FROM CHAOS TO COMMUNITY: SERIES OVERVIEW

We’ve spent the past five months focused on the basic ministries of evangelism, forming people to live the way of Jesus, deepening our connection to the mysteries of ministry and the sacraments, and helping people discover their gifts and calling and, on Pentecost, commissioning them into ministry in Christ’s name and the Spirit’s power.

Now the long season after Pentecost, the season of putting our ministries into practice, begins.

We begin this season with a series that reminds us that the trajectory of our ministries mirrors the trajectory of some of the most pressure-packed passages of our lives, those moments of transition where our lives and our relationships can no longer be what they were before.

These moments are of a piece with our own baptisms. We enter the water unclean. We emerge from it cleansed. We enter the water under sin’s sway. We emerge from it dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord. We enter the water born into biological or adoptive families. We emerge from it born anew into the body of Christ. We enter into the chaos of the water mirroring the chaos of the world and of our own hearts. We emerge from it in communion with God and one of many others among whom we will keep learning how God converts our human chaos into God’s blessed community.

Each reading in our opening series, as well as the sweep of these readings, captures this movement from chaos to community through moments of transition in creation (week 1) and in the life of Abraham’s family (weeks 2-5), moments that are mirrored in some way in most of our lives as well. We start here because our ministries will often happen in the context of such transitions in the lives of others and our own lives. We start here to be reminded that such transitions happen all across our lifespans. We start here to give encouragement and grounding.

And we start here to underscore and underscore again that the trajectory of our ministries, whether we are just now taking them up or have been at them for decades, consistently moves from chaos to community.

**June 11** (Trinity Sunday/Peace with Justice Sunday): Creation
**June 18** (Father’s Day): Birth (Communion Sunday)
**June 25**: Weaning
**July 2**: Rites of Passage
**July 9**: Legacy (Communion Sunday)
FROM CHAOS TO COMMUNITY: CREATION
FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (June 11)
TRINITY SUNDAY
PEACE WITH JUSTICE SUNDAY

FULL SERVICE

ENTRANCE
“Awesome God” Africana Hymnal, 4004
“God of Wonders” Worship & Song, 3034 OR
(suggested video or photo montage: images from outer space)

“Gracious Creator of Sea and of Land” W&S 3161
“God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale” UMH 122
(suggested video or photo montage: diverse creatures)

WORD AND RESPONSE

Reading based on Genesis 1:1-31
(suggested video or audio with multiple children’s voices from your congregation and community while the stagescape for the series is being built or revealed)

Script:
In the beginning there was God… and a mess.
And it was a real mess.
You couldn’t see anything.
Things could bump into you and you would bump into them all the time.
There were icky, gooey things, and soft things, and hard things, and sharp, prickly things-- Ouch! --
and everything was bumping into everything all the time, because you couldn’t see anything, because there wasn’t any light.
Just the mess.
And God.

Some people call a mess like that “chaos.”
I just call it a mess.
Then God did something about the mess.
God started talking.
God said, “Turn on, light!”
And light turned on.
And when light turned on,
you could tell light from dark,
and you could start to make out colors,
so you could see the mess for all it was,
everything, all jumbled up.
There was water, and rocks, and clouds,
and sand, and fire, and glass,
all jumbled up.
You could see the mess.
And so could God.

So God kept talking.
And the more God talked,
the more unjumbled things became.
Clouds rose, water fell and gathered into streams and lakes,
sand and smaller rocks dotted their shores,
while bigger rocks became land and hills and mountains,
and fire moved under the rocks.

And God kept talking.
And the unjumbled jumble began to dance
with all kinds of life.
Life in the waters, life on the land and hills and mountains,
life in the ground, and life above in the skies.
Everything was dancing with all kinds of life.
There was green life covering the land,
swimming life in the waters,
bobbing life, hopping life, standing life,
wriggling life, flying life, walking life,
rwning life-- life watching life,
everywhere life.

And God kept talking.
And there was one more kind of life
that started dancing.
And when this kind came,
our kind of life,
we did more than dance.
We started talking, too,
kind of like God was talking,
getting the jumble out of the mess,
and making more room for more life to dance.
And when God saw us start talking, 
kind of like God was talking, 
God said, 
“This is very good.”

Sermon From Chaos to Community: Creation

Call to Hear or Join God’s Speaking

_While music plays, invite participants to identify one “mess” in their own life into which God is speaking either to “unjumble” or bring life. Then invite them to consider one person in their lives and ministries to whom God is calling them to speak a word of unjumbling or bringing life, to write down that person’s name, and pray either in their seats or at the prayer rail or prayer stations._

- “Living in the Imagination of God” _Africana Hymnal, 4141_
- “The Right Hand of God” _Africana Hymnal, 4041_
- “Jesus Calls Us” _UMH 398_
- “It Is Well with My Soul” _UMH 377_

Prayers of the People

- “Prayers of the People“ _CCLI# 7039048 OR_
- “Prayers of the People“ _The Faith We Sing, 2201_

The Lord’s Prayer

**THANKSGIVING (AND COMMUNION)**

The Peace
May the peace of God’s Word made flesh be always with you.
And also with you.

_The people may exchange the peace of Christ. The offering may be collected. If Communion is celebrated, the Lord’s Table may also be prepared at this time._

Music During the Peace and the Offering

- “All Creation Sing” _CCLI# 5305393 OR_
- “All Things Bright and Beautiful” _UMH 147_

(COMMUNION _Great Thanksgiving for Trinity Sunday_)

SENDING FORTH

- “All Creation Sing” _CCLI# 5305393 OR_
Deacon or Pastor:
God spoke,
and chaos became thriving community.
Go forth in the image of our Triune God,
and speak life everywhere. Amen.

Postlude  "All Creation Sing"  CCLI# 5305393 OR
A selection based on OLD 100TH or LASST UNS ERFREUEN

MUSIC NOTES

Awesome God  (Africana Hymnal, 4004)
In an accessible setting for any congregation, this hymn offers a short, repetitive
chorus that is easy to sing in unison melody or in three-part, SAT choral format. Allow
the instruments (preferably at least piano, but also bass, drums, guitar, and other
instruments as available) to begin playing, with spoken greetings and statements of
praise and worship over the chord progression. Much of the life in these short songs is
in the interjections of the worship leader, so take some time beforehand to create some
sung hooks between phrases and lead-ins to offer the words of an upcoming phrase.
Try to avoid just speaking the words; rather, use musical cues to offer the phrases
beforehand. Allow the praise and thanksgiving for the power of God’s Spirit to be
embodied in the singing. The trickiest part of the rhythm is singing the dotted eighth
notes in the 6/8 meter, which creates a 2-against-3 rhythm. If the rhythm proves too
tricky, it would be okay to sing as a quarter/eighth/quarter/eighth, but it must be noted
that it would not be culturally or stylistically accurate. Keep the tempo slow, with the
eighth note between 132-136 beats per minute. I also recommend segueing
immediately into the next song, “God of Wonders.”

God of Wonders  (Worship & Song, 3034)
Though this is written in Worship & Song in the key of G, this song should be
lowered to F for this day to match the key of “Awesome God” just before. If the eighth
note remains the same (132-136), the tempo should be just about right after the
transition. However, moving from 6/8 to 4/4 can be difficult for the inexperienced band.
Take time in rehearsal to practice the transition multiple times to allow the eighth note to
stay the same in both meters. Another option would be to remove the tempo altogether
and have the instruments freely improvise out of tempo, with the drummer resetting to a
new tempo. Regardless, if a piano is used, the piano should not play the rhythms as
notated. A pulsing quarter note accompaniment on the chord progression will sound
more authentic and prevent rhythms from being too haphazard and jolting.

Gracious Creator of Sea and of Land  (Worship & Song, 3161)
John Thornburg and Dan Damon have created a beautiful doxological hymn that
offers praise to the Trinity by using vivid imagery, such as “sculptor of coral,” “miller of
sand,” and the reference to Jesus’ followers as “fisherfolk.” The first stanza alludes to
God the Creator, but also the story of the Exodus, in which the power of God led people
to freedom. The second stanza recalls Jesus’ teaching by the Sea of Galilee and his
invitation to follow him. The final stanza relates to the Pentecost story and the
movement of the Holy Spirit. Dan Damon’s tune is commendable and quite easy for
congregations to learn, but another choice would be SLANE (commonly associated with
“Be Thou My Vision”). Sing at a tempo that allows for a subtle lilt in the 3/4 meter and
gives the congregation the ability to sing entire phrases in one breath.

**God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale** (UMH 122)

Many congregations vary on their use of this hymn. I have found churches that
love the imagery in the hymn and also those that find it to have a lack of human
relativity because of the use of third-person language and the lack of “personal”
language. Jaroslav Vajda and Carl Schalk teamed up to create what is truly a beautiful
statement of awe, woe, grace, care, love, and joy when considering Creation and God’s
role in it. The tune is very singable, and the tempo should support four-measure
phrases, with a gentle lilt. Allow the lyricism of the tune to sing, and try different
groupings with certain stanzas (women, men, left, right, etc.) to sustain the length of the
hymn. Many accompaniment options exist, from organ accompaniment to a guitar and
flute, and possibly a light drum to create a pulse. [History of Hymns](#)

**Living in the Imagination of God** (*Africana Hymnal*, 4141)

Hymns on God’s wonderful work of creation all point toward God’s imagination
and handiwork, but picturing God’s imaginative qualities is a bit more specific than most
hymns will include. This song can be taught easily by teaching the musical phrase “We
are living in the imagination of God,” and then follow by teaching the refrain, which
begins, “Eyes have not seen…” Allow a soloist to sing the remainder of the work until
the congregation has sung the song enough to learn and confidently sing the melody
throughout. The ideal accompaniment is piano or band, and the accompaniment written
out in *The Africana Hymnal* is idiomatic for the style. Singing and playing it does take
some rhythmic practice, so be sure to work ahead! Your congregation will enjoy this and
be able to sing it confidently if it has been learned carefully by the worship leaders.
[History of Hymns](#)

**The Right Hand of God** (*Africana Hymnal*, 4041)

Many Afro-Caribbean songs have an idiomatic style rooted in forms that are
highly rhythmic, and this upbeat song is no different. The accompaniment is a calypso
rhythm and is quite difficult if taken too fast. Regardless of the speed, keep the tempo
steady so the rhythmic pulse does not lose any drive and intensity. It would be possible
when playing from the *Africana Hymnal* accompaniment to only play the choral parts if
the piano part is too difficult. Supplement with a calypso drum beat (you can find a
calypso drum part [here](#)) with congas or bongos, with steady shakers on all beats and
off-beats. Accompany with a piano, and try it with a violin or solo instrument on the
melody or improvising.

**Jesus Calls Us** (UMH 398)
This work remains one of the most prominent hymns focusing upon Jesus’ call to the disciples on the Sea of Galilee. The only modern hymn that would probably rival it in use with this scriptural story would be “The Summons” (The Faith We Sing, 2130). If your congregation is in need of a different format in which to sing this hymn, I encourage pairing it with either of the tunes SURRENDER (“I Surrender All”) or TRUST IN JESUS (“Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus”), and singing it accordingly with the refrain attached to those hymns and tunes. The refrains of surrendering and/or trusting pair well with the call to follow Jesus. Any of these tunes can easily be accompanied on the organ, piano, or folk ensemble (guitar, violin, bass, banjo, mandolin, etc.).

It Is Well with My Soul (UMH 377)
Because of the emotional story of the writing of this hymn, it remains as the most accessed article in our History of Hymns column. Choirs and congregations are widely attached to this intimate and personal hymn that speaks of peace and assurance in times of grief and struggle. This expression of liberation from sin is universal and speaks to Christians of many different walks. Choirs get excited about the possibility of singing this in a cappella, four-part harmony, so let them do it, even if it is just the refrain. If the key of Db does not work in your setting because of the difficulty of the key signature for keyboardists, it might be easier to play and sing it in the key of D, with the natural signs becoming sharps and the flats becoming natural signs. History of Hymns

Prayers of the People (CCLI)
This song is a great example of modern music created to serve a liturgical purpose, and it is very accessible to churches with any instrumental accompaniment. The song is not meant to stand alone as a song; it will require some intercessions to be created from the context of your community. Respond to each intercession with either the A theme (“You hear us calling”) or the B theme (“Lord, have mercy”). This poignant piece works with organ, piano, guitar, or any other simple accompaniment.

Prayers of the People (The Faith We Sing 2201)
Also a wonderful choice for liturgical singing, this short piece by Bonnie Johansen-Werner enhances intercessory prayer with an easily singable refrain and response. I recommend singing the refrain multiple times (in the manner of the songs of Taizé) before the petitions begin. Follow each petition, whether voiced separately or as a group, with the response. Finally, end with a reprise of the refrain before ending. If your choir is able to sing four-part harmony, instruct them to sing the parts gently as the congregation sings the melody in unison.

All Creation Sing (CCLI# 5305393)
Steve Fee has modified a long-time favorite of the church, “Joy to the World,” by adding an energetic chorus to the existing hymn. The main challenge with this song is that it needs to remain in D because of the range of the hymn. This key is familiar to United Methodist churches because it is the key contained in The United Methodist Hymnal. However, this places the refrain in a fairly high tessitura (average range) for most churches. If that is the case in your context, simply have the congregation sing the stanzas, which most will already know well, and have the worship team or choir sing the
chorus. This should work well and will give life to a hymn that is likely already familiar to your congregation. Plus, singing this setting away from the Christmas season might also enable you to do something different with it!

All Things Bright and Beautiful (UMH 147)

Because of its universal focus on the fullness of creation, this hymn is always a favorite in many settings. The playfulness of the tune seems to enhance certain phrases in the hymn ("little bird" and "river running," for instance), and this one is always a staple in children's choir settings. Have children in your church learn this hymn in either children’s choir, Sunday school, or another small-group setting, and encourage them to lead the singing of it together in worship. Accompany with a flute, recorder, or other solo treble instrument. Percussion instruments will work, too, such as hand drum or light tambourine, so if children do not want to sing, give them an instrument to play. If this is not the direction you choose, organ or piano also work best with the accompaniment. Regardless, keep the accompaniment light to sensitively address the text. History of Hymns

Creation Sings (W&S 3018)

I will not soon forget the debate we had when creating the collection Worship & Song. Shirley Erena Murray was not happy with the choice of tune (LONDONDERRY AIR) for this hymn in the book because of its “overtones of regret” stemming from the old Irish song, "O Danny Boy." She eventually relented, and I think that was a wise decision. At least in North America, most people can remember only the very beginning of “O Danny Boy,” with most not able to sing past the line, “the pipes, the pipes are calling.” However, a great number of people know the melody. Therefore, this is the perfect pairing because of the way the text sings at the beginning of the second half of the hymn ("The Spirit Sings!" and "O God, you draw...”). The highest note is also on a great vowel for that range in both stanzas. Organ or piano make the best accompaniment for this hymn.

PREACHING NOTES

Even though I usually advise against speaking about an old movie, I’m going to break my own rule here and confess that when I starting thinking about God turning a light on in the middle of the chaos of the yet-to-be-created world, all I could picture was a scene from the film Heaven Can Wait.

Heaven Can Wait is one of my all-time favorite movies. Released in 1978, the film stars Warren Beatty as Joe Pendleton, a quarterback for the Los Angeles Rams football team. At the beginning of the movie, Joe receives the news that in spite of some setbacks in his career that he suffered as the result a long recovery from an injury, he has been selected as the starting quarterback for the season’s opening game.

Joe is so excited that he decides to go on a bike ride. His path takes him along a winding mountain road. Just as he is heading into a tunnel on his bicycle, the scene
cuts to the other side of the tunnel where a sports car begins passing a semi-tractor trailer on the left side of the narrow, two-lane road.

So Joe Pendleton enters the tunnel on his bike on one end, and two vehicles riding side-by-side enter on the other.

Viewers hear a terrible crash. The screen goes totally black.

Then there is silence.

After a few moments of total darkness and silence, a tiny light appears. We hear the sound of a saxophone playing a tune. The light slowly grows larger and larger until it illuminates the next scene. And the movie continues. (I won’t give any spoilers here just in case you who are reading these words have never seen this movie. Go rent it immediately!)

It is this scene of chaos and destruction—the crash and the silence and the total darkness—into which a tiny light suddenly appears and then begins to grow and illuminate an entirely different situation—that I am reminded of as we begin our five-week series, “From Chaos to Community.”

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light” (Genesis 1:1-3 NRSV).

I love my colleague Taylor Burton-Edwards’ poetic story-version of today’s reading. I especially love the description of the jumbled chaotic mess of pre-creation darkness into which God speaks light and life and order and hope. It is a great metaphor not only for the story itself, but for the journey into which we are embarking through this series.

Life is a jumbled, chaotic mess. Every human being faces times in which everything seems to be coming apart at the seams. Some of our times of trial seem to come out of nowhere. Tragedy simply strikes. A person is fired from his or her job. An accident happens. A disease takes hold in a body. A child disappears. A tornado hits. A war breaks out. A person becomes the victim in an act of violence.

Other periods of uncertainty and strife can be predicted. The human life cycle takes each of us on a journey of growth and transition. We leave the dark, watery security of our mother’s womb by violently passing through the birth canal and out into the bright, noisy, frightening world. We start out as completely dependent, helpless infants feeding on the milk of our mother’s breast, but in a short time, we are introduced to solid food. We change from being swaddled babies into crawlers, walkers, skippers, and dancers. We learn to take care of ourselves.
As we develop into teenagers, we hear the world speaking an urgent message to us: it beckons us to become more and more independent, to break away from our parents, to rebel against our dependence on them, and make our own way in the world. Until finally, one day, we begin making decisions for ourselves. We choose to be confirmed in the faith. Our families celebrate our newfound adulthood with a bar mitzvah or a quinceañera. We get a driver's license. We graduate from high school. We leave the nest to launch out on our own.

Eventually some of us fall in love, find a person to share life with, and start a family of our own. Others among us decide to enjoy a life of independence and fulfillment in singleness. As adults, we begin building our own networks of support. We choose our own friends and groups with whom we want to affiliate. And many of us find a community in which to practice our faith.

Each one of these life transitions requires us to renegotiate our relationships and our place in the world. The changes we face as we grow and develop and transition through the human lifespan throw us into periods of jumbled, chaotic mess.

We are fortunate if we emerge into the next stage unscathed.

Just like each one of us, the people of our faith tradition faced those same life transitions. Some of their struggles—their moments of jumbled, chaotic mess—are recorded in our sacred texts.

Over the next few weeks, we will be following some of the pillars of the Judeo-Christian tradition as they find themselves wrestling deeply with the reality of their humanity and the challenges it brings. We will listen with them as they hear astonishing news from God: news that brings immense joy, even as it precipitates painful separation. We will watch as a father makes a heart-wrenching decision about his son. We will bear witness to the stories of two mothers who must face the process of leave-taking by their children. And we will journey with a teenage girl and her female servants as she makes a life-changing decision about not just her future, but the future of God’s beloved community.

Into each of these stories of jumbled, chaotic mess we will hear the voice of God speaking light and life and love and hope.

Sometimes God’s words will bring comfort—God brings order to the chaos. Other times, God speaks demands that make us uncomfortable and raise difficult questions about the nature of our faith—questions for which we do not have easy answers.

But the presence of God will be a constant in the lives of our forebears in the faith, just as the presence of God is a constant in our own lives, through the good times and the bad.
Today in the Christian Year, we are celebrating Trinity Sunday. My favorite definition of the Trinity—which I read in seminary so long ago that I cannot find the source or recall the name of the theologian who gifted me with this insight—is that God is, in God’s fundamental essence, a community of persons. God’s very identity is communal. And the church that is living out God’s mission in the world does so in God’s image: as a community of persons.

Part of the work of the church is to equip and support individuals as they live into God’s unique call and purpose for their lives. The community of faith promises to love people from the womb to the tomb and through all points in between, including during all those pesky transitions. In the vows we make at our baptisms, we commit to nurture one another in Christ’s holy church, and by our teaching and example guide one another toward accepting God’s grace, professing faith, and leading Christian lives.

Sometimes this work is challenging. It is hard for us, flawed humans that we are, to live in the image of God’s identity as a community of loving, interdependent people.

Sometimes God blesses individuals with identities or calls them to actions that other people of faith find difficult to nurture. Sometimes church members commit heinous acts against other church members or against people in the world around us. Sometimes the transitions that individuals make through the life cycle are not made easily or willingly. Sometimes transition comes as the result of violence or abuse, war-making, problematic cultural practices, or natural disaster.

· How does the church support individuals at points of transition?
· How do transitions break relationships?
· How do those get re-formed?
· What gets lost along the way? What is gained?

The good news is God-in-Three-Persons is with us, speaking light and live, love and hope, into the murky, jumbled, chaotic mess of the world. In fact, it is often in the chaos itself where the work of God happens most profoundly. When life feels messy, look for signs of God hard at work!

As we walk this journey with our forebears in the faith, may we look for the light of God shining brightly on the path ahead. May we listen for God’s voice speaking creation into being and forming community out of chaos. And may our unjumbled jumble begin to dance, even as we sing, “It is well! It is well with my soul!”
Reading Notes
NRSV texts, artwork and Revised Common Lectionary Prayers for this service are available at the Vanderbilt Divinity Library.

Leccionario en Español, Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes.

Lectionnaire en français, Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé

Calendar Notes
FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: CREATION

Colors are white or gold for Trinity Sunday. After today, the color shifts to green. It will return to white and gold twice between then and Advent: All Saints Sunday and Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday, which concludes the season after Pentecost.

June 11 Trinity Sunday, Peace with Justice Sunday
New Series Begins: From Chaos to Community
June 18 Father’s Day (USA)
June 19 Juneteenth

July
July 4 Independence Day

August
All Month Back to School Resources

September
All Month Season of Creation (2017 resources forthcoming)
September 4 Labor Day (USA)
September 15-17 Hispanic Heritage Month (USA)

October
All Month A Season of Saints (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 1 World Communion Sunday
October 6-8 Children’s Sabbath (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 15 Laity Sunday (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 31 Reformation Day (500th Anniversary)

November
November 1 All Saints Day
November 3 World Community Day
November 5 All Saints Sunday
For Your Planning Team: FROM CHAOS TO COMMUNITY: CREATION

We start a new series and a new season, even a new kind of season, with today’s service.

Lent and Easter are very much about formation. That’s why our resources during these two seasons include material for formational groups appropriate to the work of each season.

The Season after Pentecost is about engaging in ministry that flows from that formation.

So today marks more than a change in colors in the worship space (from Pentecost red last week to Trinity white and/or gold for this week, and then green until All Saints). It marks a shift in the focus of everything we do in worship and formation. We move from preparing to doing.

So the “overture” for today’s service, launching this series, needs to mark a fairly decisive shift as well to lay out the trajectory for where the series is going.

Our proposals for stagescape and the presentation of the Scripture today are designed to do just that. In the stagescape (described further below), you’ll lay out the series theme and the service themes for the five weeks. And our proposal for the reading both builds some continuity with the involvement of children near the beginning of last week’s service and expands it, as this time we hear and perhaps see many children—and diverse children—giving voice to a new take on the opening story of the Bible.

**Logistics for this Service:**

**Create the Series Stagescape:** We suggest creating a three-level stagescape for this worship series. Use sturdy boxes, stools, and tables, as well as stairs (if safe to do so), so all three levels are visible to all in the worship space. Find fabric representative of the sky, earth, and water to be placed on the three tiers. Sky could be white or light blue; earth could be brown, green, or any earth tone; water should be some tone of blue or green. Add other elements to this fabric, if desired, with elements representative of your congregation. If you have gardeners in your congregation, see if they can donate a potted plant or two to the “earth” level. Larger potted plants should be placed ahead of
time, but small potted plants may be brought in during the creation story. Add stones or rocks. Blue, white or green glass stones can pick up the light in the water level. (We would not suggest bringing sand into your worship space if you have carpet.)

If you are adding items to the stagescape during worship, you may want to place a masking tape X where each item is to be placed.

The three tiers with the elements of rocks or stones, greenery, and fabric representing the sky, earth, and water should stay throughout the worship series. This is your visual, your interpretation of the earth that God created, the stage upon which our lives and our discipleship play out.

**Rehearse the setting of the stagescape.** There are a good number of moving parts, so rehearse, preferably the night before and the morning of, at least thirty minutes before the service starts.

First, decide what will already be in place and what needs to be brought in and given special focus during the reading. Simple is often more effective and less prone to error than complicated, so you may want to bring in relatively few items, or even no items, and simply have people stationed to uncover items already placed at an appropriate time.

Second, for the beginning of the reading, try to get the worship space as dark as you can. For spaces with large windows and Sunday morning services, we realize this is a challenge. The darker the space when you begin the reading, with just audio or visual, the more you can heighten the senses.

Candle and Lights cue: When the reader (or reader on video) says, “Turn on, light,” the candles on the stagescape may be lit, and then all lights brought up.

Other items cues: We suggest at least a bowl and a jug of water (representing the waters gathering into lakes. Pour the water into the bowl placed at sea level; then place the jug beside the bowl. Add potted plants, plastic or stuffed fish, large (or many) plastic insects or insect puppets, and stuffed animals (including birds for the third level) representing other forms of life. Practice placing or uncovering these so each is placed or uncovered as it is mentioned in the reading.

Setting the stage, or even simply uncovering items, is a great opportunity for you to involve people of all ages, abilities, and ethnicities in your congregation in leading worship throughout this series. Be sure to take full advantage of it!

**Develop the video or audio of the reading with children:**
What may be ideal for today’s reading is a video of five to seven different children (different in age, gender, ethnicity, and physical ability) telling (not reading) the story script. To facilitate this with younger children, simply ask them to repeat the line you give them while looking directly into the camera, then edit out your prompts as you edit
the presentations of all the children individually into a coherent whole.

One thing that will make your editing easier is to have the children pause for a second or two after each line they give. If you are developing audio, silence is enough. Video will work better if the children “freeze” after the line.

It may take several hours for filming, and, depending on your editing skills, perhaps several more hours to get the video in final form. Make a special day of it, whether a Saturday or a weekday (if schools are out), with your children’s ministries team. Get signed release forms from the children’s parents, build up the excitement for seeing what the children have done, and then, after worship, place the finished product on your church’s website or Facebook page, on YouTube, or on other video sharing sites for all to see. You have our permission to use and adapt the script for your setting. Just be sure not to use copyrighted music as part of your video unless you have obtained written permission from the copyright holder of the music to do so.

Rehearse the Whole Opening of the Service through the Reading:
Schedule two times for full run-throughs on the staging, starting with the conclusion of the second song: one on the evening before the service and one the morning of the service— with all persons involved, including the band or musicians, the audiovisual team, and the people who will be placing or uncovering items. As part of the rehearsal, make sure the cues for starting the audio/video and for lighting are clear to your audiovisual crew and that they are able to execute them with appropriate sound levels (sound levels may change between song and video) at least three times in a row. You’ve put a lot of effort into creating these resources for the opening of this service and series. Honor that effort by ensuring the service will be as smooth as possible.

We encourage celebrating Holy Communion on weeks two and five of this series (June 18 and July 11). While we, of course, commend weekly celebration, if your usual pattern is monthly, these are the two Sundays in this series where Communion most strongly connects with the theme of the day.

Additional Resources
2014 Planning Helps for Trinity Sunday
Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Angola, Mozambique
FROM CHAOS TO COMMUNITY: BIRTH
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (June 18)
FATHER’S DAY

FULL SERVICE

Bring in and place or uncover items for this week’s stagescape during the second song.

ENTRANCE
“Sometimes by Step” CCLI# 915125
“Every Promise” CCLI# 4642105 OR

“How Can We Name a Love” United Methodist Hymnal, 111
“O God in Heaven” UMH 119

Prayer for Illumination

You are in this place, O God, and we praise you.
Open now our ears and our hearts
to welcome your word,
to feast with you at your table,
and to receive your promise
in faith. Amen.

WORD AND RESPONSE
Whether live or on video, invite diverse fathers and grandfathers of many ages to lead this week’s reading.

Reading Genesis 17:15-17, 18:1-15

Sermon “Birth”

Call to Welcome Strangers and Receive Their News
As music plays, invite worshipers to take a moment to write the names of people they would consider “strangers” who simply “appeared” in their lives and offered them some kind of news (or who would have if they were welcomed). Then ask them to take a moment to pray for them and to discern how God may be calling them to welcome these strangers and receive their news.

“Welcome” Worship & Song, 3152 OR
“Who Is My Mother, Who Is My Brother” The Faith We Sing, 2225

Prayers of the People
Whatever form you use, include time for people to name the “strangers” they have listed aloud, all at once, in response to one of the biddings.
THANKSGIVING AND COMMUNION

Invitation, Confession, and Peace

Deacon or Pastor (standing behind the Lord’s Table):
Christ our Lord appears before us, now,
as God appeared before Abraham,
sitting at his tent entrance,
at the heat of the day.

So let us prepare ourselves to feast!

Jesus, we love you.
We earnestly repent of our sin.
We seek to be at peace with one another.

Show your love
in your giving and thanksgiving,
and your commitment to reconciliation
with signs of Christ’s love and peace.

The peace is exchanged, the offering is collected, and the Lord’s Table is prepared.

Music during the Offering
“Welcome in This Place” CCLI# 4435790
“We Welcome You” Africana Hymnal, 4152

The Great Thanksgiving

Pastor:
Christ is with us.
God is in this place.

Lift up your hearts!
We lift them to you, Lord.

Give God the glory.
All our praise, all our thanks, all our lives are yours!

We are eager and ready to gather our best
and offer you all we have and all we are,
O God.
Even when you appear as a stranger among us,
we want to welcome you,
to bless you,
to feast with you,
as your servant Abraham prepared the feast
for the strangers at his tent.

And so we join our voices
with the voices of that multitude
no one can number,
and we sing:

“Alpha and Omega”
_Africana Hymnal, 4029_

Alpha and Omega,
Beginning and End,
Lamb of God, Jesus Christ,
you came among us
and were in every way good to your promise
that God’s kingdom has drawn near.

And you have shown us the way of Life:
to welcome the stranger,
to feed the hungry,
to clothe the naked,
to care for the sick, the prisoner, and the needy,
to honor all people in every condition and stage of their lives,
to show mercy toward all,
and to invest our lives even in those who may betray us.

For in the night you were betrayed
you fed even your betrayer,
by taking and blessing bread,
and saying,

_The pastor may lift the bread._
_“This is my body given for you;”_

then taking a cup of wine
and giving thanks over it,
and saying,

_The pastor may lift the cup._
_“This is my blood of the new covenant poured out for you.”_

So in remembrance of all you are,
and all you have done,
and all you have taught us,  
we offer you ourselves,  
with this bread and this cup.  

Even so, come Holy Spirit.  
**Come, Holy Spirit.**  

Come upon these gifts of bread and wine,  
that they may be for us Christ’s body and blood.  
**Come, Holy Spirit.**  

And come upon us,  
that we who receive them may be united with Christ,  
strengthened in fellowship  
and enlivened in mission and ministry  
to every person everywhere,  
even those who laugh  
because they cannot believe  
how good your good news is.  

**For yours is the kingdom,**  
**and the power,**  
**and the glory,**  
**Holy Triune God,**  
**now and forever. Amen.**  

Music During Communion  
“God Is Here” CCLI# **6454669** OR  
“A Place at the Table” W&S 3149  

**SENDING FORTH**  
*An older-adult woman may stand before the Lord’s Table to offer the reading.*  

“**The Happy Song**” (st 1) CCLI# **1043209** OR  
“**His Eye Is on the Sparrow**” (st 1) TFWS 2146  

Reading Genesis 21:1-7  

“**The Happy Song**” (st 2 to end) CCLI# **1043209**  
“**His Eye Is on the Sparrow**” (st 3) TFWS 2146  

*Deacon or Pastor:*  

Go in peace.  
Welcome strangers.  
Hear God’s voice in theirs.
Laugh if you must.  
And rejoice!

Postlude  
Reprise of “The Happy Song” or “His Eye Is on the Sparrow”

**MUSIC NOTES**

**Sometimes by Step** (CCLI# 915125)  
If you have never had the opportunity to sing this classic song made famous by co-writer Rich Mullins, you may be surprised how familiar you may be with the chorus, “Step by Step,” which can be found in *Worship & Song*, 3004. This song puts the speaker in Abraham’s shoes and speaks of God’s faithfulness for going where God leads. The original key of the song is D, which works well if the congregation will sing the song in its entirety. However, if a soloist or the worship team sings the verse while the congregation sings the chorus only, the key of F would be best to put the chorus in a better key for congregational singing. Accompaniment can range from a piano or guitar to full band.

**Every Promise** (CCLI# 4642105)  
Keith Getty and Stuart Townend have created many memorable modern hymns and tunes, a few of which are already included in United Methodist collections. This hymn will have broad appeal in churches that worship in a variety of styles, and the accompaniment possibilities are endless because of the timelessness of the tune. Use any instruments at your disposal, from solo piano to full band or folk ensemble. If possible, include a tin whistle on the melody, which itself is idiomatically Irish. Since the range is quite low in places, have an alto lead the congregation on the melody. If a lower voice (bass or tenor) were to sing in that range, the timbre would not be as welcoming to the congregation, and it would sound too low. The choir can accompany in four-part harmony, but make sure the lead is a treble voice.

**How Can We Name a Love** (UMH 111)  
This hymn represents the need for works to explore the fullness of God’s identity, found both in biblical imagery and the presence of the Spirit in the world. One of the connections between this hymn and the Scripture this week is not through the reading itself, but with the icon of *The Trinity*, by Andrei Rublev, who obviously saw the persons of the Trinity (the strangers welcomed by Abraham) in an expansive way. The persons of the Trinity are revealed in our relationships with God and one another, and Wren’s examples of father, mother, friend, partner, and--most importantly--Love, are all named here. The TERRA BEATA tune is widely known because of its association with the hymn, “This Is My Father’s World” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 144) or “This Is God’s Wondrous World” (*The Upper Room Worshipbook*, 71). Sing confidently! The worship leader and choir need to be sure to look around the congregation as the song is sung to encourage the seeing of God in one another. Accompaniment works best with organ or piano, but settings for other ensembles are prolific.
**O God in Heaven** (UMH 119)

In stark contrast to the previous hymn, the tune in this Trinitarian hymn from The Philippines is quite haunting, presenting yet another view of the character and identity of God. Because of the pairing with “How Can We Name a Love,” I would suggest putting these hymns in parallel major/minor keys (therefore, either E major/Eb minor or Eb major/E minor). Singing this hymn in Eb minor might be easier than you think, depending on how it is sung. I would recommend ending “How Can We Name a Love” with a low Eb pedalpoint and incorporating a random ring from handbells if available on Eb and Bb bells as a transition. Continue the pedalpoint as the melody is sung in unison by the worship leader and/or choir. This will allow the mourning and lyrical quality of the music to be most prominent. [History of Hymns](#)

**Welcome** *(Worship & Song, 3152)*

Laurie Zelman and Mark Miller’s hymn, “Welcome,” gives us what Laurence Hull Stookey has referred to as the “intersection of time and eternity” *(Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church, 17)* by connecting the past, present, and future with the eternal time of the reign of God. This hymn is rich with imagery of the table being prepared, shared, and extended into the world. If your congregation is unfamiliar with this hymn, my suggestion would be to teach it over time by asking them to sing the refrain (and taking the time to teach it to them before worship) the first time you encounter it during the Eucharist. Continue singing it in following weeks as you gather around the table, and have soloists sing the stanzas. Over time, the congregation will associate the hymn with the Eucharist and will be able to sing it as they build their liturgical memory. When accompanying on piano, which in this case is not easy, I recommend not playing the melody because it can easily complicate the singing. Improvise on the chords of the song and allow the voices to carry the melody. [History of Hymns](#)

**Who Is My Mother, Who Is My Brother** *(TFWS 2225)*

One of the most enigmatic passages in Scripture is when Jesus asks this very question, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” *(Matt. 12:48, NRSV)* Shirley Erena Murray reframes the conversation to see how people, many-hued and unique, will bring many characteristics to Christ’s table and receive acceptance from Jesus Christ, the Friend and Savior. The accompaniment is very simple, and I recommend reflecting that in the choice of instruments. Use piano only with this work, and it will increase the intimacy and sensitivity of the text. Also sing with a very gentle, lyrical approach—words like “stigmas” and “segregate” aren’t very common in hymnic language, and singing them gently will offer an invitational way to encounter this challenging text. [History of Hymns](#)

**Prayers of the People** *(CCLI 7039048)*

This song is a great example of modern music created to serve a liturgical purpose, and it is very accessible to churches with any instrumental accompaniment. The song is not meant to stand alone as a song; it will require some intercessions to be created from the context of your community. Respond to each intercession with either
the A theme (“You hear us calling”) or the B theme (“Lord, have mercy”). This poignant piece works with organ, piano, guitar, or any other simple accompaniment.

Prayers of the People *(The Faith We Sing, 2201)*

Also a wonderful choice for liturgical singing, this short piece by Bonnie Johansen-Werner enhances intercessory prayer with an easily singable refrain and response. I recommend singing the refrain multiple times (in the manner of the songs of Taizé) before the petitions begin. Follow each petition, whether voiced separately or as a group, with the response. Finally, end with a reprise of the refrain before ending. If your choir is able to sing four-part harmony, instruct them to sing the parts gently as the congregation sings the melody in unison.

Welcome in this Place *(CCLI# 4435790)*

Hillsong Publishing is a name well known in many modern worship music circles, and they have made a name for themselves with so many titles in the CCLI Top 100. This particular song is written as a prayer of invocation to welcome the Holy Spirit, which makes it a wonderful choice before Holy Communion. Keep the accompaniment simple, no matter the instrumentation of the ensemble, and the tempo moderate. The ideal key is C.

We Welcome You *(Africana Hymnal, 4152)*

Marilyn Thornton has created a beautiful invitation to the Communion Table that may either be sung by a soloist, a choir or praise team, or the entire congregation. Only two stanzas are written for this song, but it may be sung repetitively throughout the distribution of the Communion elements. This song may be accompanied by piano alone or a band or rhythm section. Be aware that the sixth full measure can be difficult because of the descent to Db, but when sung by confident singers in a choir, the congregation will follow suit more easily than you might think.

Alpha and Omega *(Africana Hymnal, 4029)*

In a style very similar to “Total Praise,” this modern work offers praise to God, the beginning and ending, the womb of all creation. While this song was written to be sung *a cappella* (and, in many settings, in three parts as opposed to four), it is possible to sing with accompaniment. Two repeats are written in the musical score itself, so if needed a choir can sing the first statement of each section, having the congregation echo as the repeat. Sing freely and not too quickly, but also make the tempo move enough to accommodate the breathing of the congregation.

God Is Here *(CCLI# 6454669)*

For an upbeat, positively engaging song related to Communion, see this modern work that pleads with God to open our eyes, hearts, and ears to be aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit. There are some tricky rhythms and vocal leaps in the chorus, however, and I encourage singing this song in E, which is one whole step higher than the original setting. Accompany with a guitar, simplified piano (not playing the melody), band, or small instrumental ensemble.
A Place at the Table (W&S 3149)

This hymn by Shirley Erena Murray is one of the most defining congregational songs of this generation, and its place in the church will be ever-present in the years to come. Murray redeems the juxtaposition of opposing sides (woman/man, young/old, just/unjust) by bringing them together as “everyone born.” If you find yourself introducing this to your congregation for the first time, teach the refrain in short phrases and have the congregation echo back the melody. Have a soloist and/or the choir sing the stanzas, and invite the congregation to join in on the refrain. Finally, invite the congregation to sing the fifth stanza with the choir. Though I fully recommend the PLACE AT THE TABLE tune in Worship & Song, another option would be to use the tune created by Brian Mann in the Global Praise collection, For Everyone Born: Global Songs for an Emerging Church. Use the tune that best encourages the singing in your setting. History of Hymns

The Happy Song (CCLI# 1043209)

This song is a musical testimony to the saving work of God, and it offers praise to God for the transformational work of grace. I encourage teaching the chorus only to the congregation, with a soloist singing the verses. The chorus is very singable and memorable, and with the placement at the end of this worship service, it works best this way to send the congregation forth singing something they can remember. The ideal key for congregational singing in this instance is the key of E. Accompany with piano, guitar, full band, or any instrumental ensemble in between.

His Eye Is on the Sparrow (TFWS 2146)

Well known as a long-time lyrical favorite from the early twentieth century, this hymn by Civilla Martin offers the congregation an opportunity to sing dramatically in worship with an opening section that sings in somewhat of a forlorn manner and a closing section that gives way to praise: “I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free.” Make sure the singing of this hymn reflects the contrast of these emotions, and it will be a powerful statement indeed, regardless of the musical style of worship of your church. History of Hymns

PREACHING NOTES

When I start laughing really, really hard, I shed tears. I find this very embarrassing, but some people in my life, especially my two sons, absolutely LIVE to make me laugh so hard that I cry. I’ve always been this way—easy to shed tears, whether from laughing too hard or crying.

So, when I read the story of Abraham discovering at the ripe old age of one hundred, and his wife Sarah at ninety, receiving the news that Sarah is pregnant, and the writer of the story says, “Sarah laughed to herself,” I wonder if she also shed a few tears.

SIDEBAR: LAUGHTER AND CRYING
by Dawn Chesser
Laughter and crying are similar emotions when it comes to the body. According to Robert R. Provine, PhD, “Both occur during states of high emotional arousal, involve lingering effects, and don’t cleanly turn on and off.” Shedding tears, whether from laughter or from crying, releases cortisol and adrenaline into the body. Both hormones are normally released in response to stress. When these hormones start flowing, the heart beats faster and stronger, and the bronchial tubes open up, all of which is good for us, because it helps ease our stress. Scientists also theorize that very hard laughter puts pressure on the tear ducts, similar to the way being in strong winds or bright sunlight or other irritants bothers our eyes, causing tears to fall. This response is called “reflex tears.”

END SIDEBAR

After all, news of a baby coming, even if it is long-anticipated and expected, throws us into a state of chaos. I remember well when I found out I was pregnant with my first child. It was not a planned pregnancy. I felt an incredible mix of wonder and joy, shock, fear, and whatever else a person may experience when confronted with a life-changing event. Having a child changes things. It changes the relationship between spouses. It changes the household. It changes how we feel about ourselves.

My mom had a baby when she was forty years old. That means that when she was the age I am now, she had a lower-elementary aged child. She and my dad still had many years of parenting left. It changed not just her life, but the lives of all the members of our family.

And today, I can’t help but think of all the mothers around the world who learn of their pregnancies while living in war zones, or refugee camps, or residing as undocumented people in foreign countries. I think of young women who become pregnant by accident and whose choices over their reproductive health are increasingly being limited, not only in the United States but around the world. It must be an incredibly difficult mixture of emotions to bring a new life into a very unsafe and broken environment. Perhaps it is the ultimate act of courage and hope.

To complicate matters even further for Sarah, Abraham already had a son, Ishmael, born to Sarah’s slave, Hagar. We know that the birth of Isaac greatly affected how Sarah felt about her husband’s other son and that son’s mother. We will confront that painful story next week.

Of course, we can’t overlook the fact that Ishmael’s very existence was the result of Sarah’s problems with infertility. I can’t imagine how this story falls on the ears of people in our congregations who want to bear a child as desperately as Sarah must have, but whose dreams are crushed by the inability to conceive or carry a baby to term.

So this is a very difficult situation, for Sarah and Abraham, and for all of us as we consider issues of pregnancy and childbirth in our own lifetime. At the very least, the pregnancy throws the household of Sarah and Abraham into chaos. They must face their deepest fears. They must renegotiate their relationship with each other and with
other members of the household. They must prepare to support their child well into their... what?... mid-100s?

But let us recall that last week I wrote about how it is often in our most chaotic, jumbled-up, messy moments that God shows up most profoundly.

So in this little scene, there are at least three distinct incidents of God being actively present in the midst of this chaotic, transitional moment for Abraham and Sarah and their household.

The first one comes when God speaks to Abraham and orders him to change what he calls his wife from Sarai to Sarah, because something big is about to happen. Something so big, in fact, that it requires a name change.

Giving a name or changing a name is a mark of major life transition. In many cultures around the world, giving a baby a name signals an event that is so profound that is marked by a ritual action. For example, in Hinduism, naming a baby is a sacred action that occurs on the twelfth day of life in an elaborate ceremony involving friends and family members. And in the Jewish tradition, boys are named on the eighth day of life, in a ritual circumcision called a brit milah.

Changing names also involves ritual action. The most obvious example, of course, is the tradition of women changing their last names to their husband’s surname after the ritual act of a marriage ceremony. (When I married my husband, I chose not to change my last name. But I did invite Scot to change his last name to mine! He politely declined.) And for women who have been divorced, reclaiming one’s maiden name may signal an important step in the path to recovery, whether it is marked by a ceremony or not.

**SIDEBAR: ON CHANGING NAMES**

by Taylor W. Burton Edwards

I was not born with the name Taylor Watson Burton Edwards. Burton was an addition made intentionally.

As my spouse and I were considering getting married, we thought carefully about what we would do with our names at marriage. I had been previously married (my first wife had died) and had simply kept my birth name. Grace and I were committed to equality and mutuality for our marriage, and we both wanted our marriage to be distinct from my previous one. After considering multiple options, we landed on both of us taking on a new last name: Burton Edwards.

Doing this required some legal work on our part. Both of us had to obtain legal name change rulings from a probate judge, change our social security cards, passports, and driver’s licenses, and then start notifying everyone else how to address us from now on. It was a lot of work, took some time, and still confuses some people and legal systems. When we moved to Georgia in 2014, for example, Grace had to produce both our...
marriage license and our legal name change orders (despite the fact that she had a legal Indiana license and a passport with her name listed correctly on it) to get a Georgia driver’s license. (I wasn't asked to do any of this. Go figure.)

But it was worth it. And it is still worth it.

Today, more people are finding value in having their names legally changed for all kinds of reasons. Some choose different names when they become adults. Others choose new names as or after they move through a gender or sex transition. Always, the choice to change one's name reflects a significant change in identity that one seeks to make, a new identity that may also create a variety of legal, personal, or economic challenges as the individual seeks to live into it.

Baptism had been a primary time of “new naming” for Christians in generations past, and still is in some cultures today. It was at baptism that one took on one’s “Christian name.” Truly, at baptism, we do all take on a new name and a new identity, one we did not inherit simply from birth: “Child of God.”

That name becomes indelible on us in ways even our birth name may not. Recently, I’ve been grateful for the opportunity to help advise a person who had made a sex transition and who had legally changed the name walk through the process of getting the baptismal certificate changed as well. The first name on that certificate has now changed. But the name God gave never will.

I am grateful to be part of a church that recognizes the power in naming and that is ready to stand by people who come to place in their lives where they discover it is time to change their name.

END SIDEBAR

So we know that changing a name signals something big in human life. In this case, the command from God to Abraham, that his wife is now to be known as Sarah, is accompanied by the news that after a lifetime of infertility, his ninety-year-old wife will soon be giving birth to a son. God will bless Abraham for generations through the birth of this child. Nations will come from her. Kings of nations will come from her.

What does Abraham do in response to this shocking news? He falls flat on his face and he LAUGHS. Might he have laughed so hard that he shed a few tears? Might he have needed a good shot of cortisol and adrenaline to relieve some of the stress of having to deliver this news to Sarah? Might he have needed that stress relief for himself???

In this case, however shocking and tear-producing the news might have been, the fact is that the first chaos brought by God in our series is a joyful chaos. It is celebrated with a meal: water, bread, cakes, meat, milk, curds. This is a lot of food! It is a feast of joy among Abraham and his three male visitors, strangers who just happen to land on their doorstep and who already know that Sarah is expecting a child. It’s a good thing that
God-in-three-persons showed up a second time! Right there in this midst of this chaos, at the door to the tent, just at the right time to help Abraham deliver the news to Sarah.

And of course, God is present with Sarah when she overhears the news. And just like her husband, she laughs. We know this because God asks Abraham why Sarah laughed. All of which begs the question: Did Sarah laugh so hard that she cried?

All of this reminds me of my favorite lines from William Blake’s poem, *Auguries of Innocence* (thanks, Fred Conger).

Man was made for joy and woe;
And when this we rightly know,
Thro’ the world we safely go.
Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine.
Under every grief and pine
Runs a joy with silken twine.

God is with us in our moments of greatest joy, and God is with us though the inevitable chaos and sorrow that life brings. God us with us in our friends and family, and God is with us in strangers who suddenly show up and bring us a word of hope and clarity in the midst of the jumbled, chaotic messes of life. God is with us in the familiar and God is with us in the unexpected.

The good news is, no matter what we must face, we don’t face it alone. We face life together, in community with Christ, and in community with one another, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

God is with us.
Praise be to the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Praise be to Jesus Christ, our Lord, Emmanuel, God with us.
PLANNING NOTES

BIRTH

Reading Notes
NRSV texts, artwork and Revised Common Lectionary Prayers for this service are available at the Vanderbilt Divinity Library.

Leccionario en Español, Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes.

Lectionnaire en français, Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé

Calendar Notes
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: BIRTH

The color from now until Advent is green, with two exceptions: All Saints Day or Sunday (November 1 or 5) and Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday (November 26).

June
June 18 Father’s Day (USA)
June 19 Juneteenth
https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/church-civic-holidays/juneteenth-2017

July
July 4 Independence Day

August
All Month Back to School Resources
https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/back-to-school-resources

September
All Month Season of Creation (2017 resources forthcoming)
September 4 Labor Day (USA)
September 15-17 Hispanic Heritage Month (USA)

October
All Month A Season of Saints (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 1 World Communion Sunday
October 6-8 Children’s Sabbath (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 15 Laity Sunday (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 31 Reformation Day (500th Anniversary)

November
November 1 All Saints Day
November 3 World Community Day
November 5 All Saints Sunday
Daylight Saving Time Change Song (Fall)
November 11 Veterans Day
November 12 Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday
International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church
November 19 Bible Sunday (National Bible Week November 19-26)
For Your Planning Team: BIRTH
An important function of the second service in a series is to capture the feel and energy of the opening service and take it to a new level. We capture some of the feel of the first service by building out the stagescape begun last week, using a reading or video with a chorus of diverse voices—this time of fathers of many ages (in honor of Father’s Day). We also maintain continuity throughout this series by using the same form of the Prayers of the People and through a similar form of response to the word each week. Today’s service takes it to the next level by including the celebration of Communion with a new Great Thanksgiving based on today’s reading. And the service ends on a high note.

Logistics for this Service:

Rehearse the setting of the stagescape: Run through the process you will use to add this week’s items to the stagescape before the service with the people who are responsible for bringing the items and placing or uncovering them. This week’s rehearsal may be a bit simpler, because it does not need to be choreographed to the reading. Items may be placed or uncovered during the second song of the opening set.

Once again, if you are bringing or adding items, you may want to place a small X made out of masking tape to indicate where the items should go. Be sure, wherever you choose to place them, that they will be within the sightlines of all or as many of your congregation as possible. If you use video feeds, be sure to rehearse also how the camera will follow those bringing and placing or uncovering these items so this action gains heightened attention, especially if you are in a larger space. This week, we commend at least the following two additions:
Another jug of water or a container of milk (place on the land level)
Baby blanket or swaddling cloth (also on land level)

We are commending Communion this week, so the elements of Communion may be brought and placed on the Lord’s Table as part of this opening action. If you are not celebrating Communion, consider adding pita bread or a large flat cake, representative of the cakes that were given to the visitors, somewhere in the proximity of the other items you are placing on the land level.

Make the video or rehearse the reading: If you are presenting the reading as a video, gather your diverse group of fathers for an outing and plan to make a day of it. Give yourself at least one full week of lead time, including the full day outing for recording, so your video editor has enough time to produce a polished final version. As with the video with children from last week, capture every father (perhaps in different locations at your outing site) offering all of the reading— not from a book, but directly into the camera (use
cue cards if you must), and edit them together to create the final montage.

Note that this week we have added verses from chapter 17 to the beginning of the reading. This is to make clear that Isaac was given his name (he/she laughs) because of the response of both Abraham and Sarah, not just Sarah, to the news that they would become parents in extremely old age (Abraham was 99, and Sarah 90 at the time of these announcements).

If you choose to do the reading live, do it as a reading. It may be unrealistic to expect people to be able to be “off book” for your service, and having cue cards present would be obvious to the congregation. So in this case, just have each person read, but be certain that you have readers who read well and expressively.

Be clear how you are dividing the verses among your readers and rehearse the reading in the space three to five times the night before and an additional two to three times the morning of the service. Include in your rehearsals exactly where each reader will stand and how the reader will get to and leave from where he or she will stand to read.

And remember, you need one more reader for the end of the service. We suggest an older-adult woman to reflect the voice of Sarah. Be sure she rehearses both her reading and getting to and from her post (in front of the Lord’s Table after Communion).

We have provided for Holy Communion this week. The text this week (a meal given in hospitality) strongly suggests the appropriateness of celebrating Holy Communion this Sunday.

Rehearse the Great Thanksgiving. The Great Thanksgiving in this service is new, and the “song of heaven” may be unfamiliar to you and to your congregation. Pastor, we recommend you rehearse the Great Thanksgiving in the worship space with your musicians at least five times the night before and at least three times before the service in the morning so your leadership at Communion is as smooth as possible. We also recommend that you or your worship/music leader teach the Communion song to the congregation just before the opening of the service so all will be able to sing it when the time comes.

Additional Resources
Because of the later dates of Easter, this set of readings did not appear in 2014 or 2011.

Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Brazil
FROM CHAOS TO COMMUNITY: WEANING
THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (June 25)

FULL SERVICE

ENTRANCE
Bring in and place or uncover items for this week’s stagescape during the opening song.

“Everything Falls” CCLI# 5490411 OR
“Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth” The Faith We Sing, 2050

WORD AND RESPONSE
Three readers are positioned at different places. An older-adult woman may be near the Lord’s Table, front and center. A mother of a teenager may be to the left. A teenager may be to the right.

Reading 1 (Older-adult woman) based on Genesis 21:8 (NRSV)
My son, Isaac, kept growing. The day of his weaning had come. It was time to rejoice.
My husband, Abraham, threw a great feast!

“I Was There to Hear Your Birth” Cry (st 1, 2, 1) TFWS 2051

Reading 2 (Mother of a teenager) based on Genesis 21: 9-11 (NRSV)
Sarah, my mistress, saw Ishmael, playing with her toddler, Isaac. And she said to Abraham, “Throw out this slave woman with her son. The son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son, Isaac.”
Abraham appeared deeply distressed. My son, Ishmael, was his son, too.

“Holy Darkness” (refrain, st 1, refrain) Worship & Song, 3141

Reading 3 (teenager) based on Genesis 21:14-16 (NRSV)
Abraham, my father, rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to my mother, Hagar. He put it around her shoulder. Then he sent us both away. We left and started wandering in the desert of Beersheba.

When the water of the skin was gone, she pushed me away to take shelter under some
bushes. Then she walked off, about the distance of a bowshot. As she was leaving, I could hear her say, over and over, “Do not let me look on the death of my child.” Then she started weeping, loudly.

(Silence)

Reading 4: (Mother of a teenager) based on Genesis 21:17-19 (NRSV)

I do not know what my boy said. But as I was weeping, an angel appeared to me. It told me God heard my son’s voice. It told me not to be afraid. It said to go get my boy and keep moving on, because God would make a great nation of him. And right then, I saw a well. And I went to the well, and got water, enough for both of us, and we moved on.

“Holy Darkness” (refrain, st 2, st 4, refrain) W&S 3141

Sermon “Weaning”

Call to Attend to People Parting Ways
As music plays or is sung by choir or ensemble, invite worshipers to take a moment to reflect on times of “weaning” in their own lives where they have parted ways or changed the nature of the connection with another person. Encourage folks to write down who these people are, to pray for them in this moment, and to discern how God is calling them to continue to trust these persons into God’s care and keeping.

“Lord of All Hopefulness” TFWS 2197 OR CCLI# 4778835
Tune: SLANE (UMH 451)

Prayers of the People
Whichever form you use, include time for people to pray (silently) for those they have listed and for one another to respond faithfully, and conclude with a petition for the forgiveness of sins.

“Prayers of the People” CCLI# 7039048 OR “Prayers of the People” TFWS 2201

The Lord’s Prayer

THANKSGIVING (AND COMMUNION)
May the peace of Christ, who unites us in love and goes with each of us at our partings, be always with you.

And also with you.
The peace may be exchanged and the offering collected. If Communion is celebrated, the Lord’s Table may also be prepared at this time.

“Praise You in This Storm” CCLI# 4543620 OR
“You Are Mine” TFWS 2218

The Great Thanksgiving

Music During Communion

“O God, in Whom We Live” W&S 3153 OR
“Jesus Is Here Right Now” Africana Hymnal, 4134

Thanksgiving after Communion UMH 11]

SENDING FORTH

“Let Your Mercy Rain” CCLI # 4822853 OR
“Blest Be the Tie That Binds” (st 1, 3, 4) UMH 557

Deacon or Pastor:
Blessed be the ties that bind us.
Blessed be the paths that carry us from each other.
Blessed be God who goes with us in every journey, and establishes our way.

Go in peace.

Postlude Reprise of “Let Your Mercy Rain” or “Blest Be the Tie That Binds”
Everything Falls (CCLI# 5490411)

Though this song is quite challenging to work through for a congregation, it is almost fitting that its singing takes some work because of the tension it addresses and the angst within the song itself. Making a great opening for such a difficult service, this song is best approached in one of the following manners: 1) Sing in the original key of C, but do not change octaves as written in the song. The chorus is far too high for congregations to sing, and such a dramatic shift is discouraging for singers. To achieve the octave shift, have a lower male voice sing the verse, with a treble voice singing the chorus. This will bring the difference in range without the tension that goes along with an octave shift otherwise. 2) Sing in the key of G, which is quite a bit lower than the original key (C). This places the range of the verses too low for most congregations, but the refrain is in a higher tessitura that sits well for congregational singing. Have an alto soloist sing the verses in a lower range, and invite the congregation to sing beginning at the chorus. The range in the verses is too low (and aurally “muddy”) for male ranges, but a clear, female voice can handle this in a way that doesn’t sound pressed or strained. The ideal accompaniment is piano, guitar, or full band.

Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth (TFWS 2050)

One of the more historically controversial hymns published in The Faith We Sing, this hymn embraces the feminine characteristics of God, from giving birth, to feeding, to nurturing. It must be said, however, that this kind of exploration in language addresses the need for people to see the fullness of God. Throughout Scripture, many images of God appear, and yes, even mothering ones like this lament of Jesus:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37, NRSV)

Notice it doesn’t declare a gender for God; it simply offers a feminine image of a hen because the characteristics of God are above our own understanding of who God is and how God works. In many churches, however, singing feminine imagery might be a new or uncomfortable practice. Set aside plenty of time to talk to the congregation about why singing hymns with feminine divine imagery helps better shape our understanding of the fullness of God. In conjunction with the scriptural narrative this week, the singing of this hymn can be very powerful as the people will focus upon the challenges of weaning and the lament that can stem from it. History of Hymns

I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry

This classic John Ylvisaker hymn fittingly bears a good bit of feminine imagery within its title, for who is indeed present for the birth of a child? The mother. God here is represented as a caring parent who nurtures throughout life--from birth through
childhood and all stages of adulthood. For the purpose of singing within the liturgy this week, we recommend singing stanzas 1, 2, and a reprise of 1. Accompany with piano, organ, or guitar. History of Hymns

**Holy Darkness** (W&S 3141)

Dan Schutte is most well-known for his hymn, “Here I Am, Lord,” but this particular hymn this week has some very powerful singing qualities by offering images antithetical to what is usually expected in hymns. So often darkness is regarded as the evil place, or the place without God, where God is often symbolized by light. Schutte turns this upside down, however, by offering the darkness as a very sacred place in which God dwells. Likewise, pain and suffering are seen as the places where God draws near—much more closely than in times of ease. For the liturgical purpose this week, have the congregation sing the refrain only, with the stanzas sung by soloists or choir. The ideal accompaniment is piano, organ, or fingerpicked guitar. History of Hymns

**Lord of All Hopefulness** (TFWS 2197 OR CCLI# 4778835)

If you have never prayed the daily office, singing this hymn at varying points during the day is a good start. Each stanza relates to a different time of day: waking, labors, homing, and sleeping. Singing the stanza that relates to your work at a particular time can help center your prayer on the activity of the moment. Within this service, allow each stanza to be a prayer for those encountering times of parting and possible division. Singing of bliss, strength, love, and peace can help us focus on the things we and others need as we encounter difficult times. If someone in your congregation plays a tin whistle, this is an opportunity to allow that person to add to the Irish character of the tune SLANE (which is commonly sung with “Be Thou My Vision”). Accompany the whistle with a guitar, piano, or organ. The printed key is Eb, but you might need to lower to D, depending on the key of the tin whistle.

**Prayers of the People** (CCLI 7039048)

This song is a great example of modern music created to serve a liturgical purpose, and it is very accessible to churches with any instrumental accompaniment. The song is not meant to stand alone as a song; it will require some intercessions to be created from the context of your community. Respond to each intercession with either the A theme (“You hear us calling”) or the B theme (“Lord, have mercy”). This poignant piece works with organ, piano, guitar, or any other simple accompaniment.

**Prayers of the People** (*The Faith We Sing*, 2201)

Also a wonderful choice for liturgical singing, this short piece by Bonnie Johansen-Werner enhances intercessory prayer with an easily singable refrain and response. I recommend singing the refrain multiple times (in the manner of the songs of Taizé) before the petitions begin. Follow each petition, whether voiced separately or as a group, with the response. Finally, end with a reprise of the refrain. If your choir is able to sing four-part harmony, instruct them to sing the parts gently as the congregation sings the melody in unison.
Praise You in This Storm (CCLI# 4543620)
Many churches that worship in modern musical styles will be familiar with this work, which came to prominence with the band Casting Crowns. It addresses the theme of God’s faithfulness in times of struggle and offers words of commitment for those singing to remain faithful as well. The recommended key for congregational singing is D minor (Relative to F Major), and this song can be accompanied by full band, guitar, or piano.

You Are Mine (TFWS 2218)
Hymns that offer assurance are very often the hymns many congregations want to sing, especially hymns that use the language so often found in divine encounters in the Bible: “Do not be afraid.” David Haas’s hymn also includes a very singable and sentimental melody, with only one place that is frequently challenging for congregations: The opening melodic line of the stanzas is almost the same as the first melodic line of the refrain, but the last two notes of the opening phrase of the refrain have a different rhythm, and the last note is different. This may seem like a minor issue, but it frequently trips up even the most experienced singers who are unfamiliar with the hymn. If your church has a choir, make sure they are aware of this difference and that they can sing the difference in these lines confidently. It will make a great difference when you introduce it to your congregation. The ideal accompaniment is piano or organ, although a guitar can also be effectively paired with either of these instruments (if paired with the organ, use a softer organ registration such as flute stops).

O God, in Whom We Live (W&S 3153)
The scriptural narrative this week is very difficult, and when we encounter the Communion Table, it is likely there will be some in attendance who feel wounded by the division created when Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away. For this reason, we have recommended this hymn. When sharing in the holy meal, it is important to acknowledge that we do so together, despite our “proud divisions.” Particularly poignant is the acknowledgement in this work that all are children of God. Sing this hymn in a nurturing way (this doesn’t mean very slow!) at a tempo in which the half note = 60. Allow time for the congregation to breathe before the third phrase (“We live in darkness”), and accompany with either organ or piano.

Jesus Is Here Right Now (Africana Hymnal, 4134)
Again, following so tough a story as today, the assurance that Jesus is in this place is comforting and offers hope and peace to many who will be grieving in this service. Be sure to prepare your choir ahead of time on this selection because they will be the key to the congregation learning this song. Your pianist will also love playing the accompaniment, with its swing and chromaticism of the gospel harmonies. I encourage playing and singing at a tempo where the dotted quarter note = 50. Accompany with piano or rhythm section (piano, bass, drums, organ). Make note that the copyright of this song is registered with GIA Publications, and using it requires permission from OneLicense.net.
Let Your Mercy Rain (CCLI # 4822853)

This great modern song offers the image of God as merciful rain. Be aware, however, that the image of rain can be both healing and damaging (for instance, one community plagued by drought might view this song differently from one plagued by flooding). Use your best judgment on the inclusion of a song that invokes natural images and when they will be most effective. The song itself is bold and energetic. If you are familiar with the Chris Tomlin recording of the song, I believe it is a little sedate and under tempo for such a work as this. At the conclusion of the worship service, this is a good time to speed up the tempo just a little bit more than the original. However, this also depends on the worship dynamic you create at the conclusion of the service in your context. Accompany with guitar, simplified piano (not on the melody), or band, but let the voices lead the melody. Tomlin is renowned for singing in keys not good for congregations, so the key of G is recommended here.

Blest Be the Tie That Binds (UMH 557)

Ever a classic hymn well known by churches of varying traditions, this eighteenth-century work is a perfect choice for the ending of this service because it illustrates the bonds temporarily broken and the hope to mend them, either in time or eternity. Many congregations will be familiar with this text, and accompaniment on organ or piano is recommended. However, since it is so well known, feel free to be creative with it! A common practice would be to sing in 2/2 and syncopate the rhythm, so that the following sequence is created:

When singing in this way, it is good to accompany with percussion to support the pulse of the music. Another option would be to use a new tune, such as the one written by Chuck Bell for the 2015 FUMMWA Music and Worship Arts Week, which you can purchase from Chuck Bell Music. History of Hymns
PREACHING NOTES

I breastfed both my sons, so I can write about weaning from firsthand experience. Breastfeeding my children was one of the greatest gifts of my life. It is an amazing thing for a human child to continue to be nourished by the body of its mother after it leaves her womb. I breastfed my first child for about eighteen months. I knew it was time to stop when he started using his legs to climb up my side and onto my shoulder, sometimes rotating all the way around over my head to the other shoulder and down, all while trying to stay latched on. Weaning him was not difficult. He was too active to continue. He had never taken formula, but by the time he was that age, he was fully able to be nourished by solid food.

My second child was completely different. From the beginning, he required additional nourishment beyond what my body could produce. He would breastfeed and then cry for more, so we would give him a bottle of formula too. After about six months of nursing, he was done. He quit. He grew to prefer the bottle. And so, with a great sense of loss that came from knowing that I would never nurse another child, I accepted that my son had weaned himself.

Given time to wean on their own terms and according to their own timing, both of my sons transitioned from breastfeeding to other types of nourishment without much difficulty. It was probably harder on me than it was on either of them.

But I know every woman’s experience with weaning is not like mine.

There are women who choose not to breastfeed, or who cannot breastfeed, or who are separated from their infants at birth. There are women who have difficulty breastfeeding, and who must stop the process even if they don’t want to. There are women who do not want to breastfeed for personal reasons. All of these women must physically bind their breasts to stop the production of breast milk.

In years past, and in some cultures today, there are women called to the work of being wet nurses, who breastfeed the children of women who cannot or who choose not to nurse their own babies. Today, formula and modern breast pumps have made it possible for infants to thrive, whether they are fed by breast milk or in another way.

And there are nursing babies who are suddenly separated from their mothers for all kinds of reasons—accidents, illness, death, deportation, kidnapping, being forcibly removed from a home—to name just a few. All kinds of things happen in this world that can force sudden weaning on an infant and mother.

No matter how it happens, weaning signals a change in the relationship between mother and child. It means the child is less dependent on the mother. It means others may step in to care for the child in ways equal to the mother. It may mean a time of grief for both mother and child. It is a transition.
So now that we’ve opened the pathway to being completely frank by talking about breastfeeding from the pulpit, let’s be equally frank about the difficulties inherent in this story. As always, I am partial to the always thoughtful and challenging work of Douglas E. Wingeier in *Keeping Holy Time: Studying the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001, pp.232-233), whose words I will try to summarize.

Wingeier notes that throughout the history of biblical interpretation, scholars and preachers have tried to explain, and even condone, the behavior of Sarah toward the slave and concubine, Hagar, and Hagar’s child Ishmael, by chalking it up to acceptable jealousy (even though the behavior of Abraham and Sarah violated the community standards of their time). And perhaps it is the sin of jealousy that is at the root of Sarah’s behavior. Perhaps. But I’m not willing to put it all on Sarah. I think there are other factors at play here.

So the story goes that Abraham throws a feast to celebrate the weaning of Isaac, a ritual that likely took place around Isaac’s third birthday. At this point, says Wingeier, Ishmael would have been around fifteen (although my colleague Taylor Burton-Edwards calculates Ishmael to be a little older—sixteen or seventeen).

**SIDEBAR: TIMELINE**
by Taylor Burton-Edwards
The way the story of the expulsion or, we might say, deportation of Hagar and Ishmael is usually depicted in art and common storytelling, we may have the impression Ishmael was a young child (perhaps not much more than a toddler) at the time.

The time cues in Genesis, however, tell a different tale. In Genesis 16:16, we read “Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael” (NRSV). Genesis 17:24 notes Abraham (renamed at his circumcision) was 99 when he was circumcised, and the next verse tells us that Ishmael was thirteen years old at that time. Finally, the birth of Isaac took place when Abraham was 100 years old (Genesis 21:5), which puts Ishmael at fourteen years old.

The deportation, however, happened only after Isaac was weaned. The expected age of weaning in this culture during this time period appears to have been two to three years old (see I Samuel 1:20-24), meaning Ishmael was likely sixteen or seventeen years old at the time of his deportation.

This is why we have cast Ishmael as a teenager in the reading of today’s story.

**END SIDEBAR**

In the story, Sarah becomes angry when she sees the two boys playing together. This is not the first time she has dealt with her feelings of jealousy and anger toward Hagar and Ishmael. Back in chapter sixteen, Sarai (as she was still known) complained that after Hagar had conceived, she looked at her mistress “with contempt.”
Since the role of a concubine was to produce a male heir, the child born to that woman would legally be tied to the wife of the child’s father, not the concubine. So the child to be born would be Sarai’s son, not Hagar’s. And yet, Sarai felt angry and jealous toward Hagar, even though it was Sarai who asked Abraham to go to Hagar because she, Sarai, was barren.

It’s a tough situation for all parties involved. In addition to jealousy and anger, there are issues of infertility, sexual infidelity, abuse, slavery, and gender and cultural oppression.

In chapter sixteen, Abraham reminded Sarai that Hagar was her slave, and he told her to handle the perceived insubordination in whatever way she saw fit. So, empowered by her husband, Sarai “dealt harshly” with Hagar. So harshly that Hagar ran away.

But then an angel of the Lord came to Hagar by a spring in the wilderness and told her to return home. The angel promised that she would be the bearer of multitudes. And so Hagar returned to the household of Abraham and Sarai, and life went on. For sixteen or seventeen more years.

In today’s story, when Sarah saw the boys playing together and became jealous, instead of “dealing harshly” with her slave, this time she asked Abraham to deport Hagar and Ishmael. Cast them out. Send the woman and her child back to Egypt where she had come from. After more than sixteen or seventeen years of living as a slave and concubine, under harsh treatment, Hagar and her teenaged son are cast out. They have nowhere to go and no way to support themselves.

**SIDEBAR: THE LEGACY OF ISHMAEL**

By Dawn Chesser

Perhaps most disturbing in this story is not only is Abraham willing to have his concubine and child deported, but God is portrayed as complicit in this action. God comes to Abraham to assure him that his son will be protected and that Ishmael’s offspring will be counted among Abraham’s heirs. Like Isaac, Ishmael will become a “nation” in accordance with God’s promise. And in fact, God confirms this to Hagar, when God hears “the voice of the boy” and sends an angel to tell Hagar not to be afraid, but to go to her son and comfort him.

The “Ishmaelites” became traders. They were a nomadic tribe that thrived in the southern deserts, and their lineage continues to this day in the form of the Arab people. Ishmael is honored by Muslims all over the world as the forebear of the Arab nation and a child of divine promise (information summarized from Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time*, Year A233).

END SIDEBAR

I want to suggest that we approach weaning as something that is not limited to its strict physical meaning. Weaning can be a metaphor for any kind of breaking apart of the bonds of relationship. Weaning can be the fracturing of the relationship between a
mother and daughter, a father and son, or two friends. Weaning can be applied to any transition that leads to separation from another in the life of a human being. We must wean ourselves from all kinds of relationships in this life, and each time we do it, we are thrown into the chaos of transition.

So this casting out, this deportation of Hagar and her child, is in my mind a kind of “weaning.” It is a transition from a state of dependence to one of independence. It is a break in a family relationship. It is a transition from one kind of life to another. And in this case, it is a weaning that is troubling no matter how you look at it. Because the relationship from which Hagar and Ishmael are deported was not a healthy, loving, supportive situation. It was abusive and oppressive for them both. Unfortunately for them, as for so many people who are cast out of relationships that are abusive, the departure does not necessarily lead to a better situation. People who are cast out, or who are deported, or who leave willing to escape an impossible or abusive situation, are often sent away with nothing: no food, no money, no way of supporting themselves and their offspring in a new place.

So once again we have a chaotic, jumbled, messy life transition. But what is it we said the last two weeks? When things get chaotic, jumbled, and messy, look for signs of God. God is always present with us, no matter how hard the going gets.

In the case of Sarah and Abraham and Hagar and Ishmael, some of God’s responses are hard to understand. God’s apparent support of something we find deplorable is difficult to explain.

But then, that’s the way it always is.

We know God is with us. And we know that although God is present, difficult times still come our way. We get thrown into chaos over and over. The hard truth is: God does not always prevent people from doing things that are wrong.

It is true that Sarah made a decision to trust in her ability to handle the situation. It is true that Sarah indulged her own feelings of anger, jealousy, and resentment rather than trusting God’s purpose and vision for this family. It is true that Abraham supported Sarah’s unlawful and sinful behavior, and in doing so, engaged in unrighteous behavior himself. And it is true that God didn’t prevent Sarah and Abraham from doing this terrible thing. God didn’t stop them from deporting Hagar and Ishmael. God didn’t stop them from acting inhumanely toward their fellow human beings, their own family members.

Just as God does not prevent us from acting in ways that are harmful for others.

The good news is, God is with us, even when we do not act in Christlike ways toward our sisters and brothers. God is with us, sending messages through “angels” to encourage us to engage the really hard questions, admit to our sins, own up to our mistakes, turn our lives around, and head in a new direction.
• God is with us, inviting us to trust in God more than in ourselves.
• God is with us, offering us grace so that we may have the faith to trust in God.
• God is with us, allowing us to fall down and urging us to learn from our mistakes so that we will not repeat them.
• God is with us, sometimes saying and doing things that are confusing and difficult to hear, let alone, understand.
• God is with us, watching over brothers and sisters in our own Christian faith and our brothers and sisters in nations born to the cousins of our faith.
• God is with us. Emmanuel, God with us.
PLANNING NOTES
WEANING

Reading Notes
NRSV texts, artwork and Revised Common Lectionary Prayers for this service are available at the Vanderbilt Divinity Library.

Leccionario en Español, Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes.

Lectionnaire en français, Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé

Calendar Notes
THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: WEANING

The color from now until Advent is green, with two exceptions: All Saints Day or Sunday (November 1 or 5) and Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday (November 26).

July
July 4 Independence Day

August
All Month Back to School Resources

September
All Month Season of Creation (2017 resources forthcoming)
September 4 Labor Day (USA)
September 15- 
October 15 Hispanic Heritage Month (USA)

October
All Month A Season of Saints (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 1 World Communion Sunday
October 6-8 Children’s Sabbath (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 15 Laity Sunday (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 31 Reformation Day (500th Anniversary)

November
November 1 All Saints Day
November 3 World Community Day
November 5 All Saints Sunday
November 11 Veterans Day
November 12 Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday
November 19 Bible Sunday (National Bible Week November 19-26)
November 23 Thanksgiving Day
November 26 Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday
United Methodist Student Day
For Your Planning Team: WEANING
During the season after Epiphany, we described the middle weeks of the series as climbing up to a plateau and walking around to take in the vista.

In this series, this week and next are more like walking down into a deep valley and beginning to grapple with serious and even potentially deadly challenges. We emerge from the valley at the conclusion of the series.

So today’s service picks up on some of the joy and hope of last week’s conclusion at the entrance, but almost immediately (especially in the modern worship song choice) makes the turn to sense of bleakness that dominates in today’s reading.

The reading of the Scripture this week, as throughout this series, is scripted in paraphrase, and put into the voice of the readers. To help build continuity from week to week, consider asking the same older-adult woman who read at the conclusion of last week’s service to be the first reader in today’s service. The result may be readers from three generations, older adult, middle adult, and late teenager.

Logistics for this Service: Prepare the stagescape: For this week, if it’s possible for you to shift your stagescape to remove or cover part of the blue fabric representing the sea level with a sand-colored fabric, then move the large jug from the first week and place it in the center of the new “desert” level. This places your stagescape in the desert, and the jug will represent the well presented to Hagar, God’s presence and salvation. During the opening song, have someone carry in or uncover an empty “skin of water” and place it still on the desert level, at a slight distance from the water jug. (You may have campers in your congregation who have a water pouch.)

Rehearse the Reading: The reading today is charged with emotion. There is great joy at Sarah’s weaning (Reading 1). There is some shock and disbelief at Sarah’s response to Ishmael playing with Isaac (Reading 2). There is profound sorrow and loss as Hagar pushes Ishmael away and heads her own way, weeping (Reading 3). And there is determination through some tears as Hagar and Ishmael make their way toward a new life in a distant land (Reading 4).

Because there is such deep emotion in these readings, rehearsal is imperative. The goal is for the readers to meet and reflect, not ignore or over-act, the emotion. This will take time and patience. Do not rush this. Strongly consider holding rehearsal time the night before and having at least two full rehearsals the morning of the service to ensure all can hit their emotional cues just right.
Additional Resources
2014 Planning Helps for these readings
Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay
FULL SERVICE

Using lighting or other nonverbal means, call attention to the stagescape for week 4.

ENTRANCE
“Listen to My Words” (omit stanza 3) CCLI # 7029174 OR “Out of the Depths” United Methodist Hymnal, 515

WORD AND RESPONSE
Two readers move into position during the opening music. One may be a youth, and the other an older adult.

Choir Solo or Ensemble
“Hear My Prayer, O God” (st 1) Worship & Song, 3131

Reading 1 (Youth) Genesis 22:1-6 (NRSV, alt.)

God tested my father, Abraham.
God said to him, “Abraham.” And my father replied, “Here I am.”
God said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will show you.”

So my father rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, took two of our young men with him, and got me.
He cut the wood for the burnt offering, then set out for the place God had shown him.

My father saw the place on the third day, still far off.
So he said to our young men,
“Stay here with the donkey. My son and I will go over there, worship, then come back to you.”

My father took the wood of the burnt offering, and he laid it on me.
He carried the fire and the knife.
And the two of us walked on together.

“Hear My Prayer, O God,” st 2 W&S 3131

Reading 2 (Older Adult) Genesis 22:7-10 (NRSV, alt.)

My son called to me. “Father?”
“Yes,” I said. “I’m here.”
Isaac said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”
I said, “God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” And the two of us walked on together.

When we arrived at the place God had shown me, I built an altar, and laid the wood in order on top of the fire. Then I tied and bound my son, Isaac, and I laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. I reached out my hand to take the knife to slaughter my son.

(Silence)

Reading 3 (Youth)  Genesis 22:11-13 (NRSV, alt.)
An angel called to my father just then:
“Abraham! Abraham!
Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him.
For now I know you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

My father looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. He went, took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering, instead of me.

Reading 4 (Older Adult)  Genesis 22:14, 19 (NRSV, alt.)
I called that place, “The Lord will provide.”
As it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

I returned to my young men. And we went on together to Beersheba.

“Hear My Prayer, O God,” st 3  W&S 3131

Sermon  “Rites of Passage”

Call to Address Abuse
While music plays, all may be invited to write names of persons they know or suspect may be being abused, especially children, older adults, and people with disabilities, who their abusers are, and what action they will take to address at least one of these situations in the coming week. Be sure to include in your bulletin or onscreen
information about local entities to call to report abuse or obtain help. At the conclusion of this time, all may join in singing:

“Hear My Prayer, O God,” st 4

Prayers of the People

*Which ever form you use, include time for people to pray (silently) for those they have listed in response to one of the biddings, and conclude with a petition for the forgiveness of sins.*

“Prayers of the People”
“Prayers of the People”

The Lord’s Prayer

THANKSGIVING (AND COMMUNION)

The voice of the Lord calls our name, and bids us lay no hand even on those we are poised to harm.

The voice of the Lord calls us to peace, and to become agents of peace with all who are abused, with all without voice or power.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

*And also with you.*

*The people may exchange the peace of Christ. The offering may be collected. If Communion is celebrated, the Lord’s Table may be prepared.*

Music During the Offering

“Mighty to Save”

“When We Are Called to Sing Your Praise”

The Great Thanksgiving

Music During Communion

Instrumental interlude on AUTHOR

Thanksgiving after Communion
SENDING FORTH
“Lift Every Voice and Sing” (st 1-2) UMH 519

Deacon or Pastor:
The Lord will provide.
The Lord will provide.
The Lord will provide.

Go forth to be God’s angels,
God’s messengers,
the real adults in the room,
who walk with others with patience and love
through life’s rites of passage,
who call a halt to abuse and violence before it happens,
work for healing where it does,
and become living witnesses to all that
The Lord will provide.

Amen.

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” (st 3) UMH 519
Listen to My Words (CCLI # 7029174)

Selecting the opening song on a difficult Sunday is always a challenging task. This paraphrase of Psalm 5 sets the tone for this service very well. The Psalm begins, “Give ear to my words” (NRSV), which bathes the opening of worship in prayer. Be sure to sing in a manner that invites prayer. If the opening set of four sixteenth notes is always sung with too much emphasis on the first note, the effect on congregational singing may be jarring. Rather, let the sixteenth notes build toward the half note. This will take the march-like feel out of the rhythm and add just enough lyricism to encourage the same from the congregation. Accompany with a simple ensemble, using piano, guitar, and cello. The cello would be very effective as a way to present the bass line here, and the timbre of that particular instrument, as opposed to the electric bass, will reflect the mood of this service. The original key of A minor (relative to C major) is ideal for congregational singing. Lastly, the bridge sections are so long and different from the melody of the verses that I would have a soloist only sing those sections, inviting the congregation to sing on verses only. I would also encourage the last phrase (“Listen to Our Words”) to be sung rubato and unaccompanied by a soloist.

Out of the Depths (UMH 515)

Psalm 130 also gives us the words of lament, and these words will help undergird our receiving and response to the scriptural narrative today. Presenting this hymn in a creative way can also provide context for the rest of the service. Many hymns by Martin Luther are often regarded as being accompanied by organ only in a chorale form, but I would challenge you to look for other ways to enliven the singing of this hymn. The depths of lament here conjure a feeling of simplicity. Therefore, it may be more stark and powerful to accompany the singing with a solo flute one octave higher than the melody line. A bass pedal point on E, either from organ, another instrument, or the bass section of a choir, can also prove effective. Also, create some dissonance and mystery on the last sung note from two octaves of handbells as one octave spells out an E major broken chord, with the higher octave on an E minor chord as the last sung note is sustained. History of Hymns

Hear My Prayer, O God (W&S 3131)

As a bridge from the previous hymn, hold an E pedal point as readers get in position. At that point, instruct the choir or soloist to begin. If sung by a choir, this Taizé-like chant works very well a cappella, so work to equip your choir to do this, if possible. If not, don’t fret. The accompaniment is simple and can be played on either organ or piano. The text, written by Carl Daw, reflects the angst of the Scripture passage most effectively, so whether soloist or choir--sing plaintively.

Prayers of the People (CCLI# 7039048)

This song is a great example of modern music created to serve a liturgical purpose, and it is very accessible to churches with any instrumental accompaniment. The song is not meant to stand alone as a song; it will require some intercessions to be created from the context of your community. Respond to each intercession with either
the A theme (“You hear us calling”) or the B theme (“Lord, have mercy”). This poignant piece works with organ, piano, guitar, or any other simple accompaniment.

Prayers of the People (*The Faith We Sing*, 2201)
Also a wonderful choice for liturgical singing, this short piece by Bonnie Johansen-Werner enhances intercessory prayer with an easily singable refrain and response. I recommend singing the refrain multiple times (in the manner of the songs of Taizé) before the petitions begin. Follow each petition, whether voiced separately or as a group, with the response. Finally, end with a reprise of the refrain before ending. If your choir is able to sing four-part harmony, instruct them to sing the parts gently as the congregation sings the melody in unison.

Mighty to Save (*W&S* 3038)
Because of the power of atmospherics in worship, falling into a pit of despair and not coming out is always a risk. Knowing this, it is important to remind the congregation that God knows our despair and works in the midst of it. We all are guilty of “fears and failures,” and the knowledge that Jesus is Lord can redeem even the most hopeless situations. This song is most powerful when accompanied by a full band, but a solo piano or smaller ensemble also works well.

Our CCLI Top 100 vetting team offered a critique of this song for use in conversations among worship planning teams, with the primary concerns being that the actions of the Resurrection are a little confused here. Upon consulting Paul’s letters, we find that God the Father raised Christ the Son from the dead, and this song paints Jesus as the one who “conquered the grave.” This may be a small point, but it was offered as a concern because of the way in which songs affect the theological vocabulary of the church. Receiving a high score, it was still recommended for use in worship, and the yellow rating was given to encourage conversation about it in the local church.

When We Are Called to Sing Your Praise (*W&S* 2216)
The tone of this hymn is almost defiant when paired with the KINGSFOLD tune, and singing it allows for a bit of righteous anger on behalf of those feeling that emotion in the congregation. However, on the second half of each stanza, the hymn turns toward the prayer for God to remind us that God knows our despair. The end of the final stanza even moves toward thankfulness in the midst of “the shadowed way.” Accompany on organ or piano, or even this arrangement of the tune if you would like to accompany with a Celtic ensemble.

Author of Life Divine (instrumental) [*W&S* 3166]
I recommend the playing of AUTHOR, which is the tune of “Author of Life Divine” found in *Worship & Song*, during the serving of Communion in this service—primarily to give the congregation time to wrestle with the tension between the altar used to bind Isaac and the Communion Table. Allow the music to accompany the ritual action of the holy meal to support the sighs too deep for words.
Lift Every Voice and Sing (UMH 519)

No hymn tells the story of struggle as well as this classic hymn text from James Weldon Johnson. It does take a long time to sing, so be sure you have set aside plenty of time to sing it in its entirety at the close of the service. The tempo of J. Rosamond Johnson’s tune needs to be slow, with the dotted quarter = 46 or so. Accompany with organ or piano, and be sure to prepare the choir in plenty of time so they can learn all the parts. Regarding breathing, make sure the leader and choir take full breaths to not breathe within the words at the end of the second, fourth, and eighth lines (“liberty,” “rolling,” and “victory is”). In its singing, also find a way to make sure the congregation knows the context of the hymn, which can be found in this History of Hymns article.

PREACHING NOTES

Many times, when I’ve heard preachers interpret the meaning of this story, they have said something about how it points to the absolute trust, obedience, and faithfulness Abraham had in God. Abraham’s trust and faith was so great that he was willing to murder his son if that was what God required.

I want to suggest that we approach this text with an honest and critical eye, not as a story about the depth of Abraham’s faith, but as the starting point for the legacy of the strength and perseverance of Isaac, who not only survived abuse, violence, and near-death at the hands of his father, but who also rose to become a pillar of faith, the second of the three patriarchs of the Hebrew faith tradition.

Isaac was the only one of the three patriarchs whose name was never changed. He was also the only one never to leave the promised land of Canaan. And he was the longest living patriarch, not dying until the age of 180. In spite of some of my criticisms of Isaac’s marriage to the much younger Rebekah (see preaching notes for next week), he was the only patriarch who was faithful to his wife. Rebekah brings her maids with her into the marriage, but there is no record that they became Isaac’s concubines in spite of the fact that Rebekah was thought to be barren for many years before she became pregnant and gave birth to Jacob and Esau.

BEGIN SIDE BAR: WHAT THINGS?

By Dawn Chesser

This passage starts out by saying, “After these things God tested Abraham.”

What things?

Well, one of these “things” is the story of Hagar and Ishmael being deported from their home and sent out to the wilderness. We talked about this story last week.

After that, there is a story about how Abimelech, the king of Gerar, tried to take Sarah as a wife. But Abimelech realized the strength of Abraham’s God when God came to
him in a dream and told him to return Sarah to Abraham because Abraham was a prophet. God told Abimelech that if he didn’t do it, he would die. But if he did, Abraham would pray for him to live. So Abimelech did what God asked. After that, Abimelech gave Abraham and Sarah some land, and Abraham prayed for Abimelech’s healing and the restoration of his family because they had been stricken with barrenness.

So then Abimelech made another appearance. He came to Abraham with the commander of his Army and said, “I know God is with you. I’ve been loyal to you, and I trust you and your God will be loyal to me as well.” Abraham complained that some of Abimelech’s servants had seized his well. Abimelech responded that he didn’t know anything about it. So Abraham took a sheep and an oxen and gave them to Abimelech and made with him a covenant. Abraham set apart seven lambs. Abimelech asked what it meant and Abraham told him that accepting the seven lambs would mean that he had witnessed that Abraham had dug the well at Beersheba. Abimelech agreed to the covenant and left, and Abraham planted a tree in the name of the Lord to signify the spot where he was to reside in the land of the Philistines.

It was after all this that we come to this decisive moment for Abraham that begins with the line, “After these things God tested Abraham.”

SIDEBAR: HOW OLD WAS ISAAC AT HIS BINDING?
by Taylor Burton-Edwards

Genesis gives us no direct statement of Isaac’s age when today’s story takes place. Artistic depictions of Isaac in the scene vary from a young boy to a what appears to be a teenager.

What might be most reasonable to conclude? Two paths would seem to lead to the conclusion that Isaac was likely at least a late teenager.

First, Isaac appears to have had to be able to fend for himself independently immediately after this incident, since he is not named among those who returned with Abraham to Beersheba (Genesis 21:19). Indeed, Isaac appears to have instead gone further south to Beerlahairoi to set up a farming operation and build his own household near there (Genesis 24:62). Setting up an independent household was not the work of boys, but of young men.
Second, the Bible tends to depict a strong parallelism in the events of the first families within and across generations. For two striking examples, Abraham and Isaac both pawn off their wives as their sisters (Abraham did this three times!), and in one instance both to a Philistine ruler named Abimelech (Abraham in Genesis 20 and Isaac in Genesis 26). And Isaac (via a servant) and Jacob both first encounter their future wives at a well in Haran (Genesis 24 and 29). Since the effect of this binding of Isaac is what appears to be a permanent separation between Isaac and Abraham until Abraham’s burial, which was also the effect of the expulsion/deportation of Hagar and Ishmael, it would be quite plausible to suggest a parallelism in age (16-17) may be implied as well.

Taken together, we may surmise that we are to understand that this incident took place when Abraham was around 117 and Isaac was around 17, and that it is intended to mark a decisive end of Isaac’s childhood and an equally decisive beginning of his adulthood.

END SIDEBAR

When they finally arrived at the site, right away Abraham began the work of setting out the wood for the sacrificial offering. Perhaps Isaac thought his father was simply preparing a campfire to cook dinner. But this was no benign campfire. Abraham was building an altar upon which he is going to tie down his son to make a sacrificial burnt offering to the Lord. Then, somehow, Abraham managed to wrestle Isaac to the ground, tie him up, and bind him to the altar.

As I try to imagine this scene, I am reminded of a turning point in my father’s relationship with each of my two brothers. When we were little kids, one of the greatest memories I have of our family is of my father getting on the floor and wrestling with us. He would pin us down and intone, “hoo-hoo-hoo” into our ears, which tickled us almost to the point of pain, until we screamed “uncle,” signifying that it was time to stop. My dad always stopped the torture at a cry of “uncle.”

Playing with my dad this way was wonderful and awful all at the same time. Our wrestling matches would throw our entire family room into a state of chaos as we each vied for my father’s attention. Sometimes we would try to work together to pin my dad down. He would pretend that we were making progress, but being bigger and stronger, eventually he would just flip us over. We lost every time.

As I grew into a teenage girl, my father stopped wrestling on the floor with me. But the practice continued with each of my brothers. As my brothers got bigger and stronger, I would watch with glee as it became harder and harder for my father to take them down. Finally, with each one of them, the day came when the tables turned and my brothers became stronger than our father. It was my father who was forced to scream “uncle.”

When that happened, it was the end of the wrestling matches in our family. I think of those events as marking a transition in the relationship between my father and each of

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my brothers. Taking my father down was a rite of passage through which each of my brothers declared his manhood.

The writer of Genesis does not provide a description of how it was that Abraham was able to take Isaac down. As my colleague has noted, Isaac was likely at least seventeen years old. Even if he was not yet fully grown, he was no longer a child. I wonder if Abraham had to physically wrestle with Isaac. I wonder if, as in my family, it might have been a family game they played together. I wonder if Isaac was getting closer to the point of his own declaration of manhood.

However it went, in the case of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham won the match. He not only took his son down, but he bound him with ropes and tied him to the sacrificial altar. And then he took out his knife to brutally slash his son's throat.

Right at that moment, an angel cried out to Abraham, saying that now the Lord knew that Abraham feared God, since he was willing to wrestle his son to the ground, bind him, murder him, and offer him as a sacrifice. The ram appeared in the bush, and Abraham left his son and ran to catch it. He cut Isaac loose and offered the ram in place of his son Isaac as his sacrifice. And the Lord again promised Abraham numerous blessings and offspring because of his faithfulness.

But what about Isaac? What happened to him? How did this terrible thing change his life story? Was it a rite of passage, a decisive and life-altering moment of transition for him? How did it affect his life going forward? Did it deepen his faith, or shatter it?

SIDEBAR: WHAT DO GOD’S PEOPLE DO WITH THIS HORRIFYING STORY?
by Taylor Burton-Edwards

I grew up in a very Jewish neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio. By very Jewish, I mean that nearly all of the people in a three-block radius of my home were Jewish. There was an Orthodox Jewish synagogue less than a block away. The Jewish Community Center, about four blocks away, was the primary community gathering place. The best restaurant in the area (in my view!) was Tillie Nabolski’s Nasherei, and on High Holy Days (Passover, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), I (as a Gentile) was often one of two or three students in my elementary school class.

I did not adequately appreciate all I could have learned from growing up in this environment at the time. But one of the things I recognize this has given me is that I simply cannot impose a “Christian” reading onto Hebrew Bible texts and call it good. Before I can come to “Christian” conclusions, I want to know how Jewish readers experience this text now and may have experienced it as close as we can get to the time of Jesus, and then, from there, where I can, if I can, make sense of it in light of our Rabbi, Jesus.

There are few texts more troubling to me in the Hebrew Bible than today’s reading from Genesis 22, the Akedah (binding) of Isaac, as it is known in Judaism. So part of my
preparation for this series has been to consult a local rabbi where I live (Beth Schwartz, Rabbi of Temple Israel in Columbus, Georgia) to gain deeper insight and Jewish voice and vision. Rabbi Schwartz gave me several key points about this story within Judaism and led me to a book, which I also commend to any who wish to go deeper.

First, she described Genesis 22 as “deafening.” The story is told so dispassionately, so graphically, and yet so subtly in what it says and does not say that the horror of it shines through on multiple levels.

Second, Judaism has simply continued to ask all kinds of questions of it, down to the level of individual words. Where is Isaac at the end? Why does God ask Abraham to do this? Was it God or Satan who asked for the offering, and was it God or Satan who halted it? Judaism continues to seek to live with and ask all of these questions, and many more beside.

Finally, there is the double aftermath of this story on relationships. The family is exploded, none of them living anywhere near each other after this. Isaac does not attend his mother’s burial, and he never sees his father again until his burial. The scattering of the family is often seen in Judaism as witness to how abusive and destructive Abraham’s action had been and the enduring impact of this abuse on the whole family system. Even the relationship between Abraham and God is radically changed. God never speaks to Abraham again after this.

The heart of the book Rabbi Schwartz commended, *The Last Trial*, by Shalom Spiegel, is a discussion of centuries of rabbinical commentary on this story and liturgical practice that draws from it. It raises even more questions. Did Abraham kill or even fully offer Isaac as a burnt offering, and perhaps God resurrected Isaac? Did Isaac consent to being bound and offered, and if so, how and why? Does God require human blood, or blood at all, to sanctify The Name? Along the way, Rabbi Spiegel cites numerous historical instances of Jewish martyrdom in the face of Christian persecution in which the accounts specifically cite the story of the binding of Isaac as precedent.

I’ve often experienced Christians, myself included, coming to this texts with “answers” to seek to tame its dangerous edges and core. What we might learn from our siblings in Abraham is to let the story be as dangerous as it is and join our questions and disturbance with theirs in ways that may lead us all to join in what many rabbis have described as God’s movement away from the Throne of Justice and to the Throne of Mercy.

END SIDEBAR

My colleague Taylor Burton-Edwards’s conversation with Rabbi Schwartz has been invaluable to me in sorting out what to say next. I think that we have to simply name this horror as “deafening” and simply stand with our Jewish forebears and siblings in naming the abuse and refusing to try to make sense of it. Because it doesn’t make sense, and it certainly does not do anything for me in terms of elucidating my own faith journey.
I think it is particularly important to note that Abraham’s actions precipitate not just the end of his relationship with Isaac, but also with Sarah and with the Lord God. It would appear that alongside these changes in relationship, it also brought an end to the cycle of abuse of this family.

After the binding of Isaac, Abraham returns to Beersheba. Isaac apparently settles in Beer-laihai-roi. And in the very next chapter, Sarah dies in Hebron. Abraham was apparently not with her, since he has to travel to Hebron and negotiate with the Hittites to purchase her burial plot. When we hear news of Isaac, it is when Rebekah is brought to him to be his wife. He has come from Beer-lahai-roi and has settled in the Negeb (Genesis 24:62).

One way to end the cycle of abuse is by closing the door to relationships with those who have abused. Perhaps this was Isaac’s choice, and if it was, it speaks volumes about his character. It is courageous to decide to leave one’s family at such a young age. It is courageous that Isaac chose a new home for himself. It is courageous that he chose to locate in a place that was connected not to Abraham or Sarah, but ironically, to Hagar and Ishmael. Isaac’s choice to go further south to Beer-laihai-roi to set up a farming operation and build his life there may have put him nearer to his half-brother and his brother’s mother. Perhaps he “cast himself” out of the abusive family dynamic into which he was born and reconnected with others who had also left behind this part of their lives. I don’t know. I’m only speculating.

What I do know is that in the aftermath, the family has been scattered. What I do know is that there is no record of Isaac abusing Rebekah, or being unfaithful to her, or having children with concubines when Rebekah is believed to be barren. What I do know, in short, is that the cycle of abuse seems to end with Isaac. Not only has Isaac managed to pass through this transition to adulthood, but he has not carried forward the legacy of abuse perpetrated by his father.

Was it a turning point? Was it some sort of horrific rite of passage that Isaac had to pass through in order to live into God’s vision for the chosen people? It has all the hallmarks of a major life transition: chaos, disorder, disruption, violence, and a resettling into a new identity. Isaac emerges from this episode as a strong, courageous and competent young adult. He is no longer a boy. He has become a man.

My only issue with Isaac, as we will discuss next week, is the way in which Rebekah comes to be his wife. But there is grace there as well, in that the relationship they build seems to permanently redeem the family from its cycle of abuse.

The good news in this story for me is that God was present with Isaac and Abraham. God provided in the midst of turmoil and chaos. Isaac was spared, and God’s promises came to rest upon him.

The good news is that God gave Isaac the strength and the courage to leave a situation of abuse and to seek a new life for himself, perhaps in the company of his half-brother.
The good news is, indeed, that God has provided, and God does provide, and God is providing, even in the midst of abusive systems and the horrific actions human beings level against one another, often in God's name. Lord, have mercy.

God will provide. God will make a way. That is part of our family legacy.

May it always be so.
PLANNING NOTES
RITES OF PASSAGE

Reading Notes
NRSV texts, artwork and Revised Common Lectionary Prayers for this service are available at the Vanderbilt Divinity Library.

Leccionario en Español, Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes.

Lectionnaire en français, Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé

Calendar Notes
FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: RITES OF PASSAGE

The color from now until Advent is green, with two exceptions: All Saints Day or Sunday (November 1 or 5) and Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday (November 26).

July
July 4 Independence Day

August
All Month Back to School Resources

September
All Month Season of Creation (2017 resources forthcoming)
September 4 Labor Day (USA)
September 15-October 15 Hispanic Heritage Month (USA)

October
All Month A Season of Saints (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 1 World Communion Sunday
October 6-8 Children’s Sabbath (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 15 Laity Sunday (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 31 Reformation Day (500th Anniversary)

November
November 1 All Saints Day
November 3 World Community Day
November 5 All Saints Sunday
November 11 Daylight Saving Time Change Song (Fall)
November 12 Veterans Day
November 12 Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday
November 19 International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church
November 19 Bible Sunday (National Bible Week November 19-26)
November 23 Thanksgiving Day
November 26 Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday
United Methodist Student Day

December
December 1  World AIDS Day
December 3  Advent-Christmas Series (Year B) Begins (Forthcoming)
December 21  Longest Night/Blue Christmas
December 24  Christmas Eve (evening)
December 25  Christmas Day
December 26  Kwanzaa
December 31  Watch Night/New Year’s Eve

For Your Planning Team: RITES OF PASSAGE
We go deep this week into the valley of the shadow of death.

Indeed, we start the service, just there, with a prayer-song in which we may also hear echoes of the voice of the victim, Isaac.

The reading continues the series motif of multiple readers presenting in first person, this time an older adult (Abraham) and a teenager (Isaac). In the Q’uran (Sura 37:100-107), the story is of the binding of a submissive son, often interpreted to be Ishmael rather than Isaac. To reflect this double tradition, you may wish to ask the reader of Ishmael’s part last week to read Isaac’s part this week.

This service addresses this very troubling story in two ways. As the title of this service puts it, one way to read this story is as Abraham performing Isaac’s rite of passage into adulthood and an independent life. Certainly, this story functions in this way. Abraham and Isaac separate at the conclusion of this story, and the two are never mentioned in the same place again until Abraham’s burial (Genesis 25:9).

We also address it, however, as a rite of passage that more than crosses the line into abuse. It’s not just that Isaac left to start a life on his own. Abraham’s family was scattered after this. If we map out where everyone is living at the time of the death of Sarah (Genesis 23:2), it would appear Sarah had moved to Hebron with some of her household, about a day’s journey north of Abraham (Beersheba, Genesis 22:19), and Isaac had moved to create a life for himself about a day’s journey south of Abraham (Beerlaiharioi, Genesis 24:62). Abuse can and often does scatter families like this.

So in this service we seek to honor the essential goodness of rites of passage, especially rites that are significant for allowing people to function fully as adults. At the same time, because we hear the Spirit calling us from chaos to community, we find ourselves called to reject abuse in every form and to engage as agents of prevention where we can and healing as we must whenever abuse takes place so new community can be formed in the place of the chaos left in the wake of abuse.

The sending forth propels us out on that challenging but hope-filled note as we move toward the conclusion of the series next week.
Logistics for this Service:
Preparing the stagescape: This week, the arresting visual in the Scripture is that of the fire prepared for the ritual sacrifice. This week, add some green to the third level, since the principle action of this story takes place on a mountain, and place whatever you use to represent a large bonfire there. Near the bonfire, place a coil of rope, representing the binding of Isaac. As worship begins with the opening song, use lights or other quiet, nonverbal means to call attention to these signs.

Rehearse the Reading: There are only two readers this week, an older adult and a teenager. While this means there is less to coordinate than in previous weeks of this series, the intensity of these readings is profound. Last week, the intensity was primarily in emotion. This week it is in graphic but seemingly dispassionate description of actions. No emotion is mentioned anywhere. This calls not for emotionless reading, but for a careful constraint. Once again, in rehearsal, coach the readers until they have gotten just the right tone and then are able to repeat it at least twice.

Additional Resources
2014 Planning Helps for these readings
Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Bolivia, Chile, Peru
FROM CHAOS TO COMMUNITY: LEGACY  
FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (July 9)

FULL SERVICE  
During the transition from the first to the second opening song, the persons may bring or uncover items to complete the series stagescape.

ENTRANCE  
“Song of Love” CCLI# 3607983  
“O God Our Help in Ages Past” CCLI# 2335500 OR  
“Jesus, Joy of Our Desiring” United Methodist Hymnal, 644  
O God, Our Help in Ages Past UMH 117

WORD AND RESPONSE

Reading Based on Genesis 24
During the second opening song, the readers take their places. Readers may include a teenage girl, a late middle-aged man, and an older-adult woman.

Reading 1: (Late middle-aged man)  
Abraham sent me with gifts from Beersheba to his ancestral home in Aram-Naharaim, a month’s journey, to get a wife for his son, Isaac, from his own family. When I arrived at the city of Nahor, Abraham’s brother, I stopped at the spring where the townspeople drew water. I asked the Lord, God of my master Abraham, for success. I prayed for a sign to show whom I should bring for Isaac, and immediately Rebekah fulfilled it.

“Your Love, O God” (st 1) UMH 120 (Alt TUNE: UMH 437)

Reading 2: (Teenage girl)  
A man from far away asked me for a drink, and I said to him, “Drink from my jar, and I will draw for your camels also.” When I returned from getting the water, he gave me a ring for my nose and two gold bracelets. He asked whose daughter I was, and I told him. The man fell to his knees and praised his god. I ran home to tell my family all about it. And they invited this man to dinner. He called himself Eliezer.

“Your Love, O God” (st 2) UMH 120 (Alt TUNE: UMH 437)

Reading 3: (Older-adult woman)  
We approved of the proposed marriage that night, even before the man showered Rebekah with more gifts of silver, gold, and rich garments. But we wanted him to stay with us longer before taking Rebekah to his master’s
household. He insisted he leave with her immediately. We asked Rebekah, and she consented. Before she left, we blessed her, according to our custom: “May you, our sister, become the mother of multitudes, and may your offspring possess the cities of their enemies.”

“Your Love, O God” (st 3) UMH 120 (Alt TUNE: UMH 437)

Reading 4: (Teenage girl)
We had been traveling a long time, longer than Eliezer had told us he had traveled to arrive at my home. Finally, I saw a man walking across a field apparently coming toward our caravan. He was older than I, late thirties. I asked Eliezer who this was. He said it was his master, Isaac, the man who was to be my husband. I covered myself with my veil and waited while Eliezer told his story to Isaac.

We traveled to a town where Isaac’s mother had once lived.

He brought me into her tent.

And I became his wife.

Sermon “Legacy”

“Your Love, O God” (st 4) UMH 120 (Alt TUNE: UMH 437)

Call to Prepare for a Good Legacy
As music plays (continue to play FINDLANDIA quietly), invite worshipers to write down the things they have received or become that have helped them build community and that they want to pass on to future generation, and things they have received or become that create chaos they want not to pass on.

Prayers of the People
Whichever form you use, include time for people to pray (silently) about what they have listed and for each other to respond faithfully in response to one of the biddings. Conclude with a petition for the forgiveness of sins.

“Prayers of the People” CCLI# 7039048 OR
“Prayers of the People” The Faith We Sing, 2201

The Lord’s Prayer

THANKSGIVING (AND COMMUNION)
Deacon or Pastor:

The Peace and Offertory
May the peace of Christ, who is faithful in all generations, dwell richly among us.
And may the gifts we offer, in money and in praise, be pleasing to God.

*The people may exchange the peace of Christ. The offering may be collected. The Lord’s Table may be prepared.*

Music During the Offering

“All Glory Be to Christ”  CCLI# 7008232 OR
“I Thank You, Jesus”  Worship & Song, 3037

THANKSGIVING AND COMMUNION

Invitation

*Deacon or Pastor (standing behind the Lord’s Table):*

Christ our Lord now invites us to his table.
We love him.
We have earnestly repented of our sin.
We seek to be at peace with one another.

The Great Thanksgiving

*Pastor:* So lift up your hearts!
We lift them to you, Lord.

Give God the glory.
*All our praise, all our thanks, all our lives are yours!*

Yours is the praise,
yours is the thanks,
yours is the honor,
now and forever,
One in Three
and Three in One.

*Glorify your name in all the earth.*

Out of chaos,
*you bring creation.*

Out of years of waiting and wondering,
*you bring hope for new life.*

Out of separation, death, and grieving,
*you bring healing, life, and generations of joy.*
And so we join our voices with every saint and sinner of every nation, people, and tongue, with every angel and heavenly being, and with every element of creation that shines or wriggles or vibrates in your praise:

**Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of power and might.**
**Heaven and earth are full of your glory.**
**Hosanna in the highest!**

**Blessed is Christ who comes in your name.**
**Hosanna in the highest!**

You make us whole, Lord Jesus.

Calling people from every walk of life, from mainstream to marginalized, from low to high estate, from everybody who was somebody, to everybody who was nobody, you unite us in one body.

**You make us whole.**

Showing mercy to sinful people, feeding hungry people, delivering oppressed people, and caring for and healing people of every ability and disability, you strengthen ours and every body.

**You make us whole.**

Speaking peace to thunderstorms and the storms of our lives, and calling us to be reconciled with all and to pray and seek good for those who harm us, you bring community that nurtures life and love now and for generations to come.

**You make us whole.**

And gathering with us now, at this table, as you gathered with your disciples long ago, even in the face of betrayal and death you offer to fill us with the life of God in your body and blood.

**You make us whole.**
Even so, come Holy Spirit.

*Come, Holy Spirit.*

Come upon us,
and on these gifts of bread and wine we offer
in our full-bodied praise
as we remember the words of Jesus
who gathered his disciples around bread and wine,
and said:

_The pastor or an assistant lifts the bread._

This is my body, given for you. Eat this, and remember me.

_The pastor or an assistant lifts the cup._

This is my blood, poured out for you. Drink this, and remember me.

And so,
offering our lives and these gifts before you,
Holy Three, Holy One,
we join our voices in prayer and sing:

“You Are Holy”/”Du Är Helig”  
“You Alone Are Holy”/”Sólo Tú Eres Sant”  

_The pastor breaks the bread in the sight of the people, then serves the servers, who serve the pastor and the people._

Music During Communion

- “Sing of the Lord’s Goodness”  
- “I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry”

_Thanksgiving after Communion_  
_Deacon or Pastor with People:_

Thank you, Triune God,
for feeding us abundantly
from the storehouse of your mercy
in Jesus Christ.
You restore us, body and soul.
You make us whole.

Now send us forth into the messiness of our lives,
as living witnesses of your renewing love
that brings hope and wholeness
today, tomorrow, and for generations to come. Amen.
SENDING FORTH

“10,000 Reasons” CCLI# 6016351 OR
“All My Days” W&S 3011

Deacon or Pastor:
Go in peace, love, and joy.
And let your lives be signs of God’s legacy
wherever you go.

Reprise: “You Alone Are Holy”/“Sólo Tú Eres Santo” TFWS 2077
MUSIC NOTES

Song of Love (CCLI# 3607983)
Beginning this week’s service with a song of Trinitarian praise turns the page from the setting of despair last week. The text appropriately addresses all persons of the Trinity (which is not as common as you might think in modern worship music) in a song of adoration and praise. The ideal accompaniment is full band, but piano, guitar, and a smaller ensemble can work well. The original key of B is a good choice for congregational singing, but you can also sing in the key of C if that is more helpful for your instrumentalists. If you are using CCLI SongSelect, you will notice a triplet turn in the chorus on the word “rejoice.” Feel free to omit this for the worship leader, and replace it with a C# eighth note only.

O God, Our Help in Ages Past (Watts/Walker, CCLI# 2335500)
This modern reworking of an old Isaac Watts hymn and tune by William Croft leaves most of the widely known hymn intact but adds a chorus that offers different images of God, ending appropriately with the Ancient of Days. The key has been lowered substantially from other settings in hymn collections because of the range of the refrain. This puts the range of the stanzas in a much lower range for congregations than many will be accustomed to. Accompaniment can work with a band, but to accommodate the sound and texture of the band, the chords have been simplified in CCLI’s setting of this. A piano and light instrumental ensemble will also work well. Despite the range issue mentioned earlier, I recommend the original key of this specific setting in G because of the range of the refrain. To see the two History of Hymns articles on the original Isaac Watts text, click here or here.

Jesus, Joy of Our Desiring (UMH 644)
If you have ever attended a wedding, there is a good chance you have heard this hymn text and tune because of the famous setting of it by Johann Sebastian Bach. The United Methodist Hymnal does not contain Bach’s recognizable accompaniment but leaves us with the chorale setting that, interestingly enough, does not directly serve a purpose specific to weddings. My recommendation would be for the choir to sing in four-part harmony if using the chorale setting. If you are feeling adventurous, click here for a setting with the well-known keyboard accompaniment. Note, however, that the score is in German, and it would take some preparation time to write in the English for your choir. It is also in the key of G, not F as found in The United Methodist Hymnal.

O God, Our Help in Ages Past (Watts, UMH 117)
Regardless of the style of your worship, many people may be familiar with this standard Isaac Watts hymn, which is found in an endless number of hymnals. The setting of the common-metered hymn provides enough brevity to sing all six stanzas in most contexts, along with some creativity in assigning stanzas to different groups, and even multiple modulations. A plethora of musical settings for various ensembles exist for this tune. Here is a recent setting for handbell ensembles. Lastly, this hymn is so
beloved that even two History of Hymns articles were written to explore this hymn more deeply. You can find them [here](#) and [here](#).

**Your Love, O God** (UMH 120)
This hymn is recommended in this service to enhance the reading of Scripture and provide a framework for the proclamation of the word. The language is strikingly similar to the hymn, “This Is My Song” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 437), and the tune FINLANDIA works for either hymn. No matter the tune, I recommend playing a line of the hymn tune before the first reading to signal the congregation they will eventually be singing and present the tune they will be using. The ideal accompaniment for GUDSKÄRLEK would be piano and/or guitar, and the best setting for FINLANDIA is organ or piano.

**Prayers of the People** (CCLI #7039048)
This song is a great example of modern music created to serve a liturgical purpose, and it is very accessible to churches with any instrumental accompaniment. The song is not meant to stand alone as a song; it will require some intercessions to be created from the context of your community. Respond to each intercession with either the A theme (“You hear us calling”) or the B theme (“Lord, have mercy”). This poignant piece works with organ, piano, guitar, or any other simple accompaniment.

**Prayers of the People** *(The Faith We Sing 2201)*
Also a wonderful choice for liturgical singing, this short piece by Bonnie Johansen-Werner enhances intercessory prayer with an easily singable refrain and response. I recommend singing the refrain multiple times (in the manner of the songs of Taizé) before the petitions begin. Follow each petition, whether voiced separately or as a group, with the response. Finally, end with a reprise of the refrain before ending. If your choir is able to sing four-part harmony, instruct them to sing the parts gently as the congregation sings the melody in unison.

**All Glory Be to Christ** (CCLI# 7008232)
This rousing hymn is a call to offer praise to Christ in the midst of trying circumstances. Set to AULD LANG SYNE, many in your congregation will sing this modern work because they will be familiar with the tune. It may even be possible, with a confident worship leader, to sing *a cappella* with the congregation! Be willing to step out on this one and enliven the singing with whatever works in your context.

**I Thank You, Jesus** *(W&S 3037)*
This rousing hymn from *Worship & Song* has quickly become a favorite in many congregations and serves as an effective expression of thanksgiving. The repeated text, “You brought me from a mighty long way,” is a sung Ebenezer of sorts and echoes to numerous Scriptures of God’s deliverance, including 1 Samuel 7:12 and 2 Samuel 7:18. Be sure not to sing this hymn too fast. Allow the music to swing, which can easily be done in this 12/8 meter. Any number of instruments can accompany this selection, including organ, piano, drums, bass, and electric guitar.  [Hymn Study](#)
You Are Holy *(Global Praise 3, 40)*

You might not think you would encounter a great Brazilian *bossa nova* by a Swedish composer in the ever-growing repertoire of congregational song, but Per Harling has written one of the most enjoyable songs in this style you will encounter when singing praise to God. This hymn has two parts--A and B sections--that are built over the same chord progression and can be sung simultaneously. However, I recommend singing the entire hymn through at least once before trying this. If you have a choir, simply divide them in a two-part arrangement (men and women, SB and AT, ST and AB, etc.) to help support the work of the congregation. Accompaniment can be varied, but piano and/or guitar should not double the melody. They should be played rhythmically, along with light percussion and a bass instrument (double bass, electric bass, etc.). A flute played one octave higher is the recommended instrument to double the voice in this piece. God is holy, so let the overall tempo and feel inspire you to move with the leading of the Spirit!

You Alone Are Holy *(Sólo Tú Eres Santo)* [TFWS 2077]

Obviously, I am opinionated here, but this short chorus is one of the most valuable gems in *The Faith We Sing*. It is not, however, in the same character as “Holy, Holy, Holy” or another similar hymn. It is gently rhythmic and requires some finesse in the singing and accompaniment. The song is in a perfect range for congregational singing, so place a lot of emphasis on the shape of the musical line. Create crescendos and diminuendos at powerful moments. Along with the accompaniment, which can either be piano or guitar, add a shaker and a light set of bongos or congas to enliven the pulse. Do not sing too fast, however. This should feel relaxed and quietly reverent.

Sing of the Lord’s Goodness *(W&S 3010)*

The influence of Dave Brubeck’s “Take Five” becomes apparent when the accompaniment of this hymn begins. The rhythms and chord progressions are interchangeable, but the melody is different. Most ensembles play this hymn and “Take Five” together as a pairing within jazz services, and we recommend your church do the same, if it is possible. Singing this hymn takes a good bit of rhythm and confidence because playing and singing in 5/4, especially for congregations, can be challenging. If the leadership is well-prepared, however, the congregation will be able to catch the pulse and sing along. The range is very friendly for congregational singing. The best accompaniment is piano, bass, and drums, along with a saxophone, trumpet, or other jazz combo instrumentation.

I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry *(TFWS 2051)*

This classic John Ylvisaker hymn fittingly bears a good bit of feminine imagery within its title, for who is indeed present for the birth of a child? The mother. God here is represented as a caring parent who nurtures throughout life--from birth through childhood, and all stages of adulthood. Accompany with piano, organ, or guitar. *History of Hymns*
10,000 Reasons (CCLI# 6016351)

One of the reasons this song sits at or near the top of the CCLI Top 100 is because of its melody, which has found its way into the hearts of people around the globe. The text sings like a modern-day Psalm, with elements of time and eternity throughout the song, and the tune carries with it a large amount of aural recognition (the tune is very memorable) and is quite singable. The melodic lines have a variety of contours, with the chorus serving as the climax. The range reflects this change of dynamics throughout the song, and the congregation will be quick to sing along. The ideal accompaniment is a full band, but a solo piano or rhythm section will also suffice. The ideal key is F.

All My Days (W&S 3011)

Laurie Zelman and Mark Miller’s creation is very reminiscent of the Jackson 5’s “Give Me One More Chance” (and if you have ever heard Mark Miller lead this song, you might have heard the famous intro of that song as the lead-in to the congregational singing) and offers a statement of celebratory praise to God. I recommend integrating Mark’s anthem setting of this for choir and congregation, which you can find here. In the same fashion as the Jackson 5 song, feel free to add bass, drums, and guitar to the piano accompaniment. Do whatever is most effective in sending the congregation out, singing this vibrant song of praise!
PREACHING NOTES

I need to confess to my own bias as I begin these notes. Even though I have been wrestling with these Hebrew texts over the past few weeks, none has caused me more anguish than this one. As a twenty-first century American feminist woman, no matter how much I try to avoid reading my own worldview into this story, I cannot do it. I read this story as yet another example of an abusive family system that has become part of the legacy of my faith tradition.

Two weeks ago, the abuse was initiated by Sarah against her slave Hagar and Hagar's son, Ishmael, who were cast out of the family and left to make it on their own or die trying in the wilderness. Last week, the abuse was rendered by the father of the Jewish faith, Abraham, against his teenage son, Isaac. And now, this week, it is the abuse of a teenage girl by a now thirty-something-year-old Isaac.

I know, of course, that the point of these narratives is not to establish a legacy of abuse, but to tell the stories of the founding patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel. It is to establish the lineage of God's chosen people. And I know that during this period in history, women and children were the property of men. They did not have equal rights. People understood their place in the culture, and they did their best to function in the world in which they lived. Finally, I am fully aware that it is unfair to judge behaviors by my own cultural norms and characterize these situations as abuse.

SIDEBAR: GEOGRAPHY, TIMELINE, AND GENEALOGY
by Taylor Burton-Edwards

A lot has happened since the end of the story of the binding of Isaac. Abraham had returned to Beersheba (Genesis 22:19), but without Isaac. When Sarah died, she was apparently no longer living with Abraham in Beersheba, but further north in Hebron (Genesis 23:1). She was buried somewhere east of Hebron between Hebron and Beersheba (Genesis 23:19). Meanwhile, when we get to today's story, which starts in Beersheba, Isaac was apparently well south of Abraham in or near Beerlaihaires, a place also identified as where "Sarah's tent" was located (Genesis 24:62, 67).

This is not the first occurrence of Beerlaihaires in Genesis, however. We hear of it earlier (Genesis 16:14) as a place near which Hagar had fled when Sarai started treating her harshly after it was known she was pregnant with Abram's child. So this place has connections not only with Sarah and later, Isaac, but initially with Hagar and Ishmael as well. It will also become "home base" for Isaac and Rebekah and their twin sons (Genesis 25:11).

In terms of timeline, if Sarah was 127 at her death, this means Abraham was 136 or 137, and Isaac was 37 at that time. This puts Isaac at roughly half the age of his father Abram when Abram set out from Haran for Palestine (Genesis 12:4), perhaps twenty
years or more after the binding incident at Moriah, assuming the binding incident took place when Isaac was about seventeen years old. Isaac had settled and was farming in the outskirts of Beerlaihairoi, but apparently still had no wife. If he had a household at all, it may have consisted of servants and farm workers. We learn later that Isaac was forty when he married Rebekah (Genesis 25:11). So an additional three years had lapsed between the burial of Sarah (which Isaac did not attend) and the marriage of Rebekah to Isaac.

Genesis 22:20-24 sets up the events of Genesis 24. This is the story of the family Abraham and Sarah had left behind in Haran when they began their journey into Palestine. Notice that the only female listed as a legitimate heir of the family line is Rebekah, granddaughter of Abraham’s brother, Nahor, and so first cousin once removed of Isaac. This made Rebekah the most eligible member of Abraham’s father’s family to become a wife for Isaac, according to Abraham’s conditions given to his servant (Genesis 24:4).

But knowing all that doesn’t make it any easier. It feels to me like a pattern of abuse that has become entrenched and repeated, generation after generation. And it is part of our family legacy as followers of Jesus Christ.

What is a legacy? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives us a couple of definitions:

1. A gift by will especially of money or other personal property
2. Something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past.

In the case of the legacy of Abraham and Sarah and of Isaac and Rebekah, part of the transmission from the past that we have received is that deporting a woman and child because of anger or jealousy toward them is acceptable behavior; not questioning God’s command to kill and sacrifice your son is acceptable behavior; and an older man taking a teenage girl for a wife is acceptable behavior.

Abuse is often a part of family legacy. It is a legacy that can remain hidden, existing and continuing in the background of a family that, on the surface, appears normal and healthy. Unfortunately, keeping this truth hidden can have dire consequences for generation after generation in a family system. The abusive pattern is protected by a family commitment to silence or by passive compliance. The abused victim grows up to repeat the pattern, taking on the role of the abuser. The system of abuse thus gets passed down to each new generation as accepted, if not acceptable, behavior.

I believe that because some of our sacred stories that attest to abusive behavior patterns are often treated uncritically by preachers and teachers has served to normalize abusive behaviors. It may make abusive patterns seem acceptable, be it in the families in the Bible or the families in our churches. Commentaries tend to focus on
the lack of trust in God as being at the root of Sarah’s abusive behavior, or Abraham’s unswerving faith as justification for his willingness to kill his son. In today’s story, Rebekah and her servants come across as not just complicit in the new arrangement, but downright excited about the gifts of silver, gold, and rich garments, and the promise of adventure in another land.

But I refuse to accept it as normal that a man in his mid-to-late thirties would take a teenage girl fetched from a relative by his abusive father’s servant as his wife.

Perhaps I would not be flinching so much if this legacy of acceptable behavior inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition were not so obviously alive and well, and maybe even enjoying a resurgence, in our own day and time. Only a couple of months ago I read a story in the newspaper about the number of child brides married each year in the United States. While some states specify eighteen years of age as the legal minimum, all states allow for people younger than eighteen to marry with parental consent or judicial approval. In twenty-seven states, there is no specified age below which a child cannot marry.

*Unchained at Last* is a nonprofit organization established to help women resist or escape forced marriages in the United States. Data collected by this group reveal that between 2000 and 2010, an estimated 248,000 children, almost all females, and some as young as twelve years old, were married. Many of these girls were married because it was deemed the best solution for teen pregnancy.

Girls who marry below the age of nineteen are fifty percent more likely to drop out of high school and four times less likely to graduate from college. These women have a higher likelihood of spending life in poverty and are three times more likely than average to suffer abuse from their husbands. And this is just in the United States. When you look at this issue from a global perspective, you can see that the systemic oppression of women, the trading of daughters for livestock or dowries, and forced marriages arranged by families or communities, continues to be detrimental to women’s health and women’s lives around the world.

But of course, this isn’t really about underage marriage. This is about the objectification of women’s bodies by most cultures. This about the oppression of women globally. And the continued suppression of women’s rights to equality by the institution of the church of Jesus Christ specifically.

The legacy of the patriarchal system established by the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob continues to be a challenging aspect of our faith. Its endurance is at the root of women not having equal rights with men, women not having access to higher education for most of human history, women not being allowed to vote or participate fully in civic life, women being held back and discriminated against and sexually harassed in the workplace, women being refused ordination in the majority of Christian communions around the world, and decisions about women’s health being made primarily by governing bodies made up of a majority of men.
Did God intend for it to be this way? Did God intend for God’s people to hurt, abuse, and kill one another? Did God intend for one gender or one cultural group or one religious community to have privilege over the other? Is inequality between human beings simply an acceptable part of the legacy of God’s creation and ordering of the universe?

These are the hard questions with which we must wrestle as we unpack the legacy of our founding families and the communities of our faith established from their lineage. We must face these challenges head on, with a critical eye, and with trust that God has always been with us, and is with us still, even when we lack clarity about the meaning of God’s words and actions in our faith tradition.

Today’s story brings to a kind of completion the legacy of Abraham and Sarah and the promise of their continued blessing and multiplication. Like families, communities of faith also have to pass on who they are to the next generation. They have to invest in the continuation of the community. Who are we as members of a faith tradition that began with these families and communities? What inherited traditions from their legacy are vital to our identity as followers of Jesus Christ? What are not?

Each generation of faith communities, from Abraham on down to the present day, have the same struggles. All people must deal with the human lifespan of its members: children being born and weaning, growing and leaving. Young people maturing and needing to know salvation in God. Grown people who are prone to war, and who neglect the poor and the suffering in their midst, and who wish the rain to fall only upon them and not upon their enemies.

Each generation has teenage girls and boys who are willing and eager to launch out on their own, even before they are fully ready. Each generation gives birth to people who are willing to do harm, or even take the lives of others. Nothing has really changed in the cycles of human living.

The difference we have, the good news we can proclaim, is that in Jesus we see a turning on the head of some ways of being human in the world. We hear his call to value the lives of women and men, slaves and free, Gentiles and Jews. We see him living out God’s kingdom values by feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, healing the sick, caring for the widowed, and offering hope and grace to all. But even in his time, people had a difficult time changing. Even Jesus’ own disciples didn’t fully get it. So there is work to do.

It has been quite a journey from the chaos of creation to the establishment of God’s beloved community. We have followed some of the pillars of the Judeo-Christian tradition as they wrestled deeply with the reality of their humanity and the challenges it brought. We listened with them as they heard astonishing news from God: news that brought joy, and news that led to painful separation. We bore witness to the deportation of a mother and child. We watched as a father made a life-changing decision about his
son. We journeyed with a teenage girl and her female servants as she made a life-changing decision about not just her future, but the future of God’s beloved community.

Into each of these stories of jumbled, chaotic mess we heard the voice of God speaking light and life and love and hope into difficult situations. The presence of God has been a constant in the lives of our forebears in the faith, just as the presence of God is a constant in our own lives, through the good times and the bad.

And while we end on a fairly positive note, with a marriage and a promise of the continuation of the family chosen and blessed by God, we know that the individual lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith, and the formation of the community of faith itself, has not been without trials.

Likewise, we have inherited a community of faith fraught with all the marks of human sinfulness. There has been disorder and messiness, violence, anger and abusive behavior in communities of faith down through the generations. There have been relationships formed and relationships broken. And there has also been love, and purpose, and promise, and deep relationship with our creator God.

Like all human families, the first families of our faith tradition were not perfect. They had their share of failure and struggles, just like everyone else. But throughout it all, they knew the abiding presence of the Lord God was with them—perhaps most clearly known during moments of difficult decision, rites of passage, and periods of painful transition.

And while God didn’t intervene in such a way that God’s people were spared from the pain of being human, God never abandoned them.

Just as God never abandons us.

The good news is that God is with us.

God is our refuge and our strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
Though its waters roar and foam,
Though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
The holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city,
It shall not be moved.
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
He utters his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our refuge.

Come, behold the works of the Lord;
See what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
He burns the shields with fire.
“Be still and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”
The Lord of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our refuge.
Psalm 46, NRSV
PLANNING NOTES

LEGACY

Reading Notes
NRSV texts, artwork and Revised Common Lectionary Prayers for this service are available at the Vanderbilt Divinity Library.

Leccionario en Español, Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes.

Lectionnaire en français, Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé

Calendar Notes

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: LEGACY

The color from now until Advent is green, with two exceptions: All Saints Day or Sunday (November 1 or 5) and Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday (November 26).

August
All Month Back to School Resources

September
All Month Season of Creation (2017 resources forthcoming)
September 4 Labor Day (USA)
September 15- October 15 Hispanic Heritage Month (USA)

October
All Month A Season of Saints (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 1 World Communion Sunday
October 6-8 Children’s Sabbath (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 15 Laity Sunday (2017 resources forthcoming)
October 31 Reformation Day (500th Anniversary)

November
November 1 All Saints Day
November 3 World Community Day
November 5 All Saints Sunday
Daylight Saving Time Change Song (Fall)
November 11 Veterans Day
November 12 Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday
International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church
November 19 Bible Sunday (National Bible Week November 19-26)
November 23 Thanksgiving Day
November 26 Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday
United Methodist Student Day

December
December 1 World AIDS Day
Today we emerge from the valley we entered two weeks ago into a broader, brighter plain of hope for the future.

We begin with songs the celebrate the scope of God’s love from creation to the present and point us toward the future. The reading today brings three fresh voices, again all in first person, interspersed with song as at several points throughout this series. The Communion setting adapts the version used in our second Easter Series, “Becoming” and culminates the entire series with a song of praise for God’s healing presence with us through our lives and the lives of those who will follow us.

This service also leaves you with a wide-open path for the next series you may choose to pursue. There are many possibilities during these summer months, both lectionary and non-lectionary based, and we encourage you to make good use of this time to pursue the series that will best help you and your congregation fulfill the purpose of this season: to encourage and support disciples of Jesus carrying out their ministries in Jesus’ name and the Spirit’s power.

**Logistics for this Service:**

**Setting the Stagescape:** For this last Sunday, the full stagescape comes to light. Restore the fabric to the way it was at the beginning (blue or blue-green on the lowest tier, green for the middle, white or light blue for the top). During the transition from the first to second song in the opening set, place or reveal another water jug (at earth level) a water jug, bracelets and rings, and a veil on the stagescape. If you are doing Communion, bring in the Communion elements and place them on the Lord’s Table at this time as well. Celebrate the creation that has supported these stories and continue the legacy at the foundation of our faith.

**Rehearse the Reading:** You will have three new readers today and a story that may be unfamiliar to them. So be sure to rehearse. Unlike the last two weeks, there is less intensity—or at least subtler intensity— in today’s reading. So be sure to coach your readers to keep it lively without overacting.

**Rehearse the Great Thanksgiving.** There is a meal in the midst of today’s reading, so today, rather than last week (if you must celebrate only once per month) would be the more appropriate day for Holy Communion during July. While the form of the Great Thanksgiving in this service will be familiar if you used our Great Thanksgiving on Easter 7, the words and the music used are new. So, pastor, we recommend you rehearse the Great Thanksgiving in the worship space with your musicians several times the day or evening before and at least twice before the service in the morning so
your joint leadership at Communion is as smooth as possible.

**Rehearse the Communion Song:** While both of the choices we’ve provided for the Communion song have been around more than twenty years and are quite popular in some circles, it’s possible they may be new to your congregation. Both are catchy, easy, and fun to learn. Plan to teach the song to the congregation before the service begins, so when you get to the Great Thanksgiving you can all sing with holy abandon.

**Additional Resources**

2014 Planning Helps for these readings

Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela