

Deep Roots Lent Groups

Welcome. Thank you for committing to participate in these Lenten study groups as one of the ways you are preparing your hearts and spirits for Easter.

Lent is a season when we practice returning to God. There are many paths on which we can return to God, many practices, and many experiences. Perhaps, for you, returning to God looks like re-finding and re-experiencing God's compassionate love. Or maybe it inspires you into a season of transforming actions in your life or in the world. Maybe it draws you closer to emotions you have been storing away, or more deeply into a connected community. Maybe it finds you seeking reconciliation with God across brokenness.

The journey of returning to God, returning to each other, returning to ourselves, can create unexpected challenges. But it can also help us to find expanses of resilience and energy from this renewed connectedness. It is a season of growing, of deepening, of intentionally quieting distractions and tending to those things that root us as created souls and members of God's beloved community. We seek grounding in our returning.

Sometimes the essential and beautiful and faithful calls to *do* and *act* and *transform* drown out the calls to sit quietly, and to draw energy, identity, and wonder out of our faith. And yet, our life of faith is a dance that moves out of these twin callings. Dig down, so you can grow up. Go deep, so you can go wide. Tend to your soul, so that you can respond well to the wounds and wounded of the world.

Ours is also a season of grieving. It may feel like this grief "hems us in, before and behind," as we experience both acute griefs and a long and difficult time of "seemingly lesser" griefs that nonetheless weigh on us and tint all of our efforts and experiences. Our time together during this season - both in our individual efforts and our time together as groups - is meant to create safe opportunities to experience and share honestly about this grief, as well the other parts of ourselves that we bring to the space. Some might say it's a space to "feel all the feels," and an opportunity to invite God and the prayers and love of your church family into those tender places as well.

This small group experience will consist of 2 parts:

1. 10-15 minute daily individual prayer, scripture reflection, and/or other devotional exercises
2. A weekly virtual small group meeting (or weekly text message engagement, depending on how you decided to connect!)

The scripture and prayer exercises will loosely follow the Revised Common Lectionary for the Sundays during Lent, which prescribes 4 passages of Scripture and includes a selection from: the Old Testament, the Psalms (yes, also in the Old Testament), the Gospels, and the other New Testament writings. For most of the Scripture passages, there will be a *lectio divina* style option for reflection, as well as a more concrete question or two to help you engage with the text. You do not have to do both, but you may choose to! *Lectio divina*, or “divine reading,” is a contemplative process for reading scripture. It asks us to sit quietly with a passage of scripture, to notice your reactions and emotions to words, phrases, or ideas expressed in the passage. In a posture of meditation, you explore the significance of these things that hold your attention, consider how God’s spirit may be meeting you in these places, and how you may be nudged to respond. You’ll find more specific instructions below, but it’s meant to be an open, honest, and personal process.

Not everyone feels comfortable with or enjoys this type of reading, and if you prefer a more directed approach, that will be available for most of the passages as well. There is no one right way to live life alongside our sacred text, which is full of wisdom and inspiration and revelation and deep truth, in addition to stumbling blocks and thorns that we who claim this book must also wrestle with. We hope that by seeking honest and frequent engagement with the text, you will experience a combination of emotions that help you to *move* in your faith. Anger and confusion are just as valid responses to scripture as comfort and inspiration, and it is sometimes through grappling with the difficult emotions and passages that we come to understand ourselves and our faith more deeply. This is another reason why sharing reflections in small groups can be so powerful as well; we learn from how the spirit moves in the lives of our fellow journeyers, and giving voice to our wounds as well as our hopes continues to knit together the community that seeks to respond faithfully to God’s call.

As you hopefully already know, you do not need to purchase a book to participate in this study! I will be emailing out the exercises for each week, and they’ll be dated so you can easily follow along. I do recommend using a journal or keeping a digital notes document, both as part of the daily reflection exercises and to keep track of prayer requests throughout the week. There’s no one right way to use a journal either, as I hope you hopefully already know. Maybe you write lists, or doodle, or stream-of-consciousness thoughts, or elegant and poetic prose! Maybe some days only get one word traced over and over again. No matter how you use it, I hope you will experiment with journaling at least some of the time.

In addition to the 4 scripture readings per week, we’ll do 3 prayer exercises. They may include opportunities for creative reflection, trying new or unfamiliar prayer practices, or

reflecting on pieces of music in addition to some dedicated prayer time for yourself (!) and your fellow group members. Rev. Michele often reminds us of the ways that candles can help us find centering in moments of prayer and worship, and that they help to mark a space as set apart for discerning God. If this resonates with you, make use of a candle during your prayer time.

Weekly group meetings will be opportunities to share reflections on the exercises during the week, the ways that you've been surprised by your own reactions, rediscovered texts you love or struggle with, or how words or themes have stuck with you. Group leaders may share a video or an additional devotion, depending on the week, and we'll leave significant time to share joys and concerns and prayer requests with each other. Group meetings should last no more than an hour, and may be shorter some weeks, depending on the size of the group. Because group meetings will happen on different days of the week, groups will be discussing the exercises of the previous 7 days.

Ash Wed (Feb 17): Scripture: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Today's scripture passage comes from the book of Joel, a prophet who lived about 5 centuries before Jesus. In this text, we see the first of many calls to turn towards God that we'll hear during this holy season of Lent. Here we'll practice *lectio divina*, and you'll see this pattern of engagement offered for other passages of scripture during the season.

Close your eyes and take three centering breaths before reading this passage through at least twice, preferably once aloud.

As you read the passage a third time, note a word, phrase, or verse that is holding your attention or curiosity. Write it down in your journal.

As yourself why that word or phrase is jumping out to you. Is it giving voice to a feeling you have? To a need you have? To a question you have? Does it seem out of place? Or are you curious about what it means? Do you feel God calling you to respond in some way? All responses are valid. Be honest with yourself. Take a few moments to reflect and jot down your thoughts.

As you close in prayer, offer the observations and stirrings of your heart to God, or offer the following breath prayer for 10 cycles of breath. It's based on Joel 2:12:

Breathe in slowly and pray: Yet even now
Breathe out slowly and pray: I return to you.

Feb 18: Prayer

Today, offer prayers for...*yourself*. This can be challenging for some of us. Prayers are gifts we offer to *others*, ways that we show love to *others*, ways that we hold *others* in God's light. And praying for others and for the world is, of course, essential to a life of faith. But we must be honest with ourselves, and with God, about our own needs too. It can be uncomfortable to pray for yourself if you aren't used to it. If you prefer to use a prompt, try one of the following:

1. Draw your attention to a moment that caused a strong emotional reaction in the last few days. It doesn't matter what the emotion was! Tell the story of that moment to God in a prayer, and reflect about how and why it had the impact on you that it did. Sit in that feeling, and notice how the spirit leads you.
2. Write an acrostic prayer/poem about your day using a word that you associate with prayer as inspiration.
3. Offer a prayer for *yourself* in three short parts of "Help, Thanks, Wow," which Anne Lamott calls three essential prayers in her book of the same name from 2012.
4. If you prefer more sensory-related prayers, imagine that God's love is a place. What does it feel like to you? What does it look like? Smell like? Prayers do not always need to have words. Pay attention to how you feel as you imagine being fully immersed in God's love for 5 whole minutes.

Feb 19: Scripture: Psalm 51:1-17

As you read this Psalm, imagine the emotional state of the person who originally prayed it. There may be images in it that resonate and some that are more foreign. After you have read it twice, preferably once out loud, reflect/journal on one of the following:

1. As you read the passage a third time, note the word, phrase, or verse that is holding your attention or curiosity. Write it down in your journal.

As yourself why that word or phrase is jumping out to you. Is it giving voice to a feeling you have? To a need you have? To a question you have? Does it seem out of place? Or are you curious about what it means? Do you feel God calling

you to respond in some way? All responses are valid. Be honest with yourself. Take a few moments to reflect and jot down your thoughts.

2. This psalmist seeks to experience God's restoring love. What image, metaphor, or memory do you most strongly associate with restoration?
3. In verse 17, the psalmist says "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Where does your spirit feel most broken? Offer that tender place to God, seeking God's companionship there.

As you close in prayer, offer the observations and stirrings of your heart to God, or offer the following breath prayer for 10 cycles of breath. It's based on Joel 2:12:

Breathe in slowly and pray: Yet even now
Breathe out slowly and pray: I return to you.

Feb 20: Song: You make beautiful things (Gungor):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1spkhp41ig4>

On Ash Wednesday, we remember that "we are dust, and to dust we shall return." While we didn't experience the sensation of the fine grit of ashes on our foreheads this year, that tradition serves to remind us of both our createdness and our mortality. Listen to this song, and remind yourself of the ways that you are a beautiful thing created to share that beauty with the world in ways that only you can. Do you see yourself as created by God? What's one way that you connect one of your gifts to the pain in the world? Write your reflections in your journal.

Feb 21: Scripture: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

This scripture comes from Jesus' sermon on the mount, as he is teaching the crowds that gathered to learn from him.

Close your eyes and take three centering breaths before reading this passage through at least twice, preferably once aloud. Then proceed to one of the two options below:

1. As you read the passage a third time, note the word, phrase, or verse that is holding your attention or curiosity. Write it down in your journal.

As yourself why that word or phrase is jumping out to you. Is it giving voice to a feeling you have? To a need you have? To a question you have? Does it seem out of place? Or are you curious about what it means? Do you feel God calling you to respond in some way? All responses are valid. Be honest with yourself. Take a few moments to reflect and jot down your thoughts.

2. The end of this passage features the famous advice to “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” What does that mean to you? How are you investing your energy in the relationships and actions that God “treasures?” Is there something you might experiment with changing for the rest of the day or tomorrow in response to this invitation from Jesus? Consider fasting from negative self-talk, texting a friend you’ve been meaning to reach out to, looking at old photos with a loved one, or sending an email of gratitude to someone.

As you close in prayer, offer the observations and stirrings of your heart to God, or offer the following breath prayer for 10 cycles of breath. It’s based on Joel 2:12:

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Breathe out slowly and pray: I return to you.

Feb 22: Prayer for others

Look through your journal or think back to prayer requests you’ve heard named from family, friends, or the church in the last week. If you have trouble thinking of any, choose one person/thing from the following categories:

A friend
A family member
Something from the news
Something in creation
Something/someone from church

Hold the people/situations on your list in prayer in turn, reflecting on your relationship with the person/thing, imagining how God’s presence, peace, power, and/or love could feel, look, be reflected, or be transformative for them. Take time to listen, too. You may or may not find that you leave this time of prayer with an idea or a way that you can help to support any of the people or situations you held in prayer. Any answer, or no perceivable answer, from God is ok.

Feb 23: Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

This scripture comes from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, as he gives them advice about the risks and joys of participating faithfully in ministry.

Close your eyes and take three centering breaths before reading this passage through at least twice, preferably once aloud. Then proceed to one of the two options below:

1. As you read the passage a third time, note the word, phrase, or verse that is holding your attention or curiosity. Write it down in your journal.

As yourself why that word or phrase is jumping out to you. Is it giving voice to a feeling you have? To a need you have? To a question you have? Does it seem out of place? Or are you curious about what it means? Do you feel God calling you to respond in some way? All responses are valid. Be honest with yourself. Take a few moments to reflect and jot down your thoughts.

2. Paul talks a great deal about perseverance in this passage. He's telling them that with God's help, they can be stronger than they expected in the face of serious challenges. Where have you connected in the church (SSUMC or others) in a way that bolstered you? So much in the world is overwhelming right now. How does your faith help you to find moments of clarity, and actions, big or small, to rise to the occasion in strength? If you find that clarity and inspiration to act from someplace else, name it here, and consider why that might be.

As you close in prayer, offer the observations and stirrings of your heart to God, or offer the following breath prayer for 10 cycles of breath. It's based on Joel 2:12:

Breathe in slowly and pray: Yet even now
Breathe out slowly and pray: I return to you.

Outline for group meetings (Feb 18-Feb 24)

Introductions (5-10 min)

What has your experience with Lenten studies or small groups been over the course of your life? Are there any practices or studies you remember participating in that were particularly meaningful? (10-15 min)

Deep Roots Lenten Groups - Introduction and week 1

If/when you've made time for daily scripture reading or devotions in your life, what has that experience been like for you? If you don't feel like you do this as much as you "should," what barriers can you identify that contribute to this? Time? Discomfort with scripture? Lack of accountability structure? Not knowing where to start? Understanding the need for grace for ourselves and for others, how do you plan to overcome these barriers during this season? (10 min)

What reflections or observations from your scripture reading and prayer time this week would you like to share with the group? Flip through your journal. Have you found yourself continuing to consider or reflect on any of the phrases of scripture you've sat with during the week? (15 min)

Take the remaining time to share joys and concerns with one another and then to pray together. Sometimes it can be difficult to pray out loud in front of a group. That's ok! And also, practice helps. Discuss in your group how you'd like to close in prayer each week. Perhaps group members could sign up in advance, or group members will agree to volunteer at least once over the course of your time together. Or maybe each group member will pray for one other member of the group in the closing prayer. This is more challenging to do in a virtual meeting because you're not sitting in a circle, but can be a nice way to involve all voices at the end of a meeting. In the event that no one offers to close the group in prayer, consider using the Lord's prayer to end your meeting.