

**Resources**  
**2006 Rural Life Sunday**

***“Born Again in Every Place”:***

**An Invitation to Faithfulness**

**Introduction**

***“Born Again in Every Place”*<sup>1</sup>: An Invitation to Faithfulness** is the theme for 2006 Rural Life Sunday. It combines the title of the Report to the 2000 General Conference on the National Town and Country Comprehensive Plan with a glimpse into the future possibilities for Town and Country churches in particular and the Church as a whole.

It is the hope of all of those involved in the creation and implementation of the National Town and Country Comprehensive Plan that, as laity and clergy, we accept God’s promise of faithfulness to us and commit ourselves anew to faithfulness and being born again in the places where we are called to be in ministry. The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world. Through the local church, regardless of its size, location, age, ethnicity, culture, economic strength or special context, the church encounters the world and Christians move out to the structures of society.<sup>2</sup> In a world in which poverty, oppression, exploitation and discrimination are endemic diseases like never before in the history of humankind, the church-in-mission is called upon to give witness to peace, justice, healing, reconciliation and love<sup>3</sup>: to be faithful.

**Rural Life Sunday** shall be observed on a date determined by the annual conference....If the annual conference so directs an offering may be received to strengthen the nurture, outreach, and witness of congregations in town and rural areas.<sup>4</sup>

The material follows “An Order of Sunday Worship Using the Basic Pattern” found on pages 3-5 of the *United Methodist Hymnal*. The Call to Worship, Opening Prayer, Prayer for Illumination, Prayer of Thanksgiving and the Benediction have all been written or adapted for use in observing Rural Life Sunday, 2006. There are several suggestions of appropriate hymns and texts. Please select that which seems the most fitting for your setting for worship.

**May you accept with great expectation this “Invitation to Faithfulness”!**

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<sup>1</sup> *“Born Again in Every Place”* is the title of the Report to the 2000 General Conference from the Task Force on the National Comprehensive Plan for Town and Country Ministries which calls for the renewal of the Church.

<sup>2</sup> Based on paragraph 202, 2004 *Book of Discipline*, The United Methodist Church

<sup>3</sup> “Vision for Mission”, David J. Bosch, in *Ministry & Theology in Global Perspective*, p. 378

<sup>4</sup> Rural Life Sunday, paragraph 266.3, 2004 *Book of Discipline*, *The United Methodist Church*.

## Call to Worship

Leader: We lift up our eyes to the hills-  
from where will our help come?

**People: Our help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.**

Leader: The Creator will not let our feet be moved;  
The One who keeps us will not slumber.

**People: The One who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.**

Leader: The Lord is your keeper;  
The Lord is your shade at your right hand.

**People: The sun shall not strike us by day,  
nor the moon by night.**

Leader: The Lord will keep us from all evil;  
the Lord will keep your life.

**People: The Lord will keep our going out and our coming in  
from this time forth and forever more.**

## Opening Hymn

*United Methodist Hymnal*

#140, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

# 579, "Lord God, Your Love Has Called Us Here"

*The Faith We Sing*

#2128, "Come and Find the Quiet Center"

# 2130, "The Summons", verses 1-4

## Opening Prayer

**Gracious God, you are our keeper, you are ever-present and always faithful to us. There are times when we wish that you were not our keeper, for you expect more from us than seems possible. And there are times when we are incredibly thankful that you keep us, for we need your care, your presence, your faithfulness. Enable us in this time of worship to be drawn closer to you that we might see and commit ourselves anew to your vision for the world around us. Through Christ we pray. Amen.**

## Prayer for Illumination

**Creator God, when we plant seeds, prune trees or cast nets we act in faithfulness to you. We are stirred to praise and thankfulness by spray on the bow of a boat, an orchard in bloom, green leaves, calves, lambs and chicks, open us once again through the texts read and your word proclaimed that *we* may experience rebirth. Amen.**

## Suggested Texts with Annotations

### Old Testament Lesson

#### 1 Kings 19: 9b-15a

Ahab married Jezebel and worshipped Baal. Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. (1 Kings 16: 30) Elijah listens to God ; God listens to Elijah. Elijah triumphs over the priests of Baal; the people return to the worship of God. Jezebel is not happy! Elijah fears for his life as a result of his actions of faithfulness to God: Jezebel has vowed to kill him for what he has done. Elijah meets God at Horeb; God tells Elijah what is still expected of him. God sends him to continue to be faithful to God.

What Baals do we worship? The price of faithfulness to God is high, are we willing, with God's help, to pay it? Who or what is Jezebel to an unpopular stand we as a congregation have taken as an expression of God's justice and will?

#### Ezekiel 37:1-14

Even to a Valley of Dry Bones, God can restore life. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36: 25-26)

The people were the living dead, they no longer followed God. They had hearts of stone. Other nations mocked God as a result of their behavior.

Are visible and invisible "idols" being worshipped? How would others, outside the church, describe the heart of the congregation?

### Gospel Lesson

#### John 3: 1-10 (11-17)

Nicodemus had quite a profile:

- He was a Jew, a member of a covenant people, a participant in a long-standing religious tradition, committed to be faithful to God.
- He was a Pharisee, a member of a lay renewal movement within Judaism, passionate about "doing it right", needing everyone to do it right so that the whole people might be righteous.
- He was a teacher, a guide and instructor for others, an expert and exemplar, and thus set up to evidence either integrity or hypocrisy.
- He was a council member, part of the ruling elite, making judgments about right and wrong, good or bad, acceptable or not, in or out.
- He was an elder, one whose experience has given wisdom that gains respect.
- He was dissatisfied with his life as it was – even his religion – and came to Jesus, secretly seeking something more.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> From Session 2 written by Rev. Edward Kail, Local Church Action Guide, National Town and Country Comprehensive Plan.

### **Matthew 25:1-13**

Just days before his death, Jesus told several stories to his disciples who had become focused upon the glorious temple building and preoccupied with thoughts of their own prominence in leadership...

Five of those bridesmaids were not very polite were they? Why didn't they share with the other five who had not prepared for the delay of the bridegroom? Without consulting the commentaries, could it be that this is a simple message that there are some things we must do for ourselves? One prime example is our own spiritual fire. No one else can tend it for us. No one else can read the Scriptures for us, reflect on its meaning, spend time in prayer and meditation before God so that we are shaped in the image of the Christ...

What is the focus of your congregation? Are the leaders most concerned with budgets, building and being in charge of what happens? Or is the focus upon Christ's Great Commandment to Love God and Love Neighbor? Or is the focus upon the Great Commission to make disciples? Better yet is the focus of your life and your congregation both Great Commission and Great Commandment? ...

### **Matthew 25:31-46**

How could those folks be so preoccupied that they did not see Jesus in others? Could it be that they were all gathered in a church building where the windows had all been replaced by mirrors? Could it be that all they were able to see were the needs of their own? Could it be they consumed all of their resources and energy on themselves?

Think of the rich young man (Matthew 19:16-30) He had resources and energy. Yet when Jesus called him to go with him, the invitation was refused because the young man's faith was in the resources, relationship and residence he already possessed. They were more compelling than an invitation from Jesus to make a difference to the poor and be about a daily walk with Jesus.

How would you characterize the response of your congregation to the invitation of Jesus to cast your lot with him? Are the resources of the congregation stashed and carefully given out to "the family" few? Are the church's resources scarce as a few fish and loaves in the presence of hungry thousands? Are these resources withheld from the One who can multiply and cause abundance? How are the resources and energy of the congregation deployed? How are those decisions made? How will all of that sit with Jesus on the day we all stand before him? <sup>6</sup>

## **Epistle Lesson**

### **Romans 8: 35, 37-39**

Paul's testament of the love of God as expressed through Christ Jesus. No matter the depths to which we have descended or the heights of accomplishment we have attained, nothing will separate us from God's faithfulness to us.

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<sup>6</sup> From Session 4, written by Rev. Alan Rice, Local Church Action Guide, National Town and Country Comprehensive Plan.

What are the issues which our community faces? Do folks feel that they have descended into depths to which God cannot reach? Loss of jobs? Garbage from other places being dumped on the land? Other forms of pollution? Mountain top removal by mining or the building of “McMansions” in formerly wild areas?

## **2 Corinthians 4: 7-12**

Clay jars and the power of God’s presence! Paul reflects on the need to continue to show the living Christ to others through his life.

In what ways are we corporately as a congregation and we as individuals and families continuing to show the living Christ to others by our lives?

## **Hymn of Response**

*United Methodist Hymnal*

# 593, “Here I Am, Lord”

# 592, “When the Church of Jesus”

*The Faith We Sing*

# 2120, “Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness”

# 2117, “Spirit of God”

# 2130, “The Summons,” verse 5

## **Prayer of Thanksgiving**

**God of blessing and hope, we offer the fruit of the works of our lives and our very lives. We ask your blessing upon all that we offer; transform it and us to be faithful to your will. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.**

## **Closing Hymn**

*United Methodist Hymnal*

# 664, Sent Forth by God’s Blessing

# 670, Go Forth for God

*The Faith We Sing*

#2237, As a Fire Is Meant for Burning

#2241, The Spirit Sends Us Forth to Serve

## **Benediction**

Leader: Lift your eyes to the Lord for strength,  
knowing that the One who calls you  
will neither slumber nor sleep.  
The One who calls you will keep your going out and your coming in  
from this time forth and forever more.

**All: We go in peace and hope to love and serve God in all that we do!**