

MISSION OF GRATITUDE:

**The United Thank Offering
And The Good Book Club
Weekly Meditations, Questions for Discussion
and Gratitude Journal**



**UNITED
THANK
OFFERING**

MISSION OF GRATITUDE WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

Welcome to the Good Book Club and the United Thank Offering (UTO) guide for your 14-week journey through Luke and Acts! UTO offers this booklet to support individuals and groups as they spend Lent and Easter reflecting on gratitude and mission as portrayed in Luke and Acts. Each week, participants can find a meditation on the readings, questions for personal reflection or group discussion, space to keep a gratitude journal, and a story of a ministry supported by UTO. We hope you'll join us on a journey to explore how gratitude can deepen our faith and support us as we live the mission that Jesus has called all of us to participate in.

ABOUT THE UNITED THANK OFFERING

The United Thank Offering (UTO) invites all Episcopalians to participate in a personal spiritual discipline of gratitude and giving. For more than 125 years, UTO has distributed small Blue Boxes to Episcopalians asking them to place a coin in the box for each good thing that happens in their life. These boxes are collected annually in parishes and dioceses and then throughout the whole Church. All of the thank offerings are then distributed as grants to support innovative mission and ministry in The Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion. Please note that 100% of donations to UTO are given away the following year, and each year UTO receives more requests for grants than it can fund. Each week of this Mission of Gratitude will feature a link to a video or a photo and story about a UTO grant site. We hope that hearing the stories of some of UTO grants will inspire you to participate more fully in UTO. To learn more about the United Thank Offering, including how to start UTO in your congregation or how to apply for funds, please visit www.episcopalchurch.org/uto.

A RECOMMENDATION AS YOU PREPARE TO DIVE INTO THE GOOD BOOK CLUB

(A Note from Heather)

Many of us have read Luke and Acts or, at the very least, have heard these stories read in church many times. It's easy to start skimming when the text feels familiar. We recommend using a translation of the Bible that is new to you, or reading along with a commentary. One text that I have found useful is *The Book of God* by the Rev. Walter Wangerin, Jr. Wangerin is a Lutheran pastor who wanted to make the Bible more approachable, so he turned it into a novel. Personally, as a young adult, I found reading *The Book of God* while I was doing Education for Ministry incredibly helpful, especially with the Hebrew Bible (I would get lost in genealogies and *The Book of God* omits those and focuses on the story line). You might want to utilize this resource or *The Message*, which other folks find helpful.

My favorite commentary (they are inexpensive and widely recognized scholarship) is the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary*. I have relied on books such as these while creating my meditations. I like that you can purchase (or borrow from the library) a slim version for the specific book you are reading. The scripture is at the top of each page and the commentary is at the bottom. They also include some photos of the different places they are talking about. The Collegeville group is also responsible for the creation of *The Saint John's Bible*, a wonderful hand-illuminated text. Reproductions are now available for purchase (and some libraries have copies to borrow), and it is another wonderful way to read biblical text anew.

Whatever text you choose to use, we are grateful to journey along with you!

WEEK ONE: SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11 – SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2018

READING: LUKE 1:1-4:13

The Gospel of Luke begins with a short prologue that is often skipped over, but before we begin, I want to point out that the name Theophilus literally means Beloved of God. So as we begin to read, know that, in many ways, Luke addressed this letter to all of us, as each of us is the Beloved of God. Each time I begin Luke, I begin with gratitude for being beloved by God, and so I hope you too will take a moment and give thanks for your creation and for a God who loves you so much that your name is engraved on God's hands (Isaiah 49:16).

This first week, we find ourselves at the beginning of the story of the life of Jesus. Luke focuses his story on the experience of Mary, her wonder and awe at all the things happening around her. Luke is often known as the "joy gospel," as he uses the word joy more than any of the other gospels, and that joy is certainly found in the story of the births of John and Jesus. We have beautiful Canticles, and angels and shepherds. It is clear that Luke wants us to know that God is doing something new in the world.

The beginning of Luke, particularly when it is the text at Advent, is a reminder to me that God is often easiest to see in the joy of a new thing starting. Each year during Advent, we are reminded that God loves us so much that God was willing to send Jesus to live among us, to experience the world from our perspective. Ours is a living God, and one who knows the heartbreak, joy, and struggle of humanity. Emmanuel, God is with us and God is within us, is a reminder that the incarnation wasn't a one-time occurrence but happens again and again in our lives when we invite God to do something new with and through us.

When new things come into our lives, it is often a time when gratitude is easiest. It is easy to be thankful for the new child, the new adventure, the new relationship, and so forth. Throughout the

readings this week, we see moments of gratitude lived out quietly as the story unfolds. We hear it in the beginning of the Canticles, see it in the adoration of the angels and shepherds, and feel it in the crowd gathered at the presentation in the temple.

As you read the lessons this week, pay attention to all of the ways that God is doing something new. Notice when God is behaving in unexpected ways, whom God is calling to action, and how those called give thanks to God for the work set before them.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Theophilus means *Beloved of God*. In what ways can you more fully embrace being beloved by God? Do you believe that you are? In what ways can you better treat others, particularly those you do not agree with or strangers, as if they were also beloved by God?

2. What new thing did you notice as you carefully read the birth narrative?

3. What new thing is God calling you to do this Lent? What new things in your life are you grateful for?

WEEK TWO: SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18 – SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2018

READING: LUKE 4:14-7:50

This reading from Luke marks the start of Jesus' active ministry. Jesus reads the scripture in Nazareth and ends up irritating a number of people who know him when he remarks that they have heard the scripture fulfilled that day. So he slips out of town to start his teaching and healing ministry.

He's in the spotlight as the stories about his message and healing spread, and he attracts great and demanding crowds. But think what it must have been like to be a person in the crowd watching all this – to retell the stories, to see the miracles of healing, to talk to those who were healed, or to be one of the lucky ones who received healing.

Although the crowds were demanding, there were certainly many ways people showed gratitude. Some would have said a simple thank you with their words or eyes; some would have blubbered out thanks with tears and excitement; others would have given a small gift, maybe of food; still others would have invited him to their homes for a meal; and finally, some would have been struck silent because they simply didn't have words to voice their gratitude.

All the stories of Jesus' early ministry are compelling, but the three that intrigue me the most involve women. First is the healing of Simon's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39). Jesus healed her, and she got up and started serving dinner. She reminds me of so many women who show their gratitude by providing food and service to their loved ones. And you can bet that Jesus, if he wasn't already, became a beloved person to that family after he healed her.

The second story of healing is of an only son whose dead body is being carried on a stretcher near his widowed mother (Luke 7:11-16). In her culture, with the loss of a husband and then an only son, she would have been left devastated and likely to starve. So while the boy

was raised from the dead, it really was Jesus' compassion toward the mother that moved him to heal the boy.

And finally, there is the story of the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears, kisses them, dries them with her hair, and anoints them with perfume (Luke 7:37-38,44-48). In this story, the conversation between the Pharisee and Jesus points out that the person forgiven more loves more. Or put another way, the person forgiven more is more grateful.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Place yourself in the role of observer. What expressions of gratitude would you expect to see in those who had received healing from Jesus?

2. Have you ever missed an opportunity to express thanks for something you later realized was truly a missed chance to show your gratitude? Did you do anything about it, and if so, what?

WEEK THREE: SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 24 – SATURDAY, MARCH 3, 2018

READING: LUKE 8:1-11:13

A lot happens this week in our text. Jesus teaches large crowds of people using parables and examples from their daily lives to make clear what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Jesus then moves from parables to miracles, from one side of the lake to the other (which is important because it signals to readers that Jesus is expanding his ministry from the Jewish community into the Gentile community). Our reading ends with Jesus describing what it truly will cost those who want to be his disciples, after which Jesus is transfigured and begins his journey to Jerusalem. For me, the part of the text that stands out the most is announcement of the passion.

One of the masterful literary devices that the Gospel of Luke employs is the great reversal – last will be first, first will be last. In our text this week, we get what is perhaps the biggest reversal: if you want to gain life, you must be willing to lose your life. This reversal is tied up in the first revealing of the passion. Life and death are held in the balance for Jesus as he foreshadows the end of his life and invites his disciples on the journey with him. So why is this reversal so important as we study mission and gratitude? Time and time again, we've seen with UTO grant sites that when congregations have given up doing things simply because that's how it's always been done, or when they have been willing to reimagine their space/property, then they have found new life. It's hard work. Mission often calls us outside of our comfort zone. It asks us to engage with our communities in new and profound ways. It presses at our hearts and boundaries. Often, when folks go on short-term mission trips, they come home to report that they got more than they gave, a great reminder of the reversals that come when we are open to the Holy Spirit. With all that said, Jesus is quite clear that in order truly to follow him, we must be willing to give up everything, we must be willing to die or let things die so they might be resurrected.

Jesus came into the world to remind us that God is making all things new. The greatest barrier to resurrection is fear – fear of change, fear of things ending, fear of death – but the only way to Easter is through Good Friday.

Our mission as Christians is to be fully alive in Christ, which means being unafraid of things ending and willing to give up everything to do the work that God has set forth for us to do. This is a challenging statement about discipleship, and one I personally struggle to live into each day. As I endeavor to be less afraid of things coming to an end, I find that practicing gratitude really helps. Often, when someone dies, people struggle with the things left unsaid. They wish they had said I love you one more time, or thanked that person for something he or she did for them, or they long for reconciliation over a hurt carried for too long. We get busy, we forget to say thank you, we forget to tell people that they are important to us, and the busier we get, the less we are fully alive. Practicing gratitude means learning to say thank you as often as you can – pausing to give thanks for the beautiful sunrise, thanking the person that makes your coffee, sending a thank you note to a friend simply for being your friend. It also means saying thank you to things that served you well and that you no longer need, or traditions that were live-giving for a time and now are more work than joy. Gratitude is sometimes the gateway to freedom from fear, allowing resurrection and opening yourself up to the new thing that God is doing in your life, which old habits, old traditions, or stuff you don't need is holding you back from.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Have you had a time in your life of “reversal” (gotten more than you gave, first is last, give away and gain)? What was it like for you? What did you feel?

2. What things in your life are calling to be resurrected? What things need to be allowed to die so they might be transformed?

3. Make a list of all of the people who love you most in the world. What would you thank each of them for if you could?

GRATITUDE JOURNAL THIS WEEK I AM THANKFUL FOR:



This week, we invite you to journey to a congregation in the Diocese of California that found transformation by opening its doors to a community and a culture different from its own. Members of this congregation found that, when they invited a Spanish-speaking worship service and congregation to join them in their space, their congregation had renewed life – and a new ministry. They started a homework station because so many children needed additional help with school work and a safe place to be after school. UTO funds helped to build a staircase so that additional classrooms would be accessible as the program expanded. This is a wonderful story of what happens when you open yourself up to transformation.

www.episcopalchurch.org/uto-videos

WEEK FOUR: SUNDAY, MARCH 4 – SATURDAY, MARCH 10, 2018

READING: LUKE 11:14-14:35

Jesus is in rare form in these chapters. His teachings are blunt and to the point, and he clearly delineates right from wrong, good behavior from evil. He casts out demons in the name of God, he calls out the Pharisees' behavior as an example of what not to do, and he teaches his disciples the dangers of saying one thing privately and another publicly (Luke 12:1-4), reminding them to be transparent and consistent in their words and actions because secrets will be found out.

This is the disciples' time of education, their time to receive Jesus' message, to drink it all in, because, as they will soon learn, they will be left alone. The teaching and healing ministry will rest on their shoulders, so they had better hear it, absorb it, and be able to teach it to others. There is a lot to be grateful for when you encounter a good teacher, a teacher who gives examples of what you as the learner are supposed to learn and to carry forward so that, when that teacher is no longer with you, you have a model to follow.

Jesus was the consummate teacher, and he was working with a group of disciples who needed specific skills. He knew he had to develop their skills in order to share his message, and he made it absolutely clear what was acceptable, what was not, and what they were to teach. I am sure when they were left on their own, they compared notes to get it right. They were grateful for those conversations that gave them insight into what and how they were to teach, how to cast out demons, and how to perform healings. Although they had to have been unsure of themselves as they approached their teaching and healing ministry, they could look back with gratitude that Jesus showed them what to do and how to do it. He also explained that they would have additional help, "for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say" (Luke 12:12). This assurance helped them do their ministry and strengthened them when they were challenged.

Other tidbits I take from these chapters: be humble (Luke 14:11); extend invitations to people who cannot reciprocate (Luke 14:13-14); remember your eye is the lamp of your body (Luke 11:33-34); don't worry so much about your life, what you will eat or wear – in other words, stop worrying (Luke 12:22-27) and don't be afraid (Luke 12:32). Jesus' teachings were powerful for the crowds that followed him and for the disciples who would carry on his work. I am grateful for the lessons, but also for the stories and wisdom that were passed down to teach us through the generations that have followed.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What is your favorite teaching from these chapters? How have you applied it in your life?

2. The reminder in Luke 12:1-4 not to tell private stories might be construed as saying, "Don't gossip." That is a hard teaching for many of us. How do you attempt to be transparent in your life?

3. Put yourself in the disciples' shoes. What do you most cling to from Jesus' teachings that will help you in your ministry?

WEEK FIVE: SUNDAY, MARCH 11 – SATURDAY, MARCH 17, 2018

READING: LUKE 15:1-18:17

This week, we encounter lots of parables. Our week opened with a set of parables often grouped together and known as the “Parables of the Lost.” The parables found in our reading this week deal with Luke’s desire to drive home the availability and opportunity for redemption. We begin with lost sheep and the ridiculous shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to fend for themselves in search of the one. In another, a coin is lost, about one day’s wages, and the stakes are now much higher than when the sheep was lost, but the other coins are not in danger of being lost during the search. Then, perhaps, we find one of the most famous parables, the Parable of the Lost Son, or the Prodigal Son. Each parable ends with rejoicing at the found sheep, coin, and child. Each parable has a Christ-figure who searches, prays, and works to restore what is lost. Each parable is a reminder that God is constantly seeking us out, constantly calling us back into the right relationship, and constantly rejoicing. I often find the Parables of the Lost deeply comforting; I am deeply grateful that God is constantly seeking me out and rejoicing when I’m found.

Next, we find the Parable of the Dishonest Steward. This parable is a challenge to untangle, and I’ve always been grateful for the ending. Verse 9 gives us the answer to the lesson – the problem of dishonest wealth. This parable reminds us that the wealth of this world isn’t real. It’s easy to forget that money, and its worth, is something that we as humans made up. We decided that gold is worth more than silver, for example. Jesus is trying to warn his listeners to be savvy about worldly wealth. Obviously, we need money to function in our world, but we need to remember that it is temporal, not eternal. So, be good about the money you have (16:11) to show that you can be trustworthy with the things that matter. You cannot love God and money. As I have grown older, this parable has spoken more directly

to my understanding of gratitude. None of what we have in our lives is really ours, and we certainly cannot take it with us, so it is all a gift – a gift for us to be grateful for, to use wisely, and to hand down to the next generation in as good shape as possible. Care of creation, in many ways, speaks to this parable, but so does learning to live with what we need and not what we want (or what the ads on TV tell us we need). Every time my family and I have moved, I’ve picked up every object in my house and asked myself, Does this bring me joy, is it useful (have I used it in the last year), does it fit, do we need it? And if the answer is no, then I find it a new home; if it is yes, then I give thanks and pack it.

There are three more parables in our readings this week, and they are only found in Luke! Lazarus and the Rich Man is a reminder that God has a preferential option for the poor, and therefore, we are to do the same. In many ways, this speaks to the idea of generosity that is found in the Parable of the Dishonest Steward. It’s also a reversal parable, in that those who are hungry here will be fed in heaven. I’ve often read this and thought about the reversals found in the Beatitudes. The Kingdom of God will turn everything upside down, but it begins in our care of one another. Next is the persistent widow, which reminds us of Luke’s belief that we must be persistent in prayer (which he mentions over 30 times). Finally, the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector shows us how to pray properly and declares, once again in a reversal, that those who are humbled will be exulted.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever had a time when you felt like you were one of the people in the Parables of the Lost? Have you ever lost something and spent time searching for it? Have you felt lost and had someone find you?

2. How do you manage your “things”? Do you spring clean, donate, or “fast” from buying new things? What was that experience like for you?

3. Have you ever experienced the world turned upside down, like in the last three parables? How were you persistent? How did you deal with being exalted when you were humble, or humbled when you were feeling proud?

GRATITUDE JOURNAL

THIS WEEK I AM THANKFUL FOR:



This week, we invite you to watch this wonderful video from Episcopal News Service about the Tri Parish Wood Bank in Montana. UTO awarded a grant to this project, in which members of three congregations collect and load wood onto trucks to give to people as help to survive the winter. Watch this video to see wonderful testimonies from the people in the community who had been lost and then found by Father Harry.

To learn more about this ministry or to help support it, please visit the website: www.stjamesdillon.org/Wood-Bank-Ministry.html

WEEK SIX: SUNDAY, MARCH 18 – SATURDAY, MARCH 24, 2018

READING: LUKE 18:18-22:46

Jesus' time is winding down, and he tries to explain that to the disciples, speaking of what will happen to him in the third person, but they don't get it. I have often heard comments about the disciples being a little dense since they don't understand, but the scripture says, "But they understood nothing about these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said" (Luke 18:34). I don't always understand indirect stories and metaphors either. Jesus was not always direct – his parables were puzzling, his references to his own death were oblique, and he talked about himself as if it could have been someone else – so his disciples and others who heard him were grateful for the time to think and talk about what he meant by themselves and with him. It sounds like a Bible study or a book club discussion.

In book club, we talk about what the author meant by certain passages, what are the hidden meanings, and what the author's purpose was for telling the story in a certain way. As a group, we pull the book apart and put it back together, which helps us understand and remember the book better. And sometimes, gratefully, insight comes much later, even long after the discussion. This is also my favorite way to approach Bible study.

I believe that this may be what was going on with Jesus' listeners. In order for the disciples to carry out their ministry, they needed to chew on these teachings and figure out the message so they could teach it. And I am sure the disciples were grateful to have the opportunity to talk about Jesus' teachings, to ask him questions similar to asking an author about her book, and to talk among themselves. So when they didn't get his references to his death until it actually happened, I understand. It takes time to grasp hard teachings.

There are two stories from these chapters for which I am most grateful: First is the simple version of the first celebration of the Eucharist in that secluded space (Luke 22:14-22). Jesus tells them to divide the bread among themselves and share the wine. It is this simple sharing they will remember. Next, Jesus predicts his betrayal – no oblique reference now, he doesn't name names, but he doesn't mince words. Then, he slips back into talking about himself in the third person. The second is the story the poor widow's mite (Luke 21:1-4), which I consider the foundation story for the UTO Blue Box, a practice taught through the discipline of gratitude of the United Thank Offering.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Why did Jesus use stories and indirect methods to teach his disciples? Would it have been easier if he just told people directly what he wanted them to learn?

2. What book or chapter of the Bible have you had to discuss with a group before you could figure it out?

3. Which parable or story from these last chapters sticks with you the most? Which ones are you still trying to figure out?

WEEK SEVEN: SUNDAY, MARCH 25 – SATURDAY, MARCH 31, 2018

READING: LUKE 22:47-24:53

Holy Week is often a really busy week in the life of many congregations. The busy nature of this week often means that we're working on filling Easter eggs while we wait for the hot cross buns to bake. The days can run into one another, and sometimes we forget to center ourselves in the scripture as it unfolds around us. When I was in seminary, my liturgics professor, the Rev. Dr. Louis Weil, said to me as I was running around like a chicken with my head cut off, that my job was to be present to Holy Week – to sit in the moment and watch it unfold. How would you feel if you didn't know how the story ended? This week, instead of offering you a meditation or background on what is happening in the story, I want to invite you to do just that with me – sit in the midst of the story. What follows are places to pause and look around in the story with me as the week unfolds. Our lessons for the Good Book Club do not line up with the days in Holy Week, which can be a little unsettling, so I've marked them as the day they are assigned for the Good Book Club and then in parentheses I've given the day of Holy Week they align with, in case you'd rather be present to each day in a more holistic way.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

Sunday (Maundy Thursday): Peter's denial – imagine yourself in Peter's position. Think about what you've just witnessed and your great love of Jesus. How would you feel as people began to question you about your relationships? Can you think of times in history when others have been questioned about their faith or relationships? How did they respond, and what did you think of their response?

Monday (Maundy Thursday into Good Friday): Jesus appears before Herod today, an account that only happens in Luke. Sit in the story, look around. What is Luke trying to show us by adding this detail? Herod wants to show mercy to Jesus but is swayed by the crowd. Think about a time in your life when a crowd gave you pause about what action you should take. What did you do? Are you happy with your choice? How did it feel? How do you think Herod felt?

Tuesday (Good Friday): Simon of Cyrene is pressed into service to carry the cross and follow Jesus to ensure that Jesus would live long enough to be crucified. Luke is intentional about setting this scene to be clear that the way of discipleship is for Jews and Gentiles, but the way leads to the cross. Place yourself in the story as Simon. What would this feel like? How would this experience affect you?

Wednesday (Good Friday and Holy Saturday): Today, we experience Jesus' last breath as the human being who lived and walked among us. I invite you to sit in that space – to stand at the foot of the cross with the disciples and women who had given up everything to follow Jesus. What do you think was in their hearts? How were they feeling? What might they have been thinking?

Thursday (Easter Sunday): The women come to anoint the body and find that Jesus is gone. They are greeted by angels that instruct them to remember what Jesus had taught them and to believe. Today, I invite you to join the women who approached the grave with sadness and fear for their safety but desperate to do the work set forth in their customs and traditions. Imagine the surprise – the reversal – of looking for the living among the dead. What would this feel like? What would it be like in our own lives to be searching for the living among the dead?

Friday and Saturday (Post-Resurrection): Luke tells a wonderful story of meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus. The disciples are so caught up in their conversations and their experiences that they do not recognize Jesus in their midst. When have you encountered someone only to realize later that he or she was a reminder of Christ in your life?

WEEK EIGHT: SUNDAY, APRIL 1 – SATURDAY, APRIL 7, 2018

READING: ACTS 1:1-4:22

Acts opens with a stunning experience for the apostles. Jesus assures his followers that he leaves them in good hands, that he will send power and companionship from the Holy Spirit to help them do their work. Then, he ascends into the clouds, and they stand there gawking at the sky. It has started; they are there to carry out this great ministry in the name of him whom they loved. They must have felt both profound gratitude and sadness: they have been well taught, prayed over, and reassured of their worth in carrying out this great work. They watched the healing touch of Jesus and had their last 40 days of teaching with Jesus. He's gone, but they will not be alone for long.

At the Feast of Pentecost, the apostles were sitting around when a sound like a great wind fills the room, tongues of fire appear on their heads, and they all begin speaking in languages they don't know about the great works of God. The Holy Spirit has arrived! I can imagine wide eyes, nervous laughing, foreign words coming out of their mouths that they didn't know they spoke. It must have been pretty chaotic and noisy since people on the street could hear them.

The person in the room whose reaction I like to imagine most is Mary, Jesus' mother. She was still grieving the loss of her son twice – once through crucifixion and then ascension. She was being taken care of by John, but I imagine her also surrounded by other women in their group. Mary must have felt a combination of profound grief but also gratitude that maybe her loss has been worth something important. It is her child who has empowered his followers, including her, who has sent the Holy Spirit. I imagine her feeling the kind of gratitude that mothers feel when their children do them proud, even while experiencing the acute pain of loss.

Much in these chapters is about the boldness of Peter and John, especially Peter, as he speaks out about what happened at the crucifixion and then resurrection of Jesus, annoying the Jewish leaders so much that they confront Peter and John and even throw them in jail. While thousands flocked to hear the message Peter tells of Jesus and many are converted, these teachings threaten the disciples' safety. The Holy Spirit has turned ordinary men into great preachers and miracle workers. Peter performs his first miracle, healing a crippled man. He must have felt profound gratitude that he was able to carry out his work in the name of Jesus Christ, but great humility as well. No one among Jesus' followers was left untouched, and their gratitude must have been mixed with sadness, fear, grief, and joy.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What do you think it was like for Mary, Jesus' mother, to be in that room during Pentecost?

2. Much of scripture is told from the perspective of what was happening with and to the men. What would have been the reactions of the women among Jesus' followers? What responsibility would the women feel toward Mary?

3. When have you felt or witnessed profound gratitude mixed with another emotion? How did those competing emotions sort themselves out?

WEEK NINE: SUNDAY, APRIL 8 – SATURDAY, APRIL 14, 2018

READING: ACTS 4:23-6:15

This week, we get a glimpse into how the early Jesus followers began to organize their community and the struggles that ensued. In 4:32, we are told that the community shared everything: no one went hungry and no one was in need because they shared everything and cared for one another. This message would have appealed to both Jews and Gentiles – it harkens back to the idea of Jubilee, of forgiving debts of caring for the least and the lost of society. It's a beautiful image. Luke wants to make clear that this way of life isn't without its challenges. Joseph Barnabas gets it and sets an example for others. Then, we hear about Ananias and Sapphira, for whom this lifestyle presents more challenges. The couple sells their belongings and offers some of the some of the sale to the community while keeping some hidden. The issue here, for the author, isn't that they hid money but that they were dishonest. Peter is clear that the property was theirs to sell or keep; the issue was that they said they gave everything when they in fact had not.

This story touches at something deep for us as humans, the fear of having enough, or perhaps a better way of talking about it is to say that we are always making sure we can survive. Our reptilian brain is very strong, and it does a great job. The reptilian part of our brain is focused on fight or flight and survival. It's important because that part of our brain tells us to run when we are in danger, protects us from doing silly things, and lets us know when we have wandered into situations that are less than safe. But our reptilian brain can also keep us from trusting others. We don't know why Ananias and Sapphira lied about saving some of their money, but it is clear that the couple doesn't trust that this community will truly be able to take care of their needs and feel they need an exit strategy. The deception, in many ways, is a sign that they aren't all in. It's like the person who goes on a date and has a friend call about 30 minutes into the date as an excuse to leave

early. It's hard to trust what we don't know and even harder to trust what we cannot control. This was a big challenge for those joining the community; some did it with ease and grace, and others struggled. In the end, the problem that Peter has isn't that they were afraid but that they didn't tell the truth. It's a reminder that when we fully trust someone, we have to make sure we aren't operating out of our reptilian brain but working to be honest and forthcoming with who we are and the struggles that we are facing. Often, we'll find that when we do, we don't have to struggle alone.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever had an experience of your reptilian brain taking over (for better or worse) and affecting your decision-making process? What did you learn from that experience? In a calmer moment, would you have done the same thing?

2. Are you a Plan B person? If so, has your exit strategy ever gotten in the way of being fully invested in a relationship or community?

3. How have you helped others overcome fear to be fully alive in Christ?

WEEK TEN: SUNDAY, APRIL 15 – SATURDAY, APRIL 21, 2018

READING: ACTS 7:1-10:16

Stephen's followers and friends were so grateful for his short ministry, as he preached and healed people in the name of Jesus. He drew the ire of a group who dragged him before the council, and when confronted, he infuriated the council as he recounted the history of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses with his own slant on the story. He was dragged outside the city and stoned to death, becoming the apostles' first martyr. His death was a chilling reminder of Jesus' prediction of the danger to those who followed him.

Saul was a terror, rampaging around and trying his best to stomp out any followers of Jesus – men and women alike. While traveling to Damascus, he had his conversion experience. Despite the apostles' skepticism that Saul's conversion was real, Barnabas advocated for him among the apostles, and once convinced, they had to be grateful Saul had changed sides. His passion and energy were the very gifts that made him such a success in his ministry of evangelism.

Philip was so successful in Samaria at preaching and healing that Peter and John were called in to lay hands on the converted and baptized so they could receive the Holy Spirit. A local man, Simon, practiced witchcraft, with which he awed the locals, but even he was converted. However, he later tried to buy his way into getting the power of laying on hands to bring the Holy Spirit, and Peter's confrontation with Simon clarified that we can't buy spiritual gifts – receiving them includes asking for forgiveness.

My favorite story here is about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in service of his queen. Philip, following the promptings of an angel, took a little-traveled path on which he encountered the eunuch in a chariot reading scripture out loud. Philip's explanation of the scripture's meaning led to the eunuch's conversion and baptism. After the baptism, the Lord's Spirit took Philip away, and he showed up later

in Azotus. Philip gave exactly the amount of time and energy needed to make the eunuch's conversion and baptism happen. Both men had to be grateful for how smoothly this occurred – a reminder that not all ministry needs to take enormous amounts of time.

And, finally, there are Peter's healings and vision while on the road. My favorite is Peter bringing Tabitha (her Greek name is Dorcas) back to life. She was a good woman who had become ill and died. Her friends prepared her for burial but called for Peter to come. He cleared the room, knelt, prayed, and told her to get up, and she sat up. He reached out his hand and helped her to her feet. He called in her friends who had showed him all the sewing she had done to help the poor. These women and Tabitha had to have been overcome with gratitude. Maybe she sent Peter on his way with repairs to his clothing or a new garment. Who knows, but I feel certain he was thanked according to her gifts.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Which of the apostle stories in these chapters most appeals to you?

2. How do you explain what happened in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch – Philip's appearance and disappearance?

3. Put yourself in Tabitha's shoes. How would you show your gratitude if you were healed as she was?

4. How do you think each of the recipients of healing showed gratitude to Stephen, Philip, or Peter?

5. How do you think Saul showed his gratitude to Barnabas?

WEEK ELEVEN: SUNDAY, APRIL 22 – SATURDAY, APRIL 28, 2018

READING: ACTS 10:17-13:12

One of the great struggles of the early Jesus followers, and those who would become the early church, was about whom the blessing of Jesus was available to, who was able to join the faith, and how to deal with laws that kept communities separated. Luke wanted to make clear, both through the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, that the blessing of God found in Jesus Christ is open to anyone who is willing to hear the teachings, repent, and follow them. Luke made it clear in the Gospel that Jesus ministered to both the Jews and the Gentiles and that this, at times, caused alarm or a struggle for Jesus and the disciples. We cannot forget, as we read scripture, the times that the people were living in, including the rules, regulations, and gender normative functions that were true for them. So, in our reading this week, as the first missionaries are sent out, there are challenges regarding where to go, who will accept them, and what to say or do.

We see the difficulty of being a missionary play out in Peter's experience with Cornelius. Peter is at a friend's house when the Spirit makes clear to him that three men are coming to ask for him and that he should go with them. This is important because it leads us to believe that, if Peter had simply answered the door and seen these men, he might not have been willing to go with them. Peter finds out that Cornelius, a centurion (Roman military officer), is asking to see him. He goes to Cornelius and, after being invited to share about Jesus, the Spirit moves and the household is called to be baptized.

This story is important because it hints at the need for those who are followers of Jesus to overcome their fears or assumptions about people who are different than they are and to share the peace (literally, shalom, which means wholeness and peace) of God. Paul is clear that God shows no partiality and neither should we, but rather we should welcome anyone who is willing to have an open heart and to find ways

forward. Let me be clear, I don't think this story should encourage us to go out and try to convert non-Christians and baptize them, which is what it meant at the time. Today, I think this story is a reminder that we must be willing to sit down with people who are different from us and share our experiences and receive theirs, as well. We live in an age that is quite polarized, and the more it gets that way, the easier it seems to stick to talking to people who agree with us. Paul would wag his finger at us for doing that. He would make it clear that we are to go where the Spirit calls us, share our truth, and be present to the other. I honestly believe that the polarization we are experiencing will only be overcome through relationship, reconciliation, and grateful hearts. It's hard and heartbreaking, and sometimes it can feel abusive to show up for these conversations, but like Paul, we need to trust that the Spirit has led us there and is with us in the midst of it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Where have you been invited to that perhaps made you a little nervous to go? What made you willing to show up? What was it like once you were there?

2. Have you ever visited a culture that is different than yours? Did you try the food/drink/customs of that place? What did you think? In what ways did it affect you?

3. Have you ever had to have a hard conversation with someone who disagrees deeply with you? What was it like, how did it go, and what did you learn from it?

WEEK TWELVE: SUNDAY, APRIL 29-SATURDAY, MAY 5, 2018

READING: ACTS 13:13-16:15

These chapters tell us about the travels of the missionaries Paul, John, and Barnabas as they made their way from town to town, meeting Jews in each city and sharing the story of Jesus. If they were well received, they stayed for a while, preaching and spreading the news of Jesus; at other times, they were lucky to escape alive. They were doing a lot of walking and traveling by ship. Oh, their gratitude for a good pair of sandals!

Several years ago, I learned about El Camino de Santiago in Spain from a movie, “The Way,” which follows the traditional route from the Pyrenees in France, over the mountains, and across northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela. I know several people who have walked El Camino, I’ve read books about it, and I even had the chance to visit Santiago de Compostela as part of the United Thank Offering team with the Episcopal bishop of Spain. Ours was a short visit, but the history of the El Camino pilgrimage tradition came alive for me. I ate cake decorated with the cross of St. James, and I saw the scallop shells in the pavement and on markers guiding pilgrims. El Camino pilgrims experience some of the inconveniences of walking across open countryside in all kinds of weather and coming into small communities to find a place to eat and sleep, where they share stories with other pilgrims before moving on. Pilgrims move at their own pace, some walking as much as 20 miles a day, and they are dependent on the hospitality of strangers, who for a fee, feed and house them. Two thousand years later, the pilgrims of today experience hospitality similar to that extended to Paul, John, and Barnabas.

Like our modern-day pilgrims, Paul and company walked many miles each day watching for hazards along the road. They had to be both spiritually and physically fit. They received many kindnesses for which they were grateful: finding a place to sit and rest, having the offer of

something to drink or eat, stopping to get a pebble out of a sandal or repair a broken strap, having someone offer a place to spend the night and clean up, and sharing with a welcoming stranger the remarkable story of Jesus and the promise of salvation. Even after these men argued and went their separate ways, they depended completely on the hospitality of strangers. They also felt gratitude for their safety and were grateful when tipped off to trouble coming. And those who extended hospitality also felt the gratitude of being a host, hearing these stories first, and getting to know these remarkable, inspired men.

The pilgrimages of El Camino and those of Paul and the other followers of Jesus are similar. There is a vulnerability and receptivity to hospitality during pilgrimage. The experience of gratitude, both the giving and receiving, has not changed much across 2,000 years.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever made a pilgrimage, whether walking or traveling by car?

2. If you have ever considered being a missionary, where would you want to serve and in what capacity? Have you ever considered making the El Camino pilgrimage?

3. What most intrigues you about the role of missionaries? Of pilgrims?

WEEK THIRTEEN: SUNDAY, MAY 6-SATURDAY, MAY 12, 2018

READING: ACTS 16:16-21:26

This week, we get a wonderful story of the resuscitation of Eutychus (literally Lucky in Greek), which some scholars believe was put here simply because it is an entertaining story, while others think that Luke, who has been careful the entire time with his choice of words, shared this fun story to help us understand something of the symbolism within it. I like this story because I find the three principle movements of the Eucharist – blessed, broken, and sent – to be particularly meaningful each time we gather as a community to celebrate our faith. Let me be clear: this isn't a liturgical story, but the importance of bread to it makes me, a modern Christian, think of my experience of Church – maybe it does the same for you.

In this quick story, Eutychus is sitting in a window listening to Paul preach. He falls asleep and falls out of the third-story window. When I was a child, I liked to sleep through the sermon until one day, a beloved priest said to me that if I fell asleep while he was preaching, he would stop his sermon to ask if I was awake and if I was listening. Perhaps he got that idea from this story; thankfully I was safely in a pew, but I never fell asleep during a sermon again. I'm guessing the same was true for Eutychus. The community is devastated that this young man has died, but Paul promises them that there is life within him. They share the bread, Eutychus is revived, and Paul goes about his mission. Just your average Sunday worship, right? Eutychus certainly was blessed, broken, and sent, his experience and story would serve as a lesson to those reading it that there is restorative power found in participation in the breaking of the bread and the prayers.

Blessed, broken, and sent. I remember when I first learned this about the Eucharist, I then was able to see it in all aspects of our Christian faith. We come to this faith to be blessed, by the good news of God's love, by the community of saints gathered around us, and by the

spiritual disciplines we live out each day. The second act, broken, is harder for us sometimes to see or believe, but we are human and, for better or worse, we are broken people – caught up in our fears, anxieties, stress, and schedules – so we don't always live into the fullness of who Christ lived and died for us to become. Finally, we are continually sent out, with our blessing and brokenness intertwined, to try to make ourselves, our communities, and our world more fully alive in Christ. With our blessing and brokenness, we live each day trying our best to be Christ's hands, feet, voice, and heart in the world.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Share a memory of a worship service that was particularly powerful for you.

2. Why is participating in the Eucharist important to you?

3. Think back on a time when you were aware of your blessing and brokenness being at the center of your work in the world. How were you transformed? What changed because you were willing to be present, vulnerable, and open to the Spirit?

WEEK FOURTEEN: SUNDAY, MAY 13-SATURDAY, MAY 20, 2018

READING: ACTS 21:27-28:44

Trouble seems to follow Paul everywhere. His forceful personality and great courage were well suited for the work God called him to do as the first and greatest evangelist. However, he outraged many Jews by going back to the teachings of the prophets and Moses and saying that Jesus had fulfilled what was written. He caused religious fervor like none other than Jesus. He turned people's beliefs upside down by challenging them with the teachings of this man, Jesus, who died but had been raised from the dead. Paul was a polarizing figure with no subtlety in his approach. He was a Pharisee, he was persistent and had great stamina, he claimed his rights as a Roman citizen to a trial, and he was not intimidated by people who held positions of power.

From the time of his initial arrest in Jerusalem, Paul was escorted away from a mob trying to kill him and imprisoned for two years in Caesarea. He was challenged by an attorney under one governor, who called him a troublemaker, and then brought before a new governor and a visiting king and a queen, who found that he had done nothing wrong. But still, the angry contingent of Jews wanted him killed.

After all this strife, Paul started his noteworthy trip to Italy via Malta. It was late in the season, and he predicted a disastrous voyage with great loss of ship and cargo and danger to their lives, all of which was ignored but came true. He made a second prediction, after a visit from an angel, that everyone would survive but that the ship would not make it. While adrift, some of the sailors tried to abandon ship, but Paul noted this and the soldiers did not let them escape. In the midst of this lull, Paul called everyone together to have breakfast. He broke the bread and thanked God and ate for the first time in days, feeding 276 people. This gesture of gratitude was a combination of feeding the 5,000 and Eucharist.

Eventually, after the rest of the cargo was tossed overboard, the ship wrecked against a reef and people swam or floated to Malta's shore, where they were welcomed by the locals who started a fire to warm and dry them. Paul was bitten by a venomous snake that was in a bundle of sticks he had gathered for the fire, but he suffered no ill effects to the amazement of the Maltese. The father of the village leader was ill, and Paul laid hands on him and prayed, healing him. After that, all the sick came to be healed by him. Out of gratitude for his work there, Paul is credited with founding Christianity in Malta.

After three months on Malta, Paul went to Rome, where he had private quarters with a centurion guard. He invited Jewish leaders to his house to hear his story and later for teachings about Jesus. Some believed and some did not, leading Paul to announce that he would now take the message of Jesus to non-Jews.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Paul's life – facing mob violence and shouts to kill him and being passed around from one person in power to another – resembles that of Jesus' final time on earth. What is scripture telling us by showing the similarity of these stories?

2. Explore a little about religion in Malta, which Paul is credited as founding.

3. Paul's journey to Rome resembles an action movie. What do we learn from these larger-than-life stories?



UNITED THANK OFFERING

United Thank Offering
The Episcopal Church Center
815 Second Avenue
New York, New York 10017