



I've been
meaning
to ask...

a series for curiosity,
courage, & connection

Sermon planning guide

Featuring Biblical commentary by Dr. Raj Nadella,
Rev. Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum, Rev. Remington
Johnson, & Rev. Aisha Brooks-Johnson

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 week in this series, we have included theme connections, biblical commentary, guiding questions, and links to further reading and materials.¹ We hope these offer a few ways of approaching and thinking about the texts in light of our theme. Ideally, we imagine you will use this guide as a companion to the poetry, visual art, study journal, video vignettes, and materials in the bundle—allowing all of the words, images, and ideas to cross-pollinate. You can find full-length artist statements inspired by each of the focal texts listed in this guide in our Visual Art Collection. Consider mapping out your ideas in our accompanying Sermon Planning Grid.

About the theme, *I've been meaning to ask...*

In creating this series, we started by asking ourselves questions: *"How can we listen to one another? How do we find connection despite distance? How do we create space for compassionate dialogue and for seeking the holy in one another?"*

While the challenges of becoming beloved community to one another are endless, these questions are simple. We quickly recognized that all courageous conversations begin with simple questions and the curiosity to truly listen. We landed on our leading question, *"I've been meaning to ask..."* because it conveys intentionality, warmth, curiosity, and consideration. In essence, this question also implies the following statements: *"I've been thinking about you and I've been wanting to check in... You've been on my mind... I haven't known how to have this conversation, but I'm getting started with a question."* The ellipses symbolize the main objective of this series: to cultivate courageous conversations—and to keep having them, even if we need to pause. Our weekly sub-themes provide a trajectory for going deeper. As you can see, these questions aren't surface level; they invite us to share our pain and seek ways to care for one another.

May this series help us to behold each other as images of the divine. May it help us strengthen our capacity for empathy and compassion. May it remind us of the power of asking unassuming questions. May it show us that courage is rooted in the heart. Through vulnerability and authenticity, may our courageous conversations lead us to glimpse hope, joy, and beauty—and to become the community God created us to be.

Please note: In this worship series, we wish to avoid glorifying a false sense of unity that glosses over or ignores inequities and real harm done. We acknowledge how marginalized groups and individuals who've survived trauma are often urged to forgive and forget without accountability or repair; we want to avoid perpetuating this pattern. We trust you will be mindful of this dynamic when implementing the series.

¹ 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.)*

How to use this series

We've designed this series for 4 weeks, though you could extend it up to 8 weeks long. It can be used anytime throughout the liturgical year. For each week, we've selected two focal scriptures to help us theologically explore our theme and weekly sub-themes. We hope you will customize this series to best fit your context. The two weekly focal scriptures give you flexibility to choose your preaching text(s) and to guide your community in deeper biblical study.

Theme reflections from the Sanctified Art team

"During the pandemic, I've experienced a general sense of feeling pulled apart—like my relationships are slowly and inexplicably being ripped apart at the seams. With mounting isolation, incendiary social media posts, distrust, conspiracy theories, and divergent news broadcasts, I've seen this chasm emerge. People I've loved and respected for my whole life have become like strangers to me, and bridging that divide feels impossible. Conversations that were once simple have now become like walking in a minefield. I think we've lost sight of the nuance and complexity of our neighbors and even those closest to us. We cling to labels, assumptions, and limited understandings, using them as materials to construct barriers and false, insufficient caricatures of one another. I long to return to the wisdom of our common humanity. This worship series theme feels necessary, if not inevitable. *I've been meaning to ask. . .* this phrase implies intention and interest. It's a starting point; one that feels familiar, warm, and inviting. I believe this theme and the sub-theme questions model a way of finding connection through curiosity. Can we dismantle our barriers and discover one another again? Or maybe for the first time? Perhaps we'll find courage through these conversations, and together, find a new way forward. That's my hope, at least."

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

"After years of hate rhetoric, how do we speak to those with whom we disagree? After a long span of social distance, how do we talk to one another in person again? In an age of propaganda, how do we discern and discuss reality? I am inspired by the theme, *I've been meaning to ask. . .* because it is personal and personable. It is both surface level and extremely deep. It also touches on the simple ways that love and relationship are shared." —Hannah Garrity, Founding Creative Partner

"When our team got together to discern what our next series might be, one thing was clear: people were feeling disconnected. We each went around the circle sharing stories of loneliness during the pandemic, physical isolation, concern for those feeling disconnected from the Church, and grief over the enormous divides in our country politically. With all of these concerns at the forefront of our minds, we began by asking: what stories in scripture speak to these divides in our lives? What does the Church have to say about building relationships? How do we foster and model genuine and authentic connection in this socially-distant season? How do we get to know one another—truly and deeply? What was born from these questions was the series, *I've been meaning to ask. . .* The title alone carries a message of thoughtfulness in it, for we utter these words when we've been thinking of someone. However, the title also hints to the sensitivity that vulnerability invites. So my hope for you in this series is that you will dig deep. I pray you will use these guiding questions to better know the people you sit next to in the pews each week, as well as those you may have never spoken with before. I am confident the kingdom of God looks like deep, meaningful connection. May it begin again here." —Rev. Sarah Are, Founding Creative Partner

Theme reflections from the Sanctified Art team *(cont.)*

"In the middle of the November 2020 US election season, my next-door neighbor walked out to his front yard one day while I was planting shrubs in mine. Political signs for different candidates loomed like silent silhouettes behind us. Though we've shared lots of small talk over the years, on this day, my neighbor leaned on the fence that divides us and, after complimenting my rhododendrons, asked, 'So, do you have family in the area?' I talked about my cousins who live nearby, about my parents who quit their jobs to move to the mountains as newlyweds, about the many generations before me who had spent summers here, making it a temporary and permanent home. And he told me about his large family, the many cousins and siblings who have called these same mountains home. After a while, he went back into his house and I returned to my shrubs. Our conversation did not unite us or reconcile our differing worldviews. But he essentially said to me, 'I've been meaning to ask. . . where are you from?' And through curiosity and listening, we remembered that we are born of the same dust to which we will one day return. This series alone will not heal our deep divisions or unify us in perfect harmony. But, perhaps one question at a time, we will remember how to stay curious, to keep asking, to keep listening, and to keep seeking the face of God in each other."

—Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, Founder, Creative Director

The guiding principles of this series

... where are you from?

We believe everyone is beloved, shaped from the dust of the earth and the breath of God. Everyone has a story to tell. Our stories are messy and beautiful, painful and hopeful—being written and rewritten over time. We commit to disrupting our assumptions and staying curious.

... where does it hurt?

We believe everyone carries hurt and has the capacity to acknowledge the pain of others. We believe God draws close to us in every moment of suffering. We commit to vulnerability and compassion.

... what do you need?

We believe everyone has needs, but each of us needs different things at different times. We believe God calls us to care for one another—in seasons of joy, transition, and hardship. We commit to listening and being present.

... where do we go from here?

We believe courageous conversations have the power to change and transform us. We believe God bridges connections in unexpected ways. We commit to continuing the conversation.

Week 1 I've been meaning to ask... where are you from?

Focal scriptures Genesis 2:4b-15 | John 1:35-51

Theme connections

In order to build connection and trust, we need to listen to each other's stories and experiences to learn who and what has shaped us. We also need to feel seen and known for who we are. In this first week, we hope to affirm the particularity of our identities while also acknowledging our common ground. Formed from the dust and God's very breath in the garden of Eden, we have a common home, a shared birthplace, and a collective calling: to sustain and care for all of creation. The story of Jesus calling the disciples provides a helpful charge for the whole series: to "come and see" what the journey holds. In this first week, we wish to address how the question, "Where are you from?" is sometimes coupled with assumptions, judgments, and even microaggressions—all of which can be exhausting and painful to receive. Our hope is to acknowledge, disrupt, and release the assumptions we hold about others.

Commentary on Genesis 2:4b-15 | By Dr. Raj Nadella

At some point in our lives, most of us have been asked that loaded question, "Where are you from?" I often wonder how Adam/humanity might have responded to it. Obviously, Adam was from the ground. But there are important details that merit attention, and God is in those details. God formed humanity from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, making Adam a living being. How exactly did God breathe into Adam's nostrils? God utters things into existence in Genesis 1 but is more hands-on in this chapter. God forms humanity, makes all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, plants a garden, and lets water flow from the garden. Later, God takes Adam and puts them in the garden to till it. So, I can picture God carefully crafting different parts of the body, then kneeling over Adam and breathing the breath of life into nostrils.

Much of this story is about mutuality, symbiosis, and interdependence. Adam was formed from the ground and was, in turn, asked to till it. The Hebrew word *abad* has the connotation of doing labor for the land and serving it. Adam comes from the land and is sustained by it, but also serves the land. Similarly, there is a symbiotic relationship between other parts of creation. The earth gave rise to the river and the river, in turn, watered the garden. God is in the middle of this story breathing the breath of life but also promoting mutual, life-giving relationships between different parts of creation.

As I watched the image of Derek Chauvin kneeling over George Floyd for several minutes, extinguishing his breath and causing his death, I could not help but to juxtapose it with the image of God kneeling over Adam to breathe life into the nostrils of humanity, making them living beings. As people of faith, how do we foster relationships that are defined by mutuality? Are we engaging in life-affirming practices that breathe life into others—both human and non-human?

—Dr. Raj Nadella, The Samuel A. Cartledge Associate Professor of New Testament
at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA

Commentary on John 1:35-51 | By Dr. Raj Nadella

Curiosity runs rampant in this story and Jesus is the primary focus of such curiosity. John had already known Jesus as the Lamb of God and invited his disciples to meet him. The two disciples who follow Jesus apparently want to know where he is staying, but they ask questions only after he gives them permission. They are respectful of his space and enter it only at his invitation. It is the kind of healthy curiosity that is eager to engage others but is unintrusive.

But the disciples call Jesus a Rabbi, a term that does not capture his true identity in John. Instead of answering their question (*where are you staying?*), Jesus says, "Come and you will see." The Greek word for seeing in this context is *horaw/oida*, which literally means "know, perceive, understand." Jesus seems to suggest that the disciples called him Rabbi because they did not fully perceive him. He invites them to his place so that they can perceive him. Jesus is inviting them to a deeper level of curiosity, one that entails a willingness to learn as well as unlearn prior assumptions. Such curiosity transcends superficial knowledge and requires greater investment of one's time and resources. The disciples spent the day with him and called him Messiah.

Curiosity is contagious. Andrew, who followed Jesus, introduces him to his brother Simon. Philip introduces him to Nathanael, who wishes to know if anything good can come out of Nazareth. "Come and see," says Philip. The subtext is: "Don't arrive at premature conclusions about anyone, or otherize them based on insufficient knowledge." Curiosity is also a two-way street. Nathanael hears about Jesus and approaches him, but Jesus had already learned about him enough to call him a person without deceit.

How do we cultivate deeper curiosity that grants a fuller understanding of others, especially those who look, dress, and think differently? It requires investment of sufficient time and resources to learn about them, a commitment to unlearning prior assumptions when needed, and a healthy curiosity that engages others while respecting their space.

—Dr. Raj Nadella, The Samuel A. Cartledge Associate Professor of New Testament
at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA

Guiding Q's

- Additional follow-up questions this sub-theme ignites: What's your story? Where's home? What makes you, you? How has the particularity of place shaped who you are? Whose are you? Who are your people? What assumptions do you need to disrupt? Where is God calling you to "come and see"?
- Traced back to Priestly sources in the 6th century BCE, the poetry of Genesis was most likely composed for liturgical purposes, to be addressed to exiles. It served as a refutation of Babylonian theology and power—forces that aimed to strip the Israelites of their heritage, their culture, and their place in the family of things. The Babylonian gods seemed to control the future—they seemingly had defeated the God of Israel, and so, stripping the Israelites of their past and future was to remove their sense of belonging in time and space, making them disposable, useless, and deserving of the violence done to them. Through this historical and literary lens, how might this creation narrative serve as a pathway to restoration and repair?
- In Genesis 2, the garden of Eden contains a flowing river that divides into four headwaters. Each river flows out to a new region, bringing abundance to the land it nourishes. How does this imagery paint a vision of abundance that is both diverse and unifying?
- In his commentary, Dr. Raj Nadella asserts that curiosity should be consensual, contagious, and a two-way street. Describe when you have experienced or witnessed this kind of curiosity. How are you cultivating deeper curiosity that grants a fuller understanding of others?
- In her artist statement for "Come and See," Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman claims that each disciple in John 1 has a glimpse of who Jesus is; together they form a patchwork understanding. She writes, "We need one another to discover the fullness of who Jesus is." When has someone else granted you a fuller understanding of God?

Week 1 I've been meaning to ask... where are you from? *(cont.)*

Further reading & research

Watch "Where are you from?" Video Vignette by Dr. Raj Nadella. Published by A Sanctified Art LLC. 2021.

(Note: Our video vignettes are included in the I've been meaning to ask... bundle. We hope you might be able to utilize these short videos in worship and/or small groups.)

Watch "Queen Latifah Discovers Ancestor's Emancipation Document," Clip: Season 6 Episode 4, *Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.* A production of PBS. Aired 1/14/20.

pbs.org/video/ancestors-freed-slavery-nfwc2j

(Note: For many, ancestral stories contain painful memories—or the void of missing information due to adoption, enslavement, genocide, or other forms of erasure. The Finding Your Roots series with historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr. provides many glimpses of ancestral stories where pain and promise are interwoven. Find more clips and episodes here: pbs.org/weta/finding-your-roots)

Read The resources and ideas listed on this webpage, "Earth Day Sunday 2018: Sense of Place" by *Creation Justice Ministries*: creationjustice.org/place.html.

(Note: These resources offer ways churches can honor the sacredness and history of place. In particular, you might find value in reading the pamphlet, "Sense of Place": presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/earthday2018_pc.pdf)

Read "Honor Native Land: A Guide and Call to Acknowledgement" by the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture: usdac.us/nativeland.

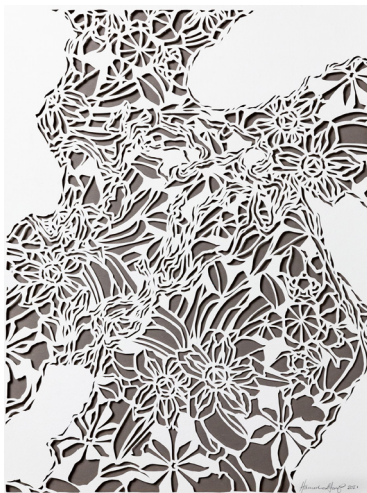
(Note: Consider including a land acknowledgement in your worship services. You can locate the native inhabitants of your geographical region using the Tribal Directory Assessment Tool: egis.hud.gov/tdat)

Read "Kaitlin Curtice" A Sample Profile from the book, *Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints* by Daneen Akers. Published on holyytroublemakers.com/kaitlin.

(Note: Potawatomi author, Kaitlin Curtice, shares about her journey reconnecting to her indigenous heritage and how that shifted her faith journey. In the interview, Curtice remarks, "Our cultural stories are all interconnected and fit together like a big, beautiful puzzle. That's why we need all of them.")

Listen "Nicole Chung: Family Lore," on the *Everything Happens* podcast hosted by Kate Bowler. March 21, 2021. katebowler.com/podcasts/nicole-chung-family-lore.

(Note: Nicole Chung shares about the complexities of her adoption story and her journey to uncover her Korean heritage. At the end of the interview, host Kate Bowler says, "Nicole didn't get an easy answer to the question of her life: where do I belong? But she reminds me that regardless of a story's incompleteness, it still has the capacity to hold incredible love." Read Kate Bowler's blessing to those who find themselves "living in the gray" at the end of the interview transcript.)



Four Rivers of Eden
by Hannah Garrity
Inspired by Genesis 2:4b-15



Come & See
by Lauren Wright Pittman
Inspired by John 1:35-51