



Presbyterians *Read*



Ash Wednesday Week

“Reading the Bible without knowing in advance what God is going to say takes humility. Like Joseph, we may have to put our initial reactions on hold and be prepared to hear new words, to think new thoughts, and to live them out. We all come with our own questions, our own sorrows and frustrations, our own longings. God will deal with them in his own way, but he will do so as part of his own much larger and deeper purposes” (Wright, p. 2).

Theme: God is Inviting Us to Be Part of the Kingdom Story

Opening Psalm

To open your discussion each week, we recommend reading a psalm together. N.T. Wright uses the psalms from the Revised Common Lectionary as the basis for his Sunday devotions. This week’s devotions begin with Ash Wednesday, so there is not a psalm included; however, the psalm of the week according to the lectionary is Psalm 51. We recommend you start this week’s discussion by reading Psalm 51:1–17.

General Opening Questions

Depending on your group, you may want to start with a general opening question. Here are a few options that you can use throughout the study:

- What struck you about this week’s readings?
- Is there a specific passage from this week’s readings that caught your attention? Why?
- What did you find challenging about this week’s reading?
- Was there a theme in this week’s readings that stood out?

Overview of Theme

We recommend reading this overview together as a group. It will help contextualize the discussion questions and focus the conversation.

In this week’s readings, N.T. Wright emphasizes that “God always wanted humans to be part of the action, not just as spectators. God made humans to reflect his image—his presence, his love, his plans—into the world” (8). But, how exactly are we meant to be participants?

Answering *how* requires that we understand *what* story it is we are participating in.

In the first few chapters of Matthew, several unlikely people are drawn into God’s story. Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist and the first disciples all “put aside their natural reactions” and moved forward with

God's invitation "without knowing exactly how it was going to work out" (Wright, p. 2). Although they did not understand the full story at the time, they were among the first participants in a new era—the era of God's reign *in* the world through his son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus' early followers understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about the God of heaven coming to take charge on earth. They believed, as do Christians today, that Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God, also known as God's reign, in the world. Through Jesus, the heavenly realm, where God's intentions, authority and power rule over all things, intersected and overlapped with the created world, thus allowing God's kingdom to permeate this world.

Jesus' presence and teachings empowered his followers to recognize the kingdom and participate in it. Participating in God's kingdom—actively working to bring signs of God's new creation into the present world—is at the heart of Christian mission.

Reading Focus

As you've probably noticed by reading the first few daily devotions in *Lent for Everyone*, Wright's translation and interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew opens many different avenues for exploring Jesus' life. Our focus as we read will be on the kingdom of God. Central to our discussions will be three questions:

- 1) What is the kingdom of God?
- 2) What did it mean for the hearers of Jesus' day?
- 3) What does it mean for us today?

Even if you miss a reading (or several) or feel lost in the material, these questions will keep you focused in the Lenten study. Together, we are developing a depth of understanding about the kingdom of God and a vision for how we are meant to participate in it.

While it is impossible to fully define the kingdom of God, it is possible to come to an understanding of its qualities, values and defining principles. Our understanding of these things comes directly from Jesus. In *The Upside Down Kingdom*, Donald B. Kaybrill explains how being disciples of Jesus equips and empowers us to be active participants in God's kingdom:

How can we translate the lofty ideas of God's reign into daily living? Jesus of Nazareth unveiled the secrets of God—the very nature of God's kingdom. We begin to grasp the meaning of the kingdom as we study Jesus' life and teachings, because he was God's final and definitive word. (p. 19)

Studying Jesus' life and teachings is how we learn to be "kingdom people"—people who, because God's Spirit rules in our lives, join in the work of the kingdom.

Many of us may have trouble articulating what the kingdom of God is or understanding it. Over the course of the study, as we read Matthew, our ideas may evolve and our vision clarify, so it is helpful to get all your ideas out on the table now. You might want to keep a journal as a group to see how your understanding evolves.

Opening Discussion Questions

- 1) If someone asked you "What is the kingdom of God?", how would you answer? Where did your understanding of the kingdom of God come from?
- 2) In the first devotion in this book, Wright reminds us that reading the Bible takes humility and we have to "put our initial reactions on hold and prepare to hear new words, to think new thoughts, and to live them out" (2). What will you need to put aside this Lent in order to let God speak to you in new ways through the Gospel of Mathew?

A Common Misconception About the Kingdom of God

Many people believe that the kingdom of God, also called the kingdom of heaven, is the place where Christians go after we die. It is a common misconception that humans are bound to the earth and that our task is to endure our time here well enough to eventually go to heaven to be with God. Early Christians would not have believed that the point of faith in Jesus was to “go to heaven” but rather that faith in him was the key to welcoming and embracing “heaven’s arrival on earth.” We still welcome and embrace the kingdom’s arrival by praying “thy kingdom come” as part of the Lord’s prayer each week. We’ll be learning more about this as we progress through the study, but it is important to recognize at the outset that the kingdom of God exists in the *here and now* and is not an out-of-this world “heaven.”

For an accessible and interesting article on this topic, see N.T. Wright’s “The New Testament Doesn’t Say What Most People Think it Does about Heaven” (Time, Dec. 2019):
<https://time.com/5743505/new-testament-heaven/>.

Key Scripture Verse: Matthew 4:18–25

The readings from Matthew in this study will be familiar to many people; therefore, the tendency may be to let past knowledge (e.g., ideas based on childhood images of God or past sermons) block new ways of reading. As such, it is important to bring up the idea of reading with fresh eyes, expecting God to reveal something new.

In *Lent for Everyone*, N.T. Wright provides his own translation of the scripture passages from Matthew that begin the daily devotions. Each week, you’ll be invited to focus on one scripture passage. The suggested passage is one that coincides well with the theme of the week, but, if your group would like to focus on a different passage, please feel free to go in the direction that you are feeling led.

- Read N.T. Wright’s translation of Matthew 4:18–25 (found below and on p. 6)
- Read or listen to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of Matthew 4: 18–25 or another version of your choice.

Matthew 4:18–25

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon (also called Peter) and Andrew his brother. They were fishermen and were casting nets into the sea.

“Follow me!” said Jesus. “I’ll make you fish for people!”

Straight away they abandoned their nets and followed him.

He went on further, and saw two brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother. They were in the boat, mending their nets, with Zebedee their father. He called them. At once they left the boat, and their father, and followed him.

He went on through the whole of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, healing every disease and every illness among the people.

Word about him went out around the whole of Syria. They brought to him all the people tormented with various kinds of diseases and ailments, demon-possessed people, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. Large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and beyond the Jordan.

Biblical Reflection Discussion Prompts:

- 1) Jesus does not talk about *what* the kingdom of God is in this passage, but he shows a lot of *what it is all about*. List or underline in the reading all the qualities of the kingdom of God that you can see in this passage. How are people reacting to the kingdom signs they are witnessing? Why do you think they are reacting in this way?
- 2) In this week's reading, Wright writes: "It's very easy for people to imagine that they can be "religious"—they can say their prayers, they can go to church, they can read the Bible—but basically they are looking on, spectating, while God does whatever God is going to do" (Wright 7). At different times in our lives and the life of the church, we've all been guilty of spectating rather than participating in what God is doing. How do you feel you and/or your church community is doing in this regard lately?
- 3) Jesus invited the first disciples to become his followers using the language of their trade: "I'll make you fish for people!" What language do you think Jesus would use to call you into fuller participation in the kingdom of God? Think about a friend, colleague or neighbour that you would like to become a follower of Jesus. What language would Jesus use to call them?

Closing Prayer

To close your discussion each week, we recommend saying the Lord's prayer together. For suggestions on using the Lord's prayer as a guide for intercessory prayer, see the Lenten Spiritual Practice guidelines.

