

Return to Baptism, Return to New Normal - A Virtual Bible Study
Leader's Guide by Aneel Trivedi

The release and approval of several COVID-19 vaccines in December of 2020 stir up hope for a “return to normal,” as it was before the disruption and trauma of the pandemic. But could a Lutheran understanding of rebirth in baptism help us imagine a way forward that doesn't just go back to what we knew before in our lives, communities, and understanding of scripture? Acknowledging instead that “normal” includes ongoing transformation through the cycle of death and rebirth - dying to the old and rising into new life as children of God.

This five-week study engages with scriptural stories of exile and return, life after trauma, and other stories of return to a new normal alongside both a catechumenate-style focus on Baptism and an exploration of God's gift of new life in their own lives. Participants will be encouraged to reflect on how the challenges of the pandemic year have impacted their faith and the way they engage with scripture. They will also be encouraged to reflect on and share their own stories of rebirth and even create new “statements of faith” that focus on rebirth into new life in Christ rather than a return to “normal.”

Goals:

- Encourage participants to deepen their own understanding of Baptism and God's ongoing transformative work in the world through the cycle of death and rebirth.
- Encounter scripture through the lens of Baptism. Explore examples of God's active role in bringing new life to the stories in scripture without glossing over the death and dying that precedes transformation.
- Provide opportunities for participants to share stories of rebirth in their own lives. Connect God's movement in scripture with God's ongoing work in the lives of participants and other members of the congregation.
- Challenge participants to see themselves in the stories of new life in scripture, and trust in the promises of God for themselves - even now, even in a pandemic.

Tips:

- Invite your confirmation guides, youth leaders, and youth who may also be in the process of thinking about and writing faith statements. There are many opportunities for mutual learning in this series!
- Check in with participants regularly and ask for feedback. You may need to spend more/less time talking about Baptism before engaging with the texts you select for the series.
- Don't skip the worship experience - it's a great way to introduce the texts, and both the Thanksgiving for Baptism and hymn(s), if repeated each week, can become meaningful experiences that reinforce the themes of the series. We enjoyed (virtually) singing ELW #330 (Seed That in Earth is Dying) together.
- We decided to use Lent Year B Old Testament Lectionary texts, but Year A & C provide similar opportunities for engagement. You can also just pick and choose texts that may be relevant to your setting - [exile from Garden of Eden, Israelites lament leaving Egypt, Moses not allowed to enter promised land, Lot's wife looks back, Babylonian exile, empty tomb, Mary mourning Jesus' death, Ruth's faithful new beginning....]

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Session Overview

This series was designed for virtual gatherings, and intentionally included familiar elements reimagined for safety. The non-traditional format was a launching pad for conversations about rebirth and seeing scripture with new eyes. If traditional in-person gatherings are possible, it might still be beneficial to adapt the meeting format somehow -- perhaps an unfamiliar time, location, or style.

Each session included:

- (30 mins) **Fellowship - Virtual soup-supper and ice breakers:** This series occurred during Lent, and the congregation had a history of gathering for Wednesday evening soup suppers prior to worship. And so, soup recipes were collected from the congregation in the weeks leading up to the series and shared in a new congregation recipe book. Participants were encouraged to bring their meal to the virtual gatherings. This worked for one congregation, but each unique setting should aim to connect to its history or stories in a new way. Ice breaker/conversation questions were designed to inspire participants to connect with their own history and story.
- (15 mins) **Worship:** Each session included a Thanksgiving for Baptism, two hymns, the texts, prayers, and a sharing of the peace.
- (15 mins) **Creative homework discussion:** Participants are asked to share their homework from the previous week and discuss what the experience was like for them.
- (20 mins) **Scripture:** Questions and conversation about the texts for the week.
- (10 mins) **Closing and creative homework assignment:** We end in prayer and send the group out with an assignment for next week.
- (midweek) **Story from the congregation:** A one-on-one conversation between the leader and a participant was shared with the congregation via podcast after the meeting. The conversations focused on personal stories of life's transitions and how the participant's faith and approach to scripture changed as a result.

Session 1 - Baptism

Texts:

- Romans 6:1-4
- Presentation for Holy Baptism (ELW, pg. 227)
- Small Catechism: The Sacrament of Holy Baptism (ELW, pg. 1164)

Ice Breaker: Are you baptized? Share a story about your baptism, confirmation, or the experience of someone in your life (children, friends, etc.).

Sample questions for engagement with texts:

- What does being baptized mean to you?
- What do each of the texts say about Baptism?

Homework: Write a haiku about your Baptism.

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Session 2 - Noah

Text: Genesis 9:8-17 (Year B - Lent 1)

Ice Breaker: Food creates deep connections to our own stories. Does anyone have a story or a memory that is stirred up by a particular food or dining experience?

Homework Review: Share haikus and share meaning/story behind the poem. What was the experience like for you?

Sample questions for engagement with texts:

- What do you think it was like for Noah and his family during the flood?
- What was it like for Noah and his family after the flood?
- Where in the story of your own life have you heard God's promises of new life spoken to you?

Homework: Think about a movie that reflects your own personal story in some way. Come back next week ready to share!

Session 3 - Sarah & Abraham

Text: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 (Year B - Lent 2)

Ice Breaker: Who in your family are you most like, and why?

Homework Review:

- Share movies. Why did you choose this movie?
- Why do you think we're able to connect to and/or see ourselves in movies even though the settings or perspectives are often completely foreign to us?
- Are you able to see yourself in scripture in a similar way? Why or why not?

Sample questions for engagement with texts:

- Do you see yourself in either the story of Noah or Sarah & Abraham?
- How are God's promises made to you in Baptism different / similar to God's promises made to Sarah & Abraham?
- What might it look like for Baptism to become a lens through which you see yourself in other stories?

Homework: Think of a movie, a book, a TV show, a song, a painting, any media that you relate to in your baptism, that you see something of your baptized self, your identity as a forgiven, beloved, child of God marked by the cross of Christ... and in particular, being joined with Christ in death and resurrection, reborn, transformed into new life.

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Session 4 - Moses & the Israelites

Text: Numbers 21:4-9 (Year B - Lent 4)

Ice Breaker: Share one high and one low from the pandemic year.

Homework Review:

- Share media. Why did you choose this particular example?
- What was the experience like for you?
- Are you able to see yourself as transformed & made new in your baptism? Why or why not?

Sample questions for engagement with texts:

- Where might you see yourself in this story? If needed - think more broadly, in the wider story of Moses and the covenant & between God and God's people.
- What is keeping God's people from owning & living into God's promises for them? What is God's solution for the people?
- What do you recognize in this text from your experience over the last 12 months in Covid-land?

Homework: As we move towards a return to a *new* normal, how do you see God at work in you today, transforming or giving you new life in light of your experiences over the last year? Free form response! Write a poem (haiku?) / Find your story in media (artwork, music, hymn, or movie?) / Find your story in scripture.

Session 5 - A New Covenant

Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34 (Year B - Lent 5)

Ice Breaker: What are you most looking forward to post-COVID? Is there anything you're dreading?

Homework Review:

- Share homework.
- What was the experience like for you?

Sample questions for engagement with texts:

- What are some things in your life that are dying or have died this year? Where do you see new life or the prospect of new life?
- What are some things in the congregation, the life of the church, that are dying or have died this year? Where do you see new life or the prospect of new life?
- What are some things about your approach to scripture that are dying or have died this year? Where do you see new life or the prospect of new life?
- Has an intentional focus on baptism changed your understanding of God's promises in your life?

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- What have you liked or disliked about this series?

Homework: After this year of uncertainty and change, and in anticipation of a return to a “new normal,” create a new faith statement for yourself. Be creative, be brief. Use something you’ve done in this series. Write a new poem, reference a song, a hymn, a movie, a painting, or a story from scripture. Find a way to share new faith statements with the wider congregation.