



# SERMON PLANNING GUIDE LENT-EASTER YEAR B

Featuring Biblical commentary by Rev. T. Denise Anderson  
Guide developed by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

## INTRODUCTION

### HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

We hope this guide is your starting point for shaping your sermons, worship services, and scripture study classes. For each Sunday in Lent through Easter, we have included theme connections, biblical commentary, guiding questions, and links to further reading.<sup>1</sup> We hope these offer a few ways of approaching and thinking about the texts in light of our theme. You can find visuals and artist statements inspired by each of the focal texts listed in this guide in our Visual Art Collection (included in the *Again & Again* bundle). You may wish to use the visuals and artist statements in tandem with this sermon guide. Consider mapping out your ideas in our accompanying [Sermon Planning Grid](#).

### ABOUT THE AGAIN & AGAIN THEME

In Lent, we're reminded that, again and again, suffering and brokenness find us. We doubt again, we lament again, we mess up again. Again and again, the story of Jesus on the cross repeats—every time lives are taken unjustly, every time the powerful choose corruption and violence, every time individuals forget how to love. With exacerbation we exclaim, "Again?! How long, O God?" And yet, in the midst of the motion blur chaos of our lives, God offers a sacred refrain: "I choose you, I love you, I will lead you to repair." Again and again, God breaks the cycle and offers us a new way forward.

This theme provides a clear invitation in a time when much is unclear. Even if worshipping apart, we come to God again and again with our prayers, our dreams, our hopes, and our doubts. Even if from a distance, we will continue to be community to one another—especially when it's hard—by choosing each other over and over again. We will continue to love God with the same persistence God chooses and claims us. Our sub-theme, *A Lenten Refrain*, speaks to the ways God can make music of our lives. "Refrain" also reminds us that Lent is a season of abstaining from certain practices in order to take on new rhythms and habits.

In this season, we need rituals—both old and new—to remember and be transformed. Embodied practice builds muscle memory. Repetition helps retrain our neural pathways. We need the 46 days of Lent because this season shapes us into more faithful disciples. Join us this Lent as again and again, we bring all of who we are to God and trust that God will meet us, time and again, along the way.

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<sup>1</sup> Under the "Further Reading and Research" sections, we direct you to the work of authors, scholars, thinkers, and writers who might inform or enhance your sermonic message. In order to honor their work and abide by copyright laws, we have refrained from including short quotes. We hope you will patronize and support these authors as best as you are able.

# INTRODUCTION (CONT.)

## THEME REFLECTIONS FROM THE SANCTIFIED ART TEAM

“I most easily identify with the negative connotations associated with the phrase, ‘Again & Again.’ Each day I wake up, it feels like an echo chamber of bad news, an endless cycle of disappointment, and the disconcerting kind of *déjà vu*. The truth is, we as humans mess things up over and over again. Humanity’s cacophonous rhythm of ‘again and again’ harms our neighbor, ourselves, and the entirety of creation. You’d think we’d learn from our mistakes, perhaps take a lesson from history, and put an end to this cycle. But I’ve gotta be honest; as of late, I’ve almost lost hope in us. Which leads me to God’s ‘again and again.’ I’m so unbelievably grateful for the ways God shows up over and over again despite our best efforts to push God away. Thank God that we are not left alone in our destructive cadence, but we are met by God, repeatedly forgiven, and mercifully shown the way. I hope to be ever cognizant of humanity’s ‘again and again,’ and resist the currents that keep us spinning in sin. I also hope to lean into and cling to God’s ‘again and again,’ which is ultimately this wonderful pattern of unearned grace.”

—Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman, Director of Branding, Founding Creative Partner

“As we explored theme options for this bundle, the tension between hope and fear was palpable all around us. It was February, 2020, before the pandemic hit. In the months that have followed, amidst the pain, the angst, the frustration, the oppression, the worldly, relational, human challenges that surround us, the sun still rises, every day. Smiles are possible, love is steadfast, joy can be found, and despite—or perhaps because of—all of the negatives, God shows up. In the small moments, in the regularity of rising and resting, God shows her beauty, God shows her love, God shows her care, again and again.

—Hannah Garrity, Founding Creative Partner

“I grew up in a family where church was not an option. We were there, every single week, rain or shine. Therefore, as you might have guessed, it was not long into adolescence when I asked the question, ‘*Why do we have to go to church every siiiingle week?*’ (Cue the dramatic eye roll.) My dad, with love, simply responded, ‘*Because we are a forgetful people.*’ For my parents, it was not enough that my brother and I heard that we were loved and were called to be love every once in a while. They needed us to hear that truth every single week, again and again, day in and day out, lest we forget. Fast forward several years, and that is now how I feel about Lent. I believe that we need the stories of Lent and the hope of Holy Week *every single year*, because there is something about ashes on foreheads, meals around tables, the darkness of the tomb, and the unstoppable hope of Easter that changes us. So once again, we walk this path together. And once again, God will meet us along the way. And once again, I am confident that we will be changed. Again and again, this world has known suffering, so again and again, we proclaim hope.”

—Rev. Sarah Are, Founding Creative Partner

“Once we come up with a theme name, Lauren and I collaborate on the visual branding for the theme. As a graphic designer, Lauren crafts the logo, and I provide photography to enhance her design elements. As we began working on *Again & Again*, our brainstorming led us to hone in on the ampersand, an ancient symbol with thousands of visual iterations. No matter how the ampersand appears, its meaning still translates. After some quick research, we learned that the ampersand was first used in graffiti in Pompeii—a city buried in volcanic ash, and yet whose story lives on. This changed how we looked at the theme; the ampersand began to represent God’s holy ‘and.’ When we feel helpless and hopeless, ‘and’ encourages us to lift our weary eyes to search for more. In a culture overrun by extremes, either/or thinking, and polarizing politics, this holy ‘and’ reminds me that we are always more—that there is always more. We are broken *and* beautiful. Joy *and* grief can coexist. Historical, systemic oppression persists *and* God is guiding us closer to liberation and wholeness. The future feels bleakly uncertain *and* we are granted sacred moments that sustain us in the present. This Lent, let us practice the power of ‘and’—especially when ‘again?!’ feels like our never-ending cry of lament.”

—Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, Founder, Creative Director

# INTRODUCTION (CONT.)

## GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR EACH SCRIPTURE TEXT

- What current or historical events mirror this scripture? How and where do you see this narrative occurring again and again?
- What patterns, repetitions, or cycles are present in the text?
- In this text, where do you see evidence of destructive patterns and cycles of brokenness? How does God break those patterns and cycles?
- In this text, where do you see evidence of God's sustaining love and grace—that come to us again and again?
- Is there a phrase or theological idea within this text that you want to offer as a sermonic refrain? What phrase or idea do we need to hear and receive—again and again?

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## ASH WEDNESDAY

## AGAIN & AGAIN, WE'RE INVITED IN

**FOCAL SCRIPTURES** Matthew 6:1-21 | Isaiah 58:1-12

## THEME CONNECTIONS

As Lent begins, we're invited in—to community, to this season, to our own spiritual journey, to true transformation. We're on this journey together, but we're invited to turn inward. Therefore, spiritual practices are not for show. Matthew 6 and Isaiah 58 remind us that performative acts (of piety and justice) are not the way.

## COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 6:1-21 | By Rev. T. Denise Anderson

As I write this,<sup>2</sup> millions have been affected by a disease that was unknown to humans just a year ago. It has stolen loved ones and changed us in ways we are still discovering. On Ash Wednesday 2020, it hadn't yet had the global impact it eventually achieved. You probably marked the occasion by having ashes imposed on your forehead as a sign of lament and repentance, showing you intend to turn things around in your living.

That was when we could touch, hug, or just be with each other without face masks and an imaginary tape measure.

I'm sure lament is easy to find today. There is also much we still need to turn around.

Collectively known as the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's anthology of Jesus' teachings begins with the Beatitudes, a litany pronouncing blessings upon the unsung folks. The poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers—these are called “blessed.” Jesus shows himself here to be countercultural. The kind of religion he promoted wasn't performative, as so much of religious life can be. We give because it is necessary. Prayer prioritizes God's will, not our words. Fasting produces spiritual, not physical evidence. What we value is different.

There's something poignant about this in a time when we cannot rely on most of the social norms we've used our whole lives. Even facial cues fail us because of the masks we must wear! Performative interactions with God and others will similarly fail us in these times. They simply won't be enough. We must go deeper.

Again and again, God invites us into fuller ways of being. There is no better time to accept that invitation than now, when so much is different. Maybe no ashes mark our foreheads today, but they can still mark our hearts.

—Rev. T. Denise Anderson, Coordinator for Racial and Intercultural Justice with the Presbyterian Mission Agency, and former Co-moderator of the 222nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

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<sup>2</sup> This commentary was written near the end of 2020, in anticipation of what the year 2021 would bring and how COVID-19 would continue to affect our lives.

## ASH WEDNESDAY

### AGAIN & AGAIN, WE'RE INVITED IN (CONT.)

#### GUIDING Q'S

- After deep self-reflection, what acts of stewardship, prayer, or allyship do you realize you do for show, for approval, or simply out of rote habit? How could those practices, instead, invite you into fuller ways of being?
- What rhythms, practices, or intentions are you committing to this Lenten season?
- Scholar of biblical interpretation, Dr. Obery M. Hendricks Jr., asserts: "In fact, there are no individual petitions anywhere in the Lord's Prayer; it is always 'our' or 'us' or 'we.' In this way Jesus makes certain to focus the disciples' gaze not on their personal needs and circumstances, but on the plight of their people."<sup>3</sup> Study the historical and sociopolitical layers of the Lord's Prayer. How does this ancient prayer shape us into more faithful disciples today?

#### FURTHER READING & RESEARCH

**Read:** "Which Jesus Shall We Teach?" By Obery M. Hendricks Jr., Ph. D. Lecture given at the "2009 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture: Sharing Not Only the Gospel, But Also Our Lives."

Published on [ptsem.edu.youthlectures.ptsem.edu/?action=tei&id=youth-2009-03](http://ptsem.edu.youthlectures.ptsem.edu/?action=tei&id=youth-2009-03).

(Note: In pages 5-7 of the published lecture, Hendricks offers a thorough historical and theological analysis of the Lord's Prayer.)

**Read:** "Ash Wednesday: We've Got Work to Do." By Dr. Wilda Gafney, Ph.D. Published on [Wilgafney.com](http://Wilgafney.com).

February 22, 2021. [wilgafney.com/2012/02/22/ash-wednesday-weve-got-work-to-do](http://wilgafney.com/2012/02/22/ash-wednesday-weve-got-work-to-do).

(Note: Gafney's historical and exegetical analysis of the Isaiah passage.)

**Read:** The Maori Lord's Prayer and consider including it in your worship: *A New Zealand Prayer Book*.

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(Note: You can read the full prayer on this blog: [livinghour.org/lords-prayer/new-zealand-maori](http://livinghour.org/lords-prayer/new-zealand-maori).)



#### INVITED IN

BY LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN  
INSPIRED BY MATTHEW 6:1-21



#### DAWN

BY HANNAH GARRITY  
INSPIRED BY ISAIAH 58:1-12

<sup>3</sup> Obery M. Hendricks Jr., Ph. D. "Which Jesus Shall We Teach?" Lecture given at the "2009 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture: Sharing Not Only the Gospel, But Also Our Lives." Published on [ptsem.edu.youthlectures.ptsem.edu/?action=tei&id=youth-2009-03](http://ptsem.edu.youthlectures.ptsem.edu/?action=tei&id=youth-2009-03).