***Reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it***

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A common refrain in the synoptics is Jesus’ command that those who have ears hear (Matthew 11:15; Mark 4:23; Luke 8:8). Like many teachers, leaders, and parents before and since, Jesus recognizes that there’s a crucial difference between the physical act of hearing and the transforming power of really having heard. Hearing (and not hearing) is clearly shaped by a variety of things (culture, class, race, age, education, etc.)—different people hear differently, and hear different things. Yet no matter how different we are, many of us share a particular form of hearing loss wise Christians have called the “small self:” the habit of interpreting everything with ourselves at the center of the universe; the conviction that we are the most real, the most vivid and the most important person in existence. Much Bible reading (like all early-stage religious practice) leaves the small self intact because it doesn’t shift us out of what long-time pastor Eugene Peterson calls the “unholy trinity” of “my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings.”

The Bible-reading approach that follows seeks instead to live into, and out of, the *Holy* Trinity of Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Rather than a fool-proof technique or a set curriculum, it is a disposition, a way of living into relationship with the Bible, the Divine to which the Bible points, and each other. There are of course crucial practices that make this possible, or more likely, but even in using these techniques it’s important to remind ourselves of what they make possible rather than thinking of them as a quick fix. This Bible study approach is only a *container*. What matters is whether it’s able to deliver the worthwhile *contents* of people who love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and their neighbors as themselves. The point of reading the Bible this way is therefore not only what we know (information) but in our lifelong “grow[ing] up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15)—formation.

Reading as if our lives depend on it starts with what is: the actual people who gather around the text, and all the things they know and don’t know, the actual places they are in their life of faith, and the relationships within which they are imbedded. It focuses on what (and who) is present rather than what (and who) is missing—paying attention to God’s Word, the people gathered around it, and God’s own Holy Spirit which is freely given to those who are willing to receive it. It reads the scriptures carefully and with the expectation that there is something here which is of value, which we cannot do without. And it shares at all kinds of levels, entering into spiritual transformation in the company of others, expecting and benefiting from the contributions of each person in the group, and living out what is “learned” not only within people’s individual lives but also in their communities (family, church, neighborhood, world). It is characterized by the following actions, attitudes, and practices:

* We focus on the quality of our reading rather than its quantity
* We sink into the text rather than skimming its surface for a quick “sound bite” to take away
* Rather than trying to “master” the text, we enter into relationship with it; in other words, we treat the text as the *subject* of a reading relationship rather than as an *object* we control
* We approach the text lovingly and receptively rather than out of a posture of distance or defensiveness—we read it like a love letter
* We read the text with openness to mystery rather than out of a problem-solving mentality.

*Strategies*

Four general strategies help us read the Bible as if our lives depend on it: creating an environment of *hospitality*, *reading* the text, allowing the text *to read us*, and *worshiping* with and through the text.[[1]](#footnote-1) These are not distinct actions that we do and are done with. Rather they are like layers of translucent cloth that we lay one on top of each other, allowing what has come before to “shine through” and come into conversation with what we are doing now.

We gather in ways that welcome each person, the biblical text, and the action of the Holy Spirit. We read the text carefully, out loud, treating the biblical passage as if it were a person who has joined our Bible study circle. Then we allow the text to “read us,” not being satisfied with a simple application but bringing the text into conversation with our lives, noticing where our life and the text’s life intersect, question, or comment on each other. We finish by worshipping with and through the text, listening for the echoes of the previous conversations in our singing, our prayers, our response actions, and the last reading of the scripture passage.

*Creating a communal space that is hospitable to the Bible, students, and the leader, and that attends to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit*. An environment of hospitality includes the physical space, the way the group interacts, and the posture of the teacher. Since it’s not uncommon for group Bible study to be characterized by either informal socializing or opinionated discussion, a key practice is to invite the group to focus on deep listening and thoughtful speaking for the well-being of all.

One way to enact this is to sit in a circle and to use a talking object of some kind, leaving a moment of silence between speakers. The point is to consider the way both words and silences contribute to a full-orbed reading of the scripture text and to the cultivation of community life. First attempts at this kind of speech are often clumsy: it may take some time to sink into the attitude of receptivity and non-judgmental curiosity that characterizes this kind of interaction, so the process may feel artificial or tediously slow at first, and the leader will have to encourage people to stick with it. Once habits of speaking and listening have been well-established, groups may want to dispense with the talking object or the more meditative pace of conversation if all is going well. They should also feel free to heighten the level of “formality” of the conversation if any person in the circle feels like the group is moving away from communal conversation and into something more private, partial, or opinionated.

A key to pulling off this kind of Bible reading is the attitude of leaders, both in their conviction about this process and in their willingness to give themselves to it. Any kind of collaboration between leader and participants requires leaders to release their hold on “getting it right,” leaning instead into trusting both the Holy Spirit and the group. This is often uncomfortable. Every time I’ve led Bible study in this mode, I’ve had at least one moment during the gathering when I thought to myself: “This was a huge mistake. I don’t know why I ever thought this was going to work.” I’ve learned to let these feelings of panic alert me that it’s time to internally lift my eyes and shrug my shoulders in an “I’m not sure what you’re up to, God, but I’ll go with it” gesture, discovering little by little that God is generous beyond my imagining. This is the case even if things do, in fact, flop. As we know from the rest of our lives, we often learn just as much by our mistakes as by our successes!

Leaders need to figure out how to work with their anxiety not only for their own ability to stay present to the process but because their functioning sets the tone in the groups they’re leading. Leaders can influence the group’s “emotional field” for the better by recognizing that resistance is a normal reaction to leadership, by being patient with how long it takes for anxiety to dissipate (especially when it can spike almost immediately!), and by learning to tolerate anxious moments in order to use them as opportunities for growth. The need to work with fear is particularly acute in 21st century North America because our culture is so chronically fearful.

Anxiety, the old fight or flight approach to any perceived threat, gets in our way because it tightens our thinking, decreases our ability to learn, replaces curiosity with a demand for certainty, makes us think in polarities (either/or), and floods our nervous systems so that we find it difficult to actually hear what others are saying or respond rather than reacting. Moving *toward* God, the text, and others instead of retreating requires each person and groups as a whole to find ways to work with their fear and take small steps toward becoming more and more transparent, including to themselves.

In addition to becoming vulnerable to God and to others, people also need to find ways to become vulnerable to the text, allowing it to be itself, independent of their ideas about it. If what we’re aiming for is relationship, the biblical text needs to be able to say *its* piece rather than what we want or need it to say. We’re most likely to allow the text to be itself when we’re able to invite and tolerate a variety of ways of interpreting the text rather than needing to nail down one “truth” in a hurry. Especially if the group does not arrive at more than one interpretation on its own, or if it’s rushing toward an interpretation that shuts things down rather than opening them up, leaders need to insist on two things: that people point to something *in the text that they’re studying* as the basis for their comments, and that the person (or the group) come up with at least three different ways of interpreting the text or a part of the text. Even if some of those interpretations seem (or indeed are) stupid, they jolt us out of assuming that our instinctive reading is the best one. In addition to allowing the text to speak for itself, these practices level the playing field between people with varying degrees of biblical literacy, keep the group’s conversation focused, remind readers that scripture is patient of many meanings, and call the group’s attention to what it’s actually doing: discerning together how God might be speaking through this text.

*Reading the text together.* Most groups that gather to study the Bible don’t want to “waste” group time reading the Bible—yet we can’t hear the text unless we *hear it*. Leaders can help themselves and group members slow down their reading by doing the following:

* using their computer and on-line resources, leaders should *import the text into a word-processing program*. A good place to get biblical texts is [www.biblegateway.org](http://www.biblegateway.org). It includes not only several translations of the text but also several languages to pick from. If they are reading only in English, they should look at two translations or more, so that they have some idea of where the translation and interpretive issues may lie. If they know another language, reading in this language will also de-familiarize the text enough to help leaders pay close attention to the text as they prepare.
* *break the text into clauses*. Seminary students often learn to do this in Greek or Hebrew class; it also works well in English. A clause usually has a subject and a verb: an action and someone or something doing the action. It doesn’t matter too much if the leader isn’t a wonderful grammarian: the main point is to divide the text into smaller units of meaning. Re-arranging things helps both leaders and the group members who will receive this text see the passage differently, gives everyone space to doodle or draw lines or underline things, and slows down first the leader’s, and later the group’s, reading.
* *read it out loud*. Reading out loud is a good way to pay attention to the text. This is especially useful in communal settings because it helps the group slow down, makes it possible for poor readers to join in by listening, and engages those who learn best by hearing rather than seeing.
* *use a pencil*. Circling, underlining, drawing lines between similar or dissimilar things, making notes in the margins are all ways to notice specifics about a text. Repeated words may be worth paying attention to. Noticing gaps (where time passes, where additional information might be needed) is also useful. Paying attention to pace—things may be moving along quickly in line after line, and then they slow down for reflection—opens up fruitful avenues for reflection. Teaching one’s Bible study partners in the congregation to gather information is especially important since it helps them see that what looks like the magic of “experts” (commenting on patterns, etc.) is actually learned behavior—and something they too could learn to do. One additional pencil-practice is to break the text into sections and title them. The easiest way to do this is to pretend you are filming a movie of this text, and then to ask yourself when the angle of the shot ought to change or when you should move in for a close-up. This exercise is most fruitful when you makes note of *why* you’ve divided the text as you have.

The leader needs to prepare for the group’s gathering by breaking the text into clauses (and making copies of this clause layout for the group), reading it out loud or in several versions, and doing a little commentary research, if possible looking at several commentaries. For those without access to extensive libraries, many resources are available online. For texts that appear in the lectionary cycle, [www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com) is a great place to start. Preparing to lead in the way suggested above is more time consuming but also more productive than using ready-made resources because it gives leaders a kind of investment in the text that’s impossible to achieve by simply reading through a prepared leader’s guide in the ten minutes before the Bible study begins.

Group time should begin with some way of releasing what could get in the way of full participation: achy bodies, long to-do lists, worries and regrets—not to mention spirits of competition, envy, insecurity, pride, and doubt. This first action of gathering could involve deep breathing, a guided meditation, or movement, and should include a spoken prayer that picks up on some of the themes in the text. Some specific suggestions for the above are listed in weekly guide that follows this general introduction.

Following the opening, the leader invites volunteers to read the text aloud as a reader’s theater. After this initial reading/hearing, the leader makes a few introductory comments based on his or her own study, giving members of the group just enough information so that they don’t stumble unnecessarily over things that could easily be cleared up but not so much that a divide between “ordinary” and “professional” readers is created. *Each person* needs to deepen his or her knowledge base over time and take responsibility for her or his own learning. Any addition to our Bible reading “toolbox” is available from then on, and as this toolbox starts filling up, the additions begin to pay wonderful dividends.

The majority of the group time in the first movement is given to conversation that the leader launches with one of the following open-ended questions: What one or two things did you notice? What puzzles you, or what would you like to know more about? What do you want to argue with? What keeps drawing your attention? If this is a story, who do you feel drawn to, or do you want to push away? What in this text reminds you of another biblical text, or of something in your life or in our world? And, always, *why*?

These questions are likely familiar to those who have practiced lectio divina. Usually a leader need ask only one or two to get things started, and then keep the rest in reserve to help open up the conversation as needed. All of them get at the same thing: how is the Spirit speaking today and in this context through this Scripture?

*Allowing the text to read us.* Since most leaders and participants in Bible studies are schooled by their culture and context to think of the biblical world as smaller than the secular world, most Bible studies include a focus on application, on making the Bible “relevant” to “real life.” The second movement in reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it invites groups to discover instead that the reign of God is the fundamental reality and that the task of readers is to make themselves and their world relevant *to it*.

Practically, this involves two things: spending *more* time with the text than we usually do so that we can release our grip on our ideas about the text and allow another (in this case, *The* Other) to get a word in edgewise; and engaging the text with our bodies and our right brains to get ourselves out of the driver’s seat of our usual way of being and thinking. Both of these practices rely on individual and group silence, which are an important way to cultivate both an outer and inner attitude of receptivity. We know in ordinary conversation that we can’t hear another person if we aren’t quiet long enough for them to speak. The same is true in Bible reading. First, *we* read: we engage the text in ways that make sense to us. While they may enlarge our Bible-reading practice, they leave us as the actor or initiator of the conversation. So we need to be quiet, to *listen*, so that we too will be read. Without back and forth, there can be no conversation.

Leaders can help groups give themselves to being read by the text by doing the following:

* *embody the text*. With a narrative text, ask for volunteers and/or assign parts (many biblical stories include crowds of one sort or another) for each character, and then simply act out the story as it is read. “Re-hydrating” the story wordlessly and viscerally, in our own bodies, allows it its own voice. . .and often clarifies where the Spirit is calling us to grow or change in ways words may have trouble doing. It’s worth acting out the story more than once, with people taking different roles or solving acting “problems” in different ways. The group will likely be tempted to talk about what’s going on—moving into the realm of words and evaluation feels much more comfortable to most of us. Refrain from doing so for now.
* *move to the text*. People could also move to the text using four kinds of movement: thrust, shape, swing, and hang. The value of these movements in the context of Bible “study” is that they allow us to engage with the text in embodied ways—and they don’t require narrative texts that we “act out.” To lead the group in moving to the text, first the group the four kinds of patterns (demonstrate each in turn, inviting people to “move like me” before you go on to the next kind of movement). Then invite people to turn *away* *from each other* to ease their self-consciousness about what they’re doing and how they look and to move to the text as you read it, using any (or all) of the coordination patterns. Breaking the text into several sections, and leaving a pause between them, will suggest the possibility that one might switch the kind of pattern used; there’s no need to specifically say this is what you’re doing, however. As in the practice of “acting out” the scripture, move to the scripture more than once to encourage people to relax their grip on their evaluative mind. See videos demonstrating the 4 movement patterns (<http://youtu.be/wizPDX-NqsA>) and a group using them to move to scripture (<http://youtu.be/oPMNcGXmDzI>) so you can see what this kind of engagement would look like.
* *use story figures.* For a more reserved form of moving to the text, consider using story figures, as Jerome Berryman and Sonja Stewart suggest in *Young Children and Worship*. Some Mennonite congregations already have story figures as part of their children’s education or children’s church supplies. If your congregation doesn’t, invite volunteers to “pose” as story figures; one person can move them around and “place” them as the story is being read. Even though people are embodying the characters in the story, they are doing so in a very low-stress way which might be more congenial for folks who don’t consider themselves actors. This approach may also be helpful for those who have restricted physical mobility.
* *engage in “artful response.”* In spite of the fact that anything with the word “artful” in it might strike terror in the hearts of self-proclaimed non-artists, artful response is not a means of generating a piece of art but instead a set of practices to help people *lounge with* the text. At its most basic level, it can involve writing out the biblical text, in silence, in a group setting. Writing the text is a good place to start with artful response because supplies are easy to come by and vulnerability is modest. Begin by mentioning the purpose of writing: not simply copying (although there may be some benefits to that too, since if we engage our bodies we are more likely to remember words) but writing the text over and over until our linear mindset relaxes and something else emerges. The end product doesn’t really matter—and it doesn’t even matter if there is no “show-able” end product. Artful response could find expression in a prayer or journal entry, a commentary on the text, an inner or outer dialogue that finds its origin in the text (for example, in a healing text, a conversation between “you” and whatever needs healing within you), an illustration of the text or a visual response to it, an “illumination” of one or several letters or words (in the style of illuminated manuscripts), etc. Other artful responses could include collage, work with clay or fabric, pipe cleaner sculptures, etc. Start with paper and colored pens, pencils, and paints; add additional refinements and supplies as people develop some facility and imagination.
* *memorize the text*. Release people into spaces where they can pace and speak aloud—something that can be done in a large church fellowship hall if it isn’t being occupied by another group, or, if the weather is decent, in the church parking lot. The process of allowing ourselves to learn biblical words *by heart* inevitably brings them alongside our regular lives and speaks into our lives long after the hour of Bible study is over.
* *talk reflectively about the text*. Because conversation tends to leave *us* front and center, this is the least desirable route to go. . .but it may be where you as a leader and/or the group you’re working with needs to start. If so, invite the group to ruminate on the following questions: What in this text speaks to your life? How does your life speak to this text? What “vibrates,” be it character, theme, problem, word or phrase, action, tone, conversation—or what do you find yourself fighting with or resisting? What movement of the mission of God is the Spirit calling you to through this text—how does this challenge you or the groups to which you belong (family, friends, workplace, neighborhood, congregation, etc.)? This phase will work especially well if the group can tolerate some silence so that the conversation is more meditative. Leaving thirty seconds to a minute of silence between speakers (a singing bowl can help with this), coupled with an invitation to the group to spend the silence receiving the testimony they have just heard, will help enlarge how people think so that their reflections can engage heart and soul as well as mind.

Part of why wordless engagement is helpful in allowing the text to read us is that it helps us relax the usual-Bible-study tyranny of our left brains. The left hemisphere of the brain specializes in cause and effect relationships, speech, and logical analysis. The right hemisphere, by contrast, thinks more in terms of wholes, of information-in-context—and seems especially important in engaging the affections, a key component in relationship. “Our problem,” writes biblical scholar Walter Wink, “is not that we have been too intellectual, but that we have been half-wits! . . . We must get our whole selves involved with [the text], right brains as well, and struggle to let it endow us with a fuller share of our available humanity.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

It may be helpful to clue in the folks you’re working with about the reasons behind this kind of engagement with the text. Lounging and lingering feel like a waste of time, and if we are willing to engage in them, take us outside of our comfort zone precisely because they de-center the self through which we are used to interpreting and evaluating everything. Gently letting people know that they may find this a stretch, and encouraging them to persevere in that stretch, will help prevent the group from drawing the conclusion that’s so inevitable in our consumer culture: the ultimate arbiter of what’s worth pursuing is whether *I like* it.

*Worshiping in and through the text*. This may be the movement that has the biggest range of expression from group to group or time to time, since communities vary widely in their worship practices and since worship shaped by a *specific* text will differ from worship shaped by *other* texts. The point is a simple one: not to leave the text before having encountered it in worship.

Leaders can help groups give themselves to worshipping through the text by doing the following:

* *use the outline of the story, or the experience of a character in it, to shape public prayers.* The following prayers, written by Barbara Nelson Gingerich, grow out of the story of Jesus calling the first disciples in Luke 5:1-11.

**Prayer of (tentative) receptivity**

Jesus, you have a way of showing up

when we’re going about our ordinary tasks,

finishing up our chores—perhaps feeling dissatisfied

that we have little to show for our hard work.

Yes—we’re ready to scoot over and make room for you,

pleased that you’d accept the hospitality of our unassuming vessel;

we’re willing to be interrupted in our cleaning up

in order to listen in on your teaching.

**Naming our reluctance**

With typical bluntness, Simon voices his doubts.

We follow his example and pause to acknowledge

whatever makes us reluctant to heed your instruction

to push off into the deep water

and let down our nets into God knows what.

**Prayer of confession**

Teacher, we think we’re doing you a favor

by giving you a berth in our boat,

but you proceed to ask us

to venture beyond where we’re quite prepared to go,

and you presume to instruct us about how to do our work—

and then you fill our empty craft with more than we can cope with.

We confess that in the light of the abundant catch you engineer

what we notice is our inadequacy,

and in self-protective reflex,

what we want to do is push you away.

**Prayer of release**

And what you see exposed in us

when our illusion that we are in control crumbles

is our fear, and you address it,

reminding us once again to release it—

and everything else that would keep us

from picking ourselves up and scrambling off after you.

We pause now to name our fears—

and anything else we need to let go of

in order to be free to follow you on your fishing expedition

to restore this beautiful, broken world.

These prayers could be interspersed with a final reading of the appropriate verses of the story as well as other acts of worship.

* *engage in symbolic actions that grow out of the text’s realities or concerns.* This might involve traditional Christian ritual actions (communion, laying on of hands, anointing, etc.) or move beyond them (for example, lining a box with strips of cloth as a way of preparing a place to receive a child: the infant Jesus, Moses in his bulrush basket) Check out the Iona Community’s Wild Goose Worship Group materials for additional ideas; *Stages on the Way, Present on Earth,* and *Cloth for the Cradle* all feature symbolic actions. They are available from GIA Publications if you search for them by title on the publisher’s website. Many congregations already engage in symbolic actions of one kind or another. You may also find that some symbolic action emerges from your (or the group’s) embodying the text or moving to it, and that it could be fruitfully adapted for public worship.
* *select and sing hymns or songs that reflect or deepen the themes of the text*. Hymnal and supplement indices are good places to look for music that may fit a particular text. Or you could proceed more thematically: for example, in a service about the *unexpected* action of the Holy Spirit, select songs that are not usually sung in connection with a particular text or season but that may speak to them. Perhaps someone might want to try their hand at a new text or write words for a “zipper” song (a song in which you can easily insert new lyrics). One group used the song “Wade in the Water,” inserting words from Mary’s song in Luke 2 in the verses (“Hungry people filled with bread, God’s gonna trouble the water, full ones emptied out instead, God’s gonna trouble the water). Or simply select songs whose themes or emotional tone allow singers to enter affectively into the world of the text and the God to whom it points.
* *share artful responses*. If the group has entered into some form of artful response, worship is an ideal time for “show and tell” for those who are willing to let others see, hear, or touch what they’ve created.

Worshiping with the text is especially crucial because of how clearly it brings together the horizontal and vertical axes of reading the Bible. Since we all understand human relationships at least to some extent, it makes sense to begin on the horizontal axis in the first movement of the Bible reading process—in conversation that engages others in relationship. But if our Bible reading doesn’t bring us into relationship with God, we’re missing a key component of formation and falling into idolatry of the Bible or of the community rather than seeing that *both* the Bible and the community point to something far beyond either: God. Worshiping through the text with others is a way to keep twinned Jesus’ commands to love God and the neighbor as oneself (Luke 10:27-8).

Groups who gather to study the Bible may very well want to worship on their own. Their worship might also be deepened by gathering with their larger community—which they can strengthen through their deep engagement with the text. In congregations where texts and themes are chosen in advance, groups could get a two week “jump” on an upcoming text, engaging in the first and second movements of reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it in the two weeks preceding a service that is structured around that same text. Worship planners and leaders, as well as pastors, may very well want to be part of such a “study” group. This would give them a chance to come to the text without needing to get something out of it for a rapidly approaching deadline. But whether or not they do so, they will be assured that there is at least one little community that is eager to receive the text, in all its resonances, during Sunday morning worship.

Spending so much time with one Bible passage will be a challenge for almost everyone, especially at the beginning. Perhaps because so much of our reading is driven either by getting the information/rule/point (nonfiction) or by moving to the end of the story (fiction), we have little or no practice basking in a text. Yet lingering in scripture is a time-honored legacy of the Christian tradition: one aspect of lectio divina is contemplation, though many contemporary practitioners move on before they get there. So working with the impatience of both leaders and participants will be crucial. It may be important to name that impatience aloud and invite people to bear with it, themselves, and each other. Instead of moving on quickly to something that feels more interesting or relevant, we can see our impatience as an invitation to cultivate the trust that God is at work, even if we don’t see or feel it, and to acknowledge that in spite of our attraction to quick results, what we really care about is a changed perception and the kind of life that grows out of that God-formed consciousness. As we have already learned from other long haul projects like weight loss plans, fitness programs, learning a new instrument or skill, and loving friends and family, receiving the benefits of something may require us to stick with it even when it’s not clear what benefit we’re deriving from it in the moment.

**Reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it**

**Week 1: Who are we as readers of the text?**

Each person, and each group, comes to the Bible from a particular *social location* or place in society. Social location includes *internal dimensions* (gender, age, race, ethnicity, and physical ability), *external dimensions* (parental status, marital status, appearance, work experience, educational background, religion, personal habits, income, and geographic location) and *organizational dimensions* (work location, work content/field, seniority, denomination, management status). All of these things influence our perspective on all kinds of things, including the Bible and the people we read it with. Today, we’ll spend some time thinking about our group social location, then we’ll read the text.

**Gathering**

Gather the group in a circle of chairs around a visual center. The visual center shouldn’t be too complicated: a piece of cloth and a candle are just fine; if you want to, it could also include some flowers or a plant, or a piece of art (something three-dimensional will work best).

Begin with some kind of gathering activity (breath meditation, movement, song) and conclude with a prayer. Some possible options:

* *breathing meditation*: Let us begin by breathing out. As we exhale, let us release not only our breath but anything that will get in the way of our time together today: aches and pains of body and spirit, regrets about the past and worries about the future, to-do lists and the activities that have brought us to this moment, breathing them out, releasing them into God’s care and keeping. . . . (*take time to release several deep breaths before beginning again*). And as we get to the end of our breath, let us breathe in, receiving not only oxygen for our bodies but also God’s presence and blessing, God’s own Holy Spirit filling our chests and abdomens like light or warmth, allowing it to radiate throughout our bodies and spirits. . . . (*take time to receive several deep breaths before beginning again*) So let’s take a few moments to exhale and inhale, breathe out and breathe in, release and receive, together, in the presence of God.
* *opening prayer*: You who speak to us in Scripture,

through the events of our lives,

and in the words and faces of our traveling companions,

open our ears and eyes and hearts

to receive what you have for us today.

Through your own Holy Spirit,

convict and energize us

so that we might be a part of your reign coming,

your will being done,

right here and right now.

We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

* *introduce the talking object and this new way of speaking*. Invite the group to pay special attention so that both its listening and speaking contributes to or builds up the group and its attention to the scripture text.

**Paying attention**

*Who are we as readers?* As a group, create a brief profile of yourselves. While this exercise may seem silly at first glance (*you* know who you are!) it’s important because it begins to make us aware of the lens through which we read and understand the Bible. Encourage the group to think of what it might want or need to say about itself if it were introducing itself to a Bible-reading group across the world.

* + have each person suggest some observation or piece of information about the group. If you needed to introduce yourselves as a group to a group of Christians you’d never met, what would you say? Thinking about the kinds of things you’d like to know about this (imaginary) other group, and why, will help you get started. It may help to write down these comments on a piece of newsprint or a white- or blackboard.
  + test your observations as a group. Does this list accurately represent the group? What more might need to be said? It may be helpful to refer to the beginning paragraph on the previous page. What relevant internal, external, and organizational dimensions of the group’s identity have you missed?

*Who is our biblical conversation partner?*

* have a volunteer read Mark 6:30-44 out loud, inviting people to close their eyes and simply listen.
* invite people to reflect in silence about memories or associations they have with this text, then share these briefly with the group

**Parting**

Close with a song and/or a prayer.

**Week 2: Reading the text.**

**Gathering**

* Gather the group in a circle of chairs around a visual center.
* Begin with some kind of gathering activity (breath meditation, movement, song) and conclude this gathering time with a prayer which picks up on the themes of the text in some way.

**Paying attention**

* Read the text as a reader’s theater. Two versions of the text in clause layout form follow. If you prefer to lay out the text yourself, see page 6 above. You’ll notice I took out the verse numbers: these are later additions and they break up the flow of the “action” in a text. They’re not really necessary when we’re reading a small chunk of text.
* Make a few introductory comments about the text. See the many resources at <http://www.textweek.com/mkjnacts/mark6c.htm> or look in several commentaries if you have access to them. Tim Geddert’s *Mark*, in the Believer’s Church Bible Commentary series, may be a good one to include in your reading since it’s written from an Anabaptist perspective.
* Launch the conversation with **one** of the following open-ended questions: What one or two things did you notice? What puzzles you, or what would you like to know more about? What do you want to argue with? What keeps drawing your attention? If this is a story, who do you feel drawn to, or do you want to push away?
* If people hesitate to speak, it may be useful to begin by going around the circle, allowing each person to speak in turn to get things started. Depending on how the group does with this, you may or may not want to do another round of “formal” sharing like this. Encourage people to keep speaking to the center rather than to enter into the back and forth of one-on-one conversation within a group context, which may be a temptation for some extroverts or strongly opinionated folks. If it seems like the conversation needs to be “launched” again, return to the list of questions above.

**Parting**

Close with a song and/or a prayer.

**COMMON ENGLISH BIBLE**

The apostles returned to Jesus

and told him everything

they had done and taught.

Many people were coming

and going,

so there was no time to eat.

He said to the apostles,

“Come by yourselves to a secluded place

and rest for a while.”

They departed in a boat by themselves for a deserted place.

Many people saw them leaving

and recognized them,

so they ran ahead from all the cities

and arrived before them.

When Jesus arrived

and saw a large crowd,

he had compassion on them

because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Then he began to teach them many things.

Late in the day, his disciples came to him

and said,

“This is an isolated place,

and it’s already late in the day.

Send them away

so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages

and buy something to eat for themselves.”

He replied,

“You give them something to eat.”

But they said to him,

“Should we go off

and buy bread worth almost eight months’ pay[[**a**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%206:%2030-44&version=CEB#fen-CEB-24441a)]

and give it to them to eat?”

He said to them,

“How much bread do you have?

Take a look.”

After checking, they said,

“Five loaves of bread and two fish.”

He directed the disciples to seat all the people in groups

as though they were having a banquet on the green grass.

They sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.

He took the five loaves and the two fish,

looked up to heaven,

blessed them,

broke the loaves into pieces,

and gave them to his disciples to set before the people.

He also divided the two fish among them all.

Everyone ate until they were full.

They filled twelve baskets with the leftover pieces of bread and fish.

About five thousand had eaten.

1. [Mark 6:37](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%206:%2030-44&version=CEB#en-CEB-24441) Or *two hundred denaria*; a denarion was a typical day’s wage.

**OXFORD NRSV**

The apostles gathered around Jesus,

and told him

all that they had done

and taught.

He said to them,

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves

and rest awhile.”

For many were coming

and going,

and they had no leisure even to eat.

And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Now many saw them going

and recognized them,

and they hurried there on foot from all the towns

and arrived ahead of them.

As he went ashore,

he saw a great crowd;

and he had compassion for them,

because they were like sheep without a shepherd;

and he began to teach them many things.

When it grew late,

his disciples came to him

and said,

“This is a deserted place,

and the hour is now very late;

send them away

so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages

and buy something for themselves to eat.”

But he answered them,

“You give them something to eat.”

They said to him,

“Are we going to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread,

and give it to them to eat?”

And he said to them,

“How many loaves do you have?

Go

and see.”

When they had found out, they said,

“Five, and two fish.”

Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit in groups on the green grass.

So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.

Taking the five loaves and two fish,

he looked up to heaven,

and blessed

and broke the loaves,

and gave them to his disciples to set before the people;

and he divided the two fish among them all.

And all ate

and were filled;

and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.

Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

**Week 3: Being read by the text**

**Gathering**

* Gather the group in a circle of chairs around a visual center.
* Begin with some kind of gathering activity (breath meditation, movement, song) and conclude this gathering time with a prayer which picks up on the themes of the text in some way.

**Paying attention**

* Read the text as a reader’s theater again, this time using a different version of the text than you used last time. Eugene Peterson’s dynamic translation *The Message* often puts things in unfamiliar ways that can help us notice nuances that had previously escaped us. You can find it here <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%206:30-50&version=MSG>
* If you want to spend this session in further conversation, consider **one** of the following questions as a way to begin: What in this text speaks to your life? How does your life speak to this text? What “vibrates,” be it character, theme, problem, word or phrase, action, tone, conversation? To what movement of the mission of God is the Spirit calling you through this text? This phase will work especially well if the group can tolerate some silence, so that the conversation is more meditative. Leaving thirty seconds to a minute of silence between speakers (a singing bowl can help with this), coupled with an invitation to the group to spend the silence receiving the testimony they have just heard, will help enlarge how people think so that their reflections can engage heart and soul as well as mind.
* Another possibility is to experiment with “artful responses” to biblical texts. At its most basic level, this involves simply writing out the biblical text, in silence, in a group setting. Writing the text is a good place to start with artful response because supplies are easy to come by, vulnerability is modest, and even those who are quick to define themselves as “not artistic” are able to enter in. If people want to, they could also paint or draw, work with clay, move to the text, write worship resources or music inspired by the text, etc. Provide colored and white paper, a variety of pens, markers, and colored pencils, scissors, glue, tape, pipe cleaners, clay, pieces of colored fabric or magazines or other collage supplies, etc. Some groups might like to begin with artful response and then move into conversation; or perhaps you will prefer to work silently for the whole time you are together, knowing that there will be time for further spoken reflection when you next gather. Tables are helpful here; if you place a ring of tables on the outside of the ring of chairs, people can simply turn toward the table to work and then back toward each other for conversation.

**Parting**

Close with a song and/or a prayer.

**Week 4: Worshiping with and through the text**

* Gather the group in a circle of chairs around a visual center.
* Begin with some kind of gathering activity (breath meditation, movement, song) and conclude this gathering time with a prayer which picks up on the themes of the text in some way.
* If you are coordinating your text study with your congregation’s worship, simply attend worship that day and bask in the music, singing, scripture reading, preaching, and response actions.
* If you are not coordinating your text study with your congregation’s worship, worship in your study group. Perhaps you want to call on those in the group who are gifted in worship planning or leading to prepare something for the group in advance. Or you might want to use an already-existing worship template, like that of *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book*. Volume 1, week 4, Monday evening. If it feels too print-heavy, it’s very adaptable: instead of passing out copies of the whole thing, invite several people to read the scriptures (Mark 6:30-44 and II Kings 4: 42-44) from their own Bibles, select some songs to sing in advance, and have a worship leader read the calls, perhaps asking the group to repeat some key phrases. After the scripture reading, some time for spoken or silent reflection, or the sharing of artful responses, can enrich the group’s worship. Conclude with prayer.

**Weeks 5-?**

You will have a better sense of the usefulness of this way of gathering around a biblical text if you do it more than once—both as a leader and as group participants. This time, choose your own text, and move through the three movements again: reading the text, being read by the text, and worshiping with the text. Since you’re picking your own text, you might choose something that’s upcoming in your congregational worship schedule so you can worship with your larger community. How is this experience different (or not) from your usual way of entering into worship?

Finish up round two of this way of reading the Bible with a group conversation about how it went. The plan is on the next pages.

**Final session**

* Gather the group in a circle of chairs around a visual center.
* Begin with a *breathing meditation*, using the following words as inspiration if they’re helpful to you.

Let us close our eyes and sit in a way that is comfortable for us, feet on the floor, our backs supported by our chairs. Begin by breathing out. As we exhale, let us release not only our breath but anything that will get in the way of our time together today: aches and pains of body and spirit, regrets about the past and worries about the future, to-do lists and the activities that have brought us to this moment, breathing them out, releasing them into God’s care and keeping. . . . (*take time to release several deep breaths before beginning again*). And as we get to the end of our breath, let us breathe in, receiving not only oxygen for our bodies but also God’s presence and blessing, God’s own Holy Spirit filling our chests and abdomens like light or warmth, allowing it to radiate throughout our bodies and spirits. . . . (*take time to receive several deep breaths before beginning again*) Let’s take a few moments to exhale and inhale, breathe out and breathe in, release and receive, together, in the presence of God.

* Continue with the following:

When you are ready, allow God to bring to your awareness the times during our Bible study over the last weeks for which you’ve been most grateful. As you become aware of them, silently give thanks for them.

*Silence* (allow 3-5 minutes)

When you are ready, allow God to bring to your awareness the times during our Bible study for which you were the least grateful, or when something internal or external got in your way. As you become aware of them, simply be with them in God’s presence, not trying to change or fix anything. You may want to return to your breath, releasing what got in your way and receiving God’s presence and blessing with you as you are.

*Silence* (allow 3-5 minutes)

When you are ready, come back to this place and this time, opening your eyes.

* Once you can see that everyone’s eyes are open, invite people to share reflections about what was life-giving and what got in their way about this Bible reading process. As people are talking, encourage them to listen especially carefully to the person on their right, as they will be praying for this person either silently or aloud at the end of the session.
* Give yourself plenty of time to pray around the circle, beginning by praying out loud for the person on your right, and closing your prayer with “Amen” so the next person knows they are now free to pray. When you have prayed all around the circle, invite people to offer each other a blessing: perhaps a hug or a handshake, maybe with the words, “The peace of Christ be yours” or something similar.
* As soon after the session as possible, make some notes of what people shared. What was especially fruitful for them in this time? What got in their way? These reflections may help you lead future group experiences of various kinds.

1. Mary H. Schertz, professor of New Testament at AMBS, articulated the three-fold movement (reading, being read, worshipping) of what she calls “confessional Bible study” at Pastors Week at AMBS in January of 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)