The reading of Holy Scripture together as a community has been a central part of Christian worship throughout the Church’s long history, and it has deep roots within the practices of God’s people, Israel.

We read Scripture together not simply to learn new information about God’s dealings with humanity in the past, but to listen in faith to what the Living God is saying to us His people today. We listen to His Word to draw closer to Him, and to one another.

After every Scripture Reading this morning, we’re all invited to take a few moments in silence to reflect upon the passage, and how God’s Spirit might be addressing us through it, as individuals or as a community.

In those moments, pay attention to any words, ideas, or images that stand out to you. In the silence afterwards, ask God to help you hear His heart for you today.

After the Gospel is read, and we’ve taken a moment to in silence to reflect upon it, I’ll share a few reflection questions that Pastor Rob has prepared to help us dig in a bit deeper.

***Reflection Questions***

This week, many students and teachers are heading back to school for another year, in order to prepare this new generation for life outside of the classroom.

In our Scripture Readings today, we too are provided with a challenge meant to prepare us for a transformed life:

* In our First Reading from the book of Deuteronomy, we hear God lay out a clear choice before the people He had rescued and redeemed from slavery: They must choose between the way of life… “loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him…” (Deut. 30:20), or the way that leads to their own destruction. This is not only a choice they must make *once*, in that moment long ago, but one they must *continue* to choose *all* the days of their life.
* In our Second Reading from Philemon, St. Paul writes to his friend from prison, urging him to willingly choose to do something very unexpected: to release all legal claims on his former slave, Onesimus, who had run away, and to instead treat his old slave as a brother in Christ and new partner in the work of God’s Kingdom. For Christians, back then and today, choosing to follow the way of Jesus often means making drastic changes in how we see and treat people, even if this means giving up one’s own rights and privileges (like Philemon), or even our freedom (like St. Paul).
* In our Gospel Reading, Jesus again uses very strong words to drive home the point that following Him… becoming a Christian disciple (a word that means “student” or “apprentice”)… means making a clear choice to hold fast to Him and take up our cross, again and again, even placing our love and commitment to Him above *all other* connections. Echoing Deuteronomy, it is a call to cling above all else to the Living God in faith, hope, and love.
* **If Jesus is calling us to follow Him into the way of life, and over and over again shows us that this means sharing God’s self-giving love with *everyone*, how can we understand the strong words He uses in the Gospel Reading about hating “father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself” (Luke 14:26) in order to be His disciple?**
* **How has choosing to follow Jesus actually influenced or changed your day-to-day life? How might God be inviting you to make a choice to trust and follow Him today?**