Called to Be the Church: The Journey
The Congregational Giving Program

Discover Your Gifts—Share Your Gifts: Five Sundays in Epiphany

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# Introduction

*Called to Be the Church* is the giving program of The United Church of Canada. We are deLIGHTed to invite you to use this resource to talk about stewardship and discipleship. It reminds us of who we are as disciples of Jesus and what lies at the core of our communities of faith—things like generosity and gratitude, gifts and surprises, and listening for God’s voice to join in a life-long search, a journey of discovering who we are as God’s people and how we share in God’s mission.

Traditionally, Epiphany lands in the first weeks of the new year, leading toward Lent. It is a time in which we hear stories of call, of questioning, and of wondering what comes next. We hear stories of finding and sharing gifts, of gratitude, of prophetic warning, calling people to hear what will happen if we live only for ourselves.

Over five Sundays (plus January 6, the Feast of Epiphany), we will take a closer look at what a variety of texts have to say about gifts that are revealed to us and what it means to share those gifts as a fundamental part of discipleship. Being disciples is not easy: it takes courage to follow the One who turns the world upside-down. Having the audacity to look around and see that we have more than enough and then to share all that we have is a task that calls to us each and every day in our worship, prayer, study, learning, and growing. And the Season of Epiphany is a perfect time for those gifts to be revealed to us and for us to find ways to share them.

In many ways, the stories found within the season of Epiphany might seem familiar. However, this might be the time when you consider a gift that you have overlooked or underappreciated. This might be a time to encourage someone around you to share a gift that you see in them. Listen deeply, daring to follow a different way, to see how God is inviting you to share your gifts in your homes, communities, and with the wider world.

Whether our community is big or small, young or old, urban or rural, or digital, or a mixture of all the above, we are all invited as Christians to think about ourselves as part of God’s mission where generosity, gratitude, and growth are all signs of how seemingly ordinary gifts enable and empower us to do extraordinary things as a response to the God who loves us beyond our understanding.

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# Week 1(a): Feast of Epiphany, January 6

## Liturgy

### Greeting

One: God is good
**All: all the time.**One: All the time
**All: God is Good.**

### Settler Acknowledgement of Our Commitment to Truth and Reconciliation

Long before my people journeyed to this land, Indigenous people were here (*you may include names of local Indigenous peoples and/or treaties*), and they received from their Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured. When they shared their vision, my people did not hear. My people tried to force Indigenous peoples to be like us, and, in so doing, we helped to destroy the vision that made them what they were.

We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that our church did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church. As we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority.

We pray that all Indigenous people will hear the sincerity of our words today and that they will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future.

### Lighting of Christ Candle and/or Rainbow Candle

One: We light this candle, honouring the One who said “I am the Light.”

### Introit

“Arise, Your Light Is Come” (*Voices United* (VU) 79 vs.1)

### Call to Worship (based on Isaiah 60:1–6)

One: Arise! Shine!
**All: For our Light has come!**
One: The glory of the Lord is in this place.
**All: The glory of the Lord is in you, in me.**One: See! Be radiant!
**All: Our hearts thrill and rejoice!**One: Let us worship in gratitude, in joy, together.

### Opening Prayer (All)

**God of all gifts, we give you thanks for the joy of worshipping together this day. Throughout time and space, you have called to us to rise up and shine, to be light for the world. Today, you continue to call to us, that we might inspire others by our rising—that our gifts might join with others as we rediscover that we are yours. May this time of worship help us to follow the Light, that we might be reenergized and recharged to be your disciples. May your Spirit rest upon us now and in all that we say and do. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying:**

(*insert a version of The Lord’s Prayer*)

### Hymn

“Will You Come and See the Light” (VU 96)
“Open My Eyes that I May See” (VU 371)
“Welcome, Jesus, You Are Welcome” (*More Voices* 137)

### Prayer of Confession (All)

**Holy One, on this day of Epiphany, we hear a story of travellers who bring extravagant gifts to Jesus, which sometimes causes us to think that our gifts are not good enough. We hold ourselves to the world’s standards of what gifts should be, and fail to see that what we offer is like those early gifts—what we offer is the best that we have. So, forgive us when we compare ourselves with others. Forgive us when our fear stops us from rising up to shine. Inspire us to look at what we have in gratitude, so that we might then share these parts of ourselves for your glory and for the transformation of the world that you love so much. We long to be reflections of your Light, in whose name we pray. Amen.**

### Words of Assurance

One: Throughout scripture, we are reminded that grace is God’s greatest gift to us. Let us draw nearer to that gift, soaking in its light so that we might indeed Arise and Shine!

### Exploring the Epiphany Box

Put a sealed jar of ordinary water into a gift box. Wrap the box in pretty paper and decorate it with ribbons, bows, and so on. Show it to the group. Ask them what they like best about it. Ask them what they think is inside of such a pretty box. Invite someone to open it and show that what’s inside is “only” a jar of water. What do we expect a gift to be? Is a gift something we want or something we need? Do we expect it to be fancy like the wrapping? In both giving and receiving a gift, we are changed when we are grateful. Just as the lives of the Magi were changed by giving their best gifts to Jesus (Why does a baby need myrrh anyway?), so our lives are changed when we give the best of what we have. When we see gifts like water as gifts that change us, we are transformed and can see that these gifts are for everyone. Imagine the kind of world we would have if we thought about gifts in this way!

### Hymn

“I Am the Light of the World” (VU 87)
“This Little Light of Mine” (*All God’s Children Sing* 66)

### Scripture

First Reading: Isaiah 60:1–6
Psalm: Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14 (VU 790)
Epistle: Ephesians 3:1–12
Gospel: Matthew 2:1–12

### Sermon

Courageous Enough to Shine

### Hymn

“In the Darkness Shines the Splendour” (VU 92)
“Grateful” (MV 182)

### Offering Invitation

We are indeed recipients of God’s grace and generosity. But in receiving, we are also called to give, to share, and to live lives of gratitude, for this is the backbone of discipleship. Like the Magi, we give what we have, not knowing how our giving will shape lives and transform us and the world. All offerings of time, talent, and treasure will gratefully be received. Now is the opportunity to courageously share your gifts to further the church’s work and the Spirit’s mission.

### Offertory

“When Heaven’s Bright with Mystery” (VU 93 vs.4)
“What Can I Do?” (MV 191)

### Prayer of Dedication

**All: Great giver of gifts, bless what we offer this day. Through your Spirit, may all that we offer be transformed and, along with us, help continue the ministry to which you have called us. May all that is given truly enable your mission to love and serve your world. Amen.**

### Prayers of the People

Sing into prayer: “And When You Call for Me” (MV 96) or “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying” (VU 400)

Gracious God, you are the one who separated Light and Darkness at creation, the one who declares all of creation to be good. You are the one who reminds us of the vastness of that creation each time we look at the stars, or attempt to count grains of sand. You are the one who gave the Magi the star to follow and the courage to journey together, leading them to a child who would change how they would see themselves and others and how they would respond with their own gifts, a child who would give them a glimpse at what it is like to listen to a voice other than the one that seems to be in control. In this time of prayer, we ask for similar courage: courage for our world, our communities, our families, and ourselves.

Wondrous God, as we look out into the world, we see many places, many situations where courage is needed, where differences are clashing, where gifts are being hoarded and squandered, not shared as they are meant to be and used in ways that tear down rather than build up (*name situations that are weighing on your heart*). May your Spirit rest in all of these situations and places. May gifts be redistributed and shared in ways that bring people peace and you glory.

Mysterious God, as we look around in our communities, we see people hurting, people working hard, people pushed to the edges, endangered because of who they are, because of who they love, because of the colour of their skin, because of what they believe. Again, we see gifts hoarded and squandered because of the unwillingness to share, unwillingness to change, and unwillingness to truly love our neighbours. Like the Magi, we must change our paths (*name local situations that need to change, local gifts that need to be shared*). May gifts be redistributed and shared in ways that change minds, open hearts, and bring you glory.

Compassionate God, we turn our focus now to ourselves and those we love, for we, too, need your transformation, grace, and love. As we look inward, we see situations that have caused hurt, pain, and sighs too deep for words. Even in our midst, we see gifts that are hoarded and squandered, people who are afraid to share their gifts because of fear. We see gifts that aren’t shared until it’s too late. May our own gifts be redistributed and shared in ways that mend relationships, help broken hearts to heal, and help us to see ourselves as worthy and able to truly love you and our world.

God who weaves all of our prayers together, may you gather all of these prayers, both spoken and held in our hearts, and weave your courage into them, so that new paths and new gifts are both revealed and shared for the transformation of this world and the coming of your reign. In the name of Jesus, the courageous one, we pray. Amen.

### Hymn

“The First Nowell” (VU 91)
“May the God of Hope Go with Us” (VU 424)
“Let There Be Light” (VU 679)
“Take Up His Song” (MV 213)
“Peace Be with You” (MV 215)

### Sending Forth

One: We have heard the words of the prophet: Arise and Shine!
**All: As we go, may we too Arise and Shine!**One: We have heard the story of the Magi sharing their gifts.
**All: As we go, may our gifts be shared with all.**

### Benediction

One: May God’s love and grace shine upon you.
May the Light of Jesus shine from within you.
May the joy of the Spirit shine all around you.
And may you and those you love, wherever they might be, remember to share your gifts for all the world to see.

Amen, Amen,

and may it be so,

this day and forever more.

## Sermon: Courageous Enough to Shine

In his book *The Darkest Dark,* astronaut Chris Hadfield writes about himself when he was a child, a child who tries everything he can to stay awake at night because he is afraid of what he imagines might be lurking in the dark. Later in the book, Chris goes to watch TV at his neighbour’s house—the only TV in his neighbourhood! Can you imagine? And his idea of what the dark is like changes because he sees real, live astronauts on the moon. He discovers that the dark is where dreams can come true, that both the shadows and the stars are beautiful, each in their own way. The dark allows him to see his own light and inspires him to decide that someday he will become a real astronaut, too.

The dark causes Chris to see light in a new way—a way that would change his life by enabling him to see his own gifts.

This light is what Isaiah was asking his people to see.

Isaiah’s people were afraid of the world around them. They were held down by empire, struggling to remember that they were God’s people. They felt enveloped in a darkness that was overwhelming; somehow, they had to learn to see their inner light again. So, Isaiah called them to Arise! and Shine! because in spite of all that was going on around them, God’s light was, indeed, deep inside of all of them. It wasn’t a call to be perfect, but a call to be authentic in living out who God was calling them to be—to follow their inner light that mirrors God’s light. This light is what causes us to shine so that we might also help to mirror the light of others, joining us and all of our gifts together. Isaiah’s people needed a new way to see themselves. They needed hope for the future and who they would eventually become. It would be a journey, an uncovering, of who they would be as God’s people—those who would live lives of compassion and generosity toward themselves, each other, and the world around them.

In many ways, we encounter a similar journey as we join the Magi in their search for the Light. They knew that this light was important for them to follow, even into the empire of Rome and King Herod, an empire that played with people’s fears (for people are easier to control if they are afraid).

When the Magi find Jesus, they bring out their best gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They then realize that this light is changing the ways in which they see themselves in the world and they know that they can’t go back to Herod, for the light that they have seen would challenge his power. So, they go home by a different road—a way that transforms them and the people who would hear their story. They could see the power, mystery, and beauty of how this light called them to give the very best parts of themselves.

Both of these stories call us to rise above our fears, to see the beauty in what we offer and how what we offer shapes us as disciples. Just like Isaiah’s people, we are not called to be perfect, but to arise and shine in all of our imperfect glory, for that’s what God asks. God isn’t concerned about what our shine looks like, but God does want us to be courageous enough to allow ourselves to be transformed in the rising—to go a different way because of the gifts that we share. Like the astronaut, Chris Hadfield, we are able to see our realities, both the light and the dark, in ways that enable us to explore the very depths of our faith—just as Chris explored the very depths of the cosmos.

When we rise and shine, we invite others to do the same. Whether we share our gifts unintentionally, or better yet with purpose and desire, our light joins with the light in others, encouraging giving and gratitude as the very backbones of discipleship. Practising gratitude and giving, rising and shining, in response to the call of our God, changes us.

As disciples of Jesus, it is for us to know that this light, and our best gifts, are within us, and only need to come out to be seen. This journey of discipleship is following the call to have the courage to share those gifts, to kneel like the Magi, to hear the call of Isaiah, not in spite of the world around us, but that the world might be transformed.

As Chris Hadfield learned, we are never alone; in both the dark and the light, we are able to hear the call of God and know that offering our gifts transforms us and the way we think about relationships with God and others. May it be so. Amen.

Chris Hadfield and Kate Fillion, *The Darkest Dark* (Toronto: Tundra Books, 2016).

# Week 1(b): Epiphany 1, Baptism of Jesus

## Liturgy

### Greeting

One: God is good
**All: all the time.**One: All the time
**All: God is good.**

### Settler Acknowledgement of Our Commitment to Truth and Reconciliation

Long before my people journeyed to this land, Indigenous people were here (*you may include names of local Indigenous peoples and/or treaties*), and they received from their Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured. When they shared their vision, my people did not hear. My people tried to force Indigenous peoples to be like us, and, in so doing, we helped to destroy the vision that made them what they were.

We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that our church did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church. As we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority.

We pray that all Indigenous people will hear the sincerity of our words today and that they will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future.

### Lighting of the Christ Candle and/or Rainbow Candle

One: We light this candle, honouring the One who said “I am the Light.”

### Introit

“Arise, Your Light Is Come” (*Voices United* 79 vs. 1)

### Call to Worship (based on Isaiah 43:1–7)

One: Come in, hearing these words:
**All: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.**One: Come in, knowing these words to be true:
**All: I have called you by name, you are mine.**One: Come in, feeling these words in your bones:
**All: You are precious in my sight.**One: We come to worship, hearing, knowing, feeling the love and wonder of our God.

### Opening Prayer (All)

**God of gifts that transform, we gather in awe and wonder at the ways in which you name us. Throughout time and space, you have called to our spiritual ancestors, naming them and renaming them as your people, to live in delight at being yours. Today, you continue to call to us, naming and renaming us, that in our quest for delight, we might see in us what you see, and share that splendour with the world. May this time of worship help us to hear our names, that we might remember that your goodness lives in us and calls us forth to be members of your family, your creation. May your Spirit rest upon us now as it rested upon Jesus. In humility, we ask these things in His name, as the one who taught us to pray, saying:** (*insert a version of The Lord’s Prayer*; *omit The Lord’s Prayer if it is your tradition to pray during the Prayers of the People below*).

### Hymn

“A Light Is Gleaming” (VU 82)
“We Praise You, O God” (VU 218)
“Come, Let Us Sing” (VU 222)
“Bathe Me in Your Light” (*More Voices* 82)

### Prayer of Confession (All)

**Holy One, on this day when we bear witness to the baptism of Jesus, we hear a story of blessing, of love, of transformation. But over time, this story may have caused us to see ourselves as separated, as special, as those who are better than others. Instead of being inclusive and celebrating who we are and whose we are, baptism has sometimes led us to believe that we are “more special” and “more favoured” than others. For all of these beliefs, we are sorry. May we see the power of transformation that baptism holds and be transformed to see your grace, offered to all of us. Forgive and inspire us, reminding all of us that we are yours. Amen.**

### Words of Assurance

One: Throughout scripture, we are reminded that grace is God’s greatest gift to us. Let us draw nearer to that gift, soaking in its light so that we might, indeed, remember who we are, to whom we belong, and that we are called to share your light and grace.

### Exploring the Epiphany Box

Put a sealed jar of ordinary water into a gift box. Wrap the box in pretty paper and decorate it with ribbons, bows, and so on. Show it to the group. Ask them what they like best about it. Ask them what they think is inside such a pretty box. Invite someone to open it and show that what’s inside is “only” a jar of water. This is a gift from God to us. How will we use it? We will share it. How will we share it? Water seems like an ordinary gift, but when we ask God to bless it and we use it for baptism, it becomes an extraordinary gift because it invites us to think about our community and our relationship with God. It enables us to reflect on who we are, whose we are, and what God calls us to do.

What kind of world would we have if we thought of all gifts and all giving as being extraordinary because they remind us that all we have is a gift from God to be shared with each other? How would sharing this gift remind others that they, too, are a gift?

### Hymn

“Jesus Bids Us Shine” (VU 585)
“This Little Light of Mine” (*All God’s Children Sing* 66)

### Scripture

First Reading: Isaiah 43:1–7
Psalm: Psalm 29 (VU 755) or (VU 756)
New Testament: Acts 8:14–17
Gospel: Luke 3:15–17, 21–22

### Sermon

The Gift of Affirmation

### Hymn

“I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry” (VU 644)
“I Have Called You by Your Name” (MV 161)

### Offering Invitation

We are indeed recipients of God’s grace and generosity. God loves us and affirms us. But, in receiving, we are also called to give, to share, and to live lives of gratitude. Baptism reminds us that ordinary gifts can do extraordinary things. Baptism inspires us to use our gifts not knowing how they might transform. Our offerings of time, talent, and money will gratefully be received. Now is the opportunity to share your gifts to further the church’s work and the Spirit’s mission.

### Offertory

“When Heaven’s Bright with Mystery” (VU 93 vs.4)
“What Can I Do?” (MV 191)

### Prayer of Dedication

**All: Gracious God, bless what we offer this day. These gifts, though ordinary, are given in response to your extraordinary love for us. Through your Spirit, may these gifts be transformed to reveal your extraordinary love and may your love be shared in all that we say and do. Amen.**

### Prayers of the People

Sing into prayer: “And When You Call for Me” (MV 96) or “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying” (VU 400)

God of Mystery and Light, we come to you this day in awe and wonder at your beauty and your ability to create and recreate all that swirls around us.

You call us to be in covenant with you—to know and receive your love and to give it back to all creation, to each other, and to you. Envelop us this day, surrounding us in the safety that is the knowledge that your Spirit is with us as we seek to follow the path of Christ.

So much of your world is lost this day.
People are lost to each other.
Children are lost from their parents and caregivers.
Men and women are lost in their struggle with drugs and alcohol.
Families are lost because of disagreement, unemployment, and heartbreak.
Countries are lost in the dust of war; refugees cry out in their loss of home and loss of safety. (*name current situations*)

But yet, your light shines wherever we are, searching us out as a lighthouse searches for a ship at sea. Your grace reminds us that we are worthy to be named—even if you must name and rename us so that we hear you calling to us. We are affirmed before we ask for affirmation. May we live in awe and wonder at this reality.

This day, we lift up those in our community who feel like they don’t belong:
because they might not fit in with social norms at either school or work,
because they are controlled by fear and anxiety,
because they feel alone or judged,
because they are sick or paralyzed by grief.

Enable us to be the ones who help others to hear their name being called, to receive your love, your hope, and your Spirit of Peace.

We thank you that you have given us hands that can reach out, eyes that see deep beneath the surface, ears that hear truth, mouths that speak justice, and hearts that open wide to give and receive your love. Thank you for the will to try again when we fail, when we fall, when we need to learn from you and from each other.

Send your Spirit once again to help us use these gifts for the betterment of your world and the coming of your kingdom. In the strong name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

### Hymn

“God Be with You till We Meet Again” (VU 422)
“May God Who Creates You” (VU 454)
“Laughter Lit the Stars of Morning” (MV 190)
“May God’s Sheltering Wings” (MV 214)

### Sending Forth

One: We have heard the words of the prophet: Do not fear!
**All: As we go, may we go with courage!**One: We have heard the story of Jesus’ baptism.
**All: As we go, may we hear our name as a gift.**

### Benediction

One: May God’s love and grace shine upon you.
May the Light of Jesus shine from within you.
May the joy of the Spirit shine all around you.
And may you and those you love, wherever they might be, remember who you are and to whom you belong.

Amen, Amen,

and may it be so,

this day and forever more.

## Sermon: The Gift of Affirmation

On this First Sunday in Epiphany, when we mark the baptism of Jesus, let us consider what we believe about baptism.

First and foremost, baptism is about affirmation. To affirm means to state positively or assert truth—the truth about someone and about our relationship with them. To affirm is to ascribe value. Baptism is about the affirmation that there is something sacred about life and that a piece of that sacred goodness is found deep within us. It acknowledges a new beginning, as did the birth of Jesus. Now we see the instance that marks the beginning of what will be a very public ministry—his baptism, the affirmation that he is God and belongs to God, and the affirmation that we belong to God as well. We hear this affirmation in the words “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11).

These words affirm the life within and that it is good. When God affirms us, we can affirm others—just as when Jesus was affirmed by God so that he could do the same. When we feel affirmed, we feel as though we can be part of the community in all of its aspects, such as stewardship and discipleship. When we feel affirmation, we can give of ourselves and go deeper into our faith because we feel safe to do so.

The truth is that we all long for affirmation, but too often it seems that it comes too late…after we feel separated, after we have struggled, after we feel lost, or as if we need to prove ourselves to receive affirmation. But God’s affirmation is different. God’s affirmation is spoken—to Jesus and to us—before we earn it, before we do anything to cause it to happen, before it is solicited. Affirmation is indeed the cornerstone of grace, which becomes the cornerstone of stewardship and discipleship.

The baptism of Jesus tells us that our baptism, confirmation, and affirmation of faith are not simply about membership in a particular congregation or church (although these rites of passage which mark milestones in our lives are important for our sense of personal belonging); they also remind us that we are God’s children, regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or any other label we humans think of as a reason either not to engage, or to exclude others from engaging.

In order to come to any sense of affirmation from this act, we must first put aside any notion we might have that baptism is about cleansing us from sins or asking for God’s forgiveness, for how can we look at a newborn baby and think that they are full of wrong? We are also not to say that those who are not baptized are damned or unworthy of God’s love. Baptism affirms the inherent worth of each of us and is a physical sign of a spiritual reality—that we belong to a loving God and that the goodness that comes from God is deep within us and serves as a communal symbol of God’s unconditional love.

In our baptism, as in the baptism of Jesus, we celebrate that we are loved—a love that comes before anything we may have done and anything we have yet to do. I suggest that baptism is about gracious blessing—a mysterious way of deeply knowing that we belong to God. God knows this, but we need something physical to remind us of this spiritual reality. We need to remember that all we are, all we have, is welcomed by God and revealed and shared in thankful response to our belonging to God.

In baptism, this is not only personally affirmed, but is communally affirmed by those who surround us in baptism—not even Jesus was baptized in private! It was important for him to be baptized in public so that the affirmation was heard by all who were present.

Through this, then, we can use baptism as an opportunity to affirm one another. Before we are asked to, before a good action is done, before we have been able to form a judgment on whether or not it is deserved, we can affirm each other, because God has already affirmed us. And when we are blessed to be in the presence of one who is being baptized, we remember our own goodness and we recall that God affirms us every morning that we open our eyes and see the goodness that is God’s world.

And so, today, we are challenged to think about what we believe about baptism. How does it shape our understanding of being a community in relationship with God and being intentionally welcoming? How can we create opportunities, as a baptizing community, to affirm each other? How does baptism lead us into generosity and discipleship?

In the movie, *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, which follows the journey of three escaped convicts, there is a scene where baptisms are taking place in a river. The men who have broken out of prison figure that they’ve done so much wrong in their lives that baptism will give them a new beginning—and so they are immersed in the water. But I think what they really do is to affirm the goodness in one another so that they can continue on their journey toward wholeness—the act of baptism doesn’t make them perfect, but opens them up to the goodness that is within them and around them. It calls them to discipleship. It calls them to offer their gifts to the world, even if those gifts aren’t always understood or received well. The song that is sung during this scene, "Down to the River to Pray,” is an invitation to walk with God and to invite others to that journey of stewardship and discipleship that has the power to transform people and systems. As a baptizing church, loved and affirmed by God, we, too, are called to that journey of stewardship and discipleship, to generously share what we have, in gratitude to God. May it be so.

Amen.

Video clip: [*O Brother Where Art Thou: Down in the River to Pray*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=82_bhD0_Trw)(youtu.be/82\_bhD0\_Trw). **Note: Faith communities must have the proper licensing to show this or any other copyrighted video during worship or another gathering.**

# Week 2: Second Sunday after Epiphany

## Liturgy

### Greeting

One: God is good
**All: all the time.**One: All the time
**All: God is good.**

### Settler Acknowledgement of Our Commitment to Truth and Reconciliation

Long before my people journeyed to this land, Indigenous people were here (*you may include names of local Indigenous peoples and/or treaties*), and they received from their Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured. When they shared their vision, my people did not hear. My people tried to force Indigenous peoples to be like us, and, in so doing, we helped to destroy the vision that made them what they were.

We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that our church did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church. As we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority.

We pray that all Indigenous people will hear the sincerity of our words today, and that they will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future.

### Lighting of the Christ Candle and/or Rainbow Candle

 (*Christ candle or rainbow candle may be lit if that is part of your tradition.*)

We light this candle, honouring the One who said “I am the Light.”

### Introit

“Lord Prepare Me to Be a Sanctuary” (*More Voices* 18)
“Morning Has Broken” (*Voices United* 409)
“This Day God Gives Me” (VU 410)

### Call to Worship (based on Isaiah 62:1–5)

One: In this Epiphany time, we will not keep silent, we will not rest.
**All: Our vindication shines out like the new dawn.**One: Light a path for us, O God, that we may move into new relationships.
**All: We have been called by you into new ways of being.**One: Your torch has been passed to us, in you our light has come.
**All: We are not forsaken; we are not desolate.**One: In you, O God, we find our delight.
**All: Let glory be on our lips as we delight in your presence.**One: Inspire us, God, as we offer our worship.

### Opening Prayer

**With open minds and open hearts, we come before you, God. You have shared tremendous news with us: news of the birth of Jesus, news of his baptism, news so incredible that it cannot be contained. We bring together all our resources, all that we are, all that we have, to share the good news. We are called to be more, we are called to be a community of faith, we are called to be the church. Be with us now as we discern your calling, as we discern our discipleship. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying** (*insert a version of The Lord’s Prayer*; *omit The Lord’s Prayer if it is your tradition to pray during the Prayers of the People below*).

### Hymn

“Arise Your Light Is Come” (VU 79)
“Will You Come and See the Light” (VU 96)
“I Am the Dream” (MV 106)

### A Time of Confession

Let us gather our hearts and minds and bring them before God in a spirit of confession. Let us pray:

### Prayer of Confession

**Listening God, when we take the time to see and use and understand the incredible gifts you have shared with us, we are in awe. At the same time, we also realize how we have misused the gifts of your Spirit. When life is happening so fast, we act and speak before we think. We have caused harm by our “off the cuff” remarks. Our actions have led to exclusion. Knowingly and unknowingly we have caused harm. Forgive us our mistakes, forgive our ignorance, forgive us, forgive….** (*silent reflection*)

### Words of Assurance

God watches. God listens to our confessions. God responds out of unconditional love. Allow the spirit to embrace you and know that you are forgiven.
**Thanks be to God. Amen.**

### Hymn

“Take My Life and Let It Be” (VU 506)
“I, The Lord of Sea and Sky” (VU 509)
“Bathe Me in Your Light” (MV 82)
“Shine, Jesus, Shine” by Graham Kendrick

### Exploring the Epiphany Box

On Post-it Notes, write the different gifts of the spirit (see 1 Corinthians 12:1–11) and place each note in a small box. Place the individual boxes in the big box which has been prettily wrapped and decorated for previous services. Begin by asking everyone about gifts—maybe birthday gifts or Christmas gifts. Talk about giving and receiving gifts and ask the congregation whether they have ever thought about receiving a gift from God. Let them guess what you have inside the box. Taking out each individual box and each Post-it Note, name each gift of the spirit, discuss the gift, and then post the note somewhere in the sanctuary. Ask whether anyone can think of any other gifts that God shares. Perhaps the discussion could lead into a conversation about different ministries that your church takes part in and how those ministries are gifts.

For Sunday school, share the story of Jesus transforming water into wine. Then use drops of sugar-free liquid flavouring to turn a glass of water into something else. Discuss with the children why Jesus performed the miracle of turning water to wine. His reasons might have included: so the party could continue, because his mother told him to, to announce his presence as the Messiah.

Make more wine! Celebrate!

### Sharing scripture

Isaiah 62:1–5
Psalm 36:5–10 (VU 762)
1 Corinthians 12:1–11
John 2:1–11

### Hymn

“I Have Called You by Your Name” (MV 161)

“You Servants of God” (VU 342)

“We Are One” (VU 402)

### The Sermon

Let It Run

### Offertory invitation

As we consider our gifts of the spirit, let us take time to remember the gift of hospital chaplaincy. Our chaplains offer much needed pastoral care in times of family crisis and urgent medical needs. Patients, family, nurses, doctors, and staff are offered a listening ear and a prayer. Where families cannot be together on a daily basis due to distance, our chaplains provide much-needed support. Let us consider the gift of chaplaincy as we offer ourselves and our resources.

### Offertory

“Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow” (VU 541)
“We Give You but Your Own” (VU 542)

### Prayer of Dedication

**We dedicate ourselves, our time and talents, our energies and money, to sharing the good news of God’s abundant and generous love. Help us use all that we are and all that we have to ensure that this story is shared: a story of love and support, prayer and worship, a story of seeing our gifts turned into much needed resources through the mission and ministry of the church. Bless each gift and each giver. In your Holy name, we pray. Amen.**

### Prayers of the People

*Possible refrain: “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying”* (*VU 400*)

Wondrous God, who continues to share with us the gifts of the spirit, help us to accept these gifts and use them in your kingdom. Where wisdom is offered, enable us to hear it. Your wisdom is sometimes discerned through unexpected people and in unexpected places. Let wisdom speak on behalf of those struggling to find a voice or where their voices have been stifled in a cacophony of political jargon and rhetoric. Let wisdom burst forth shouting your truth in a chaotic world.

*Possible refrain: “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying”* (*VU 400*)

May the gift of knowledge continue to guide us as we move through our days. Let it inform and challenge us to discover a new approach to food for God’s people. May foodstuffs move from being hoarded by a few to being shared equally, that “have not” peoples and families in our own communities be offered nourishment for their bodies and nourishment for their spiritual lives, without regard to faith or denomination. Let knowledge be shared through advocacy. Help us confront barriers that hurt and oppress, that everyone may receive a living wage, enabling a sense of dignity and pride

*Possible refrain: “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying”* (*VU 400*)

With the coronavirus pandemic still in our thoughts, we offer prayers for the gift of healing, O God. May those trained in a wide variety of specialties use their skills to heal where possible, to offer hope where needed, to offer peace freely, to offer comfort for the dying. We offer thanks for those donations that have enabled safe needle exchange sites and medical attention given at street level for those who find themselves homeless. May healing of the mind be as important as healing of the body. Thank you, God, that we continue to learn, to research to develop new ways of offering healing.

*Possible refrain: “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying”* (*VU 400*)

We pray for the gift of prophecy, God. Listening to Jeremiah, Ruth, Micah, we learn of you, O God. We learn about your commitment to humanity. We learn of your unconditional love, freely offered to all. Through the prophetic words of Jesus, we hear about the kind of community that you call us to make. Help us, God, to find our own prophetic voices. Empower us to speak out when we see injustice, when we witness oppression, where inequality continues. Guide us, God, as we use our voices to share your story in our time and context.

(*Prayer can be offered for those pastoral concerns in your context.*)

Amen.

*Possible refrain: “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying”* (*VU 400*)

### Hymn

“Draw the Circle Wide” (MV 145)
“Go Make a Diff’rence” (MV 209)
“I Danced in the Morning” (VU 352)
“I Feel the Winds of God” (VU 625)

### Sending Forth

One: Each day we are blessed by many of God’s gifts.
**All: Enable us to use them wisely, sharing them with generous hearts.**One: We are called to be light in our world.
**All: Let us share the light that never goes out.**

### Benediction

One: God is good
**All:** **all the time.**One: All the time
**All: God is good.**We go in peace. Amen.

## Sermon: Let It Run

Flip Wilson was a comedian who had a very popular variety show on television in the 1970s. He developed several characters for the show, including Reverend Leroy, the minister of “The Church of What’s Happening Now.” During one skit, Reverend Leroy was trying to energize the people and create some enthusiasm in the congregation. So, in his sermon, he hit the pulpit and he said, “If this church is going to get anywhere, it has to learn to crawl.” The congregation sat up and took notice and replied, “Let it crawl, Rev! Let it crawl!” Then he said, “And after it learns to crawl, it has to learn to walk.” And the people, getting a little excited, said rather loudly, “Let it walk, Rev! Let it walk!” Then he got excited, and waving his hands in the air, he said, “After this church learns to walk, it has to learn to run!” By now, several members of the congregation were on their feet, yelling, “Let it run, Rev! Let it run!” And then, almost dancing, he said, “If this church is going to run, it’s going to take money!” And the people standing fell to their seats and said very softly, “Let it crawl, Rev! Let it crawl!”

They have no wine, Mary tells Jesus. Is it Mary’s responsibility, or does she just want to help? And then, what’s with Jesus’ cryptic answer, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” It’s as though he’s saying “It’s none of our business.” Who talks to their mother that way? If I were to address my mother as “Woman” in this way, I’d need healing shortly thereafter, because that kind of disrespect would not be tolerated. This is a conversation that really needs facial expression. So, Jesus looks at his mother and what did he look like? Mad? Stern? I can picture Mary with her hand in the air, palm toward Jesus as if saying, “Talk to the hand,” while she says to the steward, “Do whatever he says!” Was it the little push by someone who knew Jesus better than anyone else? Was Jesus prepared to let things crawl along? Do we have Mary to thank for the best wine? Was it Mary’s push that got Jesus walking? His ministry had to start somewhere, so why not here, with a feast where there is joy and happiness and laughter, where people are enjoying each other’s company?

James Dabbs remembers what life was like growing up in South Carolina, where he describes religion as the opposite of life. “Religion was a day and a place; religion was Sunday and the church; almost everything else was life. Religion was a curious, quiet, and inconsequential moment in the vital existence of a country boy. It came around every week, but it didn’t seem to have much to do with the rest of life, that is, with life.” (James Dabbs, *The Road Home*, Philadelphia: Christian Press, 1960) Jesus’ ministry was about life, about a God who puts joy into life, a God who revels in celebration, a God who never wants that celebration to end. It was never intended to be a once-a-week thing. It was always meant to be an everyday thing.

Jewish weddings in Jesus’ time were steeped in tradition and ritual. One of the customs was providing an extravagant feast for guests. Something went wrong at this wedding, however, because they ran out of wine early. In that culture, such a miscalculation would have been a great humiliation for the new husband and wife. There are those that interpret the lack of wine as symbolising the spiritual dryness of the people. Wine was a common symbol of God’s bounty and of spiritual joy. Not only did Jesus produce a large quantity of wine, but the quality of it astonished the banquet master. In the same way, Jesus pours his Spirit into us in abundance, giving us God's best. "Let it run, Reverend! Let it run!”

At times we have forgotten the miracle of Cana. In St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador, Stella Burry Community Service (or just Stella’s Circle) seeks, on a daily basis, to celebrate life. The people there re-enact the miracle at Cana every day. Their mission: “Transforming lives through real homes, real work, and real help.” Their vision: “A home, a job, a community.” Stella’s Circle turns water into wine every day by identifying five core values that support their vision and mission and shape the culture of the organization. Each celebrates life: respect, wisdom, connectedness, innovation, and courage. Finding good housing that is secure and safe, shelter from abuse, counselling services, addiction services, on-the-job training, resume writing, and the inclusion choir. Jesus pours his Spirit into us in abundance, giving us God’s best. “Let it run, Reverend! Let it run!”

Nearly two years ago, COVID-19 sparked a global pandemic as borders closed, as families became quarantined, as the world was asked to isolate. A virus knows no boundary. It doesn’t care if you are rich or poor. COVID-19 showed no bias, prejudice, or discrimination as it ravaged our world, killing (*see latest stat for number of deaths*). It would have been easy to let things crawl along—to retreat to our homes, close the doors, shut out the world, and look after our own. That would have been forgetting Cana. That would have been the world saying we have run out of wine.

Instead, that same virus showed what the global village is capable of. When churches closed and the economy was in a tailspin, people reached out to their neighbours from balcony to balcony, porch to porch, backyard to backyard. There was concern about the church’s programs and ministries, food banks, hot meals, and shelters and concern across the country from places like Stella’s Circle in St. John’s to [First United Church Community Ministry Society](https://www.united-church.ca/search/locator/all/18041) in Vancouver. Amazingly, at the same time as people were being laid off or losing their jobs, many programs continued to be funded. The buildings closed, but church did not stop.

Generosity abounded! The Internet and platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams and FaceTime and YouTube made sure we didn't run out of wine. Even during that tragedy and shared grief, we didn’t forget Cana.

(*Include here a story of a ministry in your local community of faith and how it is making a difference in people’s lives. It may have occurred during COVID-19 or it may be current or both.*)

Generosity still abounds. We haven’t forgotten Cana, and so we need to be celebrating constantly.

At Cana, they kept the best wine for last, and for us, the best is yet to come. The same God who was with Jesus in Cana wants to generously continue the feast. The community of faith is to be a celebration of people. We need to be always celebrating people—sharing around a common table, offering signs of affirmation, giving thanks to God. Sharing our energies, our excitement, our joy, and yes, our money. Because if this church is going to run, it’s going to take money.

And the people said… “Let it run Reverend! Let it run!” (We hope.)

After all, our energy, our excitement, our joy, all flow from our God.

Jesus’ mother was not content to let things crawl. She told Jesus to do something about the lack of wine. Jesus was not content to let things walk. He turned water into wine, and it was a lot of wine, an abundance of wine. It was a sign of what Jesus’ ministry would be about: a helping ministry, a healing ministry, a teaching ministry. It is also a sign of what our ministry is about: to invite the world to pull up a chair, to generously toast the overflowing abundance of God’s love.

And the people said, “Let it run, Reverend! Let it run!”

Amen.

# Week 3: Third Sunday after Epiphany

## Liturgy

### Greeting

One: God is good
**All: all the time.**
One: All the time
**All: God is good.**

### Settler Acknowledgement of Our Commitment to Truth and Reconciliation

Long before my people journeyed to this land, Indigenous people were here (*you may include names of local Indigenous peoples and/or treaties*), and they received from their Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured. When they shared their vision, my people did not hear. My people tried to force Indigenous peoples to be like us, and, in so doing, we helped to destroy the vision that made them what they were.

We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that our church did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church. As we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority.

We pray that all Indigenous people will hear the sincerity of our words today and that they will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future.

### Lighting of the Christ Candle and/or Rainbow Candle

The apostle Peter assures us that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. We light this candle to remind us that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that even during this time of winter darkness, his light shines out into the world through our work and praise.

### Call to Worship

One: Jesus embraced his friends with love.
**All: Let us witness to God with our arms.**One: Jesus wept when his friends experienced grief.
**All: Let us witness to God with our hearts.**One: Jesus healed people with his touch.
**All: Let us witness to God with our hands.**One: Jesus taught in the synagogues.
**All: Let us witness to God with our ears.**One: Jesus walked alongside the oppressed.
**All: Let us witness to God with our feet.**One: Jesus taught us that to experience life to its fullest requires our entire selves.
**All: Let us worship God with all of our selves: mind, body, soul, and spirit.**

### Opening Prayer

Creator of all, you call us into community, to work together as one body. Be with us today as we join our hearts and voices to bring praise to you who have perfectly created each of us. Help us to see past our perceived imperfections to see the beauty you created in us and in the world. Accept the praise of your family as we reach out to you, and each other, in worship and adoration. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying: (*insert a version of The Lord’s Prayer*).

### Hymn

“Many Are the Lightbeams” (VU 588)
“I Can Feel You Near Me God” (MV 48)

### Prayer of Confession

Loving God, you have asked us to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and to let the oppressed go free. Yet there are times that we have been unable or unwilling to see those among us who didn’t have enough, who felt trapped, and who were treated as “lesser than.” For the times that our own thoughts and actions have caused us or others to stumble, we ask for your forgiveness.

### Words of Assurance

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.
God’s mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning.
You, each and every one of you, great is your faithfulness, and even greater is God’s forgiveness.
Know that through Christ’s death, even before the dawn breaks new every morning―
we have been forgiven. Amen.

### Exploring the Epiphany Box

Put pieces from “Mr./Mrs. Potato Head” toys into the gift box wrapped and decorated with ribbons, bows, and so on. Show the box to the group. Ask them what they like best about it. Ask them what they think is inside such a pretty box. Take out the pieces one by one and ask people to stick them onto the potato figurine. Ask them what the pieces are for. Can you hear with an eye? How do people use body parts in different ways? (*For example, we speak with our mouths, or we can speak with our hands through ASL.*) Ask if any of the parts are better than others. How can they be used in beneficial ways? Even though each part of our body does a different thing, it is still a gift. The lesson is that all parts of the body are useful, and the ones we think are most important may not be the ones that God has put into this congregation/family.

(*Note: Where your faith community includes a person*(*s*) *with physical challenges, please consider whether the above activity is appropriate for your context or whether you might comfortably elaborate on the example of using signing by adding other examples of aids to those who are challenged*.)

### Scripture Readings

Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10
Psalm 190 (VU 740a)
1 Corinthians 12:12–31*a*
Luke 4:14–21

### Sermon

We, The Anointed Ones

### Hymn

“Hark the Glad Sound” (VU 29)
“When Hands Reach Out and Fingers Trace” (MV 136)

### Prayers of the People―Without Lord’s Prayer

Loving Creator,
you have called us into relationship with each other.
You have commissioned our lives
to be peacemakers
to seek justice
to share your love and grace in the world.

And yet the world builds up walls against us
and becomes an empire
where oppression reigns
where violence dictates
and compassion seems distant.

Give us the strength needed to build Heaven on Earth
to do your will, not our own
to love each other fiercely
to proclaim a new way of life immersed in loving kindness.

Help us to recognize the stranger in our midst
and to open our doors to them.

Help us open our hearts
so we are receptive to your spirit.
Enable us to hear your stirrings in our hearts
and respond without fear or anxiety.
And be with us as we do your work in the world.

You have engraved us on the palms of your hands.
You know every one of our struggles.
You feel our pain and sorrow
and you rejoice when our hearts are joyful,
when our burdens have been released.

Help us to be mindful of our brothers and sisters
in our own communities, as well as in the world,
whose struggles may be different from our own
or similar to ones we have faced:
Those facing deportation
Those in the midst of war
Those who have been offended
Those who seek peace
Those living in poverty
Those suffering loss
Those in pain
Those who are overwhelmed
Those who feel unloved.
And let us give thanks
because you have called us children of God, the body of Christ.

You have offered us unending love.
You have assured us that even in our darkest times
you are there
beside us
guiding us
loving us.
With you we have nothing to fear.

Wrap your loving arms around us
and guide us into new and right relationships.
Let your blessings pour out on our lives
transforming and shaping us into all we can be
and even more than we could ever imagine for ourselves.
We ask for your blessing for those who were unable to be with us today…(*add names*).
May our prayers and your love reach them and everyone in this world.
We ask all this together, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

### Offertory Invitation

Just as God has asked us to be the whole body of Christ, we are also asked to use all of our gifts and talents to further the work of God in our world. We have all been blessed with an abundance of gifts: the communities we build, the families we nurture, the friends we love, the church we call home, our abilities and our possessions. We are also asked to share with those around us and, together, to share with those across the world through Mission & Service. We are asked to share our prayers, our love, our finances, and our connections. The body of Christ has many parts and so does the church of Christ. And when we are willing to share the pieces we have, we are able to get closer to the vision of God’s kin-dom here on earth.

Now is the opportunity to share your gifts to further the church’s work and the Spirit’s mission.

### Offering Hymn

“O for a World” (VU 697)
“Sisters Let Us Walk Together” (MV179)

### Offertory Prayer

God, we offer these gifts to you knowing that you have called us to work together.
Bless them, multiply them, and use them to enable us, your body, to create a better world with all of creation. Amen.

### Hymn

“What Does the Lord Require of You” (VU 701)
“Christ Has No Body Now but Yours” (MV 171)

### Sending Forth

God has given each of us a part in the body of Christ.

It doesn’t matter if you are an arm, or a leg, or a hand; God has a use and a purpose for you.
Go into the world knowing that you were perfectly created.
Go into the world and generously share the abundance of what God has given to you.
And whatever you do, do it in love,
knowing that you have been called to be the church,
to celebrate God’s presence,
Crucified and Risen,
our Judge and our Hope.

### Benediction

May the perfect love of God,
and the unending grace of Jesus
and the presence of our comforter, the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and with everyone you meet.
Amen.

## Sermon: We, the Anointed Ones

We can learn a lot about the possession of land and riches from Indigenous communities. Every nation has their own creation story that points to the connection between human life and land. People are woven into creation along with the land and its resources. Indigenous teachings speak in many different ways about how Mother Earth is there to provide us with everything we need. She gives us our clothing, shelter, medicines, food, beauty, water. She sustains us, and we sustain her.

Our creation story in Genesis tells us that God has created an interconnected world in which everything works together for the benefit of everyone, right down to the food we eat. We can see this interconnectedness in Corinthians which tells us that we are all parts of the same body. And we know that the body functions best when it is working together. Each of our bodies has a story to tell: stories of babies and marathons, age and love, work and rest. We use our bodies in different ways. Some of us have parts that work better than others (*You may want to add a personal anecdote. For instance, I would note that “Sometimes, my hip arthritis makes me waddle a little bit like a penguin” to lighten it up.*) Some of us have parts that we use in different ways: some of us use our fingers to read or our hands to speak. Each of our bodies are unique, but none is better than any other. They are different, but not superior.

Unfortunately, this is not how history, or our present day, has always seen bodies. We are supposed to be treating our bodies, and the bodies of others, as part of God’s creation: beautiful, unique, and sacred, something that we should care for with just as much love as we offer the land and the water. Sadly, often our society treats our bodies with the same disregard that is often shown to our land and water resources. Despite the fact that there is more than enough of what we need for everyone, we still live in a world with marked disparity between the rich and the poor. We still live in a world where people have power and other people do not. And we know that this system is failing us. All too often our bodies are seen as nothing more than capital, used to make money for a system that places more value on some people than on others, and where our worth is measured by our ability to be financially productive. But this is not what God commanded of us.

In today’s reading, “the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4: 19) most likely refers to the year of Jubilee which is described in Leviticus 25. Every 50 years, the Israelites are to release their indentured servants. Creditors are to return properties to their rightful owners. Outstanding debts are to be forgiven. The Jubilee ensures that the poor are cared for and that the hoarding of land and wealth is made incredibly difficult. In this passage, God also makes it very clear that “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land” (Leviticus 25: 23–24). God commands us to share our resources, to ensure that there is economic justice, to make sure that inequities are eliminated.

We know as a church that we have not always lived out that commandment. We have not always been welcoming to the stranger in our midst. We have a history that we need to acknowledge: our involvement in residential schools, our silencing of minority voices, the years of pain and trauma that our 2LGBTQI community has gone through. There have been, and continue to be, many times when our church body has not worked together the way it should, or when we have placed a higher value on some parts of the body of Christ than others.

Yet, we are an Easter people. We know that with God there is always a chance for new beginnings and new relationships.

When I think of those new beginnings and relationships, I think of Toronto Urban Native Ministry (TUNM). This ministry began in 1996, when Eileen Antone from Oneida saw a need for places to worship in Toronto that were welcoming to Indigenous people, and where Indigenous cultures and traditions could be incorporated into worship. She approached what was then Toronto Conference, and the Conference agreed to use Mission & Service money to hire a minister for TUNM: Elder Grafton Antone, Eileen’s husband.

Over the years, this little church plant grew, eventually becoming an ecumenical ministry shared with the Anglican Diocese of Toronto. TUNM is a good example of what can happen when the whole body of Christ works together and when resources are shared.

Now, 26 years after TUNM started, it has three staff and reaches more than 90,000 people each year through culturally appropriate street outreach, harm reduction work, prison ministry, hospital chaplaincy, worship, Traditional ceremonies, and reconciliation work. This is just one of many examples of the ways in which our Mission & Service dollars can have a greater impact on our communities than we can imagine.

Today’s reading from Luke tells us that Jesus went to the synagogue in his home community of Nazareth. The writer makes a special point of telling us that Jesus went “as was his custom” (Luke 4: 16). Jesus was not someone who only attended religious services on High Holy Days. He was someone who continued throughout his life to participate in the weekly gatherings of the faithful. We are taught by Jesus’ example that being a part of the life and work of the congregation is integral to how we are to live.

Jesus went into the synagogue and chose a reading from Isaiah that speaks of bringing good news to the poor, releasing the captives, and letting the oppressed go free. He begins his reading with the same words Isaiah spoke: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me” (Luke 4: 18). This is the same Spirit that was given to us during Pentecost, which means that *we* have also been anointed to carry out this task.

We have a choice as individuals and as a church. We can choose to continue in the same way or we can be open to the possibility that God’s Spirit continues to blow through the walls of this church, calling us to live our lives and our faith in the best ways possible: the ways that will allow all parts of the body of Christ to be lifted up and valued. As followers of Jesus, the one who went all the way to the cross to show us the importance of standing in solidarity with the marginalized among us, we live into the promise that God’s Spirit is upon us, calling us to ensure that the year of Jubilee is not a far-off dream, but a daily reality in our bodies, our homes, our communities, and the world. And we also live with the promise that we never do this work alone. Together, as parts of Christ’s body within this community of faith, and as one community of faith among all that make up The United Church of Canada, we are making a difference.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

# Week 4: Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

## Liturgy

### Greeting

One: God is good
**All: all the time.**
One: All the time
**All: God is good.**

### Settler Acknowledgement of Our Commitment to Truth and Reconciliation

Long before my people journeyed to this land, Indigenous people were here (*you may include names of local Indigenous peoples and/or treaties*), and they received from their Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured. When they shared their vision, my people did not hear. My people tried to force Indigenous peoples to be like us, and, in so doing, we helped to destroy the vision that made them what they were.

We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that our church did not or would not hear and how we have behaved as a church. As we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority.

We pray that all Indigenous people will hear the sincerity of our words today and that they will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future.

### Lighting of the Christ Candle and/or Rainbow Candle

(*You could also simply light the candle*(*s*) *and then proceed with singing and the call to worship.*)

One: God is here

**All: all the time.**

One: All the time

**All: God is here.**

One: All are welcome
**All: all the time.**One: All the time
**All: All are welcome.**

### Call to Worship (Jeremiah 4:1–10)

(*“Listen, God Is Calling”* (*MV 97*) *could be used as a centering song before and after.*)
**Listen, God is calling, through the Word inviting,
Offering forgiveness, comfort, and joy! (Listen)**

One: Listen―Do you hear the voice of the Holy One?
**All: Inviting, daring, challenging, celebrating, creating―you and me.**One: I form you.
**All: I know you.**One: I consecrate you.
**All: I appoint you.**One: I send you.
**All: Fear no one. I am with you.**One: I will deliver you.
**All: I have put my words in your mouth.**One: God, may we have ears to hear and voices to speak this truth.
**All: Let us worship.**

### Opening Prayer

(*Written by the Worship Team of the Inaugural Meetings of Fundy St. Lawrence Dawning Waters Regional Council and Region 15 Regional Council, May 2019. Used with Permission*.)

(*facing east*)
One: From the east, the direction of the rising sun,
 we receive peace and light and wisdom and knowledge.
**All: We are grateful for these gifts, O God.**

(*facing south*)One: From the south comes warmth, guidance,
 and the beginning and the end of life.
**All: We are grateful for these gifts, O God.**

(*facing west*)One: From the west comes the rain,
 purifying waters, to sustain all living things.
**All: We are grateful for these gifts, O God.**

(*facing north*)One: From the north comes the cold and mighty wind,
 the white snows, giving us strength and endurance.
**All: We are grateful for these gifts, O God.**

(*facing upward*)
One: From the heavens we receive darkness and light, the air of your breath,
 and messages from your winged creatures.
**All: We are grateful for these gifts, O God.**

(*facing downward*)One: From the earth we come and to the earth we will return.
**All: We are grateful for your creation, Mother Earth, O God.**

One: May we walk good paths, O God,
living on this earth as one creation should,
rejoicing in one another’s blessing,
sympathizing in one another’s sorrows,
rooting up injustice,
planting the seeds of peace,
and together with you, renewing the face of the earth. Amen.

### Hymn

“Dance with the Spirit” (MV 156)

“Creator God You Gave Us Life” (MV 27)

“Deep in Our Hearts” (MV 154)

“Will You Come and See the Light” (VU 96)

“The Church Is Wherever God’s People” (VU 579)

### Prayer of Confession

Let us pray:

One: Created.

**All: Consecrated. Appointed. Sent. Confident. Faithful.**

One: Great Spirit, you invite us to accept the richness and abundance in which every human being is delightfully made.

**All: Forgive us when we limit the grace and wonder of which we are capable.**

One: Forgive us when we put limits on your power in us, such as when we say, “But I am only…only one person…only so talented…only so much.”

**All: We are not *only* any single thing. We are yours.**

One: And the Spirit that thrums within each of us is blessed, beautiful, and capable of creating new and abundant life. That is your truth.

**All: May our words and our actions as the church of Christ testify that it is also ours.**

(*Silence or contemplative music could be offered.*)

### Assurance of Grace

The Spirit calls and commissions us to be the body of the Risen Christ. Every single inch of who we are is enveloped in that call to create: to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow those systems and ways of living that diminish the image of neighbourly love. Together with all our relations, may the gift of our lives build and plant a kin-dom almost and already on its way. Rest assured, we are made for this. We are forgiven that, in turn, we may also forgive through the eternal power of Life. In Jesus’ name, so be it. Amen.

### Exploring the Epiphany Box

(*Purchase or borrow 3-D glasses and pictures.*)

Put a 3-D picture in your decorated box. Ask the congregation what they think is in the box this week. Take out the picture and show everyone. “What do you see?” Accept all answers. “I can’t quite make out what this picture really is―can you? What are we missing?” Chances are that someone will identify it’s 3-D and that you will need 3-D glasses. “Right! It is a 3-D picture and in order to see all the angles of what this is, we need to see differently. We need a different kind of sight―we need 3-D glasses!” Whip out your glasses and exclaim, “Ah-ha!” Let the congregation take turns looking at the picture with 3-D glasses, but don’t let anyone say what it is. Keep it a secret until you’re ready to ask everyone to share their answer at the same time.

Continue with: “Sometimes, this is us. We look at one another and we think we see clearly: They are just a child. They are just a senior. They are just rich. They are just poor. They are just disabled, and so on. The Bible tells us that the prophet Jeremiah saw himself that way. God asked him to change the world, and all he could think about was how mixed up he was to be trusted with something so important. Jeremiah only saw how small he was as a child for something that seemed so big. Surely God meant to ask someone else!

“But God doesn’t see us that way. God sees every dimension in which we are powerfully and beautifully made. God calls everyone in the world and asks, ‘Do you see what I see? Because I see someone who has the gift to change the world. Will you share the gift of your life, your voice, your presence, your talents, your treasure, so that love and justice can be seen by everyone?’”

Then ask: “Do you know any child in particular who showed us how to see God’s gift in others in that way?” (*The obvious answer might be* *Jesus, but welcome all answers―there can be some powerful stories here.*)

Conclude with: “If we accept God’s invitation to see ourselves with love and compassion, then guess what? Our faith helps us see the potential in everyone to join in. All they’re waiting for is someone who will see them clearly and who invites them to be a part of something we call church. This week, practise looking at the people around you and naming the gifts that God has given them. Tell them what you see and invite them to share their gift!”

### Hymn

“Small Things Count” (VU 361)
“I Can Feel You Near Me God (Jump for Joy)” (MV 48)

### Scripture

(*Feel free to read Jeremiah 4:1–10 only, unless your congregation regularly reads all the lectionary readings for the Sunday.*)

Jeremiah 4:1–10
Psalm 71:1–6
1 Corinthians 13:1–13
Luke 4:21–30

#### Ministry of Music

### Sermon

Here! Now! Are You Ready?

### Hymn

“Deep in Our Hearts” (MV 154)
“Open My Eyes, that I May See” (VU 371)
“Seek Ye First the Kingdom” (VU 356)

### Offering Invitation

Practise what you preached with the kids. If you’re a small congregation, ask people within the church to look at another person and name a gift they see. Then have the congregation affirm that we are blessed when a person shares that gift. If you’re a larger congregation, you may want to have your staff or a key volunteer take the lead on this.

For example, the minister might say: “Kelly, in you I see God’s gift of wisdom.” Then invite everyone to respond, “It’s an honour to know you, Kelly!” Then Kelly would take a turn, or the minister could continue naming the gifts of other people in the congregation.

If you have newcomers in your community, you may choose to ask them their name and what brought them to worship that day. Use that response as the gift and affirm in the same way as above.

For example, the minister might say: “Jim, I see your presence as God’s gift for us today.” Then invite everyone to respond “It’s an honour to know you, Jim.”

At the end, close with this invitation:

“We are invited by the Giver of every good gift to share all that is within us. Everyone who is here is a gift. Everyone who is yet to arrive is a gift. Everyone who we are yet to meet is a gift. For the rich and varied ways we will respond and share the gifts within us, we give thanks. Our offering will now be received. Now is the opportunity to share your gifts to further the church’s work and the Spirit’s mission.”

### Offertory

“Your Work, O God, Needs Many Hands” (VU 537)
“What Can I Do?” (MV 191)

### Prayer of Dedication

May what we have offered here be true, be blessed, and be sent into our world by the Spirit of the One who, even now, is with us. Always. **Amen.**

### Prayers of the People

Creator, you planted us in the great cosmic eruption of life.
You invite us into relationship,
into a boundless love that sees the truth of who we are:
Created. Consecrated. Appointed. Sent. Confident. Faithful.
Yours.

As your people, imperfect as we are and perfectly capable as you affirm,
you invite us into your mission of love and reconciliation.
You call us to build on what you have planted.

(*Name the ways your church is living out your local mission, or the church’s national mission, and give thanks and praise to the Maker.*)

Reconciling and Reviving God, you invite us into the wounded places

where what we see is distorted and obscured
by our bias, our judgments, our hard-heartedness.
You give us courage and the assurance that into this valley we must go:
for there, you give us the possibility of vulnerably
facing all that keeps us from your Kin-dom come.
You call us to uproot and tear down.

(*Name the wounded places you see in your community, our country, and our world where we are reluctant to engage and yet are surely called not to turn away, but to lean into with our faith.*)

Resurrecting and Living God, you invite us to transform and be transformed
so that we align our sight with your Kin-dom vision,
so that we see that death cannot exist apart from life.
Death is always a part of life,
and wherever this life may take us, we are not alone.
You are with us,
created and creating God,
you who tears down, only to build,
you who plucks up, only to plant.
In the breath of the Spirit that fills our lungs,
in the strong name of Christ who urges us onward with Love and Justice
in response to your invitation, we offer all that we have, all that we are,
in the service of Community and Creation.
We pray in the name of the one who said that
you are like a mother who gathers her chicks beneath the shadow of her wing
and that you are also like…Our Father… (*Prayer of Jesus*). Amen.

### Hymn

“God of the Bible” (MV 28)
“Let Us Build a House” (MV 1)
“Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness” (VU 375)

### Commissioning

Here is the place.
Now is the time.
God calls.
We answer.
Let us go and answer as church,
as people sent toroot up injustice
and to plant the seeds of peace,
that together with the Spirit, we would renew the face of the earth. Amen.

### Benediction

One: Bless the Giver
**All: and every good gift!**One: Bless all that has been planted,
**All: that it will sprout in us and in others.**One: Bless the harvest of life
**All: that we are called to share.**One: In our words, in our actions, in our time, talents, and treasure
**All: may the Spirit in me honour the Spirit in you.
Amen.**

### Sending

“Behold, Behold, I Make All Things New” (MV 115)

## Sermon: Here! Now! Are You Ready?

Created. Consecrated. Appointed. Sent. Confident. Faithful.

These are the words God ascribes to Jeremiah as a child―words that stretch back to before Jeremiah was born, if you take the scripture literally.

Jeremiah earned the tag “the weeping prophet” for all the struggles he endured. God called him to speak truth to power. What’s God calling you to do this morning?

What about our congregation? Did you hear that? I think I heard God is calling us. Here. Now.

Are you ready?

Jeremiah warned Israel that their kingdom would fall to the Babylonians because the Israelites insisted on breaking right relationship with God’s peace and justice. They didn’t want to do the work of the kin-dom anymore, because it was easier to invest in systems of idolatry, greed, and false prophets, maintaining the status quo at any cost.

So, Jeremiah was called to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. In our United Church language, we would say that he was called to live a faith whose actions profess that “in life, in death, in life beyond death―God is with us.”

Jeremiah was scorned, shunned, and finally thrown into a well to starve to death, so that King Zedekiah’s officials could claim they had no blood on their hands.

Jeremiah is the stuff of biblical legend, so of course those words apply to him and his faith in his time, when there was great instability and conflict. We get it. God called Jeremiah.

But what does that have to do with us? Are you called by God? Am I? Is this church called by God? Are you a prophet, a leader, a revolutionary?

Like Jeremiah, would you say that God called you before you were even formed?

We’re teachers, parents, grandparents, retirees, engineers, lawyers, plumbers, and fisher folks (*describe the occupations of your community of faith*). We’re not called to face off against kings in God’s name, are we? Let’s have a show of hands. Who’s going to follow in Jeremiah’s footsteps and be first down the well?

So, what about us? Is God inviting, daring, challenging, celebrating, creating you and me?

Anthropologist, practitioner, and storyteller Marlon Hall once said yes! (Pretty much.)

He said, “Worship is when you do what you were born to do and what you’re doing makes an indelible mark on humanity that no one can erase because no one can make it but you. Worship is when, because of the art that you do…because of the architecture that you do, you do it so divinely artfully that human flourishing comes about and humanity is not the same because of your everyday life.… Worship is vocation; it’s *vocare* [in Latin]. It’s when you sing the same song on Tuesday at your board meeting” that you did on Sunday in your worship.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

How are you doing your work? Because God is saying the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few (Matthew 9:37), God’s calling you to roll up your sleeves. Will you? Will we answer the call together?

God is calling you, just as Jeremiah was called. Here. Now. In and through your work: your teaching, your babysitting, your parenting, your knitting, your fishing, your painting, your plumbing, your retiring. Whatever you do, God is calling you to work for a new kin-dom’s birth. Are you ready to deliver?

Jeremiah’s faith reminds us that church is not just a noun, it’s also a verb―a way of seeing and experiencing the journey of life and inviting others to do the same. It’s not a destination or an end. It’s an orientation for how to begin living again―living in a way that is profoundly shaped by the Spirit of love and justice that’s turning over tables and building bridges between all of us.

Jeremiah was a prophet in the time of King Zedekiah. That was his calling. That was his work. What’s yours? What’s mine? What’s our God-given work together?

Created. Consecrated. Appointed. Sent. Confident. Faithful. These are not just Jeremiah’s words. These are God’s words for you and me.

God is inviting, daring, challenging, celebrating, creating you and me as people of faith―as communities of faith.

Listen! God is calling us. Here. Now. Are you ready?

Pluck up. Pull down. Throw out, overthrow. Build. And plant.

What happens when we commit those words to flesh, to the way we see one another and the choices we make for the sake of this world as disciples of Jesus?

Some everyday people in St. John’s United Church in Fall River, Nova Scotia, did exactly that. With the eyes of the church, they looked around at their community. What would be their work? How was God inviting them to serve?

They could see youth struggling with couch surfing, addictions, peer pressure, bullying, and the lack of a safe place to simply be themselves.

They decided to pluck up and pull down some of those very issues. To throw out and overthrow those plagues on our youth. To build and to plant something new. God was calling. Here. Now. And they were willing to open their hearts and minds to listen.

What became the “KD Lunch Ministry” would be their God-given work.

Every Thursday, volunteer teams from the congregation would set out a grand central table in their hall. This was the grandest of communion tables. They would fill it with fresh bread, salads, fruit, and of course, homemade sweets from the kitchens of the congregation. They also supplied all-you-could-eat Kraft Dinner. The lunch was free, and all were truly welcome.

They boldly invited students from the nearby high school to come and eat and drink without price. (Isaiah 55:1)

At first, only a few students responded. Eventually, hundreds came, so many that, to the congregation’s delight, the students filled the hall and some had to eat KD in the pews.

Students asked, “What is this place, anyway?”

When told it was a church, many were surprised. They’d never been inside one.

When asked, “What’s the catch? What do you want from me? Why are you doing this?” Volunteers would respond: “There is none. We want you to know you are loved, you are seen, you matter. We do it because we choose to.”

A group of students arrived early one day, forlorn. Their friend had just been in a car accident that morning. Distraught, they called a volunteer to join their conversation. They asked if it was okay for them to pray for their friend. The volunteer responded: “Of course!” One youth spoke up with the question on everyone’s heart, “But we don’t know how. Can you show us?”

“I can try,” said the volunteer. “What was your friend’s name? Tell me about them, and how you’re feeling. Then, let’s pray.”

Over the years, graduating students made banners, writing messages of thanksgiving to the congregation. One read, “Without Thursdays, I don’t know if I would have made it though this year. Thank you.”

Those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, listen to what I’m telling you:

This is the call. This is the work.

Today, our ancestor of faith, Jeremiah, calls us. Jesus Christ, calls us. The Holy Spirit calls us.

God is calling us to transform our everyday work, our skills, and our talents that we all take for granted by turning them into ploughshares and pruning hooks for the kin-dom that is already almost here.

Listen, God is calling. Here. Now.

Are you ready?

God is inviting, daring, challenging, celebrating, creating you and me as people of faith, as a community of faith.

You are created. Consecrated. Appointed. Sent. Confident. Faithful.

God says, “You are gifted, called, and chosen. You are mine.”

Siblings in Christ, Good News: you are the church!

United in how we give and share who we are and what we have, let’s give the Spirit our answer.

Over the last [*number of*] weeks, you’ve been asked to consider making a financial commitment to the ministry we share together. This is the place. Now is the time. God is calling. Are you ready? I invite you to make that commitment by filling out your PAR form online or in person today. (*Offer all the ways for financial giving that you would like to offer the congregation*.)

If you believe in the love and justice work of our church, both at home and around the world through Mission & Service, ministries like (*name examples that resonate with your church*), then right here, right now, united, let’s *give* our answer.

If you believe in the mission and ministry we share together as people committed to loving and serving God’s people through ministries like (*name local examples about your ministry that inspire and are meaningful to your church*), then right here, right now, united, let’s *give* our answer.

May our actions declare our birthright, as a city on a hill, as a lamp whose sole purpose is to never be hidden, but to shine the affirming love and justice of God for the sake of all.

And all the people said: Amen.

# Week 5: Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

## Liturgy

### Greeting

One: God is good
**All: all the time.**
One: All the time
**All: God is good.**

### Settler Acknowledgement of Our Commitment to Truth and Reconciliation

Long before my people journeyed to this land, Indigenous people were here (*you may include names of local Indigenous peoples and/or treaties*), and they received from their Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured. When they shared their vision, my people did not hear. My people tried to force Indigenous peoples to be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made them what they were.

We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that our church did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church. As we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority.

We pray that all Indigenous people will hear the sincerity of our words today and that they will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future.

### Lighting of the Christ Candle and/or Rainbow Candle

(*You might choose to simply light the candle*(*s*) *and then proceed with singing and the call to worship.*)

One: God is here
**All: all the time.**One: All the time
**All: God is here.**

One: All are welcome
**All: all the time.**One: All the time
**All: all are welcome.**

### Call to Worship

(*Sung refrain suggestion: “Born in Human Likeness”* (*MV 47*))

One: To God,

**All: I will sing.**

One: Passionately. Unapologetically. Free.

**All: I will sing.**

One: For You, Spirit, are here. All the time.

**All: I will sing.**

One: As time flows in the endless cycle of the cosmos,
as this morning’s dawn rakes across the horizon of deep darkness,

**All: I will sing.**

One: As the green blade rises from the root of all life,

as life emerges from the dark mystery of Mother’s womb,

**All: I will sing.**

One: As I try to hold onto you, you dance well beyond my reach.
As I call, your name answers from the foundation of my being.

**All: I will sing. From my whole heart I will sing your praise,**

One: for we are the work of your hands.

**All: Let us worship.**

### Opening Prayer

One: Holy One and One in three, the chickadee sings and the chickadee knows you, in whose glory life is bestowed.

**All: Spirit God, the gale wind unsettles and the gale wind knows you, in whose breath life is bestowed.**

One: Living God, the mustard seed sprouts and the mustard seed knows you, in whose kin-dom life is bestowed.

**All: Enduring God, the oak tree rises, the oak tree knows you, in whose care life is bestowed.**

One: God with us, the children see and the children know you, in whose mystery life is bestowed.

**All: In the works of our hands, may we also show that written on our hearts, your name lives and your name grows. May it be so. Amen.**

### Hymn Selections

“Come and Find the Quiet Centre” (VU 374)
“How Lovely Is Your Dwelling Place” (MV 29)
“It’s a Song of Praise to the Maker” (MV 30)

### Prayer of Confession

**Eternal and Ever Present One, you are beyond us and before us. You are as familiar as the palm of our hand and beyond our complete understanding. Forgive us when instead of leaning into your wild ways, we limit one another through tamer imitations of life. Forgive our need to confine and control our human siblings into prisons we have made for one another: worthy/worthless, insider/outsider, saved/damned. Liberating Spirit, unsettle us with your extreme grace, that we would venture into the wilds of your redeeming and reconciling love, trusting the mystery that will always be both within and beyond us. In Christ’s name, we ask it.**

(*silent reflection*)

### Assurance of Grace

We give thanks for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for in this, you will not waver. Today we call for forgiveness. May we hear your answer as you stretch out your hand toward all that we were, all that we are, and all we are becoming. May we rest in the truth that we are yours, and you, Holy One, are our God. Amen.

### Exploring the Epiphany Box

Find a small mirror. Feel free to decorate the frame in any way you choose, but painting it with many colours would be especially beautiful and appropriate. Place the mirror in the decorated box you’ve been using throughout this stewardship series. Wrap the box in heavy paper and write words of thanksgiving all over it. Again, use many colours. Some words you might want to include are from today’s psalm, as well as a few more, e.g., “give thanks,” “with my whole heart,” “sing praise,” “forever love,” “faithfulness,” “mission,” “justice,” “work of your hands,” “purpose,” “Spirit,” “God,” “YHWH,” “Christ,” “Church,” along with any others that seem appropriate.

Hide the box before the conversation. If you have little children in your congregation, invite them to explore and try to find the box. Be playful with wondering questions, e.g., “I wonder what might be in here,” “I wonder what these words say,” “I wonder who wrote these words,” “I wonder what they might mean.”

Have the children open the box. Take out the mirror and reflect their image back to them and to the congregation. Remind everyone that the gift of Christ, of God with us, for us, is that God’s love is written on our hearts. (Jeremiah 31:33) The psalmist reminds us that each of us is the work of God’s hands and all those words are inside us just waiting to come out. We make those words live when we live as Jesus taught. When we live as Jesus taught, we are the church. We are praise, love, faithfulness, justice, mission; we are the work of God’s hands. We are beautifully and wonderfully made.

As your closing prayer, ask the congregation to give examples of your mission work that connect with a few of these words. For example, how have you experienced God’s love in/as church? Feel free to include some Mission & Service and national examples from the United Church.

For each example, do a body prayer of thanks. Stand up. Start with your hands spread open by your sides, and as you stretch them above your head with arms held wide, call out, “Thank you, God!”

**Hymn Selections**

“Jesus’ Hands Were Kind Hands” (VU 570)
“As a Fire Is Meant for Burning” (VU 578)
“As Long as We Follow” (MV 140)

**Scripture**

Isaiah 6:1–8 (9–13)
Psalm 138 (VU 860)
1 Corinthians 15:1–11
Luke 5:1–11

### Ministry of Music

### Sermon

With My Whole Heart…Thank You.

**Hymn Selections**

“Come, O Fount of Every Blessing” (VU 559)
“Spirit, Open My Heart” (MV 79)

### Offering Invitation

Just as the psalmist sang thanksgiving to God from their whole heart, we are also asked to offer all that we are for the work of Christ in our world. Whoever we are, we all have been blessed by God, and God calls upon each of us to share our blessings. In the sharing of our gifts, God rejoices as we fulfill our purpose in Christ―to love one another, as in turn we are loved with God’s whole heart. Now is the time to fulfill that purpose. Let us give boldly. Let us give together. Let us give thanks to the One whose love endures forever.

### Offertory Response

“Your Work, O God, Needs Many Hands” (VU 537)
“What Can I Do?” (MV 191)

### Offertory Prayer

**You are the Source of everything we have, all that we are, and all that we will become. We offer everything we have received to you, in praise and thanksgiving. Giving for the sake of our human siblings, our planet, and our future, we make our offering. Now take all that we offer, God, and bless and yield these gifts a hundredfold, that when the voice of your people cries out, the call to be church would be our answer. In Jesus’ name, we ask it. Amen.**

### Prayers of the People

God.
It would be so much easier if you fit neatly into the boxes we make,
where we could catch just a glimpse of you when it’s convenient,
but always safely tuck you away for later,
when we decide if we are ready to wrestle with what you put before us.
It would be so much easier, if you were tame, well behaved, transactional.
That we know. That we understand. That has a clear beginning, middle, and end.
But you’re not like that. Thank you, God―that you’re not like that.
Just when we think we can pin you down,
you flip tables on us again, and again, and again.
You arc across time and space,
eternity unbound in galaxies that spur
the seeds of stars that yield life on a scale the human mind cannot begin to fathom.
We are just a speck of dust on this third rock from the sun.
And yet. And yet into this speck of dust, you breathed yourself.
Your Spirit.
What are we to make of you, you who are beyond our imagination, and as close as our very next breath?
What are we, to be loved by the likes of you?
Even the hard-hearted and self-assured, you love.
Even when I walk in the midst of trouble,
even as my enemies of self-doubt, judgment, and despair haunt my trail,
you preserve me. You stretch out your hand with grace and mercy,
lifting me up, renewing my spirit, reminding me―that I was created with the purpose of your love and justice.
When I was in the grind of the frontline day and night―I called, and you were with me.
When I was in the midst of chemo and radiation―I called, and you were with me.
When I was confronted with loss―I called, and you were with me.
When I needed a community to belong to―I called, and you were with me.
When I was lost and tossed upon the sea of no care―I called, and you were with me.
When I was sure I had come to the end of my limit―I called, and you were with me,
not always in how I imagine or would conceive,
but always born in the still, small presence at the root of my being,
who is louder than all the thunder under heaven.
So I will give you thanks, God of Holy Mystery.
I will praise you with my whole heart song,
for you alone are worthy of this.
All life is the work of your hands,
and this, you will not forsake.
(*add local thanksgivings*)

Now with these hands of mine,
may I protest the proud patterns of empire that seek to dominate and destroy your image.
May I reach out and embrace the stranger, feed the hungry, clothe the naked,
and restore the shamed, and in so doing, realize the wonder of who you made me to be.
May I give thanks in the labour for which I have been called―
that together, we would create a kin-dom and a people
who know the value of your wild, heedless love
that will never submit to any limit anyone could ever place upon you.
Thanks be to you, Divine Lover, for loving us, all of us, all the time.
Amen.

### Hymn Selections

“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You” (VU 232)
“Though Ancient Walls” (VU 691)
“Deep in Our Hearts” (MV 154)

### Commissioning

One: Rise. Rise in the glory of the One who calls you and I to be church,

**All: to be the living echo of the first Word,**

One: to be enduring love made flesh,

**All: to be committed with our whole heart, a living testament of generous love and justice come on earth.**

One: In the works of our hands,

**All: in the song that fills our lungs,**

One: In the praise that carries us home, rise!

**All: We rise in the glory of the one who calls us to be the church. Amen.**

### Benediction

May the Creator uphold you.
May the Redeemer restore you.
May the Sustainer release you.
And through this blessed grace, may you share
the Good News of life, poured out for everyone and everything,
Everywhere.
Amen.

### Sending Selections

“May the God of Hope Go with Us” (VU 424)
“Sent Out in Jesus’ Name” (MV 212)

## Sermon: With My Whole Heart—Thank You!

When you think of the word “courage,” what comes to mind? (*Consider and thank all answers.*)

For most of us, courage conjures up a valorous ideal: climbing Mount Everest, skydiving, David facing Goliath.

We think of courage in terms of what’s demanded of us when we face something extreme―something out of the ordinary.

But courage can also be needed when holding our child for the first time, or riding a bike without the training wheels, or leaving the house after quarantine.

Courage could be admitting we need help, telling a partner how we really feel, or listening to someone tell us their truth.

None of these examples are as glorious as our Hollywood ideals would portray, but they are courageous moments in the extreme. What kind of world would it be if those everyday acts were seen as more courageous?

I think the psalmist is courageous in how they sing thanksgiving to God. We might just want to pause here this morning and take notes.

The description of God is absolutely extreme: boundless, deep, and illimitable.

God is “exalted…above everything,” (Psalm 138:2) so that even “the kings of the earth shall praise you [God]” (vs.4) for “great is the glory of God” (vs.5).

God seems too marvellous and too far beyond humanity ever to be bothered by what’s happening with this speck of dust on the third rock from the sun.

And yet, the psalmist sings, “For though [God] is high, [God] regards the lowly” (vs.6). God listens to the psalmist’s prayers and worship: “On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul” (vs.3).

God stretches out a divine hand with healing and grace when the psalmist feels hemmed in by whatever haunts them, and this God, above and beyond everything in the extreme, has a “purpose for me” (vs.8) to be fulfilled. And not only that, this God above and beyond everything we can conceive is the one who will see it through.

This God is almost beyond reach and always as close as our next breath. We need courage to swim in these divine waters. We need courage to ponder what we think and believe about this living God with us.

Brené Brown, a renowned researcher, storyteller, and professor, reminds us that courage comes from a Latin root word meaning “of the heart.” “The original definition was, ‘To tell the story of who you are with your whole heart.’”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Have you ever told anyone the story of who you are with your whole heart? Have you ever told God that story? I wonder.

The beginning of this psalm utters absolute thanksgiving with extreme courage: “I give you thanks, O [God], with my whole heart” (vs. 1).

Every verse speaks of vulnerability, which “…is not winning or losing,” the categories we hold beloved in our culture and society. “Vulnerability is having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our greatest measure of courage” (Brené Brown, *Rising Strong*).[[3]](#footnote-3)

The psalmist tells their whole story to God with their whole heart. All the trouble, toil, and snares are spelled in between the syllables even as they acknowledge they can’t control the outcome: will God accept them for who they really are? “Do not forsake the work of your hands” (vs.8), sings the psalmist.

The psalmist shows up, and is seen, when they have no control over what happens—and comes with a mouth full of praise and thanksgiving to God that this is the kind of relationship they share, a relationship unlike any other.

There is no doubt. In verse after verse after verse, the psalmist reminds us that this God who is above and beyond it all is right in the middle of us—all of us—and loving us all the way. Thanks be to God indeed!

When I think of how powerful telling the story of who you are with your whole heart really is, how it can totally change the storyteller and all those who have ears to listen, I think of the story of Mike, as told by the Rev. Matt Fillier.

Unlike most teens who showed up to church camp on registration day, begrudging their tag-along parents, Mike showed up with his social worker. Tall for his age, head shaved, muscular, with an eye that said “I dare you,” I knew Mike would be a challenge.

I wasn’t wrong.

He was prone to confrontation at the least provocation. His common retort to anyone who questioned his decisions was, “You wanna fight?”

And fight he did. For much of the week. But the camp staff decided they were not going to give up on Mike. This is who he was, and there was more to him than this jagged exterior that had been shaped by multiple foster homes and by living on the bleeding edge of society’s privilege.

Each time Mike’s interactions would descend into conflict, the staff would take him aside and talk him down. If it took ten minutes, or an hour, it mattered not. Each time, we would ask Mike if we could pray with him. Sometimes he would join in, but mostly he would be content for the “church people” to do the “church thing.”

After a few days, Mike got the message. He had nowhere to run, we weren’t going to run away, and we weren’t going to fight. We did something all the more insidious―we would love him and walk with him throughout his time with us.

As the week unfolded, he made friends. The rest of the camp could see the effort he was putting in and reached out to model the same courage the staff were demonstrating. It worked. Mike’s hard exterior of resentment softened, and he let us into his world. It was a privilege. It was church at its finest.

On the last day of that camp, everyone was in the dining hall busily gobbling up the kitchen’s last supper, a full turkey dinner with all the trimmings. In all the clutter and chaos of mealtime at camp with 80 kids, Mike slid back his chair and walked to the front of the room. He found the neatest soapbox any street corner preacher could desire―a milk crate―and proudly stood upon it.

He cleared his throat. The room was silent. And Mike proceeded to testify.

He said, “Before we leave, I just want to let all of you know, I love you. I love you because you loved me. I don’t belong most places. But here, I found my place. I will never forget you and…thank you, thank you, thank you.”

After the tsunami of tears, an eruption of applause followed.

Mike is still in my heart to this day. I’m still telling this story. I still pray he has found his place in the world.

Mike told the story of who he was with his whole heart. He had no control over the outcome. He was absolutely courageous because he was willing to trust and be vulnerable with us. That is the gift of church. It changed his life and it’s still changing mine. I can never repay Mike in kind for the honour he extended to me, and to us.

“On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. …Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. [God] will fulfill [God’s] purpose for me; your steadfast love, [God], endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands” (Psalm 138:3, 7–8).

I can never thank God enough for the power of community filled with the transformative power of the Spirit―that’s church.

After all, church is the place where we can show up and tell our whole story and know, here, we are gifted, called, and chosen; we are God’s people. We are not alone. And nothing and no one can take that away.

(*Feel free to include local examples of your congregation’s transformative ministries that people treasure with their whole heart.*)

How do you respond to that kind of extreme grace and acceptance? What are we to do with this almost-beyond-us, always-with-us God?

Simple. “I give you thanks, [God], with my whole heart…I sing your praise…I give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness…your steadfast love endures forever” (vs.1, 2, 8).

Friends, thank you. Thank you for being my church. Thank you for being our church. Thank you for giving from the abundance of your treasure, for there, your whole heart will also be. When we give with our whole heart, when in our giving we tell the whole story of who we are as God’s people, lives can be changed, the world can be turned, and what seems like a dead end is transformed into the beginning of something altogether new.

Friends, the Spirit in me honours the Spirit in you,

Thanks be to God! Amen.

1. Marlon Hall quoted in the video *Worship Is Life*, [theworkofthepeople.com/worship-is-life](https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/worship-is-life). Reprinted with permission of The Work of the People: Films for Discovery & Transformation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brené Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability,* TED Talk, [youtu.be/iCvmsMzlF7o](https://youtu.be/iCvmsMzlF7o). TED's videos may be used for non-commercial purposes under a Creative Commons License, Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives (or the [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)) and in accordance with the [TED Talks Usage Policy](https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization/our-policies-terms/ted-talks-usage-policy). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brené Brown, *Rising Strong: The Reckoning, The Rumble, The Revolution* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), p. 23. Reprinted with permission of Penguin Random House. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)