

*A Preacher's Guide  
to Topical Sermon Series*

24 THEMATIC PLANS

Compiled by Jessica Miller Kelley

# Contents

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## ix Using This Resource

### BIBLE AND THEOLOGY

---

#### 3 Brief: Small Books, Big Gospel

*A six-part series on the Bible's briefest books.*

JONAH P. OVERTON

#### 13 H-E-Double-Hockey-Sticks

*A five-part series on the topic of hell with an emphasis on increasing knowledge and understanding while reducing fears.*

BRIAN GERARD

#### 21 Our Greatest Story

*A four-part series exploring the Greatest Commandment as it pertains to belonging, identity, and our place in the larger story of God's kin-dom.*

GAIL SONG BANTUM

#### 29 Reconsidering Jesus

*A four-part series reexamining well-known passages about Jesus and the lessons they offer.*

JIA STARR BROWN

- 35 Black Is, Black Ain't: A Celebration of Blackness in the Bible**  
*A four-part series celebrating the sacred beauty, brilliance, resilience, and diversity of Black identity.*  
BRANDON THOMAS CROWLEY
- 43 A Deconstructionist's Journey**  
*A six-part series on deconstructing oppressive church beliefs while reconstructing a faith of liberation and hope.*  
TYLER HO-YIN SIT

## SPIRITUAL FORMATION

---

- 55 The ABC's of Spiritual Success**  
*A three-part series on the building blocks of a sustaining relationship with God.*  
NAPOLEON J. HARRIS V
- 61 Rhythm of Life**  
*A five-part series on spiritual practices that lead to transformation.*  
JOSH SCOTT
- 71 Rest**  
*A three-part series on practicing Sabbath.*  
CAROL CAVIN-DILLON
- 77 The Power of Powerlessness**  
*A six-part series on how Jesus defines power as compassion, not coercion.*  
BENJAMIN R. CREMER
- 87 Sensing Faith**  
*A five-part series on deepening our faith by engaging the five senses.*  
RODGER NISHIOKA

## CHRISTIAN LIVING

---

**97 All In**

*A four-part series on what it means to go all in with our hearts, hands, resources, and future as an act of whole-life stewardship.*

JOSEPH YOO

**105 You Be the Judge . . . or Not**

*A five-part series about judging other people, how to manage this impulse, and when and how we should (or should not) judge.*

COLBY MARTIN

**113 Screen Time: Troubleshooting Our Relationship with Technology**

*A four-part series on mindful and faithful use of devices, media, and AI.*

MATT MIOFSKY

**121 Ready for It**

*A four-part series on biblical resilience in the face of personal challenges and unsettling world headlines.*

BETHANY PEERBOLTE

**129 Imagine the Impossible**

*A six-part series on imagination and the future of our faith and the church.*

ADRIENE THORNE

## JUSTICE AND INCLUSION

---

**141 Fight like Jesus**

*A six-part series on nonviolence as a way of life, exploring Martin Luther King Jr.'s six principles of nonviolent resistance.*

MARK FELDMEIR

**151 Take Up Your Mat**

*A four-part series focused on the healing justice ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of John.*

AMOS DISASA

**159 Faith That Frees**

*A four-part series celebrating Black history and the role of faith in the stride toward freedom for African Americans.*

DIANE GIVENS MOFFETT

**167 I Wish You Love**

*A four-part series for LGBTQ+ Pride month, weaving Scripture with the life and music of Dolly Parton.*

SAM LUNDQUIST

---

**SEASONAL**

**177 Holy Darkness, Holy Light**

*A five-part Advent and Epiphany series.*

SHAWNA BOWMAN

**187 In Plain Sight**

*A seven-part series for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany using the ordinary stuff of life.*

JILL J. DUFFIELD

**197 Women in the Wilderness**

*A seven-part Lenten series on fugitivity, feminism, and the fierce grace of survival.*

ROBERTO CHE ESPINOZA

**209 What If?**

*A six-part Lenten series asking the church to embrace the possibility and hope of Jesus's challenging call on our lives.*

JOY MARTINEZ-MARSHALL

**219 Contributors**

# Using This Resource

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*A Preacher's Guide to Topical Sermon Series* is designed to equip and inspire your sermon planning with twenty-four creative ideas for series that will educate and intrigue your congregation and help them grow as Christians. You may wish to use these outlines as they are or adapt them for your congregation's needs—or maybe a series included in this resource will spark a different idea of your own.

Contributors include twenty-four experienced preachers from seven denominational traditions offering sermon ideas on a wide variety of themes, from Sabbath to hell to our use of technology. Seasonal series will make for transformative Advent and Lent experiences, while other series are ideal for Black History and Pride months. Some series explore a single book of the Bible, and others draw lessons for discipleship from across the Bible's sections and genres.

Consider this a buffet of homiletical and creative inspiration. Take what appeals to you, try out something new, and plan a menu for years of compelling preaching with your congregation.

**What's Included** Each of the twenty-four series plans includes:

- A series overview introducing the overall message of the series.
- A chart outlining the sermon titles and focus Scriptures for each week of the series, along with a very brief description of each sermon's theme.
- Tips and ideas for the series, with suggestions for worship elements, visuals, fellowship activities, and/or outreach efforts that enhance the congregation's engagement with the series topic.

- Sermon starters for each Sunday to summarize the week's message, prompt your research and writing process, and offer sermon illustrations to enhance your preaching.

## **Making the Most of a Series**

Exploring a theme or book of the Bible across several weeks (as short as three weeks and as long as eight in this resource) gives congregants and visitors a memorable handle to latch on to from week to week. Knowing what is being preached on the following week keeps people engaged, coming back, and telling friends. Like a television show or miniseries, preaching in series can create a don't-want-to-miss-it desire to be there for each week of worship.

Maximize the impact of each series with the following tips:

*Use consistent visuals.* Even if you do not have a dedicated graphic designer in your church, you can create one image or typographic treatment for the series that can be used on your printed materials (bulletins, mailers, posters, etc.) and digital media (website, social media, or worship screen if you use one). Some of the “Tips and Ideas” sections of series plans include ideas for altar displays and other visual elements to enhance the worship space.

*Go beyond the sermon.* We all know that worship and spiritual growth do not hinge entirely on the sermon. Be intentional about choosing songs and other elements that support the theme. Plan special events at which congregants can discuss or put into practice the ideas being preached on in the series. Many “Tips and Ideas” sections have suggestions for such events.

*Spread the word.* Visitors may be more likely to give your church a try if they know an upcoming service will be addressing a topic or question they have wondered about. Promotion of the series can be done through social media, special mailings, and church newsletters. The week before a new series begins, introduce it in worship and through email, encouraging members to attend and suggesting they forward the email to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers who may be interested in the topic.

Get your congregation excited about the opportunity to explore biblical stories and themes in depth across a number of Sundays, and watch their engagement grow.

*Seasonal*

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# What If?

*A six-part Lenten series asking the church to embrace the possibility and hope of Jesus's challenging call on our lives.*

JOY MARTINEZ-MARSHALL

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**Series Overview** The Lenten season invites followers of Jesus to repentance, morality, charity, communion with God, and renewal. This Lent, let us imagine *what if?* What if we participated in Lenten traditions this year? What if we could be reminded why we believe? What if we identify places in our lives that feel like wilderness and ask God to bring about spring there? The *what if?*s of this series ask the congregation to consider embracing the life Jesus calls us to, in a variety of challenging ways.

Embracing the season's solemnity does not void Lent of the hopeful whisper of revival. Asking *what if?* implores Christians to hope, even at times to be foolishly hopeful, that the world, the church, and themselves can be made new in Christ. Asking *what if?* stands defiant in the face of apathy, obligation, and hopelessness. So, what if Christians considered the possibility of hope? What if we fail? But what if it transforms us?

	Sermon Title	Focus Scripture	Theme
Lent 1	What if we embraced the immigrant?	Deuteronomy 26:1–11	God invites us to welcome the immigrant among us.
Lent 2	What if we embraced lament?	Luke 13:31–35	Jesus models how to lament for us.
Lent 3	What if we embraced abundant life?	Isaiah 55:1–9	Abundant life is found not in things but in relationship.
Lent 4	What if we embraced restoration?	Luke 15:1–3; 11b–32	We are not in competition for God's love.
Lent 5	What if we embraced service?	John 12:1–8	Jesus invites us to serve him and our neighbors.

	Sermon Title	Focus Scripture	Theme
Lent 6	What if we embraced the politics of Jesus?	Luke 19:28–42	Sometimes, we must be political about peace.

**Tips and Ideas  
for This Series**

This series hopes to navigate the potential drudges of Lent by asking the preacher to confront and consider social justice concerns, political pandering, and overwhelming apathy. With the decline in church attendance, the closing of many churches, and the increase of Christian nationalism, many congregations are feeling burdened by hopelessness. At the beginning of Lent, groups can gather to create a “hope board” as a visual aid to identify places, situations, or relationships that need hope. Consider hosting a Prayer of Lament service that provides space to lament as Jesus did when overlooking Jerusalem. Images of rebirth, unexpected endings, and unlikely allies can serve as illustrations.

**Lent 1: What If We Embraced the Immigrant?**

**Deuteronomy 26:1–11**

*“So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house. (Deuteronomy 26:10–11)*

Our journey toward Jerusalem begins with a reading from the book of Deuteronomy, a book compiled of speeches given by Moses to the new generation of Hebrews preparing for life in the promised land after living in the wilderness. Often heard as a list of rules, laws, and ordinances only to be written off, at the heart of the book is a way to be in relationship. It mixes genres and extends to us an invitation into faithful relationship with God.

What is Lent but the opportunity to wander in the desert with Jesus? What is Lent but a time to make our way, covered in the dust of our rabbi as he moves toward the cross? With all this wandering comes a sense of restlessness like the Hebrews experienced. It brings with it a relentless push to put one foot in front of the other, no matter the aches, anxieties, or ambitions. Though we go knowing that the promised land awaits and the joy of resurrection meets us, the calling is to experience the journey. What if we, like this passage suggests, become people who give, remember, and foster a welcoming spirit for Lent?

Moses told the people that when they “come into the land that the LORD your God is giving [them]” (v. 1), they should take the first fruits that are from God’s graciousness and offer back to God the best of what God has blessed them with. This hope of reciprocity and gratitude seemed far off in the desert, but Moses and the people know that God will honor the promises made. Lent asks us to do the same, to collectively, as a group, reenact and remember how God has been faithful in the past and let it illuminate the future.

This litany about covenant fidelity helps to ground the people lest they forget about God. With a home, a future, and hope, the celebration does not end. The bounty is not just to be celebrated in one community. Throughout Deuteronomy, the people learn what it is like to be in relationship with God and uphold the covenant. Such relationship with God asks God’s people to welcome the stranger. In the Hebrew, *gar* means sojourner, a temporary inhabitant, a newcomer lacking inherited rights, a foreigner: in other words, an immigrant.

In our congregations and communities, we may not know about peoples’ statuses, papers, or backgrounds. And yet, Deuteronomy asks of us to engage in hospitality to the immigrant, to welcome them into fellowship and the sharing of the celebration of provision. The invitation to give and remember must also lead to the ritual and practicing of welcoming all around us. Because the Israelite people knew what it was like to be exploited for free labor, God asks them to live as people of generosity. God asks them to honor their story by celebrating the bounty God graciously gives.

Immigration has been a polarizing issue in our world for ages. With changes in society, so, too, come shifts in people groups as they migrate. What if, when we welcome the immigrant among us, we find that there is much to celebrate? God has given plenty. In turn, we must share it with whomever we identify, even falsely, as a Levite or an alien to us.

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## Lent 2: What If We Embraced Lament?

Luke 13:31–35

*“Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:33–34)*

It is OK to not be OK. It is OK to be sad, mad, frustrated, disappointed, and a multitude of emotions. Emotions are a part of the

human experience and something Jesus expressed fully. Too often, we in church ignore such truth. We come into the sanctuary with masks securely fastened, not letting the cracks of life show. You do not want others to know that you have struggled this month, that Lent has not really felt any different than the expected monotony of life. These intentionally curated masks might hide our hurt, but their cumbersome nature does little to ease the pain, the sadness, or the confusion one is truly experiencing.

One third of the psalms are songs of lament. Lamentations as a book lives up to its name. The biblical canon never offers platitudes like, “Suck it up, buttercup.” “Life’s tough; wear a helmet.” “Get over it.” Instead, the Scriptures tell us we are bade by a loving God to express our lament at the foot of the cross. To grieve to God knowing God will not leave us alone in the rubble left by divorce, infidelity, addiction, depression, fear, pain, seasons of darkness, seasons of light, joy, and great anticipation. God is there with us.

Jesus himself models lament, saying “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” As the people dealt cruelly with the prophets before, the Messiah will be no exception to those he comes to offer salvation. Jesus is full of grief.

Day in and day out we hear: “How are you?” “How are things?” “How are you doing?” Only to reply, half-heartedly and quickly, “I’m fine!” “I’m good!” “Anyways, how are you?”—always attempting to turn the conversation. But Jesus can handle our truth, our laments. The season of Lent asks us: Are we really OK? After stripping away the distractions, being called back to faithfulness, self-denial, and almsgiving, and accepting our own mortality, why do we still allow masks to rule our lives? If not now, when will we come to accept where we really are? It is in this season of longing for resurrection and spring that we can explore these complexities of the human experience. In this exploration, we can find rest, solidarity, and wisdom from the experience of the one we call Lord and Savior.

The church must embrace the importance and place of lament in our world, our lives, and our churches. What if we had the audacity to acknowledge the things whispered only in the realms of our hearts to find hope in Christ’s presence even there? What if we embraced lament this Lent?

What if we named what causes such grief and where wounds still ache? Only when we properly lament are we able to feel hope as we lean into Jesus.