

THE TREE OF LIFE



CURIOSITY
COMPASSION

COURAGE
COLLABORATION

A 5-week series for engaging
the Greater Milwaukee Synod's
Mission Statement
and Core Values



WHAT'S INCLUDED

This is a 5-week series intended to highlight the Greater Milwaukee Synod's mission statement and four core values. These are the roots of who we are called to be as a synod and as the people of God in southeast Wisconsin.

This series is loosely based on the Revised Common Lectionary readings for Lent (Year A), but may be used at any time.

SUGGESTED MUSICAL RESOURCE

The name of this series was inspired by the "Tree of Life" liturgical resources from Marty Haugen. If this series is used in a worship setting, these resources may be helpful, and can be found here: <https://www.giamusic.com/products/P-463.cfm>

Note: This liturgy includes some "Alleluias," so slight changes may be needed for Lent.

AN IDEA FOR ENGAGING CHILDREN (IF USED FOR LENT)

Consider making an "Easter Tree" (In homes or adapted for congregational use).

BRIEF DESCRIPTION: Create a tree that has 45 Bible verses hanging on strips of paper from the limbs. As each day of Lent passes, remove and read one verse. By the end of Lent, the tree will be bare. In preparation for Easter morning, the tree can be re-decorated with butterflies or eggs, symbolizing new life.



Read more about this idea here: <https://courtneydefeo.com/what-is-easter/>

Find a list of 45 Bible verses here: <https://www.scribd.com/document/27021984/Lenten-Offerings>

EACH WEEK'S RESOURCES CONTAIN:

HIGHLIGHTED READINGS

Each week, two readings are highlighted for use around the theme; one from the Old Testament, and one from the Gospels.

The readings correspond to the Revised Common Lectionary's Lent (Year A) every week except week 4, in which the suggested Gospel reading is from the Narrative Lectionary.

NOTES ON THE THEME

Each week includes a few notes on the ways the assigned readings correlate to the week's theme. These could be used as nudges for preaching, Bible study, personal reflection, or group discussion.

QUESTIONS FOR THE WEEK

Consider using these questions in creative ways to spur engagement or discussion:

- at the beginning of a worship service as a prompt for reflection or discussion
- at the beginning of the sermon to help people engage the theme of the day
- at tables in the fellowship time after worship
- in Sunday School, confirmation, or youth activities

SONGS, PRAYERS & GRAPHICS

Each week's suggested resources include a hymn from the ELW, a contemporary or modern song, a prayer of the day, and a graphic. *Note: All graphics are downloadable at milwaukee-synod.org/vision* The main graphic is copyright-free and can be modified or shared in any way.

SYNOD MINISTRY HIGHLIGHT

God accomplishes so much through our combined efforts! Consider using these weekly ministry highlights as a brief way to tell the story of what God is doing through the Greater Milwaukee Synod.

WEEK 1

INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

THE TREE OF LIFE

We Follow Jesus, Form Communities, Love All
(Greater Milwaukee Synod Mission Statement, adopted May of 2019)

READINGS

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Humans were created to be in relationship with God and one another.

Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus is God in the flesh, experiencing the fullness of human life, including physical, emotional, and spiritual struggle.

NOTES ON THE THEME

God created humans in love and in community. God calls us to be fed from the divine tree of life. Yet, on earth, humans experience a variety of “wilderness moments” in which human life is vulnerable, and we feel distant from God, distant from community, and distant from love. The synod’s mission statement (“We Follow Jesus, Form Communities, Love All) is one way we live out our God-given purpose to share in the fullness of human life gifted to us by God. Consider asking people to name what they think it would look like to really live into each of the three phrases. How is God already at work, moving us in those directions?

QUESTIONS FOR THE WEEK

Think of some of the obstacles or struggles you have faced in your life. What are some ways God has worked beyond these struggles to make you more patient, compassionate, or loving?

WORSHIP PLANNING

Suggested Hymn: ELW #334 - *Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery*

Modern Song: *In Christ Alone* - by Keith Getty & Stuart Townend

Prayer of the Day: From *Feasting on the Word, Worship ed.*

Wild God of the Wilderness, as we devote these 40 days to you, shape us by your Holy Spirit into the image of Christ our Lord, so that we may be ready, by your grace, to confront the power of death with the promise of eternal life. Amen.



All graphics available at
milwaukee-synod.org/vision

SYNOD MINISTRY HIGHLIGHT

Did you know that every year, across the country, our ELCA launches many "new start" congregations? In our synod, one of these new starts is a ministry named "The Table." This is a house-church style community that meets at Alice's Garden (2136 N. 21st Street, Milwaukee) for much of the year and is rooted in ancient spiritual practices. God uses this ministry to bring hope and healing amid the challenges of daily life for thousands of people every year.

Find a brief video to help you tell the story of "The Table" at www.milwaukee-synod.org/stories

WEEK 2 CURIOSITY

We believe that God is always up to something new, working to bring people together from diverse contexts to experience resurrection, hope, and community. Our task is to wonder and explore as the Holy Spirit moves among us.

READINGS

Genesis 12:1-4a

God is up to something new with Abram and Sarai.

John 3:1-17

Nicodemus is a curious Pharisee.

For further study
on the theme, read

Acts 2:1-24

NOTES ON THE THEME

Nicodemus and Sarai are often seen as doubters, as if doubt is the opposite of faith. But what if we saw them as 'curious' instead? What if we saw their doubts as seeds of faith, which God can use to bring them to the tree of life? Their curiosity brings them face to face with God, and their curiosity allows them to receive God's gift of abundant life. Later in John's gospel, Nicodemus arrives at Jesus' cross; his journey from curiosity to the cross can be a model for our own journeys centered on the tree of life.

QUESTIONS FOR THE WEEK

We often react to people or situations with judgment rather than taking a curious stance. Think of a time recently when you reacted in a way you are not proud of. Now, re-think the situation. Why was it difficult for you? Why did those around you behave as they did? What other questions could you ask to learn more about the situation before reacting again?

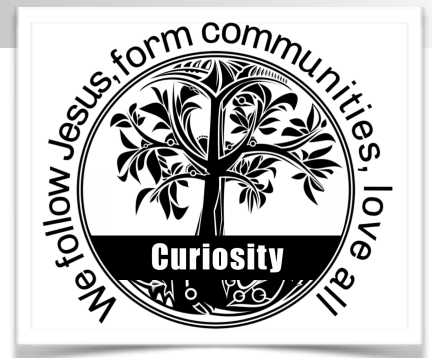
WORSHIP PLANNING

Suggested Hymn: ELW #767 - *Lord Take My Hand and Lead Me*

Modern Song: *Questions* - by Tori Kelly

Prayer of the Day: From *The Lutheran Book of Worship*

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



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SYNOD MINISTRY HIGHLIGHT

The leaders at Christ our Savior Lutheran in Sussex noticed that a new school was being built immediately adjacent to their property. They wondered how they might collaborate with the school and the parents to be present in the everyday lives of the children who go there. Those conversations led to the development of the "T.A.C.O.S." (Teens Around the Community of Sussex). This innovative ministry seeks to engender resiliency in teens as they grow in, and rely on their faith. *Learn more at www.tacosoutreach.com*

WEEK 3 COMPASSION

We believe that Jesus' command to love God and our neighbors needs to guide everything we do as we form communities of grace, welcome, service, and justice.

READINGS

Exodus 17:1-17

God gives water through a rock to the Israelites.

John 4:5-42

Jesus gives living water to, and through, a Samaritan woman.

For further study
on the theme, read

Luke 10:25-37

NOTES ON THE THEME

Seeds of faith cannot grow into strong trees of life without water. God is constantly calling us to compassion for others as a way of watering their own seeds of faith, planted in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. God gives us living water so that we may share it with others; those in our own groups (who might whine, like the Israelites) or those in other groups (whom we might avoid, like the Samaritan woman). Where is God bringing living water to us and through us in ways that defy our expectations?

QUESTIONS FOR THE WEEK

When did someone else show you compassion?
When have you shown compassion to someone else?
What do you think makes people compassionate?

WORSHIP PLANNING

Suggested Hymn: ELW #777 - *Come to Me All Pilgrims Thirsty*

Modern Song: *Nothing Like your Love* - by Hillsong United

Prayer of the Day: From *Feasting on the Word, Worship ed.*

Lord God, Great I AM, you are living water. As we worship you this day, remind us that through our baptism, we are full of your living water, and we are called to be channels of your love and vessels of your grace to all our neighbors, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



All graphics available at
milwaukee-synod.org/vision

SYNOD MINISTRY HIGHLIGHT

Located in Grace Lutheran Church in Kenosha, the Grace Welcome Center is a warm place that provides hearty breakfasts for families, adults and children each and every Thursday & Friday. The Welcome Center was a response to the sudden closing of First Step, a low barrier shelter, that served the community for 14 years. The Center continues to grow, now offering free haircuts and other resources for those who need them.

To learn more and find videos, visit www.gracewelcomecenter.org/about1.html

WEEK 4 COLLABORATION

We believe that, just as God walks with us in our journey of faith, God invites us to walk with and work with each other and with our neighbors in relationships of authentic mutuality and equity.

READINGS

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Samuel anoints David; God often chooses the “least likely” candidates to join with us on our journey of faith.

Mark 12:28-44 (Narrative Lectionary, not RCL)

Love your neighbor as yourself. The widow gives all she has.

For further study
on the theme, read

Ephesians 4:1-16

NOTES ON THE THEME

God calls us to walk with our neighbors in mutual and equitable faith journeys. Throughout scripture, God often calls those who the world might see as “least likely” to contribute to the group. In our workplaces, schools, clubs, families, and other places, those with power tend to keep it - but the church gets its life from equal collaboration between all of God’s children.

QUESTIONS FOR THE WEEK

In what ways do you see collaboration within your congregation?
What are some things happening in your community in which you'd like to see your congregation collaborate with other community leaders? How might you help take the first step?

WORSHIP PLANNING

Suggested Hymn: ELW #725 - *When the Poor Ones*

Modern Song: *Do Something* - by Matthew West

Prayer of the Day: From *RevGalBlogPals* (see web address below)

Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit you have made us one with your saints in heaven and on earth: Help us to see your presence burning in the hearts of others; grant that we may be united in a fellowship of love and prayer; to be your hands and heart in the world; enable us to witness to your grace and mercy. We pray all this through the love your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Written by "Terri," posted on *RevGalBlogPals*

<http://revgalblogpals.blogspot.ca/2008/08/take-up-your-cross.html>



All graphics available at
milwaukeeesynod.org/vision

SYNOD MINISTRY HIGHLIGHT

Since 2010, Midway Laundry in Sheboygan has served as a home base for "Laundry Love Sheboygan," a collaboration between Ebenezer UCC, First Congregational Church, Wesley United Methodist Church, and First United (ELCA). Church members from all four congregations provide not only soap and drier sheets, but a sense of belonging, encouragement, and community.

WEEK 5 COURAGE

We believe that God is inviting us to explore new ways of being church, re-examining familiar structures, beliefs, and practices, that we might experience the rich and full life that God intends for all creation.

READINGS

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Dry bones are never the end of the story. God's Spirit is enfolded.

John 11:1-45

The raising of Lazarus is a foretaste of the feast to come.

**For further study
on the theme, read**

Isaiah 42:5-9

NOTES ON THE THEME

Believing in resurrection hope, despite death all around us, is an act of courage. Faith is courage to explore new ways of being church, which includes re-examining some of the familiar practices which may no longer be life-giving. We are able to mourn the loss of something which previously gave life but is no longer beneficial for the continual growth of new things. God intends a full and abundant life for all and it takes courage to live into God's way of life, rather than to seek the kinds of "life" which others may expect.

QUESTIONS FOR THE WEEK

Think of a person you know whom you would call courageous. Don't let yourself off the hook by thinking of courage only in the context of those we call "heroes." When have you shown courage? What do you need to feel courage?

WORSHIP PLANNING

Suggested Hymn: ELW #333 - *Jesus is a Rock in a Weary Land*

Modern Songs: *Come Alive (Dry Bones)* - by Lauren Daigle
or *Set a Fire* by Will Reagan

Prayer of the Day:

God, give us the courage to be strong yet vulnerable. Give us the courage to risk and re-examine our comfortable patterns so that we and all others might experience the rich and full life you intend for all your creation. We pray all this through the love of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.



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SYNOD MINISTRY HIGHLIGHT

Together, we are called to dismantle racism by creating and deepening a culture of resistance to racism through organizing and training among the ministries of the synod. Anti-Racism isn't just a training or an event, but an identity into which we are continuously called to live. God gives us the courage to have difficult conversations, trusting that we are created to be one in Christ.

To learn more about resources for this work, please contact the Anti-Racism Team's co-chairs, Esther Rusch (e.rusch386@gmail.com) or Pr. Fred Thomas-Breitfeld (pastorfred81@gmail.com)