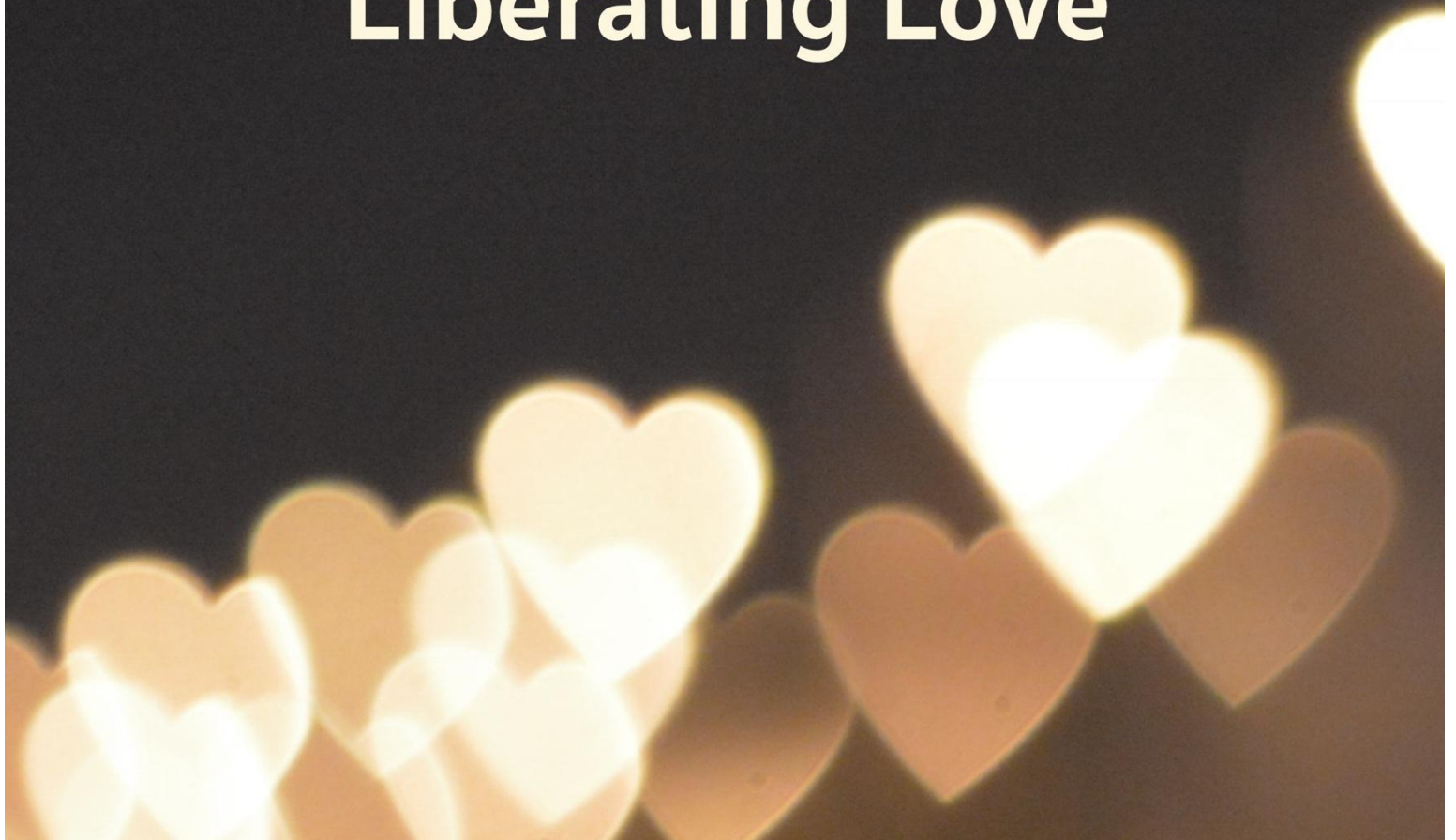




Soul Matters

The Gift of **Liberating Love**



Materials for individual reflection
January 2024

Welcome to the Gift of Liberating Love

Love, it sits in the chest,
at least at the start.
It's what makes our heart beat again after being broken,
and our lungs breathe again after being closed off in the dark for far too long.

For some, it came in the form of our grandfather's eyes
which saw us as carriers of something bigger and more precious
and older
than our little bodies disclosed.
For others, it arrived as we pressed hard
against our mothers' warm skin
and heard a speechless whisper say
we can always come home.

We recognize love as the thing that allowed us to finally remove our masks,
or that which said I don't want you to take it off, until you are ready.
We were taught love by those who arrived in the midst of our fear
and shook as we shook, instead of simply trying to make our trembling stop.

But here is the secret. The inevitable awakening.
The wonder that each of our lives is meant to reveal.
Love doesn't just love us;
It asks us to become it.

That's why those metaphors of comforting quilts
which wrap us in their warmth will never do.
True love is always a thunderstorm
that cracks us clean open
so the echoes of other breaking hearts
can make their way in.

Yes, it wants us to be whole and strong.
But love's deepest longing is that we will use that strength
to tear down the structures that leave others bloodied and bruised.
We must always remember what Selma's prophet of peace regularly preached:
Love and power are always rightly wed.

And maybe this is where the second secret comes loose.
As I shake the walls to let others free,
I learn that the ones I've liberated include me.

Our Spiritual Exercises

It's one thing to analyze a theme; it's quite another to experience it. By pulling us out of the space of *thinking* and into the space of *doing*, these exercises invite us to figure out not just what we have to say about life, but also what life has to say *to us*!

Pick the exercise that speaks to you the most. Come to your group ready to share why you picked the exercise you did and what gift it gave you.

Option A Your Current Love Story

Love takes many forms. How it shows up in our life this year is often quite different from last year. Sometimes it shifts and morphs even faster than that.

So what form is it currently taking in your life today? And what story/moment captures, not only the form it is taking, but the gift it is giving you?

For your spiritual exercise this month, spend some time trying to identify this single moment that exemplifies how love is showing up for you. For inspiration, here are a few poems that capture such moments...

- Aimless Love, by Billy Collins
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=41392>
- Gate A-4, by Naomi Shihab Nye
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwDXJ50U22o&t=29s>
- The Whistler, by Mary Oliver
<https://allyourprettywords.tumblr.com/post/35611837944/the-whistler-mary-oliver>
- On Faith, by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer
<https://ahundredfallingveils.com/2023/10/22/on-faith/>

Option B Remembering How Long Your List Is!

We've all been saved, sustained, healed, and transformed by the love of close friends and family, as well as those who only briefly crossed our paths. In big and small ways.

But we forget. These special people and their gifts slip from our memory, leaving our hearts feeling, some days, like we've only been loved by a few.

So this month, let's repopulate our lists! Let's remember how long those lists really are!

You can do this in one sitting or spend a week working on it. But whatever amount of time you devote to this, make it roomy enough to allow your memory to widen. The big moments will likely come first; the quieter moments and single exchanges will take some time to tumble back into your brain. For some of us, it will help to go through our lives chronologically. For others, thinking about types of love will work best. And when you think your list is done, give it just a bit more time. Pay special attention to who arises from this moment of extra thought.

When you are done, here are some additional ways to work with the list if you like:

- Read it aloud and pay attention to which names catch in your throat or bring an unexpected tear.
- Add a second column to your list and write down the gift their love gave you.

- Pick 3-5 names from the list and write them a letter, letting them know how their love lives in you still.
- Record yourself reading the names. Listen to the recording and see what feelings or insights arise.
- Record yourself saying thank you to each name. Listen to the recording and see what feelings or insights arise.
- Invite a friend or family member to do the exercise with you. Then tell each other the stories of 3-5 of the people on your list. Be sure to have each other share what criteria each of you used to pick your 3-5.
- Sit your list by your coffee machine and, for a week, read it each morning while you sip on your first cup of joe. Such a better way to start the day than with the news or your to do list!

Option C

Another List of Loves...

Besides people who have loved us, there's also the things we love! Both liberate us, just in different ways. To create a list of what you love is to remind yourself that life is friend not foe. It is to liberate yourself from the tangled and terrible idea that life is a game to be won or a set of threats to avoid. By stacking up all the things we find precious, we are reminded that this life of ours is also precious and generous at its core.

So give yourself that liberating gift this month by creating a giant list of all the things you love about life!

Many of us will spend an hour or a few days compiling our list and see how far we get. But for some, it might help to set a goal and then keep working until you hit your chosen number. Maybe a list of 50, or why not make your goal to list 100!

Here are a few places to turn for inspiration:

- Alex Dimitrov's poem, *Love*: <https://aprweb.org/poems/love0>
- Courtney Martin's spoken Poem, *I Love*: <https://courtney.substack.com/p/i-love#details>
- A collection of various lists: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/15d-Yy-nBb04dZ8DwWgcXmqYNhhpDcY79rOiP0r8B31g/edit?usp=sharing>

Option D

Letters from Love

To condemn yourself as unlovable is to swallow a terrible lie. And to believe that you must earn love through perfectionism, or that you must seek love from others in order to become whole, turns all of us into hungry beggars. I believe there is an ocean of warm, affectionate, and outrageously unconditional love available to us all - and that it is conveniently accessible from within. I don't believe anyone is excluded from this ocean of love; it is only a question of learning how to hear it, how to feel it, how to trust it.

- [Elizabeth Gilbert](#)

The writer, Elizabeth Gilbert, is serious about self-love. As her quote above intimates, she struggles to free herself from the self-punishing voices of perfectionism and inadequacy, and she wants the same freedom for others.

One of the tactics she uses is her daily practice of writing herself letters *from Love*. That's right, *from* love. Not from herself. The distinction is key. It's her way of going beyond simple self-affirmations and tapping into a bigger kind of love, arguably the biggest kind. She quotes Einstein, who said, "The most important decision we make is whether we believe we live in a friendly or hostile universe." By writing herself letters from Love itself, she is telling herself not only that she is lovable but that she is surrounded by a loving and friendly universe.

Here's her technique. Before putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), she asks, "**Dear Love, what would you have me know today?**" Out of that mind frame, she shapes her letters. Or to put it as she would: She then lets love itself write a letter to her.

So friends, how might it change your days if you began them by figuring out what love itself wants to say to you?

Well, why not find out by taking a week this month to write a daily letter to yourself from Love?! (*And if a week's worth of letters feels too intimidating, try writing just one!*)

To help you on your way, here are a few of the weekly blog posts Gilbert writes to support people as they do this daily practice. They begin with a general reflection and then end with one of the Letters from Love she has written:

- <https://elizabethgilbert.substack.com/p/welcome-to-week-two>
- <https://elizabethgilbert.substack.com/p/letters-from-love-with-special-guest-eff>
- <https://elizabethgilbert.substack.com/p/letters-from-love-with-special-guest-f90>

And here are a few examples of letters others have written:

- <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1v82xXq4a6l22qbVg10fGgb1rZmjLOmCXZF-89qNClto/edit?usp=sharing>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/CzJpfQhAfez/>

Option E

Watch Love Drop Into Your Day

Green Renaissance is the creative project of a couple from South Africa. Their goal is to inspire change and help people reconsider where meaning comes from. You will fall in love with their work. Especially their video projects on love.

So here's your work: Drop one of their "love films" into your life every day for a week.

To make that easy for you, we've curated a playlist of their videos, on YouTube Videos [HERE](#).

You can keep this exercise simple by just watching one a day and let that impact as you will. Another option is to use one or all of these strategies:

- Watch/listen with the pause button and a pen handy. Keep an eye/ear out for the line that strikes you the deepest. Hit pause and write it down. Then take a few minutes to ask yourself, "How is my inner wisdom trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge through this line? This video?"
- After watching the video, take a moment to reflect on what you want to promise yourself because of the impact the video had on you.
- As you watch/listen, ask yourself, "Where do I see myself in the video?"
- Watch the videos with someone close to you and discuss it afterward.

The Playlist:

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvXOKgOQVYP5XWrUFZCLnOIpHAT9Yclhq&si=sGzPLpVDo0t0xpXg>

Option F

Ask Them About Love

One of the best ways to explore our monthly themes is to bring them into the conversations you have with those closest to you. It's a powerful way to deepen our conversations and our relationships.

Below is a list of "love questions" to help you on your way.

Come to your group ready to share what surprised you about the conversation(s) and what gift or insight it gave you. And as always, keep a lookout for how your inner voice is trying to send you a word of comfort or challenge through these conversions with others.

Love Questions:

1. What did love mean to you as a child?
2. How has love changed as you've gotten older? Is it softer? Quieter? Larger? Tougher? Sneakier? More central? More painful? More universal? More ordinary? More mysterious? More demanding?
3. Whose love has companioned you the longest?
4. Has love ever scared you?
5. What most helped put you back together after love broke you to bits?
6. We know that self-love and self-care are essential. But which part of yourself most needs love and care right now? Your physical self, emotional self, intellectual self, relational self, spiritual self, sensory self, hidden self, pleasure-seeking self, fearful self, childhood self, hopeful self?
7. What do you know of "a love that will not let us go"?
8. What has been your greatest act of love?

Option G

Which Liberating Love Quote Calls to You?

Sometimes we read a quote and it perfectly captures what's going on for us right now. Or allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light. With this in mind, spend some time this month reading through the quotes in the *Companion Pieces* section below to **find the one that best illuminates your journey with Liberating Love.**

We encourage you to use the same discernment practice with these quotes as you do with the packet's list of questions:

- **Read through the list of quotes** a few times, noting which ones "shimmer" (i.e. call to you or have an emotional gravitational pull for you). It often helps to circle or star these quotes that stand out.
- With each reading, **narrow your focus** in on those that stick out, until you finally **settle on the one quote** that pulls at you the most.
- Then make space to **reflect** on the gift, challenge or insight your chosen quote is offering you.
- Some of us may want to **go further** and capture your reflections with journaling or creative expression.

Come to your group ready to share your quote and the journey it took you on.

Your Question

This list of questions is an aid for deep reflection. They are not meant to be answered as much as to take you on a journey.

Read through the questions 2-3 times until one question sticks out for you and captures your attention, or as some faith traditions say, until one of the questions “shimmers.”

Then reflect on that question using one or all of these questions:

- *What is going on in my life right now that makes this question so pronounced for me?*
- *How might my inner voice be trying to speak to me through it?*
- *How might Life or my inner voice be trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge through this question?*

Writing out your thoughts often enables you to go deeper. It also sometimes helps to read the list of questions to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with.

A note about self-care: *Often these questions take us to a vulnerable space. It is OKAY to ignore the questions that may be triggering – or lean in if that feels safe.*

1. How has love changed as you’ve gotten older? Is it softer? Quieter? Larger? Tougher? Sneakier? More central? More painful? More universal? More ordinary? More mysterious? More demanding?
2. Whose love has companioned you the longest?
3. Is there anything from your younger years that you now recognize as love, but didn’t understand as such back then? How might that awareness offer you a gift with your present relationships?
4. Some say the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. Others say its opposite is fear. What do you say?
5. Are you using your busyness to shield you from your heartbreak?
6. Is it time to offer “tough love”?
7. What might it mean to regularly ask, “What would love do here?”
8. What’s the scariest thing that could happen to your heart? How does consciously knowing that call you to protect yourself or pursue new priorities more fiercely?
9. Has heartbreak ever held you back? Could some form of heartbreak be holding you back today?
10. We know that self-love and self-care are essential. But *which part* of yourself **most** needs love and care right now? Your physical self, emotional self, intellectual self, relational self, spiritual self, sensory self, hidden self, pleasure-seeking self, fearful self, childhood self, hopeful self?
11. In what new way are you being called to use your personal/social/cultural/economic power in the service of love?
12. If Love could speak, what do you think it would want to say to you?
13. **What’s your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining the gift of love.

Wise Words

Love is what we are born with. Fear is what we learn. The spiritual journey is the unlearning of fear and prejudices and the acceptance of love back in our hearts.

Marianne Williamson

When we take actions that are aligned with love and justice, we remember who and what we truly are: facets of the Holy Oneness.

[Lóre Stevens](#)

There is a love
Holding me.
There is a love
Holding you.
There is a love
Holding all.
I rest in this love.

[Rebecca Parker](#)

Love is the drive towards unity of the separated.

[Paul Tillich](#)

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.

James Baldwin

The mystic is not somebody who says, 'Look what I've experienced. Look what I've achieved.' The mystic is the one who says, 'Look what love has done to me.'

James Finley

Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.

M. Scott Peck

The longer I live, the more deeply I learn that love—whether we call it friendship or family or romance—is the work of mirroring and magnifying each other's light. Gentle work. Steadfast work. Life-saving work in those moments when life and shame and sorrow occlude our own light from our view but there is still a clear-eyed loving person to beam it back. In our best moments, we are that person for another.

James Baldwin

Joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love. Anger is the force that protects that which is loved.

[Valarie Kaur](#)

I feel our nation's turning away from love... moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again. I write of love to bear witness both to the danger in this movement, and to call for a return to love.

bell hooks

To accept your country without betraying it, you must love it for that which shows what it might become. America -- this monument to the genius of ordinary men and women, this place where hope becomes capacity, this long, halting turn of 'no' into the 'yes' -- needs citizens who love it enough to re-imagine and re-make it.

Cornel West

I am confused by people who say they love us but are never upset when we are treated unjustly. The two simply cannot co-exist. A love that's aloof isn't a love I have any use for. I need a love that is troubled by injustice.

Austin Channing Brown

Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.

[Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.

Cornel West

To practice love is to disrupt the status quo which is masquerading as peace.

[Austin Channing Brown](#)

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.

Elie Wiesel

To invoke Love

is to ask for a hug from a thunderstorm,
spill tea in the lap of the infinite trickster...
is to take the risk of inviting chaos to visit the spaces
you spent so much time making tidy...

is to allow for the possibility that your words
and actions might become so empowered
you can no longer believe in apathy,
or the self-righteous idea that nothing can change.

[Rev. Sean Parker Dennison](#)

And if I have prophetic powers and understand all
mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so
as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am
nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:2

It's the truth: just by being born you are loved.
There is something within you and every person
that can be loved.

[Naomi King](#)

If he truly loves you, he will love you when you are
an ocean breeze, but also when you are a summer
storm. You were not made to be loved in parts, you
were meant to be loved as a whole.

Nikita Gill

The Dalai Lama says that when we make a mistake,
we need to ask, "Can I love this too?" Can I love all
of me, even the peevish parts? Even the insecure
bits, the anxious bits? Because I can love my niece
even when she sticks her hand in my cup of coffee
and gets mad and hollers at me for it. It's easy. I
don't expect her to be perfect. Can I extend that
understanding to myself? Can I love my anxiety too?
My depression too? My desire to seem like I have
my shit together even when I'm freaking out? Can I
love all of me?

[Rev. Kate Landis](#)

Whenever I hear someone I love being hard on
themselves—whether referring to something they
did, how they look, or a habit they can't kick—I
have a little rejoinder. I always say, "Don't talk
about my friend like that."

[Suleika Jaouad](#)

How you love yourself is how you teach others to
love you.

[Rupi Kaur](#)

We accept the love we think we deserve.

Stephen Chbosky

Self-love means not letting the opinions,
preferences, needs, and desires of others dictate
your life

Bernie Siegel

Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world.

[Mary Oliver](#)

Love can work its way into improbable and
impossible situations. Like water over stone, it has
the potential to wear down our suffering, create
new pathways of possibility, and support life in
inhospitable terrain... Love keeps us company,
settling in beside the unlikely good or the unlikely
bad that comes our way.

[Rev. Jen Crow](#)

Find those who tell you Do not be afraid, yet stay
close enough to tremble with you. This is love.

[Cole Arthur Riley](#)

God is Love

1 John 4:8, The Bible

Music

Two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. They are organized as a journey of sorts, so consider listening from beginning to end and using the playlists as musical meditations.

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlists on [The Gift of Liberating Love](#)

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [The Gift of Liberating Love](#)

Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#).
Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

Videos & Podcasts

How to look with love

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jraZdnk9Mk>

The benefits of not being a jerk to yourself

https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_harris_the_benefits_of_not_being_a_jerk_to_yourself

For Many, Shane Koyczan

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_o_B2jTGQc

The love that liberates us from our masks!

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CsoemaNpiE6/?igshid=MTc4MmM1Yml2Ng%3D%3D>

Alok Vaid-Menon on Self Love

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDZskzSLzPk>

On the love that leads us to beauty

<https://psyche.co/films/ill-always-err-on-the-side-of-beauty-a-mothers-cinematic-ode-to-her-son>

Dr. Maya Angelou on the love that liberated her

Trigger warning: indirect reference to sexual abuse.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7dxnQQEpXs>

Love as sweet labor rather than a feeling

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P85WOHJprJw>

Related longer podcast:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmiqcUaDVfE&t=27s>

Talk about being liberated by dancing!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAuy28yeil0&t=191s>

Articles

11 Words That Come From “Love”

<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/61620/11-words-you-might-not-realize-come-love>

The Type of Love That Makes People Happiest

<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/02/falling-in-love-wont-make-you-happy/617989/>

Radically Loving Your Body

<https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/10-tips-for-loving-your-body-disabled-or-otherwise/>

On Falling in Love – James Baldwin

<https://thedewdrop.org/2020/01/10/on-falling-in-love-james-baldwin/>

How James Baldwin’s Writings About Love Evolved

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/01/james-baldwin-idea-of-love-fire-next-time-if-beale-street-could-talk/579829/>

Books

[Klara and the Sun](#)

[Hello Beautiful](#)

[A Man Called Ove](#)

[Design the Long Life You Love](#)

Movies

[Once](#)

[The Shape of Water](#)

[Moonrise Kingdom](#)

[God’s Own Country](#)

[Puzzle](#)

[The Elephant Whisperers](#)

[What They Had](#)

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page:

Find us as “soul_matters_circle”

Music Playlists:

Click [here](#) for links to the [Spotify playlists](#) for each month.

Click [here](#) to check out the [YouTube playlists](#).

Packet Introduction Credit Note: Unless explicitly noted otherwise, the introductions of these packets are written by our Team Lead, Rev. Scott Tayler. Rev. Scott gives permission for his pieces to be used in any way that is helpful, including in newsletters, worship and in online service/recordings.



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