



# FINDING LIGHT IN DARKNESS

**Lenten Bible studies highlighting the possibilities for life in barren times**

By Rev Alistair Macrae



**UnitingWorld**  
connecting communities for life



lentevent



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connecting communities for life

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# ABOUT LENT EVENT

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## **Lent Event began as a community movement in the suburbs of Sydney nearly a decade ago.**

The aim was clear: to empower people and church communities during the Lenten season to engage with and help address global poverty. Participants were called to embrace simple living, to set aside material goods for the Lenten period and donate any money saved to support community development projects that offer a better future to people living on the margins in some of the world's poorest countries.

Lent Event has grown rapidly and still encourages church communities to recognise what we have and the impact our choices and our actions have on other people, sometimes on the other side of the world. It promotes a deeper understanding of what poverty is and highlights the imperative for the Church today to embrace those on the margins, to seek justice and to share resources.

Importantly, Lent Event provides a catalyst for people and communities across Australia to connect with the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, to listen to their voices and learn from their experiences. In this way Lent Event

is a real partnership and one that has been deeply valued by many people.

Over the past decade Lent Event participants have contributed over \$2.5 million to transformational community development projects in Asia, the Pacific and Africa facilitated by UnitingWorld Relief and Development. Conducted in partnership with churches and their agencies around the world, these projects focus on promoting local capacity and ownership to see sustainable change. As a result, more children have access to education and safe drinking water, for example, and more lives have been improved through access to the employment opportunities created by small business loans.

These Bible studies, along with prayers, worship resources and children's activities are designed to draw you into the experiences of Christians all over the world. We are so thankful that you have chosen to join us again on the Lent Event journey of renewal, connection and transformation.



# ABOUT UNITINGWORLD

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You may not know that the Uniting Church in Australia has established relationships with 35 churches in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. UnitingWorld has responsibility for representing the Uniting Church to each of these churches as we partner with them in transforming local communities.

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**Our mission is simple: we want to see a world where peace and justice reign and in which church communities and people step up to partner in God's mission.**

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By helping build the capacity of local church partners to respond to local challenges through sustainable, community owned initiatives, and by connecting the Australian Church in this mission, we recognise the relational, global nature of God's people.

We see lives changed.

Connecting Australian church communities with this mission is a big part of what we do. We achieve this

by educating and empowering the Australian Church – from individuals to congregations to youth groups to schools – to be effective global partners who understand God's mission in the world and their role in it. It's all about developing real connections on a global level.

Lent Event is just one way you can engage with UnitingWorld and connect with the Uniting Church in Australia's overseas partners. Our prayer is that along the way you will be challenged and motivated to pray, act and connect on a deeper, more engaged level.



# INTRODUCTION

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## THE SEASON OF LENT IS HERE.

Over the next seven weeks we will be going on a journey together, a journey through Lent to the celebrations of Easter and beyond into our everyday lives.

## WE PRAY THESE BIBLE STUDIES WILL SUSTAIN YOU ALONG THE JOURNEY.

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Biblical texts are full of stories and imagery that speak of life out of death, of light in darkness. We learn about the formation of a nation that began with an old, apparently barren couple. We are invited into the lives of great people who were once considered small. We read of times in exile, of decades spent wandering the desert, of lengthy periods of war and suffering. In these passages we see God at work in the most surprising ways. The stories of the Old Testament reach fulfilment in the ultimate presentation of new life: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In light of such stories it may be ironic that the Church today often flees from hardship and yearns to escape 'out of the desert' – craving comfort, prosperity and fame.

Jesus called himself the 'light of the world' and called his followers to be the same - advising us to expect, and even rejoice, in times of suffering and to be present in situations where there seems to be little hope. The Bible, as well as the experiences of the Church from its earliest days right up until the present, highlight that it is in such stages of life that our faith grows. Indeed, Jesus' call to the Church encourages us to



recognise that we have a key role to play in confronting darkness, injustice and discouragement. Through the Spirit, we participate in God's reign, becoming agents of transformation, hope and peace.

There is perhaps no better time to study such texts than during Lent. Although in Australia Lent falls during autumn, a season beautiful for its own reasons, in the Northern Hemisphere Lent has always been celebrated during spring. Spring, the season which literally bursts with new life: from the barrenness of winter, life comes gushing forth from mountains, presses up through frosted earth and

unfolds from the tips of every twig.

Over the next seven weeks we will be 'dropping in' at different stages of God's story as told in the Old Testament lectionary readings. Each study highlights a different aspect of God's story, character and relationship with human beings. Central to each study is the focus on the surprising ways that God relates with God's creation. Where God leads, what God would have us do, who God would have us be often does not fit into our understanding of what is wise or conventional – and certainly rarely 'suits' us.

# THE BIBLE STUDIES

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## PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE

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The studies have been designed to allow for reflection on biblical passages and themes, to promote discussion and growth and to stimulate conversations about faith in action.

The studies can be done in groups of two or more people, or used as a journey guide for individual reflection. Each study, apart from the final week, follows a similar pattern and has a three-fold purpose:

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### 1. To set time aside during Lent to reconnect and refresh in preparation for Easter.

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This Bible study series offers the opportunity for people to meet together to read the Bible, pray and encourage one another. Suggested

**opening and closing prayers** are provided to bookend your time together, recognising God's presence at the centre of all we do.

Perhaps as a change for some of us, the Bible studies in this series focus on the Old Testament lectionary readings for the six weeks leading up to Easter. We encourage you to **read the passages out loud** once or twice. As we come to the studies each week, be encouraged by the knowledge that individuals, groups and congregations all around the world are coming together to reflect on, discuss and spur one another on through these very same pieces of scripture.



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## 2. To reflect on scripture and ask ourselves what it means to be the Church, God's people, in Australia and around the world today.

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Each week will allow time for you to **reflect on the passage** and ask: what stands out, what is challenging? Questions for reflection and snippets of parables, books and speeches in the **'Going Further'** section will take us deeper and inspire us to apply the challenges and encouragement that become apparent throughout the studies to our own lives and the life of our congregations. **The experiences of our overseas partner churches** will help us view biblical passages and themes through a different lens. It is our hope and prayer that these reflections will encourage you and challenge your perception of what is Church, what is faith, what is different.

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## 3. To energise and encourage each other to embrace a vision of 'faith in action' in your own life, local community/ congregation and the wider world.

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Lent is a time for us to reconnect and refocus in preparation for Easter and beyond. Historically, it has also been a time when Christians sacrifice something in order to learn what it means to rely on God, to put our faith into action. Lent Event calls us to do the same by giving up everyday items, or even something more substantial, in order to embrace lives of sacrifice and simplicity. Our actions will not only benefit our own lives, they will also act as a means of financially supporting the community development work of our overseas partners, connecting us to the work of God on a global scale through relationship with trusted partners. In addition, each week provides a simple task to encourage us all to put our **faith into action** or to provide an opportunity to keep reflecting throughout the week on what we've discussed.

# A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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The experience of church decline in the 'West' is not universal. Movements of renewal, deepening discipleship and transformative social engagement are taking place around the world, often in places that experience poverty and hardship. When we engage in study of the scriptures this should not surprise us, as we will learn as we study these Old Testament passages. We cannot claim that God is more active in some places than others, but it is clear that for the seed of the gospel to take root and bear fruit the soil must be ready. In the West it seems that the concrete of affluence and materialism often prevents the Spirit's access.

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**As in our personal lives, it is often only through some kind of crisis that we become sufficiently vulnerable to the presence and activity of God.**

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In my time as President I was blessed and inspired by the witness of our partner churches in different parts of the world. Vibrant witness in situations of political hostility. Church initiated community development projects indicating that God's gracious care is not only for people's souls but our whole lives. Courageous acts of justice-seeking and peace-making in the name of Christ. In my lifetime bibles had to be smuggled into China, now the Chinese Church is the major exporter of God's Word to every corner of the earth.

We need to hear these stories from our partners. As we stand in prayerful solidarity with them, and as we contribute whatever other resources our Lenten disciplines yield, we also receive richly in encouragement and inspiration. We discover afresh that the light shines in the darkness. God is making all things new. Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed!

*Alistair Macrae*



# STUDY 1

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## LIFE THROUGH LIMITATION

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

Gospel reading: Matthew 4: 1-11

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### Opening prayer

**Leader:**

Because the world is beautiful  
And beauty is a tender thing  
And we are keepers of creation

**Group:**

*We need you God*

Because human knowledge seems endless  
And we do not know what we do not know  
*We need you God*

Because we can live without you  
And are free to go against you  
And could worship our wisdom alone  
*We need you God*

Because you came among us  
And sat beside us  
And heard us speak and saw us ignore you  
And healed our pain and let us wound you  
And loved us to the end  
And triumphed over all our hatred

*We acknowledge our need  
And we offer you our worship*

*Amen.*

*From Be Our Freedom Lord, Terry Falla 1994*

## Introduction

The first Sunday in Lent is often associated with the story of Jesus' temptations by the Devil in the wilderness (Matthew 4: 1-11). The immediate Old Testament background for this story is Deuteronomy chapters 6-8. As with Israel in the desert, the test to which Jesus is subjected has to do with the question of fundamental trust. Who or what do we trust to determine our choices, our direction? This key biblical theme first appears in the opening pages of the Bible and resurfaces constantly throughout scripture in various ways: 'Choose this day who you will serve'. It is the daily question for would-be followers of Jesus. In whom or in what do we place our ultimate trust for our life, our death, our life beyond death?

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### **Read Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7**

What is your initial response to this passage? What is the main question in this story for you?

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## Reflection

In this study we will concentrate on the story from Genesis 3, mindful of Walter Brueggemann's warning that no text in the Bible has been 'more used, interpreted and misunderstood' than this one. The story is not primarily interested in abstract questions of sin, death, evil or 'Fall'.

Rather, it is the story of the God who calls us to be *God's creatures*, to be in this world on God's terms alone. Chapter 2: 15-17 sets the scene for the story to come and explains the reason for being in the garden in the first place. Verse 15 describes the human **vocation** – the human creature is called to care for the garden. From the beginning God entrusts the garden to human care, to share God's work. Verse 16 describes God's **permission**. Everything is permitted in the garden. Well almost. There is also a **prohibition**. We are told nothing about the nature of the tree nor invited to speculate.

### **The point is that the Creator sets limits and seeks unqualified obedience.**

Chapter 3 begins by referring to the prohibition in 2: 17. The prohibition given by God as an unequivocal command is now dealt with by the snake as if it were an option.

Notice another subtle shift. God is no longer the conversation partner but it is now speech about God. The snake quotes God, but inaccurately. The woman corrects the snake but already the possibility has opened up there are alternatives to radical obedience to God. From that point things become distorted. The repercussion of their guilt works its own damage. Adam and Eve sought knowledge and control rather than trust. Now they have it.



The good news in this story is that despite everything the Creator continues to care for the garden and will not give it up. The snake tried to slide around the prohibition thinking it was just a rule but it turned out to be 'the wise passion of the Creator'. So this is not simply a story of human disobedience and God's displeasure. It seems to describe God's dilemma when confronted by the facts of human choices. When the facts call for death (in the terms of the story), *God continues to insist on life for creation.*

This story informs our living and calls God's people to respond in faith acknowledging our vocation, the freedom of God's call within the limits that God sets to protect our freedom.

*References:*

*Brueggemann, Walter Genesis, Interpretation, John Knox 1982*

*Vawter, Bruce. On Genesis, Doubleday, 1977*

## **Faith flourishing at the grassroots**

Limits on exercising ministry have often helped the Church rediscover its natural strength of grassroots connecting. In countries where religion is officially restricted or where Christianity is a distrusted minority faith, the Uniting Church's overseas partner churches often work relationally through people and communities rather than by trying to establish unwelcome public institutions.

In Sri Lanka, for example, the Government limits what is said publicly about the civil war, in which over two hundred thousand people died over a period of three months in 2009 alone. In this context the Methodist Church carefully offers safe hospitality for people bearing the trauma of war. One of these homes supported by the Uniting Church is for women who have experienced abuse and violence. The home provides a safe space for women to recover from trauma and explore vocational opportunities.

In China, religion was suppressed during the Cultural Revolution that ended in 1976. During that time, local elders regularly and quietly visited families, praying, reading the Bible

and supporting them away from the official gaze. This underground connecting provided the means and spiritual impulse for a burgeoning Church when the Cultural Revolution ended.

In Fiji, police monitor and attend the meetings of the national Conference and Standing Committee to ensure the Church does not discuss certain public matters. While not accepting such limitations, the Church is working to strengthen the person to person and community to community connecting that is fundamental to the people of Jesus.

Such limitations are not God-given but can represent an invitation for the Church to rediscover trust in the grassroots movement of Jesus Christ.

What encouragement can the Australian Church take from these stories of churches overseas following the call of God within limitation?

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## Questions for discussion

1. Share an experience where an apparent 'limit' set by God has yielded greater freedom.
  2. How do you discern the voice of God amidst the din of voices claiming your attention?
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## Going Further

*Break into small groups and read the following passage from Matthew 6:25-33 (NRSV)*

<sup>25</sup> "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup> And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>28</sup> And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup> But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Our fundamental human mistake, the Genesis story suggests, is to pursue autonomous freedom which only produces anxiety. Anxiety comes from doubting God's providence, rejecting God's care and seeking to secure our own well-being.

**To trust God with our lives is to know abundant, overflowing life.**

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## Questions to discuss

1. Can you share an experience of when a greater understanding of the wider world has put your own life into perspective?
  2. How, during Lent, might a greater awareness of the lives of other people release us from self-absorption and open us to others and to God?
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## Act

If you have not yet decided what you are going to give up (or, alternatively, to commit to do) for the 40 days of Lent, decide now.

Over the next week take time to jot down what is difficult, what is easy and what is surprising about the choice you have made.

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## Closing prayer

God our creator, you are maker of heaven and earth

Be our freedom, Lord!

God our Redeemer, in Christ you have come to us

Be our freedom, Lord!

God our Sustainer, you comfort and disturb

Be our freedom, Lord!

God, one God, beyond understanding, made known in Jesus, present in our midst

Be our freedom, Lord!

Enlighten our lives with your word, that in it

We may find our way and our hope

Be our freedom, Lord!

Amen.

*From Be Our Freedom Lord,  
Terry Falla 1994*

**“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”**

*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

# NOTES

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# STUDY 2

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## BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

Genesis 12: 1-4a

Gospel reading: John 3: 1-17

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### Opening prayer

**Leader:**

Lord God,

In Jesus you came in the body:

Flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone

One with us in searing pain and delirious laughter.

We thank you that you did not remain an idea,

Even a religious idea

But walked, wept and washed feet among us.

By your love

Change our ideas

Especially our religious ideas

Into living signs of your worth and will.

**Group:**

*Through our lives and by our prayers*

*Your kingdom come*

*Amen.*

*From Present on Earth - Worship Resources on the life of Jesus,  
Wild Goose Worship Glasgow, 2002*



## Introduction

The previous study of Genesis 3 posed a stark challenge – who or what determines our choices, our direction? Are we prepared to hear the ‘no’ of God, trusting that God’s limitations are in the interests of our greater freedom? The message reminds us of the words of Jesus: ‘Whoever loses their life for my sake and the gospel will gain it.’ Or the old hymn: ‘Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free.’

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### *Read Genesis 12: 1-4a*

What is your initial response to this passage? What is the main challenge in this story for you?

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## Reflection

Today’s reading is the iconic biblical call story of Abraham. This passage outlines God’s intention to begin an alternative community – a community which, in a world that has lost the plot, will embody the restorative power of God’s blessing. But God seems to have chosen a distinctly unpromising couple to launch the project: an ageing Abraham and his apparently barren wife Sarah.

Genesis makes clear that the Creator of the entire world is the same as the God who calls Israel to its particular vocation of transformation through blessing. With the exception of

Noah, the picture in Genesis 1-11 is of resistance to God’s ways and call. Here in the story of Abraham and Sarah we encounter refreshing receptivity to God’s summons. **This is a story that revolves around promise and faith.** Brueggemann says: ‘Promise is the mode of God’s presence in these stories... Faith is the capacity to embrace God’s announced future with such a passion that the present can be relinquished for the sake of that future.’ (p106)

In the previous verses (11: 27-32) we learn, perhaps characteristic of those nomadic times, that this is a family on the move. Abraham’s father Terah had moved his family out of the great metropolis of Ur to go to the land of Canaan. But upon reaching the famous city of Haran they settled there. In today’s passage God calls Abraham and Sarah to continue their journey away from the centre towards the periphery. From the known and relatively secure to only God knew where – ‘to a land that I will show you’.

God’s promise is that through this ageing and previously barren couple God will make a great nation. But it is not conventional greatness. Abraham will be blessed so that he will be a blessing! **The particularity of God’s call to Abraham, and through him Israel’s vocation, is to be a blessing to ‘all the communities of the earth’.**

This is a story, like the creation story, about God's capacity to bring creation out of nothing, life out of apparent death. It's about God's relentless pursuit of individuals and communities to the human vocation of being agents of blessing in the world. It was in this spirit that Jesus would later say of himself 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). This story stands as a challenge to us every time we act as if the world is settled and fixed, that no genuine newness is possible.

This week's gospel reading invokes Jesus' challenge to this view in similar tone to the call of Abraham. Jesus speaks of the possibility, through God's action (spirit), of genuine life-changing newness. Creation out of nothing, hope out of despair, life out of death, being born 'from above'.

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## Questions to discuss

1. God makes a covenant with Israel through Abraham. They are 'blessed to be a blessing'. How would our priorities change if we understood ourselves as heirs of this same tradition and saw our mission 'to bless the world'?
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**“There is always the danger that we may just do the work for the sake of the work. This is where the respect and the love and the devotion come in – that we do it to God, to Christ, and that’s why we try to do it as beautifully as possible.”**

*Mother Teresa*

## **A gift both ways – from Tonga to Wagga Wagga and back**

Around the world people have long experienced what it means to give and receive blessing as part of the global Church. In partnership with the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, young people from Wagga Wagga Uniting Church have become part of that tradition.

The Uniting Church in Australia has a relationship with the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga that stretches back decades, with the Tongan community both here in Australia and across the Pacific known for its warmth and the vitality of its Christian witness.

Young people from Wagga Wagga Uniting Church, themselves a diverse group, experienced the mutual blessing of the global Church when they spent several weeks hosted by Tongan families in Houma. The young people aged 14 to 18 intended to support the work of preschools by providing some practical help and teaching English to children.

"I almost felt a bit guilty because I think we got more out of it than we were able to give," says Kate Elliot Rudder, one of the young leaders. "The sense of community and family is so important to Tongans. And they are happy with what they have, although there is a lot of poverty. It made me appreciate what I have in Australia. I want to try to complain a lot less."

The Uniting Church in Australia, through UnitingWorld, continues to support the Tongan Church through projects and exchange of people. Spending time with Tongan communities, learning from the way projects are carried out and exchanging ideas has shaped more than one group of UCA members.

"Our young people have seen a different kind of faith in action in Tonga and I hope it's made them more thoughtful about their own place in the church," says Youth Group leader Holly. "They've certainly grown

a lot in confidence and feel as though they have ownership of this trip and its outcomes."

Reflecting on the experience of the youth from Wagga Wagga and your own experiences, in what ways are we blessed by our relationship with overseas partners?

## Going Further

*Break into small groups and read the following excerpt individually or out loud for the group.*

'In our work, as in any undertaking, time conceals a menace. The ideal pursued, the effort to pursue it, becomes a little worn, and we are led to mingle mediocrity with holiness. Time and advancing years bring the temptation to compromise between the supernatural imperatives of the love of our Lord and those of our human maturity. As each year passes by, more of us reach the decisive moment in the spiritual life when we must make the final choice between Jesus and the world, between the heroism of love and mediocrity, between the cross and an easy existence, between holiness and merely decent religious conformity.'

(I wrote this down in my journal at the age of 19 and unfortunately did not note the source. I think it is from Charles de Foucauld, the founder of the Little Brothers of Jesus.)

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## Questions to discuss

1. Do you identify with the struggle Charles de Foucauld describes?  
Is there a credibility gap between the life you seek to lead and your actual life?
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## Act

### Identify:

- One thing you as an individual can change to reduce the gap between 'the heroism of love and mediocrity' in your life.
  - One thing your group or congregation can change to reduce the gap between 'the heroism of love and mediocrity' in the life of your church.
- 

## Closing prayer

God of the impossible,  
who creates life out of nothing,  
who brings life out of death  
and who offers abundant life to the  
living dead,  
bring us forth from our tombs,  
gush up from within us with the living  
water of your Spirit  
and empower us with all joy and  
hope in believing  
that we might be used as instruments  
of your peace, mercy and justice.  
Through Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

# NOTES

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# STUDY 3

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## THE GOD WHO PROVIDES

Exodus 17: 1-7

Gospel reading: John 4: 5-42

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### Opening prayer

God of the Exodus  
When we lose sight of you  
And are on the point of turning back, remind us that,  
although in this life  
We will never arrive  
It is on the road that you meet us  
And to your future that you call us  
  
Remind us too that it is in the desert  
That we have experienced your grace  
And grown stronger and gentler  
  
For to those who persist and journey on  
There is the surprise of discovering  
That the desert is fertile  
  
Amen.

*Adapted from Terry Falla, 1994*

## Introduction

Last week we discussed the Church's call to be a blessing and were called to consider living lives that choose the way of the Cross; a life of heroism of love over mediocrity. In this week's study we will again examine a life of faith – the journey of discipleship that commences with the divine call, 'follow me'. In our passage God's people are once again on the move and once again we see God's divine leading, continuing human resistance and the unsurpassable graciousness of God.

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### **Read Exodus 17: 1-7**

What is your initial response to this passage? What is the main challenge in this story for you?

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## Reflection

Israel are a people 'on the way', on the move from a past act of redemption towards a promised goal yet to be fulfilled. These wilderness stories are about a people stuck between a rock and a hard place, between promise and fulfilment. And when the goal is distant it is easier to lose the plot. Wilderness is not merely a place; it is a state of mind with which we are all familiar, between the 'already' and the 'not yet'.

The wilderness might feel like a godforsaken place but it is not. The

people are being led by God – but God's leading does not always move directly to oases, to what is comfortable, and God's interests do not always directly coincide with our perceived interests. In our story the people are once again led to a dry place and they complain to Moses – this time they have no water at all! Moses reminds them that it is God they are disputing with, not him, but they won't accept that. "*Why did you bring us out of Egypt?*" they ask.

The name given to the place, Massah/Meribah, in verse 7 indicates that divine testing is the main association with this story. The memories will be referred to later in Israel's story: 'You shall not put Yahweh, your God, to the test like you did at Massah' (Deut 6:16, Psalm 78:18). But what does testing God actually mean? In this context it is not asking, as in verse 7, 'is God among us or not?' Rather, it is trying to coerce God to act on our terms. It is making faith dependent on God responding to our bidding. In essence, it is an attempt to turn faith into sight.

**The story challenges any attempts to hold God hostage to our demands, to make God into our servant. Apart from denying the 'Godness' of God it can also lead to attitudes like 'God did not heal or protect you because you did not have enough faith'.**

Moses turns to God for help like a parent might seek counselling for how to deal with troublesome children. God gives directions on how to find water – Moses is to take his trusty staff and strike the rock at Horeb. Just as Moses struck the Nile to make it unfit for drinking so here he strikes the rock to bring life-sustaining water. God's promise of water and manna in the desert are more than providential acts. They are acts of creation or recreation; wilderness is not without resources. God's provision includes nature's God-given potentialities. There is water coursing through rock formations, in massive artesian lakes. God's actions enable their hidden creative potential to surface.

In this week's gospel Jesus' encounter with a woman at a well in the desert in the heat of the day brings forth life-giving water, 'gushing up to eternal life'. In the words of Jean Vanier, Jesus revealed to this marginalised woman 'her fecundity', her fruitfulness. She becomes the first evangelist as she rushes to share with her neighbours the source of living water.

*Reference: Terence Fretheim, Exodus, Interpretation. John Knox, 1991*

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## Questions to discuss

1. In what ways do we try to coerce God to act on our terms?
  2. 'God's provision includes nature's God-given potentialities.' How might we sharpen our awareness of creation's abundance?
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## The potential for peace

When we talk about conflict, poverty or injustice it is all too easy to despair or only see people as helpless: without natural abilities, skill or desire for change. But the work of our overseas partners in the islands of eastern Indonesia tells a different story. Here in what we might mistakenly think is the 'wilderness' there are resources for change.

Many of these communities have been significantly affected by years of conflict, while others face the burden of remoteness from transport, communication and health services. In these communities the Church (sometimes with very limited resources) is coming alongside local people who are seeking local solutions to the barriers they face in creative ways.

The Indonesian island of Ambon knows conflict. Between 1999 and 2004 over 5000 people were killed and thousands displaced as a result of violence among religious groups. On the north of the island is a cluster of predominantly Christian villages with significant Muslim minority populations. These village communities saw their homes destroyed on two separate occasions. Homes have been rebuilt but tensions exist just under the surface, fuelled by lack of access to education, income and opportunities.

Our partner in Ambon, the Protestant Church in Maluku, recognises the Church has an important role to play in rebuilding trust. More, it recognises the role of women in creatively restoring the fabric of society. A program run by the Church is bringing Christian and Muslim women together to discuss local issues and solutions. How

can trust be built? How can conflict be averted? How can access to economic opportunities be shared more effectively?

**The emphasis here is on helping local people to recognise, and act on, the creative potential that exists within them.**

By building on the natural capacity of local women to participate and lead in economic and social life, the quality of life for all families can be improved.

UnitingWorld places the creativity and resourcefulness of our partners and people in local communities at the core of all we do. The projects supported through Lent Event this year will provide people with resources, training and the opportunity to unearth and make the most of their God-given abilities.

***What about this story do you find challenging? What is encouraging?***



## Going Further

*Break into small groups and read the following individually or out loud for the group.*

Recognising that the earth and the fullness thereof is a gift from our gracious God, and that we are called to cherish, nurture and provide loving stewardship for the earth's resources. And recognising that life itself is a gift and a call to responsibility, joy and celebration, I make the following declarations:

1. I declare myself to be a world citizen.
2. I commit myself to lead an ecologically sound life.
3. I commit myself to lead a life of creative simplicity and to share my personal wealth with the world's poor.
4. I commit myself to join with others in reshaping institutions to bring about a more just global society in which each person has full access to the needed resources for their physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth.
5. I commit myself to occupational accountability, and in so doing I will seek to avoid the creation of products which cause harm to others.
6. I affirm the gift of my body, and commit myself to its proper nourishment and physical well-being.
7. I commit myself to examine continually my relations with others, and to attempt to relate honestly, morally and lovingly to those around me.
8. I commit myself to personal renewal through prayer, meditation and study.
9. I commit myself to responsible participation in a community of faith.

*From Visions of a World Hungry*  
by Thomas G Pettepiece

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## Questions to discuss

1. Which declarations from the list can you particularly affirm? Which declarations do you find more challenging?
  2. Write a list of three declarations for yourself, knowing that God is the Creator of all that is and cares equally for us all.
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## Act

This week identify three simple ways you can live out the declarations you have written for yourself. This might involve reducing the number of items in your weekly shopping basket; increasing the amount of Fair Trade products you purchase; working with others to meet with or write to political or business leaders; or devoting half an hour each day to prayer, meditation or study.

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## Closing prayer

Lord, you come to us, you meet us in countless ways,

often when we least expect you.

Teach us to expect you in the most ordinary days, and in unlikely places, enable us to be surprised by gracious intrusions among us, free us to lay aside our doubts and follow you.

Amen.

## NOTES

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# STUDY 4

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## WHAT IS MY VOCATION?

1 Samuel 16: 1-13

Gospel reading: John 9: 1-41

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### Opening prayer

You elected your Son, great God,  
To speak and act your truth  
Lay down your way  
And elicit your life among us.  
He calls from us  
What is noble and true and pure  
So we can contribute to your reign.  
Make space in our lives  
To be eloquent of love  
Brave in commitment  
And faithful in service  
Until poverty is banished  
And justice reigns,  
Through Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

## Introduction

Over the past few weeks we have seen examples of a familiar narrative: God's divine leading, continuing human resistance and the unsurpassable graciousness of God. It has become apparent that God works in surprising ways. This week, while focussing on the call of one of the most influential leaders of Israel, we will reflect on our own vocation. How, as God's people, can we hear God's call amidst the din of the world?

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### ***Read 1 Samuel 16: 1-13***

What is your initial response to this passage? What is the main challenge in this story for you?

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## Reflection

Here begins the story of David who appears in today's passage as an unknown shepherd boy but by 2 Samuel 5 has become the 'shepherd of Israel'. The importance of this part of the David story is to emphasise that his emergence is a result of the divine initiative and authorisation, not by human whim or historical accident.

Samuel is sent by God into new territory, beyond the northern kingdom. Samuel is rightly nervous. After all, there wasn't actually a

vacancy in the King department – Saul still holds the reins! God authorises a deception to allow Samuel's departure. The Elders in Bethlehem are rightly terrified because of the political risk but in the end they accede to Samuel's ploy. The famous parade of sons proceeds. Samuel is impressed with Jesse's first son, Eliab – he is tall and attractive. No, God is looking for a 'right heart'. The seven sons fail to receive the divine approval. Isn't there another son? Yes, but this nameless youngest son has no obvious credentials.

The whole household is forced to wait, as Israel has waited, for the arrival of David. In a delicious irony, we learn David is an attractive package after all! Nevertheless he has to pass God's 'heart' test. In a private ceremony David is anointed. No words are spoken. The anointing oil confirms that the shepherd boy will become king. This is the shock of this story. The youngest son of Jesse, the smallest clan of the smallest tribe of Israel, is chosen.

Young David is a passive participant in this divine-human drama. In a sense then this is not really a story about David, rather it is a story about God. The story joins those numerous other biblical stories where the choices of God are surprising and inscrutable. Cain is chosen over

Abel, Joseph is chosen over his older brothers, Jacob supplants Esau, Mary is chosen over women of higher degree. On and on the strange, wondrous choices of God continue because 'God looks on the heart'.

This is a story about the providence and sovereignty of God. As Christians we find deep resonances with the story of Jesus who also emerges from obscure origins as God's anointed one, the 'great shepherd of the sheep'.

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## Questions to discuss

1. Discuss why David and/or Jesus were unlikely prospects for their call.
2. What other stories from the Bible can you identify which make the point that it is not our amazing capacities that determine God's call on our lives?

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**Through the story of David we became aware that the call of God is not determined by what's on the surface. God sees the depths of the human heart. God calls us as agents of love in a world that has lost this love.**

*Rev. I Gusti Made Alit Purya, Bali*

## Life on the margins

India is home to over 1.2 billion people. High rates of economic growth has led to rapid increases in income per capita and a significant decline in the number of people living below the poverty line. Economic, social and political reforms have all played a part. People are living longer and earning more and the education of the nation has increased.

But India is also a place where caste is embedded in the very fabric of society and continues to dictate people's position and rights. Opportunities are unequal because people are not equally valued. The 2013 Human Development Report highlights that equity is an essential part of human development, stating:

*Every person has the right to live a fulfilling life according to his or her own values and aspirations. No one should be doomed to a short life or a miserable one because he or she happens to be from the "wrong" class or country, the "wrong" ethnic group or race or the "wrong" sex.*

Biblical texts take this idea even further. All humans are equal, created in the image of the living God. Inequality finds no place in the Gospel, which is made clear by Jesus reaching out to all people, including those with physical ailments, women, foreigners and children. They are all

equally worthy of his attention and all have a role to play.

The Church today is called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus to places on the margins, to people who are excluded or suffering. For the Church of North India, people on the margins are those from the lowest caste (Dalits), those who live outside the opportunities that land, wealth and education provide. They may not be valued by wider society, but the Church is answering Jesus' call by recognising the inherent dignity in all people and seeking to give marginalised people a platform on which to have their voices and needs heard.

The Bishop of the Amritsar Diocese of the Church of North India puts it like this: "With the caste system the Dalits were never encouraged to take a stand and struggled to ask for their rights. Now they are asserting their own identity and the Church is in solidarity."

UnitingWorld is committed to working with our overseas partners to help ensure all people, and especially those who are particularly vulnerable, are able to participate in the decisions that affect their lives and have the resources to pursue opportunities and live with dignity.

***How might you as an individual, or you as part of a group, respond to the call to minister 'on the margins'?***

## Going Further

*Break into small groups and read the following excerpt individually or out loud for the group.*

'I ran away and stayed away;  
Mother Teresa moved in and stayed. That was the difference. She, a nun, rather slightly built, with a few rupees in her pocket; not particularly clever, or particularly gifted in the arts of persuasion. Just with this Christian love shining about her; in her heart and on her lips. Just prepared to follow her Lord, and in accordance with his instructions regard every derelict left to die in the streets as him; to hear in the cry of every abandoned child, even in the tiny squeak of a discarded foetus, the cry of the Bethlehem child; to recognise in every leper's stumps the hands which once touched sightless eyes and made them see, rested on distracted heads and made them calm, brought back health to sick flesh and twisted limbs. As for my expatiations on Bengal's wretched social conditions – I regret to say that I doubt whether, in any divine accounting, they will equal one single quizzical half smile bestowed by Mother Teresa on a street urchin who happened to catch her eye.'

From *Something Beautiful for God*,  
by Malcolm Muggeridge.

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## Questions to discuss

1. Share your own story of call, be it a sudden realisation or an emerging awareness of your vocation.
  2. Mother Teresa showed a commitment to her calling by 'moving into the neighbourhood'. How can we show the same commitment to our vocation?
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## Act

In the face of poverty, injustice and conflict it is sometimes easy to close your eyes, to 'run away and stay away'. Discuss in small groups how your family, group or church might engage more with local and international issues.

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## Closing prayer

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will,

rank me with whom you will;

put me to doing, put me to suffering;

let me be employed for you or laid aside for you;

exalted for you or brought low for you;

let me be full, let me be empty;

let me have all things, let me have nothing;

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things

to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

you are mine and I am yours,

to the glory and praise of your name.

Amen.

*The Covenant Prayer: Uniting in Worship, People's Book, p 50*



# NOTES

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# STUDY 5

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## DRY BONES COME TO LIFE

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Gospel reading: John 11:1-45

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### Opening prayer

The darkness of the journey  
Is not about deprivation  
The bleakness of the journey  
Is not about loss of identity  
The depth of the journey  
Awakens our soul to new life

God of all our journeys

We adore you.

Amen.

*Of Ash and Rainbows – a resource book of words for worship,  
Keree Louise Casey, NSW 2003*

## Introduction

Last week we talked about how we, as God's people and disciples of Jesus, can hear and respond to the call of God in our lives. We were encouraged to reflect on our vocation as individuals and as the wider Church. This week we turn our attention to the power and faithfulness of God. Can we be sure that God is faithful and at work, even in the face of death and despair?

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### **Read Ezekiel 37: 1-14**

What is your initial response to this passage? What is the main challenge in this story for you?

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## Reflection

The first half of Ezekiel is a hard read, full of anger and cursing. In the second half of the book there is change towards hope and the possibility of redemption. This famous story is the third of four vision stories in Ezekiel. Like the first vision (3: 22-27) this one takes place in the valley near the exilic settlements. In the first vision Ezekiel is asked to withdraw, to go into seclusion, signifying the absence of prophetic inspiration and therefore, death. This time it's a call to life out of death through the utterance of the prophetic word.

The vision uses the metaphor of dry bones to represent physical

and spiritual decrepitude. Ezekiel is led in a trance through the field. He hears the question, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' There seems to be only one possible answer. Ezekiel however, knows better. **God's power extends even to the realm of death.** He is called to announce a message, summoning the dead back to life. It comes to pass before his eyes.

Throughout Jewish and Christian history this story has been mined for what it might teach about life after death. While Ezekiel does not rule out the reversal of the natural life-death sequence, neither does he affirm it. As his explanation in v11-14 makes clear, the vision is about the restoration of Israel. Christian readers reflecting, say, on the decline of the Church in the West, read this passage as hope in the God whose Spirit can restore life to dying people and dying churches.

The story is held together by the term '*ruah*' which can be translated as breath/wind/spirit. It occurs ten times in the story. The *spirit* leads Ezekiel into the valley strewn with the dry bones. He is to proclaim that God will instil life-giving *breath* into the bones. The bones are assembled and joined together and Ezekiel summons the *breath* from the four *winds* to bring life to this gathering of zombies. It is a re-enactment of creation when God formed humanity from the dust of the earth and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life (Genesis 2:7).

In this story we are again reminded of the faithfulness of God. **The dry bones indicate a sense of despair and death, but God's actions bring renewal and life.** God is faithful to Israel, as God is faithful to us.

The story finds its closest echo in the New Testament reading for this week, the raising of Lazarus from the dead by Jesus. In the place of death, in response to the divine Word, life is restored.

Ref: Joseph Blenkinsopp, Ezekiel, Interpretation, John Knox, 1990

Neil Peterson, Ezekiel in Context, Pickwick, 2012

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## Questions to discuss

1. In your own life how might you make yourself more vulnerable to the promptings of God's Spirit? Share any practices you follow that help you discern God's leading.

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**“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”**

*Reinhold Niebuhr*

## Bamboo shoots emerging after spring rain

In China this Sunday anywhere between 23 and 70 million Christians will gather to worship. The real figure is difficult to estimate.

700,000 churches will open their doors to people, young and old alike. And in 2012 the Amity Press printed the 100 millionth copy of the Bible since it began printing in 1987.

“The growth of the Church in China is comparable to a Chinese proverb – ‘like bamboo shoots emerging after spring rain’”, says Rev Dr Ji Zhang, UnitingWorld's Manager of Partnerships, Asia. “After years of persecution, Christianity has come back stronger than ever.”

During the Cultural Revolution of 1966 - 1976, when all religious gatherings were forbidden, temples, churches and mosques were closed and sometimes vandalised, people relied on personal faith in God alone. Without leadership structure or ‘church’ and with many Christians not even possessing a Bible, relationship with God became central. The experience was similar to that of the early Church as they survived persecution.

Today, the growth of the Church in China has been explosive with congregations of more than 5000 people overflowing into the street. Adult baptisms of 100 to 150

people at a time are commonplace. Moreover, the Church has found a place within society, recognised by Government and in some cases provided with funding to help extend care to orphaned children and the elderly and provide schooling for migrant children. The Amity Foundation, established by the Church, is the biggest NGO in China and provides much needed social services to the poor and marginalised.

“What we see coming out of the Cultural Revolution in China are people who are deeply committed and willing to speak openly about what is dear to them”, says Rev Dr Kerry Enright. “Having held onto faith through trying circumstances, the lives of these Christians are incredibly inspiring.”

UnitingWorld is developing a relationship with the China Christian Council that will see exciting opportunities for both to share knowledge and people so we can learn from each other.

***As a group discuss where you discern God breathing life into the Church today.***

## Going Further

*Break into small groups and read the following excerpt individually or out loud for the group.*

‘The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate energising for the new future. The wrenching of Good Friday had left only the despair of Saturday and there was no reason to explain the resurrection out of the previously existing reality. The resurrection can only be received and affirmed and celebrated as the new action of God whose province it is to create new futures for people and to let them be amazed in the midst of despair... The resurrection of Jesus is not to be understood in good liberal fashion as a spiritual development in the Church. Nor should it be too quickly handled as an oddity in the history of God or as an isolated act of God’s power. Rather, it is the ultimate act of prophetic energising in which a new history is initiated. It is a new history open to all but peculiarly received by the marginal victims of the old order.’

From *The Prophetic Imagination*  
by Walter Brueggemann.

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## Questions to discuss

What part does trust in the resurrection of Jesus play in your Christian life?

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## Act

In many places it seems that death and suffering reign. As a group discuss where you see God's Spirit breathing life into what appears to us to be hopeless in your local community or in the wider world. Discuss what actions you can take to participate in this work.

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## Closing prayer

Come, Holy Spirit,  
wash away our sin,  
send rain upon our dry ground,  
heal our wounded souls.  
With your fire, thaw our rigidity, kindle  
our apathy  
and direct our wandering feet  
through Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

From *Praise in all our Days*, Taizé





# NOTES

# STUDY 6

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## FAITH IN TOUGH TIMES

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Gospel reading: Matthew 27: 11-54

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### Opening prayer

God help us

To rise up from our struggle

Like a tree rises up from the soil

Our roots reaching down to our trouble

Our rich, dark dirt of existence

Finding nourishment deeply

And holding us firmly

Always connected

Growing upwards and into the sun

Amen.

*Michael Leunig, When I talk to you, 2003*

## Introduction

Last week's study was all about life and death. Reading from Ezekiel, reflecting on the resurrection and discussing how we can be responsive to God's Spirit, we recognised not only the power of God, but the certainty that God will restore, breathing new life and creation. This week we will talk about the cost of discipleship, and how we hold onto this faith even in the toughest times.

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### ***Read Isaiah 50: 4-9a***

What is your initial response to this passage? What is the main challenge in this story for you?

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## Reflection

This passage records the third 'servant song' in Isaiah. The references to the suffering that the servant has endured are reminiscent of many of the psalms.

Following God's way, we imagine, will bring fulfilment – maybe even success, popularity and prosperity. Clearly, it isn't necessarily so! The servant has suffered pain, rejection and indignity in fulfilling his vocation. The power of this servant is related to the gift of God's Spirit (Isaiah 42:1) and the divine word which he is authorised to speak (49:2).

This sense of being called and empowered by God enables the servant to accept the hostility his message provokes, confident that in the end, God will remain faithful to those who follow God's way. The servant confidently challenges his accusers to bring their case to court because he knows the Judge! The one who will arbitrate is none other than the one who 'morning by morning' instructs and encourages him. The abuse and shame directed at the servant loses its power because he knows 'he who vindicates me is near'.

Scholars suggest that the story of Jeremiah might have influenced aspects of the Isaiah servant story. If so, we will be warned (or is it reassured?) that the journey to confidence in God's protection and care is punctuated by times of bitter questioning and despair. But often the outcome of such moments of struggle and uncertainty are gifts of empathy and empowerment. Indeed, those with the greatest capacity to encourage are sometimes those who themselves have faced times of trial and suffering.

**“Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.”**

*Desmond Tutu*

## The cost of discipleship

Many people in the Philippines have over recent years been killed, tortured or abducted because they sought to uphold the rights of farmers, workers, urban poor and indigenous peoples. There are documented cases, including cases filed in court, which strengthen the belief that Government security forces are behind these attacks on political activists, human rights defenders and people's welfare advocates.

Pastor Berlin Guerrero stood with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) in advocating for the people's welfare and in defending their basic human rights. After he had led worship one Sunday he was abducted in front of his wife and family. On the following Monday, after international pressure on the Government, he was charged with a false allegation that he had murdered someone years earlier. For the next fifteen months he was imprisoned at the Cavite Provincial Jail as his petition to quash the murder charge was examined at the Supreme Court. Finally, the Court of Appeals required the case to be heard. Finding no merit in the case, the court ordered Berlin to be released immediately.

While in prison, Berlin sought to remain faithful in ministry, helping to run Bible studies and midweek services for prisoners, organising a

choir and concerts, and facilitating the development of a statement of principles for good relations among prisoners. After his case was dismissed, Berlin continued to receive death threats so fled to Australia where he has been given refuge. He works as a social justice officer at the Justice and International Mission Unit of the UCA Synod of Victoria and Tasmania while fulfilling his ministerial formation as a candidate to the Ministry of the Word. He hopes to be ordained at the end of the year and to be reunited with his family when they are finally allowed to migrate to Australia.

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## Questions to discuss

1. It is often claimed that suffering is the most common reason that people reject belief in a loving God. Has that ever been an obstacle to faith for you? How, if at all, did you address it?
  2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a famous book *The Cost of Discipleship*. What has it cost you, if anything, to follow the call of God through Jesus? Have you ever considered doing a 'cost-benefit' analysis of your discipleship?
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## Going Further

Theologian Russell Maltby went through all the promises of Jesus to disciples and classified them under three headings. Disciples of Jesus would be:

1. Absurdly happy
  2. In constant trouble
  3. Never alone
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## Questions to discuss

1. Test this out for yourself with some of the promises of Jesus you can bring to mind.
  2. How do you respond to this prospect?
  3. Over the past six weeks we have heard a number of stories of overseas churches responding to God's call. How have their stories helped you see your own discipleship in new light?
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## Act

Over the next week conduct a 'cost-benefit' analysis of your discipleship. In a journal jot down moments where it has cost your pride, wallet or social/family life to follow Jesus. Make sure you also keep track of the benefits of following Jesus too.

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## Closing prayer

Christ our victim,  
whose beauty was disfigured  
and whose body was torn upon the cross;  
open wide your arms  
to embrace our tortured world,  
that we may not turn away our eyes,  
but abandon ourselves to your mercy.  
Amen.

Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*,  
p 13



## STUDY 7

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# WHERE TO FROM HERE?

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### Opening prayer

Jesus, our joy,  
in your presence we find forgiveness,  
the clear flowing waters.  
Thirsting for the realities of God,  
we recognise your presence as the Risen Lord.  
And just as the almond tree  
begins to blossom in the light of springtime,  
you make even the deserts of the soul burst into flower.  
Amen.

*An Easter prayer from the Taizé community*



## Introduction

As we meet together this week Christians all around the world are preparing for Easter. Palm Sunday heralds the beginning of Holy Week and as we gather together we remember the final stages of Jesus' own journey. Jesus – focused and determined – faces Jerusalem, knowing what awaits him there.

Lent culminates in the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the ultimate story of light bursting forth from darkness, of life in death and newness for all creation.

This week we will spend time looking back over the past six weeks. Go through each week and use the questions to guide your reflection, **or choose a few weeks to focus on as time permits.** I then encourage you to look forward. Where will your Lenten journey take you this year? What will you, your group or your congregation change? What will you keep doing?

## Looking back

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### Study 1

#### Life through limitation

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This week we discussed how we discern the voice of God amidst the din of our lives and the cacophony of voices claiming our attention. We then shared experiences where apparent 'limits' have yielded freedom.

*Individually reflect on your journey through Lent. Have you learned to discern the voice of God more? Where have you discerned greater freedom in your life?*

We then discussed how opening ourselves up to the experiences of others may release us from self-absorption and open us up to others and to God. The 'take home challenge' was to decide on a sacrifice for Lent and keep a rough journal of what was difficult and surprising about your choice.

*As a group share your experiences of sacrifice throughout Lent. What was difficult? Did the experience open your eyes to the experiences of the world's majority who often have to go without? How will this sacrifice carry over into life going forward?*

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## Study 2

### Blessed to be a blessing

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In our second study we talked about the covenant that God made with Israel: they would be 'blessed to be a blessing'. The spotlight was then turned on our own lives. How would our priorities change if we understood ourselves as heirs of this same tradition and saw our mission 'to bless the world'? We then read about the relationship the UCA has with overseas partners and were encouraged to recognise these relationships as two-way channels of blessing.

*As a group discuss how the past six weeks have opened your eyes to the experience of the global body of Christ. How have you been encouraged by experiences of the Church overseas?*

The challenge for the week was to identify practical ways we as individuals and we as congregations can reduce the gap between 'the heroism of love and mediocrity' in our lives.

*Reflect together how these practical changes have impacted the way you serve God and serve others.*

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## Study 3

### The God who provides

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In our third week together we reflected on what it looks like to be in the desert: do we try to coerce God in such times? Or do we broaden our perspective and embrace God-given potentialities?

The challenge in this week was to, in the footsteps of Thomas G Pettepiece, come up with three declarations that reflect a trust that God is the Creator of all that is, and God cares equally about all God's children.

*As a group discuss how living out these declarations has made a difference to your everyday life.*

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## Study 4

### What is my vocation?

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This week asked us to consider our vocation and led us to reflect on the surprising and inscrutable choices of God because 'God looks at the heart'.

*Reflect individually on what you feel God has called, or is calling, you to. Does it surprise you? What holds you back from embracing your vocation?*

We reflected on the life of Mother Theresa and the way the Church of North India embraces the call of Jesus to embrace those on the margins and we were challenged to think about our own commitment to our vocation.

The challenge for this week was to identify how you, your family, group or church can engage more with local and international issues. In many instances this may mean we have to face up to our desire to 'run away and stay away'.

*As a group discuss how your Lenten journey has grown your commitment to your vocation. How, if at all, has engaging more with local and international issues energised the life of your congregation?*

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## Study 5

### Dry bones come to life

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In our fifth study we spent time with Ezekiel and his vision in which dry bones came to life. We reflected on the story of the Church in China, emerging in nature as bamboo shoots after spring rain, and were encouraged by Bruggeman's reflections on the Resurrection.

*Share with one another whether your journey through Lent has strengthened your trust in the resurrection of Jesus. If it has, how has this energised your discipleship?*

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## Study 6

### Faith in tough times

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Last week we reflected on the cost of discipleship and faith in tough times. The take home challenge was to conduct a 'cost-benefit' analysis of your discipleship.

*Share with one another: what has it cost your pride, wallet or social/family life to follow Jesus this week? What benefits have you perceived?*

Last week we also read the story of Pastor Berlin Guerrero from the Philippines. Berlin was persecuted for his staunch commitment to advocating for marginalised people's welfare and defending their basic human rights.

*Discuss how your faith community can show a commitment to speaking against injustice, both at home and overseas.*

## Going forward

As a group, come up with a list of priorities that have emerged for you as a result of these studies for your congregational life and faith going forward.

### OR

As an individual, write a list of priorities that have emerged for you as a result of these studies for your life and faith going forward.

*Spend time as a group praying for these priorities.*

## Sending prayer

Guide us God  
As we seek to follow you  
In a world  
Where darkness overwhelms

Help us recognise your touch,  
Your whispering voice,  
Your call in the desert

Grant us your strength God  
As we learn and live in your way  
And give us new hearts  
And new eyes to see you

Be with us on the journey  
From darkness into light

Amen.

# PROJECT INFORMATION

**In 2014 Lent Event is supporting UnitingWorld's overseas community development and relief projects.**

**These projects include:**

## **Training Midwives in South Sudan**



In South Sudan, where women are more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than anywhere else in the world, UnitingWorld works with local partners to train midwives to deliver quality care to mothers and their babies – even in the most remote areas. Increasing maternal and child health typically means mothers have fewer pregnancies, healthier babies and more opportunities to contribute to community life.

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## **Women's Empowerment in Indonesia**



In Maluku, Indonesia, where conflict has deeply impacted community life, UnitingWorld works with our partner, carrying out workshops that focus on conflict resolution and training women in business and leadership skills. As women from a range of religious and cultural backgrounds meet in small groups, they learn business skills and discover the role they have to play in community leadership and as cultivators of peace.

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## **Education in North India**



UnitingWorld works with local church partners to make sure all children are able to access education, resulting in increased literacy rates, more children learning instead of working and equality between girls and boys. In North India we work with our partner to identify and support children who have dropped out of school to re-enrol, offer children from disadvantaged families tutoring and nutrition support and increase community awareness of their rights to health care and education.

# PROJECT INFORMATION

## Partnering Women for Change in the Pacific



Across the Pacific women play a central role in their families, communities and the local church. But women also face many challenges, including lack of access to economic resources, a limited role in community decision making and vulnerability to gender based violence.

In Kiribati, UnitingWorld and the Women's Fellowship are supporting women, primarily from remote islands, in social and family issues, linking them into existing support services and providing training in livelihood and business skills.

Women who participate are encouraged and supported to organise small scale workshops with women in their own communities, sharing skills and learning on a larger scale.

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## Peacebuilding in Papua New Guinea (PNG)



UnitingWorld values the voices of all people in the development process, regardless of their social status, gender or age. We recognise the importance of participation and consultation to make sure people in the communities with which we work are able to express their needs and contribute to their own futures. But not all development projects, whether large or small, are inclusive of the people most affected.

Take for example large scale mining projects in PNG, which are set to dramatically increase the wealth of the country. Not everyone will get to share in the benefits and there has been tension among different groups within society. The potential for conflict is great. UnitingWorld is working with a range of communities to make sure all people have a voice, encouraging inclusive development and promoting peace.

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*Do you want to find out more about the community development projects your gifts to Lent Event in 2014 will support? Visit [www.lentevent.com](http://www.lentevent.com)*





# MAKE A DONATION

Your financial contribution to Lent Event will support vital community development projects that are transforming lives worldwide.

## Here are the simple ways to make a donation:

(1) Complete and return this form to

### **Lent Event**

PO Box A2266

Sydney South NSW 1235

(2) Call 1800 998 122

(3) Donate online [www.lentevent.com](http://www.lentevent.com)

(4) Fax this form to (02) 9262 7936

## Contact Details:

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☐ Mr ☐ Ms ☐ Mrs ☐ Miss ☐ Dr ☐ Rev ☐ Prof

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SURNAME

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STATE

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Please make payable to Lent Event

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TOTAL AMOUNT \$ \_\_\_\_\_

NAME OF CARDHOLDER \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

☐ I would like to hear more about how UnitingWorld is partnering with churches overseas to transform lives and see an end to global poverty.

Your personal information will only be used for the purpose for which it was collected and will not be disclosed to any person, body or agency except where required by law.

Donations to Lent Event support the community development and emergency relief work of UnitingWorld through the Relief and Development Unit.

Donations \$2 and above are tax deductible.



