

STORIES — AND — RITUALS

LESSON 13

Stories & Rituals: The Bible in Broad Strokes

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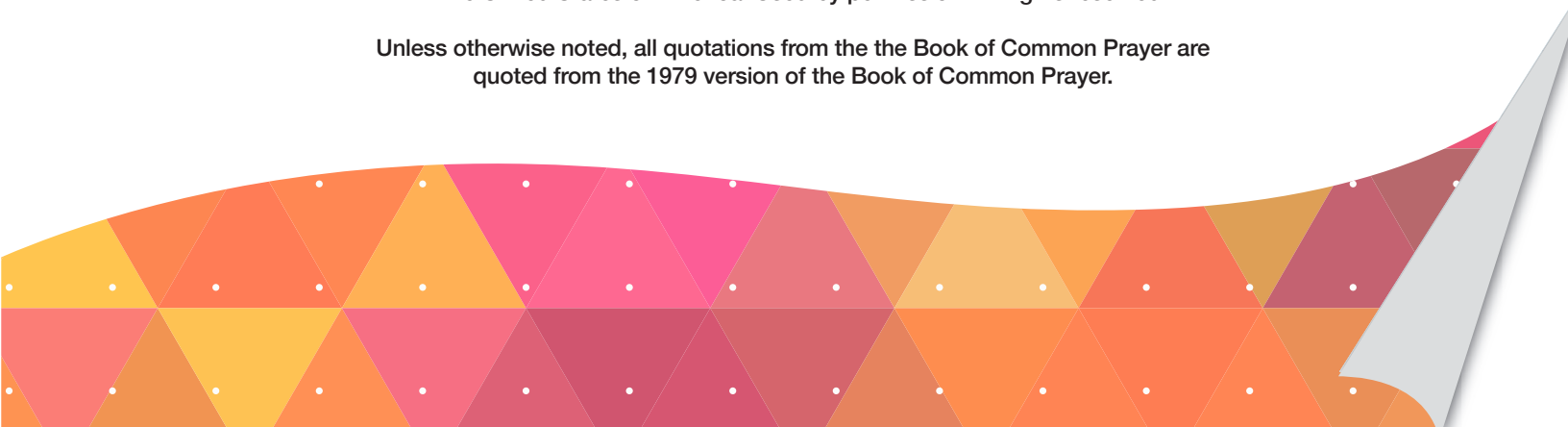
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Return to the Lord Your God

Texts: Malachi 3:1-7

Big Idea: God is always ready to meet us.

Lesson Objectives

Participants will:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of trust by working with a partner to complete an obstacle course.
2. Understand that God is always ready to meet us by engaging in a re-telling of the Malachi text.
3. Illustrate their understanding of returning to God by coloring their thoughts and prayers.

ACTIVITY (TIME)

Dive In (10 minutes)
Group Check-In

Community Builder (15 minutes)
Blinded Trust

The Story (15 minutes)
Return to the Lord Your God

The Ritual (15 minutes)
Return in Color

Dig Deeper (10 minutes)
Retell the Story!

Wrap it Up (5 minutes)
Closing Prayer

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Nothing

- Objects to create an obstacle course
- Blindfolds

- Copy of Lesson Sheet 13.1

- Soft, instrumental music (optional)
- Method for playing music (optional)
- Crayons, markers, or other coloring supplies

- Bibles
- Smartphones, tablets, or other devices that can connect to the Internet

- Nothing

LESSON OVERVIEW



What's the Story?

Today's story is found in Malachi 3:1-7. Traditionally, Malachi is seen as one of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. The name "Malachi" means "my messenger" or "my angel." Malachi was a prophet who brought God's teachings to the people. In the Christian Biblical narrative, the book of Malachi comes at the very end of the Old Testament—setting the stage for the arrival of Jesus in the Gospels.

Historically, the book takes place after the return of the exiles from Babylon. Although life in their homeland was restored, these exiles still faced many challenges. In this particular passage, we discover that the messenger whom God is sending to fulfill the covenant with humanity has not arrived. In this passage, the prophet reminds God's people that they are not perfect and that judgment will one day come.

Although the words of this passage may seem harsh at times, there is also hope in the prophet's message. Malachi reminds us that God waits for us to return, repent, and reconcile. When we make the decision to do so, God will be there, waiting for us to return.



What's the "Big Idea?"

Today's lesson focuses on the idea that *God is always ready to meet us*. In Malachi 3:6, God says to us, "return to me and I will return to you." There are many things that cause a broken relationship between us and God. Although there are things that break this relationship, God is still there waiting for us to return and mend the brokenness. God never leaves us and is ready to meet us when we return.



What's the Symbol?

In many cases, when people are ready to meet and greet us, they wait for us with open and loving arms. God is the same way. Find a photo of someone awaiting another person with open and loving arms. Place this photo in a frame (if possible) to keep on your altar for this lesson.



What's the Ritual?

Today's ritual will invite participants into a time of prayer through the practice of "praying in color." You will walk your group through a series of questions and reflections, and individuals will be invited to color their response to these reflections on a sheet of paper. The questions will invite participants to think about what keeps their relationships with God broken, and how they can return to a waiting and loving God.



Setting Up Your Space

Set up your "altar" area. Set up a table and cover it with fabric or linen. On the table, place a few candles and a large cross. Place your photo symbol on the altar in a place where everyone will see it. Have permanent markers and supplies for the ritual and the Dig Deeper activity nearby. If you are using the Community Builder activity, set up the challenge.

DIVE IN (10 MINUTES)

Group Check-In

Materials:

- Nothing

During the session:

- Open your session with a quick prayer. Use this one or a prayer of your own:
Holy Lord, open our eyes, ears, and hearts to see your love and faithfulness in the world around us. Help us see your love for us in your Word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.
- **Let's start our time together by sharing some of the great and not-so-great things that have happened to us this week. What were the high points and low points of your week? Go around the group and invite everyone to share.**

COMMUNITY BUILDER (15 MINUTES)

Blinded Trust

Materials:

- Objects to create an obstacle course
- Blindfolds (one for every two participants)

Special Note: This activity requires space. Be sure to set up this lesson in an area where you can safely set up an obstacle course.

Before the session:

- Gather chairs or other free-standing objects you can use to set up an obstacle course. If you have a large group, you may wish to set up two obstacle courses

During the session:

- Ask students to split into pairs. Hand each pair a blindfold. **Today we are going to practice trusting each other while completing a challenge. Pick one partner to wear a blindfold. This partner should stand at the start of the obstacle course I have set up.**
- Invite the partner to be blindfolded to stand in front of the obstacle course. **The person who is not blindfolded should stand at the other end of the obstacle course. Your job is to safely navigate your partner through the course, only using your voice.**
- Invite the pair to lead each other through the obstacle course. If needed, invite the blindfolded participant to ask clarification questions. This exercise is about trust and communication.

COMMUNITY BUILDER - CONTINUED

- Once one partner pair has safely completed the obstacle course, invite another pair to complete the course. Continue inviting pairs to complete the course until every person in your group has completed the course blindfolded (*partners will eventually have to switch places*).
- **How did you feel as you completed the obstacle course? Did knowing that your partner was at the end of course waiting to meet you bring you comfort? How?**



THE STORY (15 MINUTES)

Return to the Lord Your God

Materials:

- Copy of Lesson Sheet 13.1

Before the session:

- Make a copy of Lesson Sheet 13.1
- Practice reading through the story several times so you are familiar with it.

During the session:

- Tell the story on Lesson Sheet 13.1.
- **After the story, ask: What is this story telling us about God?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: God always comes to us; God is waiting for us to return; God is ready to meet us when we decide to return.]*
- **What is this story telling us about humanity?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: We all have broken the relationship between us and God through sin; we return to God; when we return, we have the opportunity to reconcile ourselves to God.]*
- **What is this story telling us about the world?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: The world awaits God's return; the world is full of opportunities for us to return to God and be reconciled with God and with each other.]*
- **Our Christian tradition teaches us that humanity isn't perfect. If you look at the narrative of the Bible, you see and read that people have turned away from God and broken God's commandments. However, we also are taught that God is waiting for us to return and repair the broken relationships we may have. God is waiting to meet us and guide us through the ups and downs of life.**



THE RITUAL

(15 MINUTES)

Return in Color

Materials:

- Soft, instrumental music (optional)
- Method for playing music (optional)
- Paper
- Crayons, markers, or other art supplies

During the session:

- If you are playing music, begin playing it softly.
- **What do you think it means to “return to God?” Let’s take some time to reflect on the meaning of this phrase.**
- Hand each participant a sheet of paper and some crayons or markers.
- **In a moment, I am going to invite you to find a spot in the room. Take your paper and coloring supplies with you. Then, I am going to read you some questions. You will think about your answers to the questions, and then color something to represent your answers on the paper.**
- Invite participants to find a space where they can feel comfortable. People should make themselves comfortable but able to complete the activity.
- **Today we are going to spend some time “praying in color.” Sometimes it is hard for us to vocalize our prayers to God. Using the coloring supplies, I want you to think about one thing that may have broken your relationship with God. Once you think about this thing, color or draw your thoughts about it in the center of your paper.**
- Give participants some time to think and color. Once everyone is about finished, continue.
- **There are things that keep us from God. But, God calls us to think about these things, return, and reconcile ourselves. What does it mean to you to “return to God?” Find a new spot on your paper and spend time coloring or drawing something that reminds you of the meaning of this phrase.**
- Give participants some time to think and color. Once everyone is about finished, continue.
- **When we make the decision to return, we know that God is ready to meet us. What does it mean to you to know that God is ready to meet you? Find a new spot on your paper and spend time coloring or drawing something that reminds you of this.**
- Give participants some time to think and color. Once everyone is about finished, continue.
- **Take a moment to look at your drawings. What prayers, thoughts or feelings come to mind? If you have any additional prayers or thoughts for God, color them in any blank space you have on your paper.**
- Give everyone time to finish their drawings. Then, invite the large group back together.
- **Take your drawings with you. Hang them in a spot where you will always see them and use them for your own personal prayer.**

DIG DEEPER

(10 MINUTES)

Retell the Story!

Materials:

- Bibles
- Smartphone, tablet, or other device that can connect to the Internet (optional)

During the session:

- Split students into groups of three or four. Give each group a Bible.
- Invite groups to find today's story in their Bibles (Malachi 3:1-7).
- **Our Biblical tradition teaches us that Malachi was a prophet who brought God's Word to the people. With your group, read through the words of the prophet again and create a skit that tells others about God's words.**
- Invite groups to find a space in which to work. Have them read through the story, and then work with their other group members in order to create a short skit about the story.
- Give groups time to create and practice their skits. Then, bring everyone back together and invite each group to share their skits.
- Record video of the skits if you wish to capture the activity on film.

WRAP IT UP

(5 MINUTES)

Closing Prayer

Invite the group to share any prayer concerns or requests they may have for the week. Close your time together in prayer. Use the following or pray your own prayer:

Almighty God, you reach out to us and are always ready to meet us when we return to you. Help us remember that you are always with us and that we can return to you. Open our hearts and minds to welcome your love and grace in our lives. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Lesson Sheet 13.1

Return to the Lord Your God

The words of the Lord, as told by the prophet Malachi:

Look! A messenger is coming—I am sending someone to prepare the way before me. Suddenly, this messenger will arrive in the Temple. This will be the messenger of the Covenant; this person is the one you have been waiting for a long time. But the questions we ask are these: who will stand up to this messenger's arrival? Who will survive his appearance?

We ask these questions because this messenger will come and make things new. He will be like hot fire from a refiner, or like strong soap you use in the laundry. He will come purify and cleanse people until they are ready for God to appear. He will clean them until they are worthy of making offerings of righteousness to God. Then, and only then, will Judah and Jerusalem be pleasing to God as they were a long, long time ago.

Yes, it's true. I am coming to bring judgment. I will speak against sorcerers, adulterers, liars, those who harm and exploit other people, and those who take advantage of the widows and orphans. I will bring judgment to those who aren't helpful to those who are needy and to anyone who doesn't honor me.

I am your God—I am the great I AM—and I haven't changed. And because I haven't changed, you, the children of Jacob, haven't perished. You have been difficult and have not always followed my commandments. You haven't done what you have been asked to do. What I am saying to you is this: return to me. I am waiting for you. I am ready to meet you and take care of you. Return to me and I will return to you.

The question you should now ask is this: "How do we return?"