

First Sunday after the Epiphany/Baptism of the Lord, Year B (January 7, 2024): Becoming the People of God – There Was the Morning

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). Have participants talk about the day of their baptism in pairs or groups of three. Provide the following questions: “Do you remember your baptism? Were you baptized as an infant or an adult? Who baptized you? Who was present? Who was missing?”

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Genesis 1:1-5](#) and [Mark 1:4-11](#).

- Why is water so significant in the sacrament of baptism?
[“Water is the incubator, the womb of God out of which Creation is birthed.”]
- The Preaching Notes say, *“[John the Baptist was] someone who knew. Someone who had found what he (and they) was looking for. So, John gave it to them with water and with words. They glimpsed it in the gathering of the multitudes. ...That was why they splashed into the river to be baptized by this crazy man. He had something they wanted. He saw what they were looking for.”* Have you found what you were looking for? When did you realize that you had found it? Is there a time when you mistakenly thought you had found what you were looking for?
- Was Jesus’ baptism necessary if he did not need repentance? Is the biblical account of his baptism relevant for us today? Why?
- The author of the preaching notes says that we want certainty that God claimed us, that we are beloved children with whom God is well pleased. Do you have this certainty? If so, how did you gain this certainty?
- Like John the Baptist, how could you lead people to Jesus, our savior? How could you help others gain the certainty that they are beloved children of God?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer:

God, our Creator, may we always remember that, through our baptism, you claimed us. We are your beautiful and beloved children. Thank you for the gestures of love we receive daily through your creation. Help us share these gestures of love with others. Amen.

Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B (January 14, 2024): Becoming the People of God – Your Servant Is Listening

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). Have participants answer: “Is there anyone in your life who helps you discern when God is calling or speaking to you?”

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [1 Samuel 3:1-10\(11-20\)](#) and [John 1:43-51](#).

- Why was Samuel unable to recognize the voice of the Lord the first three times the Lord called him? [“Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him” (1 Samuel 3:7)]
- The Preaching Notes say, *“It’s loud in our world with distractions aplenty, voices calling, blaming, warning, vying for our attention. It’s loud in our souls, where we are filled with our own questions and fears, filled with our own failures and inadequacies.”* What are noises impede us from listening to the voice of God when God speaks to us?
- What kept Nathaniel from believing Philip when he told him that Jesus from Nazareth was the Son of God? [Nathaniel was not listening. His biases and prejudices hindered him from listening clearly.]
- What does it take to recognize God’s voice and receive God’s message?
[We need to listen attentively to the Lord. Samuel answered, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening’ (1 Samuel 3:9).]
- Do our biases and prejudices impede us from recognizing God’s voice proclaimed through other humans? What might you do this week to listen to God?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer:

God, our guide and comforter, help us recognize your voice amid the many noises that distract us. Please give us the wisdom to listen attentively to your voice and respond to your call. Amen.

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B (January 21, 2024): Becoming the People of God – A Second Time

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). Have participants answer: “Have you ever experienced God’s call to a specific ministry or mission?”

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Jonah 3:1-5,10](#) and [Mark 1:14-20](#).

- Why did God send Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh?
- Why is it essential for those in power to listen to and respond to God’s message? [They can, as the king of Nineveh, call for a communal answer to God’s message.]
- What are God’s prophets and prophetesses telling us at this time? What is the collective response these times call for? [For example, God calls us to repent from the many ways we keep destroying God’s creation and to take communal measures to stop the destruction.]
- The Preaching Notes say, *“The real call of the book of Jonah is to be more like the God who sent him; the one who believes in second chances; the one who doesn’t give up issuing the invitation, even when the response isn’t what was hoped.”* What does it mean for people of faith who are in the business of making disciples who make disciples?
- Simon and Andrew immediately left their nets and followed Jesus (Mark 1:18). Have you ever left something behind to follow Jesus? Is there anything you need to leave behind to respond to Jesus’ invitation to follow him now?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for not giving up on us and repeatedly extending your grace and mercy toward us. Please help us share the grace we have freely received from you. Amen.

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B (January 28, 2024): Becoming the People of God – Among Your Own People

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). Have participants answer: “How can we discern if a prophet or prophetess is speaking in the name of God and not in the name of other gods?”

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Deuteronomy 18:15-20](#) and [Mark 1:21-28](#).

- Why did the Israelites need a prophet? Do we need prophets or prophetesses now?
- Mark 1:22 says, “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” What does it mean for Jesus to teach as one who has authority?
- Why did the impure spirit recognize the Holy One of God (Mark 1:24)? [God has created everything, even the powers and principalities. God calls to their God-given vocation everything that has fallen apart from God.]
- The Preaching Notes say, “*Like the prophet who comes from within the people of God, sometimes the demonic does as well. We ought to be as quick to call out what is wrong within us and among us as we are to point out how bad things are ‘out there.’*” How can a community of faith discern and unmask the evil that might exist within it?
- Ephesians 4:11 (NIV) says, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.” Have you or has someone in your community been given the gift of prophecy?
- The Preaching Notes say, “*The community of faith can be a supportive incubator for those who discern a call to leadership or ministry of various kinds.*” How can your faith community be supportive so its members can fulfill their God-given call?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer:

God of Power, when we face the evil and suffering in the world, help us remember that you are present among us. You continue choosing prophets within our communities to unmask and resist the powers and principalities at work in the world. Please give us the wisdom and strength we need to join in their ministry of resistance. Amen.

[Bible verses marked NIV are from the](#) Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by [Biblica, Inc.®](#) Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B (February 4, 2024): Becoming the People of God – With Wings Like Eagles

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). Have participants answer: “Can you remember when the Lord renewed your strength?”

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Isaiah 40:21-31](#) and [Mark 1:29-39](#).

- The Preaching Notes say, “*The prophet [Isaiah] is asking us to pay attention to what already is. We are asked to know that God is among us, around us, within us already. Waiting in the Lord, in this case, means trusting, relying on, and being confident in the Lord.*” Do you see God at work around you and/or within you?
- After Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law, she began “to wait on” Jesus and his disciples. She did not take time to rest. What does it say about the traditional role of women in society and within the communities of faith?
- Why did Jesus not want the demons to say who he was? (Mark 1:34b).
- According to Mark 1: 35-39, how were Jesus’ priorities set?
- What is the difference between “waiting upon” the Lord (Isaiah 40:31) and “waiting on” the Lord (Mark 1:31)? What do these two concepts mean to our walk with our Lord? [We hope in the Lord and we serve our Lord.] How might you serve our Lord this week?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer:

Dear God, life can be hectic and tiring. We wear many different hats and have many responsibilities. Whenever we are exhausted and about to give up, please help us to have hope in you. Please give us the wisdom and determination to go to a quiet place to be in your presence and renew our strength to continue fulfilling your call upon our lives. Amen.

Subscribe to receive the Discipleship Email Newsletters: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/subscribe>.

Rev. Dr. Alma Tinoco Ruiz is an Assistant Professor of the Practice of Homiletics and Evangelism and Director of [the Hispanic House of Studies](#) at [Duke University Divinity School](#). She is a practical theologian whose work centers on the intersection of homiletics, pastoral care, and evangelism.