

## BIBLE STUDY

by Catherine Malotky  
and David Engelstad

## RENEW

The cloud of witnesses surrounding us can teach us much about what it means to bring your best self to the life you've been given. This Bible study will invite us into the dynamic web of life anchored by "renew, respond, and rejoice." This is vocation in the richest sense of that term—who are you and how are you called to service in a world full of surprises? There is so much to do. How do we stay spiritually healthy in the face of overwhelming need?

### *Getting Unstuck: Renewing Hardness of Heart*

#### Key verse

Psalm 51:10–12

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

#### Materials you will need

- Journal
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW, the red book) or *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW, the green book)
- Leader Guide on page 34

#### Beginning

##### READ PSALM 51:10–12 ALOUD.

1. In your journal, recall at least one time in your life when you could or did offer this

prayer on your own behalf. What was at stake for you? What did you hope your own renewal would accomplish?

2. Where have you heard these words before? Where do you remember using them in the liturgy? (See ELW 185–188. Note that in LBW, this psalm was used as the offertory in services without communion.)

#### Set the stage

The words of Psalm 51 are ascribed to King David, remembering a time when his spirit was deeply troubled and he felt ashamed. He had experienced renewal—painful yet powerful, and made his story-psalm public so that others might learn from it. The church has been using David's words in its worship and confessions ever since. Maybe you have uttered them too...at a time when you felt guilty, indifferent, defiant, or empty. Calling out these words of Psalm 51 does not immediately accomplish our renewal,

but it does announce our desire for and intention to pursue it. And it signals our awareness that renewal is what we need.

In this session, we will explore the creative tension between renewal and challenge.

Critical questions to keep in mind as you study:

- How do I know when and what kind of renewal I need?
- How can I renew myself when so many others depend on me?
- Who benefits from my renewal?

### Learning from the saints

#### *King David's witness*

In the story of King David in 2 Samuel (11:1–12:15), David was filled with desire for another man's wife (Bathsheba). If you don't remember the story, read it to acquaint yourself.

3. What do you think David's behavior reveals about his spirit? Was he spiritually full, satisfied, and content? If not, what words would you use to describe his spirit, given his behavior?
4. To what lengths does David go to achieve his desire? What values seem to be driving his behavior?
5. Given other biblical stories about King David, it seems he usually operated from other core values, like compassion, responsibility, faithfulness, and justice. Think about a time when you observed a leader betray long-held values. What did this do to your sense of confidence in his or her leadership?

Renewal was not on the king's mind as he *procured* Bathsheba. Not until Nathan the prophet confronted him. Nathan was not the only subject of the king who witnessed David's shameful behavior. Rather, he was the one we hear about because of the clever and potent

way he helped David to see the shameful of his behavior.

#### READ 2 SAMUEL 12:1–13.

6. What does David realize?
7. Do you think David would have heard Nathan's accusation if he had been more direct? Why or why not?

We could read this story of adultery simply as an example of what is (in our time) common tabloid news. For our purposes in thinking about renewal, however, we can learn something about how God works. Through Nathan, God imaginatively and lovingly sought a way to get around David's defenses in order to help him see, embrace, and own his need for renewal—for his own benefit and also for the well-being of others. (See "A Hard Truth," p. 26.)

8. Think of a time(s) when someone you know has imaginatively, lovingly and/or cleverly helped you see/embrace/own your need for renewal. Give thanks for them and for the God who put them up to it.

#### *Hagar's witness*

In Genesis 16:1–6 we meet Hagar, the Egyptian slave-girl of Sarai, Abram's barren wife (In chapter 16, their names have not yet been changed to Sarah and Abraham). In a practice that was not uncommon at that time, Sarai gives Hagar to Abram so that he might have a child through her.

Not unlike Mary, the mother of Jesus, Hagar is used by God to bring a new life into the world for the purpose of blessing. And like Mary, Hagar is willing to be part of God's purposefulness. However, once Hagar has conceived, trouble began brewing between

Hagar and Sarah. Sarah interprets Hagar's delight at the birth of her son Ishmael as also being a sign of contemptuousness at Sarah's barrenness. We don't know with certainty if Sarah is projecting her own insecurity on Hagar here or not. What we do know is that jealousy infects Sarah's relationship with Hagar, and the graciousness of Hagar in giving birth to Abraham's child for Abraham *and* Sarah's sake is not in any way returned by Sarah.

Sarah, in fact, treats Hagar so harshly (Genesis 16:6) that Hagar flees from Sarah into the wilderness. Even in our day we would know that it is an act of great desperation for a pregnant woman to flee into the wilderness alone. An angel of the Lord meets Hagar there, offers reassurance and blessing, and urges her to return to Sarah. Hagar responds: "Have I really seen God and remained alive?" Clearly renewed by this visit from God, Hagar returns and eventually bears a son—Ishmael. Peaceful coexistence ensues...for awhile.

In time, God's promise of a son to Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah comes to pass and Isaac is born. The story of Hagar and Ishmael continues after the birth of Isaac in Genesis 21:8–21. Read it again to acquaint yourself.

9. What is Sarah worried about? What does she want for Isaac (verse 10)?
10. What values seem to be driving Sarah's behavior? Have they changed from before Isaac was born?
11. Sarah's fixation on her desire is much like King David's. Sarah's spirit was closed, reactive, vengeful, and blinded by her own desires. What does she do?

We can easily see that Sarah's spirit is in need of renewal. In this story, Sarah is not the one who is renewed. Hagar this time is our focus of attention, and she is now wandering for a second time in the wilderness.

No longer pregnant, now Hagar has a young child to care for and protect. The first time, Hagar fled on her own volition, and maybe thus was empowered by it. But this time, Hagar has been unfairly and unjustly sent off. Hagar reacts to this circumstance with feelings of despair. She cannot imagine a happy ending; only a tragic one. Hagar imagines that neither she nor her child will survive; and she is devastated by this thought.

12. How does God intervene (verses 17–19)?

Hagar does not need a Nathan to cleverly and skillfully reveal the cost of blindly acting on her desires. Hagar here is more like Job, a victim of misfortune so immense that there seems no escape. With God's intervention, she recovered the courage and fierceness she had lost. She is renewed.

13. Think of a time(s) when renewal for you has meant recovering your sense of hope, courage, fierceness or purpose. How did you learn that this was possible? What words or presence helped to empower you?

### Trying it out

Renewal can take many shapes and have many meanings. In its simplest form, it could be like a trip to a spa—a treat whose nurture helps us recover a welcome zest for living. Renewal can also take on more serious and profound forms—intended to transform our lives when they are severely blinded or filled with despair. But no matter what form the renewal might take, we often have an initial resistance to it. (See "Breaking and Remaking," p. 14.)

### Self-talk

When God talks to us about renewal it is always in a form that invites, inspires, and nurtures it. However, our own self-talk is frequently neither inviting

nor affirming. When balancing our need for renewal against the responsibilities of our daily lives, our inner voice may tell us: “You don’t have time for this now.” Like Martha (Luke 10:38–42) or the elder son (Luke 15:11–32) we often seek to be responsible first and renewed afterward—if there is time for it.

14. How do you talk to yourself about renewal? What do you say to yourself about its importance, place and priority in your life?

### Self-care

Renewal can range from repentance to daring co-creation. Renewal might be a leap of faith. It could be learning a new skill. Or it might be quiet solitude. The reason it changes shape and strategy is that its aim is transformation. For example, if your spirit is stagnant, renewal is the counter-action (movement of some kind) that restores balance and alignment with God’s will. The opposite would also be true. If your spirit is inappropriately active, stillness might be what’s called for. When King David and Hagar learned what kind of renewal they needed and saw God at work promoting it, their lives were transformed. (See “Time for a Tune-Up,” p. 22.)

15. Think about what kind of renewal you need right now. What state of being are you yearning for? Examples include: contentment, empowerment, patience, courage, and so forth.
16. What might you do to move yourself closer to that state of being?
17. How do you imagine or see God at work promoting this renewal in you and for you?

### Closing

Light a candle and spend a few minutes in prayer looking over the answers to the questions in this study, particularly those that have invited you to reflect on your own life.

Close by reading or singing Psalm 51:10–12. 🌿

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky and the Rev. David Engelstad** have spent two and a half decades as ELCA pastors, serving congregations together in the early years, and then following separate ministerial paths into communications and chaplaincy. Their interests in spiritual direction, coaching, and faith formation inspired this Bible study. They are honored to be the parents of two 20-something daughters and two aging canines. They have just begun empty nesting and are enjoying hiking, biking, writing, and photography.



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# RENEW

## *Getting Unstuck: Renewing Hardness of Heart*

### Overview of session concepts

In our culture, renewal is offered to us through all kinds of media, promising calm and ease. In fact, renewal can be quite trying, since to be truly renewed, something fundamental has to change in order for life to be different on the other side.

The idea of *hardness of heart* can so easily apply to any of us when we find ourselves out of hope and joy. Albert Einstein once said that a problem cannot be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it. Another similar point says that continuing to do things the way you've always done them but expecting a different outcome is not going to solve the problem.

Renewal requires new perspectives, new ideas, new behaviors, and then we can be set on a new, better course. So renewal is not all about sipping iced tea on the beach! It's often hard work, disruptive, and even painful to get to the other side of a hard heart or a narrow perspective. But that's where renewal lies.

Our challenge as Christians is to trust God's redeeming power to bring new life into even the darkest of situations. The risen Christ is the best model of God's work among us: new life out of every death (of any kind).

### Beginning

#### *Reflection*

Gather the group's attention and invite them to center their energy for the session ahead. You could light

a candle in silence as a way of creating a worshipful atmosphere. Ask a volunteer to read Psalm 51:10-12 slowly and meaningfully. Then invite participants to write in their journals. If you have time, you could create small groups to share their ideas with each other.

### Learning from the saints

For these sections of Bible study, work your way through the stories together. If your group has not been exposed to these stories, take the time to read them aloud. If they know the stories, it would be good for you to brush up on them, since sometimes the stories we remember from Sunday school are a little sanitized.

### *King David's witness*

3. He was not at his best. His spirit was preoccupied with his desire and power rather than living in balance and honoring his responsibility as king to honor his subjects.
4. He schemed to have Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed. He seemed to value his own wants over others: self satisfaction, power, etc.
5. You could note that for a while, King David had what he desired. For a while, it did not occur to him that pursuing Bathsheba and having Uriah killed had caused damage to not only his own spirit, but to the lives of Bathsheba's and Uriah's families. In fact, it threatened the integrity of his whole kingdom accord-

ing to Nathan's explanation (2 Samuel: 12:11–12).

Most participants will report that their confidence about the leader's capacity was diminished, and they may even have a strong sense of betrayal.

6. Nathan sought to clear David's eyes from the distortion of his desire (for Bathsheba) until David could see that taking Bathsheba from Uriah as he did, was utterly wrong. So wrong that the king confesses to Nathan: "I have sinned against the Lord."
7. Nathan told David a story. David listened. And David was moved. Moved to anger at the cruelty, injustice, and lack of compassion he heard in the story. Nathan did not say "This is a story about YOU" until David could see the story from Nathan's perspective. Or we might equally say, from God's perspective. If Nathan had not been patient and clever, David might have told him to go away, might have said "I'm the king and I get to have what I want."

### *Hagar's witness*

9. She wants her son, Isaac, to be Abraham's sole heir.
10. Putting the best construction on everything, Sarah was trying to manipulate circumstances so Abraham could have a son. That same value seems to be at work here, too, but Sarah's jealousy, insecurity, and cruelty have emerged more clearly. She plainly doesn't want any competitors for Isaac, or herself, as his mother.
11. She demands that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael to the wilderness, which he does.
12. God hears the boy's voice and calls to Hagar, saying that she should not be afraid and promising her that God will make of her son a great nation, which implies that he will live.

### **Trying it out**

This section is intentionally self-reflective. You will know your group best. If they do well sharing personal reflections, create small groups so they can do so. If they do not like sharing, affirm and invite them to do this privately. Any sharing will enhance the learning, as long as the point of view is non-judgmental and encouraging.

### **Closing**

Do take the time to create a worshipful atmosphere at the end. This is an opportunity to draw everything together. You could close by reading the prayer for "Those seeking a deeper knowledge of God," *ELW*, p. 76.

Light a candle and ask the group to spend a few minutes in prayer looking over the answers to the questions in this study. Close by reading or singing Psalm 51:10–12. 🌿

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## BIBLE STUDY

## RESPOND

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### *Gifted to Serve*

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#### Key verse

Luke 1:46–48

*And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he had looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.”*

#### Materials you will need

- Journal
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW, the red book)* or *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW, the green book)*
- Paper cup with a hole poked in the bottom
- Measuring cup with water in it and a bowl to catch the water

#### Beginning

#### Reflection

**READ LUKE 1:46–48 ALOUD.**

1. Mary received astounding news. Imagine Mary singing this song after learning that she would conceive a son who would be important to the well-being of her people. How would you characterize her spirit based on the words of this hymn?
2. Hold the punctured paper cup over an empty bowl. Pour water into the cup. What happens? What has to happen to keep water in the cup?
3. In your journal, write about a time when the blessing poured into you, and then poured out on someone else. How did you feel about it? What did you notice about the staying power of the blessing you received? Have you ever tried to pour from an empty cup? How did that go?

## Set the stage

This session shifts our focus from renewal to response. We often seek renewal—think of an empty cup in need of filling. We invite God to fill us with blessing and affirm our gifts. When we respond, we are pouring out the essence and substance of our renewal. Love, compassion, kindness, and other gifts flow into us, and we respond by sharing our abundance with a world in need. We become servants.

Recall the people of Israel, wandering in the wilderness, being given manna each day by God. There was always manna enough for the day, but no more. This demanded that they both trust God and also discipline themselves to gather the manna each day. Your daily devotions and other acts of renewal are like this practice. These activities become spiritual food so that you might have the strength and energy to serve others.

In this session, we will explore the way response flows from renewal. Critical questions to keep in mind as you study:

- How do I discern which of my gifts God wishes me to offer to others at this time?
- What do I do if God seems to be asking me for more than or less than I think I have to offer?
- Whom do I serve? Where will/can I offer my gifts?
- How do I serve from a sense of fullness?

## Learning from the saints

In thinking about *respond*, we will consider the stories of two women: Mary the mother of Jesus, and the widow at Zarephath. One was asked to respond as a young woman full of potential, while the other was asked to respond at a time when death seemed imminent. Both are now remembered as faithful responses to God's call. (See "Choosing Joy," p. 12.)

## Mary's witness

In the story of Mary's call to be the mother of Jesus in Luke (1:26–56), Mary was a young woman full of potential, engaged to be married, at the front end of a life she could imagine might be full of dreams come true. If you don't know the story, read it to acquaint yourself.

4. What, exactly, was Mary told she was chosen to do? (Luke 1:31)
5. Based on this call or "assignment," what tasks would her job description include if you were to write it? Get specific! What was the time line for this responsibility?
6. What challenges did Mary encounter along the way? Think of Mary pondering how to be the mother of Jesus. What kind of thoughts and questions can you imagine may have gone through her mind as Jesus was growing up? (Luke 2:21–51)
7. What do you think she might have done to provide herself with the support she needed to respond to this calling? What would you have done or what did you do as a brand new mother? (see Luke 1:39–56 and 2:21–24)

Years of tradition and story-telling have smoothed out the challenges of Mary's assignment. For Mary, *respond* was the daily call to love and parent Jesus, and she did so by asking for God's help and trusting in God's blessing.

8. Consider call(s) that come (or came) to you when you feel/felt full of potential and vitality and are literally bursting with life. What does enthusiasm contribute to the ways you respond? How is your response vulnerable if it is based too heavily on enthusiasm?



### The widow's witness

The widow at Zarephath's story is told in 1 Kings 17:8–24. It's a story of loss, preceded by the death of her husband, and soon, she believes, her own death and her son's. Read the story aloud.

9. How does the mood of this story compare to Mary's story?
10. Is the widow in need of renewal? What would help her (17:7, 12)?
11. Given what you know about the widow's predicament, if you were the widow, how might you have responded to Elijah's first request (17:10–11)?
12. Recall a time when you felt like you were starving, or felt depleted and empty.

We all go through periods in our lives when we are not getting what we need to be healthy and responsive. When you have felt this depleted, it is easy to assume that God will surely agree that this is not a good time to ask you to part with your meager resources. How do you or might you tell God that this is not a good time for you to be a “provider” for others?

At the beginning of the story, God tells Elijah, “I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” The widow does not hear this command from God, just Elijah does. So when Elijah asks her for some food, her response is guarded and hesitant. For a woman

who parented and tended a household, what kind of hospitality is it to offer such a pittance to a stranger in need? Surely Elijah could do better elsewhere. She must have wondered, “Can't he see that my days of giving are over? Can't he see that God wouldn't want to take what little I have?”

13. The widow's capacity to respond was severely diminished by her circumstances, and yet Elijah asked her to serve. What emotions did she have to muster up in order to respond? What helped her to re-imagine what God might have been up to with this seemingly insensitive request?
14. What did Elijah's request reveal about God's opinion of her capacity to respond? How might this have been a source of renewal for her?

### Trying it out

Despite the fact that many people think it's the big things that will bring them happiness, often it's a small act of kindness that brightens their day. A person diagnosed with cancer would like to hear, “It's all gone and will never come back.” But more often, what they hear that brings them hope is the voice of a friend saying: “You and your story are sacred to me. You can tell me anything.”

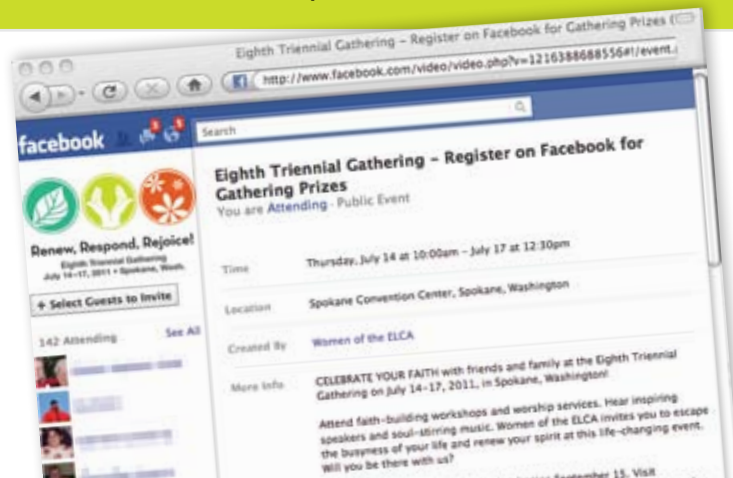
*Respond* is often a quiet act. Like the air we breathe, it nurtures life without calling attention to itself; often without people even being aware of it. And as such, it

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cultivates humility. Instead of asking, “What can I do that others will notice,” it invites us to ask, “What can I do that others need me to do?”

### Self-talk

In the story of the widow’s mite, Jesus commends to his disciples the behavior of a widow whose offering was but two copper coins (Luke 21:1–4).

15. Do you commend yourself when you make a response that seems minor? Why or why not?
16. Jesus also said: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10). God is clearly aware of our “little” acts of kindness and hospitality and assigns great value to it. What might help you to notice and value this behavior as God does?

It is likely that you are well practiced at this quiet kind of *respond*. Maybe you are so well practiced that, like the widows in Luke 21 and 1 Kings 17, you no longer hear the voice of God calling you to make these responses. Cultivating the habit of responding “faithfully in a very little” is good. But even better is both cultivating that habit and also noticing that God is the inspiration and witness of this habit. Why? Because little acts of faithfulness run the risk of being overlooked by others, even our loved ones.

### Self-care

In a context where there is little or no thanks, *respond* can sometimes turn into *resent*. We can feel used, unappreciated, taken for granted. We can wonder: “What difference does it make that I do these things?” We can be tempted to quit responding, as a way either to force others to notice our importance and the importance of what we do; or as an act of giving up and giving in to the perspective that we have nothing important to offer. (See “Renew, Respond, Rejoice...Resent?” p. 22.)

This is why it is so important where we fix our gaze when we respond. In addition to seeing those we serve and their response, faith would invite us to also see God’s response to us. When we see God smiling at us, encouraging us, inspiring us, and promising to bless our responses—then we can know that what we have done has already made a difference. No matter what other thanks we might receive, we know God is at work in us and through us.

17. Think of a time recently when you responded lovingly to someone. Recall what you were thinking/feeling when you were making this response. Note these things in your journal.
18. Now, imagine God as the author of your response. See God guiding your acting. Hear God encouraging and championing your response. See God lingering as a witness to your loving, inviting you to savor and enjoy love well intended and spent. How does that change your thinking/feeling? Note these things in your journal.

### Closing

Light a candle and remember times when you have been aware of God’s call to you. Close with this offertory prayer:

*Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts: our selves, our time, and our possessions. Use us, and what we have gathered, in feeding the world with your love, through the one who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 107) 🌸*

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# RESPOND

## *Gifted to Serve*

### Overview of session concepts

In our day, we can too quickly imagine that our response to God's call needs to be spectacular. The media brings us stories about momentous accomplishments, and often biblical stories are about the famous or those who had game-changing impact on the life of God's people. However, our response to God's call is often modest, and in fact, it is more often the steady, day-in and day-out responses we make that actually change the world, slowly and over time.

Jesus' mother was not asked to create a start-up business or be volunteer-extraordinaire at her local synagogue. Mary was called to be a mother, to further God's purpose in each moment of Jesus' growth and development.

The widow at Zarephath was not called to make rain out of nothing or rescue her household through ingenuity and brilliant diplomacy. Instead, she was called to trust enough to give away her last bit of flour and oil to the prophet who asked for it. Her willingness to trust was not rewarded with pomp and circumstance. In fact, her son died soon after. The prophet brought him back to life, but she still had to deal with the agony of his decline and death first.

### Beginning

#### *Reflection*

Gather the group's attention and invite them to center their energy for the session ahead. You could light a candle in silence as a way of creating a worshipful atmosphere. Ask a volunteer to read Luke 1:46–48 slowly. Then work your way through the questions. Though the cup and water is a simple demonstration,

it creates a physical image of how renewal and response are intimately connected.

### READ LUKE 1:46–48 ALOUD.

1. Mary was hopeful and trusted in the promises God said her son would fulfill.
2. The water runs out of the bottom of the cup. In order to keep water in the cup, you have to keep pouring water into the cup.

### Learning from the saints

4. What, exactly, was Mary told she was chosen to do? (Luke 1:31) In modern language, she would become pregnant, give birth, and become a mother.
5. Encourage participants to be specific: change the baby's diapers (however that looked in those long ago days); get up at night to nurse the baby; manage skinned knees; feed her child daily; tell him stories before bed; and so forth. The time horizon was every day for the rest of her life, as it is for any mother.
6. Anna and Simeon were the first of many to say things about Jesus that Mary had to either believe or reject. Jesus began exercising his spiritual interests early. In some ways, as a prodigy, he needed special attention.
7. She sought out other mothers, like Elizabeth. She followed the traditions of her faith by circumcising and naming her son (2:21) and presenting him at the temple (2:22–24).
8. It helps you to dive in; get going. It wears off; we can become discouraged; lose our sense of motivation or the energy to persist in our calling.

### *The widow's witness*

The widow at Zarephath's story is told in 1 Kings 17:8–24.

9. Mary's story is full of hope and new life. The widow's story is about life's ending.
10. The widow is in need of water and food, a most basic physical renewal, or she will die.
11. Most participants will probably say they would not respond to Elijah's first request. She has virtually nothing. Why should she share it with him?
13. Trust and hope. She had to re-engage the idea that her days of purpose and service were not over just because her gifts were so meager and ordinary. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8).
14. God noticed the widow, saw her value, trusted her faithfulness, and gave her a role that needed to be played out. She had to

have come to the surprising realization: God really still needs me. If *God* deemed her capacity sufficient, that's renewing!

### **Closing**

Do take the time to create a worshipful atmosphere at the end. You could sing a version of the Magnificat as part of the closing. It is the gospel canticle in the Service of Evening Prayer (*ELW*, p. 314–315), or choose another rendition. There are many!

Light a candle and remember times when you have been aware of God's call to you. Close with this offertory prayer:

*Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts: our selves, our time, and our possessions. Use us, and what we have gathered, in feeding the world with your love, through the one who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 107) 🌿*



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## BIBLE STUDY

# REJOICE

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by Catherine Malotky  
and David Engelstad

## *Rejoice in the Lord*

### Key verse

Philippians 4:4

*“Rejoice in the Lord always; again,  
I will say, Rejoice.”*

### Materials you will need

- Journal
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW, the red book)* or *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW, the green book)*
- Three candles

### Beginning

#### Reflection

1. Take a moment to quiet yourself. Light a candle or close your eyes. Be still and ask yourself, “What thoughts are weighing on my mind? What responsibilities are pressing for my attention? What feelings threaten to erode my sense of well-being?” If it helps, jot down some thoughts in your journal.

### READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4 ALOUD.

2. Notice what comes up in your thoughts and feelings. Does this feel like a command to you? Does it feel like it could rise naturally from your current circumstances, or would you have to work at it? Note your thoughts in your journal.

### READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4–7.

3. Take another moment to turn inward and be with the peace of God which passes all understanding. Does that change how you feel inside?

### Set the stage

We live in a context where our lives are rarely free from complexity, struggle, and demands. You may have grown up hearing and thinking that “daily taking up our cross” was not only a faithful response but also an unavoidable one. You probably knew someone whose

motto is “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” It may even be yours. Those feeling the challenge of life might even say, “Life is tough. Get used to it.”

The Apostle Paul knew that many (most?) people complain about the difficulty of being faithful. They might have reminded him that renewal is hard work and responding takes concerted effort. They might even have said: “And now you tell us that we’re supposed to rejoice in all this effort? Isn’t that asking a bit too much? Paul surely heard their complaint, just as Moses heard the complaints of the people of Israel in the wilderness. But Paul heard also where they placed their emphasis. They felt they could not rejoice in all this hard work and effort. So Paul repeated his words to them: “Rejoice in the Lord always.” I have not asked you to rejoice in your efforts, or in the challenges of life. But rather, I tell you to rejoice in the Lord—in the one who is with you in all of this effort and amidst all of the challenges.

In this session, we will explore the cycle of faith between renew, respond, and rejoice.

Critical questions to keep in mind as you study:

- How do I rejoice when things are complicated or unresolved?
- What feelings inspire rejoicing? Might there be some additional feelings to associate with rejoicing?
- How does rejoicing spring out of responding and lead again to renewal?

## Learning from the saints

### *Miriam’s witness*

#### **READ EXODUS 15:20 AND NUMBERS 26:59.**

4. Who is Miriam?
5. Why did Miriam rejoice? Read Exodus 14:19–31.

6. On the one hand we can understand Miriam’s rejoicing, but there is definitely another side to the story. The people have escaped slavery in Egypt, but they now face life in an unknown wilderness. What are they up against? Read Exodus 12:37–39; 15:22–25; and 16:1–3.

In Exodus 15:21, notice that Miriam’s song is directed to the Lord (in a manner that recalls the words of Paul). Perhaps she was rejoicing because their lives had been spared. But things were still dire. Perhaps Miriam was not rejoicing in her/their circumstances, but rejoiced because she was grounded in the faith that God would see them through whatever was to come.

This is rejoicing as an expression of faith. Faith declares, “I will look first for what God has done for me” and not merely to what God has *not* done. Faith does not choose to withhold thanks until all current needs have been met. Miriam did not choose to say: “When everything gets back to normal, to the way I want it to be, *then* I will rejoice.” Instead, in front of the whole people of Israel (a people in need of her example), she declared “Now is the time for rejoicing. Now is the time to thank the Lord. Now is the time to live with hope,” even though an unknown wilderness lay before them. (See “Choosing Joy,” p. 12.)

7. Given the people’s sense of vulnerability, their grumbling (see Exodus 14:11–12), and fickle thankfulness, it seems that Miriam’s dancing was out of step with the prevailing attitude of her people. How do you think she was able to rejoice so unashamedly? What do you think her rejoicing did for the women who danced with her? What do you think her rejoicing did for Miriam’s ability to endure the struggles still in front of her (and her people)?

### *The witness of a paralyzed man’s friends*

#### **READ MARK 2:1–12.**

8. Give your imagination time to really think about the sights and sounds at the beginning of this story. What do you see and hear?

9. Whose faith does Jesus commend? (See Mark 2:5.)
10. Jesus forgives the paralyzed man's sins, and, in response to the scribes' complaints, Jesus also cured him of his paralysis. These are both very good things, for which everyone could rejoice. What did the paralyzed man learn about his friends' commitment to him?

What makes the actions of the paralyzed man's friends an act of rejoicing? Think of rejoicing as whatever response your heart/spirit wishes to make when it feels generous and contented.

**Generosity** stems from the belief that there is always enough and more to go around. An example of this is the attitude Jesus dared to feed 5,000 people with a few fish and a couple of loaves of bread (Matthew 14:13–21).

**Contentment** stems from the belief that "I have enough and do not really need anything more." An example is when Jesus resists the devil's temptation in the wilderness. Jesus' behavior demonstrates that he trusts that God knows what he needs and will help him satisfy these needs in a healthy manner. Therefore, Jesus' responses to the devil seem to be saying: "I do not, however, trust that what you are offering to me is what I truly need or need at this moment" (Matthew 4:1–11).

The paralyzed man's friends could have been like so many who offer pity while secretly feeling fortunate that they weren't in the same boat. What caught Jesus attention, however, was their faith, the opposite of pity. It was a faith that trusted that if Jesus had healed others then why not this friend? Their faith said not only "What have we got to lose?" but more so, "What a wonderful thing this would be to do together."

11. What do you think enabled the paralyzed man's friends to reject scarcity and embrace generosity and contentment?

## Trying it out

### Self-talk

Recall a time when you were able to embrace generosity and contentment. What enabled you to be generous and contented given that our culture so depends on us believing that we don't/can't have enough (scarcity)?

It is an odd thing. We often think that our deepest desires are to get what we want. Yet, our greatest joy is often not experienced when good things happen to us, but rather when we are a part of good things that happen for people we care about and love. We could simply chalk this up to our learned modesty—the kind that feels embarrassed by too much attention and worries about being conceited. So it might be hard to be joyful about our own blessings. Yet, issues of modesty aside, rarely does personal good fortune or even a great achievement inspire lasting rejoicing.

12. Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?

### Self-care

13. How might you cultivate and practice generosity and contentment—a life of rejoicing?

Our deepest and most enduring rejoicing seems to manifest when we use our gifts on behalf of others. When we experience ourselves as generous, compassionate, creative and courageous for the sake of others, it can be renewing. When we give, we experience in that same moment that *a new and right spirit* has been created within us. This is the cycle of faith. When our rejoicing seems diminished or faint, as it surely will become in time, then we are led to seek the renewal that begins the cycle again. (See "We Can Do More," p. 18.)

And what's not to celebrate in this?

When we seek *renewal*, we present ourselves to the God who breathes freshness and inspires goodness and nurtures our gifts within us.

When we *respond* we dare to be the creative, courageous and caring people God has shown us we are.

And when we *rejoice*, we experience joy in the way God blesses us and others with and through an attitude of generosity and contentment.

Because God knows we need to renew, respond and rejoice, God invites us also to believe that each stop along this cycle reflects an aspect of God's love and desire for us.

In the Eucharist, we see this cycle expressed in worship. God offers a meal to us, knowing that we are hungry to be with God, to have God incarnate and close. In passing the peace, God offers the gift of reconciliation and we clear the air between us, creating the possibility of renewal together as a community of faith. God's response is the meal itself, God giving God's self to all who receive it. God, as host, rejoices that we come to the table set for us, for it is God's desire that we know the love and peace of Christ, and that we take it into ourselves and are renewed. We respond by eat-

ing and drinking, and we rejoice after with prayers of thanksgiving. (See "A Joyful Exchange," p. 26.)

### Closing

Light three candles, one for renew, one for respond, and one for rejoice. Arrange them in a triangle and remember that they are the anchor points for our life of faith. Remember the cycle of faith, and the movement between these points.

**READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7 ALOUD**, slowly and meaningfully. Give yourself a few moments to let it sink in, and then close with this prayer:

*Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 117) 🌸*

*"...Where two or three are gathered in my name,  
I am there among them."*

MATTHEW 18:20

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# REJOICE

## *Rejoice in the Lord*

### Overview of session concepts

Often we think of rejoicing as something that happens spontaneously. For example, when you hear that you have been chosen for a job you were seeking, or when you learn that a tumor recently discovered in your body is not malignant, you are likely to rejoice. In these moments, no one has to tell you: “Rejoice!” Rather, your rejoicing seems to well up inside of you, and you can’t help but want to share your good news with others.

But, in Philippians, the Apostle Paul says: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice.” It’s a command, not a statement of what’s true. Why does Paul think we might forget to rejoice unless we are instructed to do it? In Philippians 4:2, Paul’s letter reveals that there is a conflict or competition of some sort between Euodia and Syntyche, both of whom have ministered alongside Paul in the past, but are now not “of the same mind.” There are plenty of complications in life that can distract us from the work that God is doing. Life is never complete or resolved once and for all. Even death can leave questions and unresolved issues for survivors.

### Beginning

#### *Reflection*

Ask the group to take a moment to quiet themselves. Light a candle. Be still and ask them to reflect on: “What thoughts are weighing on my mind? What responsibilities are pressing for my attention? What feelings threaten to erode my sense of well-being?” Ask them to jot down some thoughts in their journals.

**READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4 ALOUD.**

**READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4–7.**

### *Set the stage*

Here is one way to see what Paul is trying to say. We all know that when a loved one dies, it initially may require great effort to engage in conversations with family or to attend a grief support group. Rejoicing of any kind may not seem appropriate. Yet, what if you rejoiced in the people and the resources that offer you support in the midst of your grief? In this case, rejoicing is not about feeling happy, but rather about feeling grateful. And realizing your thankfulness for support might also encourage you to trust that healing is possible and healing is happening.

In this session, we will explore the cycle of faith between renew, respond, and rejoice.

### Learning from the saints

#### *Miriam’s witness*

1. A prophetess and sister to Aaron and Moses.
2. The army of Pharaoh—which was seeking to annihilate the people of Israel—had lost all its soldiers; all drowned in the Red Sea. The lives of people of Israel were spared (“saved” Exodus 14:30); and they were finally free of their slavery in Egypt.
3. The people of Israel fled from Egypt with virtually none of their possessions. Water was scarce. They had little food. They were in an unfamiliar land and would have to employ all of their resourcefulness simply to survive.

4. Maybe Miriam's faith was so sure that she was able to turn to God in thanks without being concerned about the reaction she'd get from those around her. Her rejoicing could have been inspiring to others. Keeping God's faithfulness in mind would help her face the unknown before her people. Trust is a powerful motivator and consoler.

### *The witness of a paralyzed man's friends*

#### **READ MARK 2:1–12.**

5. You would see lots of people crowded together. The text is not clear whether they were listening to Jesus talk (it would have been relatively quiet) or if he was making his way from small group to small group (like a party, it would have been noisy). At some point all attention must have been diverted to the ceiling. Then, everyone would have seen the paralyzed man slowly being lowered into the house.
6. The people/friends who brought the paralyzed man.
7. Yet even without this "happy ending," we can see that the paralyzed man's friends have already achieved their goal: to demonstrate the lengths they will go to for the sake of their paralyzed friend. Just getting their friend out of his house and onto the roof of the house was already a victory. And having accomplished that, there was no way the paralyzed man would have returned home—healed or not—without feeling the commitment and support of his friends.
8. Their joy (or rejoicing) in this friendship and the hope that sprang from it is central to their scheme, and it clearly won the day with Jesus.

### **Trying it out**

A point that doesn't need much introduction is that our own society's economic message is that none of us ever have enough. Thus we are encouraged to make consumption our habit and to set our goal as the satisfaction of our needs and wants. This message, of course, is based on the notion of scarcity—a belief that we do not have what we need and a fear that there is not enough to go around.

### **Closing**

Light three candles, one for renew, one for respond, and one for rejoice. Arrange them in a triangle and remember that they are the anchors points for our life of faith. Remember the cycle of faith, and the movement between these points.

Read Philippians 4:4–7 aloud, slowly and meaningfully. Give the group a few moments to let it sink in, and then close with this prayer:

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