

Renew Your Life

COVID-19 Version

Session 4: The Energy of Paradox

Reading: Chapter 4

Welcome & Opening Questions (10 minutes)

Introduce yourself and share your responses to this question:

- What is something from your faith that brings you comfort or hope? Share a favorite hymn or other sacred music, Bible verse or Bible story, if one comes to mind for you.

Group Prayer Practice (5 minutes)

Spend a few minutes in silence as a group. Sit in a comfortable position and imagine yourself being held by God. Close your eyes and focus on your breath. Gently set aside or release any distracting thoughts during this time. The leader will guide you with these prompts.

- As you think about the past day or week, what did you experience that was life-giving?
- As you think about the past day or week, what was energy depleting for you?
- Silently, release the past day or week over to God in prayer.
- Imagine yourself held in the expansive energies of God's love. Take a minute to breathe deeply of God's presence and peace.

Amen.

Scripture Text (2-3 minutes)

John 9:1-12 (NRSV)

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

Reading Recap (5 minutes)

On the other side of possibility (last session's theme), is the paradox of seeing light and darkness at the same time. The reality of a paradox means that life is filled with unwanted gifts; gifts we would rather not receive. Part of our journey is finding any unexpected blessings that come with those gifts. As we journey through times of suffering, either our own or with someone, three directions to explore, at the right time, are *acceptance* (life is difficult and light and darkness can coexist); *resistance* (God calls us to make a better world); and *presence* (our presence with others brings the light of Christ).

Questions on Chapter 4 (35 minutes)

Start with these questions, adding in other questions to supplement. Questions are also available in the *Renew Your Life* book, starting on page 141.

- What concepts in the readings and sermon were life-giving for you?
- What concepts or stories were difficult or challenging for you to think about or integrate into your life?

The Energy of Paradox

1. Think about the image of an unwanted gift. What is helpful about that image as you consider the struggles you have had in life? What have you discovered about yourself or about your faith because of an unwanted gift?
2. Pastor Kai describes three ways to wrestle with dark times: *acceptance* (life is hard), *resistance* (we are invited to bring hope to the world), and *presence* (being with others who are suffering). What was helpful for you in those responses? What would you add to what Pastor Kai wrote? What questions do you still have?
3. Which of the three ways do you identify with, as you think about this time of a pandemic and a search for racial justice?

Update during COVID-19

Paradox – The Struggle is Real

The coronavirus and, more recently, the search for racial justice has exposed our human condition. We are not in control. We are not immune from suffering and struggle. What happens to some effects all. It has also raised common questions: Why do we have to suffer in this life? Is our God in control? Is our God present at all? Notice that in the text, Jesus doesn't answer the questions, but says that God's work can be done in and through suffering.

Questions during COVID-19

1. Where have you seen light and darkness during this pandemic in your own life and in the greater world? What, if anything, are you learning in this time about dealing with paradoxes?

2. What might be some of the “unwanted gifts” of this time? How could the “unwanted gifts” reshape our lives and connect us more deeply with God and one another?
3. Simplicity and complexity could be one of the paradoxes we are experiencing in this time. How has this paradox been revealed in your own life recently?
4. Pastor Kai learned what he needed and what he should avoid during his struggles. What have you discovered about what you need and what you should avoid?
5. Pastor Kai says many of the big “why” questions we have in life will forever go unanswered. He writes, “If we release the why question, our energy is freed to ask other questions... Will we say yes to light and storm? Can we be people who are willing to embrace the unanswerable questions and stand together with God? Can we be people who are willing to take this mysterious journey with one another?” What are your reactions to these thoughts and questions?
6. How do we live in response to God’s love in this time?

Closing Question & Faith Practice (5 minutes)

Explore how the chapter theme can make a difference in your life by considering this question & trying this faith practice:

- How has living through this time caused you to re-envision your life going forward?
- Use this breath prayer in the coming week to remind you of God’s grace and creative, renewing energy. (see “breath prayer” instructions).

Inhale: Spirit of God

Exhale: You are with Me

Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

God, this is a time of challenges beyond what we could have imagined. We each face our own, unique circumstances, and together we share in a time of unforeseen changes, loss, uncertainty, pain, brokenness, fear and disruption.

Yet, God, we know that your steadfast love never ends and your presence never leaves us. We continue to see you in ordinary and extraordinary moments. We thank you for creation’s renewal and beauty, for actions of kindness and love, for the blessings of daily life and for your renewing gift of hope. We are especially grateful for those who are doing self-sacrificing work on behalf of others, the community and the world. Most of all, we thank you for your peace, love and grace.

Guide us to know how to be your blessing in the world today. Open our hearts and imaginations to see how we can create healthy and abundant life for others. Sustain us, comfort us, guide us and enliven us to be your presence in the world. Amen.