

***Growing with God* Introduction**

The intent of this program is to offer participants a path to a deeper relationship with God. As their relationship deepens, they are, in turn, able to invite others into a deeper relationship. The program will invite participants into a more disciplined and focused prayer life and a willingness to trust God's guidance and direction in their lives. Topics will include contemplative prayer practices, traditional spiritual practices, and discernment. We will use scripture that will focus attention on Biblical stories of hearing and seeing God and how each narrative unfolded as the individual sought to be obedient to God's invitation.

Each lesson will begin with a short worship service that will focus on the scripture for that lesson. The scripture will be offered in its Biblical context to provide a deeper understanding of the specific scripture. A spiritual practice will be introduced each time; we will explore its history and heritage and its practice within the context of the Christian faith. The scripture for the lesson will then be explored in the context of the spiritual practice for that lesson.

The participants will be invited into small groups of 4-5 individuals. The small groups will be the setting for exploring and processing the experiences of the practice and the scripture itself; how did I experience the practice as a way of encountering God? How did I experience/encounter God? Within the small groups, everyone will be encouraged/expected to participate; the small groups will remain constant throughout the program to encourage sharing and to provide a setting for deep sharing that remains within the group.

The small groups will come together, and individuals will be encouraged to share with the larger group. This sharing may be about the experience of the practice as well as the small group experience. We will close our time together with a brief worship/time of blessing.

Participants will be encouraged to bring a study Bible and a journal or other appropriate materials that can be used to record their reflections each time. The course leader(s) will provide several different translations to offer a deeper understanding of the scripture for the lesson.

The course leader/s will need copies of *The United Methodist hymnal* and *The Faith We Sing*.

LESSON 1

Using the times listed in the formats (page 6) provided as a guide, move through each week's lesson.

Introduction:

Invite each participant to share their name, their home church (if multiple churches are participating) and one reason they chose to participate in this program.

Share an overview of the program (using information from the course introduction) and explain the format of each week's lesson (pass out the handout (page 6) that provides the format for the lessons).

Opening worship

Opening words:

"Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal." (Psalm 106:1)

Bless the Lord My Soul-TFWS#2013

Introduction to the Scripture:

God has just created woman from man; they are both naked but not ashamed; they are also innocent. The snake however is introduced to us as "shrewd," "crafty," and "clever;" his intent is to tempt the woman and, in turn, the man. His question to the woman is intended to trick her and he succeeds in enticing her to eat the fruit of the tree. She then offers the fruit to the man who eats as well. They now have a degree of knowledge that they did not previously have, but with this knowledge comes shame and a loss of their childlike innocence. And so, they hide from God; they are ashamed that they are naked, but they also feel guilt, for they have been disobedient.

When God asks where they are, the man acknowledges his fear because of his nakedness. The man blames the woman for giving him the fruit and even blames God for giving him the woman. The relationship between God and humanity has been broken.

Read Genesis 3:8-9:

Slowly read from several translations (provided on page 7) with a brief silence in between; review the scripture and chose which translations you will use; in the weeks ahead plan to vary the translations used.

Read questions:

Read through the following slowly leaving time in between each question.

The man and woman had no problem hearing God, but they chose to hide from God; they were ashamed, guilty, and afraid.

Do you sometimes hear God calling, “Where are you?” and choose to hide as well? What are you hiding from; what is the broken piece that separates you from God?

Or have you already wandered too far away to hear God? What were you afraid of that you chose to wander far from God?

Or are you filling the empty space with your own words and thoughts so that there is no room for God; no quiet space in which to hear God?

We are inviting you in this time and space and in the weeks to come to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and his words to you, his deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God’s invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from ***Come and Find the Quiet Center-TFWS#2128***; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

“Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, ‘Amen’. Hallelujah.” (Psalm 106:48).

Introduce Rule of Life

Introduce the spiritual practice known as a **Rule of Life** using the information below that provides the history of this practice in the Christian faith.¹

¹ For each of the spiritual practices introduced in this study, more detailed information and guidance for practicing can be found in the *Spiritual Practices Handbook* found on the Conference website: <https://www.unyumc.org/ministries/spiritual-practice-and-handbook>

Rule of Life²

A Rule of Life is a pattern of daily actions that are chosen to accomplish something specific. For Christians, the intent is to focus our attention continually on God; to organize our life in such a way as to always seek to be present to and aware of God and the God moments in our life. A Rule is not designed to make our life restrictive, but to offer a structure within which we can stay centered and focused.

The concept of a Rule of Life in Christian community began with the desert mothers and fathers in the early 4th century. In the early 5th century Benedict of Nursia left Rome and went into the countryside to live in solitude with God; soon others gathered around him and he found himself the leader of a monastic community dedicated to prayer and a life focused on God. Out of this early monastic community grew the most well-known Rule of Life which is still practiced in Benedictine communities today. Benedict's Rule was based on an intentional life of prayer in all things; out of this life emerged 'The Hours', set intervals throughout a 24-hour period dedicated to prayer. The intent of the Benedictine life was to regulate their lives in such a way as to become spiritually alive, conscious of God's presence at all times, and, ultimately, one with God. As monastic life blossomed in the Middle Ages, a Rule of Life was a common element of such a life. A Rule of Life enables us to be centered and focused on God in all aspects of our life.

Introduce the **basic guide for creating a Rule of Life** that has been provided (see page 8); hand out the guide and quickly walk participants through the questions.

Invite the participants to begin creating a Rule of Life using the questions as a guide.

LUNCH

If the group is larger than 8, divide the group into smaller groups of 4-5; these groups will remain constant throughout the program. Each group should be encouraged to create a covenant for their time together as a group. You can provide sample covenant ideas below:

Sample Covenant Ideas

- we hold one another in prayer
- we honor each other's experiences
- we speak only about our own beliefs, feelings, and responses
- all members have permission to share as much or as little as they are comfortable with

² *The Rule of Life will be the foundation practice for the entire program; each week participants will discuss the practice and their experience of living with a Rule of Life.*

-all that is said in the small group is confidential and does not go beyond the small group

-we are not here to try and 'fix' each other or another's problems

-we will not interrupt one another

A group covenant allows each participant to feel safe and will encourage a deeper level of sharing.

Have each participant in the small group discuss their experience of creating a Rule of Life; how many of them were familiar with the practice? Invite participants to share parts of their Rule of Life; what aspects seem particularly challenging? Encourage them to refine their Rule of Life in the week ahead; living with this Rule of Life will be an important element of the program.

Have each small group share (as they are comfortable) their group covenant and their experience (while being mindful of their covenant) of creating a Rule of Life

--This element will not be necessary if you only have one small group

Closing and blessing. Invite any questions from the lesson and encourage everyone to spend time with their Rule of Life and begin practicing it. As you close your time, offer a simple prayer and the closing blessing from the morning worship.

HANDOUT FOR LESSION 1

Format for Lesson 1

10:00-10:20	Introductions
10:20-10:40	Overview of program
10:40-11:20	Opening/introduction to Scripture
11:20-11:40	Introduce Rule of Life
11:40-12:10	Begin Rule of Life
12:10-12:55	Lunch
12:55-1:15	Create small group covenant
1:15-2:00	Share Rule of Life experience in small group
2:00-2:45	Share in large group
2:45-3:00	Closing/blessing

Format for Lessons 2-8

10:00-10:10	Share names
10:10-10:50	Opening/introduction to Scripture
10:50-11:35	Small group sharing-Rule of Life
11:35-11:50	Introduce spiritual practice
11:50-12:35	Lunch
12:35-12:45	Lead the spiritual practice
12:45-1:15	Journal about experience
1:15-2:00	Small group sharing
2:00-2:45	Share in large group
2:45-3:00	Closing/blessings

SCRIPTURE FOR LESSON 1³**Genesis 3:8-9**

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

-NRSV

They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. The Lord God called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"

-JSB

The man and his wife heard the sound of Yahweh God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from Yahweh God among the trees of the garden. But Yahweh God called to the man. "Where are you?" he asked.

-NJB

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"

-NIV

When they heard the sound of God strolling in the garden in the evening breeze, the Man and his Wife hid in the trees of the garden, hid from God. God called to the Man: "Where are you?"

-The Message

³ NRSV-New Revised Standard Version, JSB-Jewish Study Bible, NJB-New Jerusalem Bible, NIV-New Interpreter's Version

LESSON 2

Using the times listed in the format for weeks 2-8 provided as a guide, move through this week's lesson.

Introduction:

Invite each participant to share their name and their home church (if multiple churches are participating).

The scripture for this lesson is **Genesis 15:5-6**. The scripture should be read from multiple translations (included on page 15). A broader narrative that will provide setting and context is offered.

Participants will share their experience of practicing a Rule of Life:

- Did the rule they created actually lead them into God's presence?
- Were they able to faithfully practice it?
- What would they do differently given their experience?

The spiritual practice for this lesson is **Lectio Divina**. The history of this practice in the Christian faith will be presented and the group will engage in this practice. Instructions for leading this practice are provided.

Opening worship

Opening words: "Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal." (Psalm 106:1)

Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying-TFWS #2193

Introduction to the Scripture:

God came to Abram and told him to go to a new land; one that God would show him. And in that land God would make Abram the father of a great nation and they would become a blessing for all the earth. Abram heard God and was obedient. He took all that he had and set out to the place where God would lead.

But their journey leads them through some difficult places and Abram's faith is challenged. Sarai is old and remains childless and Abram begins to wonder if perhaps he should 'adopt' someone to become his heir. God comes to Abram to reassure him that God's promise remains and that his heir will be his own son. Abram's faith in God's promise is renewed.

Read Genesis 15:5-6:

Slowly read from several translations⁴ (provided on page 15) with a brief silence in between.

Read questions:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

Abram exhibits extraordinary faith in God in this passage. Sarai is old and no longer able to bear children; this is the reality that confronts Abram. Yet in spite of this 'reality', Abram trusts in God and the promise that God has made to him. And because of that faith, Abram did indeed have offspring as numerous as the stars.

Does God's 'voice' come to you with such clarity that you are able to believe in spite of the circumstances? How do you hold onto that clarity when challenges emerge?

Do you trust in God's promise when the 'reality' you are confronted with would tell you it is not possible?

Do you become impatient with God's promise and seek to find your own way? Do you think that perhaps it is your job to provide a solution for God? How do you trust in the *sometimes slow* work of God?

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from ***We Walk by Faith-TFWS #2196***; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

"Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, 'Amen'. Hallelujah."
(Psalm 106:48)

⁴ Try to vary the translations used each week so that, at some point, you read from each of the translations provided.

Small group sharing

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of working with a Rule of Life. Were they able to practice the rule of life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this rule of life, would they/how would they change it?

Introduce spiritual practice

Lectio Divina

This practice originated in the 3rd and 4th centuries with the desert mothers and fathers; it was formalized by Benedict of Nursia in the 6th century. If you remember from our last session, Benedict was also credited with formalizing a 'rule of life'. This was a period of time when monastic life began to grow and flourish; religious individuals gathered together in this form of community. Lectio Divina became a well-established practice in monastic life. There are four classical steps:

-lectio	read
-meditatio	exegete
-oratio	pray
-contemplatio	union

This practice was originally used with the Psalms. It can be used with any scripture, but poetic books (Psalms, Prophets, John, Revelation) and Gospel narratives are a good place to start. It is helpful to have multiple translations available.

Lectio—read the scripture slowly. Consider reading it out loud to help slow the process and help you hear every word. Receive the words as though they were written for you. Listen for a particular word or phrase that speaks to you in your particular situation. What might God be trying to communicate?

Meditatio—reflect prayerfully on what you have read. Meditate on the particular word or phrase that resonated for you. Listen for God's invitation to you today.

Oratio—allow a prayer to emerge as a result of hearing God's word to you today. Be honest with yourself and with God.

Contemplatio—simply rest with God; this time of union is a time when the Holy Spirit prays in you and through you. Give thanks.

Once you have introduced the practice, ask if there are individuals who have practiced this before. Ask them to share briefly their response to this practice.

Dibelius

LUNCH

Leading the practice

The first step of the process is to read the scripture slowly 3-4 times inviting the participants to listen for a word or phrase that ‘speaks’ to them; something that seems to stand out from the rest of the scripture for them.⁵ I would suggest using two different translations, but two that are not dramatically different; it shouldn’t seem like a jarring difference as they listen. The next step is to meditate/reflect on the word or phrase and to listen for God’s invitation to them in that particular word or phrase; to what might God be drawing their attention.

The next step is to be prayerful with God about what they sense God’s invitation to be; allow the prayer to be as interactive as possible (be honest with God about how you are feeling about the ‘invitation’ and also listen carefully for God’s response). The last step is to simply sit with/rest in God’s presence; allow the Holy Spirit to pray with/for you. Give thanks for this time with God.

Participants are then encouraged to journal about their experience.

The process should be as seamless as possible, so you should explain the steps and then explain that once you begin, you will allow them to move through the steps at their own pace. If this is a first time for many, I suggest you encourage them to move on to the next step if they have not already done so. As a first practice, give them 8-10 minutes for steps 1 and 2. Allow another 5-8 minutes for step 3 and then step 4 can lead into journaling as they are led, but encourage them to start journaling in another 3-5 minutes. Let them simply move into the time on the schedule for journaling and then call them back together at the end of that time.

Draw this time to a close with a prayer expressing gratitude for the ways in which God ‘showed up’ and invited them to something deeper.

Small group sharing

Invite participants to share their experiences within their small groups.

Large group

Invite participants who are comfortable to share their experience with the larger group. Invite questions/comments about the experience and the practice itself.

⁵ *Suggested scripture reading: Luke 5:1-11*

Closing/blessing

Closing and blessing. Invite any questions from the lesson and encourage everyone to continue to practice their Rule of Life. As you close your time, offer a simple prayer and the closing blessing from the morning worship.

SCRIPTURE FOR LESSON 2

Genesis 15:5-6

He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

-NRSV

He took him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He added, "So shall your offspring be." And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit.

-JSB

Then taking him outside, he said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars if you can. Just so will your descendants be," he told him. Abram put his faith in Yahweh and this was reckoned to him as uprightness.

-NJB

He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

-NIV

Then he took him outside and said, "Look at the sky. Count the stars. Can you do it? Count your descendants! You're going to have a big family, Abram!" And he believed! Believed God! God declared him "Set-Right-with-God."

-The Message

LESSON 3

Using the times listed in the format for weeks 2-8 provided as a guide, move through this week's lesson.

Introduction:

Invite each participant to share their name and their home church (if multiple churches are participating).

The scripture for this lesson is **Genesis 32:24-30**. The scripture should be read from multiple translations (see page 21). A broader narrative that will provide setting and context will be offered.

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule of Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule of Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule of Life, would they/how would they change it?

The spiritual practice for this lesson will be **entering the narrative or guided meditation**. The history of this practice in the Christian faith will be presented and the group will engage in this practice. Instructions for leading this practice are provided.

Opening Worship

Opening words:

"Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal." (Psalm 106:1)

Come and Fill Our Hearts-TFWS#2157

Introduction to the Scripture:

After many years, Jacob is returning to his homeland (a place he left under dark of night to escape his brother's wrath for having taken Esau's birthright). He is now a wealthy man with wives, slaves, and livestock, yet he is fearful of the reception he will receive from his brother. On this night before he expects to meet Esau, he leaves his family and all that he has brought with him, crossing back over the river, to spend the night alone. As Jacob prepares to meet his brother, he first encounters a divine being who wrestles with him and who then gives Jacob a new name.

Read Genesis 32:24-30:

Slowly read from several translations⁶ (provided on page 21) with a brief silence in between.

⁶ *Try to vary the translations used each week so that, at some point, you read from each of the translations provided.*

Read questions:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

Despite his enormous wealth, Jacob's life is incomplete. He has been living in a foreign land away from his family; his decision to return home has left him fearful of the reception he will receive from his brother. As Jacob struggles with his fears, he struggles with God as well and as a result of that struggle, God gives Jacob a new name; a name that continues the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham.

Have you found yourself at times, like Jacob, separated from 'home'; what were the fears that kept you in a 'foreign land'? What prompted you to return home despite your fears?

As you struggled with your fears, did God seek to enter in? Did you, like Jacob, choose to struggle with/against God? Were you also seeking a 'blessing' in the midst of your fears?

Did God offer you a 'new name'? Did you continue to struggle with God, or were you able to accept the 'new name', knowing God was fulfilling God's promise within you?

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from *Grace Alone-TFWS #2162*; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

"Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, 'Amen'. Hallelujah."
(Psalm 106:48)

Small group sharing

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule of Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule of Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule of Life, would they/how would they change it?

Introduce spiritual practice

Entering the narrative/Guided meditation

Guided meditation was formalized by Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. This practice is also referred to as *entering the narrative*; it encourages use of the imagination, feelings, senses, reason, will and memory as you enter into the experience. You are invited to become a participant in the Biblical narrative; to experience Jesus in a personal way. It is often best to begin with a Gospel story that is familiar to you. The intent is to hear God's invitation to you today in the scripture. Ignatius wrote a number of meditations based on specific Biblical narratives which are included in his *Spiritual Exercises*; you might begin by using one of these. There are also a number of books which offer guided meditations as well as a number of online resources.

In this practice, a Biblical narrative is read. The narrative is then re-phrased in such a way that you are invited to be part of the story. Reflection questions are offered at intervals in the narrative; at the close of the reading, you are invited to be present to God and listen for God's words to you.

Once you have introduced the practice, ask if there are individuals who have practiced this before. Ask them to share briefly their response to this practice.

LUNCH

Leading the practice

As you prepare to guide the participants through this narrative, be aware and share with them that this narrative differs from most Ignatian narratives because it is scripture from the Old Testament and Ignatius primarily focused on scripture from the Gospels. It is helpful for participants to understand that this practice can be used with any scripture where an individual has an encounter with God.

Let them know that you will guide them through the scripture, pausing to give them time to reflect and 'see' themselves in the story. Invite them to spend time with the invitation and then when they are ready, to begin journaling about their experience. If this is a first experience for most of them, you should plan to allow 8-10 minutes after you finish reading and then gently encourage them to begin journaling.

I have indicated appropriate places in the narrative to pause to allow them to enter in slowly; the times indicated are intended to be a guide...

You have been traveling for several days with your family and entire household. It has been a hot and dusty journey. (pause 10 seconds)

You have lived far from your home for many years after running away from your home because you angered your brother by taking something that rightfully belonged to him. Now that you have gotten

Dibelius

close to home, you are fearful of your brother's reaction to your return; will he still be angry? (pause 10 seconds)

Perhaps he will come and forbid you to return; perhaps he will come prepared to fight. (pause 15 seconds)

You have already sent others ahead with gifts for your brother so that he will know you come seeking restoration of the broken relationship. As you ponder the nature of your brother's reception, you send your family ahead of you so that you can spend the night alone. What does it feel like to be in familiar surroundings; places you have not been for many years? (pause 10 seconds)

What are the feelings within you as you are fearful that you may never be able to return home? (pause 10 seconds)

As you lie awake struggling with your fears, a man comes along and begins to wrestle with you. Now you are fearful for your physical well-being and you put all your strength into wrestling with this stranger. Feel the tiredness in your body as you struggle. (pause 15 seconds)

As dawn begins to break, the stranger injures your hip in an attempt to get away. But you seek first to receive a blessing from this stranger; for you, a reminder of the blessing bestowed by your father; the stolen blessing that has brought you to this place. As you feel the physical pain in your hip, you also feel the emotional pain of this reminder of the stolen blessing that caused the break in your relationship with your brother. (pause 15 seconds)

"What is your name?" the stranger asks. And then the stranger, the divine being, the presence of God offers you a new name, a name that will reaffirm God's promise for your life. Listen carefully as you are present with God; what is the new name that God offers you?

Draw this time to a close with a prayer expressing gratitude for the ways in which God 'showed up' and invited them to something deeper.

Small group sharing

Invite participants to share their experiences within their small groups.

Large group:

Invite participants who are comfortable to share their experience with the larger group. Invite questions/comments about the experience and the practice itself.

Closing/blessing

Closing and blessing. Invite any questions from the lesson and encourage everyone to continue to practice their Rule of Life. As you close your time, offer a simple prayer and the closing blessing from the morning worship.

SCRIPTURE FOR LESSON 3

Genesis 32:24-30

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

-NRSV

Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob". Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved."

-JSB

And Jacob was left alone. Then someone wrestled with him until daybreak who, seeing that he could not master him, struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him. He said, "Let me go, for day is breaking." Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The other said, "What is your name?" "Jacob", he replied. He said, "No longer are you to be called Jacob, since you have shown your strength against God and men and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked, "Please tell me your name." He replied, "Why do you ask my name?" With that, he blessed him there. Jacob named the place Peniel, "Because I have seen God face to face", he said, "and have survived."

-NJB

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men

and have overcome.” Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

-NIV

But Jacob stayed behind by himself, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he couldn't get the best of Jacob as they wrestled, he deliberately threw Jacob's hip out of joint. The man said, “Let me go; it's daybreak.” Jacob said, “I'm not letting you go 'til you bless me.” The man said, “What's your name?” He answered, “Jacob.” The man said, “But no longer. Your name is no longer Jacob. From now on it's Israel (God-Wrestler); you've wrestled with God and you've come through.” Jacob asked, “And what's your name?” The man said, “Why do you want to know my name?” And then, right then and there, he blessed him. Jacob named the place Peniel (God's Face) because, he said, “I saw God face-to-face and live to tell the story!”

-The Message

LESSON 4

Using the times listed in the format for weeks 2-8 provided as a guide, move through this week's lesson.

Introduction:

Invite each participant to share their name and their home church (if multiple churches are participating).

The scripture for this lesson is **Exodus 3:1-5**. The scripture should be read from multiple translations (see page 27). A broader narrative that will provide setting and context is offered.

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule of Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule of Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule of Life, would they/how would they change it?

The spiritual practice for this lesson will be the **Jesus/breath prayer**. The history of this practice in the Christian faith will be presented and the group will engage in this practice. Instructions for leading this practice are provided.

Opening Worship

Opening words:

"Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal." (Psalm 106:1)

O Lord, Hear My Prayer-TFWS #2200

Introduction to the Scripture:

Upon fleeing from Pharaoh, Moses settles in Midian. There he comes to the rescue of seven young women, all the daughters of a man named Reuel (also called Jethro). When they tell their father of the young man who came to their assistance, Jethro invites Moses into his home. Moses has been living with this family, has married Zipporah, one of Jethro's daughters and now has a son. While Moses has been living with Jethro and his family, the plight of the Israelite slaves in Egypt has grown worse. The slaves have called upon God to rescue them and God has heard them.

Read Exodus 3:1-5

Slowly read from several translations (provided on page 27) with a brief silence in between.

Read questions:

Moses had been tending his father-in-law's flock for years and perhaps had shepherded them to this particular location in the past. But this day, Moses notices the bush that appears to be on fire, yet not

burning up. This day, he takes time to stop and look. How often had Moses passed by this bush before and hadn't noticed because he was preoccupied with his own concerns. How often are we so consumed by our own concerns that we pass by the "burning bush"?

The scripture says that "when God" saw that Moses noticed and took time to stop and see, then God spoke to him. How patient must God have been waiting for the day when Moses would notice and take time to stop and look? Do you think God is patiently waiting for you to notice; for you to take time to stop and look and listen?

When God called his name, Moses responded, "here I am." When God calls your name, do you respond; do you listen for God to invite you to stand on holy ground?

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from *Walk with Me-TFWS #2242*; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

"Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, 'Amen'. Hallelujah."
(Psalm 106:48)

Small Group sharing

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule of Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule of Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule of Life, would they/how would they change it?

Introduce spiritual practice

Jesus/Breath prayer

The prayer that became known as the Jesus prayer evolved out of the desert communities in the 6th century; it was originally called the heart prayer. Over time it was primarily associated with the Eastern Orthodox Church and reached its widest use in 19th century Russia. The intent of the prayer is to invoke the presence of Jesus and to be present to Him. The breath prayer is a variation on the Jesus prayer. It is called a breath prayer because it focuses attention on one's breathing but also because in Hebrew the

word for breath and spirit is the same (ruach). The use of this prayer helps us to experience what it means for the Holy Spirit to pray in and through us.

Original form of Jesus Prayer

- lower your head on your chest angled toward your heart
- close your eyes, imagine you are looking into your own heart
- carry your mind and all its thoughts and place them in your heart
- repeat the phrase frequently
- sit in silence; be calm, be patient, be in the presence of Jesus

Current form of Jesus Prayer

- close your eyes and get comfortable; take some cleansing breaths; fill your lungs with God's breath of life
- gently place all your other thoughts in your heart and let them go; rest in silence briefly
- as you inhale, "Lord Jesus Christ"
- as you exhale, "Son of the living God"
- as you inhale, "have mercy on me"
- as you exhale, "a sinner" (someone who is separated from God)
- feel free to move your lips silently as you repeat the phrase
- repeat slowly as you breathe in and out
- be in the presence of Jesus

Breath prayer variations involve the use of sacred words that first, address God and then identify a desire/wish. It should be a short phrase that has a comfortable rhythm.

Sample ideas:

Inhale

Jesus
Spirit of the living God
Holy Spirit
Eternal Divine

Exhale

remember me (Taize hymn)
fall afresh on me (hymn)
flow through me
baptize me with love

LUNCH

Leading the Practice

Start first with the original form of the Jesus Prayer. Slowly lead participants through the steps:

- Lower your head onto your chest and tilt toward your heart
- Close your eyes, imagine that you are looking into your heart
- Gather all the thoughts in your mind and gently place them in your heart

Dibelius

- Invite each person to slowly repeat the phrase softly to themselves (for participants who may not be familiar with this practice, allow 30-60 seconds)
 - o Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner
- Invite the participants to sit in silence and simply be in the presence of Jesus (allow 3-5 minutes)
- Invite the participants to briefly journal about their experience
- Encourage participants to practice this prayer both with and without incorporating the structured breathing

Move into a time of brainstorming ideas for breath prayers that would be meaningful to the participants. Come up with a list of sacred names (be sure to include God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit including ideas that express the roles of the Trinity, i.e., creator, parent, redeemer, sustainer). Then create a list of desires/wishes; what would you ask of the Holy.

Encourage the participants to create their own breath prayer for the weeks ahead and to practice it regularly.

Small group sharing

Invite participants to share their experiences within their small groups.

Large group

Invite participants who are comfortable to share their experience with the larger group. Invite questions/comments about the experience and the practice itself.

Closing/blessing

Closing and blessing. Invite any questions from the lesson and encourage everyone to continue to practice their Rule of Life. As you close your time, offer a simple prayer and the closing blessing from the morning worship.

SCRIPTURE FOR LESSON 4

Exodus 3:1-5

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

-NRSV

Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground."

-JSB

Moses was looking after the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led it to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame blazing from the middle of a bush. Moses looked; there was the bush blazing, but the bush was not being burnt up. Moses said, "I must go across and see this strange sight, and why the bush is not being burnt up." When Yahweh saw him going across to look, God called to him from the middle of the bush. "Moses, Moses!" he said. "Here I am," he answered. "Come no nearer," he said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

-NJB

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush, Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said "Here I am." "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

-NIV

Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. He led the flock to the west end of the wilderness and came to the mountain of God, Horeb. The angel of God appeared to him in flames of fire blazing out of the middle of a bush. He looked. The bush was blazing away but it didn't burn up. Moses said, "What's going on here? I can't believe this! Amazing! Why doesn't the bush burn up?" God saw that he had stopped to look. God called to him from out of the bush, "Moses! Moses!" He said, "Yes? I'm right here!" God said, "Don't come any closer. Remove your sandals from your feet. You're standing on holy ground."

-The Message

LESSON 5

Using the times listed in the format for weeks 2-8 provided as a guide, move through this week's lesson.

Introduction:

Invite each participant to share their name and their home church (if multiple churches are participating).

The scripture for this lesson is **I Samuel 3:4-10**. The scripture should be read from multiple translations (see page 34). A broader narrative that will provide setting and context will be offered.

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule of Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule of Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule of Life, would they/how would they change it?

The spiritual practice for this lesson will be **Prayer Beads**. The history of this practice in the Christian faith will be presented and the group will engage in this practice. Instructions for leading this practice are provided. Beads will need to be provided (see list on page 32).

Opening Worship

Opening words:

"Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal." (Psalm 106:1)

Bless the Lord, TFWS #2013

Introduction to the Scripture:

The young Samuel has been dedicated to the service of God and now resides in the Temple with Eli, the priest in charge of the Temple. Although hearing the voice of God and being directed to prophesy the words of God had been more common in Israel in the past, at the time of Eli and Samuel it has become quite rare. So Samuel does not recognize God's voice and assumes that it is Eli. Initially Eli, who has been asleep, is confused when awoken by Samuel. It takes several interruptions before Eli realizes that it is God who is calling to Samuel and then Eli instructs Samuel how to respond to God's call.

Read I Samuel 3:4-10:

Slowly read from several translations (provided on page 34) with a brief silence in between.

Read questions:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

God called Samuel, but Samuel didn't recognize God's voice. We are told that was because Samuel did not yet know God and so the voice was not familiar to him. God calls to each of us; sometimes we too fail to recognize God's voice. Where are you in your life with God; is God's voice familiar? Do you recognize God's voice when God calls?

At last Eli realized that it was God who was calling Samuel. Eli had lived a long life serving God and he is able to give Samuel guidance. Have you had or do you have an Eli in your life? Individuals who have perhaps journeyed longer and further with God who have recognized God's call in your life. Or perhaps you have been an Eli for someone.

So Samuel went and waited for God to speak again. How are you waiting? Do you sometimes get impatient for God to call your name? And when Samuel knew it was God's voice, he answered, "Speak for your servant is listening." When God calls yet again, do you listen and offer yourself up to God?

How do you respond to God? Do you recognize God's voice? Are you open to others in your life who may recognize the voice that is not familiar to you? Do you wait? Do you listen? How do you respond?

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from *The Summons*, TFWS #2130 (vs. 1 & 5); read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

"Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, 'Amen'. Hallelujah."
(Psalm 106:48)

Small group sharing

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule of Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule of Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule of Life, would they/how would they change it?

Introduce spiritual practice

Prayer beads

Prayer beads were first introduced in the 3rd century by the desert mothers and fathers. There were 150 beads originally; one for each psalm. These ‘beads’ were made of pebbles, seeds, shells, and other commonplace materials. They were often worn as necklaces, belts, and bracelets. Making the beads themselves was considered a spiritual practice. They were first introduced as a formal act of devotion in the 6th century by Benedict of Nursia. During the Middle Ages, they were in common usage in all of Christian Europe as well as the Eastern Orthodox Church. The form of prayer beads known as The Rosary was introduced by St. Dominic in the 15th century. Protestant prayer beads are much more contemporary and began in the Episcopal Church. The intent in using prayer beads is that they occupy our ‘busy minds’ so that we can be open to a deeper place. They offer a discipline that helps us pray even when we don’t feel like it. We don’t pray to accomplish something, but to offer ourselves to God so that God might do something in us. Most important; don’t worry about whether something happens; God is at work when we open ourselves to God.

There are a number of liturgies that have been written for contemporary prayer beads. However, I would suggest that, over time, you consider writing your own liturgy. The beads include a symbol bead which is intended to provide a theme or focus for the prayers that you will use; then a bead for the prayer of invitation, four large beads, and four sets of seven smaller beads. Think about a scripture that would serve as a guide for your prayers; be creative as you choose a symbol bead; for example, a cross is often used to represent repentance or forgiveness, a dove represents the Holy Spirit, angels often represent compassion and mercy, a butterfly is often used for transformation. Let your prayer of invitation flow out of the scripture. The large beads, after a form of address to God, might have a more general petition; the small beads in turn, would be more specific. Consider the sample liturgy:

Prayer of invitation: “transform my life, renew my mind so that I might discern God’s deep desire for me” (Romans 12:2)

Large beads: Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. (Hymn #393)

Small beads: Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

I would suggest that hymns make a great resource for creating prayers if you are uncertain; I do want to remind you that although we do create prayers for the beads, the underlying intent is to make our hearts and minds more available to God for God’s movement in our lives.

Once you have introduced the practice, ask if there are individuals who have practiced this before. Ask them to share briefly their response to this practice.

LUNCH

Leading the practice

Given a somewhat limited amount of time for creating the prayer beads, the participants will be invited to make a variation on the more traditional circlet; they will make a prayer 'strand'.

Explain to the participants that variations on the more traditional form have developed; since some participants may have already made and used the circlet form, this will give them the opportunity to explore something slightly different.

You will need:

- A focus/symbol bead
- A invitatory/ or bead of invitation
- A single large bead
- 7 smaller beads
- 3 different beads to serve as separators
- 12 seed beads
- A small metal ring
- Wire

The focus bead will go on first; loop the wire through the bead and tie a knot at the top of this bead with one length of wire long enough for all the remaining beads.

The sequence of beads is as follows:

- Seed bead
- Separator bead
- Seed bead
- Invitatory bead
- Seed bead
- Separator bead
- Seed bead
- Large bead
- Seed bead
- 7 smaller beads each separated by a seed bead
- Separator bead
- Seed bead
- Small ring

Tie another knot once the ring has been attached.

These beads can then be used in a similar manner to the circlet beads. Open with a prayer for your focus; then the invitational prayer, the large bead prayer and the small bead prayer (the separator beads are simply to provide some additional space). The liturgy for the invitational, large and small beads would follow a similar format to the liturgy for the same beads in the circlet form.

Draw this time to a close with a prayer expressing gratitude for the ways in which God 'showed up' and invited them to something deeper.

Small group sharing

Invite participants to share their experiences within their small groups.

Large group

Invite participants who are comfortable to share their experience with the larger group. Invite questions/comments about the experience and the practice itself.

Closing/blessing

Closing and blessing. Invite any questions from the lesson and encourage everyone to continue to practice their Rule of Life. As you close your time, offer a simple prayer and the closing blessing from the morning worship.

SCRIPTURE FOR LESSON 5

I Samuel 3:4-10

Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

-NRSV

The Lord called out to Samuel, and he answered, "I'm coming." He ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But he replied, "I didn't call you; go back to sleep." So he went back and lay down. Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" Samuel rose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But he replied, "I didn't call, my son; go back to sleep." Now Samuel had not yet experienced the Lord; the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time, and he rose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli understood that the Lord was calling the boy. And Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down. If you are called again, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" And Samuel went to his place and lay down. The Lord came, and stood there, and he called as before: "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel answered, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

-JSB

When Yahweh called, "Samuel! Samuel!" he answered, "Here I am," and, running to Eli, he said, "Here I am, as you called me." Eli said, "I did not call. Go back and lie down." So he went and lay down. And again Yahweh called, "Samuel! Samuel!" He got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, as you called me." He replied, "I did not call, my son; go back and lie down." As yet, Samuel had no knowledge of Yahweh and the word of Yahweh had not yet been revealed to him. Again Yahweh called, the third time. He got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, as you called me." Eli then understood that Yahweh was calling the child, and he said to Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if someone calls say, 'Speak, Yahweh; for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Yahweh then came and stood by, calling as he had done before, "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel answered, "Speak, Yahweh; for your servant is listening."

-NJB

Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down. Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie do." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

-NIV

Then God called out, "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel answered, "Yes? I'm here." Then he ran to Eli saying, "I heard you call. Here I am." Eli said, "I didn't call you. Go back to bed." And so he did. God called again, "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, "I heard you call. Here I am." Again Eli said, "Son, I didn't call you. Go back to bed." (This all happened before Samuel knew God for himself. It was before the revelation of God had been given to him personally.) God called again, "Samuel!"—the third time! Yet again Samuel got up and went to Eli, "Yes? I heard you call me. Here I am." That's when it dawned on Eli that God was calling the boy. So Eli directed Samuel, "Go back and lie down. If the voice calls again, say, 'Speak, God. I'm your servant, ready to listen.'" Samuel returned to his bed. Then God came and stood before him exactly as before, calling out, "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel answered, "Speak. I'm your servant, ready to listen."

-The Message

LESSON 6

Using the times listed in the format for weeks 2-8 provided as a guide, move through this week's lesson.

Introduction:

Invite each participant to share their name and their home church (if multiple churches are participating).

The scripture for this lesson is **I Kings 19:11-13**. The scripture should be read from multiple translations (see page 42). A broader narrative that will provide setting and context will be offered.

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule or Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule or Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule or Life, would they/how would they change it?

The spiritual practice for this lesson will be **the Examen**. The history of this practice in the Christian faith will be presented and the group will engage in this practice. Instructions for leading this practice are provided.

Opening Worship

Opening words:

"Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal." (Psalm 106:1)

Come and Fill Our Hearts, TFWS #2157

Introduction to the Scripture:

King Ahab and his queen, Jezebel, have been worshipping Baal; Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel; God prevails and the prophets are killed. Ahab and Jezebel are angry and threaten to kill Elijah. Elijah then, fearing for his life, flees into the wilderness of Judah. There he encounters angels who provide food and water before sending him on the long journey to Mount Horeb. When he arrives at Horeb, he hides in a cave, still fearing for his life. God comes to Elijah and asks him what he is doing hiding in a cave; Elijah explains that he is in fear of retribution by Ahab. But God calls Elijah out of the cave.

Read I Kings 19:11-13:

Slowly read from several translations (provided on page 41) with a brief silence in between.

Read questions:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

God calls Elijah to come out of the cave; in spite of his fears, Elijah obeys God. When you find yourself hiding in the cave, what is the fear that has caused you to hide? What is God's invitation to you? Do you hear God's call? Are you willing/able to set aside your fears and come out?

Elijah is expecting God to be in the spectacular; the wind, the earthquake, the fire; do you seek God in the form of power and might? Elijah hears the still small voice and knows it to be God; he waits in the silence. Do you allow yourself time and space to wait in the silence; to listen for and hear the still small voice of God?

When God asks Elijah what he is doing hiding in this place for the second time, Elijah is ready to accept God's call to him to return, to anoint a new king. How often does God come to you in your fears and challenge you to return to what you are fleeing? Are you able to hear and accept the challenge and trust in God?

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from *Faith is Patience in the Night*, TFWS #2211; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

"Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, 'Amen'. Hallelujah."
(Psalm 106:48)

Small group sharing

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule or Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule or Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule or Life, would they/how would they change it?

Introduce spiritual practice

Examen

The Examen is a highly structured practice that originated with Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. The practice has two specific steps. The first step is known as the Examen of Consciousness; the second step is known as the Examen of Conscience. The intent of this practice is to notice the ways in which God has been present in your life to help you become more sensitive to those moments and more aware of the invitation God may have for you in those moments. As you focus your attention on the 'God moments' in your life, you will become more aware of those moments as they are occurring and more present to God in all of your life.

In the first step you will focus on your awareness of God throughout your life; do you recognize God in the moment. As you become aware, reflecting back, of the moments that you did not recognize God, what was happening within you at that time? How was that different from the times you were aware of God?

The first step in this practice is to choose a period of time starting with the present moment and moving backwards through the time period. It is easiest to begin this practice with a relatively short period of time; I would suggest starting with 24 hours.

Quiet yourself and take a few deep breaths. Close your eyes and take a few moments to appreciate the silence. Invite God to be present with you.

Look back over the last 24 hours beginning with the present moment; let each hour gently pass by your awareness, pause between each hour. As you move backwards, try to notice the presence of God in the day and your own way of participating in, missing or resisting God's presence. Then ask yourself: What am I noticing that I have taken for granted during the time period? What feelings and thoughts are emerging?

When you are ready, journal about your insights noting what happened (or didn't happen) at specific times of which you are now aware but were not at the time.

The second step is known as the Examen of Conscience and is a time of prayerfulness when you place those moments before God. There are five movements to this prayer time.

First I would invite you to enter into prayerful space. Then move through the steps as follows:

- The first act is acknowledgement and gratitude; recall all the blessings you have received over the time period; acknowledge those blessings as gifts from God and give thanks.

- The next act is petition; pray for the grace to see yourself clearly and honestly (your true authentic self); pray for clear vision to see yourself as God sees you and as others see you; empty yourself of self to make space for God.
- Then, admit; consider the times in the period when you have lapsed in faith, resisted God's action, or become alienated from God, recognize a specific area of your life that needs healing or attention.
- Next repent; humble yourself and ask for forgiveness, say to God "I'm sorry."
- And finally resolve; to accept God's grace and love. Determine now, with God, to be open to new ways of being in the world, to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

When you have completed the practice, journal about your feelings and insights noting, in particular, what needs attention and what you need to entrust to God's care.

Once you have introduced the practice, ask if there are individuals who have practiced this before. Ask them to share briefly their response to this practice.

LUNCH

Leading the practice

Examen of Consciousness:

The first step with this practice is to choose a period of time starting with the present moment and moving backwards through the time period. It is easiest to begin with a relatively short period of time; we will start with 24 hours.

Invite the participants to quiet themselves and take a few cleansing breaths. Invite them to close their eyes and take a few moments to appreciate the silence. Invite God to be present with the group. Read through the following slowly indicating that you will allow them to move through this time at their own pace.

You are invited to look back over the last 24 hours beginning with the present moment; let each hour gently pass by your awareness, pause between hours. As you move backwards, try to notice the presence of God in the day and your own way of participating in, missing or resisting God's presence. Then ask yourself: What am I noticing that I have taken for granted during the time period? What feelings and thoughts are emerging?

When you are ready, write about your insights noting what happened (or didn't happen) at specific times of which you are now aware but were not at the time.

For a first time experiencing this practice, consider allowing 15-20 minutes for this piece; if you notice that participants are still writing, encourage them to draw their thoughts to a close; they can always return to this later. Then invite them into the second step, the examen of conscience.

Examen of Conscience:

For a first time through this practice, it is best to read through the steps first so they know what to expect; then it is helpful if you move them through each step. Invite them to resume a prayerful attitude and posture. Then move them through the following steps:

- acknowledge; recall all the blessings you have received over the time period, accept all as gifts from God and give thanks (allow about 5 minutes for this)

- ask; pray for the grace to see yourself clearly and honestly (your authentic self), pray for enlightenment to see yourself as God sees you and as others see you; empty yourself of self (allow 3-5 minutes)

- admit; consider the times in the period when you have lapsed in faith, resisted God's action, or become alienated from God, recognize a specific 'sin' or area that needs healing or attention (allow 3-5 minutes)

- repent; humble yourself, repent and ask for forgiveness, say to God "I'm sorry" (allow 3-5 minutes)

- resolve; assent to grace, determine now, with God, to be open to new ways of being in the world, resolve to accept God's love, follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and live by Christ's truth (allow about 5 minutes)

Invite them to write about their feelings and insights and, noting in particular what needs attention and what they need to entrust to God's care. (Give them 5-8 minutes to write.)

Draw this time to a close with a prayer expressing gratitude for the ways in which God 'showed up' and invited them to something deeper.

Small group sharing

Invite participants to share their experiences within their small groups.

Large group

Invite participants who are comfortable to share their experience with the larger group. Invite questions/comments about the experience and the practice itself.

Closing/blessing

Closing and blessing. Invite any questions from the lesson and encourage everyone to continue to practice their Rule or Life. As you close your time, offer a simple prayer and the closing blessing from the morning worship.

SCRIPTURE FOR LESSON 6

I Kings 19:11-13

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

-NRSV

"Come out," He called, "and stand on the mountain before the Lord." And lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire—a soft murmuring sound. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his mantle about his face and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then a voice addressed him, "Why are you here, Elijah?"

-JSB

Then he was told, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before Yahweh.' For at that moment Yahweh was going by. A mighty hurricane split the mountains and shattered the rocks before Yahweh. But Yahweh was not in the hurricane. And after the hurricane, an earthquake. But Yahweh was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, fire. But Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire, a light murmuring sound. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then a voice came to him, which said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

-NJB

The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

-NIV

Then he was told, "Go, stand on the mountain at attention before God. God will pass by." A hurricane wind whipped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before God, but God wasn't to be found in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake, but God wasn't in the earthquake; and after the earthquake, fire, but God wasn't in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper. When Elijah heard the quiet voice, he muffled his face with his great cloak, went to the mouth of the cave, and stood there. A quiet voice asked, "So Elijah, now tell me, what are you doing here?"

-The Message

LESSON 7

Using the times listed in the format for weeks 2-8 provided as a guide, move through this week's lesson.

Introduction:

Invite each participant to share their name and their home church (if multiple churches are participating).

The scripture for this lesson is **Isaiah 55:2b-3**. The scripture should be read from multiple translations (see page 48). A broader narrative that will provide setting and context will be offered.

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule or Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule or Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule or Life, would they/how would they change it?

The spiritual practice for this lesson will be **walking the labyrinth**.⁷ The history of this practice in the Christian faith will be presented and the group will engage in this practice. Instructions for leading this practice are provided.

Opening Worship

Opening words:

"Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal." (Psalm 106:1)

Bless the Lord, TFWS #2013

Introduction to the Scripture:

It is believed that these words from Isaiah were written shortly after the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon. The prophet sought to restore faith in the one true God and God's universal kingship, the coming of the messianic era and the future restoration of Jerusalem. The prophet emphasizes the covenant between God and Israel and that it is important that the people abandon their sinful ways so that God will again bless them as a people.

Read Isaiah 55:2b-3:

Slowly read from several translations (provided on page 48) with a brief silence in between.

⁷ Portable labyrinths are available through the Conference Center, the Albany and Adirondack Districts, and Rev. Nancy Dibelius.

Read questions:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

God invites the Israelites to heed God's words; God then promises to provide good, even rich, 'food'. They need encouragement to trust in God after their years in captivity. Do you, at times, doubt God's promise of rich 'food' because of the struggles and challenges you have encountered? Who encourages you at such times in your life?

God tells the Israelites to listen, to come to God, and God will comfort and restore them. Do you listen for God in the midst of difficulties? Do you trust that God will comfort you? Do you trust that there will be restoration in your life?

God renews the covenant of commitment to the Israelites and promises them a place in God's kingdom. After the fall of David's dynasty, it was difficult for them to understand how God would fulfill this promise. Do you, at times, have your own expectations and fail to see and understand the promise God is making?

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from *When We Are Called to Sing Your Praise*, TFWS #2216; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

"Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, 'Amen'. Hallelujah."
(Psalm 106:48)

Small group sharing

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule or Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule or Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule or Life, would they/how would they change it?

Introduce spiritual practice

Walking the labyrinth

Labyrinths date back well before Christianity. The oldest labyrinth to be identified dates to roughly 3000 BCE; the oldest examples are found in Greece, Italy and Siberia. Sometime during the fourth century, the labyrinth was adopted for Christian use; one in a Christian church in Algeria dates to 350 CE. The labyrinth became an established practice during the Middle Ages, the most famous one was constructed within the Chartres Cathedral in France in the 13th century. The labyrinth became a substitute for fulfilling the desire to take a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands since travel to the Holy Lands had become very dangerous, especially for Christians.

The labyrinth is not a maze; there is a single path that leads to the center and back out. Walking the labyrinth became a practice that allowed an individual to experience God's presence in a tangible way. It reminds us that we travel this path to God together, even though we may at times be at different places on the journey. As with many spiritual practices, the path leads us to the center where we can be one with God and then, when we have reconnected with God, it leads us back where we can be in service in the world.

The labyrinth can be walked with a single prayer focus, it can be walked while reflecting on scripture, it can be walked in silence where space is made for God to enter in, it can be walked as a solitary practice and it can be walked in community.

Once you have introduced the practice, ask if there are individuals who have practiced this before. Ask them to share briefly their response to this practice.

LUNCH

Leading the Practice

Since it is likely that many of the participants will not have experienced the labyrinth previously, it is recommended that specific direction be given for this practice.

Prior to leading the practice, put the following questions on slips of paper. Make enough copies of the questions so that each participant can receive one. The first question should be given to the participant as they enter the labyrinth. Place the remaining two questions at equal distances to the entrance and the center and to each other. Explain to the participants that they should pick up the next question when they get to that place on the labyrinth. They are invited to reflect and be prayerful about each question. When they reach the center, invite them to simply be present to God without a specific intent. Invite them to use the time walking back out as a time of thanks for whatever insights they received.

- What should I do with my life? What does God want of me?

- What happens when the path seems blocked? What are you feeling vulnerable to?
- Which boundaries in your life need to be confronted and challenged? Where is the mystery drawing you?

Start by sitting in a circle around the outside of the labyrinth. Invite the participants to sing Come and Fill Our Hearts, TFWS #2157. Explain that you will stand at the entrance of the labyrinth. When they feel led to begin to walk, they should move to the entrance. You should allow 10-15 seconds between participants so it doesn't get too crowded. Explain that they are free to move at whatever pace works for them; if they overtake someone, they should move off the path and go around. When they reach the center, they are invited to sit or stand and be present to God; when they are ready, they may walk the path back out (explain that it is equally important to follow the path back out). If they encounter someone coming in, the outward-bound participant should move off the path to allow the individual coming in to stay on the path.

Invite participants to journal about their experience and any response they may have had to the questions. Allow 3-5 minutes for them to journal.

Draw this time to a close with a prayer expressing gratitude for the ways in which God 'showed up' and invited them to something deeper.

Small group sharing

Invite participants to share their experiences within their small groups.

Large group

Invite participants who are comfortable to share their experience with the larger group. Invite questions/comments about the experience and the practice itself.

Closing/blessing

Closing and blessing. Invite any questions from the lesson and encourage everyone to continue to practice their Rule or Life. As you close your time, offer a simple prayer and the closing blessing from the morning worship.

SCRIPTURE FOR LESSON 7

Isaiah 55:2b-3

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

-NRSV

Give heed to me, and you shall eat choice food and enjoy the richest viands. Incline your ear and come to Me; hearken, and you shall be revived. And I will make with you an everlasting covenant, the enduring loyalty promised to David.

-JSB

Listen carefully to me, and you will have good things to eat and rich food to enjoy. Pay attention, come to me; listen, and you will live. I shall make an everlasting covenant with you in fulfillment of the favours promised to David.

-NJB

Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.

-NIV

Listen to me, listen well: Eat only the best, fill yourself with only the finest. Pay attention, come close now, listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words. I'm making a lasting covenant commitment with you, the same that I made with David: sure, solid, enduring love.

-The Message

LESSON 8

Using the times listed in the format for weeks 2-8 provided as a guide, move through this week's lesson.

Introduction:

Invite each participant to share their name and their home church (if multiple churches are participating).

The scripture for this lesson is **Luke 5:4-10**. The scripture should be read from multiple translations (see page 53). A broader narrative that will provide setting and context will be offered.

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule or Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule or Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule or Life, would they/how would they change it?

The spiritual practice for this lesson will be **discernment**. The history of this practice in the Christian faith will be presented and the group will engage in this practice. Instructions for leading this practice are provided.

Opening Worship

Opening words:

"Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal." (Psalm 106:1)

In The Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful, TFWS #2195

Introduction to the Scripture:

Jesus has very recently returned to Galilee to begin his ministry. He has been rejected in his hometown, has cast out a demon, has healed Simon's mother-in-law as well as many others. And now Jesus goes to call the first of the disciples. He is walking along the lakeshore and he sees Simon and James and John mending their nets after a night of fishing; he gets into Simon's boat and asks him to push him out from the shore so that he can speak to the crowd that has gathered.

Read Luke 5:4-10:

Slowly read from several translations (provided on page 53) with a brief silence in between.

Read questions:

Read through the following slowly, leaving time in between each question.

Jesus asked Simon to put out his nets even though he and James and John had fished all night and caught nothing. Do you remember a time when Jesus asked you to trust him in spite of the 'reality' you knew? How did you respond?

When Simon saw the large catch of fish, he was afraid; he recognized his sinfulness in the presence of Jesus. Are there moments when you are struck by your own sinfulness? Are you fearful?

Jesus said, "Do not be afraid". He invited Simon to follow him; scripture tells us that Simon "left everything and followed him". What is your response when Jesus invites you to follow? How difficult is it to "leave everything"?

We are inviting you in this time and space to consider your relationship with God, to seek out God and God's words to you, God's deep desire for you. You are invited to enter into the empty space with the knowledge that you are beloved by God and that God's invitation to you may not always be comfortable or easy, but it will be an opportunity to heal the broken places and live more fully into the person God created you to be.

Reading from hymnal:

Read the words from *Would I Have Answered When You Called*, TFWS #2137; read slowly as though you were reading, not singing (the breaks are different).

Closing Benediction:

"Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, From eternity to eternity. Let all the people say, 'Amen'. Hallelujah."
(Psalm 106:48)

Small group sharing

Invite the participants to break into their small groups to share their experience of continuing to work with a Rule or Life. Have they been able to practice the Rule or Life? Did the rule as they created it lead them into God's presence? After practicing this Rule or Life, would they/how would they change it?

Introduce spiritual practice

Discernment

The word discernment comes from the Latin, *discerno*, meaning to separate, mark off, divide; to keep apart; to distinguish between. The word has to do with separating and sorting; separating one thing from another, separating ourselves from the world. And then sorting through the many things that may be calling to us, to distinguish that which is foremost, that which God is inviting us into.

Discernment is one of the spiritual gifts that Paul articulates in his letter to the church in Corinth. This gift is defined as "a special ability to distinguish between truth and error, justice and injustice, what is

authentic and genuine and what is phony. You are able to ‘see through’ people or circumstances to know what is real and what is an illusion, and you have the wisdom and courage to speak or reveal the truth.”

Although we may not all share in the gift of discernment, there are practices that help us discern a particular decision or choice in our lives. When confronted with a decision that may have multiple choices, how do we listen for God in the midst of it?

*Hearing with the Heart*⁸ by Debra K. Farrington and *The Way of Discernment—Companions in Christ*⁹ are both excellent resources for discernment practices. You are going to be invited today into a practice that is described in Farrington’s book. This is not intended to be the only practice, but to help you begin to explore the practice of discernment.

Once you have introduced the practice, ask if there are individuals who have practiced this before. Ask them to share briefly their response to this practice.

LUNCH

Leading the practice

This is not intended to be the only way to practice discernment, but to help you begin to explore the practice. This particular exercise involves visualization; seeing the decision in the presence of God.

This particular exercise invites you to lift your choices up to God so that you might gain a better understanding of God’s desire for you.

First consider a decision that you may need to make, then find an image that would represent God’s love for you. For example, you might picture God’s love as a bright light, an open hand, something in nature; something that will be authentic for you and your relationship with God (allow 3-5 minutes). Then be clear about the decision you are trying to make and the choices that are before you (allow ~3 minutes). Then, using the image you have chosen, imagine the decision that needs to be made being held in God’s loving presence; lift the decision up to the image you have chosen. Hold that image for several minutes. Then imagine each of the possible choices being held in God’s love. Place them in God’s presence, see them, spend several minutes with each choice (allow 8-12 minutes). When you have lifted each of the choices into God’s presence, express your gratitude to God.

⁸ Farrington, Debra K., *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God’s Will for Your Life*, San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 2003, pg. 64.

⁹ Doughty, Stephen V. and Thompson, Marjorie J., *Companions in Christ: The Way of Discernment*, Nashville, TN, Upper Room Books, 2008.

Then take time to reflect on what you saw. As you reflect on what you 'saw', do you have a sense of God's response to each of the choices; do you have greater clarity with regard to God's deep desire for you? (Allow ~5 minutes)

Take time to journal about this experience. (Allow 3-5 minutes).

Draw this time to a close with a prayer expressing gratitude for the ways in which God 'showed up' and invited them to something deeper.

Small group sharing

Invite participants to share their experiences within their small groups.

Large group

Invite participants who are comfortable to share their experience with the larger group. Invite questions/comments about the experience and the practice itself.

Closing/blessing

Closing and blessing. Invite any questions from the lesson and encourage everyone to continue to practice their Rule or Life. As you close your time, offer a simple prayer and the closing blessing from the morning worship.

SCRIPTURE FOR LESSON 8**Luke 5:4-10**

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

-NRSV

When he had finished speaking he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and pay out your nets for a catch." Simon replied, "Master, we worked hard all night long and caught nothing, but if you say so, I will pay out the nets." And when they had done this they netted such a huge number of fish that their nets began to tear, so they signaled to their companions in the other boat to come and help them; when these came, they filled both boats to sinking point. When Simon Peter saw this he fell at the knees of Jesus saying, "Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man." For he and all his companions were completely awestruck at the catch they had made; so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were Simon's partners. But Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on it is people you will be catching."

-NJB

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men."

-NIV

When he finished teaching, he said to Simon, “Push out into deep water and let your nets out for a catch.” Simon said, “Master, we’ve been fishing hard all night and haven’t caught even a minnow. But if you say so, I’ll let out the nets.” It was no sooner said than done—a huge haul of fish, straining the nets past capacity. They waved to their partners in the other boat to come help them. They filled both boats, nearly swamping them with the catch. Simon Peter, when he saw it, fell to his knees before Jesus. “Master, leave. I’m a sinner and can’t handle this holiness. Leave me to myself.” When they pulled in that catch of fish, awe overwhelmed Simon and everyone with him. It was the same with James and John, Zebedee’s sons, coworkers with Simon. Jesus said to Simon, “There is nothing to fear. From now on you’ll be fishing for men and women.”

-The Message