

Office of Disciples Women

Thanksgiving Program: Awake! Awake! to the Blessings of our God

2009 General Program

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Illinois/Wisconsin Region



Awake! Awake! To the Blessing of Our God!

Purpose:

The purpose of this lesson is to remind us of the blessedness that is experienced in both the ordinary and extraordinary of our lives. It is a call to gratitude, as voiced in thankfulness, as response for what God has done, is doing, and will do in our lives and in the world.

Suggestions for Leader:

1. Two weeks before the meeting read Psalm 92. Dwell in this scripture for several days. Read it both silently and aloud. If possible read it in several translations including the one that you read most frequently. *Crosswalk.com* is a good online resource for different Bible translations. Write down your thoughts, questions, and emotions as you read the scripture. Note if they remain the same or are different as you read on several occasions. Finally, consider other contexts in which you have engaged this scripture, i.e. has it been referred to in a sermon, have you studied it in a Bible study, does it bring a song to mind. What do you bring to the table as a result of these encounters with these scriptures?
2. Now read the introduction and familiarize yourself with the lesson materials. Gather resources that will be needed for the lesson, i.e. paper and pencils for Bible study. Prepare bookmarks with the Dag Hammarskjöld quote for each participant. These may be as simple as a cardstock copy of the bookmark provided at the end of the lesson material or as elaborate as your craft skills and time allows. You may provide materials and each participant make her own bookmark.
3. One week before your meeting recruit someone who is comfortable reading in group settings to read the scripture during your meeting. Ask her to read the Psalm in the NRSV and in her favorite translation. Ask her to bring both translations to the group meeting. Ask individuals to assist with leadership in worship. Finally, contact all the members of your group. Invite them to bring a photo or a small item that represents something for which they are thankful. These items will be added to the table during the worship component of your meeting.
4. The day before the meeting give thanks to God individually for each woman in your group. Try to be specific in how God has blessed you through your relationship with that woman. Perhaps some of these prayers might include an acknowledgement of growth and spiritual deepening that has come from a challenge that one or more of the women have provided for you.

5. On the day of the meeting, create a comfortable space in which your group can gather. It is best if everyone can sit in a circle where they may see the faces of everyone present. In the center of the meeting space place a table. Cover the table with a beautiful and if possible multi-colored cloth. Upon the cloth place a lit candle, a manger with the Christ child, a cross, and the elements for communion, a cup with juice and a loaf of bread of sufficient size to have some left after your group has partaken.
6. During the meeting, in your own words present background information provided in the introduction. Share the questions in the concluding paragraph of the introduction and allow participants opportunity for initial responses (*you may want to follow up on some of these responses, asking for additional thoughts or if there have been any changes in response before moving into the worship component of the meeting*). Engage the lesson materials. Allow time for silent reflection so participants have time to process information before responding. Discuss potential service projects and ask for group members to generate additional suggestions. Conclude with worship.
7. Following the meeting, distribute the remaining bread to participants and ask them to feed it to the birds that may gather in their yards as a way of practicing the truth that the transforming power for life which comes through God is for the wholeness of all of creation.

Introduction:

In a recent trip to a local craft shop, I saw a wall hanging that said, “SIMPLIFY! Instead of sheep, count your blessings.” Immediately the 19th century hymn, *Count Your Blessings*, written by Johnson Oatman, Jr. came to mind. Standing there with a wooden sheep staring at me and the hymn singing in my head, there seemed to be a congruency in the sentiment of both artists. The 2008 work of the craftsperson and the 1897 lyrics of Oatman both seem to suggest that discouragement, worries about the circumstance of life, doubt, and/or conflict may easily occupy our minds. Indeed, they may even rob us of a night of restful sleep. The antidote suggested by both artists is for us to redirect our thoughts to the blessings of God. Indeed, similar thinking seems to predate both artists as seen in the prayers of the children of Israel as expressed throughout the First Testament, especially in the Psalms.

Our God is a God of blessing

Walter Brueggemann begins his definition of blessing, as understood in the First Testament, as “a blessing is an act – by speech or gesture –whereby one party transmits the power for life to another party.” He goes on to suggest that this act is best understood in sacramental terms. In

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other words a blessing attempts to put into words what is beyond our ability to fully understand. It speaks to the working of God in our lives and in God's world. At a fundamental level blessing is about relationship – our relationship with God. A blessing is not a wish; it is the fundamental assurance and hope that God is sufficient and provides in all of life.

Within the First Testament texts, blessing or the power for life generally has a material dimension and is related to productivity and generatively. Blessings are concrete and specific. They are about prosperity, health, and the birth of children. Abraham and Sarah received the blessing of a son, Isaac. Jacob received the blessing of his father in terms of the birthright. Hannah was gifted with Samuel. Naomi was blessed through Ruth. Most Disciples Women are familiar with the blessing reported in Numbers 6: 24 – 26,

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

These words serve as the foundation of our Disciples Women Benediction

Gratitude is our Attitude of Response

Similarly, in the First Testament, thanksgiving relates to concrete and specific acts of God. One may adore God for who God is but one gives thanks for what God does. The prayers and the praise of Israel, as frequently seen in the Psalms, reverberates with words of thanksgiving as Israel gives an accounting of how God has brought forth life in the midst of the real-life problems that Israel experiences. Brueggemann suggests that for Israel thanksgiving is an act of "truth-telling" rooted in gratitude that comes from the assurance that God is faithful and provides in every circumstance of life. For Israel, thanksgiving gives public testimony to the nature of God as seen in God's actions and invites others to join in gratitude for the great things that God has done, is doing, and will continue to do.

Finally, both blessing and thanksgiving have communal characteristics. In ancient Israel, worship included the pronouncements of blessings. Israel, as a covenant people, was blessed so that the people might live as a blessing to others. As agents of God, the people were empowered with the power of life. The widow and the orphan could be cared for and the stranger could be protected and welcomed. Likewise, gratitude as voiced in thanksgiving is the antithesis to self-sufficiency. It is rooted in the understanding that all that all we have in life, indeed life itself, is dependent upon the

gracious activity of God in the world. Gratitude was voiced in thanksgiving and embodied in acts of justice and obedience to YHWH. Accordingly, thanksgiving was seen as the prime motivation for the life of faith.

In today's world the concepts of blessing – the power for life – and thanksgiving are well worth pondering. What does it mean to be blessed and to bless others? How are the blessings of life to be seen and named in the real-life circumstances of the 21st century? How do we as people of faith and as disciples of the Risen One engage in truth-telling that names the specific, concrete acts of God as life is empowered and brought forth in the ordinary and extraordinary of our lives? How do we engage in thanksgiving that is specific and names the particularities of our God and of our blessings? How can thanksgiving be countercultural and transformative as we acknowledge our dependency in the midst of a culture that idealizes individualism and self-sufficiency? How may we join with the children of Israel whose thanksgiving rings forth in the Psalms, with Jesus who lifted a cup and gave thanks, with Paul who extols us to give thanks in all circumstances (see I Thessalonians 5:18) and with Dag Hammarskjöld who says, "For all that has been thanks. For all that will be Yes!" in nurturing an attitude of gratitude and in offering our own words of thanksgiving?

Invite the participants to share initial reactions to the quote by Dag Hammarskjöld and to the questions that are raised in the preceding paragraph.

Consider the Following Questions

1. How do you experience the power for life today?
2. How is this power for life shared with others?

Bible Lesson:

Reading the book of Psalms, one finds the full range of human emotions as expressed in these poetic prayers which were collected over centuries. But more than ancient words, these prayers are our prayers as they express our hopes and our fears and give voice to our joy, anger, thankfulness, and despair. In these prayers we see reversals of circumstances and the fulfillment of hope as God meets the people and provides for their needs. Psalm 92 is an expression of Israel's gratitude and confidence in the goodness of YHWH. As one scholar suggests, Psalm 92 focuses on gratitude as the fundamental posture towards God.

Read the Following Scripture

Psalm 92

A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath.

1 It is good to give thanks to the Lord,

to sing praises to your name, O Most High;

2 to declare your steadfast love in the morning,

and your faithfulness by night,

3 to the music of the lute and the harp,

to the melody of the lyre.

4 For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;

at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

5 How great are your works, O Lord!

Your thoughts are very deep!

6 The dullard cannot know,

the stupid cannot understand this:

7 though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish,

they are doomed to destruction forever,

8 but you, O Lord, are on high forever.

9 For your enemies, O Lord,

for your enemies shall perish;

all evildoers shall be scattered.

10 But you have exalted my horn like that of the wild ox;

you have poured over me fresh oil.

11 My eyes have seen the downfall of my enemies;

my ears have heard the doom of my evil assailants.

12 The righteous flourish like the palm tree,

and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

13 They are planted in the house of the Lord;

they flourish in the courts of our God.

14 In old age they still produce fruit;

they are always green and full of sap,

15 showing that the Lord is upright;

he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Background on the Scripture

In the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Psalm 92 is entitled "But You, O Lord, Are Exalted Forever," thus highlighting the psalmist's trust in the sovereignty of God. Psalm 92 is an individual psalm of thanksgiving, in which the psalmist gives thanks for a particular act through which God has provided redemption. It should be noted that the verb tense used in the Hebrew in verses 10 and 11, may be translated as past or future tense. Thus, we cannot be certain if the psalmist is thanking God for something that has happened or will happen. We can be certain that despite circumstances suggesting the success of the wicked, the psalmist expresses complete trust and confidence in God's ability to deliver God's people and to bring about justice in God's world. While identified as an individual psalm of thanksgiving, the psalm has communal elements as the psalmist invites others to join in his song of thanksgiving and praise.

The fourth book of psalms (Psalms 90 – 106) serves as a response to the crisis of the exile that is spoken of in the third book of psalms (Psalms 73 – 89). These psalms give answers for the questions that are raised in Psalm 89. The overwhelming response is that God's kingdom will be established, that God's provision is unfailing because of God's unfailing love, and that those who trust in God will be blessed. Psalm 92 brings together the themes of God as refuge, which is seen in Psalm 90 and 91, and God as enthroned king, which is seen in Psalms 93 – 106. God is praised as God acts to save God's people. The righteous will be blessed and flourish because they are rooted in God. As one scholar states: "The life of the righteous also testifies to God's

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strength... for the righteous have discovered that trusting God is precisely what constitutes life.” This is sufficient reason for the psalmist gratitude.

In the superscription, the psalm is associated with the Sabbath day (Saturday). While it is not clear that the psalm was originally written for the Sabbath, rabbinic sources confirm that the psalm was read in the Temple on the Sabbath after the daily offering. This association seems fitting as Psalm 92 speaks of God’s desire for the ordering of society and the proper treatment of humanity. Further, the association is strengthened as the Sabbath was a time to give thanks and praise as the people gathered for worship.

Engaging the Scripture Together

Discuss the following:

1. How have you been made glad by God’s works ?
2. What have been the reversal of circumstances that you have seen brought about by God in your life? In the world?
3. How does trusting in God constitute life?

Giving Voice to Our Gratitude

1. Divide the participants into groups of three or four. Ask each small group to paraphrase Psalm 92 in their own way. They may use poetic or narrative form; if you have a group that is musical they may want to write their own lyrics for a simple and familiar tune. Instruct the groups to be specific in naming how has God provided for them, protected them and cared for them in the face of opposition. Inform the groups that their prayers will be shared in worship. Allow 10 minutes for this activity. Conclude this activity by inviting those who are willing to share their group prayer.

Distribute bookmarks.

Worship:

Assembling Our Worship Center

*Begin by singing **Praise God, From Whom All Blessing Flow** Provide an opportunity for each participant to share about the photo or the item that represents that for which they are thankful. After each person shares, she will place the item in the worship center with the items that are already there. As the item is placed have the group sing the **Praise God, From Whom All Blessing Flow**. (If you have a large gathering, you may want to have three or four individuals*

share and then place their items as a group)

Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Call to Worship

One voice: Each morning we wake to the blessing of our God!

Many voices: We stretch; we rub the sleep from our eyes.

We receive the gift of the new day with all of its opportunities and challenges.

One voice: Each night we sleep beneath the blessing of our God!

Many voices: We are renewed and refreshed; we relax and let go.

We trust that our God watches over us and cares for us.

One voice: The blessing of our God is power for life.

Many voices: We are blessed!

Let us give thanks; let us worship the All-sufficient One.

Gathering Prayer

God of blessings and abundance, as the light has burned brightly in our midst throughout this time in which we have gathered, your presence burns brightly in the world around us. Forgive us for those times in which we have been distracted by the luminaries of the world. Draw our hearts and minds into this moment so that we may truly worship and give for thanks for the many blessings of life. We pray in the name of the Risen One from whom we receive the power of life. Amen.

Meditation

Invite participants to sit comfortably and to focus their attention on the worship center that is in the center of the gathering space. Invite participants to take several slow deep breaths, breathing in through their noses and out through their mouths.

After a brief silence, read the following slowly

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Leader: For you, O Lord, have made me glad, by the works of your hands.

The works of your hands, O Lord seen in the amber and ruby leaves of autumn trees, and in the amethyst, scarlet, and emerald of lush tropical plants. The works of your hands, O Lord tasted in golden succulent corn, ground and mixed to sustain life, in the juicy sweetness of a crisp apple newly picked from the tree, in bags of rice delivered to refugees across the globe. The works of your hands, O Lord, felt by the dying one whose hand is held and brow is wiped, by the child whose tears are wiped and bruised knee kissed, by the displaced worker as a hand is placed on her shoulder and she is assured that she will not be alone. The works of your hands, O Lord heard in a baby's cry, in songs of praise in all the languages of the earth, in the truth cries that name the injustices of life.

Leader: For you, O Lord have made me glad, by the works of your hands.

I know, O God, that you are there in the midst of it all. As the manger and the cross stand in the midst of our blessings, you are there in the midst of life. You are with us when we receive the news that we are to be mothers and grandmothers. You are with us when we are accepted and rejected into the college that we have always wanted to attend. You are there when we are employed and are unemployed. You are with us when we laugh and when we cry. And more, O God you are not only with us – you are with everyone. You are in the midst of life. You are in the refugee camps of Chad and Darfur. You are in the cottage industries of Thailand. You are on worksites along the gulf coast and throughout the world. You are in high school stadiums and in concert halls. You are in homes that are humble and homes that are cardboard boxes. You are in the midst of life – giving life.

*A this time participants are invited to share where they see
the works of God's hands by completing the following:*

Leader: For you, O Lord have made me glad, by the works of your hands

Participant: I see the work of your hand God in... (time for sharing)

Leader: For you, O Lord have made me glad, by the works of your hands.

How great are your works, O Lord.

Song of Response

Worship the King

Chalice Hymnal # 17

Offering

Invitation to Offering

God did not withhold Godself from creation. Instead God came into the world to experience all that life has to offer. From the height of celebration to the depths of suffering and despair, God gave Godself over in the person of Jesus Christ. Through Christ we have been blessed and called to live as a blessing. May our offerings be a tangible sign of our desire to follow Jesus in caring and in sharing, in being a blessing in the world.

Offering Prayer

God we give you thanks for the many blessings of our lives and ask that you would bless that which we return to you today. We ask that you would continue to meet us in the ordinary and extraordinary times of life. Let us respond in gratitude so that our lives may be acts of living praise as we embody these words...

Unison: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Great Thanksgiving

Invitation to the Table

In some traditions the Lord's Table, communion, is referred to as Eucharist. Eucharist means 'thanksgiving.' This is indeed a place of thanksgiving as we celebrate all the promises of God, those which have been fulfilled and those which wait for fulfillment. Let us come with joy and thanksgiving to meet our Lord and Savior.

Prayer for the Bread and the Cup

God, we come to the table of thanksgiving awed by the height, the depth, and the breadth of your love seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. We are humbled and amazed as we stand in anticipation of all that will be when your kingdom is fulfilled. Nourish us as we partake of bread of life and cup of salvation so that we might be strengthened for the life of

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discipleship today and all of our tomorrows. In Christ name we pray. Amen.

Words of Institution

Leader: For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:23-34)

Leader: The gifts of God for the people of God.

(The elements will be shared by the leader serving the first woman and then handing that individual the cup and the bread. Each person will serve the person who is sitting next to her as the cup and the bread are passed around the circle. It is appropriate to say something like "The bread of life and the cup of salvation" or similar words as you serve the communion elements.)

Song of Response

Give Thanks

Chalice Hymnal #528

Benediction

Unison:

God be merciful and bless us and cause your face to shine upon us that your way may be made know on earth, your saving health among all nations.

Potential Service Projects:

1. If there is a local food pantry or clothing closet, the program offering may be donated to this ministry. Encourage your group to consider how they might assist in this ministry in an ongoing way.
2. Arrange for volunteers to assist with a local Habitat for Humanity program.
3. Check with your regional website regarding what programs the region may be sponsoring, i.e. Miracle Day, regional mission trip, and consider how you might assist.
4. Identify a special need of Week of Compassion and donate to help meet that need. More information may be obtained by going to www.weekofcompassion.org.

5. If any of your members are on Facebook encourage them to participate in (lil) greenpatch, a program that works to address issues of global warming.
6. Explore and consider how your group may participate in the Heifer Project. Information may be obtained at www.heifer.org.
7. Make a covenant with members of your group to engage in one act of blessing each day for seven days. These acts of blessings may be visiting homebound members of the church, sending cards to individuals who are in prison, taking a meal to an individual who is ill. Have your group share ideas as they covenant together.