

Part One: Death and Resurrection

A Chat for Faith Teams

Accompanying the Devotional Series

“When the Path Gets Rocky: A Lenten Journey of Sorrow and Joy”

By The Rev. Dr. Walt Lichtenberger

NOTE to Faith Team Leaders: This Faith Chat is part one of a five-part devotional series focusing on holding sorrow and joy. It contains a variety of options allowing its use either at a monthly or even weekly gathering of a Faith Team. Faith Team leaders are encouraged to use bits and pieces as they see fit. The goal is to have a meaningful conversation that is supportive and allows participants to explore and deepen their faith. By design, there is more material than could possibly be used in a single session.

Gathering (15 minutes: 0:00-0:15)

Coming Together - (12 minutes: 0:00- 0:12)

Introduce yourself around the table. Share your name and something about yourself that others may not know.

Light a candle and invite God's Spirit to be present.

Opening Prayer: *Ask for a volunteer to pray the following...*

Gracious God, help us in our learning to be kind, inquisitive, and responsive to your grace. Make us aware in our listening and speaking that you have gifted each of us with wisdom and experiences to share. Give us the courage that we need to welcome change and transformation. Through Jesus Christ, amen.

Introduction: (3 minutes: 0:12- 0:15)

As Cleopas and another disciple traveled to the village of Emmaus (seven miles from Jerusalem), their journey was full of sorrow. The recent death of their teacher and friend rocked their world. What a horrible series of events they experienced as the hated Romans and the religious establishment in Jerusalem crucified Jesus! It was such a miscarriage of justice. Yet, what could they do? Powerless, they watched it happen. Now they walked away and struggled to make sense of it all. Grief covered them like a heavy woolen blanket.

When a death occurs it assaults our senses. Suddenly, our feet are walking on rough and uneven ground. Everything seems to have changed. Despite our best efforts to maintain

control, we are faced with the harsh reality that life is often out of control. It is easy to lose our orientation and find ourselves lost.

To live is to die.
All must walk the rocky path
through sorrow and joy.

As people of faith, we are neither exempt from suffering the death of loved ones nor are we exempt from facing our own mortality. No matter how much we deny or avoid it, all things living will at some point stop living. Death will arrive at each of our doorsteps; invading and interrupting, disorienting and dislocating.

That said, as people of faith, we are not without hope. Our faith provides comfort and strength to us as we stumble down grief's uneven path. Clinging to God's promise to always be with us, we carry on as best we are able. Trusting that we are not alone, God's Spirit accompanies us through death and loss.

For some, these words might seem hard to hear, especially if your grief is painfully fresh. Hang in there. Although your loss won't ever fully go away, over time you will gain the ability to hold joy alongside sorrow.

Holding these polar opposites together is never easy, but this is the paradox in which we live. Our lives are full of joys and sorrows, even if we can't fully appreciate or always identify them. Even in the most joy-filled moments of life there can be sorrow and visa versa. We gain important lessons from both experiences.

In this Faith Chat, we will be looking at Death and Resurrection. Part One centers on Death and Resurrection because it hearkens to the waters of baptism, where we begin our Christian journey of faith. Through water and Word, we are baptized into the Death and Resurrection of Jesus. In baptism, we are forever linked to Christ. All of our life - which its accompanying sorrow and joy - is lived in the context of this promise-filled relationship that God formed with us.

Trusting in God's promise and presence, we venture forth on our spiritual quest. Like Cleopas and the other disciple, we head to Emmaus. For some of us, grief weighs heavy like a woolen blanket. For those who are not currently in that place, we've been in that place at some point

in our lives. Walking with sorrow, we yearn for the joy that comes with the Christ who we will undoubtedly meet along the way.

Engaging God's Word: (10 minutes: 0:15- 0:25)

Reading God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:15-0:20)

Luke 24:13-27 (NRSV)

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

For those who are using this Faith Chat for more than one session, you may choose either to repeat the verse above or choose one of the alternate options. Use the same questions below to reflect upon your guiding scripture text.

- Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do

not weep.” Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!”

Luke 7:11-16 (NRSV)

- Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

Psalms 130:1-6 (NRSV)

AND

“O Israel, Hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.”

Psalms 130:7-8 (NRSV)

[Notice the remarkable change of tone in the beginning and end of this Lament.]

- “Why is light given to one in misery,
and life to the bitter in soul,
who long for death, but it does not come,
and dig for it more than for hidden treasures;
who rejoice exceedingly,
and are glad when they find the grave?
Why is light given to one who cannot see the way,
whom God has fenced in?
For my sighing comes like my bread,
and my groanings are poured out like water.
Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me,
and what I dread befalls me.
I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;
I have no rest; but trouble comes.”

Job 3:20-26 (NRSV)

Responding to God’s Word: (5 minutes: 0:20- 0:25)

What stands out for you in these words of scripture?

What initial questions emerge?

How does it make you feel?

What insight does it contain regarding sorrow? Joy? Death? Resurrection?

What does it teach us about our relationship with God? With others?

How does it challenge you? Comfort you?

What promise does it contain concerning God?

Exploring Connections (45 minutes: 0:25- 1:10)

Choose one or more of the following options to generate group discussion. For those who are using this Faith Chat over multiple sessions, you might want to do one of the supporting Jesus-healing stories in Option A for each session.

Option A: Jesus Brings New Life

Choose one of the following Jesus stories from Luke's Gospel. If you are using this Faith Chat for more than one week, you might want to select a different story for each session.

I. The resurrection of a Widow's Only Son

This Jesus story bears resemblance to a resurrection story told of Elijah, who resurrects the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17). In both cases a man has died, leaving his widowed mother destitute. At the time, society prevented women to hold property or assets. When their husbands died, they turned to their sons to provide. If a woman didn't have children or was a widow, they were at the mercy of distant relatives. This patriarchal system was full of abuses and injustices.

When Jesus brings the widow's son back to life, he restores two lives. This miracle speaks of not only God's desire to bring life in the face of death but also of God's intention of restoration of people besieged by injustices.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!"

Luke 7:11-16 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you find sorrow in this Jesus story? How about joy? What insights in "holding sorrow" or "holding joy" might this story contain for you?

What personal experiences of loss inform your reading of this story?

What do you learn about death, resurrection, and God from this Jesus story? Through this story, what is Jesus inviting you to consider, feel, or do?

What hope or promise does this Jesus story contain?

How does this story relate to **Luke 24: 13-27** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

II. A Lesson About Worry

Although the economic system that was used at the time of Jesus is not the same one in which we find ourselves, issues surrounding faith, wealth, and possessions are similar. One might see material riches as signs of God's favor. Blessed are the rich! The poor? Not so much. In fact, poverty is even blamed on those who find themselves without the economic resources. The poor aren't working hard enough, according to some commentators (who usually tend to be wealthy themselves.) Such attitudes persist in our materialistic culture.

Jesus's ministry to the poor challenges such notions. The fact that poor shepherds are the first to receive the news about the Messiah's birth is significant. God has come down for all humanity, not just those who can afford it. What is more, Jesus's later teaching lifts up the difficulty that rich people have in entering God's reign (see Luke 18:24). Trusting in one's own wealth can be a significant barrier to trusting in God's provision and care.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his^[b] kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unending

treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Luke 12:27-34 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you find sorrow in this Jesus story? How about joy? What insights in “holding sorrow” or “holding joy” might this story contain for you?

What personal experiences of loss inform your reading of this story?

What do you learn about death, resurrection, and God from this Jesus story? Through this story, what is Jesus inviting you to consider, feel, or do?

What hope or promise does this Jesus story contain?

How does this story relate to **Luke 24: 13-27** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

III. Jairus’s daughter

On the way to the home of Jairus, where a pre-teen is dying, a chronic sufferer delays Jesus. Ironically, the woman who suffers from uncontrollable bleeding has been doing so for the same dozen years as the child has been alive. These two women, of different ages, are linked in the story by the number twelve. Both face a life that illness compromises. In the case of the pre-teen, she is helplessly immobilized (and later dead). The woman who grabs ahold of Jesus’s cloak is bolder; her experience has given all she has for a cure. As John Carroll notes she “spends her whole ‘life’, the resources needed to sustain life, while trying to end the flow of her life’s blood (pg. 119, Luke: A Commentary, Westminster John Knox Press).” She is socially “dead” on account of her ritual impurity. Jesus brings more than healing to these women, he resurrects both - allowing them to return to life, communal worship, and social interaction.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.

Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him. Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus’ feet and begged him to come to

his house, for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying. As he went, the crowds pressed in on him.

[verses 43-48 recount the healing of a woman in the crowd who suffers from hemorrhages and touches Jesus's cloak for healing. This action delays Jesus's progress towards Jairus.]

While he was still speaking, someone came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer." When Jesus heard this, he replied, "Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved." When he came to the house, he did not allow anyone to enter with him, except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother. They were all weeping and wailing for her; but he said, "Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. But he took her by the hand and called out, "Child, get up!" Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. Then he directed them to give her something to eat. Her parents were astounded; but he ordered them to tell no one what had happened.

Luke 8:40-42; 49-56 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you find sorrow in this Jesus story? How about joy? What insights in "holding sorrow" or "holding joy" might this story contain for you?

What personal experiences of loss inform your reading of this story?

What do you learn about death, resurrection, and God from this Jesus story? Through this story, what is Jesus inviting you to consider, feel, or do?

What hope or promise does this Jesus story contain?

How does this story relate to **Luke 24: 13-27** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

IV. A Demoniac Death

In the Bible, demons belong to the realm that opposes God's will. They destroy life as God created it to be. Such is the case in the story of the Gerasene demoniac. Possessed by demons, this man is living death (note: his "home" is in a graveyard.) Tormented within, he is unable to live in life-giving relationships with others. When Jesus casts out the demons, he restores not only the man's life but allows for his reconnection to family and community. Resurrection occurs as the man leaves the tombs and returns home.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss..

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”— for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

Luke 8:26-33 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you find sorrow in this Jesus story? How about joy? What insights in “holding sorrow” or “holding joy” might this story contain for you?

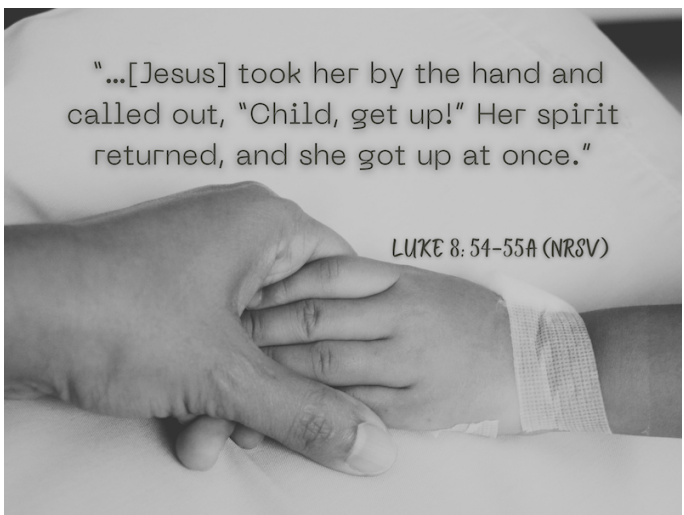
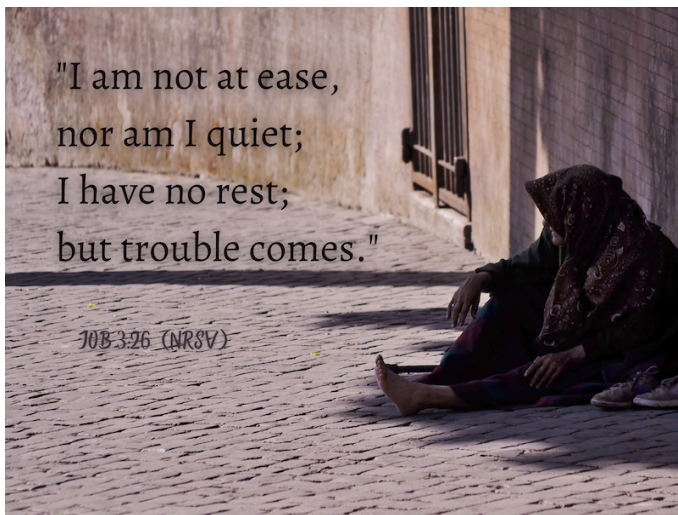
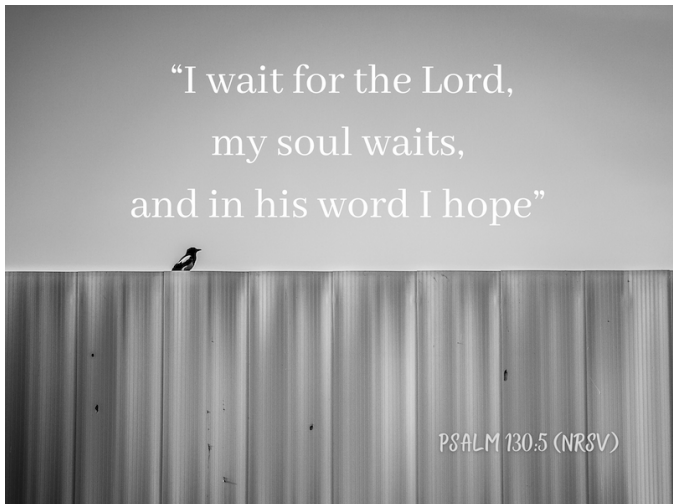
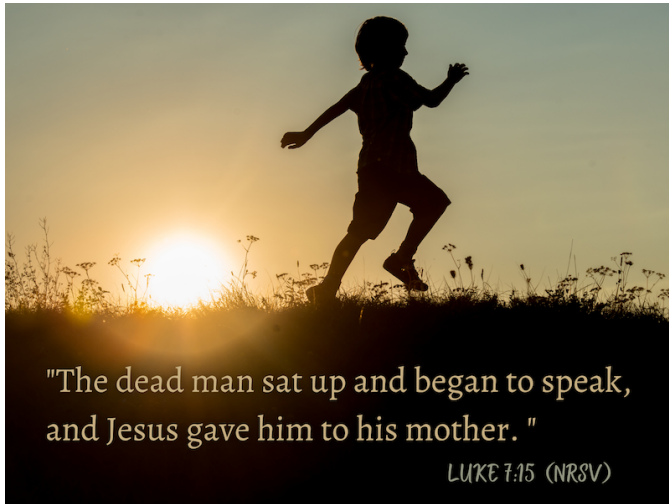
What personal experiences of loss inform your reading of this story?

What do you learn about death, resurrection, and God from this Jesus story? Through this story, what is Jesus inviting you to consider, feel, or do?

What hope or promise does this Jesus story contain?

How does this story relate to **Luke 24: 13-27** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

Option B: Inspirational Images



Discuss the Inspirational Images above.

How do you connect or disconnect with them?

In what ways do the images express sorrow and joy?

Where do you see God present (or absent) in each image?

What other images would you choose to go with these scripture texts?

Option C: Gleaning Wisdom from Experience:

Look at the following questions through the lens of your Faith Team. Allow for recurring foci and conversations of the group to guide your conversation.

Sharing only where you feel comfortable, what are your experiences with death? Are they recent or embedded in your past memory? What emotions accompany you as you grieve? How do you “hold” your sorrow?

Where have you experienced God’s presence during times of death? Did you recognize it while you were in the midst of things or later as you reflected back upon the situation?

What are your experiences of resurrection? Where have you seen life restored or made new? Where was God?

Where do you long for resurrection in your life?

Option D: Holding Sorrow by Naming It

When we experience loss and find ourselves in sorrow, it is important for us to name our reality. There may be a temptation to gloss over hurts, pretending that “everything is good.” We might have been socially conditioned to maintain a “stiff upper lip,” seeing tears as a sign of weakness. Denying our feelings we might want to push through sadness.

However, such responses might not be the healthiest path we can travel. Bottling up emotions, ignoring the inner voice of our heart, can increase the pain and prolong our suffering. Burying uncomfortable feelings deep within ourselves isolates. It separates us from others who care for us. Worse, it divides us up within ourselves. We are not being true to ourselves when we don’t acknowledge how we are genuinely feeling.

Naming our feelings helps keep things real. When we resist efforts to ‘sugar coat’ or clean up feelings for public consumption, we are being honest about the depth of our sorrow, loss, and grief. This may be “off-putting” for others, keeping them at a distance. However, our grief is our grief and something

that we must go through in the most genuine way we can. If some people have difficulty with it, then that is on them. After all, we are not called to grieve according to their playbook but our own.

[Note: the book of Job does a good job in giving expression to human suffering. Job is honest and speaks what is on his heart. Although his words offend the religious sensibilities of his friends, he remains genuine in grief. At the end, God honors the truthfulness of Job's speech.]

Telling our grief story using the most honest language that we can is part of the healing process. Each time we recall our feelings and experience, we gain a little strength. The storyteller has power over the story. Finding folks who will listen to us might at first be a challenge. But, if we persist, we will find others who have similar experiences. They like us, have a need to be able to tell their stories and have others listen.

Questions for discussion:

- How does expressing your feelings come to you? Is it easy or hard? What experiences in your past either aid or challenge you when it comes to sharing emotions?
- What "language" might you use to name your sorrow? Is your default approach healthy? How might you increase the health of your methods of communicating feelings?
- Do you have conversation partners or those who listen to your most genuine of stories? What traits or characteristics make up your audience?

Option E: Holding Joy by Cherishing Memories

At times of loss, it is helpful to get out old photo albums or scroll through the digital images on your smartphone. There is something therapeutic in looking at the smiling faces captured by film and pixels. Frozen in time, these images tell a story from our lives where joy lived, even for a few fleeting moments. In the midst of grief's tears, they remind us that we have laughed.

Loss messes with our senses, including our memory. In the overwhelming pain of the present, we can be so consumed with sorrow that it can seem like there is no joy to any of life.

Looking back, the images remind us of life's goodness even in the midst of struggle, uncertainty, and want. Holding photos in our hands, we have tangible evidence of our happiness. We know how to giggle and smirk. There is something within us akin to a funny bone. The simple joys of sharing a meal or admiring a vista with those we love happened to us. We are worthy of and experienced in having loving relationships.

At this point, you might ask the question; “doesn’t it hurt more to remember?” Wouldn’t a little amnesia serve as a balm for our bruised spirits?

Sure. As we hold reminders of past joy, we might shed tears. These are, after all, occasions of the past never to be repeated in exactly the same way. We are prevented from duplicating those frozen moments because we have suffered a loss. So, why dredge up more pain?

Cherishing memories is an important part of walking through grief’s murky portal. Even if we have tears in our eyes (or heart), as we look back we are invited into a place of gratitude. Reminding ourselves of good things that occurred allows us to thank God for the blessing of those moments.

Allowing appreciation to swell within ourselves is a good thing. When we are grateful, we embrace with humility the reality that so much of our lives comes as a gift that is beyond our control. Even in the midst of loss, there are things that we can count as blessings from our loving and gracious God.

Cherishing memories also tweak our imagination. If such things happened in the past, might not other such things happen in the future? Trips, meals, sunrises, parties - all these things have been and might be again. This is not to minimize that our loss will alter future images. But It does raise the possibility that our lives and the lives of those around us, and creation itself will continue. As hard as it might be to fathom, there is a future ahead of us that will contain future joys. Even the most traumatic of losses don’t stop the flow of time. As hard as it might be to imagine, blessings and joy await us beyond the veil of our present tears.

Questions for discussion:

- What is your favorite, most joy-filled memory?
- How might the cherishing of past memories help create future moments in which we will delight?
- Have you ever gathered photographs of loved ones following a death in your family? Describe that experience. Was it helpful in your grief to remember past joys?

Sending (15 minutes: 1:10- 1:25)

Sharing of Appreciation for Learning (5 minutes: 1:10-1:15)

Ask each person to name a single insight or learning that they will take home with them.

What can you do differently going forward based on these insights/learning from this Faith Chat?

Bringing Our Time to a Close (10 minutes: 1:15-1:25)

Salt, Light, and Prayer: Go around the table a second time. Ask folks to share three things: 1) something positive from their week; 2) something with which they are struggling; 3) someone who is in their prayers.

The Lord's Prayer: Close with saying Jesus' prayer together (choose a version as a group)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

-OR-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.