

**The Samaritan Institute  
at  
The Sunshine Cathedral**

**\*Forty Days with God**

**A Six Week Lenten Study Course**

\*Course curriculum designed and prepared by  
The Reverend Dr. Durrell Watkins

*"Here at the Sunshine Cathedral, we are  
seekers and students of Truth, empowered  
by Spirit, sharing the Light with the World"*

Sunshine Cathedral  
is  
A Metropolitan Community Church  
Affiliated with The Center for Progressive Christianity

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The following six lessons can be studied independently or in small home groups.

## **Lent 1**

**Ice Breaker:** If you were a performer, you might have a stage name. One method for choosing a stage name is to use the name of your first pet and combine it with the name of the first street you lived on...it doesn't always work perfectly (my name would be *Duchess Route Nine*). Still, just for fun, using the name of your first pet and your first street, what would your stage name be?

### **Introduction to the Series:**

*Lent is a period of 40 days (that lasts 46 days because we don't count Sundays) leading up to Easter. Lent is a period of preparation for renewal in our own lives. By observing Lent, many of us find that Easter becomes more real and more personal for us because we have spent an intentional period of time preparing for it!*

*There are several disciplines we can engage in our observance of Lent. Some people increase their financial giving to church or other charitable causes during Lent. Some people fast on Fridays (eating less and abstaining from meat). Some people "give up" something that is getting in their way of spiritual growth. Some people "take on" something that will improve the quality of their lives. Some people simply commit to worshiping more often. Some people commit to journaling or daily prayer or meditation. Of course, one could adopt more than one of these disciplines, but for many of us, any one of them would be a challenge and would invite new blessings into our lives.*

*One of the disciplines you have apparently agreed to "try on" is meeting weekly to discuss scripture and to pray together. This is a wonderful commitment and it may enrich your spiritual development greatly over the next six weeks. If nothing else, it may help you feel more connected to people in your church or it may allow you to make new friends. This weekly gathering for discussion and prayer may also help you feel closer to God. Whatever disciplines are guiding you through Lent, remember that the season is leading us to Easter joy. Have a blessed and holy Lent!*

### **Why 40?**

Have you ever noticed how many times the number 40 pops up in scripture? During Lent we will look at just six scripture passages that mention a period of 40 days, but there are other passages where the number 40 is used. Why do you suppose 40 is repeated so often in the bible?

Of course we can't know for certain what 40 means, or if it always means the same thing, but that it is used so often suggests that it is meant to symbolize something. One possibility is that it simply suggests a long period of time. 40 days of rain or 40 days on a mountain or 40 years of wandering about lost could symbolize a prolonged period of searching for God's help or God's will. Another possibility is that the ancients thought the earth was flat, with four corners. Four representing the "ends" of the earth and multiplied by

10 (representing a tremendous increase) might suggest that “all the earth” or the whole earth and all who inhabit it are part of God’s plan and are loved by God. Another possibility is that one story mentions 40 and after that other authors also use the number 40 to suggest that the God of our past is also the God of our present and of our future...the God of our previous stories remains with us to guide, comfort, strengthen, and bless us.

So, whatever the number 40 may have meant to the biblical writers, it is clear that it was a significant symbol for them. With that in mind, we will examine a few stories that use that number and we will consider how those stories are relevant for us today.

### **Scripture for Week 1: Genesis 7.4-5, 12**

*‘Seven days from now, I [the Eternal] will bring rain down on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and so I will wipe out from the surface of the earth every moving creature that I have made.’ And Noah did just as the Eternal had instructed him...And for forty days and forty nights heavy rain poured down on the earth.*

Now, without getting into ancient flood narratives (and there are quite a few), and without struggling too much with ancient theologies that attributed natural disasters to divine wrath, let’s just play with the imagery of a forty day flood.

Have you ever felt as if you were drowning in work? Have you ever felt as if you were being flooded with bad news? Do the bills ever keep pouring in faster than your income seems to? Have fears or regrets washed over you making you feel as if your whole world was submerged in negativity? If you have ever had this experience, then this story may have meaning for you!

Let’s look at the good news that is woven through this familiar flood story:

1. Noah’s world is being flooded (whether in an allegorical or literal sense). But he is given hope...even though the flood waters are coming, there is a way for him to find safety. It may take work on his part, it may take faith or hope or a willingness to look ridiculous or even to be wrong, but there are options available to him. Even though things are difficult, Noah still has a purpose, and he still has his family, and he still has reason to hope. The floods may be devastating and they may last a long time, but they won’t be the end of the story!
2. Everything is wiped out...but not really. Noah, the story says, builds an ark that is able to house not only his family but also many animals. Not everything will be lost. Even after much is lost, there will still be something left. And by focusing on what is left more than on what is lost, Noah and his family will be able to rebuild their world. Something will be left, and with God’s help, that something may just be enough!

3. The rains lasted interminably...forty days and forty nights. But it wasn't really interminable, it just felt that way. The rain eventually stopped. The flood didn't last forever. The sun came out again, and a new beginning was possible. We may feel like we're being overrun by difficulties, but eventually the sun will emerge again. Lent lasts a long time, but not forever...it may seem difficult and somber, but it leads to good news and to joy and to indomitable hope. Lent leads to Easter! The floods give way and the sun shines again. The forty days are long and difficult, but they will not last forever. In time, they give way to a better and brighter day.

We aren't being unrealistic...of course things end badly sometimes. But the hope of religious people is that the end we see isn't the "final" end...there is always more to the story. Our actions live on after us. The love we share in life lives on after us. And so, the good we share with the world continues to bless the world; that means that we are significant no matter what we are facing in a given moment!

The job may end badly, but there are more jobs or other income possibilities.

The relationship may end badly, but we still have ways of expressing and sharing our love for others.

The disease may go into remission (and we can certainly hope), but if it doesn't we can still live lives of quality and joy and purpose.

The floods may be powerful and may last a long time, but they don't define us and beyond them there is something else. The love of God remains with us through it all, and beyond the flood the love of God still endures. So we dare to hope, and we face the storms and we know that the longest deluge can't drown our sacred value or our eternal significance.

Our sacred stories remind us that we aren't the first people to face difficulties. They also remind us that we aren't facing them alone. God is with us, loving us no matter what happens. Things may get better, and we have every right to hope; but even if the situation doesn't improve, we can find peace and opportunity and the assurance that we are God's children, forever. The floods may come, but the sun will also shine again. This surely gives us comfort and strength for our journey.

**Discuss:** Have you ever faced a flood in your life? How did it finally resolve itself? Was there a blessing on the other side of it? What hope can you claim in the time of life's storms? How do our sacred stories give you courage?

**Circle Prayer:** Standing in a circle, holding hands, just say in a word or two something you would like people to remember in prayer for the upcoming week. Then, starting with one person and going around the circle, just say a one or two line prayer...you can pray for the group, for the church, for someone on your heart, for peace in the world, for people on the church's

prayer list...just pray. If you aren't comfortable praying aloud in front of people, just gently squeeze the next person's hand to let them know to pass you. Your silent prayers are effective too.

## Lent 2

**Ice Breaker:** What was your favorite childhood story? Why was it important to you? Do any images from that story continue to inspire you today?

### **Scripture for Week 2: Exodus 34.27-29**

*The Eternal said to Moses, 'Write down these words, for in accordance with them I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.' So Moses stayed there with The Eternal for forty days and forty nights, without eating any food or drinking any water, and he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.*

*As Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the commandments in his hands, he did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant while he conversed with The Eternal.*

The passage from Exodus 34 actually offers some useful spiritual disciplines we can practice during Lent, or at any time we want to deepen our spiritual experience. What are they?

1. Writing as a Spiritual Exercise: God said to Moses, "Write down these words..." Writing is a wonderful way of getting clarity. (a) When we have goals, we can write them down and use our written list to pray about our goals, or to prioritize them. Writing them gives us something to focus on and when we are focused we accomplish our goals more easily. (b) We can also write prayers as a way of expressing our deepest feelings and yearnings. When we don't know what or how to pray, it sometimes helps to write our prayers. (c) When we are "stuck" in a decision making process, or we are seeking inspiration, it can be helpful to just to write. We can write the alphabet, or our name, or random non-sense sentences like "My mind is blank, I cannot think." And then, a sudden burst of inspiration or insight might strike and we find ourselves writing something that is very useful for us. When we need to hear the Voice of Wisdom, a good technique is to simply write.
2. Sitting with an Issue as a Spiritual Exercise: "Moses stayed there...forty days and forty nights." Sometimes we need clarity on some topic. If we ask our subconscious mind to work it out for us, and then go to sleep ("sleep on it" is advice we've been given many times!), then we often find the solution coming to us in a dream, or we wake up the next morning with a fresh new idea or a new attitude about how to approach the situation. Whether we need 40 hours or 40 minutes or 40 days or 40 winks, we can just relax and sit with an issue, or "sleep on it" and allow our own higher wisdom to give us the guidance we need!
3. Lightening Up as a Spiritual Exercise: Moses fasted for forty days and nights. His version of the fast, according to the story, was to go without food or water for a long time. Our fasts will probably not

need to be so extreme (and I for one would never deprive my body of nutrition or hydration for 40 days!), but there may be something we could give up for a while to lighten our load and make our journey easier. Guilt is something we might try living without for a few weeks! Shame is another thing we could stop dragging around with us. Resentment and regret might also be things we discard for a while. Letting go of some of our excess baggage or “lightening up” may free us to enjoy our lives more and to experience a deeper connection with the Spirit of Life.

4. Practicing Love as a Spiritual Exercise: Moses’ forty days on the mountain in the presence of God (mountains often symbolize the divine Presence in sacred literature) resulted in his having the Ten Commandments. According to Jesus, the law and the prophets, that is, the whole of scripture can be boiled down to treating others the way we’d like to be treated (Matthew 7.12). Jesus also said the greatest commandments are to love God and our neighbors (Matthew 22.36-40). The Ten Commandments are ways that we can show love for God and neighbor, but the spirit of the law is love. And once Moses had encountered the law of love, “the skin on his face [became] radiant.” Practicing love is the best way to experience the presence and power of God in our lives.

**Discuss:** Moses’ forty days with God resulted in some really good spiritual lessons. What would you like to accomplish during your forty days of Lent this year? How would you like your Lenten disciplines to help deepen or strengthen your spirituality?

### **Circle Prayer**

### **Lent 3**

**Ice Breaker:** Each person, complete the following sentence: **If I were an animal, I would be a(n)**\_\_\_\_\_. Explain why you would be the animal you named.

(How did it make you feel to identify with the animal? Strong? Beautiful? Swift? Graceful?)

### **Scripture for Week 3: Numbers 13.17, 25-28, 30-33**

*Moses sent scouts to reconnoiter the land of Canaan...after reconnoitering the land for forty days the scouts returned, met Moses and Aaron and the whole community...and they told Moses, 'The land does indeed flow with milk and honey and there is luscious fruit. However, the people there are fierce, and the towns are fortified...' Caleb spoke up, saying, 'Let's seize the land!' But the scouts answered, 'We cannot attack these people; they are too strong for us.' So they spread discouraging reports among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, 'the land we explored consumes its inhabitants! And the people we saw were veritable giants...we felt like mere grasshoppers, and so we must have seemed to them.'*

The passage we just read involves a planned invasion. We might not think that such a plan is ethical or wise, but in antiquity, war and conquest were considered normative. It is also important to know that the writer of this "history" may be remembering the events as he would like them to be rather than how they really were. Ancient histories were often more concerned with describing the significance of a person or event than with describing factual details. So, we can't know if Moses wanted to take the land by force or not. What we can explore is the attitude of the people in the story.

According to the text, Moses chooses leaders to help plan a bold initiative that will empower his people. But, the leaders forget that they are leaders. They spend 40 days focusing on problems rather than on solutions. They imagine the worst without developing a plan to make things better. They forget that part of what they are supposed to be doing is viewing the future through a lens of faith, and approaching the future with both courage and optimism. Of course there will be challenges, but there are also opportunities. These leaders surrender their leadership, and they become followers of fate rather than builders of a dream.

Moses' scouts sink into fear-based thinking. They make negative projections, and they spend so long (40 days) contemplating failure, they can't even imagine success any more. Negative thinking has become a habit, and habits are hard to break.

Remember, it only takes 21 days to form a habit, and Moses' scouts have been practicing fear and worry and dread for almost twice that long! As a result, they start seeing themselves as small and their

problems become “giants” in their imaginations. Once we see ourselves as tiny and weak and our problems as huge and invincible, we have defeated ourselves before we’ve even attempted our project. We can spend our time building up our problems, or building up ourselves. The choice is ours.

**Discuss:** What if Moses’ friends had spent 40 days planning for success instead of failure? What if they had spent 40 days looking for opportunities instead of for problems? What if they had spent 40 days telling themselves that their dreams were achievable rather than impossible? What if they had spent 40 days feeding their faith instead of their fear? More importantly, what might we achieve if we spent 40 days thinking positively and believing that we deserve Good in our lives, and that we are capable of accomplishing our goals? How might 40 days of developing a positive outlook turn some things around in our lives?

**Circle Prayer**

## Lent 4

**Ice Breaker:** Even if you know most people in the group, introduce yourself with an alliterative sentence based on the first letter of your first name. The pattern is: **I'm ADJECTIVE NAME. I like ACTION-ing NOUN.**

For example, "I'm kooky Katherine. I like kissing kittens;" or "I'm generous George. I like giving gifts." Spend a moment thinking of your alliterative sentence, and then let each person introduce himself/herself in this playful way.

### **Scripture for Week 4: 1 Kings 19.3-9**

*Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough...",* he said. *"Take my life [God]; I am no better than my ancestors."* Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel...came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

In the story from 1 Kings 19, Elijah finds himself in political trouble and he goes into hiding for his safety. The problems are so difficult, he becomes overwhelmed with depression. But a messenger comes along and encourages him and insists that he try to take care of himself. In fact, the messenger comes back a second time to encourage him again and to advise him to practice self-care. Strengthened as a result of the kind ministry of this messenger (or "angel"), Elijah was able to travel for forty days until he reached a place where he truly felt safe.

The story is full of rich imagery:

- Elijah goes into the wilderness...when fearful circumstances drive us into the unknown, that is a wilderness experience. The ancients believed that demons dwelt in desert places. Elijah is facing his fears (or trying to run from them), and those fears are his psychological demons. The desert represents his emotional struggle.
- The food appears in conjunction with a messenger ministering to him...is this reminding us that our loving actions actually nourish and refresh people? Are we being reminded that we all need a hand up sometimes? Because of the ministry of kindness that the messenger offers, Elijah summons strength he didn't have previously and he was able to go forward.

- Where did he go? To “the mountain of God.” In ancient literature, mountains are often symbols of the divine presence. Elijah is in the desert (the place of emotional struggle/dealing with his demons), but he doesn’t stay there. He is tempted to give up, but with the help of a stranger, an anonymous friend, a messenger, an “angel,” he doesn’t give up, and even though he is in the desert a long time (40 days and 40 nights), by not giving up he eventually reaches the place of security, fulfillment, peace...the place where he could experience God.

The story reminds us of some important truths for our life-journeys:

1. When we praise, encourage, show kindness to, or pray for others, we are actually offering them more soul-nourishment than we may ever know. Our loving actions can make a big difference; they may be what keep someone from giving up prematurely!
2. Sometimes we need a hand. Let’s not be too proud or too stubborn to receive the love, the kindness, the support of friends when they offer it. Such gifts of love may be just what we need to energize us enough to make it to our goal.
3. We all have “demons” (negative thoughts), but we need not stay stuck in the desert places. Of course, clinical depression should be treated by a professional, but all of us can experience counter-productive attitudes. The good news is that our thoughts produce our feelings, and we have the power to change our thoughts. When we are overwhelmed with fear, regret, or anxiety, it is important to find reasons to hope. We can have a goal and we can determine to move forward toward that goal. It may not be easy and it may take a long time, but the movement forward will keep us from feeling stuck and it will keep us from being victimized by all those negative (demonic) thoughts and feelings. The lesson is to have a goal and to keep moving toward it...as long as we are moving forward, however slowly, we are experiencing the promise that God is near.
4. If we don’t give up too soon (Elijah had to stick with it for forty days and nights...was he really crossing out days on a calendar as they passed by or does “40 days and nights” simply suggest a long and trying period of time?), we will eventually reach the place where we sense the comforting presence of God again (symbolized by Mount Horeb in the story). Of course, God was with us all the time, but when our thoughts and feelings are in the desert, we are more mindful of the demons than the divine. By accepting help when we need it, by not giving up, and by having a goal and moving steadily toward it, we will eventually reach the place where we are aware of the divine presence (mountain of God) which was available to us all the while. From the mountain top, we can finally see how the experience behind us offered blessings or at least lessons, and how the future before us is filled with opportunities and possibilities.

**Discussion:** Share your thoughts or observations about the scripture passage. Has there been a time when you were in the desert but found your way to the Mountain of God? Has there been a time when you encouraged someone and it made a difference for that person? Have you ever been encouraged in a way that energized you just when you needed it most? How did you experience grace in these circumstances?

**Circle Prayer**

## **Lent 5**

**Ice Breaker:** Give each group member a small piece of paper. Ask them to write a “What if” question, such as “What if unicorns were real?” or “What if we all had three eyes?” When everyone has completed their question, ask them to pass their question to the person on their right. Next, each person writes the answer to the question they’ve received. They should answer the question as if they had written it. For example, if Todd hands his question (“What if I won the lottery?”) to Shawna, she should answer the question as if she had won the lottery, not Todd.

When everyone has written their answer, each person will read **ONLY** the question they have in front of them. Ask the person to their right to read the **ANSWER** to their question. They should then read the question on their paper and the person to their right reads the answer, etc. Even though the questions and answers are unrelated, the responses can get quite funny.

Example: Say there are three people in the group: Todd, Shawna, and Mark all write a “what if” question. Todd writes, “What if I won the lottery?” Shawna writes, “What if I were 4 inches taller?” Mark writes, “What if bull frogs could carry hand guns?” Todd then passes his question to Shawna, who passes her question to Mark, who passes his question to Todd.

Now, each person answers the question in front of them as if it was the question they had asked. Todd answers Mark’s question (as if it were his own), “What if bull frogs could carry hand guns?” by writing, “They could form a frog police force.” Shawna writes an answer to Todd’s question (“What if I won the lottery?”), “I would tell my boss off and quit my job.” And Mark writes an answer to Shawna’s question (“What if I were four inches taller?”), “I would be a freakin’ giant!”

Finally, have each person read the question they have in front of them, and then have the person next to them read the answer they have to their question. So, the dialogue goes like this:

Todd: What if bull frogs could carry hand guns?

Shawna: I would tell my boss off and quit my job!

Shawna: What if I won the lottery?

Mark: I would be a freakin’ giant!

Mark: What if I were four inches taller?

Todd: They could form a frog police force.

As you can see, sometimes the dialogue is just whacky (like Mark and Todd's exchange), but at other times, the dialogue can be very humorous (as with Todd and Shawna and Shawna and Mark).

Now...Write a "what if" question, and pass it to the person next to you. Answer the question you are given as if you wrote it. When the facilitator tells you, read the question you have been given, and then the person next to you will read their answer. See what happens!

### **Scripture for Week 5: Jonah 3.1-5, 10**

*The word of God came to Jonah again, "Set out for the great city of Ninevah, and announce to it the message that I will tell you." So Jonah made ready and went to Ninevah, according to God's bidding. Now Ninevah was an enormously large city...Jonah began his journey through the city, and had gone but a single day's walk announcing, "Forty days more and Ninevah shall be destroyed," when the people of Ninevah believed God; they proclaimed a fast and...put on sackcloth...When God saw their actions...God repented of the evil [that Jonah had declared] God was threatening to do to them; God did not carry it out.*

Jonah is called to go to the capital of the Assyrian Empire and preach to them. Jonah finds this to be a particularly onerous assignment because the Assyrians are the enemies of his people. Reluctantly (and with the help of a rather implausible big fish – see chapter 2), Jonah winds up in the land of his enemies answering the call to preach to his foes. The message he gives them is that down the road ("forty days more...") the wrath of God would wipe them out. But the people of Ninevah turned to God and asked God to spare them. God proved to be more merciful than Jonah's portrayal of God, and Ninevah was spared.

1. It's interesting that people who speak for God often suggest that God is angry, vicious, and even monstrous. But the very people who are condemned by religious leaders can turn to God for themselves and experience God in another way...they can experience the inclusive, unconditional love and mercy of God.
2. Sometimes we worry about what is coming down the road ("forty days more..."), but the goodness of God can be experienced in the present moment. Rather than tormenting ourselves about what might go wrong tomorrow, we can turn to God right now and experience God's loving embrace in this moment. Others may have said that God was against us, but we trust our experience more than their prejudices, and we may find that God is much kinder and more gracious than those who speak for God would have us believe! God isn't causing our sorrow; God is with us in the moment of sorrow

offering hope and comfort. God is available to us, loving us, showing us the grace that some who speak in God's name seem to lack.

3. The story of Jonah would have us believe that when we turn to God, God notices and responds. God saw the actions of the people of Ninevah, and God responded with grace and mercy. When we seek God in prayer, study, worship, giving, or service, we can be sure that God is available to us and is responding to our honest attempts to know God better.

**Discussion:** Think of a time when you turned to God and experienced God's presence with you. Others may not have believed God would listen to us, but we discovered for ourselves that God was better than those who sometimes speak for God. If you feel comfortable doing so, share a story of a time you knew God heard you and responded graciously.

**Circle Prayer**

## **Lent 6**

**Ice Breaker:** Who was your favorite super-hero when you were a child? Why did he or she appeal to you? If you were a super-hero today, which one would you most resemble (The Lone Ranger, Wonder Woman, Inspector Gadget, Spider Man, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, etc.) and why?

### **Scripture for Week 6: Mark 1.12-13**

*At once the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.*

The Book of Mark begins by claiming to be “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ [the son of God].

“Gospel” means *good news*. So from the start of this narrative we are given a clue that what we are about to read or hear may sound new to us but it will also be good. However, this is no pie in the sky promise...the Gospel of Mark includes storms and confrontations with demons and struggles and illness and wilderness experiences. Life isn't necessarily easy in Mark's gospel, and at the end, there is an execution. Most scholars believe that Mark's original ending is chapter 16, verse 8. That verse tells us, “[The women who visited Jesus' grave] went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Finding Jesus' tomb empty is encouraging to us because we know the story and expect the tomb to be found empty. But if we went to visit the grave of a loved one and the grave was empty, we would probably find the experience very unsettling. Life is full of unsettling events, but the Good News is that we can remember who we are even when difficult times hit. We can be encouraged in the hard times and we can allow ourselves to experience joy in the good times.

Life has ups and downs, good times and difficult times, joy and sorrow, anticipation and regret, grief and comfort, fear and relief, pain and healing. But the ups and downs are experiences, and of course, experiences change. Sometimes things go our way, others times...not so much. But the Good News is that we don't have to be victims of our circumstances. We can know that we are people of sacred value even when things aren't going well. We can know that we are lovable just as we are...no matter what.

By verse 9 of the first chapter of Mark's gospel, Jesus is being baptized and at his baptism he has a vision of the heavens opening and the voice of God affirming him. Later we'll see Jesus experiencing some difficulties in life, but we know who Jesus is...no matter what happens, no matter how dicey things get later on, we know from the beginning that Jesus is God's “beloved child with whom [God is] well pleased.” That is a powerful lesson for us! We are not our circumstances. In good times and bad times, we are the children of God, loved by God, valued by God,

cherished by God...God is well pleased with us! Situations and circumstances are bound to change, but what can remain constant is our assurance of our sacred value. We are God's children with whom God is well pleased!

Immediately following Jesus' baptism experience where he hears who he truly is...God's child, filled with God's love, anointed with God's spirit, blessed with God's favor...he is then "driven" (sounds unpleasant) into the wilderness. Right after a wonderful experience (his baptism), Jesus had a difficult experience (the desert). But he can handle the difficult experience because he knows who he is now...he is God's child with whom God is well pleased!

Jesus' wilderness experience was a pretty lengthy one (40 days), but knowing who he was and trusting in God's love for him sustained him. In fact, his higher thoughts ("angels") ministered to him even as he was tempted by his worst fears and most negative inclinations ("Satan"). Remembering who he was helped him survive the wilderness experience and he emerged from that desert ready to begin a ministry that would change the world.

We worship in our progressive, positive, practical spiritual environment because we need to hear who we really are and how enormous our potential really is. Once we know that, we can face the changes and chances in life. Negative thoughts and feelings ("Satan") may attack, but we'll have higher thoughts ("angels") to comfort, guide, and minister to us. We can survive the hard times, and emerge from our wilderness with the self-confidence and grace to change our world.

**Discussion:** Without disclosing the details of your times in an emotional wilderness, think of the "angels" who have ministered to you, helping you navigate the wilderness and emerge from it ready to be a bright light to the world. Was your angel a song? A poem? A story? A friend? A lover? A grandmother? An uncle? A neighbor? A teacher? An insight? An inner assurance? Think of the times the angels (messengers of hope, of grace, higher thoughts from within yourself or from the wisdom or love shared by someone else) ministered to you. Think of the times God used you as an angel to lift up someone else?

If we know who we really are, and if we believe in God's unconditional and all-inclusive love, we'll recognize the angels when they come to give us aid. Our faith might not keep us out of the wilderness, but it can help us emerge from the wilderness stronger than ever before. What angel has helped you believe (or has encouraged you to be willing to believe) that you are God's child with whom God is well pleased? Did you find that revelation to be a substantial blessing? How did the angels minister to you until you could find your way out of the wilderness again?

**Circle Prayer**

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