

The Art of Prayer:
An Improvisational Worship Service for Holy Monday
Designed by Kristen Leigh Mitchell

“On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?’” –Mark 11:15-17

The above Gospel reading is provided on a notecard as people walk into the chapel and gather in the empty center of the space. There are no chairs.

12:00 Gathering Chant

Led by Patrick Evans

12:03 Call to Worship

Read by speakers interspersed throughout the crowd

Speaker 1: As we learn to enjoy and trust in the presence of God, we will naturally want to turn towards that presence in prayer. Prayer can take on many forms: talking, listening, stillness, activity, solitude, community. In all its diverse expressions, prayer is the ultimate empowerment of the people of God.

Speaker 2: Today we stand in a house of prayer, a free space, vacant of buyers and sellers, open to all. Ecclesiastes reminds us that “to everything there is a season.” Here at the end of this special season of Lent, as we transition into this sacred time we call Holy Week, we seek to engage in the full spectrum of human experience through the story of Jesus.

Speaker 3: This story will lead us into times of love and struggle, betrayal and hope, confrontation and sacrifice, grief and redemption, confusion and acceptance, death and resurrection. All the complex paradoxes of life come together now, in this week, in this moment.

Speaker 4: This open space is a summons of the Spirit, to guide you in a free exploration of that spectrum, to bring your whole, full, and truest self into a prayerful moment of sacred play...to let the real thoughts, emotions, and experiences that you are carrying with you right now interact in unexpected ways with the opportunities for worship offered all around you.

Speaker 5: This is a playground of prayer. It is an invitation to experience childlike wonder. And it is a call to community, to co-creation. You are free to spend your time of playful worship devoted to one form of prayer, or to move around the space and explore different ones. The balcony is also open for those who would like some time of solitude, and there is a suggestion for the center of the space on the back of your handout as well. At the end of the service, Patrick will call us back together with song for our benediction, so don't worry about the time. Just lose yourself in this place.

12:05 Time for Improvisation, Creativity, Collaboration

See below for specific guidelines pertaining to the different prayer activities offered in the space. The purpose of this chapel service was to create an improvisational prayer space in which people felt enough of a balance between structure/guidance and freedom to experience the Holy Spirit moving in new and meaningful ways through multiple expressive outlets. The space provided opportunities for people to be in prayer both as individuals, and in interaction with the community. Levels of interactivity ranged from total solitude to physical embrace, from playing and dancing alongside others, to watching the action from the balcony, and included opportunities to make individual contributions to communal works of art. It was crucial to provide both opportunities that felt safe and opportunities that encouraged people to take risks, stretching the limits of imagination, creativity, and play as expressions of worship, and prayerful ways of interacting with God. This style of prayer service can be especially meaningful for diverse communities struggling to relate to one another through words. Collaborative art can be a powerful way to unite the voices of many and communicate collective vision, while still retaining the unique contributions of each individual.

One of the most important parts of creating a successful and coherent prayer service like this is to find a way to create continuity between the different prayer activities, threading meaningful actions together with Scripture passages and/or the liturgical season. For this service, Ecclesiastes served as a way of reflecting on all the different “seasons” we pass through during our lives as human beings, which was then connected to how Jesus will face the fullness of what it means to be human during Holy Week. This theme created a prayerful containment that allowed for a great many things to be taking place at once without the space feeling too chaotic or overwhelming. Additional Scripture quotes at each station contributed further layers of meaning relating to each prayer activity. Handmade signs were an important component; most of us spend entirely too much time reading impersonal, typed text. There is warmth and humanity present in a handwritten invitation to prayer. This takes additional time and effort to prepare, but it makes a huge difference.

12:25 Closing Song

Led by Patrick Evans. Same song as earlier, but slower, pulling people ever so gently from their various prayer activities, and eventually bringing them back to the center with singing. We ended the service holding hands in a circle.

12:29 Benediction

“Friends, as we enter into Holy Week, may we seek to create new ways to work together, to pray together, to play together, and to love one another. Amen.”

Prayer Stations

A Time to Build...

As you build with the Legos, pray for **those rebuilding their lives** around the world, especially in places torn apart by war, conflict, and natural disasters. With each new block, may we pray for the strength and the vision to build structures and systems with long term and life-giving sustainability for generations to come.

“Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.” -Isaiah 57:14

Setup Guidelines: Legos are placed around a table, or near cushions on the floor.

A Time to Heal...

Think of someone who needs the light of **God’s healing** in their lives right now. As you light a candle, imagine that person filled with Divine light and life.

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” –Matthew 4:24

Setup Guidelines: Provide a large station with plenty of candles and a lighter.

A Time to Embrace...

Setup Guidelines: Someone wears a sign around their neck with the title for this station, “A Time to Embrace,” and stands by ready to give hugs to anyone who wants one.

A Time to Refrain from Embracing...

Jesus taught that when we pray, we should “go into a room and shut the door, praying to God who is in secret.” In these **moments of solitude**, we often hear the deepest cries and calls of our hearts.

If this crowded city environment has caused you to neglect solitude and long for stillness, feel free to spend some prayerful time apart from the crowd, in the balcony.

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” -Mark 1:35

Setup Guidelines: This sign is placed near the entrance to the balcony. If a balcony is not available, as an alternative, you can use partitions to create a space of privacy in the midst of the prayer room or worship space.

A Time to Seek...

Art helps us to cultivate a **new kind of seeing** that is motivated by a seeking of the truest self.

Use the magazines to seek words that speak deeply to your heart. As you paste them onto the canvas, open yourself to a new way of seeing. Together we'll create a collage that represents the parable of our collective heart.

“Therefore I speak to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.” -Matthew 13:13

Setup Guidelines: Provide a table with magazines, a few pre-cut words, a large canvas (preferably painted with a solid, subtle color – not left white), and plenty of glue sticks.

A Time to Lose...

Sometimes we need to lose hold of our conscious selves in order to find our truest selves. Whether we are playing or listening, MUSIC is a great way to “lose ourselves” in the moment.

These musicians are improvising. Feel free to sit and **get lost in the sound**. Watch the sign on the piano to see how you can participate. (Yes, you! Don't be afraid. Trust and listen... the notes/keys/colors indicated are 100% safe...try it!)

“Those who try to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will keep it.”
-Luke 17:33

Setup Guidelines: A sign is placed on or near the piano that is black on one side saying “PLAY BLACK KEYS” and white on the other side saying “PLAY WHITE KEYS.” A pianist can hold down improvisational prayerful meditative music using any of the black keys, or hold down a simple chord pattern of Dm6 and G7 to create an improvisational structure for playing any of the white keys. The sign is switched back and forth to indicate which is happening and people are invited to play on the upper octaves of the piano. Place cushions and chairs nearby for those who just want to sit and listen. A basket with rainsticks, chimes, and other unobtrusive/prayerful musical instruments can be placed near the sitting space as well.

A Time to Dance / A Time to Speak

(the following text is printed on the back of the handout with the Gospel reading)

In the center of the floor, dancers will be participating in an improvisational exercise called “flock of birds.” The dancers all copy the movements of the person in the front, who is making interpretive motions based on a word. This person leads the dance until he or she decides to turn to their left. Then as the group turns together, the leader becomes a follower and one of the followers becomes the new leader.

A Time to Speak

Listen inwardly for a word that you feel wants or needs to be spoken into this prayer space and embodied by the dancers. Speak it clearly into the dance space, to see how the dancers will interpret this word through their motions.

A Time to Dance

If you feel comfortable doing so, join in on the dance by following the motions of the leader, and remember that if you end up in front, it will be your turn to create the movements that others will follow, until you decide to turn to your left.

“They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance.” –Job 21:11

Setup Guidelines: At least four dancers are needed to hold down the core of the dance in the center of the floor. Others may join in as they like.

A Time to Rend...

“Kriah” is the practice in traditional Jewish mourning where immediate family members of the deceased tear their clothes. Also known as the “rending of garments,” it is a physical and visible **demonstration of grief** (some have even speculated that the Temple at Jerusalem symbolically participated in kriah at the time of Jesus’ death, when the temple curtain was torn...).

Choose a piece of fabric and tear it in half (you may cut it a little with the scissors to begin your tear). Leave half of it at the foot of the cross to symbolize your grief or suffering. Take the other half with you, as a symbol of your commitment to continue walking in the way of Love, in spite of your pain.

“Do not let the fact that conditions are not as they should be stop you. Go on anyway. Everything depends on those who go on anyway.” -Robert Henri

Setup Guidelines: Swatches of fabric are placed on a table near a cross. Pre-cut slits in the center of the fabric make them easy to rip. Place a basket at the foot of the cross for people to leave half.

A Time to Weep...

Drop a glass pebble into this bottle to represent **the tears that you have cried** over the past year.

“You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle.” – Psalm 56:8.

Setup Guidelines: A bottle of water is placed on a table with a bowl of (preferably blue) glass stones.

A Time to Break Down...

Even after the resurrection the marks from the nails on Jesus' hands were still visible. Resurrection and redemption do not turn back time and eliminate brokenness, but reveal a new way of understanding these experiences. With God, the **broken pieces of our lives** are often rearranged into a new and beautiful creation.

Choose some broken pieces to represent parts of yourself that feel broken or fragmented, and place them in the grout. Together we'll create something beautiful out of our collective brokenness.

“For my power is made perfect in weakness.” -2 Corinthians 12:9

Setup Guidelines: Break old ceramic mugs, bowls, plates, and pots into manageable pieces, and leave them on the table next to a shallow wooden frame. Fill the frame with molding compound just before the service. Have someone to watch/manage the grout and assist people.