I turn patiently to the concept of seeking, of ever-seeking hope. I arrive here with the lens that I cannot change the world by changing others, but that I can change the world by changing myself afresh. I focus on what I can control. So, I relish in this opportunity to continue seeking a new layer in these familiar words from God, our God. God who is always moving, present and continuously, in ways far beyond the page—active, unending, never quite attained, an opportunity."

—Hannah Garrity, Founding Creative Partner

"So often faith is portrayed as something you have or you don't. You are strong in your faith, or you are knee-deep in doubt. It's one or the other. This black and white thinking fits with our society's obsession with choosing sides. However, it doesn't fit with my experience of faith. For me, faith has always been an experience of seeking—seeking God in the world, seeking the good, seeking a deeper truth. I seek my way through prayer. I seek my way into scripture. I am forever cobbling together memories, feelings, questions, and experiences, all in an effort to see God more clearly. When we studied the scriptures for this season of Lent, I saw that same hungry seeking in the text. Over and over, people ask questions. Jesus asks questions. The crowds ask questions. Everyone seems to be looking for something deeper, and it is that honest curiosity that allows them to run into the Divine. This Lent, I long for that same experience for all of us. So may we be seekers. May we ask questions. May we look for God under every rock and stone. And in the seeking, may we find."

—Rev. Sarah A. Speed, Founding Creative Partner

"When I hear the term 'seeking' used within a faith context, I automatically think of the famously-quoted adage, 'Seek and ye shall find' (Matthew 7:7). This verse is often used to perpetuate a transactional, fairytale faith: if you just try harder or pray harder, then what you want will be granted to you. I wish more than anything that life and faith would operate within a predictable, merit-based system of seeking and finding, asking and receiving. However, you and I both know this isn't reality. Instead, I hope to live a seeking faith, a faith that is ever-growing, adaptive, resilient, and filled with awe. We are now in the third year of a societal overhaul in which many of our disparities, vulnerabilities, and differences are more exposed. This chapter of life has most likely unearthed big, honest questions—about your purpose, your faith, your identity, your future. And so, this Lent, we invite you to bring those big questions to God. We invite you to engage in the spiritual practice of seeking, staying curious, porous, and malleable. Like Nicodemus, can you let go of what you used to know in order to begin again? Like the Samaritan woman at the well, will you let yourself be fully seen? Like Mary at the empty tomb, can you recognize God's resurrection when you encounter it?"

—Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, Founder, Creative Director

introduction *(continued)*

theme reflections from the sanctified art creative team *(continued)*

"Questions are a sign of growth, curiosity, and wonder. We expect that children as they grow will ask thousands of questions about the world around them, not because they are suspicious of it but because they are drawn to it. Being drawn toward a deeper faith, and toward God at its center, will naturally come with questions, big questions that dwarf our simplistic answers. Many of the college students I've pastored come from churches that rush to answer questions quickly and definitively because they are seen as a sign of doubt, which is seen as a sign of lacking faith. But questions are an invitation into deeper faith. They are an invitation for the Spirit to move within the wonder, in the space between the question and the answer. This Lent, let us seek good questions rather than easy answers."

—Rev. Anna Strickland, Operations Support & Content Creator

about our focal scriptures

Our theme and resources are inspired by the Revised Common Lectionary (Year A), with particular emphasis on the focal texts listed each week in this guide.



SAMPLE

seeking: *Will you give me a drink?*

focal scriptures John 4:5-42 | Exodus 17:1-7

theme connections

Jesus crosses cultural, religious, and societal boundaries by leading his disciples through Samaria. In the heat of midday, he seeks out connection with a Samaritan woman drawing water from the well. His command to her is also a question and an invitation to a new way of life: *Will you give me a drink?* For the woman, to respond is risky but life-changing. This question creates a dialogue between them in which Jesus sees the woman fully; she leaves the well transformed. In the wilderness, the Israelites essentially ask: *Will you give us a drink, God? Will you take care of us, even now?* In their discomfort and fatigue, they question Moses and God. This week, we might imagine ourselves at the well or in the wilderness. Are we willing to care for our neighbors, seeking to not just quench thirst, but to find living waters that sustain us all? In this season, what are you thirsting for? In what ways are you needing sustenance?

commentary on John 4:5-42 & Exodus 17:1-7 | by Rev. Danielle Shroyer

"Give us a drink," the Israelites ask. God hears them, readily responds, and calls Moses to bring forth water from a rock. But do the people know what they truly thirst for?

In the seasons of our lives, we all have felt frustrated and lost in the wilderness. During these times, our fear gets the better of us. Survival mode reigns. Sometimes our focus on survival is so loud we miss the cry underneath: "God, have you abandoned me?"

What would it have looked like, I wonder, if the Israelites had instead cried out for God's assurance? "Show us you're still with us, God," they could have prayed with open hearts. "We feel alone and unmoored." Where could the water have come from, if the question had come from a softer place than the rock of our human defenses?

This is the way Jesus himself taught us to pray. He gave us full permission to ask for what we needed, to request of God our daily bread. He knew, I think, that it's also a prayer for God to walk with us. It's an honest admission that none of us rely only on ourselves. We need God. We need each other.

Many years later, Jesus asks this same question of a Samaritan woman at a well. Everything he risks by speaking with her—crossing cultural, religious, and social lines—demonstrates his willingness to be vulnerable. When he asks for what he needs, he shows that even he cannot make it alone. What a risk for the Son of God to be so openly human. And yet, it is this question—and his willingness—that leads to this woman's transformation. Despite a long list of good reasons why she shouldn't be vulnerable to anyone, she boldly asks Jesus for living water instead. And she did so fully trusting he would give it.

We often see this Gospel story as a bridge-building one. It's a reminder to be brave enough to cross boundaries and offer a drink to those society may separate from us. And it is. And also, it reminds us that God designed this whole world to run on benevolent connection. And that requires us to not just be charitable, but vulnerable.

The question for us this Lent is not only whether we would extend a drink; it's whether we will be brave enough to ask God for one when we need it.

guiding q's

- What are you truly thirsting for? As Rev. Shroyer points out in her commentary, the Israelites cry out to Moses, "Give us water to drink!" But perhaps the softer, more vulnerable question they could have asked was, "God, have you abandoned us?" What are the softer questions underneath our human defenses? In the parched places of our souls, what are we thirsting for?

seeking: Will you give me a drink? (continued)

guiding q's (continued)

- The narrator of John 4 emphasizes that the Samaritan woman leaves her water jar at the well (John 4:28). Does she actually give Jesus a drink? Perhaps the narrator wants us to know that the well water is not the living water, as it becomes irrelevant. What is the living water? How do you define or describe God's living water?
- Compare and contrast Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman with Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:1-17). In both stories, Jesus engages in a long conversation one-on-one with a person, speaking of the Spirit and eternal life. Consider the time of day and settings for each story. Compare the identity and status of Nicodemus the Pharisee to the unnamed Samaritan woman. Compare how Jesus interacts with each person, and how Nicodemus and the woman respond to Jesus. What is each person seeking? What does each person gain? In looking at these stories side-by-side, what do you learn about Jesus?
- In her artist statement for *Living Water*, Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman writes of the Samaritan woman: "She needs to not be defined by the worst parts of her life, the number of her husbands, or others' assumptions, but to be seen through the lens of mutual need—to be seen as one of the first witnesses of the Messiah, and now a vessel of living water herself."⁸ Contemplate Wright Pittman's image and all the ways it communicates interdependence. How does this image help you see this story in a new way, through the lens of mutuality?
- In their transformative conversation, Jesus and the Samaritan woman cross social, political, cultural, and religious boundaries. What does it look like for you to cross divides in order to connect with someone? What can this connection look like through the lens of mutual need?

further reading & research

Read *Ask Me For a Blessing (You Know You Need One)*, by Adrian Dannhauser. (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022).

(Note: Each week, Episcopal Priest Adrian Dannhauser stands outside her church on Madison Avenue at 35th Street in New York next to a chalkboard, in which she writes: "Ask me for a blessing. God's grace is meant to be shared." She got the idea from offering "Ashes to go" during Lent and realizing that the simple act of asking someone if they needed prayer and a blessing often led to many holy encounters and conversations—not so unlike the one shared by Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. Dannhauser writes about her experiences sharing sacred space with strangers, often those who are religiously unaffiliated, on the streets of New York.)

Read "Only Bridging Can Heal a World of Breaking" by john a. powell. *Yes! Solutions Journalism*, The Building Bridges Issue, Winter 2020. November 11, 2019. [yesmagazine.org/issue/building-bridges/2019/11/11/only-bridging-can-heal-a-world-of-breaking](https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/building-bridges/2019/11/11/only-bridging-can-heal-a-world-of-breaking)

(Note: In this article, john a. powell⁹ the leader of The Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California, describes the social capital theory of bridging and how this can lead to meaningful integration—not assimilation—and provides an antidote to the "breaking" that is caused by divisive "othering." He writes: "The idea of 'bridging' provides a path to healing the practices of 'breaking' across communities of difference that are so prevalent today." To learn more about powell's work, you might also listen to this podcast¹⁰ episode hosted by Eboo Patel, in which they discuss the ruptures in john's childhood and how those experiences shaped him into a "bridger.")

⁸ The art and artist statement are included in our *Seeking* Visual Art Collection.

⁹ john intentionally spells his name in lowercase letters in an attempt to, in his own words, be "part of the universe, not over it, as capitals signify."

¹⁰ "How do we live together when we profoundly disagree?" on *Interfaith American with Eboo Patel*, Sl:Ep3. Podcast hosted by Eboo Patel. [interfaithamerica.org/eboo-patel-podcast-powell](https://www.interfaithamerica.org/eboo-patel-podcast-powell)

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

seeking: *Will you give me a drink? (continued)*

further reading & research *(continued)*

Read "A Tale of Two Disciples and the Second Sign (John 3-4)" by Karoline M. Lewis. *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

(Note: Karoline Lewis' commentary on John is partly what inspired Wright Pittman to focus on interdependence in her art for John 4. In her commentary, Lewis offers a fresh perspective on this story, emphasizing that Jesus' request for water may have been a conversation starter, but it was essentially a request due to his human need. She writes: "Jesus is worn out. He needs water, as does she. . . . There is a mutuality of need present before the two ever utter words to each other" (55-56). Lewis analyzes the reciprocity of relationship between Jesus and the woman at the well.)



Living Water

by Lauren Wright Pittman
Inspired by John 4:5-42



Wet Stones

by Carmelle Beaugelin
Inspired by Exodus 17:1-7