

**Neh. 8:1–3, 5–6,  
8–10**

**Ps. 19**

**1 Cor. 12:12–31a**

**Luke 4:14–21**

## Worship Alive

### **Goal for the Session**

*Youth will engage the transformative power of worship and scriptural interpretation through the story of the returning exiles' experience in Nehemiah 8.*

## ■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

### Focus on Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10

#### **WHAT is important to know?**

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Kathleen M. O’Connor

The covenant renewal of all the people calls them to unity and invites them to renew life in their God. Rather than seeing divine instruction as cramping, restricting legislation, the Jews, then and now, recognize Torah as a compassionate guide, a pathway, a set of wise instructions about how to live together in justice and joy. But that guide and that path have not been sealed forever in concrete at Sinai. Instead, they must be reinterpreted to show the path to community and to joy, as the people worship the God who renews their life. In the season of Epiphany, Ezra reminds us that we too are recipients of divine instruction.

#### **WHERE is God in these words?**

— From “Theological Perspective,” Rick Nutt

Christians, then, while denying the law or any system of works as a way to salvation, can embrace the law for the purposes it serves: restraining evil, convicting of sin, and aiding our understanding of God’s will. Because we know the law as gift from God, we understand that the entire law can be summarized positively as loving God and loving one’s neighbor. Christ becomes for us not the rejection or abrogation of the law but its telos, or fulfillment.

#### **SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?**

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” W. Carter Lester

When we gather together as God’s people, when we are conscious of coming into the presence of the living and holy God, when we center our worship on God’s Word, when we offer all of ourselves to God, we cannot help but be changed over time. We gather to give glory to God and to have God make a difference in us so that we can be sent to make a difference in God’s world. When all of that happens, we have reason to follow the example of the people on this special day in Nehemiah 8 who ate and drank together and made “great rejoicing” (v. 12).

#### **NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?**

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Valerie Bridgeman Davis

The book of Nehemiah narrates Nehemiah’s return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its wall. As King Artaxerxes’ cupbearer, Nehemiah receives news that the city is ruined. So the king releases him to help restore his homeland. Now it is time for the people to experience the word of God read and explained. Imagine. These ancient peoples have been so long away from their homeland. They may have heard the Law of Moses read in the shadow of Babylonian temples or even in synagogues. But here, in its native place, the Law looms large. And it needs an interpretative voice.

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

***Nehemiah 8:1–3,  
5–6, 8–10***

## Focus on Your Teaching

Young people are aware that the traditions, roles, ideas, and even music of other generations cannot speak fully to their context today. Rebellion occurs (justified or not) when young people resist untransformed culture. Through Nehemiah 8, youth are offered a glimpse of a society in flux, but which had tools of interpretation for their experience (worship, scriptural interpretation) to carry them across the divide from then to now with some pain, but also celebration. This is a word of hope to teens longing for transformation and justice in the world.

*O Lord, connect me to both our traditions and your transformation  
running their course through my days. Amen.*

**YOU WILL NEED**

- play dough
- paper plate
- various small items  
such as a paper clips,  
coins, marbles
- Bibles
- sturdy chair
- 2 pitchers of water
- water basin
- flashlight
- copies of Resource  
Sheet 1
- pens
- newsprint
- markers

For Responding:

- option 1: newsprint,  
marker, paper, pens
- option 2: newsprint,  
marker
- option 3: copies of  
Resource Sheet 2,  
pens

For Music Connection:

- recording of  
“Beautiful Things” by  
Gungor and music  
player

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*Before the session*, form play dough into a ball the size of your fist. Place it on a paper plate and put it on a table. Set out various small items such as paper clips, coins, or marbles. You will need at least one item for each person in your group.

Gather the group around the ball of play dough. Give each person a small amount of play dough and ask him or her to pick up one small item. Invite youth to take turns adding their dough to the ball on the table and using their small item in some way in order to create a sculpture, but without saying what they are trying to create. Acknowledge that the shape and purpose might change drastically over several turns. After everyone has had a turn, discuss:

✪ What does our creation look like?

✪ Like this sculpture, how do our life experiences shape or transform us?

Explain to the participants that today’s Scripture passage tells the story of the ancient Israelites, who had been through several transformations that shaped their lives.

Pray:

*Holy One, tune our ears to listen to your voice. Work in our hearts as we  
speak and hear one another today. Amen.*

Use of props for reenactment: reader stands on chair like Nehemiah, pitcher and basin can be used to make sound of water pouring like the Water Gate, flashlight can simulate sun moving across the sky.

## EXPLORING

Ask youth to turn to Nehemiah 8. Offer the following background information:

- ✧ After years in exile, the Israelites have returned to Jerusalem. They are a new generation who have never seen their homeland before.
- ✧ To the Israelites, the city of Jerusalem and the land on which it sat was a part of their identity, just as the Law of Moses was a part of their core identity.
- ✧ The Law of Moses includes the Ten Commandments and other related laws about how to serve God and live together peacefully. It is part of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Torah.
- ✧ The Water Gate was one of the twelve gates to the city of Jerusalem, and had a stream running under it to deliver water to the city.

Have participants bring Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, and 8–10 to life using a sturdy chair, two pitchers of water, a basin, and a flashlight. Ask a volunteer reader to stand on a chair to portray Ezra before the crowd as he or she reads the verses aloud. During the reading, ask others to provide the special effects, and others to serve as the crowd. The pitcher and basin can be used to make the sound of water pouring like the Water Gate. The flashlight can be used to simulate sun moving across the sky. Discuss:

- ✧ After their time in exile, why might the Israelites have wanted to assemble and ask Ezra to read Scripture?

Give each person a copy of Resource Sheet 1 (Reinterpretation Reflections) and a pen. Have participants work individually or in pairs to respond to the questions. Compare responses and then discuss:

- ✧ How does the Bible help us live together in justice and joy?

Write the following phrases on a posted sheet of newsprint: *Gather, Grow Deeper, Praise and Respond*, and *Go Out with Joy*. Explain that these phrases could describe four aspects of a worship experience. Have participants identify the actions in Nehemiah 8 that correspond to these four aspects of worship.

Ask:

- ✧ Why are each of these four parts of worship important?
- ✧ Why did the Israelites weep? How does this illustrate how the reading of the Law of Moses affected them?
- ✧ Where is God's presence seen in Nehemiah 8?
- ✧ How were the Israelites changed and shaped by this worship experience?

EASY  
PREP

With the group's permission, share their design with worship leaders in your congregation.

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of the following learning activities:

- 1. Personal Reflection** Participants will personally consider the difference that worship has made in their lives. Write the following on a posted sheet of newsprint: *When has worship made a difference in your life?* Give each person a sheet of paper and a pen. Have participants silently reflect on the posted question. After a few minutes, pose the question for group discussion.
- 2. Building Block Worship** Participants create a meaningful worship experience. On a sheet of newsprint, have participants list what makes a worship service most meaningful. What helps to make worship a life-changing experience? What makes worship inspiring? Work together to design a worship experience that will inspire youth, including the setting of the experience and what will happen during the service.
- 3. Creating Litanies** Participants write a litany exploring ways transformation is still needed in the world. Form pairs of participants. Give each pair a copy of Resource Sheet 2 (Litany) and a pen. Have participants follow the instructions on the page to create a litany. When all are finished, give pairs an opportunity to read their litanies to the rest of the participants.

## CLOSING

Gather participants in a circle around the play-dough sculpture. Invite them to work together to re-form it to represent how they hope they will be transformed by God in the week to come. Pray aloud:

*God of creation and transformation, may you shape us as we have shaped these prayers today. May these prayers be made real in your world through our work and your grace. Amen.*

## ■ ENHANCEMENT

### MUSIC CONNECTION

Listen together to “Beautiful Things” by Gungor, which has themes about renewal, transformation, and hope. Discuss:

- ☞ How does the line “Could all that is lost ever be found? / Could a garden come out from this ground, at all?” relate to the Israelites in Nehemiah 8?
- ☞ Where do you hear themes of transformation and renewal in this song?
- ☞ How is music an important part of transformation in worship for you?

## Reinterpretation Reflections

The covenant renewal of all the people calls them into unity and invites them to renew their life in God. Rather than seeing divine instruction as a cramping, restricting legislation, the Jews, then and now, recognize Torah as a compassionate guide, a pathway, a set of wise instructions about **how to live together in justice and joy**. But that guide and that path have not been sealed forever in concrete at Sinai. Instead, they **must be reinterpreted** to show the path to community and to joy, as the people worship the God who renews their life. In the season of Epiphany, Ezra reminds us that we too are recipients of divine instruction.

—from “What?” excerpt

### Reflection Questions

How does Nehemiah 8:10 illuminate the meaning of O’Connor’s statement that “Torah . . . is a set of wise instructions about how to live together in justice and joy?”

How does verse 8 show that there was reinterpretation going on for the community?

Why is it important to reinterpret Scripture for a particular era, context, or community?



# Litany



### Step 1

List four things that need your attention in the world, such as the environment.



### Step 2

List four ways you can get involved in the things that need your attention in the world, such as praying.



### Step 3

Write the words or phrases from Step 1 in the first blanks and the words or phrases from Step 2 in the second blanks.

One: The world needs \_\_\_\_\_ and we can \_\_\_\_\_.

**All: Transform us, Lord.**



One: The world needs \_\_\_\_\_ and we can \_\_\_\_\_.

**All: Transform us, Lord.**



One: The world needs \_\_\_\_\_ and we can \_\_\_\_\_.

**All: Transform us, Lord.**



One: The world needs \_\_\_\_\_ and we can \_\_\_\_\_.

**All: Transform us, Lord.**

