



A Sanctified Art LLC is a collective of artists in ministry who create resources for worshipping communities. The Sanctified Art team works collaboratively to bring scripture and theological themes to life through film, visual art, curriculum, coloring pages, liturgy, graphic designs, and more. Their mission is to empower churches with resources to inspire creativity in worship and beyond. Driven by the connective and prophetic power of art, they believe that art helps us connect our hearts with our hands, our faith with our lives, and our mess with our God.

Learn more about their work at sanctifiedart.org.



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I've been
meaning
to ask...

a series for curiosity,
courage, & connection

**Study journal
with art, poetry,
& prompts for
fostering deeper
connection**



sanctifiedart.org

Here if You Need Me

I got the call and almost
rushed right over.

I wanted to hold your hand and
tell you it would be okay.

I wanted to start a meal train.

I wanted to bring casseroles and flowers
and hope of better days.

I wanted to take my heart
out of my chest
and put it in yours

so that the ache might fade.

I wanted to speak, and fight,
with the person in charge.

I wanted to get justice,

I wanted to make it fair.

I wanted to start a campaign.

I wanted to rewind time,
to easy, better days.

There is so much that I want to do,
but it's not about me.

It's about you.

So tell me—

what do *you* need?

I am here.

I am listening.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are



In creating this series, we started by asking ourselves questions: *"How can we listen to one another? How do we find connection despite distance? How do we create space for compassionate dialogue and for seeking the holy in one another?"*

While the challenges of becoming beloved community to one another are endless, these questions are simple. We quickly recognized that all courageous conversations begin with simple questions and the curiosity to truly listen. We landed on our leading question, *"I've been meaning to ask..."* because it conveys intentionality, warmth, curiosity, and consideration. In essence, this question also implies the following statements: *"I've been thinking about you and I've been wanting to check in... You've been on my mind... I haven't known how to have this conversation, but I'm getting started with a question."* The ellipses symbolize the main objective of this series: to cultivate courageous conversations—and to keep having them, even if we need to pause. Our weekly sub-themes provide a trajectory for going deeper. As you will see, these questions aren't surface level; they invite us to share our pain and seek ways to care for one another.

As you journey through this series and study journal—both alone and alongside others—we pray that the scriptures, art, poetry, commentary, and prompts lead you deeper into the heart of things. May this series help us to behold each other as images of the divine. May it help us strengthen our capacity for empathy and compassion. May it remind us of the power of asking unassuming questions. May it show us that courage is rooted in the heart.

Through vulnerability and authenticity, may our courageous conversations lead us to glimpse hope, joy, and beauty—and to become the community God created us to be.

Artfully yours,

The Sanctified Art Creative Team

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About the SA creative team

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I've been meaning to ask...

A guide to conversation & listening

...where are you from?

We believe everyone is beloved, shaped from the dust of the earth and the breath of God. Everyone has a story to tell. Our stories are messy and beautiful, painful and hopeful—being written and rewritten over time. We commit to disrupting our assumptions and staying curious.

...where does it hurt?

We believe everyone carries hurt and has the capacity to acknowledge the pain of others. We believe God draws close to us in every moment of suffering. We commit to vulnerability and compassion.

...what do you need?

We believe everyone has needs, but each of us needs different things at different times. We believe God calls us to care for one another—in seasons of joy, transition, and hardship. We commit to listening and being present.

...where do we go from here?

We believe courageous conversations have the power to change and transform us. We believe God bridges connections in unexpected ways. We commit to continuing the conversation.

Establish norms

We hope you'll use this journal to foster courageous conversations. Establish the following norms to maintain a safe and brave space.

- **Speak from the 'I'**—Commit to sharing what you know to be true from your lived experience. Do not make personal attacks, speak for other people, or state generalities or stereotypes. Speak only from your personal experience. Keep in mind that vulnerability begets vulnerability. If you share, it might give someone else the courage to share too.
- **Listen from the heart**—Commit to compassionate listening. Commit to receiving what your neighbors offer. Commit to a space where everyone can feel heard.
- **Step up & step back**—Remember that you are called to both speak up and step back and listen. Be mindful that you are doing both gracefully throughout the conversation. To do this, you might follow the practice of mutual invitation. When you finish sharing, invite another person to share. They can either share or say, "Pass for now," then invite someone else to speak.
- **Say more & circle back**—A helpful refrain for conversation is, "Say more." Sometimes it takes a while for each of us to articulate what we truly want to say or to find the courage to say it. If someone has shared something particularly vulnerable or raw, consider circling back with that person at another time. Check in to see if they wish to say more after having some time and space away.
- **Hold space**—Welcome moments of silence and stillness to let words and thoughts sink in. Silence can be sacred. If someone shares something that is particularly painful or emotional, resist the urge to respond in a way that could unintentionally dismiss their experience. Instead, you might say, "I hear you and I see you," or, "Thank you for sharing; you're not alone."
- **Respect boundaries**—Respect each other's boundaries and privacy by acknowledging that what you share in your conversation is to be confidential, unless permission is granted to share it otherwise. Be mindful of your own personal boundaries—you're encouraged to step into a vulnerable space, but not an unsafe one. Share only what you feel safe sharing.
- **Stay curious**—Curiosity is a spiritual practice. If you don't fully understand someone's experience, get curious to learn more. You might ask: "Can you tell me more about how that made you feel?" Or, more plainly, lean on the questions in our series: "Where are you hurting right now?" "What do you need?"

**I've been meaning to ask...
where are you from?**

We Are Not Strangers

If you ask me where I'm from,
I'll tell you about the South—
about sweet tea, church pews,

slow drawls, sultry summers.
And if you pause,
then I may go on to tell you

how I'm from a family of preachers,
how I stand on the shoulders of generations
who believed that love could be the answer.

And if you're still listening even then,
I'll tell you that I'm from strong women
with tall spines who have carried the weight

of inequality on their backs with children on their laps.
And then I'll tell you about
the kitchens that I'm from,

which have always cooked enough
food for unexpected guests—just in case.
Or I could tell you about the car

that carried us into the mountains, summer after summer
so that we could breathe again.
That's part of where I'm from.

And if you haven't given up yet,
then I may even mention the dirt—
the earth that catches me,

the earth that holds me.
The earth that reminds me of growth.
The earth that will eventually welcome me home.

You and I aren't really strangers after all.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

...where are you from? Conversation prompts

*Respond to any of the following prompts
with a conversation partner, or choose
one to reflect and journal.*

1. How many places have you lived or visited? What place(s) have you loved? What place feels most like home?
2. Is there a story behind your given name or your surname? If you have a nickname or a chosen name, how is this name meaningful to you?
3. Share about a family member or close friend who has shaped who you are. How has this person impacted your life?
4. Share a memory from your childhood.
5. If you feel comfortable, share anything you know about your ancestry or ethnicity. What stories have been passed down to you? What stories or information are missing? In what ways does your story of origin hold pain, and in what ways does it hold promise?
6. What's something you love or celebrate about yourself?

Week 1 I've been meaning to ask... where are you from?

Read Genesis 2:4b-15

Commentary | Dr. Raj Nadella

At some point in our lives, most of us have been asked that loaded question, "Where are you from?" I often wonder how Adam/humanity might have responded to it. Obviously, Adam was from the ground. But there are important details that merit attention, and God is in those details. God formed humanity from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, making Adam a living being. How exactly did God breathe into Adam's nostrils? God utters things into existence in Genesis 1 but is more hands-on in this chapter. God forms humanity, makes all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, plants a garden, and lets water flow from the garden. Later, God takes Adam and puts them in the garden to till it. So, I can picture God carefully crafting different parts of the body, then kneeling over Adam and breathing the breath of life into nostrils.

Much of this story is about mutuality, symbiosis, and interdependence. Adam was formed from the ground and was, in turn, asked to till it. The Hebrew word *abad* has the connotation of doing labor for the land and serving it. Adam comes from the land and is sustained by it, but also serves the land. Similarly, there is a symbiotic relationship between other parts of creation. The earth gave rise to the river and the river, in turn, watered the garden. God is in the middle of this story breathing the breath of life but also promoting mutual, life-giving relationships between different parts of creation.

As I watched the image of Derek Chauvin kneeling over George Floyd for several minutes, extinguishing his breath and causing his death, I could not but help to juxtapose it with the image of God kneeling over Adam to breathe life into the nostrils of humanity, making them living beings. As people of faith, how do we foster relationships that are defined by mutuality? Are we engaging in life-affirming practices that breathe life into others—both human and non-human?



Genesis 2:4b-15 Reflection prompts

1. As a family of faith, our creation story grounds us in goodness. It tells us the truth about who we are and it helps us belong to something bigger than ourselves. How does this story of origin impact your sense of identity? How does it impact how you see others?
2. In Genesis 2:15, God settles the human in the garden of Eden to farm it and take care of it. The ancient Hebrew verbs used to describe these actions are *abad* (serve/work/till) and *shamar* (protect/guard/preserve). How does this verse inform your understanding of humanity's relationship to the earth?
3. Return to the last paragraph in Dr. Raj Nadella's commentary. Name examples of life-affirming practices that breathe life into others—both human and non-human.

Week 1 I've been meaning to ask... where are you from?

Read Genesis 2:4b-15

From the artist | Hannah Garrity

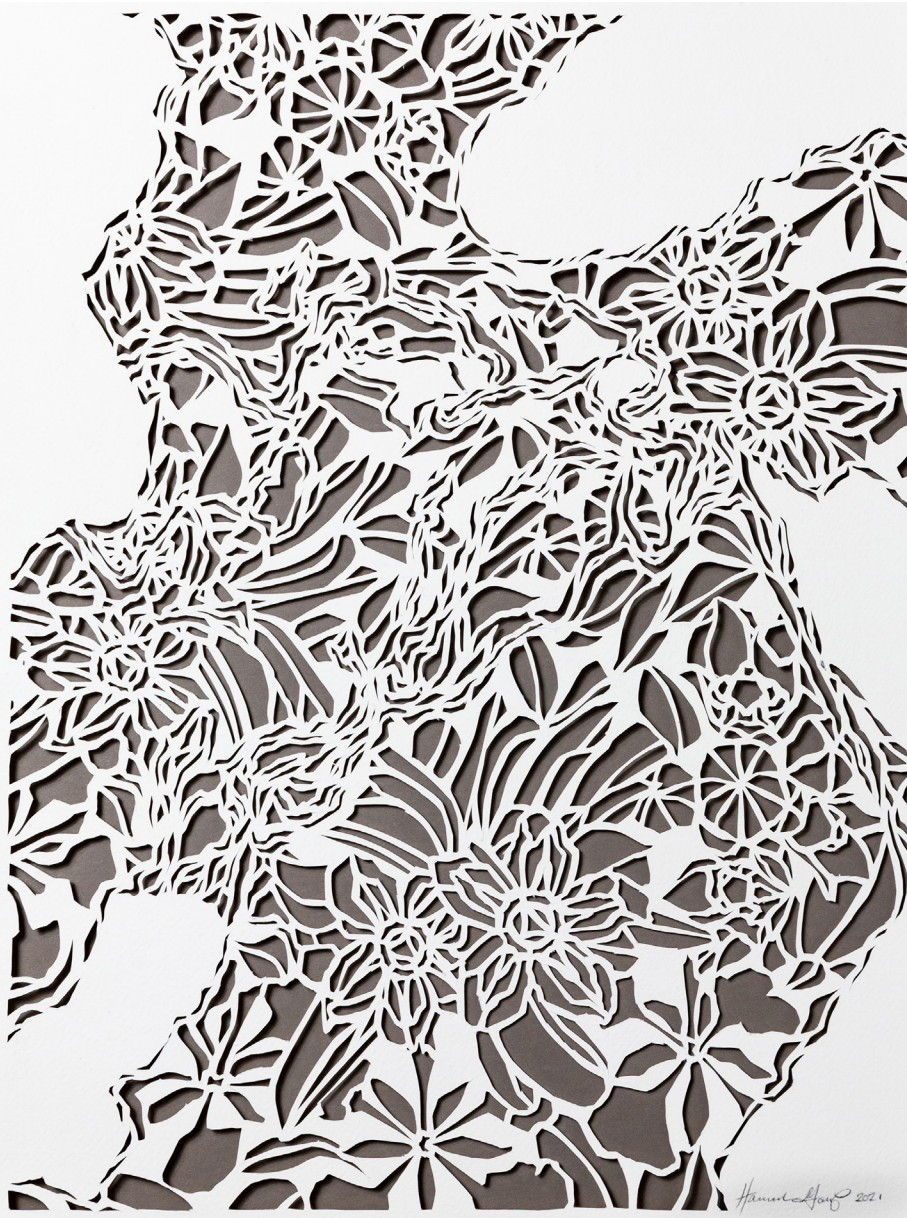
The natural beauty and wealth of the earth are poetically described in this passage. The valley of the Tigris and Euphrates weave inward, framed to the north and east by the Pishon and Gihon. The surrounding seas—Mediterranean, Persian, Caspian, Red, and Black—lean in on this land of Eden. Beauty and abundance burst forth from the earth. Where are we from? Here, we are from the earth and the water; we are from the Spirit. God reaches down and places the first humans here and molds them from the elements in this land of abundance.

This image is built on the patterning of flowers in Saudi Arabia, in Syria, in Iran. Indigenous to the area, the Blood Lily, Jasmine flower, Damask rose, Purple Crown, and Desert rose bloom among the rivers and the seas of Eden. Where are you from? How is it beautiful?

As I studied the satellite maps of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the water, topography, vegetation, and human efforts to control them create a powerful sense of flow. The land appears in motion like water. From afar, the lines begin to look like patterns; repeating with variation, they remind me of the incredible intricacy of life, the omnipresence of God. There are visual parallels in the macro and the micro. A wide view of the lands and the waters of Earth are reminiscent of close-up images from within the human body. The layout that I chose for this image reminds me of dancing, of flowing to music, to the beauty of life. Where are you from? What energy and emotions do you feel about that place?

Pray

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Four Rivers of Eden | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace

Week 1 I've been meaning to ask... where are you from?

Read John 1:35-51

Commentary | Dr. Raj Nadella

Curiosity runs rampant in this story and Jesus is the primary focus of such curiosity. John had already known Jesus as the Lamb of God and invited his disciples to meet him. The two disciples who follow Jesus apparently want to know where he is staying, but they ask questions only after he gives them permission. They are respectful of his space and enter it only at his invitation. It is the kind of healthy curiosity that is eager to engage others but is unintrusive.

But the disciples call Jesus a Rabbi, a term that does not capture his true identity in John. Instead of answering their question (where are you staying?), Jesus says, "Come and you will see." The Greek word for seeing in this context is *horaw/oida*, which literally means "know, perceive, understand." Jesus seems to suggest that the disciples called him Rabbi because they did not fully perceive him. He invites them to his place so that they can perceive him. Jesus is inviting them to a deeper level of curiosity, one that entails a willingness to learn as well as unlearn prior assumptions. Such curiosity transcends superficial knowledge and requires greater investment of one's time and resources. The disciples spent the day with him and called him Messiah.

Curiosity is contagious. Andrew, who followed Jesus, introduces him to his brother Simon. Philip introduces him to Nathanael, who wishes to know if anything good can come out of Nazareth. "Come and see," says Philip. The subtext is: "Don't arrive at premature conclusions about anyone, or otherize them based on insufficient knowledge." Curiosity is also a two-way street. Nathanael hears about Jesus and approaches him, but Jesus had already learned about him enough to call him a person without deceit.

How do we cultivate deeper curiosity that grants a fuller understanding of others, especially those who look, dress, and think differently? It requires investment of sufficient time and resources to learn about them, a commitment to unlearning prior assumptions when needed, and a healthy curiosity that engages others while respecting their space.



John 1:35-51 Reflection prompts

1. When Nathanael first hears about Jesus, he asks, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46) When have you, like Nathanael, made a harmful assumption about a person or place?
2. Despite Nathanael's initial judgments, Jesus sees only goodness in him. Consider a time when you have felt known and honored for your unique identity.
3. "Come and see" becomes a refrain in this passage. In your own life, how are you cultivating deeper curiosity that grants a fuller understanding of others?

Week 1 I've been meaning to ask... where are you from?

Read John 1:35-51

From the artist | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

This text paints a parade of shifting identities and assumptions, starting off with John the Baptist doing what he does best: pointing people to Jesus. One after the other, these men follow Jesus, despite the fact that not one of them has a full picture of who he is. There is something compelling about Jesus which brings all of these different people together on a common path. As the disciples come together, each with their own experiences and particularities, a patchwork understanding of Jesus is pieced together.

In this image, I drew Jesus' followers each wearing a pattern that references their identity and their understanding of who Jesus is. John the Baptist's clothes contain patterns of his unusual diet—locusts and honey—as well as three droplets of water, representing his baptism of Jesus. The unnamed disciple identifies Jesus as Rabbi, and so his clothes are patterned with scrolls. Andrew identifies Jesus as Messiah or anointed, so his clothes are patterned with jars of oil. Andrew, Simon, and Philip are all from a fishing town called Bethsaida. Each of their clothes contains a reference to their hometown: Andrew with waves of water, Simon Peter with swirling fish, and Philip with fish scales. The fish on Simon's clothes swim around rocks which reference the meaning of his new name, Peter. Philip refers to Jesus as the one "about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote." (John 1:45) His clothes are patterned with the stone tablets etched with the Ten Commandments. Nathanael's clothes are patterned with the very fig branches Jesus saw him under.

Jesus' clothes include the colors of all the followers' clothes and his halo contains imagery referencing the many attributes the disciples use to describe who Jesus is. Jesus, half in the frame, cannot be fully known or contained by our patchwork understandings.

Pray

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Come & See | Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital painting

I've been meaning to ask...
where does it hurt?

When it Hurts

I can tell that you're hurting.
It's the way your eyes cast down,
the way you shuffle through the house,
distractedly bumping into things.
It's the restless sleep and
the quiet space between us which
turns us into icebergs.
We float by, silent in the night,
most everything existing
under the surface.

I can tell that you're hurting.
It's the way your prayers were quick
at first, and then—none at all;
your silence challenging God,
daring God to say something to the void.
I can tell that you're hurting,
but I don't know what that feels like.

Tell me—
where does it hurt?
I'm not offering to fix the pain,
I'm not that powerful.
However, I am offering to see it.
Show me your scars,
and I'll show you that
you're not alone.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

...where does it hurt? Conversation prompts

*Respond to any of the following prompts
with a conversation partner, or choose
one to reflect and journal.*

1. What makes your heart hurt?
2. Where in your life do you feel vulnerable, humbled, or broken open?
3. What is your first memory of grief? What have you learned from your grief?
4. How do you emotionally process your pain? (*E.g. time alone, therapy, exercise, time with friends, etc.*)
5. Describe a time when you felt fully seen, known, and accepted for who you are.
6. Share about a time you witnessed someone else's grief or pain. How did that experience impact you?

Week 2 I've been meaning to ask... where does it hurt?

Read 1 Samuel 1:1-18

Commentary | Rev. Brittany Fiscus van-Rossum

How many of us are hurting in silence, hiding our pain because we believe it to be shameful? Maybe we have been taught that certain afflictions are not for polite company, and we have learned the painful, practiced art of smiling through platitudes. Maybe our pain has been invalidated or ignored so many times that we begin to believe there truly is something disgraceful about our feelings or experiences. Maybe it feels easier to bury our emotions for fear of how they will be perceived. In the book of Samuel, Hannah has been belittled, patronized, and provoked for her infertility—a bodily condition over which she has no control. Some of us, like Hannah, may be all too familiar with the particular grief of infertility. Others of us carry the secret sufferings of child loss, postpartum depression, sickness, job loss, economic insecurity, or addiction. What would we say if someone stopped to ask us, “Where does it hurt?” and acknowledged the validity of our answers? Would we, like Hannah, be able to share our pain with a humble and dignified honesty that trusts that there is no “right” or “proper” way to feel? Would such honesty with our own hurts and disappointments allow us to be more present to others’ afflictions, as well?

Hannah finds some peace after she explains her feelings in her own words, and she is (finally) respectfully acknowledged by Eli. Even as Eli himself is not able to provide an immediate solution for Hannah, he is able to accept her hurting and pray for her. Eli does not have to solve anything to be present. If we are ever to be people who bring peace and healing to this hurting world, we must be willing to pause and bear witness to pain—to our own and others’. Like Hannah, with dignity and honesty we can embrace our stories without shame, trusting that God is present and ever listening. In turn, instead of shirking away or delegitimizing, we can perceive and accept the pain of others, and like the God we follow, stand alongside those who suffer.



1 Samuel 1:1-18 Reflection prompts

1. Questioning and diminishing Hannah, Elkanah says: “Why are you so sad? Aren’t I worth more to you than ten sons?” (1 Sam. 1:8) Have you ever centered yourself in the story of someone else’s pain? Has anyone done this to you?
2. Hannah prays persistently before God: “. . . just look at your servant’s pain and remember me!” (1 Sam. 1:11) In what ways are you praying to be seen and remembered? In what ways are you suffering silently?
3. Rev. Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum writes: “Eli does not have to solve anything to be present.” Consider someone in your life who is hurting. How can you be fully present to their pain without trying to solve or fix anything?

Read 1 Samuel 1:1-18

From the artist | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

When I first started creating art for this series, I began by painting a collection of small abstract pieces using acrylic paint, pastel, and graphite. I cut small squares of canvas, taped them down to my art table, and began painting—moving intuitively from one piece to the next. My goal was to capture the emotional landscape of courageous conversations. The colors represent moments of warmth and connection, as well as dissonance and contrast. Like our voices, each hue bleeds into the next. The marks and textures evoke the rhythm of dialogue—rambling, sputtering, persuasive, bold. In these visual orchestras, I see fluidity and possibility. After I took photos of each painting, I used my stylus and Ipad to digitally draw imagery inspired by each scripture—placing my subjects in the midst of these emotional landscapes.

In Hannah, I see a woman who has been mocked, shamed, diminished, and ignored. However, she refuses to be silenced. In the presence of her pain, she grits her teeth, pours her heart out before God, and insists that we see her: “Just look at my pain and remember me!” (1 Samuel 1:11) I decided to render her body as fading into the scene to symbolize the invisibility she feels, and also the vulnerable transparency she exudes.

When I look at this image, I remember when I have been Peninnah. Whose pain have I mocked? I remember when I have been Elkanah. Whose pain have I questioned? I remember when I have been Eli. Whose pain have I dismissed? And then I remember when I have been Hannah, and I look for who is screaming in my own midst.

Where does it hurt? When I ask this question, I'll remember to also say: “I see you.”

Pray

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Seen | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Digital painting with mixed media collage

Week 2 I've been meaning to ask... where does it hurt?

Read Mark 5:21-43

Commentary | Rev. Brittany Fiscus van-Rossum

In the days before the pandemic, my church—a vibrant community of people with and without housing—used to gather in an old basement. Some days, especially the rainy ones, we would crowd too many people in our tiny space. On such busy days of ministry, my church had a smell to it: the combined scent of damp socks and worn-out sneakers, drying jackets and sweat-stained tee-shirts, bathrooms used as showers, coffee percolating, and the remnants of cigarettes just smoked. Every crowd has a smell to it—the pungent, sweet smell of human life itself. Death has its own smells, too. Sometimes I think we would like to sanitize or avoid them both, because what we can perceive with our senses can also remind us of where life can hurt. We shirk from the man who smells of his own urine, avert our eyes from the dirtied hand reaching out for change, and try not to see ourselves in the woman whose only possessions are piled in a damp cart.

But in this passage, we find Jesus in the midst of human life—and all its hurting. He is in the press of the crowd with sweaty human bodies and the scent of a woman's blood. Jesus stops and listens to this long-hurting woman—as if pain were not so shameful but something we all experience. Jesus then enters a stagnant, grief-filled room, no doubt smelling of sickness and death. He reaches out and touches the body of a girl already thought lost. These relational and embodied healings humanize those whose hurting has been pushed aside, calling our attention to the broken systems that can perpetuate and dehumanize pain. Jesus' healing disrupts the injustice of a woman who has been rejected and labeled impure for her condition. With the girl, Jesus disrupts death itself. How might we allow Jesus to disrupt us—enabling us to acknowledge others' pain so that we may seek life together? We must put ourselves in the uncomfortable places where human beings live, breathe, and hurt—because those are the places where we will also find Jesus.



Mark 5:21-43 Reflection prompts

1. These two healing stories—of a hemorrhaging woman and Jairus' daughter—are bound up together. You can't tell one story without also telling the other. In what ways have you experienced healing to be interdependent? Where do you see glimpses of collective healing?
2. For the hemorrhaging woman, physical touch ignites her healing, which she feels immediately in her own body. Telling her whole truth before the crowd allows her to heal emotionally and spiritually. What practices or actions cultivate spiritual and emotional healing?
3. Rev. Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum writes: "We must put ourselves in the uncomfortable places where human beings live, breathe, and hurt—because those are the places where we will also find Jesus." In your own life, where are the uncomfortable places where human beings live, breathe, and hurt?

Read Mark 5:21-43

From the artist | Hannah Garrity

In this image, syringes, vaccine vials, masks, and Holy Spirit doves pour down the page from Jesus' hem to the woman's hand—a cacophony of biblical and medical miracles. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, scientists, doctors, and nurses have stepped into their roles with gusto. They had no other choice; they were called to the work by God as Her disciples. Millions of people have died this year of COVID-19. Residual epidemics of systemic colonialist oppression have become painfully apparent across the globe and in all of our localities. *Where does it hurt? How can I help?*

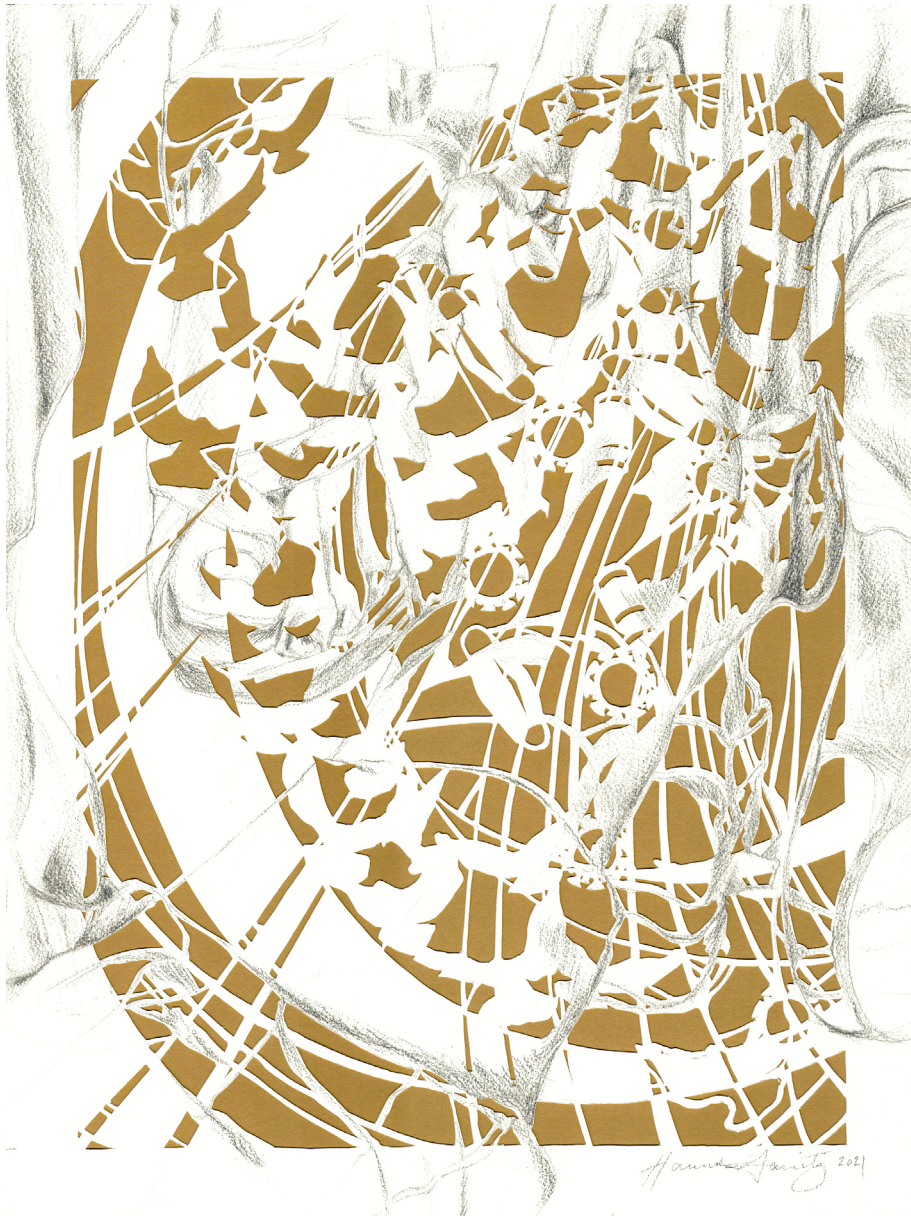
Over the course of history, the hemorrhaging woman in the crowd has been depicted in a subservient role in many of the art pieces inspired by this Mark text. The woman's hand reaches out to Jesus' cloak among the feet of the crowd, which still places her physically lower in the visual. This was a difficult place for me to draw her into the image. It infuriates me that she is considered unclean because of her medical condition. It is complex. *Where does it hurt? How can I help?*

Despite her condition, God calls her to this place; she had no other choice. I am inspired by her bravery. God calls her to demand the care she needs and the dignity she deserves. The power of her presence is palpable. In this way, the physical placement of the woman's hand among the feet of the crowd exhibits her power—the power of her presence.

Who, by their presence, is demanding me to act on my call from God? What is my role as a disciple in this time of global pain? Am I stepping into my role with gusto? Who needs me to ask, *"Where does it hurt?"*

Pray

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Medical Miracle | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace

Unlearning Hands

I used to always ask,
"How can I help?" but
maybe I can't help.
Maybe these hands are too small.
Maybe the boat will sink anyway.
Maybe your heart has been broken
and grief has moved in, making itself
at home in your life.
Maybe what you need from me
is not a solution
or a plan
or a fix-it strategy,
but something else,
something more.

I'm learning to unlearn
my desire to fix.
I am learning to unlearn
centering myself
in the story of your pain.

When I asked before,
"How can I help?"
What I really meant to say
was, "What do you need?"

What do *you* need?

My hands might be small,
but they can still hold yours.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

...what do you need? Conversation prompts

*Respond to any of the following prompts
with a conversation partner, or choose
one to reflect and journal.*

1. Share a memory of a time someone extended care for you. What did they do and how did it make you feel?
2. Share a memory of a time you tried to extend care for someone else, but didn't give them what they needed. What do you wish you could have changed about that experience?
3. What is your love language?¹ (The five love languages are: physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, and acts of service.) Name a time when you have experienced this type of love and connection.
4. Share about a time you needed help, but didn't ask for it. What do you wish you could have changed about that experience?
5. What emotion do you feel most often: shame, fear, or anger? When you are in one of those spaces, what helps you move through those feelings?
6. What's a gift (tangible or intangible) you've received that you'll never forget?

¹ *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman, © 1992.

Week 3 I've been meaning to ask... what do you need?

Read Job 2:11-13

Commentary | Rev. Remington Johnson

In Job, we have a person who has suffered extreme trauma—the trauma of losing his livelihood where his present and future wellbeing are very much in question. In a year of record unemployment and underemployment, financial traumas are all around us. These are very real and impact every aspect of a person's life. A scarcity mindset can creep in, causing every decision to be skewed and suspect, making even the most mundane of daily decisions challenging. Job has also seen his children die a sudden, unexpected death. The loss of a loved one, no matter the circumstances, will also impact us, but the impact can be so much sharper when it is unexpected and untimely. Job has suffered physical pain and discomfort—pain that must have seeped deep into his bones. This is very real trauma.

His friends hear of his traumas and head to see him. They offer solidarity in very specific ways. Initially, they react with the proper level of emotion. They match the amplitude of the situation. They are feeling with Job, and by weeping aloud and tearing their robes are offering Job an outward manifestation that his traumas are indeed very real and worthy of the feelings of the moment. We each have different ways of reacting to trauma and grief. In the church I was raised in, the parishioners would fill the refrigerator of the one in trauma with casseroles. A few folks would descend on a home and clean it top to bottom. It was their way of tearing their clothes and rubbing ashes on themselves.

Later, Job's friends sit with him for days and witness with their very presence the incredible weight of the trauma. Often, we are able to demonstrate our outrage, surprise, grief, and all the rest when we see someone hurting, but we can miss following that up with tangible signs of solidarity. Job's friends do this well.

How can we show up for one another in ways that both explicitly show that we see the pain of the moment and also that we are not afraid to sit with someone in this pain? During healthcare chaplain training, one of my supervisors would use the analogy of a person at the bottom of a hole. Our job was not to offer them a rescue line and attempt to pull them out, but to descend into the hole to bear witness to their reality and be with them.

This being with one another is incarnational. It is a sacred act. Every Sunday, we do this. We come together and do this. We witness one another's existence, traumas, needs, and spend time together. Sacred space and sacred time.



Job 2:11-13 Reflection prompts

1. Read chapters 1-2 of Job's story. Take note of each of the ways Job experiences trauma, hardship, and suffering. Have you experienced any of these forms of suffering (economic loss, theft, natural disaster, death of loved ones, physical ailments)?
2. What are the exact actions Job's three friends take? In the midst of his suffering, what do they *not* do?
3. Consider the cultural practice of rending one's clothing and scattering ashes to express lament and deep grief. What are modern-day practices that might emulate these embodied acts?

Read Job 2:11-13

From the artist | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

The day my grandmother died, my mother-in-law called. My grandmother died peacefully in old age, and yet, my mother-in-law knew the significance of her loss. She knew how my grandmother had helped raise my sister and me when our mother died when we were young. She knew that my grandmother was the matriarch of my large extended family, and that her death would usher in a new reality for us. She knew that my grief for my mother—well-worn and familiar—would bleed into this new, unfamiliar grief. She knew that losing my grandmother would feel like losing a parent all over again.

I missed her call, but she left a voicemail. Softly, her voice message began: "Lisle, I just heard about your Nana..." Then her voice cracked, she sighed, and began to weep. After a few moments of weeping quietly, she found her words again: "Anyway, I love you. Call me if you want to talk."

I don't remember much of what others have said to me in the fresh fog of grief, but I will never forget that.

In a way, she didn't need to ask me what I needed. Without assumption or question, she simply entered into my pain and joined me there. Her profound act of solidarity gave me great comfort when little comfort was to be found.

In this image, I wanted to evoke the emotional impact of rending one's clothing in solidarity with someone who is hurting. While this ancient cultural practice might feel curious to us now, I love that it's an embodied way to tear away the armor that guards our own hearts so we can truly show up—tenderly—to join another in their pain.

If you are hurting right now, may this image remind you: you are not alone. God's heart is breaking open for you.

Pray

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Break Open | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Digital painting with mixed media collage

Week 3 I've been meaning to ask... what do you need?

Read 2 Timothy 4:9-18

Commentary | Rev. Remington Johnson

While Job asked for nothing, Paul is active. He has requests. He has needs and he is making them known.

"What do you need?" This is such a direct and vulnerable thing to ask. It isn't a limiting question like, "Would you like me to make you a casserole?" It is open-ended, and when we offer this question to another, we do not know how they will respond.

Paul responds with needs, wants, and a desire for justice. The list is long, both in things that Paul wants brought to him and in wrongs he needs to name.

I asked a person who was nearing death, "What do you need?" They answered, "I need to be healed. I need to feel better." I cannot heal them. I am not sure I can make them feel better. I can be with them. I can witness the desires of their heart.

Paul offers us a moment of intense humility as he opens himself up to share what he needs. The grievances, the stuff—all of it is important, and offering space for folks to respond openly and honestly about what they need is such a sacred act. Note: this isn't some form of paternalism where we quickly judge Paul's needs and make decisions about whether those needs will really serve Paul. We may of course eventually move to a place in the conversation where we talk about what we can and cannot provide, but we must first trust the one we are meeting to know what they need. We can respond to someone's named needs with additions and clarifications, helping them really target the need that caused the specific request to arise, but again, the first step is hearing—fully hearing—what someone's needs are and discerning how we might respond.



2 Timothy 4:9-18 Reflection prompts

1. Recall Paul's story when he was still known as Saul, wreaking havoc in Jerusalem and persecuting Jesus followers (Acts 9). In his letter to Timothy, he is nearing the end of his life, imprisoned for following Jesus. Imagine what Paul is thinking and feeling as his life comes full circle.
2. Paul mentions the friends who abandoned him and then deserted him when he was on trial. His letter hints at the resentment, bitterness, and anger many of us feel toward those who have wronged us. However, it invites us to consider what we truly need to heal and move forward. According to his letter, what does Paul say that he needs?
3. Paul asks Timothy to "Come quickly." When in your life has someone dropped everything to come be by your side? When have you done this for another?

Read 2 Timothy 4:9-18

From the artist | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Paul's actions have returned to him. While in a position of power, as Saul, he persecuted people of faith, and now he sits alone at the end of his life, beaten and imprisoned for his own beliefs. It would make sense to me that Paul would be in turmoil, filled with guilt for his former actions, and troubled with resentment. He lists people who have abandoned him, which might have led him to instruct Timothy to right it all. However, Paul chooses another way: "May it not be counted against them!" (2 Tim. 4:16) Perhaps he is able to offer forgiveness because of the blinding forgiveness he himself received... maybe because he forgave himself too.

What does Paul need at the end of his days? He needs companionship, and he needs it quickly. He needs his cloak to wrap around his battered body and the company of books to keep his imagination engaged. He needs parchments to share his wisdom and to proclaim the Good News. He could've passed on bitterness to Timothy, but instead expresses gratitude for God's provision. I believe the foundational need of this text is the need for forgiveness. Forgiveness transforms Paul's life. It enables him to seek companionship and comfort instead of vengeance, and it is the essence of the message he carries.

In this block print, I carved Paul writing this letter to Timothy. The lines on his skin echo the twists and turns of his life while the lines on the page give him release. The cell bars obscure the view, however, the light of his halo and the power of his letter cannot be contained. His hand reaches just beyond one of the bars because in receiving forgiveness, reaching out for companionship, and letting go of guilt and resentment, he is free.

Pray

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Paul in Prison | Lauren Wright Pittman
Hand-carved blocks printed with oil-based ink on paper

I've been meaning to ask...
where do we go from here?

Flashlight

I wish I could draw you a map
of the next steps—
the next conversation,
the next brave truth,
the next fumble,
the next apology.
Wouldn't it be nice to know
what's coming?
Wouldn't it be nice to
prepare our hearts?

But I don't know where to go
from here.

I am a child with a flashlight—
deeply hopeful and a
little nervous,
all at the very same time.

What I *do* know is I don't
want to go
anywhere without you.
So I'm hoping that you will
take my hand.
See this truth.
Trust my voice.
Look for the good.
And day by day,
we can go from here,
because we were never meant
to go alone.

And maybe we'll get lost;
but then again,
maybe we'll be found.
So if you're willing,
if you'll just say yes,
I will let you hold the flashlight.
We can find our way,
step by step,
light in hand,
abolishing shadows
together.

Who needs a map
when you have
the light, anyway?

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

...where do we go from here?

Conversation prompts

*Respond to any of the following prompts
with a conversation partner, or choose
one to reflect and journal.*

1. What energizes or excites you?
2. What is something you deeply long for?
3. Share about a time when you found empathy for someone and it surprised you.
4. What's something in your life, in the Church, or in the world that desperately needs to change? How do you want to be part of that change?
5. Share about a time you found common ground with someone who is different than you.
6. Share about a time you felt truly free.

Week 4 I've been meaning to ask... where do we go from here?

Read Ruth 1:1-22

Commentary | Rev. Aisha Brooks-Johnson *(Brooks-Lytle)*

Lessons in Grief, Grace, and Growing Together:

The story of Ruth and Naomi offers an inside look at grief, loss, and God's ability to redefine the meaning of family and community. In grief and loss, it is easy to withdraw and handle heavy burdens alone. Grief can be dizzying, leaving one with a multiplicity of emotions. I, too, know the experience of widowhood at a younger age. While a few verses mention the death of a father and two sons, there are thousands of unwritten pages of pain, emotion, grief, and loss in the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah that we will never know.

Naomi carried an additional burden, knowing her daughter-in-laws would have to navigate as single women within a patriarchal society. Naomi's natural response to the pain is one of fear, anger, and isolation. One daughter-in-law respects Naomi's wishes and returns to her familial surroundings. The other daughter-in-law, Ruth, does not. Ruth's response echoes the unending and far-reaching love of God. Ruth's response is not one of fight or flight, but is rooted and grounded in being bound to another. In the face of loss, these family ties are deepened through a spiritual bond of connection, commitment, and community. Ruth is willing to live, worship, work, advocate, walk alongside, and find her earthly resting place with Naomi from this day forward.

We have experienced a lot of death, grief, and loss in the midst of a global pandemic, racial brokenness, economic disparity, and political division. Can you imagine a world in which we took spiritual oaths like the one we find in the book of Ruth? What if we resisted the temptation to fight or flee in the face of grief, pain, and oppression? What if we took these vows with members of our human family?

Imagine a member of the human family before you and speak these words aloud to them: *By the mercy of God and because of God's grace, we are bound to one another. Your pain is not your own but is now my pain. The plight of your people is held in my hands and my heart as if they were my own. Where you journey and work, I too, will journey and work alongside you, with God's help. Where your bones are buried, may I too, find a resting place and declare every earthly resting place sacred in the eyes of God.*



Ruth 1:1-22 Reflection prompts

1. Ruth remains steadfast and tenacious in her commitment to Naomi. Why do you think Ruth makes this choice?
2. When Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem, the town rejoices, and they arrive at the beginning of the barley harvest. Even as they step into a new beginning together, Naomi insists she be called "Mara," for her grief has changed her. When have you experienced the collision of life-altering grief and abundant joy?
3. Think of someone in your life you struggle to connect with or understand. Now return to the end of Rev. Aisha Brooks-Johnson's commentary and read aloud the closing blessing as a prayer for that person.

Week 4 I've been meaning to ask... where do we go from here?

Read Ruth 1:1-22

From the artist | Hannah Garrity

In his sermon on June 14, 2020,² at Montreat Conference Center, North Carolina, Rev. Matt Gaventa explored the situation at the US-Mexico border in relation to the travels of Ruth and Naomi. At that time, I drew an image for the worship service inspired by news images from the border. A woman stands with a plastic grocery bag in her hand. Another woman embraces her. They are exhausted, yet determined. In the figures pictured here in the wall, I reimagined that idea. *Where do we go from here?*

Ruth and Naomi are hungry; they are traveling to connect with their family, their security. They are risking their lives and safety to strive for their best chance to thrive. They are currently in motion, striving to settle down. The barley woven into the blade wires in the border of the artwork represent the tension between scarcity and abundance in this narrative. *Where do we go from here?*

Here, Ruth and Naomi are flowing through the wall; they are on both sides. As we have all become more aware of the number of people in the world and the humanity of each one as a precious child of God, we find it both easier and harder to answer the question, "Where do we go from here?" Easier because we know the teachings of our faith: to love God and to love one another, as my daddy has always reminded me. As I daily expand my mind to see reality as abundance, my quest continues to lead me back to providing all I can for those whose presence in my life demands it. There is perpetually enough to share, every day. *Where do we go from here? To whom can we extend abundance? Whose presence is demanding us to share?*

Pray

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Flow of Humanity | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace

² Summer Worship June 14, 2020." Montreat Conference Center Summer Worship Series. montreat.org/podcast/rev-matt-gaventa-june-14-2020.

Week 4 I've been meaning to ask... where do we go from here?

Read Acts 10

Commentary | Rev. Aisha Brooks-Johnson *(Brooks-Lytle)*

Draw The Circle Wider:

I have a true confession. I am a rule follower. I love things that are done decently and in order. I find comfort in knowing that there are rules and regulations, standards, do's and don'ts in our daily lives. Rule followers must always keep one thing in mind: sometimes the rules change. As a devout Jew, Peter had been raised to follow spiritual and ritualistic laws passed down from generation to generation. These rules were established to set apart the people of God. The rules were set to create space and rhythm around work, worship, and daily living. The rules were woven into the lives of the people as expressed through prophets, priests, and kings.

And then there was Jesus. Peter followed Jesus in his earthly ministry. Jesus was known to take rules and redefine what it meant to embody those rules. Jesus healed on the Sabbath. Jesus dined with tax collectors and sex workers. Jesus called people to stop hiding in trees, whispered truths to seekers in the middle of the night, and told people to stand up tall for there was no one to throw stones any longer. Peter was a first-hand witness to Christ's ministry of inclusion and the incarnational ministry of drawing the circle wide.

In Acts, we find Peter established as the pioneer of the first church. Peter was a rule follower, not perfect, but passionate about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Passionate rule followers must participate in the spiritual practice of worshiping the One who makes the rules and not the rules in and of themselves. As a fellow rule follower, I can only imagine Peter's reaction to this vision of a sheet filled with ritualistically unclean foods. I can only imagine Peter's thought process of being asked to kill and eat these unclean things. I can only imagine the struggle of digesting the divine message declaring, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (Acts 10:15)

Thanks be to God that there is a wideness in God's mercy. There is hope for the faithful rule follower. God will draw the circle wider to include everyone to receive God's message of grace, justice, and love. God will open our eyes, show us what is in our sheet, and give us new ways to proclaim the lifesaving, world-changing, transformative power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to all.



Acts 10 Reflection prompts

1. Read through the story again noting each time a character's assumptions or preconceived notions are disrupted and reconfigured. How is each character transformed?
2. Cornelius summons Peter simply to listen to him. He gathers an audience to amplify his message. He extends radical hospitality to one he is forbidden to welcome. In your own life, how can you practice such openness and humility?
3. Peter declares: "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another." (Acts 10:34) In what ways are you learning and practicing God's inclusive love for all?

Week 4 I've been meaning to ask... where do we go from here?

Read Acts 10

From the artist | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

I admit that when I read the first sentence of this chapter, I immediately made assumptions about Cornelius—labeling him an oppressor in the clean-cut categories in my mind. As a Roman Centurion, Cornelius holds significant military power and stature, able to summon the might of six hundred soldiers. But the next few sentences disrupted my quick judgments, for we learn that he instead inspires his entire household to be devoted to God, he gives generously to the people—the Jewish Jesus followers—he is employed to fiercely patrol or even harass, and he prays constantly. Instead of nationalism or the emperor, he worships God. His life reflects his devotion from the inside out.

We don't know how or when Cornelius was converted to compassion, but we might imagine that his deep spiritual formation prepares him to receive and respond to God's messenger, and subsequently, to summon Peter into his home. Cornelius breaks the law to welcome Peter. Without questioning or gatekeeping, Cornelius bows before Peter and simply asks him to share everything God has directed him to say.

In that moment, Peter tells the crowd what he, too, has learned—that God is more expansive than he had realized. He tells them what he knows to be true—that the story of Jesus has transformed their reality. The room fills with Pentecost. The Spirit dances upon them, encircling them in an ever-widening bond.

I don't have answers for where we go from here. But in this story I see clearly a way to take the next step—by allowing compassion to shape me from the inside out, by opening myself to God's holy imagination. But mostly, by looking into the eyes of one God has named beloved and saying, "Tell me: what have you learned, and what do you know to be true?"

Pray

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Ever Wider | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Digital painting with mixed media collage

The Way Home

Do you think,
when they got to the end of the
Edmund Pettus bridge
they asked,
"Where do we go from here?"

Do you think,
when the church voted for all
people to preach and lead
that they asked,
"Where do we go from here?"

Do you think,
when your parents had their
first fight
with you sleeping peacefully in
the next room,
that they asked in hushed
voices,
"Where do we go from here?"

Do you think that maybe people
have been asking this question
for as long as we've been
asking questions?
I don't know for sure,
but I do know that I want to ask
hard questions with you.

So here it goes—
"Where are you from?
Where does it hurt?
What do you need?
And where do we go
from here?"
I pray,
I trust,
I believe—
if we keep asking,
we just might find
our way home.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

A Covenant of Grace

O WALY WALY (8.8.8.8)

Text: Anna Strickland (2021)

Music: Traditional English melody



We all come from the dus - ty earth
We all have wounds that no one sees
We all need peo - ple who will be
Sur - prised by God's un - bound - ed love

5



And from the pla - ces of our birth
Op - press - ion, trau - ma, and dis - ease
With us in sol - i - dar - i - ty
From ma - ny walks of life we come

9



An - ces - tral sto - ries who we'll be
When we bear wit - ness to the pain
No ex - pla - na - tion, no de - fense
To build a cov - e - nant of grace

13



We bring it all to come and see
It can be - gin to heal a - gain
Just min - is - try of their pres - ence
And in our diffr - enc - es em - brace

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