

Tell Me A Story: Lent

A journey through the season, for all ages, based around Bible stories and children's books



by Margaret Pritchard Houston

Why do an All-Age Lent course?

More and more, churches are realising that doing things with all ages together can bear fruit in many ways. All-Age Worship is part of this, but church is bigger than worship, and so it's important to think about where else in the life of the church we can do things with all of us.

An All-Age Lent group has multiple potential benefits:

1. It can **enable parents to participate** – especially now in lockdown, they don't need to worry about what their children are doing while they're on Zoom doing the course.
2. It can **build relationships between people of different ages**. This can be an important part of changing a church's culture to be more welcoming towards children – after all, as the Revd Mary Hawes said once in a course I was on, "it's harder to tut at a child you know."
3. All-Age experiments like the Channel 4 programme "Old People's Home for Four-Year-Olds" have shown that **having contact with children significantly improves the emotional and mental wellbeing of older people**. Bringing children into spaces normally reserved for the pensioner set isn't just good for children – it's good for older people too. Especially for older people who have been very isolated over the last year, the chance to get to know children can be very good for mental health.
4. It models, for children, **what it looks like to be a Christian at all different ages**. Children who usually only spend time at church with other people their age need examples of what being a Christian at 15, 28, 45, or 80 looks like.
5. It **helps adults re-connect with a sense of play**, becoming more childlike and more open and creative – which is how Jesus said we should be.
6. It **engages children with the seasons of the church year**, something they often miss out on.

I'm sure you will discover more benefits as you go through this course!

A note for concerned adults:

Making something All-Age doesn't mean dumbing it down. It doesn't mean turning a serious Lent course into some combination of a three-ring circus and an episode of Peppa Pig. Children's spirituality is real, and serious, and deep – and any programme that seeks to take children seriously will ultimately end up taking adults seriously too.

The stories and activities in this course are designed to be accessible by people anywhere from toddler-hood on up, and encourage us all to be *childlike, but not childish*. In this course, we ask real questions, about life and death, change and transformation, repentance and forgiveness, and more. Each session has three ways of responding – Talk, Make, and Do. People are free to choose a response activity based on what most interests them, not based on their chronological age. You may therefore end up with a discussion group that happens to be composed mostly or entirely of adults, while the children are all doing art or games, but you may not.

And there's another benefit:



7. It allows people to **explore different sides to their own spirituality.**

So often, children at church MAKE and DO, while adults TALK and LISTEN. In this course, the 45-year-old who has sat in church listening to sermons and spoken prayers for the past 30 years may find new understanding of God by responding to Scripture by making something. And you may find that the person who most enjoys sitting and talking about Scripture for 20 minutes straight is 10 or 11.

It's important to present all manners of response as equally valid and equally interesting. Discussion isn't "the boring bit for the grownups" and art and games aren't "frivolous things we put on to keep the kids quiet while we do the important discussion."



Why use children's books?

First of all, Jesus calls all of us to become like little children. Through re-discovering our sense of play, our capacity for awe and wonder, our ability to ask big questions and be okay with not knowing the answers yet, we become *childlike*, which is different becoming *childish*. This course encourages all of us, of whatever age, to connect with our sense of play and discovery. Children's books are a perfect medium to encourage that.

And of course, children's books are rather like parables – they look deceptively simple, but actually contain huge amounts of hidden depth and profundity. For example, *Where the Wild Things Are*, used in week 2, probably has less than 500 words, total, but has an enormous amount to say about exile and homecoming, loneliness, alienation from one another, forgiveness, repentance, self-control, and grace. That's a lot for a book with only a few words per page, but it's all genuinely there in the text and illustrations. The thing that good children's authors know is that childhood is a complicated time, with lots of big feelings and lots of big lessons to learn. When they write books that take children and childhood seriously, they end up writing books that take human nature seriously, and we can all connect with that.

What are the themes?

We look at one theme each week, related to Lent, exploring it through Scripture, a children's book, and response activities.

Week One: Temptation

Week Two: Journey

Week Three: Stuck

Week Four: Change

Week Five: New Life

What is the course structure?

The course is designed to take about forty-five minutes each week, and can be done on Zoom.

In each session:

A children's book is read, followed by a Scripture story.

Think about the home environments in which this happens. Can you encourage families to set up a "sacred space" by their computer, even if it's just lighting an LED tealight? Do you want to start by everyone holding up their candle to their webcam, so we can all see the light flickering in each other's homes?

For each session, I provide a suggested Scripture retelling from one of two children's Bibles – *The Lion Bible: Everlasting Stories*, or *Children of God Storybook Bible*. There is a different way of telling for the Scripture of week 4, as it's from an Epistle.

I'm aware there are many and varied ways of telling Bible stories in settings with children present – videos, Godly Play, drama, etc. This course was originally designed to be done in person, so books were chosen in order to create a "family storytime" atmosphere. However, reading books over Zoom can still be very effective at doing this:

- If you have access to a scanner, you can scan the pages of the book and put them in a Powerpoint, and then share your screen, so everyone can see the book.
- Or you could ask everyone to put you in Speaker mode, so they see the reader on their screen, and the reader holds up the book to the webcam at intervals, so people can see the illustrations. It may help to practice this on a Zoom call with a friend before Week One!



These two books have been chosen because they have a richness to their text and illustrations that means adults will be able to engage on a deep level as well as children.

However, if you have a different Bible storybook that you like, or want to use videos etc, you're free to do so. Do check ahead of time, though, to make sure discussion questions/activities don't lean heavily on a specific line/image etc in the suggested Scripture story, which isn't present in the one you choose! And do make sure that any version you choose is open-ended enough in its telling of the story to allow for creative response (ie, no summary of "the moral of this story is ..." at the end of each section, etc.). I would also encourage you to choose one whose illustrations are not "cutesy" and which features people whose skin tone isn't always pale.

Note – as mentioned in the pastoral note below, some of the stories used may be difficult for people. You can begin the reading time by explaining that if you need to turn off your camera so people won't see you, that's fine, and explaining how to get in touch with someone from the ministry team if you want to talk.

Quiet reflection on the story.

The leader, or a participant, lights a candle, and the group holds silence for ten seconds to reflect on what they've heard. Small children can be taught deliberately to hold silence – you can use counting fingers to ten, teach children to hold their fingers on lips, etc. This may take a bit of time in the first session. If there's the occasional squawk from a pre-verbal child, that's fine.

After ten seconds, you can go to a response activity.

If your group is really good at holding silence, you can extend this time week by week. Young children may struggle to hold silence for more than a minute, however.

Response activities:

The group then disperses to response activities – one focused on discussion, one on making something artistic, one on doing something physical (TALK AND LISTEN, MAKE, DO). These will be done in breakout rooms. You may want people to sign up ahead of time for which breakout room they'd like to be in, or you may just need to be okay with a minute or so of slight chaos as people raise their hands and you assign them to the correct breakout room.

Reflection, feedback, and closing:

The groups then all come back together and share what they did in their groups. This is so we can learn from each other and benefit even from the activities we didn't do.

The leader asks some open-ended wondering questions about the session, and the session closes with prayer.

The goal is NOT to have distilled the story into a take-away moral, or lesson, by the end. The goals are to foster awe and wonder, build intergenerational community, and equip people to keep thinking about the stories, and their responses, throughout the week.

You will need:

Copies of the 5 children's books:

Oh No, George! By Chris Haughton
Where the Wild Things Are, by Maurice Sendak
STUCK, by Oliver Jeffers
The Very Hungry Caterpillar, by Eric Carle
The Garden of Hope, by Isabel Otter

Copies of the two Bible storybooks: *The Lion Bible: Everlasting Stories*, and *Children of God Storybook Bible*

YouTube videos – two are used in the closing prayers – ready to go, and someone who knows how to share screen and share computer sound as a meeting host.

The materials needed for the response activities – these are listed separately at the start of each week. Mostly, the “Talk” response activity needs no materials, the “Make” and “Do” activities do. I’ve done my best to make them fairly easy to get hold of, and not too cost prohibitive. These can be sent out to people participating, or available outside your church for people to pick up. Make sure you’re preparing packs according to Covid safety guidelines.

If preparing resource packs for specific “Make” and “Do” activities is too much for you, here’s what you can do instead:

1. Cut the “Do” activity if it requires materials. So instead of three choices in some weeks for breakout rooms, there’s two.
2. Have the MAKE activity each week be completely open-ended. Instead of using the suggested activities, just encourage people to use whatever they have in their house to make something that helps them reflect on the stories they heard. This can be with the stuff in their recycling bin, with pen and paper, with items from their garden or their local park, or whatever they like. This allows for more creative freedom and less prep work for you. However, some communities may struggle with the open-ended element of this and prefer a more structured activity, so structured activities are provided.

Staff and/or volunteers:

1 leader to read the stories and lead the feedback time at the end

Someone to facilitate the discussion in the TALK AND LISTEN response time (they need to be able to facilitate an open-ended conversation that may go in an unexpected direction, not need to have one “right” answer, and be skilled at ensuring adults don’t talk over children). It may also be helpful to have a scribe here, but they can be chosen from among the group if you decide to go for that.

At least 1 person in the MAKE and DO breakout rooms, to supervise, lead the activity when needed, and make sure everyone stays safe.

This means, if the reader also takes on one of the other roles, this course can be led by a minimum of three people. Ideally, it would be the same three people every week, to build relationships.

A pastoral note: some of these conversations and stories may open up emotional wounds for people. Discussions about repentance and forgiveness, about getting stuck in life, about change and transformation, and bereavement, can connect to very deep and often unresolved struggles in our lives. You may find it helpful to have someone on hand who is skilled and trained in pastoral care and safeguarding, available in a quiet place for anyone who needs to talk to someone. Anyone who is visibly struggling at the end of a session needs to be looked after to ensure they’re safe to go home.

A note on safeguarding and accessibility:

The Church of England safeguarding guidance on doing Zoom sessions with children and young people present can be found here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Being%20connected%20with%20ZOOM%20safely.pdf> . It’s relatively simple and straightforward.



A simple risk assessment should be done, looking at the safety of the activities, ensuring online safety, and making sure parents are informed of their responsibilities.

All leaders should have a DBS check, even if parents are present throughout the session. If leaders already have an up-to-date DBS check for other activities they lead for the church, they do not need a new one done for this activity.

This should not be an administrative burden. A bit of time spent thinking about how to make sure the sessions are safe and accessible for everyone, and checking with your Diocese if needed, is all that's required.

Week One:

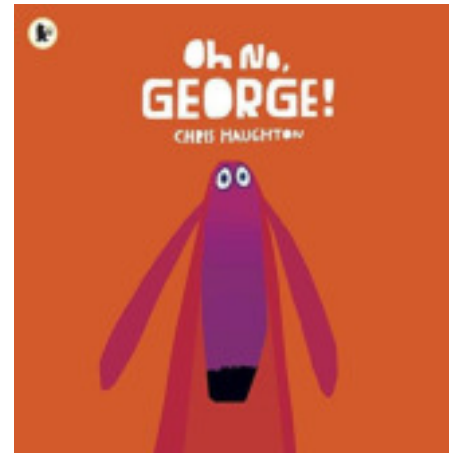
Temptation

Story: 10-15 minutes

Children's Book: Oh No, George! By Chris Haughton

Scripture: The Lion Bible: Everlasting Stories, "The Story of Jesus the Teacher," page 172, OR Children of God Storybook Bible, "Jesus in the Desert," pages 70-71

NOTE: if this group includes people who are relatively new to Christianity (and even if it doesn't), it may help to begin this session with the "Lent in Three Minutes" video from Busted Halo, which can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xo1mjuy1NA0> , before reading the stories. Have someone read the written text out loud as it goes up, for non-readers. Please note Busted Halo is a Catholic YouTube channel, but most of what's included in this video is standard practice across most of Anglicanism as well.



10 seconds of quiet reflection

The leader, or a participant, lights a candle, and the group holds silence for ten seconds to reflect on what they've heard. Small children can be taught deliberately to hold silence – you can use counting fingers to ten, teach children to hold their fingers on lips, etc. This may take a bit of time in the first session. If there's the occasional squawk from a pre-verbal child, that's fine.

If your group is really good at holding silence, you can extend this time week by week. Young children may struggle to hold silence for more than a minute, however.

Responses: 15-20 minutes

TALK AND LISTEN:

The goal isn't to find definitive answers, but to explore the themes of the stories together. You don't necessarily have to get through all of the questions.

What happens in these stories?

How are these stories the same? How are they different?

What is your favourite part of the stories?

Oh No, George!

How do you think George felt when he did something wrong?

How do you think Harry felt when he came home?

Do you think it's *always* wrong for George to eat cake, dig in the dirt, or chase cat? What might make it okay?

Jesus in the Desert/Jesus the Teacher

I wonder what you can see in the picture. How does the picture make you feel?

Why do you think Jesus said no the thought/the devil?

I wonder how Jesus felt at the beginning of the story. I wonder how he felt at the end.

Our own lives:

How can we know if something we want to do is right or wrong?

MAKE:

Sand pictures

You will need:

A bag of sand for each household

Scoops or cups (can be found at home)

PVA glue and spreaders

Black paper or card (ideally A3 size or larger)

Optional:

Sand in different colours

Oil pastels

Chalk

This activity provides a sensory connection to the story – as Jesus went to the desert, we touch and work with sand to make art that responds to this story. The dark background makes a visually striking image.

Encourage people to draw or write using the PVA glue. You can draw or write something that's on your mind, or something connected to the story – what was your favourite part? What was the most important part? Scoop out the sand and shake it over the glue design, then gently pour off the excess back into the container.

The idea of "desert time" may be especially potent this year – we have all, in our own ways, gone into the desert and been alone, away from society and support, and, like Jesus, we may have found it a challenging experience. If the conversation goes this way, encourage it.

If you're using multiple colours of sand, do one colour at a time. There may be some of one colour that sticks in a different spot on its way out – that's almost inevitable.

You can also add details with oil pastels and/or chalk, if you want.

You can encourage people to take a picture of their sand painting when they're done, and create an online gallery of them on your church's Facebook page or Instagram account.

NOTE: these pictures need to be dried FLAT, not hung up to dry. The effect of gravity on glue is much stronger than its effect on paint.

DO:

Bread-baking.

The presence of bread in this story connects the beginning of Lent to its end, with the Last Supper. This activity is especially appropriate for anyone being confirmed, or admitted to Communion, at Easter.

There are many bread recipes out there. Since you only have half an hour, I suggest using an unleavened bread – you can mix the dough and shape your loaves within that time, as there's no need for the dough to rise. A very good one from BBC Good Food can be found here: <https://www.bbcgoodfood.com/recipes/3080679/authentic-unleavened-bread> – I've used this many times with children's groups, and it's forgiving of the measurements not being exact.

You can create individual ingredient packs for participants, if they don't already have these ingredients at home. Consider that if you have high levels of poverty in your area, and access to an oven isn't universal, this may limit people's ability to participate in this activity.

A certain amount of creativity can be used when it comes to shaping the loaves. This is a fairly elastic dough, and so you can make sculptures instead of plain round/oval loaves. The basic shapes are:

Blobs: big shapes of dough, shaped by hand

Snakes: long narrow pieces of dough, made by rolling dough in your palms

Spheres: made by holding the dough in one hand and moving the other in a circular motion above it.

You could use these three basic techniques to make the dough in the shape of Jesus, a cross, George the dog, a desert with palm trees – anything, really!

Remind people to set a timer as they put their bread in the oven!

Reflection: 10-15 minutes

Sharing from the different groups:

Someone who was in the discussion group: feed back some of the things you talked about.
Would anyone like to add anything to those thoughts?

Would anyone like to show us something you made, and tell us about it?

Would anyone like to tell us about something you did?

Questions for the whole group:

I wonder what your favourite part of this session was.

I wonder what the most important part of this session was.

I wonder if there's anything from today's stories or activities you want to think about, or pray about, between now and next week.

Closing Prayers:

Light a candle, encourage people to turn off their lights, and watch the 40 Days video using the “share screen” feature: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-6a25Yo2wE>

Prayer:

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land.

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean.

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

All: AMEN.

Leader: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

All: In the name of Christ, Amen.

Week Two:

Journey

Story: 10-15 minutes

Children's Book: "Where the Wild Things Are," by Maurice Sendak

Scripture resource: *The Lion Bible: Everlasting Stories*. Read "The Prodigal Son," pages 190-191

10 seconds of quiet reflection

The leader, or a participant, lights a candle, and the group holds silence for ten seconds to reflect on what they've heard. Small children can be taught deliberately to hold silence – you can use counting fingers to ten, teach children to hold their fingers on lips, etc. This may take a bit of time in the first session. If there's the occasional squawk from a pre-verbal child, that's fine.

If your group is really good at holding silence, you can extend this time week by week. Young children may struggle to hold silence for more than a minute, however.



Responses: 15-20 minutes

TALK AND LISTEN:

You don't have to use these questions, if you prefer a more freewheeling discussion. However, the goal isn't to find definitive answers, but to explore the themes of the stories together. You don't necessarily have to get through all of the questions.

Who is in the stories, and what happens to them?¹

What's the same about the two stories? What's different?

What made Max go home again? What made the son go home again?

Have you ever been on a long journey? What was it like?

Do the characters in the stories change? (Max, the son, the older son, the father) How so?

Why do you think Jesus told that story?

Where are you in those stories?

Is there anything you find difficult in those stories?

What does it mean to forgive someone? What needs to happen for forgiveness to happen?

Are there times when forgiveness isn't possible?

MAKE:

As with every week, the results of these activities can be photographed and uploaded to an album on the church's Facebook page or onto their Instagram account.

¹ Thanks to Elizabeth Caldwell, in her book, *I Wonder: engaging a child's curiosity about the Bible*, for this question.

Activity One: Journey

Make a painting showing the different places the characters in today's stories have been.

Needed materials:

Paper

Washable paint

Brushes

Aprons

Paint palettes or plates

Water

You can also have:

Glue

Natural materials (eg leaves, grasses, sand)

Coloured tissue

Rubber stamps and inkpads

You can choose to make one painting, and focus either on The Prodigal Son or Where the Wild Things Are, or to make two – one for each story. Families can make their painting together, or each member can make an individual one.

As you work, talk about what it feels like to be in those different places. Have you ever been in a place where the wild things are? Have you ever had to sleep in a place that felt like the pigsty? What does it feel like to journey away from home? What does it feel like to come back? What if you can't come back? What would you do then?

Activity Two: Masks

Make "Wild Thing" masks.

Needed materials:

Paper plates

Glue

Scissors

Marker pens and/or paint (and paint palettes, water, brushes, aprons)

Yarn

Elastic

A hole-punch

Optional: reinforcers for the holes

Invite participants to design a "Wild Thing" mask. Does your mask look like one in the book, or are you inventing your own? What does it feel like to put the mask on? What does it feel like to take it off and be yourself again?

When the masks are done, punch holes in each side and attach elastic to fit around the person's face.

DO:

Games:

Give people some time to clear/find a space where they can move freely while still hearing/seeing each other on the screen.

1. **“I am walking.”** Start with having people walk around the space in their normal way. Then call out “I am walking ... like a wild thing” “like I’m the younger son on my way home” “like I’m the father running to meet his younger son” “like I’m Max on the boat, sailing away from home” and so on. Encourage participants to think of other ones. Things to think about: are you moving with a clear destination, or wandering randomly? Are you moving slowly or quickly? Are you standing straight, hunched over, or something else? How does your body show how you’re feeling as you make this journey? Does changing how your body moves change how you feel?
2. **TIMED CHALLENGE:** Give people three minutes to create a still scene from one of the stories, using **ONLY** the items present in the room they’re in, and their own bodies, if they wish to use them. Go around each household and have them show their scene – can you guess what each one is?

Reflection: 10-15 minutes

Sharing from the different groups:

Someone who was in the discussion group: feed back some of the things you talked about. Would anyone like to add anything to those thoughts?

Would anyone like to show us something you made, and tell us about it?

Would anyone who did the games like to tell us about what it was like?

Questions for the whole group:

I wonder what your favourite part of this session was.

I wonder what the most important part of this session was.

I wonder if there’s anything from today’s stories or activities you want to think about, or pray about, between now and next week.

Closing prayer activity:

Light a candle and have everyone turn off the lights.

Touch your feet, if you can. If you can’t, wiggle your toes. If you’re in a wheelchair or a pushchair, touch the wheels. Think about some of the places you’ve travelled in the last week – even if it’s only within your house – then the last year, then your whole life. Think about the places you’ve been that have felt like coming home. Think about the places you’d like to go, that you miss, because of lockdown. Pray for all those places.

Leader: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

All: In the name of Christ, Amen.

Week Three:

Stuck

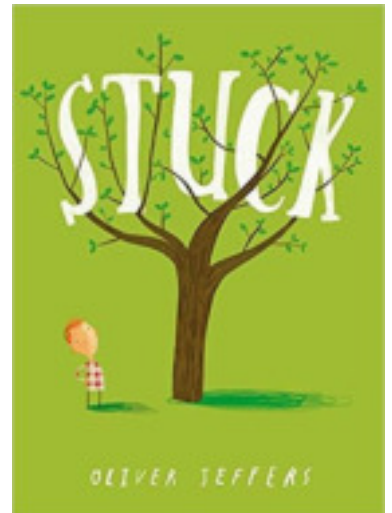
Story: 20 minutes (these are longer stories)

Children's book: STUCK, by Oliver Jeffers.

Scripture resource: Children of God Storybook Bible, by Desmond Tutu

Read pages 28 – 35: Moses is Saved, The Voice From the Burning Bush, and 'Let My People Go'.

Note: the focus here is not so much on the liberation, which comes later, but on how easy it is to get stuck and how getting unstuck requires work. We'll reflect on how we get stuck doing bad things even when we know better, and how we get stuck in bad habits. We'll look at what happens to finally get unstuck and be free.



10 seconds of quiet reflection

The leader, or a participant, lights a candle, and the group holds silence for ten seconds to reflect on what they've heard. Small children can be taught deliberately to hold silence – you can use counting fingers to ten, teach children to hold their fingers on lips, etc. This may take a bit of time in the first session. If there's the occasional squawk from a pre-verbal child, that's fine.

After ten seconds, anyone who wishes to stay and sit by the candle to pray is welcome to, or you can go to a response activity. (If you don't have a spare leader to ensure the candle is blown out once it's no longer attended, you may choose to use an LED candle, or a string of fairy lights, or a projected series of images, or some other focal point instead.)

If your group is really good at holding silence, you can extend this time week by week. Young children may struggle to hold silence for more than a minute, however.

Responses: 15-20 minutes

TALK AND LISTEN:

You don't have to use these questions, if you prefer a more freewheeling discussion. However, the goal isn't to find definitive answers, but to explore the themes of the stories together. You don't necessarily have to get through all of the questions.

Questions about both stories:

What was your favourite part of the stories? What was the most important part?

How are Floyd and Moses the same? How are they different?

I wonder what it feels like to be stuck. I wonder what it feels like to get unstuck.

Stuck:

Have you ever got stuck somewhere? How did you get unstuck? Did anyone help you?

Floyd keeps trying to fix the problem, and ends up making it worse. Why do you think this happens?
Has this ever happened to you?
The book ends without resolving the whole problem. Do you think the situation gets fixed? How?

Bible story:

Who is stuck in this story? In what ways?
I wonder why God appeared as a pillar of cloud, and as fire?
I wonder how Moses felt when God called his name?
I wonder if Moses knew what God had planned.
I wonder why God wants us to hear this story.

MAKE:

Activity One:

Keyrings. You can buy keyring kits from Baker Ross, starting at £4 for 8, with discounts for bulk buys for larger churches.

Keys can open doors and get us in and out of places where we might feel stuck. Decorate a keychain with something that reminds you of today's story, or something that means "stuck/unstuck" to you.

Activity Two: Making Choices

You will need:

The three Exodus pictures (at the end of this activity) on a single page or Powerpoint, so you can share your screen and see them all at once.

A copy of STUCK

For each household:

Drawing materials – any combination of paint (and paint palettes, aprons, water, brushes, paper), felt tips, coloured pencils, oil pastels, chalk, charcoal, etc.

Paper

Artists make choices when they make art. Look at the three different pictures of the same scene from today's Bible story.

What can you see in these pictures?
Which is your favourite?
How do they make you feel?
What's the same?
What's different?

Now hold up a page from STUCK

What colours do the different artists use?
Are you looking at the scene from above? Below? Straight on? What difference does that make?
Is there a lot of detail or are the brushstrokes thick and blurry?
Are there lots of straight lines or curvy lines or both?
Is there a lot of white space or is the space filled in?

Then you can do one of the following:

1. Copy your favourite picture of the Exodus scene. Notice what choices the artist made as you copy.
2. Draw the Exodus scene in the style of STUCK's illustrations.
3. Draw a scene from STUCK in the style of one of the Exodus artists.
4. Choose your favourite scene from either story and draw it in your own style. Is your style similar to any of these four artists? What's different?

NOTE: this won't be finished in the time – people can keep working on their pictures afterwards. Have a way of sending them the pictures to keep working.

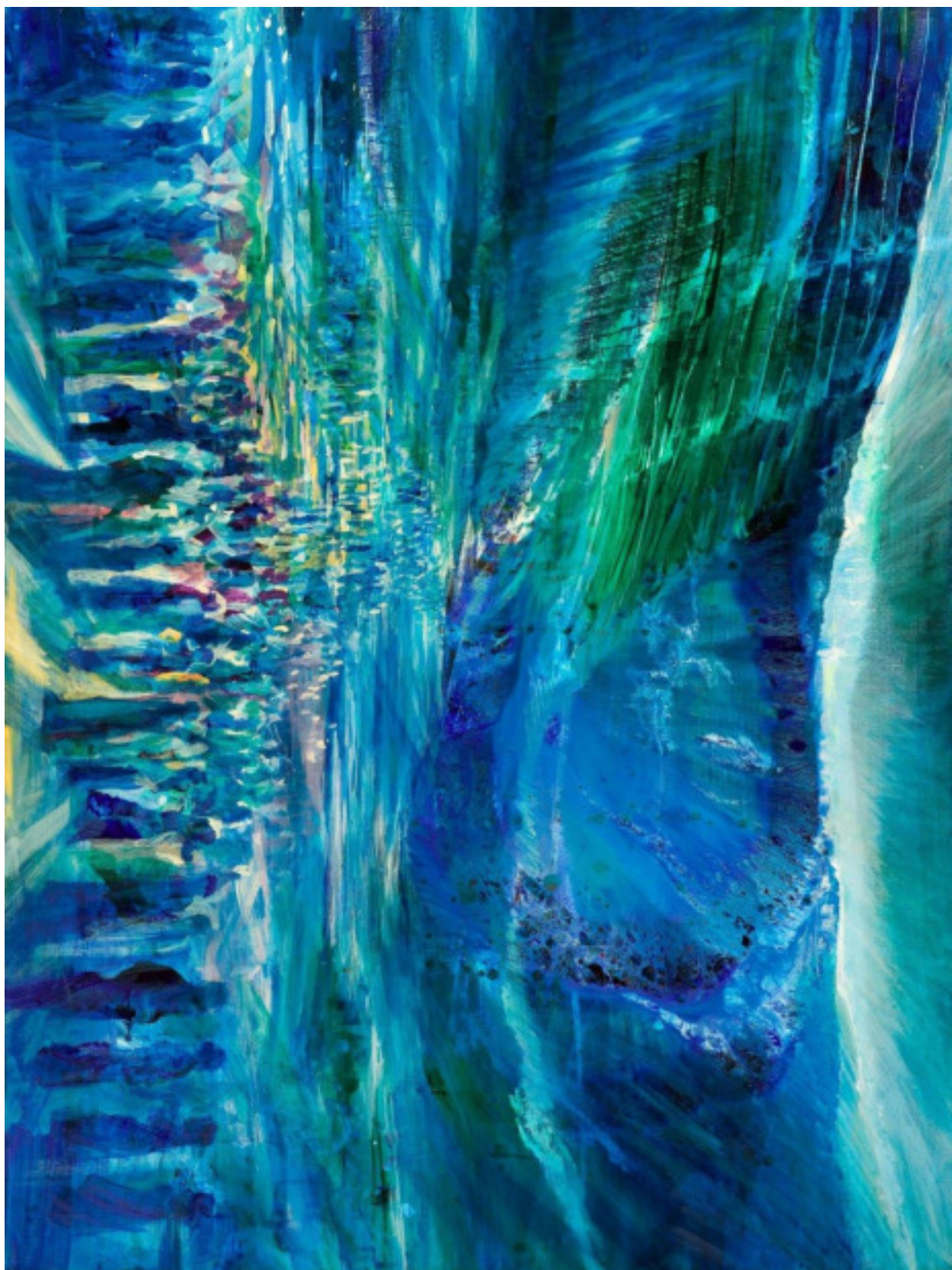
The three interpretations of Exodus are on the following pages.



Exodus, by Richard McBee



Crossing of the Red Sea, by Marc Chagall



The Red Sea, by Yoram Raanan

DO:

Activity Three: Breaking Bad Habits

You will need:

GETTING UNSTUCK cards for everyone (at the end of this activity).

This activity is a combination of TALK AND LISTEN and DO. It's based on the mindfulness principle of using sensory feedback and curiosity to help us break bad habits. Like the first activity, it may be easier for people aged 7 and up, who have a longer attention span and more ability to be self-reflective. (This activity may touch on addiction issues, but is not intended as actual treatment for serious addictions – if anything like that comes up, refer the discussion to a skilled pastor who can listen and pass things along, or your Safeguarding Officer.)

Have the group spend one minute in silence, focusing on breathing. Just breathing in and out. If a thought occurs to you, try to let it pass through your mind and then out the other side.

For the next minute, keep sitting in silence, but this time have the group focus on how their body feels. Ask, is your jaw tense? Are your shoulders hunched? Are your hands relaxed or in fists? Do your feet feel sore? How fast is your heart beating? Are you breathing deeply or quick and shallow?

Then spend two more minutes, still in silence, but this time focusing on their senses. Ask, *What can you hear? What can you see? What can you feel? What can you smell? What can you taste?*

At the end of the full four minutes, ask people to share what the experience was like. Did you find yourself getting distracted? Did you want to check your phone? Get a snack? Turn on Netflix? Have a cigarette?

Our brains are really good at building habits. We need this to survive – we need to not spend all our brain's energy, every day, on remembering to eat, sleep, etc. Habits can be good.

But habits can also be harmful. Is there a bad habit you're trying to break? Maybe it's something you're trying to give up for Lent. Is there something you do when you feel bad that's not actually helping the feeling? Maybe you feel sad, so you scroll through social media, or zone out watching tell you don't actually care about, or eat junk food, or have a glass of wine. And we can know, even while we're doing it, that we don't really want to be doing this, that it's not helping us, but still, the habit is very strong.

Hand out the GETTING UNSTUCK cards. Give people some time to look them over and fill in the "DO NOW" bit.

Explain that our brains are wired to make us want to avoid feeling bad, and feel good. And that often, we use bad habits to try and escape feeling bad, and do things that feel good instead. But sometimes, those bad habits can make us feel even worse. So instead we try to *force* ourselves to change. We make ourselves feel horrible and guilty. And that makes the bad habit worse. And we get really really stuck. Like Floyd in the book, we keep throwing more and more things in the tree and making the situation worse.

God doesn't want us to be stuck. God wants us to be unstuck. And when we notice what actually feels good, and helps us, we get unstuck.

Your bad habits may feel good for a little while. That's how we get into the bad habits. Because at first they feel good. But then they don't. We use them in the wrong ways. So breaking bad habits isn't about telling yourself how bad the habits are, and punishing yourself, but about figuring out what actually *does* help you feel good, and face the hard things.

Ask people to look at the second part of the GETTING UNSTUCK card. This week, the challenge is to do the bad habit, but to get curious, and connect with your body, and notice what's happening when you do.

GETTING UNSTUCK CARD: FRONT – photocopyable

GETTING UNSTUCK		
DO NOW:		
What bad habit do I want to try breaking?	What feelings is that bad habit in response to?	What can I do instead?
DO THIS WEEK:	During this week, we want you to DO your bad habit. Go ahead! If you get stressed, have that cigarette. Bored? Have three massive slices of cake. Sad? Scroll through Twitter/Instagram. But WHILE you're doing that, use this card to help you get curious about what it feels like. Fill in this card AT THE SAME TIME as you are doing your bad habit.	
What does my body feel like while I'm doing this?	What am I noticing in my senses – smell, touch, taste, hearing, sight?	
Reflection: By getting curious and paying attention, did your feelings about your bad habit change? How? What do you feel about it now?		

You can do this as many times as you want/need during the week.

GETTING UNSTUCK CARD: BACK – photocopiable

A bit about this exercise, from Mindful.org:

The prefrontal cortex, that youngest part of our brain, it understands that we shouldn't smoke and it tries its hardest to help us change our behaviour, to help us stop smoking, to help us stop eating that second, that third, that fourth cookie—we call this cognitive (thinking) control, we're using [thinking] to control our behaviour. Unfortunately this is also the first part of our brain that goes offline when we get stressed out which isn't helpful.

Now we can all relate to this in our own experience. We're much more likely to do things like yell when we're stressed out or tired even though we know it's not going to be helpful. We just can't help ourselves. Now when the prefrontal cortex goes offline we fall back into our old habits.

Seeing what we get from our habits helps us understand them in a deeper level to know in our bones so we don't have to force ourselves to hold back or restrain ourselves from behaviour. We're just less interested in doing it in the first place. And this is what mindfulness is all about: Seeing really clearly what we get when we get caught up in our behaviours, becoming disenchanted, on a visceral level; and from this disenchanted stance, naturally letting go.

As we learn to see the results of our actions, we let go of old habits and form new ones. It's about being really interested in getting close and personal with what's actually happening in our bodies and minds from moment to moment.

It's about being willing to turn toward our experience rather than trying to make unpleasant cravings go away as quickly as possible. And this willingness to turn toward her experience is supported by curiosity which is naturally rewarding. What does curiosity feel like? It feels good. And what happens when we get curious? We start to notice that cravings are simply made up of body sensations: there's tightness, there's tension, there's restlessness, and these body sensations come and go.

These are bite-sized pieces of experiences that we can manage from moment to moment rather than getting clobbered by this huge, scary craving that we choke on. In other words, when we get curious, we step out of our old, fear-based reactive habit patterns and we step into being.

From: <https://www.mindful.org/simple-way-break-bad-habit/>

This is what Lent encourages us to do. Step out of our bad habits, and notice that we feel good. Actually, we feel better! We aren't punishing ourselves by denying ourselves our bad habits – we're rewarding ourselves by stopping when it stops feeling good, and doing something better instead. God wants us to have abundant life, not constant fighting with ourselves.

Reflection: 10-15 minutes

Sharing from the different groups:

Someone who was in the discussion group: feed back some of the things you talked about.
Would anyone like to add anything to those thoughts?

Would anyone like to show us something you made, and tell us about it?

Would anyone who did the DO activity like to tell us about what it was like?

Questions for the whole group:

I wonder what your favourite part of this session was.

I wonder what the most important part of this session was.

I wonder if there's anything from today's stories or activities you want to think about, or pray about, between now and next week.

Closing prayer activity:

Turn off the lights and light a candle.

Then show the video to the song "When You Believe" from *The Prince of Egypt*
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTTxywB7b_U).

One of the lines that recurs in the song is, "though hope is small, it's hard to kill." This is used as a refrain in these prayers.

Leader: God, we thank you for all the times when you have helped us get unstuck from a bad place or situation.

All: Though hope is small, it's hard to kill.

Leader: God, we thank you for the times you have saved your people, through Moses in Egypt, through Jesus's death on the cross, and so many other times.

All: Though hope is small, it's hard to kill.

Leader: Lord, help those places in our lives that are still stuck in hard places. The places that feel like they can never be fixed. The miracles we prayed for that didn't happen. Help us find hope.

All: Though hope is small, it's hard to kill.

Leader: Loving God, be with all the people in the world who feel stuck or helpless. Help them know they are never alone, and you are on their side.

All: Though hope is small, it's hard to kill.

Leader: Help us, Lord, to see you in all other people. Help us all to help each other become unstuck, and be free.

All: Though hope is small, it's hard to kill.

Leader: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

All: In the name of Christ, Amen.

Week Four

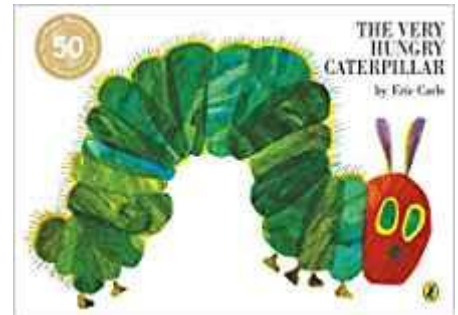
Change

Story: 15 minutes

Children's book: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, by Eric Carle

Scripture resource: *Children of God Storybook Bible*, by Desmond Tutu

Read pages 102-103: "Jesus is Changed on the Mountaintop"



10 seconds of quiet reflection

The leader, or a participant, lights a candle, and the group holds silence for ten seconds to reflect on what they've heard. Small children can be taught deliberately to hold silence – you can use counting fingers to ten, teach children to hold their fingers on lips, etc. This may take a bit of time in the first session. If there's the occasional squawk from a pre-verbal child, that's fine.

If your group is really good at holding silence, you can extend this time week by week. Young children may struggle to hold silence for more than a minute, however.

Responses: 15-20 minutes

TALK AND LISTEN:

You don't have to use these questions, if you prefer a more freewheeling discussion. However, the goal isn't to find definitive answers, but to explore the themes of the stories together. You don't necessarily have to get through all of the questions.

Questions about both stories:

What was the same about these stories? What was different?

What was your favourite part of the stories?

What was the most important part of the stories?

What have been the biggest changes in your life?

What does changing feel like?

What have been some of the hardest changes from Covid?

Where has God been in the big changes in your life?

What makes change good or bad?

The Very Hungry Caterpillar:

I wonder if the caterpillar knew what was going to happen to it.

I wonder what it felt like inside the cocoon. I wonder what it felt like to come out as a butterfly.

The Bible story:

I wonder why Jesus chose a mountaintop for this to happen.

I wonder why Moses and Elijah were there.

I wonder what Peter, James, and John felt when they saw Jesus change.

Question about our community, if there's time and it's appropriate:

What changes are needed in our church or community to make it look more like God wants it to?
How can we make that happen? What might we have to leave behind, like the caterpillar?

MAKE:

Activity One: All change!

You will need:

A whole bunch of stuff that is broken or isn't being used, but which can be turned into art, such as:

Socks missing their pair

Cardboard toilet and kitchen roll tubes

Packing material

Empty plastic bottles

Empty tins (careful of jagged edges)

Empty jars

Broken picture frames

Coasters

Bookmarks

Napkins

Hair accessories

Toys your kids have grown out of

Old bits of aluminium foil

Fabric samples from choosing carpets/blinds

Wallpaper fragments

Small to medium cardboard boxes

Old Christmas/birthday cards

The above items can all be found individually by households at home. The following ones may need to be provided in resource packs:

Scissors, glue, Sellotape, and staplers.

You may find it helpful to have additional things that can help change this stuff into art, such as:

Coloured paper

Crepe paper in different colours

Sharpies (the oil-based ones – though not the alcohol-based ones – write on plastic, glass, pottery, etc. APRONS for kids are helpful here – Sharpies are permanent.)

This art activity is completely open-ended – participants can make whatever they want. The point is to look at things and train ourselves to see them in a new way, changing and transforming them. The process is key here.

People may really struggle with not knowing what to do, with experimenting, with seeing things in new ways. It may help to have the next page as a “share your screen” during the activity:

NEED IDEAS?

TRY ONE OF THESE:

Choose an item – what else does its shape remind you of?

What if you hold it upside down? How about backwards? What do you see now?

Pick two items and see how many different ways you can combine them.

Choose an item. Ask the person next to you to think of three words to describe it.

Choose an item. Can you use it to make a sound? Can you turn it into something you would wear? Something you would use in the kitchen?

Choose three items. Use one to create a problem and the other two to solve it.

What is the youngest person at the table doing? What are the older people at the table doing? Do those give you any ideas?

Remember: it's okay to try something that doesn't work! And it's okay to finish this session without finishing anything. This is about learning to see in a new way, not about making something perfect.

Activity Two: Past, Present, Future

If you can find a map of your area from at least fifty years ago, have that shared on your screen next to a map of how the area looks now.

What's changed about your area? What's changed about how you use it, over the years? What changes have happened in your life that affect where you go, what you do?

Then, make drawings of what you'd love your area to look like in the future. What changes would you love to see? What would give life to your area? Who needs to be included? How can your area be changed to look more like God's Kingdom?

This could lead to a longer-term project, if some clear local needs come up out of this conversation. It may also help your church to develop its thinking in terms of outreach, etc – eg if a youth club is needed, or a place for new parents to gather, or services for the elderly, etc.

DO:

Fun With Foam:

Thanks to stayathomescience.com for the scientific background on this activity. You will either need to do this activity outside, or in a fairly open space with a floor covering. It can get messy.

You will need:

Unbreakable clear cups or other containers
Bicarbonate of soda
Lemon juice or citric acid
Clear hand soap or washing-up liquid
Water
Food colouring
Spoons for stirring

For the extension activity, if you choose to do it, you will need:

A3 paper
Space to dry the artwork
Glue spreaders, paintbrushes, rollers, etc.

Instructions:

1. Pour about half a cup (120 ml) of water into each container, with a few squirts of dish soap and as much food colouring as you like. Stir it all together. Participants can help with this – very young children may need adult help to make sure you don't get a dish soap apocalypse.
2. Pause to talk about what the mixture looks like and feels like. What are the colours like? What's it doing? What could you use it for?
3. Now add 1 tablespoon of bicarbonate of soda to each cup, stir, and then add 1 tablespoon of lemon juice/citric acid. This should start a chemical reaction that creates FOAM, which will hopefully spill out of the cups and all over the tarpaulin.
4. When everyone's calmed down, talk about what's changed. (People can be touching the foam and playing with it as you chat.) What's different? What does it feel like now? (It will

be colder, as well as a different texture.) What could you do with it now? What are the colours like? Can we change it back?

5. Give people time to play with the foam.

Extension 1 (optional): provide paper for people to make foam art. You can scoop coloured foam onto the paper and swirl it around to make shapes, designs, etc, then scrape the foam off and some of the colour and patterns should remain.

Extension 2 (optional): try it with different proportions of materials, or without one of the materials. What's different now?

Reflection: 10-15 minutes

Sharing from the different groups:

Someone who was in the discussion group: feed back some of the things you talked about. Would anyone like to add anything to those thoughts?

Would anyone like to show us something you made, and tell us about it?

Would anyone who did the foam activity like to tell us about what it was like?

Questions for the whole group:

I wonder what your favourite part of this session was.

I wonder what the most important part of this session was.

I wonder if there's anything from today's stories or activities you want to think about, or pray about, between now and next week.

Closing prayer activity:

Turn off the lights and light a candle.

Watch the video "Portrait of Lotte" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPxdhnT4Ec8>) or "Portrait of Vince" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWINGOpjwrs>) together. These are videos made by a father who took a weekly video of his children from birth into their teenaged years. They are a profound meditation on the changes of growing up.

Leader: Lord, you changed on the mountaintop. Your creatures change and grow every day of their lives. Children grow into adults, caterpillars become butterflies, the sunrise changes to sunset. Our lives change, in good and bad ways – we learn and grow, and we lose and grieve. And we know that, like you, we will one day face the greatest change of all, from life to death to new life again.

Be with us in the changes. Help us to know you will never leave us, even when we are in a cocoon or in a scary new place. Help us to change in ways that make us more like you, and help our churches and schools and workplaces and communities to change in ways that help all of creation to flourish and grow.

All: Amen.

Leader: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

All: In the name of Christ, Amen.

Week Five

New Life

Story: 20 minutes

Children's book: The Garden of Hope, by Isabel Otter

Scripture resource: The Lion Bible: Everlasting stories

Read pages 204 – 206: The Tomb, and The Story of the Resurrection

10 seconds of quiet reflection

The leader, or a participant, lights a candle, and the group holds silence for ten seconds to reflect on what they've heard. Small children can be taught deliberately to hold silence – you can use counting fingers to ten, teach children to hold their fingers on lips, etc. This may take a bit of time in the first session. If there's the occasional squawk from a pre-verbal child, that's fine.

If your group is really good at holding silence, you can extend this time week by week. Young children may struggle to hold silence for more than a minute, however.

Responses: 15-20 minutes

TALK AND LISTEN:

You don't have to use these questions, if you prefer a more freewheeling discussion. However, the goal isn't to find definitive answers, but to explore the themes of the stories together. You don't necessarily have to get through all of the questions.

Questions about both stories:

I wonder what your favourite part of these stories was.

I wonder what the most important part of these stories was.

I wonder if you have ever been in a beautiful garden. What did it feel like?

What about these stories is the same? What's different?

The Garden of Hope:

What has changed between the beginning and the end? What has stayed the same?

Why do you think the garden was so important to Maya?

Which character in this book is most like you? Why?

Why do you think the book is called *The Garden of Hope*?

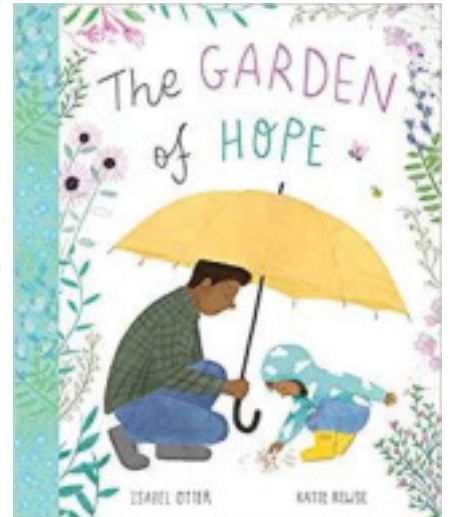
I wonder what gives you hope.

Bible story:

I wonder how the women felt when the angels told them Jesus was risen.

I wonder why Mary didn't recognise Jesus until he spoke.

I wonder where you are in this story.



I wonder why Jesus died and rose again.

MAKE:

Each household can make individual Easter gardens.

You will need:

- Plates or trays
- Moss, dirt, etc., or paper or fabric to make these
- Glue and scissors
- Paper or card, and markers, to make people or other items for the garden
- Tiny flowerpots – on their sides, covered in moss or dirt or fabric, these can be empty tombs.
- Pebbles
- Twigs and string, to make crosses
- Small blooming flowers

Again, as with every “Make” activity, photographs can be taken of each mini Easter garden and uploaded to an online photo album.

If you’re really feeling ambitious, you can also include materials for the following embellishments of Easter gardens:

Tissue paper flowers:

There are a variety of tutorials online for those who like having step-by-step directions to follow. You can find one here: <https://www.verywellfamily.com/tissue-paper-flowers-craft-620428> . However, especially for younger children, simply having tissue paper, pipe cleaners, and glue available should be enough to spur creativity. The ends of the pipe cleaners can be twisted around branches of plants in your Easter garden to add these flowers to the garden.

Scratch art crosses:

Scratch art crosses are available at Baker Ross (bakerross.co.uk), starting at £4 for a pack of 12. They are cross-shaped hanging ornaments that are covered in a dark waxy coating. As you use the included stylus to scratch away a design, it reveals a rainbow of colours beneath the darkness.

Have each person decorate a cross and hang it from a plant in the Easter garden.

People:

Baker Ross also has blank cardboard cutouts of people (56 for £4.50) in a variety of skin tones. They also have wooden peg dolls and wooden stand-up people, both also blank. You could make the characters in the story and add them to the scene. String, glue, fabric, googly eyes, etc., as well as felt tip pens, make this activity more exciting.

DO:

Scavenger hunt

Start by giving people three minutes to find something in their home or garden that reminds them of HOPE. Then, take turns explaining why you chose that item.

Repeat with the following:

An item that reminds you of something SAD

An item that reminds you of NEW LIFE

An item that reminds you of GROWING

This should be more than enough to take up the time – however, if you find yourself still with time to fill, start getting suggestions from participants on themes to find objects for!

Reflection: 10-15 minutes

Sharing from the different groups:

Someone who was in the discussion group: feed back some of the things you talked about.
Would anyone like to add anything to those thoughts?

Would anyone like to show us something you made, and tell us about it?

Would anyone who did the scavenger hunt/gardening activity like to tell us about what it was like?

Questions for the whole group:

I wonder what your favourite part of this session was.

I wonder what the most important part of this session was.

I wonder if there's anything from today's stories or activities you want to think about, or pray about, between now and next week.

Closing prayer activity:

Turn off the lights and light a candle.

This is both a closing of this course but also a bridge to Holy Week – the atmosphere therefore is one of expectation and reverence, rather than closure.



Have everyone mute themselves, then play a Taize chant on the “share screen” function (Remember to click the “share computer sound” box) and people can join in singing at home.

Some suggestions:

Wait For The Lord (https://www.taize.fr/en_article10308.html?letter=W)

Nothing Can Ever (https://www.taize.fr/en_article10308.html?letter=N)

One of the Kyrie Eleison (https://www.taize.fr/en_article10308.html?letter=K)

Jesus, Remember Me (https://www.taize.fr/en_article10308.html?letter=J)

When finished:

Leader: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

All: In the name of Christ, Amen.