

Turning to Scripture After a Disaster: Four Bible Studies

The Word of God is at the heart of the prayers of the church; it is woven through our liturgies and flows through our Book of Common Prayer. Scripture can be especially meaningful after a disaster because the words often originated with the prayers and reflections of people who turned to God to help them understand and weather difficult times.

The four Bible studies that follow address some of the needs that many adults experience after a disaster: expressing grief after loss, practicing self-care, coping well and welcoming a “new normal.” The sessions can be used as an adult forum series or by groups already meeting for prayer or discussion. They can also be utilized in quiet prayer and reflection at home.

The topics are:

1. Expressing Grief: A Psalm of Lament (Psalm 6)
2. Practicing Self-Care: Plucking Grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 11:28-12:8)
3. Coping Well: Walking with Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:1-11a; 14-18)
4. Welcoming the New Normal: Breakfast with Jesus (John 21:1-14)

NOTE TO FACILITATORS

If you are facilitating a small-group session, you might want to include the following in your setup:

- A small central table with familiar spiritual symbols such as a lighted candle, cross and Bible
- Copies of the Study Guide for all participants

You may also provide additional handouts about coping after a disaster or information about local resources and programs. Include contact information for pastoral care providers and other resource providers in your congregation.

Session One — Expressing Grief: A Psalm of Lament

OPENING PRAYER

Dear Lord, be with all who seek comfort and support this day. Help us to find your guiding words and presence in those around us. Help us to find listening ears and kind words as we seek to bring our thoughts and prayers to you. In Christ's Name, Amen.

SCRIPTURE: PSALM 6

Note: This Scripture can be read silently, aloud or in parts. It can also be read several times, such as with the Scripture reading practice of *Lectio Divina*. Other psalms of lament include Psalm 3 and Psalm 13. These can be read as well for comparison or additional discussion.

PSALM 6

LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger; do not punish me in your wrath.

Have pity on me, LORD, for I am weak; heal me, LORD, for my bones are racked.

My spirit shakes with terror; how long, O LORD, how long?

Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me for your mercy's sake.

For in death no one remembers you; and who will give you thanks in the grave?

I grow weary because of my groaning; every night I drench my bed and flood my couch with tears.

My eyes are wasted with grief and worn away because of all my enemies.

Depart from me, all evildoers, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.

The LORD has heard my supplication; the LORD accepts my prayer.

*All my enemies shall be confounded and quake with fear;
they shall turn back and suddenly be put to shame.*

COMMENTARY

Sometimes, our grief is too large for words. Speech begins to fail us. And prayer? How do we pray for things we cannot name? Our Scriptures were written by people under similar duress, and they expressed their ache in the poetry of the psalms. After Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, psalms were used to mourn this life-altering event. Many other books of the Old Testament were written by Israelites living in exile, trying to deal with being uprooted and coping after the loss of home, family members and self-determination. When we pray the psalms, we pray with centuries of spiritual ancestors who grabbed hold of God and wrestled during times of unimaginable strife. Their words become ours, helping us to wrestle with God when nothing makes sense.

QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION, REFLECTION OR JOURNALING

- Read the Scripture again quietly to yourself. Which parts resonate with your own experience?
- What are you grieving the loss of? In the wake of recent events, what feelings are you struggling to understand?
- How would you describe your feelings about God right now?
- Where have you experienced God's absence and/or presence in the disaster?
- In what ways would you like to echo and add to the psalm?

CLOSING PRAYER

God of all consolation, grant to those who sorrow the spirit of faith and courage, that they may have the strength to meet the days to come with steadfastness and patience; not sorrowing without hope, but trusting in your goodness; through him who is the resurrection and the life, Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

(New Zealand Prayer Book — He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa, p. 833)

Session Two – Practicing Self-Care: Plucking Grain on the Sabbath

OPENING PRAYER

Dear Lord, be with all who seek comfort and support this day. Help us to find your guiding words and presence in those around us. Help us to find listening ears and kind words as we seek to bring our thoughts and prayers to you. In Christ's Name, *Amen*.

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 11:28-12:8

Note: This Scripture can be read silently or aloud. It can also be read several times, as with *Lectio Divina*.

MATTHEW 11:28-12:8

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

At that time Jesus went through the cornfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.

When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath." He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless?"

I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath."

COMMENTARY

After a disaster, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the urgent needs around us. As Christians, we are taught to help people in need and serve others. In this passage, Jesus acknowledges the disciples' need for rest and nourishment.

The sabbath was instituted to remind people that their worth and dignity were not based on their achievements. Jesus breaks the sabbath law while simultaneously upholding it. He knows the disciples are human and have needs like hunger that need to be met if they are to follow Jesus on the long road ahead. This story may ring true for you if you are prone to skip meals, forgo sleep and ignore your other needs in the name of an urgent cause like disaster relief.

Rest and pacing are needed if we are to sustain energy through the rebuilding process. It is not your job to repair your community single-handedly. Our achievement-driven culture makes it easy to feel guilty when we are not constantly helping after a disaster. But even Jesus needed to rest. Jesus often retreated from the suffering crowd to rest and pray in silence. If Jesus needed rest and nourishment, we do, too. If we take care of our own needs, the work of long-term recovery will be more sustainable.

Sometimes, actions that appear Christ-like, like working nonstop without rest, are counterproductive and damaging. If the disciples cared about looking or feeling holy, they could have remained hungry, but Jesus knew that how we treat our bodies matters. We are not machines. We need to build communities and work groups where we encourage each other to take time to rest, eat and grieve.

QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION, REFLECTION OR JOURNALING

- Read the Scripture again quietly to yourself. What parts resonate with your own experience?
- What were your patterns of self-care before the disaster? What are they now?
- How have you made time to rest since the disaster?
- What is one way you can find rejuvenation this week? How could others support you in your self-care?
- What does a community that encourages self-care look like to you?

CLOSING PRAYER

God of all consolation, grant to those who sorrow the spirit of faith and courage, that they may have the strength to meet the days to come with steadfastness and patience; not sorrowing without hope, but trusting in your goodness; through him who is the resurrection and the life, Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

(New Zealand Prayer Book — He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa, p. 833)

Session Three – Coping Well: Walking With Ruth and Naomi

OPENING PRAYER

Dear Lord, be with all who seek comfort and support this day. Help us to find your guiding words and presence in those around us. Help us to find listening ears and kind words as we seek to bring our thoughts and prayers to you. In Christ's Name, Amen.

SCRIPTURE: RUTH 1:1-11A; 14-18

Note: This Scripture can be read silently or aloud. It can also be read several times, as with *Lectio Divina*.

RUTH 1:1-11A, 14-18

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons.

The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth.

When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food.

So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband."

Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

COMMENTARY

This passage describes Naomi and Ruth's dire situations: they are vulnerable, displaced and struggling to survive. Naomi's family moves to Moab to escape famine. The death of their husbands leads Naomi and Ruth to return to Bethlehem.

Both moves are motivated by grief and the basic need for survival. Each woman copes with her suffering in a different way. Ruth copes by clinging to her mother-in-law and pledging her life to Naomi. Orpah copes by returning to her family. Naomi copes by returning to her people. Later in the story, she will change her name and express her displeasure with God.

Being frustrated by our loss of control, depression, grief and stress is normal; even Ruth's well-known pledge to follow Naomi wherever she goes contains a note of desperation. How we cope with a crisis affects our well-being and the well-being of our family, friends and community.

According to pastoral care providers, instances of domestic violence, addiction and depression can often increase after a disaster. It can be difficult to cope with the everyday stresses of life after a disaster has destroyed all semblance of normalcy.

QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION, REFLECTION OR JOURNALING

- How has the disaster affected your sense of home?
- How has the disaster affected your primary relationships with family, friends, neighbors or co-workers?
- What is helping you hold on? What is helping you cope with the current disaster?

CLOSING PRAYER

God of all consolation, grant to those who sorrow the spirit of faith and courage, that they may have the strength to meet the days to come with steadfastness and patience; not sorrowing without hope, but trusting in your goodness; through him who is the resurrection and the life, Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

(New Zealand Prayer Book — He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa, p. 833)

Session Four – Welcoming the New Normal: Breakfast with Jesus

OPENING PRAYER

Dear Lord, be with all who seek comfort and support this day. Help us to find your guiding words and presence in those around us. Help us to find listening ears and kind words as we seek to bring our thoughts and prayers to you. In Christ's Name, Amen.

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 21:1-14

Note: This Scripture can be read silently or aloud. It can also be read several times, as with *Lectio Divina*.

JOHN 21:1-14

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the LORD!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the LORD, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."

So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."

Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the LORD. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

COMMENTARY

For the followers of Jesus, his crucifixion was a life-shattering disaster that threatened their very lives. Jesus's execution reminds them of the Roman Empire's constant threat. In the passage before today's reading, the friends of Jesus are hiding out in a locked room. The disciples have lost their friend and leader; they are afraid Roman leaders will kill them too. When Jesus appears to them, he invites the disciples to leave the fear-filled room and live again.

In the long life cycle of a disaster, the end point is often called the "new normal." Things will never be exactly as they were before the disaster, but there is now a new stability, and new patterns become familiar.

In the passage we just read, Simon Peter is trying to create a "new normal" after Jesus's death. Peter tells his friends he is going fishing, and they choose to join him. Fishing was the livelihood of many disciples before they followed Jesus. In returning to their old profession, they are trying to get their lives back after the disaster. But the task is not easy. They are not the same people they were before they met Jesus. All night, the fishing nets come up empty.

The resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples. And though he doesn't identify himself, they know him. He aids the disciples in a familiar and miraculous catch of fish. Life can't return to how it was before Jesus died. Life lived in the assurance of Jesus's resurrection, empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit, will become the norm for his followers. And it will always be new.

QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION, REFLECTION OR JOURNALING

Like the disciples, many of us have experienced change since this disaster. We've been stretched and confronted with parts of ourselves we didn't know existed. What have you noticed about yourself since the disaster?

- The new normal will look different for each of us. What parts of your new life are welcome? What parts of your new life are challenging?
- As you enter the new normal, what are you finding in your nets? What has been added to your life?
- The disciples encounter the resurrected Christ in an unexpected way. How have you encountered Jesus since the disaster?

CLOSING PRAYER

God of all consolation, grant to those who sorrow the spirit of faith and courage, that they may have the strength to meet the days to come with steadfastness and patience; not sorrowing without hope, but trusting in your goodness. Through him who is the resurrection and the life, Jesus Christ our Savior, *Amen*.

(New Zealand Prayer Book — He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa, p. 833)