

November 18

Lesson 12 (NIV)

JACOB'S DREAM

DEVOTIONAL READING: [Psalm 42:1–5](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Genesis 28:10–22](#)

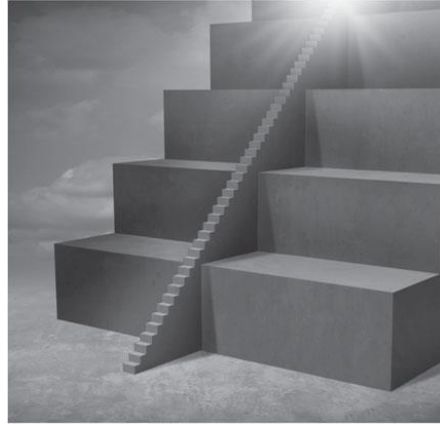
GENESIS 28:10–22

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it stood the LORD, and he said: “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

¹⁸ Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear ²¹ so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the LORD will be my God ²² and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.”



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KEY VERSE

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.—[Genesis 28:15](#)

GOD'S WORLD AND GOD'S PEOPLE

Unit 3: God Blesses and Re-creates Regardless

LESSONS [10–13](#)

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Tell what Jacob saw in his dream, what God told him, and how Jacob responded.
2. Compare and contrast how people memorialize things with how Jacob did so.
3. Share with the class one way God has provided for him or her.

LESSON OUTLINE

[Introduction](#)

- A. [From Scripture to Song](#)
- B. [Lesson Context](#)
- I. [Moving Away \(GENESIS 28:10–15\)](#)
 - A. [Jacob's Departure \(v. 10\)](#)
 - B. [Jacob's Dream \(vv. 11–15\)](#)

Leaving Home

II. Marking the Place (GENESIS 28:16–19)

A. Acknowledging God (vv. 16, 17)

B. Anointing the Stone (vv. 18, 19)

III. Making a Vow (GENESIS 28:20–22)

A. God’s Provision (vv. 20, 21a)

B. Jacob’s Pledge (vv. 21b, 22)

Taking Vows Seriously

Conclusion

A. “Stopping” Stones

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Beersheba *Beer-she-buh*.

Bethel *Beth-ul*.

Chaldeans *Kal-dee-unz*.

Ebenezer *Eb-en-ee-zer*.

Esau *Ee-saw*.

Hagar *Hay-gar*.

Harran *Hair-un*.

Ishmael *Ish-may-el*.

Laban*Lay*-bun.

Melchizedek*Mel-kiz-eh-dek*.

Nahor*Nay*-hor.

Nathanael*Nuh-than-yull* (*th* as in *thin*).

Terah*Tair*-uh.

ziggurat*zih*-guh-rat.

Introduction

A. From Scripture to Song

The Scripture text today from [Genesis 28](#) records Jacob's experience with God via a dream one night as he was departing from Canaan. The passage has prompted two well-known songs over the years. One is the African American slave spiritual "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." The other is the hymn "Nearer, My God, to Thee." The latter is perhaps best known as the song that the musicians on board the *Titanic* purportedly began to play as the ship plunged into the icy waters of the Atlantic Ocean on that tragic April night in 1912. Much of the content of this hymn is based on the incident found in today's text.

While the words and melody of this hymn are comforting to hear or sing, we must remember that Jacob's circumstances in [Genesis 28](#) were very uncertain. He was on the run from his angry brother, Esau. Jacob's self-exile had him traveling to a place he had never been and moving beyond the territory of the promised land for the first time.

When would he be able to return home? What did the future hold? Jacob came to realize that what he was leaving behind did *not* include the blessing and protection of God. God had his future well in hand.

B. Lesson Context

When Esau realized that he had been outwitted by his brother Jacob (for the second time), he determined to kill Jacob, though not until after Isaac's death. Rebekah learned of Esau's plan and urged Jacob to flee northward to Haran ([Genesis 27:41–45](#)). This was the place where Abraham stopped and stayed for a time on his way from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan. Abraham's father, Terah, had died in

Harran ([11:32](#)), and apparently Abraham's brother Nahor had decided to remain there. Jacob was thus being sent to stay with family, specifically with Rebekah's brother Laban (see lesson [9](#)).

Rebekah then spoke to Isaac about her dislike for the Hittite women in the region (two of whom Esau had previously married) and her concern that Jacob might marry one of them ([Genesis 27:46](#)). This persuaded Isaac to do what his father Abraham's servant had done for him years before: secure a wife for Isaac from his family in the area of Harran. Isaac, however, did not send a servant to do this; he sent Jacob himself ([28:1, 2](#)). Isaac may well have been aware of Esau's intentions to kill Jacob.

[Genesis 28:6–9](#) notes that when Esau recognized that Isaac had sent Jacob away to find a wife, Esau married a daughter of Ishmael (Abraham's first son by Hagar). Thus Esau married someone with closer family ties. He seems to have desired to lessen Isaac and Rebekah's disappointment with him on account of the Hittite women he had married. Perhaps Esau wanted to allay some of the hurt Isaac no doubt felt in having been taken advantage of and deceived.

I. Moving Away

([GENESIS 28:10–15](#))

A. Jacob's Departure (v. [10](#))

[10](#). Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran.

Beersheba is the town where Isaac had eventually settled, following a series of disputes with the Philistines over the ownership of certain wells ([Genesis 26:15–33](#)). A journey from Beersheba to *Harran*, where Jacob's relatives live, is approximately 550 miles. This is quite a journey for someone who is used to living "among the tents" ([25:27](#))!

[Genesis 26:34](#) states that Esau is 40 years old when he marries two Hittite women. Jacob's age when he leaves his parents to find a wife is not stated. Circumstantial data based on subsequent events are used by some scholars to suggest him to be age 77 when he leaves his parents. An alternative viewpoint calculates an age of 57.

B. Jacob's Dream (vv. [11–15](#))

[11a](#). When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set.

Later we learn that the *certain place* where Jacob stops *for the night* is the town of Luz ([Genesis 28:19](#)). It is approximately 60 miles north of Beersheba, so it may take Jacob a few days to reach that point in his travels. With no streetlights or flashlights available to illuminate the way, travelers of the era must stop when *the sun* sets. Even if the moon were full, walking would be problematic.

Two meals per day are customary, and perhaps Jacob has the second of these before bedding down for the night. His meal may be something his mother prepared for him, which is possible at this stage of the journey. But Jacob will have to live off the land as the journey progresses.

What Do You Think?

What “at a minimum” preparations should we make before embarking on a physical, emotional, and/or spiritual transition?

Digging Deeper

How do we know where and when to draw the line between preparations God expects us to make and stuff we are to trust him for?

11b. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.

We may wonder how Jacob intends to get much sleep if he is using a stone for his pillow! We will discover the importance of this detail when we get to [Genesis 28:18](#), below. And this will be no ordinary night of *sleep* in any case.

12a. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven,

The *stairway* of which Jacob dreams is generally believed to be more than just a set of steps, but part of a structure known as a ziggurat. A ziggurat resembles a pyramid in shape, but includes steps that one climbs until reaching a platform at the top. An altar or shrine may be there, used by worshippers for sacrifices or other religious ritual.

12b. and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

Probably more captivating to Jacob than the structure is what he sees on it. *Angels* will play an important part in the account of Jacob’s life, particularly from the standpoint of his spiritual pilgrimage ([Genesis 32:1, 24](#)). In the case before us, he dreams of them. The progression (dreaming of angels, meeting them, touching one) may reflect Jacob’s progress in his journey with the Lord, climaxed with the changing of his name by the angel with whom he struggled ([Genesis 32:28](#)).

Centuries later, Jesus seems to comment on this incident very early in his ministry. It happens during his first meeting with Nathanael, who becomes one of his disciples. Expressing astonishment at what Jesus knows about him, Nathanael declares Jesus to be both the Son of God and the king of Israel ([John 1:49](#)). In response, Jesus declares that Nathanael will witness “greater things” ([1:50](#)).

One such thing will be seeing “heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” ([John 1:51](#)). The implication is that Jesus will serve the function of a stairway as he bridges the gap between Heaven and earth, between the holy God and sinful humanity. This happens through his death and resurrection.

13a. There above it stood the LORD,

Archaeologists have discovered that the steps of pagan ziggurats are for gods to descend to earth. What Jacob sees, however, is different: *the Lord* stands *above* the stairway and makes no move to descend. What exact form Jacob sees is unknown to us. But it is likely more awe-inspiring and glorious than the angels.

13b. and he said: “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.

As *the Lord* speaks to Jacob, it is worth noting that he says nothing whatsoever about Jacob's deceptive actions toward his father and his brother. That is not what this wanderer from home needs to hear at this point. Instead, God reaffirms the covenant promises made to grandfather *Abraham* and father *Isaac*.

The promise embraces two important elements: the *land* and Jacob's *descendants*. The fact that the land will be given to Jacob's descendants means that he will have a wife and at least one child. Such an affirmation is likely intended to provide much-needed assurance to Jacob, since he will soon be leaving the territory of the land of promise to go to Harran. Perhaps Jacob has been wondering if and how the promise will be affected by his departure from the land (or by his treatment of his father and brother). If he harbors any such doubts, God has come to ease them.

14a. "Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south."

This language reflects God's promises to Abraham. The phrase *like the dust of the earth* was used when Abraham separated from Lot and as Abraham was promised all the land he could see ([Genesis 13:14–18](#)). Jacob may have heard about this from his grandfather personally, for Jacob was 15 when Abraham died (computed from [21:5](#); [25:7](#), [20](#), [26](#)).

14b. "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring."

This part of the message was first stated in [Genesis 12:3](#), when Abraham was leaving Harran (the place Jacob is now headed). To bless *all peoples on earth* has been God's larger plan all along. It is not a new element.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways our church can better participate in fulfilling God's promises in [Genesis 28:14](#) in light of [Matthew 28:19](#), [20](#)?

Digging Deeper

Evaluate how [Acts 3:24–26](#) and [Galatians 3:7–9](#) should direct your efforts.

15. "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

God's promise *I am with you* is one of the most common and reassuring statements in Scripture (see [Genesis 26:24](#); [Isaiah 41:10](#); [43:5](#); [Jeremiah 1:8](#), [19](#); [15:20](#); [42:11](#); [46:28](#); [Haggai 1:13](#); [2:4](#); [Matthew 28:20](#); [Acts 18:10](#)). For Jacob these words provide further encouragement as he embarks on life as a fugitive and a sojourner. In pagan thinking, gods are local, not global. They are limited to the territory or country that they rule. But Jacob, though he is moving away from the land promised to his grandfather and father, is not moving away from the presence or protection of God. Finding a place outside of God's "jurisdiction" is impossible ([Psalm 139:7–12](#)).

What Do You Think?

Which Scriptures do you find most useful in reminding you of God's presence? Why?

Digging Deeper

How do you resist slipping into a passive "God will take care of it" mind-set whenever you meditate on those texts?

The landscape covered by God's promises to Jacob is quite extensive: the Lord *will watch over* him throughout his travels, *bring him back* to his homeland, and fulfill everything he has promised to Jacob. In fact, God says *I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you*. This does not mean that once God's promises have been fulfilled, Jacob is on his own. It expresses the degree of God's commitment to keeping his word.

LEAVING HOME

I grew up in the Midwest, then moved to California several decades ago, where I quickly adapted to Western culture. Six years later I was invited to interview for a ministry in the Midwest.

As my plane flew over the Sierra Nevada, I looked down on Yosemite National Park, which had become one of my favorite places in God's creation. I wondered if it was a good idea to leave California's diverse natural beauty, which I had grown to love. Then I reminded myself that God might be calling me, and I should be open to the invitation.

The interview went well until a member of the church board said, "It looks to me like you've moved around a lot." In that moment, I knew a "city feller" from California would have an uphill battle relating to, and winning the hearts of, these fine people. Their outlook had been shaped by the fact that many had never lived anywhere but the small town in which they'd been born! We mutually agreed that I could more effectively minister in my new home in the West.

When Jacob left home, we easily imagine his mixed feelings, since he was leaving familiar land and people. But one night he had a magnificent dream in which the Lord promised to be with him. We should not expect such a dream today ([Hebrews 1:1, 2](#)). God sometimes communicates his will through doors he opens ([1 Corinthians 16:9](#); [2 Corinthians 2:12](#); [Colossians 4:3](#)). But we should not overlook the fact that the declarations and examples in Scripture are our primary source of assurance. And one of those examples is God's providential protection of Jacob.

—C. R. B.

II. Marking the Place

(GENESIS 28:16–19)

A. Acknowledging God (vv. [16](#), [17](#))

16. When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

Jacob seems to awaken as soon as the dream ends, while it is yet night. His amazement that *the Lord is in this place* is probably due to the fact that the spot seems very ordinary. There is nothing especially holy about it. Jacob is learning that God can make the most ordinary location holy by his presence; this is a truth that Moses will come to realize in his day ([Exodus 3:5](#)).

17. He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

A wondrous fear kicks in. (The words *afraid* and *awesome* are derived from the same Hebrew word.) Jacob is stunned to have found himself in the presence of God—the God who has revealed something of his splendor to Jacob and has in addition spoken to him.

Many today express desire to have a face-to-face discussion with God. But Jacob’s experience is cautionary. The phrase *the house of God* is considered in [Genesis 28:19](#), below.

B. Anointing the Stone (vv. [18](#), [19](#))

18. Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it.

Perhaps Jacob lies awake the rest of the night, reflecting on the contents of the dream, replaying it over and over in his mind. Any paralysis in that regard gives way to action when he arises *early the next morning*.

The stone he had placed under his head now serves a different purpose. The *oil* he pours *on top of it* serves to consecrate the place. Oil is often used in the Old Testament to set apart priests and kings. But it will also come to be used on objects (example: [Exodus 30:22–29](#)); the one we see here is the first such. A single stone may not constitute *a pillar* to our thinking today; but the important point is commemorating an event, not the size of the memorial.

19. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

Bethel means in Hebrew “house of God,” which reflects Jacob’s earlier declaration in verse [17](#). Ironically and sadly, Bethel later becomes the site where the first king of the northern kingdom of divided Israel builds one of his golden calves to keep the people from going to Jerusalem to worship at the temple there ([1 Kings 12:28, 29](#)). Archaeologists have not been able to determine with certainty the location.

What Do You Think?

How can we improve the ways we use (or don’t use) naming practices to remind us of things and actions of God?

Digging Deeper

Give an example of when a naming or renaming practice was successful in this regard and one when it wasn’t. Explain why in both cases.

III. Making a Vow

[\(GENESIS 28:20–22\)](#)

A. God’s Provision (vv. [20](#), [21a](#))

[20](#), [21a](#). Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father’s household,

Vows have not been seen prior to this point in Old Testament history. Regulations for making vows will later be included within the Law of Moses ([Numbers 30:1–16](#)). Jacob’s vow echoes the words God had spoken to him in his dream ([Genesis 28:15](#)).

B. Jacob’s Pledge (vv. [21b](#), [22](#))

[21b](#), [22a](#). “then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house,

Jacob’s vow should be viewed as different from vows that are sometimes made to God in the heat of a crisis or emergency. Jacob is making his vow based on what God has revealed to him.

One must also keep in mind that this vow is coming from someone who is just beginning to understand what trusting in God means. Jacob has a lengthy journey ahead of him, in terms of both miles and spiritual maturity. When Jacob promises *then the Lord will be my God*, he is pledging that at the end of his journey his personal relationship with the Lord will be far deeper than what it is now.

What Do You Think?

How can we create ways to remember and celebrate what God has promised and done?

Digging Deeper

What dangers present themselves by adding memorial aids to those God has already provided (example: the Lord’s Supper)?

[22b](#). “and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.”

Jacob’s additional promise to *give you a tenth* has a precedent in [Genesis 14:17–20](#), where Abraham offered a tenth to Melchizedek. As with vows, tithing will also be covered in the Law of Moses ([Numbers 18:21–29](#); [Deuteronomy 14:22–29](#)).

The tithe, or tenth, in the ancient world was usually a tax given to a ruler. The context shows that Jacob’s desire to give a tenth to God is in appreciation for God’s working through him.

TAKING VOWS SERIOUSLY

“I take thee to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health.” So begin the traditional wedding vows spoken by millions of couples in days gone by. Today, however, we might hear something like this: “I promise to love and cherish

you as much as I do our dog, Spot.” Or this: “I promise to grab your toes with my toes when we cuddle at night, and when old age has robbed my toes of their monkey-like dexterity, I will just place my feet gently against yours until we fall asleep together like we always have.” (Yes, both of these can be found on the Internet as serious suggestions!)

The first of these comes from the stilted Old English of the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*. The second may be an example of how pets have come to replace children in the family plans of many couples. And the third may be seen as a clever way of saying, “My love for you isn’t based on the agile, youthful bodies we have today.”

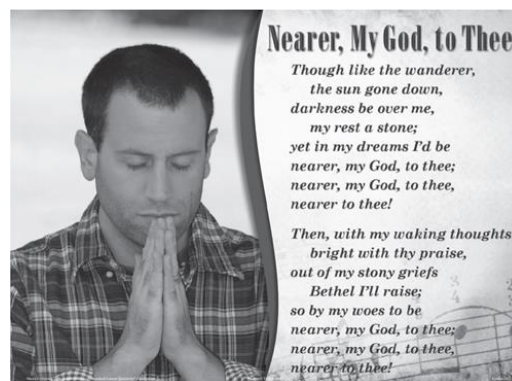
Jacob’s vow to follow God may have been stated in common language, but he was serious in what he was promising. He based his vow to God on his solemn trust in God’s faithfulness. Whatever our vows, in whatever circumstances, we should make them just as seriously.

—C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. “Stopping” Stones

We have seen in our study today how something very common, a stone, became something very special for Jacob as he marked the place where God appeared to him. Years later, he stopped at the same place and used a stone yet again to remember God’s faithfulness to him through very turbulent years. The prophet Samuel used a stone to commemorate the Lord’s deliverance of his people during a battle. He called the stone “Ebenezer,” meaning in Hebrew “stone of help” ([1 Samuel 7:12](#)).



Visual for Lesson [12](#). Point to this visual as you ask, “How do these lyrics connect the story in [Genesis 28](#) with our own experience as believers?”

It is important for us to stop and mark times when the Lord has demonstrated his faithfulness to us or answered our prayers. Our memorial does not have to be a stone (it probably will not be), nor do we have to pour oil on it. It could be a card someone sent, a picture, a gift, a copy of an e-mail. In fact, any object, though as common as a stone, can serve the purpose—if it reminds us to stop at a specific time during our busy schedules and thank God for blessing us.

To pause and remember spiritual landmarks can be a source of great reassurance and encouragement to us. That is especially so when our own times become as turbulent as Jacob’s did.

B. Prayer

Father, thank you for the many ways you have shown the unfailing nature of your love. You have been abundantly faithful to us; yet in the hectic pace of life we often fail to stop and acknowledge our gratitude. May we do that not only in private settings but also before those who need our testimony. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Remember God's faithfulness to you
—in tangible ways.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student

Into the Lesson

Open the session by starting a discussion about how we commemorate major holidays. Call out a few of those holidays and ask participants to discuss how they observe those days. Then divide your class into groups of four or five and ask them to invent a holiday. Instruct them to come up with a list of customs to honor the meaning of the day.

Lead into the Bible study by saying, "Holidays are important because they cause us to remember things that we value, including relationships that are dear or milestones of various types. In today's lesson, we are going to discover the importance of commemorating key moments in our relationship with God.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Too Busy to Remember?" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Group students into pairs to complete it as indicated. Lead into the Bible study by saying, "Lord Ashley was aware of our tendency to forget about God in the midst of our busy lives. However, our lives can go off the rails when we fail to remember and respond to God's character. In our Bible study today, we'll see how one man made sure that he'd never forget a life-changing encounter with God."

Into the Word

Divide the class in half. Have one group read [Genesis 28:10–22](#) and make a list of everything that God promised to do for Jacob. Instruct the second group to read the passage and make a list of everything that Jacob promised to do for God in return. Lead a discussion of how the dream changed the trajectory of Jacob's life. Point out that God had already made this same promise to Abraham in [Genesis 12:1–3](#);

however, God deemed it necessary to remind Jacob of his spiritual heritage by renewing the promise directly to him in a dream.

State the following hypothetical situation: “Imagine that the next day Jacob decided to disregard the dream. What outcomes different from those promised in the dream might have become reality?”

As students brainstorm, remind them to consider Jacob’s character flaws and that he was on a long journey into a kind of self-exile, away from his family. Ask them to imagine how those facts would affect their answer.

Begin a transition by writing “Spiritual Forgetfulness” on the board and asking, “What are some dangers of this?” Lead whole-class discussion while jotting responses on the board. If students are slow to respond, use passages such as [Isaiah 17:10, 11](#); [65:11, 12](#) as discussion prompts.

Into Life

Connect the above with specific customs and traditions of your church that are intended to keep everyone mindful of God. Ask what those customs are and discuss how they are like and unlike Jacob’s “stone ... pillar” in [Genesis 28:22](#). Let this lead to a discussion of ways your congregation can become better at collectively remembering God’s goodness.

Follow with a minute of silence for students to reflect on their personal history with God. Have them write down (1) one thing that God has done for them for which they are particularly grateful and (2) one thing they can do to create a reminder of what God has promised yet to do. (*Option.* Provide small craft stones for the second step; have permanent markers available for students to write on their stones a word or symbol as a blessing reminder for the future.)

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Table of Blessing” activity from the reproducible page for whole-class completion. Introduce the activity by telling the class that it’s time to plan a mini-holiday to celebrate God’s history with them.