

God of the Bible:

A Study for United Methodists about
How God Is Revealed in Scripture.

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LEADER'S GUIDE



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*All Scripture readings are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
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Introduction:

How shall we speak of God? What language shall we use? What words will invite, embrace, nurture and strengthen people, loved by God?

The stained-glass windows in Parkers United Methodist Church — deep blue, rich red and strong gold — fascinated me as a child. The shepherd who is good to the sheep on the right side is the same as the one who knocks at the door on the left side. Swirls and triangles and ovals are beautifully interwoven around names of forebears of the church family. I did not know what they meant and yet I knew what they meant. They pointed me toward God who is gentle and strong, beautiful and mysterious, close by and far away. The windows fascinate me still. Many years later, I realize that my soul was shaped by the images of God that embraced me, week by week, year by year.

The Bible overflows with images of God. We have our favorites and love them well. My own spiritual journey is marked by the unearthing of scriptural images, one by one, sometimes multilayered: light in darkness, water in desert, guide in wilderness, rock that gives birth. For even the most seasoned reader of the Bible, there are images in the Bible unexplored.

Our speaking of God can overflow with the richness of Biblical imagery and the expansiveness of Christ's embrace.

God is big, beautiful, beyond our imagining. Therefore, we need this resource. I hope you will read it with eagerness. I also hope you will use it as you invite people toward God, as you help people grow in discipleship, as you engage in Christ's mission in the world.

— *Bishop Hope Morgan Ward, North Carolina Conference*

How to Teach This Study

Practical Preparation:

AUDIENCE

The primary audience is intended to be any person with an interest in learning about a variety of scriptural images of God. This study is written with the assumption that the subject will be new for many people, ensuring that each person experiencing this study has enough context and insight to explore and engage each section more fully. Those who are more comfortable with the material may be able to provide additional insight.

Since this study will primarily be used in United Methodist churches and communities, the theology, language and pedagogical (teaching) approach are faithful to the diversity of expression found within The United Methodist Church.

DURATION OF STUDY

This study was written to be adapted to fit the needs of multiple groups. For example, this study can be used as a:

- 5-week Sunday school study;
- 6-week Bible study session with a creative group response during the last session
- 6-week study with a worship service as the last session
- 10-week study; each meeting including half a section of material

GATHERING SPACE

The gathering space for your group should be conducive for study; each section includes worksheets and biblical content, which requires some space for participants to feel comfortable and write responses. The gathering space should also be open enough for a brief worship experience at the end of each section. You may also decide to pay particular attention to the images visible in the gathering space and the ways that they may influence the discussion.

FORMAT

Each section of the participant's guide includes an introduction to establish context for the topic, biblical study and accompanying worksheets, a brief order of worship for a worship experience and closing discussion questions or opportunities for further exploration. This guide was written to engage a variety of learning styles: interpersonal (group discussion), intrapersonal (silent reflection), visual, aural (hearing) and kinesthetic (movement). As a leader and facilitator, it would be helpful for you to know the ways you learn best and which elements of each section appeal to you. Try to be aware of your preferences and the ways that you will provide space for the other learning styles so that each style is understood as valued.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to expose participants to a broader range of images of God so that their theology and experiences of God may be expanded. Before this can happen, leaders must first recognize that some images (often, male images) used for God in The United Methodist Church have been held in higher esteem than others.

This study is written in such a way that participants should not feel criticized for the particular images of God they find meaningful. Expansive studies intentionally embrace traditional images and focus upon exploring the less common images in biblical and church traditions. This nonthreatening approach seeks to acknowledge God's unchanging nature and our human limitations as we seek to know God as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The questions posed throughout the study are meant to be open-ended questions that do not have a single correct answer. The brief discussion of each passage below is meant to provide the leader with an example of possible answers the study has in mind. Encourage participants to explore the metaphorical language by restating it. This may be difficult because many people have been conditioned to think that language about God has to be phrased in statements that sound like one of the creeds. You may hear some participants leaving the metaphorical language of the Bible in order to make propositional statements about God.

You may also find that participants disagree about the meaning of a given verse. One good strategy for the leader is to direct them back to the biblical text, to ask them to talk about the words that they see there and to reflect on what they mean. Focusing on the passage gives participants an opportunity to engage the biblical text directly and to discuss how they arrived at their differing conclusions about its meaning. Attention to the language of the text will also help learners to stay within the metaphorical framework of the text and to appreciate what it has to offer.

“*Expansive studies intentionally embrace traditional images and focus upon exploring the less common images in biblical and church traditions.*”

Facilitating Group Dynamics

LEADERSHIP THROUGH FACILITATING

As the leader of this study, you are the group facilitator. You are not expected to be an “expert” on expansive language or to have the answer to every question a participant has. In the act of facilitating, you show leadership by providing space for participants to feel safe and learn together. As much as possible, be aware of your own theology and responses to the content of each section. Try to allow the participants to express themselves without being persuaded in a particular direction. As a facilitator, your primary role is to invite participants to explore their authentic reactions to the material. Try to encourage participants when they feel vulnerable and safe enough to share their emotions. Affirm their responses as a valid and valued contribution to the discussion.

SAFE SPACE

As a facilitator, you are also responsible for creating “safe space” so that all participants feel comfortable sharing. Because your group will probably have a wide variety of perspectives on the various discussions, consider writing a class covenant together prior to or during the beginning of your first meeting. This could include instructions for what can be shared and what should be kept confidential, time limits that need to be set to ensure everyone has a chance to share, or guidelines that include special needs the group may have. Consider establishing clear guidelines for expressing disagreement respectfully and specific rituals for acknowledging and addressing conflict.

TIME KEEPING: “STEP FORWARD, STEP BACK”

An important and yet sometimes overlooked aspect of any study is careful attention to the time you have together. Do not allow one person to dominate a conversation and leave others without adequate time to share. There are ways you can agree together as a group to hold each other accountable to the time. For example, you could have someone volunteer to be “the timekeeper” or decide with the group that each person has a reasonable time limit to share.

Another helpful approach is to introduce this concept as “step forward, step back.” If it seems that a few people have been speaking while the other participants have not shared, offer the group the space for those who have not spoken to “step forward” and share, and those who have been primarily talking to “step back.” This will help people of all personality types feel like they have the opportunity to contribute to the conversation. Remember that not every participant will feel comfortable sharing with the whole group.

ADDITIONAL GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

At the end of each section, you will find suggested activities and creative opportunities for participants who want to engage the material on additional levels. These activities are not required, but you may choose to ask your group to choose particular activities between meetings as helpful.

You will notice that the last section of the study is an addendum of worship materials and resources for use outside of a class atmosphere. These resources have been compiled with the hope that your group will choose to adapt them as helpful to expand the conversation beyond the class and into your congregation or community. As with any resource list, this is not an exhaustive collection, but we hope that it is a good starting point for your community.

One sample covenant:

As we study God of the Bible, each of us covenant together that we will come to class with a posture of curiosity, respect and hope. Through Christ, we are unified in love, even if we disagree. When we disagree, we will assume the best of one another and always ask questions to increase our mutual understanding. What we share in this room will remain anonymous, and we will listen fully to all voices. All questions are welcome in this room and encouraged. Each one of us will feel free to say, “I don’t understand”, “I am not sure” or “can we pause?” And the group will hear these as honoring the new information, treating these as requests for connection and relationship rather than challenges or dissension.

INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL DISCUSSIONS

The Bible study questions in these lessons are meant to be open-ended questions that do not have a single correct answer. The leader's job is to facilitate the learner's discovery through their engagement with the biblical text. The suggestions below are intended to help prepare leaders to respond to questions learners may have in ways that further the aims of the study.

The brief discussion of each passage in the leader's guide is meant to provide the leader with examples of the possible answers. Readers will probably mention many of the sample answers listed in this guide. If they do not, try to reframe the question in a way that will point them in a new direction instead of supplying answers for them.

Encourage participants to explore the metaphorical language of a passage by restating it. This can sometimes be difficult, because many people have been conditioned to think that language about God has to be phrased in statements that sound like one of the creeds. You may hear some participants leaving the metaphorical language of the Bible aside in order to make propositional statements about God. For example, in the midwife image of Isa. 66:6-9 in Week 1, some readers will be happy to conclude that God is our Deliverer, but will not want to talk about the messy language of birth. Use the language of the passage to ask questions that probe beyond doctrinal statements. In this case you might ask, "What kind of deliverance does Isaiah imagine?" Attention to the language of the text will help learners to stay within the metaphorical framework of the text and to appreciate what it has to offer.

Participants may also disagree about the meaning of a given verse. One good strategy is for the leader is to redirect them to the biblical text, to ask them to talk about the words that they see there and to reflect on what they mean. Focusing on the passage gives participants an opportunity to engage the biblical text directly and to discuss how they arrived at their differing conclusions about its meaning. Sometimes, one interpreter will discover that what they thought they saw in the passage is not actually there and they may change their mind. More often, perhaps, learners may discover that both perspectives make sense depending on the assumptions you make as you read. When this happens, you may want to stop and point it out to the class. Understanding that more than one good interpretation of a passage is possible is part of being a mature reader of scripture.

Some participants may be disturbed by elements of the biblical language or find that they do not agree with the imagery. For example, some might not agree with the judgment implied in the image of God the vinegrower throwing branches into the fire. Some participants may be opposed to female imagery like that of the midwife. Allow participants to express their discomfort with the language but encourage them to take it seriously as a part of the picture that the biblical language offers to help us understand who God is. Each metaphor expresses only a small slice of the entirety of who God is. By exploring all of the imagery—even the parts that make us uncomfortable—we learn about the nature of God.

Week 1 Imagining the Mystery and Love of God

“God of the Bible, God in the Gospel, hope seen in Jesus, hope yet to come, you are our center, daylight or darkness, freedom or prison. You are our home.”

“God of the Bible” by Shirley Erena Murray, verse 1

Materials and Set Up:

- Week 1 worksheets
- Bibles
- Pens or pencils
- *The Faith We Sing* and *Worship & Song* (or copies of songs and prayers)
- Drape the table with navy blue fabric or table cloth as a symbol of the vast universe.
- 3 clear wide water bowls on a mirror
- Floating water candles for each participant
- Matches

Worship and Time Planning

GATHERING & CENTERING (15 MINUTES)

Invite each participant to say their first name as they light a water candle.

CENTERING PRAYER

Mysterious One,

Let the wind whisper your name

Holy, Beautiful, Shepherd,

Parent, Lover, Friend,

Befriend us in our journey

Teach us in the way

To listen, capture, embody

Your awesome grace. Amen.

HYMN:

“God Of the Bible” *Worship & Song* # 3020

Can be sung to the tune of “Morning Has Broken,” *United Methodist Hymnal* #145, *Bunessan 55.54 D*

BIBLE STUDY (1 HOUR)**CONCLUDING IN PRAYER (15 MINUTES)****CLOSING HYMN:**

“Bring Many Names” *The Faith We Sing* # 2047

PRAYING TOGETHER

Invite each participant to pray a word that would describe their experience today beginning with the following phrase: God of love and mystery today I experience your...

Bible Study Instructions:

Divide into groups of two or three, and assign each small group one of the following topics. If the class is large, assign each topic to more than one small group.

Small group instructions: Look up each passage and read it aloud to your group. Answer the following questions regarding each passage. Brainstorm answers and record them on the handout.

1. How is God portrayed in the passage? Pick out words or phrases from the scripture that are important to the passage. What are the central nouns, verbs or adjectives that describe God's activity in this passage?
2. Paraphrase the central idea(s) of the passage. Restate the image in your own words.
3. What kind of relationship between God and people is communicated by this image?
4. What seems important to you about the way this passage characterizes God? What insight into God's character does it have to offer?

A. Midwife: Isaiah 66:6-9; Psalm 22:9-10

Isaiah 66:6-9: In this passage, God delivers Zion's children. The passage uses the metaphor of safe passage through childbirth to speak of God's faithfulness to the promises made to Israel. The midwife is the one who "delivers" the children from danger.

Psalm 22:9-10: the Psalmist speaks of God as the one who took him from the womb and upon whom he was cast since birth. The birth metaphor expresses the frailty of human life and dependence upon God who brings forth life.

B. Vinegrower: Isaiah 5:1-7; John 15:1-6

Isaiah 5:1-7: God planted a vineyard, expecting it to grow grapes. But the grapes were wild. Therefore, God destroys the vineyard and its protections. The details of the metaphor point to God's careful tending of Israel. The "fruits" that were expected are probably actions like mercy, kindness and faithfulness.

John 15:1-6: Jesus speaks of himself as a vine and God as the vinegrower. God removes and prunes branches that do not bear fruit. They are tossed into the fire. The metaphor implies that God provides what the branches need to grow and judges those who do not respond.

C. Shepherd: Ezekiel 34:1-16; Psalm 23:1-4; Luke 15:1-7

Ezekiel 34:1-16: After criticizing the shepherds (leaders) who do not care for the sheep, God offers to serve as the shepherd. Seeking out, gathering and rescuing sheep are primary activities of God as shepherd.

Psalm 23:1-4: God as shepherd provides for the basic needs of the sheep. God leads the sheep in the right path.

Luke 15:1-7: The shepherd goes in search of a single lost sheep, brings it home and rejoices.

Bring the group back together and ask each group to share about the scripture they studied.

Ask the group to reflect on the images as a whole. In what way does each metaphor say something unique about God—that is, what does each metaphor express that is not found in the others?

Homework

Invite participants to bring to the next class a picture, a drawing or an object that makes them think of God's wisdom.

Week 2 Listening to Wisdom

“Those without status, those who are nothing, you have made royal, gifted with rights, chosen as partners, midwives of justice, birthing new systems, lighting new lights.”

“God of the Bible” by Shirley Erena Murray, verse 3

Materials and Set Up:

- Week 2 worksheets for each participant
- Bibles
- Pens or pencils
- *The United Methodist Hymnal* (or copies of songs and prayers)
- Drape the table with bright yellow fabric as a symbol of wisdom
- Oil lamp, open Bible or reading glasses

Worship and Time Planning

GATHERING & CENTERING (15 MINUTES)

Invite participants to place the picture, drawing or object they brought and spread them on the table.

PRAYER

“Canticle of Wisdom” *United Methodist Hymnal* # 112

HYMN

“Immortal, Invisible God Only Wise” *United Methodist Hymnal* # 103

BIBLE STUDY (1 HOUR)

CONCLUDING IN PRAYER (15 MINUTES)

HYMN

“Woman In The Night” *United Methodist Hymnal* # 274

PRAYING TOGETHER

Invite participants to pray a word that would describe their experience today beginning with the following phrase: God of love, mystery and infinite wisdom, today I was able to open my mind to...

Bible Study Instructions

In Proverbs 8 we learn about the nature of God through the personification of God's wisdom.

Divide the class into two groups and assign verses 1-21 to one group and verses 22-31 to the other. Join back together again to complete part C.

A. PROVERBS 8:1-21

1. Read Proverbs 8:1-5 and discuss the following questions.

What does it mean to you that God's wisdom calls out to people?

What does Wisdom's role say about the character of God?

Where does Wisdom stand when she calls? What do you think these locations represent?

God's wisdom searches for people to teach. She calls out to them. She wants to be known.

God also wants to be known. God's wisdom is one way that God communicates with people.

Wisdom goes to the busiest parts of the city. She isn't hiding and she isn't sitting in the library or in the leader's house. She is out in the middle of everything.

2. Read verses 6-11. What kinds of things does Wisdom want people to learn? How is Wisdom described? List some of the phrases from the passage.

She wants people to learn: prudence (v. 5); what is right (v. 6); truth (v. 7). Her words are straight (v. 9) and very valuable (vv. 10-11).

3. Wisdom describes herself in verses 12-21. What are her important attributes? What does it mean for Wisdom to do these things?

She lives with prudence and attains knowledge (v. 12). She has good advice, insight, and strength (v. 14). Those who rule wisely do so because of her (vv. 15-16). She loves (v. 17). She brings riches and honor (vv. 18, 19, 21). Wisdom describes herself as the heart of knowledge. All of the synonyms for wisdom (advice, knowledge, etc.) connect all of these words to Wisdom. Those who follow her teachings benefit from her.

B. PROVERBS 8:22-31

These verses speak of Wisdom's relationship to God.

1. List the actions of God regarding Wisdom: God created, set up, brought forth.
2. When did these things happen? Ages ago, at the first, before the beginning, when there were no depths, etc.
3. Wisdom was present when God did what things?

Established the heavens, drew a circle on the face of the deep, made firm the skies above, established the fountains of the deep, etc.

4. What other words and phrases that describe Wisdom seem important?

Why does Wisdom's claim that she was brought forth before creation seem important to you?

Wisdom was present when everything was made. She knows everything, and she is also involved in creation, so creation is made according to God's wisdom.

Ancient Jews (and later, Christians) understood God's wisdom as a way God communicated with people. If God is invisible and immortal, how can mere humans know or understand God? For many, the answer was through God's wisdom. The idea that God spoke creation into being suggested that Wisdom was present at creation—and because of this, is visible in creation. God's wisdom was also communicated in God's law—and later, in Jesus.

C. READ VERSES 32-36

Wisdom makes some weighty claims about her importance: “Whoever finds me, finds life” (8:35). Relate what is said here to the section you studied earlier. How does this claim make sense based on what you have already learned about Wisdom's identity and role?

Homework

Ask participants to write a letter to someone who has been a mentor, a teacher, a source of God's wisdom in their lives.

Week 3 God Who Loves, Nurtures, and Parents

“God in our struggles, God in our hunger, suffering with us, taking our part,
still you empower us, mothering Spirit, feeding, sustaining, from your own heart.”

“God of the Bible” by Shirley Erena Murray, verse 2

Materials and Set Up:

- Week 3 worksheets
- Bibles
- Pens or pencils
- *The Faith We Sing* and *The United Methodist Hymnal* (or copies of songs)
- Drape the table with a light blue or lavender cloth to symbolize life
- A large bowl of water (or baptismal font)
- Seashells or other signs of baptism for each participant

Worship and Time Planning

GATHERING & CENTERING

ENTERING IN PRAYER

As people enter, invite them to dip their fingers in the bowl of water and touch their foreheads saying, “Thank you God for my baptism.” (If any participant has not been baptized yet, invite them to say: “Thank you God for the living waters.”)

BIBLE STUDY (1 HOUR)

CONCLUDING IN PRAYER

CLOSING HYMN:

“I Was There To Hear Your Borning Cry” *The Faith We Sing* # 2051

PRAYING TOGETHER

Invite participants to pray a word that would describe their experience today, beginning with the following phrase: God of love, mystery, and infinite wisdom, who loves, nurtures and parents me today, I give you thanks for...

Bible Study Instructions

The image of God as father is familiar from both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. But the Bible also includes many images of God as mother. In this session we explore this imagery to better understand what it expresses about God's nature.

This week, assign a single verse from part 1 to each person and let them work on it and answer the questions. Then discuss sections 2 and 3 as a group.

1. Answer the following questions for your assigned verse:

Restate the imagery in your own words.

What does the image suggest about God's relationship to humankind?

Isaiah 49:15

God is like a nursing mother. Just as the mother cannot forget her child, so also God remembers us. Even if a mother might forget, God will not. The image suggests God's devotion to humankind. God loves and thinks about God's children just as mothers do.

Isaiah 66:13

God comforts people like a mother comforts her child. God is in touch with what humans experience and knows human sorrow. Like a mother who desires what is good for her child, God reaches out to comfort and soothe our sorrows.

Isaiah 42:14-17

God cries out like a woman in labor. God has kept peace for a long time—like the time of a pregnancy. But now the moment has come and God cries out in a moment of change. The image is destructive in verse 15, but God also promises not to forsake them in verse 16.

Psalms 103:13

God has compassion on those who fear the divine presence. God is like a father in God's concern. This passage may also reflect the idea that children feared or respected their fathers.

Deuteronomy 32:6

God is a father who created, made and established the people. The passage suggests

the dependency of the people on God, like children in relationship to a father.

Galatians 4:6-7

Paul's listeners are no longer slaves but now are children, with God as their father. Just as human fathers gave inheritances to their male and female children, God's children are also heirs.

2. Some images from scripture are specifically gendered male or female. Others are not. Read the following passages together and discuss whether you think the action described is that of a mother, father or both.

Deuteronomy 8:4-6

In the wilderness period, God was a parent to Israel. God cared for them and also disciplined them. God's law is part of the discipline of the parent and evidence of God's care for humankind.

Hosea 11:1-4

God loved Israel as a child and called to them; but they turned away. God taught them and held them.

Deuteronomy 32:18

This is strange metaphorical language because the metaphor of God as rock does not fit well with the image of parenting children or giving birth. The image is also interesting because it has both male and female actions in producing children. The first verb, "bore," refers to the father's role, while "gave you birth" is the mother's.

3. Is God as mother or father an important image for you personally? If so, what elements of parenting do you find most important to your idea of God?

Homework:

Ask participants to take a brief moment every night during the week to write the ways in which God has nurtured and cared for you that day. Encourage them to read it aloud as prayer, concluding with the prayer that Jesus taught, and adapting that prayer every night by beginning with:

Eternal One Mother and Father of us all

Our Father

Our Mother

Our Parent

Our Creator

Our Source of Life and Love

Our Beloved

Or others

Week 4 God of All Creation

“Not by your finger, not by your anger, will our world order change in a day,
but by your people, fearless and faithful, small paper lanterns, lighting the way.”

“God of the Bible” by Shirley Erena Murray, verse 4

Materials and Set Up:

- Week 4 worksheets
- Bibles
- Pens or pencils
- *The Faith We Sing* and *The United Methodist Hymnal* (or copies of songs)
- Drape the table with a light green fabric or table cloth to represent creation
- A generous fruit basket with at least one piece for each participant

Worship and Time Planning

GATHERING & CENTERING

As people come in, invite them to take a piece of fruit from the basket and savor it. Ask them to think about the memories that the flavor of the fruit elicits in their minds. What memories are triggered?

Centering Prayer:

Tiptop
Rain Drops
Cloudy day, welcome,
You come announcing hope
The earth has been so dry, anxious
Waiting impatiently for her lover's kiss.
Mother nature savors the sweet heavenly water
The fruit of her womb leaps with joy, a fresh harvest
Just begins
Bring forth
new season
awaken all
your senses
God is here.

HYMN:

“Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud” *United Methodist Hymnal* #113

BIBLE STUDY (1 HOUR)**CONCLUDING IN PRAYER (15 MINUTES)****CLOSING HYMN:**

“Water, River, Spirit, Grace” *The Faith We Sing* #2253

PRAYING TOGETHER

Invite each participant to pray a word that would describe their experiences today, beginning with the following phrase: God of love, mystery and infinite wisdom, who protects, nurtures and parents me, today I praise you for...

Bible Study Instructions

Although many of our images attribute human qualities to God, other biblical images compare God to animals or inanimate objects. In this session we explore what we can learn about God from these unusual metaphors.

Assign each verse to a person or small group. You can determine the sizes of the groups based on the preference of the group members. Give the individuals or groups time to read their verses and answer the questions. These verses are shorter and easier to understand, so you might have each person or group work on more than one verse. Then, have everyone who worked on each verse contribute to the group discussion.

1. Answer the following questions for your assigned verse:

- (A) Restate the imagery in your own words.
- (B) What does the image suggest about God's relationship to humankind?

1. Rock: 2 Sam 22:2-3; Psalm 62: 1-7

2 Sam 22:2-3: “[David] said: the Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence.”

Psalm 62:1-2: “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress, I shall never be shaken.”

2. Eagle: Deuteronomy 32:11-12; Exodus 19:3-4

Deut 32:11-13: “As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him; no foreign god was with him. He set him atop the heights of the land, and fed him with produce of the field; he nursed him with honey from the crags, with oil from flinty rock.”

Exod 19:3-4: “Then Moses went up to God: the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: you have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.’”

3. Lion, Bear: Hosea 13:4-8

Hosea 13:4-8: “Yet I have been the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt;

You know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior.
 It was I who fed you in the wilderness, in the land of drought.
 When I fed them, they were satisfied;
 they were satisfied, and their heart was proud; therefore they forgot me.
 So I will become like a lion to them, like a leopard I will lurk beside the way.
 I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, and will tear open the covering of their heart;
 there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild animal would mangle them.”

4. Light: Psalm 27:1-3; Isaiah 60:19-20

Ps 27:1-3: The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
 The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
 When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall.
 Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
 Though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

Isa 60:19-20: The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.
 Your sun shall not more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.

5. Fountain: Jeremiah 2:11-13

Jer 2:11-13: Has the nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

Homework

Have participants write and prepare to share a brief prayer about how each has been touched by the reflections and personal stories shared during these past four weeks. There will be time in the closing communion for interested participants to share these gritudes.

Week 5 Knowing the Unknowable

Hope we must carry, shining and certain, through all our turmoil, terror and loss,
bonding us gladly, one to the other, till our world changes, facing the cross.”

“God of the Bible” by Shirley Erena Murray, verse 5

Materials and Set Up:

- Week 5 worksheets
- Bibles
- Pens or pencils
- *The Faith We Sing* and *The United Methodist Hymnal* (or copies of songs)
- Drape the table with a white table cloth to represent mystery
- Communion elements (bread, juice, pitcher, chalice, paten, napkins, etc.)

If you are not an ordained elder, invite an elder to preside over your communion service. An elder could also consecrate the elements and package them for your class.

Worship and Time Planning

GATHERING & CENTERING (15 MINUTES)

Invite participants to greet each other by saying, **The Peace of God be with you...** and exchange signs of peace (handshakes, hugs, high-fives, etc.)

PRAYER

“A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada” *United Methodist Hymnal* # 883

HYMN:

“The Care the Eagle Gives Her Young” *United Methodist Hymnal* # 118

BIBLE STUDY (25 MINUTES)

CLOSING COMMUNION (45 MINUTES)

Bible Study Instructions

Read Exodus 3:13-15. The story of Moses encountering God in the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-12) may be familiar to many group members. If it is not, you may want to read it aloud as well.

Discuss the following questions about the biblical passage

1. In this story, God discloses God’s name to Moses: I Am Who I Am. This seems like an unusual name. What does this name mean to you? What does it suggest about the nature of God?

2. The Hebrew word that is translated can also mean “I am what I am” and “I will be what I will be.” How do these multiple meanings affect the way you think about God’s name? What does it mean to have a name with more than one meaning?
3. The name of God appears many times in the Hebrew Scripture but is usually replaced in the English translation by the word LORD (using small capital letters). (Exodus 3:16 and 18 are examples of this.) Open to any other page in the book of Exodus and look for the word LORD. Does it change anything to think that the Hebrew word used in these instances is the name of God: I am who I am?

Discuss personal and shared experience of God’s names and descriptions.

1. What names and descriptions are used often for God today?
2. As we have seen throughout this study, the Bible offers dozens of different names and images for God. Why does the Bible describe God in so many different ways?
3. How does it strengthen your faith to know that God can be described in a variety of ways?

Closing Communion Liturgy and Plan

COMMUNION LITURGY

CALL TO THE TABLE:

O God of our ancestors, our present and future generations, at the end of this brief journey we come rejoicing.

We gather to break bread as your beloved community and to drink from the cup of salvation as your faithful disciples.

Today, we remember that through Christ’s sacrificial love, you redeemed us and transformed us into a new creation.

Grant that, as we celebrate your life among us, we may be empowered by the Holy Spirit to praise your holy name and share your grace with the whole world. Amen.

HYMN

“For Everyone Born” *Worship & Song* #3149

A CREED AND CONFESSION

“The World Methodist Social Affirmation” *United Methodist Hymnal* # 886

THE MODERN GREAT THANKSGIVING

God of mystery and infinite wisdom, who loves, nurtures and parents me, creator of all, my perfect shepherd, the midwife of my inspiration and ideas, let me declare your mighty deeds in this world and especially in my life...

Invite participants to read their prayers. If someone has forgotten their prayer, simply ask him or her to speak from the heart.

For these, your wonderful acts in our lives, we praise you God of many names.

CONCLUDE WITH:

O burning Mountain, O chosen Sun, O perfect Moon, O fathomless Well, O unattainable Height, O Clearness beyond measure, O Wisdom without end, O Mercy without limit, O Strength beyond resistance, O Crown beyond all majesty: The humblest thing you created sings your praise. Amen

“Praising God of Many Names”, *United Methodist Hymnal* #104

Today we remember when you gathered with your disciples like we are gathering this evening and you did the unexpected. You gave a new meaning to a very familiar Passover meal. It was the first and last supper that welcomed the mystery of your grace.

Jesus took the bread and broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said:

“This is my body broken for you, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

(Ask a participant to lift the bread and break it.)

We can only imagine the sense of wonder and confusion among the disciples. Then after they were satisfied, Jesus took the cup, gave thanks to God, and said:

“Drink from this, all of you, this is the cup of a new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

(As you speak, ask one participant to pour the juice into the cup and a second to lift it.)

And so we declare in faith that the unknowable God has become known to all generations at this table. With gratitude and joy in our hearts we proclaim that:

“Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.”

(Ask participants to raise their hands as the following blessing is prayed.)

Bless these simple elements, bless the whole world that they may feel at home in you, bless us as we share with one another your love in the bread and the cup. Amen.

What a great moment to pray the Lord’s Prayer as you taught us. We pray with freedom using the language and imagery that is closest to our hearts...

Sharing the bread and the cup

CLOSING HYMN:

“As We Go” *Worship & Song* # 3183

Praying Together

Major crossroads,
 Sharp turns,
 Unexpected detours ...
 Don't panic, think
 New vision has birthed
 Deep well of imagination
 Nascence of ideas...
 Don't be anxious, greet
 Possibilities lead you home
 to the essence of God!