



When you think about it, it's a little strange to gather with others, some we don't even know, to do something as intimate as worship God. When any of us walks into the worship space on Sunday morning, we don't know all the thoughts, feelings, struggles, and joys present among the congregation. For someone who is grieving, the congregation singing "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" might hit a wrong note. For a couple anxious to have a child, the story of Sarah and Abraham or Elizabeth and Zechariah can feel cruel. It would be easier if we could design a worship service for each person's own needs, and worship individually. But that is not what we are called to.

Many will remember Jesus' words "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). We worship together, bringing all that we are to the service in which we acknowledge God's goodness, hear God's word, share our joys and sorrows, and pray for peace and justice. We do not gather only for joy and thanksgiving; we also gather to lament and beseech. We need both expressions in the presence of God. As we share sorrow and joy in each other's presence, we remember that we do not travel through life alone; we have the trust and compassion of others on the journey.

Gathering for worship also forms us as people with a shared purpose. We are gathered around the same book, the same loaf and cup, the same baptismal waters, all speaking to the mercy of God for the life of the world (John 6:51).

Many of us have also worshiped virtually, watching a live-streamed worship service or a pre-recorded service. For those who are homebound or live with ongoing health concerns, joining the faith community in this way can be meaningful. But for all the ways that virtual worship convenes us, it does not give access to the full dimensions of material, sensory worship through the physical presence of others and the central symbols tangible in our midst. We may continue with both virtual and physical gatherings, but may God move us to yearn for the material reality of our physical gatherings and to work to make our gatherings accessible to all.

When we are physically present with each other in worship, we remember the embodied nature of our faith. We might smell another's perfume or aftershave; we might enjoy the scent of grape juice or wine when we share the Lord's Supper. We pass the offering plate or share the peace of Christ and touch another's hands. We see the beauty of the human being in the generations present in the sanctuary, so many different ages, so many different abilities, so many different ways God's people express their faith. We feel the wood of the pew or chair against our back; we pass our neighbor a mint when they begin to cough. We hear the voices of the faithful, a familiar hymn; we sit in a full silence.

Our gatherings around Word and sacrament, prayers and fellowship, form us together as Christ's body for the life of the world. Our gatherings confirm God's love of material creation and how we in turn care for one another's bodily selves and all creation. We follow Jesus and worship God by gathering with seekers and other disciples along the journey.

➤ Think of the different places you have worshiped God with others. What images, smells, and sounds come to mind?

➤ Think of the place where you worship most often. Who is the youngest person there?

Who is the oldest?

Who is the first to share a prayer?

Who comes in late and who leaves early?

➤ What symbols do you see in your worship space? (*baptismal font, communion table, cross, and so on*)

➤ What is it like for you when there is silence during the worship service?

O Holy One, settle my thoughts, open my heart, and receive my prayers this day. In these moments, fill me with your grace and renew me with your love, and I will give you praise for all I encounter this day. Amen.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Scattered throughout the New Testament are hints as to what early worship in the church looked like. In 1 Corinthians 14:26–28, the apostle Paul writes:

What then should be done, my brothers and sisters? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at the most three and each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God.

We see those pieces in our worship today:
song, lesson, interpretation.

In Luke 24:13–35, we read the story of two disciples encountering the risen Christ as they walk to the village of Emmaus the afternoon of the day of the resurrection (Easter Sunday). As the two are walking, a third person joins them. It is Jesus, but they do not recognize him. What follows in the story are four acts that reflect the form of our corporate worship. The three **gather** on the road; they **hear Scripture** interpreted; they **break bread** together; the two are sent, returning to Jerusalem to share the good news of their encounter with Jesus.

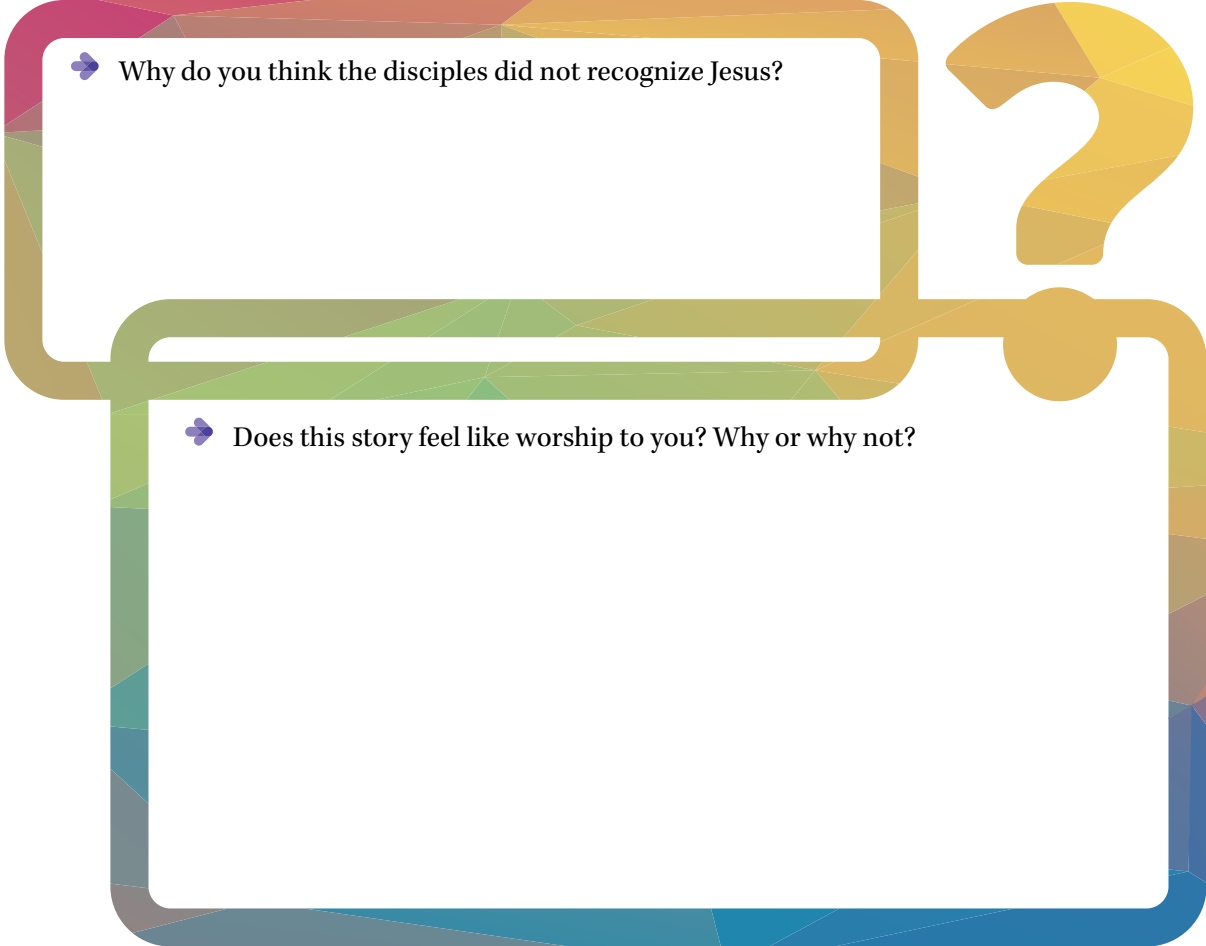
Luke is the only Gospel writer to tell this story. Mark's Easter story ends abruptly, with the women returning from the empty tomb but not telling anyone what they saw and heard (Mark 16:8). Matthew's account of the resurrection concludes with the disciples going to the mountain where they worship their risen Lord and hear his commandment to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20a). In John's Gospel, we see the risen Christ join his disciples by the lakeshore, eating a breakfast of fish with them, and calling Peter to follow him anew (John 21).

This Emmaus experience of Cleopas and the other disciple begins their healing after the horrific events of Jesus' death. Scholar Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder writes, "How do you act after a crisis? In the case of Luke's witnesses, the writer shows that people react differently, even to the same event. The critical, common element is that,

for the believer, clarity comes when Jesus speaks or expresses himself. In trying to deal with difficult experiences, the word of God is *the* expression that brings peace and understanding. That word of God also prompts worship. After Jesus' followers had shared their horrific experience and received clarity, the disciples went back to Jerusalem, with the pain of the crucifixion still fresh. But this time they went with joy so that they might worship and bless God.”¹

There is an air of mystery to this story. Scholars do not know of any archaeological evidence of the village of Emmaus. We might say it never existed, that this is a made-up story. But a good storyteller knows how to turn an ordinary place into an everywhere. By not knowing specifically where Emmaus was, or what kind of village it was, it can become anywhere; any road can be that road.

The mystery continues with Cleopas and the other disciple. Cleopas is named only here in Luke 24; he is never mentioned again in Luke/Acts or in any other New Testament writing. We might imagine who the unnamed disciple is, but we cannot say with certainty. And so, any one of us can be one of these disciples who encounter the risen Christ on the road.



Why do you think the disciples did not recognize Jesus?

Does this story feel like worship to you? Why or why not?

1. Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, “Luke,” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian K. Blount (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 184.

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

As we read the story of two disciples walking along a road after the news of Jesus' death and resurrection, we are reminded of the fourfold pattern practiced by Christians across the centuries and around the globe: gather, hear the word, share a meal, be sent. Christians do these things in multifaceted ways, according to different cultures and styles, and with many other added elements (including praying and singing), but these actions in the Emmaus story are core to worshipping God. We begin our worship by gathering, just as the two disciples and Jesus gathered on the road and then at the inn.



WHY SUNDAY?

Christians have traditionally gathered on Sunday to worship. Sunday is the first day of the week, so maybe the faithful wanted to start their week off in the right way. But it goes deeper than that. Christ rose on the first day of the week, and the resurrection of Jesus was the defining event for the Christian community. It's been said that every Sunday is a little Easter, a commemoration of God's power and love seen in the resurrection. Looking back further in Scripture, we see that God began the creation on the first day of the week, separating the darkness and the light. Christ's resurrection is a new creation, and a new day.

ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP

If you were to travel the world and worship in a variety of Christian churches and communities, you would likely not encounter very many similarities in the parts of worship other than music, Scripture, and prayer. How lively or quiet worship is very much depends on the culture that surrounds it.

In the United States, Protestant and Roman Catholic worship services may have similar structure. The liturgical movement of the 19th and 20th centuries began with the Roman Catholic church and flowed into Lutheran and Episcopal churches and some other Protestant denominations. One of the results of that movement is that a Roman Catholic person might worship in a Lutheran church today and hear the same readings as she would at her home church. A Presbyterian might worship in an Episcopal church and see the similar pattern of song, confession, Scripture, sermon, prayers, and sacrament.

Within these structures, worship leaders have varying freedoms with regard to what they say. In some churches, there are prayer books, and the same prayers are read in a liturgical season, such as Advent and Lent. In other churches, the worship leader writes



the words that will be spoken. And in some traditions, all prayers and messages are extemporaneous, flowing through the work of the Spirit.

WORSHIP SPACE

Where we worship is utterly unimportant to God and deeply important to some. The first Christians worshiped in each other's homes, and there are still house churches today. For those who participate in these communities, there is an intimacy that allows for relationships to deepen and for meaningful conversation about God and faith.

Religious people have also built extraordinary structures in which to worship God. The Jewish people built a great temple in Jerusalem, and after it was destroyed, built a second temple, which was then remodeled. That is the temple Jesus knew in his lifetime.

Archaeologists have found the ruins of ancient churches, some of which have had more recent sanctuaries built in the same location. There are monasteries in Egypt that date back to the fourth century, and churches in Ethiopia and Jerusalem built on sites of ancient worship spaces. The oldest cathedral in the world is thought to be in Armenia, Etchmiadzin Cathedral, originally built in the 400s.

One of the best-known ancient churches is Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. It was built in the 500s and became the center of the Eastern Orthodox church and an active worship space until 1453, when the city of Constantinople fell to Mehmed the Conquerer, who renamed the city Istanbul and converted the church into a mosque. It remained a mosque until the 1930s, when Ataturk led the secularization of Turkey, and the mosque became a museum. In 2020, it became a mosque once again.

Throughout Europe and in the United States, there are stunning cathedrals like St. John the Divine in New York City and Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Many church buildings on the East Coast were built in the Puritan style, made with clapboard wood and clear windows, without much ornamentation.

What often makes a space feel holy is not its appearance but the memory of sacred acts and meaningful worship that have taken place there.

- How would you describe your worship gathering in terms of building, diversity of people, and worship styles?
- What would you like to experience differently as you gather with others for worship?

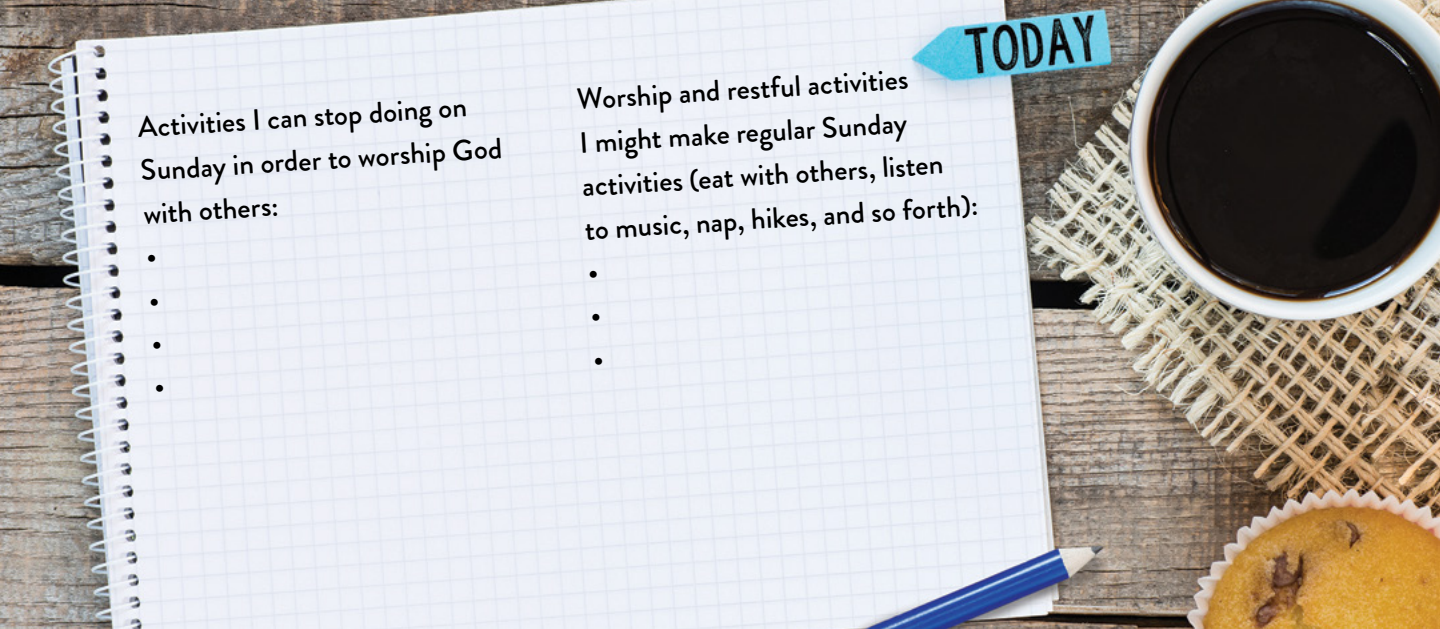
PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

For some, worship attendance is a natural part of their weekly routine. We hardly think about what we will do on Sundays; preparing for worship, gathering with our church community, and spending time with others is part of our life rhythm. For others, going to church is something we learned later in life. Perhaps we had an Emmaus experience or were invited to worship by someone and got involved in this new activity. While it's not something we have done all our lives, it is something we practice doing every week. Still others have been part of worshipping communities but seldom attend for any number of reasons: competing activities on Sundays, work obligations, church conflicts. Perhaps we participate occasionally in church and decide each week about whether or not we will go. Following are some ideas to consider regarding gathering for this weekly practice.

PREPARE TO WASTE TIME

Let's be real. Going to church is unlike any other activity most of us do at other times in our week. As said previously, in the world's logic, it is a huge waste of time. Nothing of material value is produced to be sold. It is not just a meeting of personal friends we choose to be with. We don't control the guest list, the time it starts and finishes, or what is said. And we are stuck in a place where we must be relatively quiet most of the time and follow worship leaders' instructions. If that's not enough, other things are not getting done—laundry, grocery shopping, cleaning, cooking—that many of us need to do on the weekends due to overly busy lives during the week. In a society obsessed with personal freedom, worship implies giving up control we normally have. Creating the space in our lives to gather with this strange crowd may take some degree of discipline and planning, not to mention attitude adjustment. In recent decades, we've seen increased attention given to explaining the gift and importance of Sabbath rest and worship, despite the effort it takes to shove away all the *to-dos* for a day to be with others and worship God. Spend a few minutes jotting down ideas in the columns on the next page that might help you enjoy the gathering more:

MAKE A PLAN



WORSHIP IN VARIOUS STYLES

For Sunday worship, if you are comfortable, visit a congregation that worships in a style different from your own. Rather than spending too much time comparing and evaluating all the things that you see—pastoral style, preaching, singing—try to let the newness of this experience disrupt you so that you make room for God to be present to you. If you do not feel safe in other places, consider watching a service virtually.

Besides Sunday worship, consider attending other special types of worship, such as ecumenical worship services on common feast days, prayer vigils after a natural disaster or social justice rally. Notice who is gathered and how worship is led and received.

WORSHIP IN VARIOUS PLACES

First, notice some things in your regular place of worship. How large is the space and how high are the ceilings? Is it dark or light? Does it feel crowded with furniture and objects or open and airy? What religious symbols are present, such as baptismal font, communion table, pulpit, Bible, hymnals or music books, and art, including stained glass?

Pick a church space that appears different from your own. Visit it for worship or at a time people are not worshipping. Sit in a chair or pew for awhile and be silent. If you are alone, imagine the space with people in it worshipping.

- How might worshipping in a space like this be different from your regular place of worship?
- What religious symbols are present?

CREATE A WORSHIP PLACE AT HOME

Set aside time and space in your home as a place where you can read Scripture and reflect on it, pray, and sing or read the words to a hymn. You might have an entire room for that purpose or a corner of a kitchen table with a candle that invites the light of Christ. Use that space for your personal daily or weekly devotions. As you gather yourself for worship in your space, take several deep breaths and acclimate to the quiet. You might use a recent worship bulletin from your church to guide you.

FOLLOWING JESUS

As a faithful Jew, Jesus worshiped God. He often quoted Hebrew Scriptures in his teaching, and he lived out God's call through the voice of the prophets. During his earthly life, Jesus gathered his disciples to teach them and to break bread with them. When he rose from the dead and met Cleopas and the other disciple on the road to Emmaus, their memories were stirred as Jesus taught them and broke bread with them. That is how they recognized him.

Christians today continue that tradition of teaching and breaking bread in worship. Whether it is two or three or a thousand, when we worship, Christ is still with us. As we move from gathering to participating, we remember that, in worship, we are not simply spectators being entertained but followers who join in the movement of worship.

Many hymnals and liturgy books have excellent introductions about the practice of worship. Perhaps your church or local library has copies of these.

REFLECTION SONG

How did you gather during the COVID-19 pandemic? Many churches chose to be safe and worship online. In a short time, many choirs figured out how to gather and sing together in a safe way. Watch the YouTube video "Hymn—Blessed Jesus, at Your Word" (bit.ly/FMBlessedJesus, 2:28).

O Jesus, our companion, our teacher, our friend,
we give you thanks for your presence among us in all times and all places:
In our celebrations, our anniversaries, our gathering with family and friends,
as well as our bleak nights of the soul, our grief, and our loneliness.
Each time we gather,
each time we share bread at a table,
each time your Word is opened to us anew,
let us give thanks once more for your presence among us,
and pray that others would know your presence too. Amen.