



**Welcome to *Journey with John*, the NC Synod's 2022 Summer Bible Reading Plan.**

This study is brought to you by the synod's Engage the Bible Task Group—a Book of Faith ministry—and it features writers both clergy and lay from across this synod. We give thanks for their contributions to this summer's experience and we pray that your engagement with Scripture is a blessing.

Begin by first reading the corresponding verses from the Gospel of John. Next read the thought-provoking devotional and sit for a while with the questions. Close your reading with the prayer.

In the introduction to *Journey with John*, the Rev. Dr. Mary Hinkle Shore invites us to travel through this Gospel in ways that we will be drawn ever more deeply into the abundant life of love and faithfulness that Jesus came to give.

**We pray the Holy Spirit's richest blessings on your engagement this summer through *Journey with John*.**



## Introduction

### *Who is Jesus?*

It is said there are two kinds of stories: (1) A man went on a journey, and (2) A stranger came to town. John's gospel is the second kind of story.

People will ask questions like these: Who is this man? Where has he come from? People watch Jesus do something, or they listen to him teach, and they begin to puzzle through questions of his origins, his identity, and most importantly, his relation to the One he calls Father.

### *Believing = Trusting*

Throughout the gospel, Jesus will call on people to believe. Don't think of believing as giving mental assent to a creed or a doctrine. Think instead of trusting. Who are the people in the story trusting that Jesus is the Son who reveals God's work to them? And when someone does trust, what things change in their lives?

### *Home and Family*

The Gospel of John is the story of the Son coming to invite the whole world into the life he shares with the Father and the Spirit. The gospel opens by saying that Jesus gave those who received him "power to become children of God" (1:12). In the middle, Jesus talks about the many rooms in his Father's house (14:2) that he intends to share with his followers. At the end, Jesus refers to the twelve as "my brothers" (20:17). "Believing" means recognizing one's true life in the family of God.

The Gospel of John is also the story of a family fight. You will read the phrase "the Jews" in this gospel. The author differentiates those who recognize Jesus from those who do not, and he sometimes calls those who did not recognize Jesus "Jews," even though nearly everyone in the story, including Jesus and the twelve, are also Jews. We think that some of the argument narrated in this gospel belongs to a generation or more after the time of Jesus, when the gospel was actually written.

### *The Cross as Jesus' Glorification*

We are used to thinking of the resurrection or the ascension as demonstrating the glory of God and Christ. In John, Jesus' identity and his glory are most clearly seen at the cross. Why? The cross reveals both God's self-giving love for the world and just how steadfast is the faithfulness between the Father and the Son. Such love and faithfulness characterize the abundant life that Jesus came to give to all who receive him. May our journey with John draw us ever more deeply into that life.

### **To Consider:**

1. Which is easier for you, belief in Jesus or trusting him?
2. How would you describe abundant life?

*Brother Jesus, in your life and death, you revealed how completely God loves the world. Thank you for drawing us into that love and life. Bless our study, that our lives, like yours, may show forth God's love now and always. Amen.*

Mary Hinkle Shore is the Rector and Dean of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary of Lenoir-Rhyne University. She lives and works in Columbia, South Carolina. She and her husband, Hank, enjoy time in the mountains of North Carolina as often as they can.



## A Chatty, Loving God Whose Word Echoes throughout the Universe and Holds the Cosmos Together

The Prologue to John's Gospel was probably a separate poem or hymn which the writer adopted in order to begin the Gospel with his central theme—to get his audience to believe that Jesus is Messiah, the Son of God (20:31). Of course, this famous text begins with reference to the *Logos* (translated Word) who is said to be eternal and with God (vv.1-2), and He is said to be Creator, a light shining in the darkness

(vv.3-5; light seems to be related to life or divine life in v.4, what promotes self-understanding [Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol.2 pp.17-18]). Later we are provided with an account of the testimony of John the Baptist to the Word/Light (vv.6-8,15). Next the Word's presence among us in the world receives testimony (vv.9ff.). He is designated as the Father's only Son (vv.14,18), a giver of grace and the One who makes the faithful children of God (vv.16,12), who makes God known (v.18).

Borrowing this message from a previously-circulating song, the Johannine writer was not the first to attribute the status of *Logos* to Jesus. Indeed, the Neo-Platonic Jewish philosopher Philo had spoken of the *Logos* as an intermediary between God and the cosmos/universe. Of course, early Christians agreed, but wanted to claim a more elevated status for Jesus, and so began to say that He was more than an intermediary with God, but God Himself (v.1). We're hinting here at the Trinity, but what sense does that make? In a sermon on this text, Martin Luther helps us understand. He claimed that nothing represents the condition of someone's heart better than his words. If you have somebody's word, you have them. And so, God's Word is God Himself (Complete Sermons, Vol.1/1, p.173). God likes to chat. Has been doing it forever (v.1).

*Logos* was also used by the Greeks and ancient Stoic philosophers to make clear that the cosmic process was rational, kind of like the rational character of the human mind. Don't we marvel sometimes at how magnificent the created order is, that it all sticks together? For Christians who like the Johannine writer say that Christ created it and that creation reflects the *Logos* (who is Christ) this entails that Christ is what holds it all together, keeps the multiverse from collapsing into itself in another Big Bang. How wonderful to think of Christ as in the stuff of the universe, as their glue! It entails that we are meeting Jesus and God in every encounter and gaze every day and every moment. Wow!

The final verses of the lesson refer to the work of the Word on earth in the man Jesus, which was a further manifestation of God's ongoing care for His Creation, His efforts to renew it. As Luther says in a sermon on this text:

*Hence God does not merely create, but whatever He created He also preserves...until the time He Himself has appointed... Thus, as human beings we did not create ourselves, so we can do nothing at all to keep ourselves alive by our own power. The fact that I grow and develop is God's work alone. (Luther's Works, Vol.22, pp.27-28)*

### To Consider:

1. How can the Word of God still be God? How can Jesus be divine?
2. What does it mean to say that Jesus is Word of God? What difference does that make in everyday life?
3. How do we Christians view creation differently from others because we believe Christ made them and still preserves them? Does this make us look at Jesus' saving work a little differently? And if so, how? What do all these issues have to do with the images of light and darkness?

*Glorious Lord Christ: secretly diffused and active in the depths of matter,...it is You to whom we cry out with a desire as vast as the universe, "In truth You are our Lord and our God." Lord, lock us up within You. Make this belief so strong as to become one of the supports of our inner lives... For nothing, Lord Jesus, can exist outside of You.*

*—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. (famous modern Catholic scientist and theologian)*

Mark Ellingsen is member of the NC Synod clergy roster, but he has served three decades in Atlanta on the faculty of the largest Historic Black Seminary in the country, the Interdenominational Theological Center. Named for his accomplishments and numerous media appearances to Marquis' *Who's Who in America*, this former parish pastor and ELCA seminary professor (Luther Seminary), also served six years at a theological think-tank in France for the Lutheran World Federation, is the author of 27 books and over 400 articles, most recently *Sin Bravely* (Continuum), *Finding Peaks and Valleys in a Flat World* (Vernon Press), and new this fall, *Racism in the Mind: How Faith and Evolution Move Us to Challenge Racial Idolatry* (New City Press).





## John's "Who's Who?"

John begins his Gospel with his first testimony. He jumps us into the "Who's Who" of his testimony. In addition, John brings God's model of invitation as he points to Jesus and Jesus invites us to 'come and see.'

The Priests and Levites ask, "Who are you?" They ask because they are tasked to, but I also hear a deeply personal question: "We're asking for ourselves also. It has been hundreds of years since the last Jewish prophet so...could this BE...?"

John clearly defines who he IS and whose he is as he immediately points us towards who Jesus is: "the lamb of God," (v27, v29, v34, v36), "the son of God." He is "the Messiah of the whole world," (v29), not just part or some and not the *sins* of the world, but the *sin* of the whole world. (Isaiah 52:15; 53:11) Now that's some good news!

Jesus continues on this "Who's Who" with his teaching method of asking us in verse 38, "What are YOU looking for?" Are you looking for the Lion that history and maybe the Pharisees and Scribes seek or the Lamb of the whole world that John is pointing to? Jesus begins his series of invitations to us—not a demand but an invitation to come and see what we seek—and offers us a model of invitation to bring others that have been praying for God's comfort and answers (v45).

John points those who would listen to Jesus, Andrew extends the invitation to Simon, and Phillip extends the invitation to Nathaniel. "What are you looking for?" Looking for a Lion or a Lamb (v38)?

In Jesus' call to companionship, he reveals that God is mindful of the individual. Whether it is Phillip's expectation of a future revelation, the deepest prayer under the fig tree, or my own unspoken prayers of my heart.

Jesus simply asks us to "come and see."

### To Consider:

1. When asked, who would I say I am and define myself?
2. What am I looking for in Jesus and how would I describe Jesus in order to invite someone to meet him?

*All-knowing God, we more easily define ourselves by what we are against, by who else is wrong instead of by what we believe in and love. In Jesus you personally invite Nathanael and us to know and proclaim who Jesus is and to see/imitate him in his journey of full incarnation in our lives Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.*

*And, if you sing your prayers, try: I love to tell the story (ELW #661), I heard the voice of Jesus say (ELW #332, #611), Come thou long expected Jesus (ELW #254), Taste and see (ELW #493).*

Gerald and his wife Margaret live and worship in Asheville, NC. Their home is nestled up against the Mountain to Sea Trail and they walk, garden, and get to be with grandchildren. Gerald also serves as Music Coordinator/Webmaster for the Church of the Advocate, serving the homeless in Asheville since 1997.



## Light of Love for the World

In the previous chapter, John introduces us to the light in the darkness that is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit unlike the baptismal by water John the Baptist uses. Now John introduces the first of Jesus' recorded miracles: turning water into wine in the wedding at Cana, like the New Covenant wine Jesus gives his disciples at the last supper in the other three Gospels.

Pondering, I was struck with how far Jesus and

his mother, Mary, have come from the time of his birth, some thirty years earlier. Joseph, Mary's husband, righteously planned to dismiss her quietly rather than disgrace her publicly because she was already pregnant before they lived together! The virgin Mary and her child were already a disgrace to her family and to all Israel! Yet here they are invited to a wedding feast with no hint of disgrace from their friends or the community. They seem to be accepted and Jesus does not disappoint. He makes a good wine from the water for purification provided.

John then takes us to the Passover in Jerusalem, where Jesus, consumed with zeal for God's house, the Temple, drives out all those who have made His Father's house a marketplace. The Jews ask for a sign of authority for his doing this, to which Jesus says: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He speaks of the temple of his body; they think of the forty-six years it took to build the temple: Impossible!

Yet John says many believed in his name because they saw the signs he was doing during the Passover festival, even as Jesus' disciples remembered after his resurrection and believed the Scripture and what Jesus had spoken. So how is it that John closes this second chapter by solidly condemning people's hearts in his final two verses, reminiscent of Genesis 6:5-7, Psalm 95:10-11 or, perhaps Luke 18:8b? Do we truly so love the darkness rather than the light that we would hurt each other more readily than we would love one another?

### To Consider:

1. Take some time to think about it: can Jesus really entrust himself to you; have you allowed him to abide in you as you abide in him?
2. Looking at the neighbors around you, who is it upon whom you look down; who is already disgraced so that you give preferential treatment to others than to him or her?

*Heavenly Father, your love endures forever, overflowing with goodness and blessing for all your creation. You see our hearts are not always with you as your beloved Son saw on the cross that we know not what we do. Thank you that you so loved us while we were yet sinners, you sent Jesus, who gave the life of his being—body and blood—to atone for all the sin of the world. Abba, you are perfect and trustworthy. Let your Word be as a radiant light in our hearts, reviving our souls with a love for you that is ever true and faithful—one that overflows to all, not just some, of our neighbors. Amen.*

*Carlos Cavazos writes:* I was born and raised Roman Catholic and was an altar boy for many years, along with my two younger brothers. As a teen, I pretty much left Catholicism, but still loved occasionally worshiping in packed cathedrals in big cities—even London's Westminster where I could feel I was worshiping with far more than a remnant of believers. In Seattle, I was drawn time and again to Trinity Lutheran Church and became a Lutheran church member; still more Christian than Lutheran or Catholic even now that I worship in Advent Lutheran Church, Spindale.



## The World Is Too Much with Us

OK, I am writing about the third chapter of the Gospel of John. Let's talk about the elephant in the room. John 3:16 is indeed the gospel in a nutshell but as I approached this task, I was reticent to go straight to that overly familiar text. Fortunately, I was struck by the two distinct yet related sections of this chapter that focus on how the world often sees the message of the Gospel. In the first, the teacher is Jesus, in the second, his cousin, John the Baptizer.

In verses 1-21, we find the famous meeting of

Jesus and Nicodemus. This Jesus, who is making all things new, intrigues and baffles the established religious leader. "How can anyone be born again after having grown old?" "How can these things be?" And there is Jesus' frustration. "Are you a teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things?" "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

In verses 22-36 we are told that Jesus is now also baptizing, and according to the Jew (the only descriptor used for this person) who questions John, Jesus is drawing bigger crowds. You can almost see John shaking his head in resignation as he answers. To paraphrase John's reply: "Has no one been listening? It was never about me. It was always about Him. He must increase but I must decrease."

Each of the inquirers in these accounts—Nicodemus and the questioning Jew—viewed the Good News through lenses that distorted the message. Nicodemus, a faithful teacher of the Law, had been born a Jew. His faith was inherited as God had promised. What other birth does he need? John's interrogator looked through the lenses of popularity and influence. How can it be a good thing if people are turning elsewhere? In the eyes of the world, John is failing. He must be just a flash in the pan.

Now, some two thousand years later, we are entrusted with this Gospel. We are charged to proclaim it in word and deed. We can only do all this by the Holy Spirit. But even when the proclamation is done well, the listeners process through the lenses of their experience and worldview. Being born again and putting this Jesus guy first are alien concepts. God's free gift of faith through water and the Spirit does not jibe with the world's concept that you don't get something for nothing. And yet, true life is found only in the realization that "God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

OK, John 3:16 snuck its way into this writing. But isn't that the point? We can only find the fullness of life in God's love shown to us in Jesus Christ.

### To Consider:

1. What lenses distort the Gospel message even for us, the faithful?
2. Jesus and John patiently answered the honest questions. How can we find patience and loving kindness in proclaiming the Gospel in a world increasingly determined to demonize those who appear to disagree?

*We pray: Heavenly Father, we praise and thank you for the love you have shown us by your Son Jesus the Christ. Help us to patiently share this love in word and deed. Send your Holy Spirit upon us that we may daily renew our baptismal vows. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen*

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## Where Is God Now?

We believe that God is Spirit, everywhere, at all times and in all places. When Jesus was talking to the Woman of Samaria people thought a god dwelt in his temple, people went there to worship. Where they worshiped mattered. Worship at an empty temple was nothing.

When this gospel was written circa AD 90 neither of these locations was existent as a place to worship. The shrine on Mt. Gerizim was destroyed in 128 BCE. The Temple in Jerusalem

was destroyed in AD 70. And where was the dwelling of God if the temple had been destroyed? Where then should you worship?

Accepting and anticipating these realities, Jesus answers the question: Where is the Father? “The hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.” The Father seeks those who are not bound to either geographic boundaries or building sites for true and proper worship. The dispersed people of the early Church were marked and known to each other by their religious practice and worship. They worshipped the Father in spirit and in truth in the places they had been sent.

What we believe is embedded in our worship. Our actions and words of worship are the witness that testifies to our belief. Our worship calls us to remembrance of our faith in the Persons of the Trinity. We worship in spirit and in truth. The location of our worship is in ‘the temple of his body’ (John 2:21). The Risen Christ is the true locus of the Spirit of God.

The healing of the little boy shows us how God’s life-giving power is not bound by location. It was at the hour when Jesus had said to the dad, ‘Your son will live,’ that the child began to recover. We believe this sign—God is Spirit, unlimited and unconfined by time or space. We believe and we worship in spirit and in truth.

### To Consider:

1. The Gospel according to John is written in the context of the biblical history of Israel and the 400+ years between Malachi and Matthew. To learn the background of the enmity between Israel and Samaria read I Kings 17:24-41. The Books of the Maccabees also has good background information on the tumultuous events of the invasions and occupation of the Roman Empire.
2. As you reflect on the last two years, how has your faith been a ‘spring of water gushing up to eternal life’ not dependent on a particular building or gathering? Take some time to make a list of all the ways you have developed to worship in spirit and in truth while church services have been suspended and to write a prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God.

*Father God, Spirit of Holiness: according to Jesus’ promise he abides with his Church on earth even to the end of the ages so that we may worship in spirit and in truth at all times and in all places forever and ever. Amen.*

Margaret Ashby is a collage artist, gardener, and retired pastor. It is her great delight to cut things apart and glue them together. Worship is purpose; prayer is our essential job.





## Are You Well?

In Chapter 5, we find Jesus at a pool in Jerusalem surrounded by people seeking healing in the waters. Jesus approaches a man who has been ill for 38 years. His question, “Do you want to be made well?” (v6) evokes a response from the man indicating healing is not possible because he has no one to carry him to the pool. Instructing the man to rise, take his mat and walk, Jesus heals him and disappears into the crowd. There were no preconditions for healing—a man who had given up hope is

restored to wholeness.

Our newly-healed friend encounters Jewish leaders who focus solely on the fact that his healing broke a Sabbath rule, showing no consideration for the man released from his years of suffering. In first-century Judaism, Sabbath was one of three practices that defined community identity; breaking one of these laws was a direct challenge to authorities. When they find out it was Jesus, they confront him. Jesus’ defense, “My Father is working, and I also am working” (v17) further inflames his detractors. Now Jesus has really done it—he has broken a Sabbath law and claimed equality with God!

Jesus presents evidence of his intimate relationship with God. In addition to the witnesses of John the Baptist and Moses, revered prophets, Jesus says, “The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works I am doing, testify on my behalf” (v36). Despite this strong argument, Jewish officials persist in their outrage and begin planning Jesus’ death. They have all the information needed to believe Jesus, but their need for power and control has rendered them unable to hear the truth. Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (v25). These leaders, in striving to maintain the status quo, remain in spiritual darkness and miss the opportunity to receive life. Jesus came so we could be made well—we just need to listen for His voice.

### To Consider:

1. The man by the pool had lost any hope of healing when Jesus approached him with the offer to be made well. Does this example of God’s grace offer hope in an area of your life or in the world?
2. In verses 10-18, the Jewish leaders opposed Jesus because he challenged the established rules of the synagogue. When do we, in contemporary church life, reject the teachings of Jesus because they challenge existing church structures?

*God of healing, thank you for loving us so completely and without condition! Open us to receive all the teachings of Jesus designed to make us well in all areas of our lives. If there is something in Jesus’ words or deeds that challenges our structural thinking, give us the courage to dismantle what we have mistakenly embraced. Amen.*

Carol Schierlmann currently serves as the Director of Spiritual Development at Advent Lutheran Church in Charlotte, NC. She felt God calling her to a new path in 2017 and entered Union Presbyterian Seminary where she completed a Master of Arts in Christian Education. She is particularly interested in helping folks find the blessings in spiritual practices and deeper examination of holy texts.



## Feedin' Folks

When I was growing up, once a week my grandmama would round up nearby family for an impromptu supper.

"Nothing special," she'd say to anyone she called with an invitation. "I'm just heating up scraps." My grandma loved to cook, so there were plenty of "scraps" to feed anyone who might find their way to her table. Her "scrap" suppers always made for a very satisfying meal. If you left her table hungry you had only yourself to blame.



In chapter 6 of the Gospel of John, Jesus is also concerned with "feedin' folks."

Picture it. Jesus is experiencing the peak of his popularity. People have traveled miles to hear his words. He's a rock star. He's done a great miracle, feeding the crowd with only a few loaves of bread and some fish. Like my grandmama feeding her crowd with "scraps" from the refrigerator, he turned a little into a great feast. Expectations are high. Could Jesus do it again? Would he do it again? Could he

top his last miracle?

Jesus didn't give them just another meal. He gave them THE meal. He gave them these words: "I am the Bread of Life. If you come to me, you will never be hungry, and if you believe in me, you will never be thirsty." He was telling them that God would always supply their needs. And he wasn't just talking about dinner.

Jesus was talking about nourishing their spirits. He was telling the crowd, gathered expecting to be fed another meal, that the bread of life is more than food for their bodies. Jesus did not offer "scraps" but eternal life. He offers all we need. All we must do is accept his gift.

When we pray, when we open our Bibles, when we give of ourselves, and when we partake of the Lord's Supper, we are being fed with the bread of life. We are at the table for a most satisfying meal.

### To Consider:

1. How are we like the crowds that followed Jesus? What do we expect?
2. Does Jesus, the Bread of life, truly satisfy your needs? In what ways?

*Loving God, thank you for feeding our bodies and our spirits through your word and your grace. Help us to feed our neighbors in the same way, sharing our own "scraps." In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Julie Arndt is a member of St. Mark's Lutheran, Lumberton, N.C. She is a middle school English teacher who hopes to return to her classroom this fall, having spent the past year recovering from the amputation of part of one leg. With the help of her husband Robert, a team of patient physical therapists, and many prayers from many friends, she is making strides toward her goal.



## Murmurs

Murmurs....murmuring.... What a funny word that is if you say it over and over again. And you've done it yourself, no doubt. Sitting in an audience and waiting for the show to begin, and it's two minutes past showtime—what's happening? you murmur. You are in a restaurant and witness an argument at the next table—why doesn't she just get up and leave? you murmur. You walk into class and there is a pop quiz—are you kidding me? you

murmur!

We move into this chapter in John with murmuring going on. Jesus has come to Jerusalem for the final time in secret because the authorities were looking for him. It was a festival, and the crowds were complaining, muttering, and murmuring about Jesus—he is a good man, NO, he is deceiving us. And now the Pharisees begin to hear the murmurs and send the temple police to arrest Jesus.

This passage in John calls attention to how destructive the murmurs and mutterings of the crowd became. It caught the attention of the authorities and called into question if Jesus was the Messiah. There was a division in the crowd. Some heard him and believed. Some heard him and thought he had a demon.

We have always struggled with the murmurs. How often have people gathered in the parking lot after worship and muttered quietly about the sermon, the choir, the visitor who came that morning? How about the Altar Guild team murmuring in the sacristy about a parament that wasn't put away correctly? And let's not even talk about the muttering and murmuring that goes on at annual meetings.

We are called to be witnesses today to the risen Christ. If we had been in Jerusalem at that festival time, would we have been at the back of the crowd, joining in with the disgruntled and unbelievers, or would we be speaking up to say truly, this IS the Messiah? And more importantly, do we speak up today or are we engaged in destructive murmuring?

### To Consider:

1. Consider what happens in your life, in your congregation. Are you engaged in a whisper campaign that creates division? How can you influence and create change there?
2. How do you speak up and witness to God's presence in your life? Do you speak the truth about Jesus the Messiah?

*Lord, we know you as Messiah and Lord of all. Be with us in our daily walk as we encounter others who may not believe, or who are questioning, and give us the words and courage to speak the truth. Amen.*

Kimerly Hinkelman is a retired Non-Profit leader, a lifelong Lutheran, and has served on many committees, sung in choirs, changed paraments, and loves the church. Kim and her husband, David, a retired ELCA pastor, live in Western North Carolina with their three great dogs.



## A New Lens for Righteousness

The eighth chapter of John's gospel opens with a familiar scene. A crowd of people has gathered to listen to Jesus, and the religious leaders interrupt in order to put Jesus on the spot, to test him. They bring a woman of whom they are thrilled to make an example. Quoting Leviticus 20:10, they name drop the biggest name they can: Moses. Moses says this woman should be stoned to death for her sin; what say you, Jesus?!

Now, Jesus knew they were misquoting Leviticus

20:10. He could easily have given them a public dressing down, saying they should know better than to leave out the part of that verse that says both the man and woman are to be stoned to death for their adultery. He could have turned to the crowd and cleared up the scriptural reference, making an example of the men who were making an example of the woman.

But Jesus thinks a while, scribbles in the sand a bit, and when he speaks, he doesn't address the old law—at least not in the way everyone there likely expected. He offers them a new lens. He knows the law. The religious leaders have just spit some of it his way. The air is thick with their words, and the woman knows she is in danger if it is applied. Amid all that tension, Jesus offers a simple suggestion: you who are without sin...you cast the first stone.

Jesus protects the vulnerable while calling the powerful to repentance. In one sentence, he diffuses the violent scene, keeps the law, and offers a new lens for righteousness.

The chapter continues with Jesus asking them to see through a new lens.

The religious leaders say his testimony on his own behalf is not valid;

Jesus says the Father who sent him testifies on his behalf.

They say Abraham is their father;

Jesus says God is the Father (and they aren't acting like children of either one).

They say Jesus is too young to know Abraham;

Jesus says, "...before Abraham was, I am."

Jesus persists, in this chapter and beyond, in teaching whoever will listen that God is doing a new thing.

### To Consider:

1. When you realize Jesus doesn't seize the opportunity to publicly correct the powerful men misquoting scripture, how do you feel?
2. How might you use this story of Jesus to inform your own response to those who are intent on trapping you in a "but the Bible says..." conversation? How might your deepening love of neighbor help you in that moment?

*Lord Jesus, we need you. When we are vulnerable, draw near. When others wish us harm, draw near. When we spit the law from our own lips with intent to harm, draw near. When we can't see what God is doing, draw near. When we are sure we are right, draw near. Gather us into the crowd that longs to learn from you. We love you and we trust you. Amen.*

Pastor Jennifer Shimota serves among the people of Coble's Lutheran, Julian, NC. Pastor Jennifer and her Siberian Husky, Eleanor Rigby, are in a mutual admiration society of two, being each other's biggest fans. When she's got free time, you'll likely find Jennifer in the kitchen learning something new like candy-making or how to make sourdough bread from wild yeast. Also, she loves Jesus something fierce.



## The Voice

The 9th chapter of John features the wonderful story of Jesus healing a blind man. As the story unfolds, however, Jesus does more than just give the man sight.

Contrary to popular opinion, sheep are not ignorant creatures. Sheep also have wonderful memories. They can remember approximately 50 individuals for years at a time. They also know and understand their shepherd's voice. A shepherd communicates with his flock with a

certain sound. If another shepherd tries to make that sound, the sheep will not respond because it is not the voice of their shepherd. Keep this in mind as you read this chapter.

Getting his sight should have been a day of celebration for the man. He should have had a celebration thrown by his family and his faith community. However, when the formerly blind man begins to give Jesus all the credit, the church leaders and his own family throw the man OUT of their community. On the day the man gains his sight, he loses 1) his family, 2) his church, and 3) his home. He becomes a lost sheep.

It is after the man becomes lost that Jesus comes BACK into the story. Jesus goes into full "Good Shepherd" mode and FINDS the man. Jesus then asks the man one question, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" When the man says, "Who is he? Tell me! So I may believe," Jesus replies, "You are looking at him. And you are speaking to him." This man, this lost sheep, hears the voice of his shepherd. The Real Shepherd. The Good Shepherd.

In that moment, the man who lost his family, his church, and his place in society, now has a NEW family, a NEW faith community, and a NEW flock.

Jesus' voice is louder and greater than all the voices that tell us we are not worthy. When we find ourselves lost or left out (or even thrown out), we can rest in the promise, the oath, that our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, WILL find us, and call us back home.

### To Consider:

Think of a time when you felt lost.

1. When did the voice of Jesus find you?
2. How did knowing Jesus found you in your time of need make you feel?

*Almighty and Good Shepherd, thank you for calling out to us in our times of loss and loneliness. Open our ears, hearts, and souls so we can hear you always. Amen.*

Pastor Jonathan Conrad is the Senior Pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Wilmington, NC. He is the fortunate husband to Kristen and the lucky father to Paul and Maddie. PJ's motto is "All really means all" and continues to work to make St. Paul's a place where all are welcomed, known, and loved.





## Open Doors

*Jesus said, "I am the door. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. —John 10:9*

Doors open and doors close. Doors welcome us in and doors shut us out. So do gates and fences and wall and borders. They can insulate and isolate us, or they can provide the passageway to new adventures and possibilities. They can keep us exclusive, or they can enable us to be more and more inclusive.

Doors were never a barrier to Jesus. Behind locked doors He appeared to His disciples after His resurrection, bringing assurance, confidence, forgiveness, and hope. These men weren't meant to be huddled together in fear, closed off from the world. Instead, they unlocked and opened the doors of their hearts and minds to bring Jesus' ministry and mission to the ends of the earth. In doing so they turned the world upside down!

We can, too. In our thinking and attitudes, what are the closed doors in our lives that we need to open? How can we be more welcoming and inviting to the people in our community? What are the prejudices that we must overcome? The probing question has been raised, 'Why do the people in the pew look just like me?' Maybe because we haven't taken seriously Jesus' commands to love and serve all people. Perhaps we need to widen the circle of our friends and be better neighbors to those right in our midst. Just as there's always room for one more guest at the dinner table, there's room to welcome someone new to our pew.

This also applies to the leadership of our church. We might ask, "Why does the pastor look just like me?" All pastors have talents to share and gifts to bring and a unique message to proclaim. Be open to the possibility of being served by a pastor of a gender or race or color or nationality other than your own. Don't shut doors that the Spirit is opening in your personal life and in the life of your congregation.

In Revelation 3:8, the Lord proclaims, "Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut." Just as Jesus is the door to salvation, so He opens doors of opportunity for us to enter and pursue.

### To Consider:

1. What are the closed doors in my life that are holding me back?

*Lord, help me realize that open doors lead to open minds, open hearts, and untold blessings. Amen.*

Joseph A. Miller is a retired pastor living in Salisbury. He likes to swim, travel, play the accordion, and collect U.S. commemorative stamps. He and his wife Marcia have two sons and two granddaughters.





## The Supreme Act of Love

Likely, this story is familiar to you. Lazarus falling ill and dying; Mary and Martha sending for Jesus' help; his delaying and later weeping at Lazarus' tomb; Martha's confession of faith; and Jesus' raising of Lazarus and ordering that he be unbound; all is familiar.

There's rich soil here for our consideration and edification. Yet towards the end there's a curious twist we may well overlook. It is this act, the act of comforting Mary and Martha, of raising

Lazarus and ordering him unbound that finally does it. This is what finally solidifies their decision to arrest Jesus and put him to death.

It is curious; this act of Jesus is a supreme act of love. John makes a point to tell us that Jesus loves Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. While we know that Jesus loves all, it is important to note that these three siblings, along with the disciple whom Jesus loves, are noteworthy in Jesus' loving affection. So, what Jesus does here in his weeping and in his comforting; in his declaration, "I AM the resurrection and the life;" in his rising up and unbinding is all a supreme act of love. And it's curious that this act of love is what seals his fate as being the one who will die for the sake of his people...of course Jesus already knows this is what it means for him to be the Messiah.

Love can be a wonderful thing, comforting and affirming. But love can also be an unsettling thing. It invites vulnerability and growth; growth well beyond what we might experience outside of love. We might think, "of course! We want to be loved!" But love can pose a very real threat to our normal order of things. The Chief Priests and the Pharisees are all too aware of this and so their answer is to kill love. We may be tempted to scold them for this behavior; but love, especially the love of Jesus, invites us to consider how we too may respond to the amazing, grace-filled, abundant love of Jesus in this way and how we might respond to that same love with Martha's confident, "yes Lord, I believe."

### To Consider:

1. When was a time you truly felt unconditionally loved?
2. How did it make you feel vulnerable?
3. How did it make you feel welcomed and affirmed?

*Lord, your love for us is beyond our comprehension. It accompanies us through all of life, into the valley of the shadow of death, and beyond. This love can challenge and unnerve, but this love can also welcome and affirm. Help us to respond to your love with "yes Lord I believe." Amen.*

Jonathan Schnibben is the pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Mount Holly. In addition to being a pastor and writing devotions for the NC Synod, he enjoys cycling and cooking. If you'd like to listen to more of his devotions you can check out his podcast, *Ground Up Faith*, wherever podcasts are found.



## “Who Does This ‘Son of Man’ Think He Is?”

When reading John chapter 12, I had to keep in mind John was writing from the perspective of Jesus; as the pre-existent divine Word, and the self-revelation of God. This is important to know because we are getting a front-row seat in Jesus’ final days on Earth as a human being and getting all of the juicy cliffhangers of what is to come with his death and resurrection.

Throughout the entire chapter, Jesus is alluding to what the world will be like after his death and the importance of walking in the light. One could even perceive each event as a warning for us to cling to the cross, and really listen to what God has been trying to tell us since the Old Testament. The chapter begins with Jesus in Bethany. While at dinner; Mary poured pure nard on Jesus’ feet. Judas Iscariot, wisely denoted as a thief, was so concerned over the wasted perfume, he exclaimed, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?” Jesus then replied, “you will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me” (vv7-8). Jesus is telling us we will always be destitute and lacking the basic necessities in life. He is also telling us to prepare, for we will not always have Him. Though this may sound bleak, we are given a glimpse of Good News at the end of the chapter.

This insight is given while the crowd is grappling with Jesus’ prediction of His own death: “The Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this ‘Son of Man?’” (v34). Jesus gives them an answer as to who exactly He is. Jesus is the light, and He advises us to walk in the light while He is still here before darkness overtakes us (vv35-36). This is a powerful message. Jesus was sent to save mankind, and here He is knowing he will die, is still trying to save us, and reminding us that He is the way, the truth, and the life (light).

The chapter ends with Jesus reminding us of His purpose on Earth, “I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness” (v46). If we continue to trust and believe in the Lord, there will be no darkness. Our paths will be illuminated with righteousness, and we too will be raised up at the end of our days.

### To Consider:

1. Are there any areas of your life (work, finances, relationships, goals, use of time, etc.) where you need God to shine His light into?
2. What do I need to ask of God in order to grow in the light?

*Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Jesus into my world to be the light that extinguishes the darkness. Thank You, for through Your goodness and grace, You proposed and planned to redeem mankind through faith in His finished work. May I live and work to Your praise and glory, from this day forward and even forevermore. This I ask in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Tiffany Shine is an HR Business Partner for Target corporation. She enjoys advocating for others through community outreach programs and fighting injustices in the workplace. Tiffany strives to cultivate an equitable experience for all. Outside of work, she is newly engaged and procrastinating wedding planning by enjoying family time, the outdoors, and Netflix.



## Everyone Is Included

Before Jesus died on the cross, he washed the disciples' feet so they would remember how much he loved them. Everyone's feet would get very dirty from walking barefoot from place to place. When Jesus knelt to wash their yucky feet, he chose to do a job that no one wanted.

Jesus loved each of the disciples very much—even Judas. Jesus knew that Judas was going to betray him, and he still washed his feet. I am comforted knowing that Jesus chose to include Judas, because I don't like to see anyone left out.

After washing everyone's feet, Jesus gave a new commandment, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." By serving the disciples, Jesus showed us what it means to love one another and how he wants us to live God's love.

Today, God works through our hearts and moves us to serve others. We may not wash feet with water, but we do things like give hugs, protect God's creation, sing Christmas carols together, and prepare meals to care for our neighbors living in homelessness. Sharing God's love through these simple acts of kindness makes me joyful.

Serving others is about including everyone in our world. We are each unique and no one is perfect, but no one should be left out. When we love one another, we help give each other what is needed for today and beyond.

### I Wonder:

1. How Jesus and Judas both felt when Jesus was washing Judas' feet?
2. How can you share God's love by including others today?

*Dear God, we pray that Jesus' extravagant love for us will always flow through our bodies and lead us to include others in your love, even when it may be hard. Amen.*

Lauren Roberts is a sophomore at Manus Academy in Charlotte, NC. Her congregation is Morning Star in Matthews, and she enjoys hanging out with her puppy, baking with her dad, and watching movies with the family.



## Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled

The text today begins with words of comfort, “do not let your hearts be troubled.” I find my heart troubled often recently. Between the pandemic that just won’t seem to let up, political tensions rising across the globe, and news headlines that seem to be more and more depressing each day, it

seems that trouble is never far. However, there is always hope. Right at the start of the chapter, Jesus reminds the disciples that he has prepared a place for each of them in heaven to dwell with God for all eternity. Even in the darkness of our world, we live in the hope that one day we will be reunited with Jesus in his heavenly kingdom.

Then the disciples ask for proof. I can relate to their insistence for tangible evidence; as the saying goes, “seeing is believing.” How much more difficult is it for us to believe today? We don’t have the physical person of Jesus in our midst. And yet, we are filled with hope at the same promises that Jesus gives his friends: that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. We are able to know God through Jesus Christ.

The second section of this chapter is filled with comfort. Although Jesus was only on earth with his disciples for a short time, they would not be abandoned; he promised them that the Holy Spirit would remain with them forever. And that same Spirit abides within us. We are never truly alone because God promises to be with us always and bring us peace. Even in times of sorrow, anger, and fear, the Triune God remains with us.

### To Consider:

1. What comes to mind when you think about the kingdom of heaven?
2. When have you felt the comfort of the Holy Spirit surrounding you?

*God of peace, thank you for sending your Spirit to dwell within us. Help us strengthen our faith and confidently trust in your great promises. Amen.*





## Embodied Love

I am writing this less than 24 hours after the massacre at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, TX, and 11 days following a hate-filled rampage that slaughtered 10 Black people in a Buffalo, NY grocery store. Reading in John 15 that those who abide in Jesus will have whatever they ask is difficult to process at the moment. If the richest nation on earth was measured by the number of children living with food insecurity, domestic violence,

lack of adequate housing, little to no mental health support, unmitigated gun violence, or the 30 plus K-12 mass shootings in less than six months, an epic failure would be found. None of that includes those reeling from the impact of mass criminalization, drug addiction, poverty, or the difficulties navigating everyday life as a member of an American lower caste (often defined by not being white, protestant, cis, and hetero). Whether the direct victims are adults or not, children pay the price. This leads me to wonder where are those abiding in Jesus and why haven't they asked for an all-stop?

Where are the people who love their neighbor enough to put their bodies on the line in protests, advocate before governments, or create room in leadership for all people? Where are the support teams offering food, water, consensual hugs, babysitting services, financial contributions, listening ears, and watchful eyes for those on the ground? Jesus lived life in a bronze body that intimately held markers of being a child refugee, adult life as a carpenter, and final years in ministry opposing an empirical government that eventually sanctioned his murder; yet he stayed the course of an embodied love. Though one may feel alone, powerless, or as if best efforts will never be enough, the command remains. May those who have chosen to abide in Jesus find hope in the promise to receive what has been asked and stay the course. May those struggling with how to abide in their life start with a love in action that causes no harm.

### To Consider:

1. What does an embodied unapologetic love in action for myself look like this week?
2. How can an embodied unapologetic love in action impact my community this week?
3. Does what I call love harm the broader community?

*Creator, guide us in a refining love for self and community that knows no boundaries, stop signs, or fear; especially when it is easier to put our heads in the sand than face the call of a love in action that challenges comfortability. In the name of the one who lived a life of embodied, unapologetic love. Amen*

Minister Kathlene Judd is the theologian-in-residence at Prince of Peace Lutheran in Greensboro, NC. She believes in the power of love, joy in smiles, and hugs with consent.





## Questions, Uncertainties, and the Unfailing Promises of God

*Some of the disciples kept asking, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We don’t understand what he is saying.” —John 16:18 NRSV*

I don’t know about you, but I completely relate to the disciples on this one. This chapter of John, which wraps up Jesus’ final teaching on the night of his betrayal, is overwhelming. Even Jesus

acknowledges that he has been speaking figuratively. As we stumble through these words, we, too, may find ourselves saying, “What does he mean? We don’t understand!”

Yet, this is part of the gift of this section of John. Jesus makes room for questions, uncertainty, and lack of understanding. Though he speaks of a day when such questions will no longer be necessary, he suggests his followers don’t need to have all the answers. Instead, Jesus will do what he has always done. He will give them what they need.

The great promise he makes is that, after his death, resurrection, and ascension, he will continue to be with them by sending the advocate or helper, what we call the Holy Spirit. This Advocate will make it clear that Jesus is victorious over sin and death and that God, who is righteous, is the judge. Should we wonder what that judgment looks like, all we need to remember is that the one who judges the world is the one who, out of unfathomable love, went to the cross and rose from the dead, utterly defeating the powers of sin and death. In addition, this Advocate will speak through us, shepherd us, and help us proclaim that Jesus is victorious!

This is good news for us. It is easy to look at all that is unfolding in the world and think sin, death, and brokenness are victorious. Yet, even in the midst of this, we cling to another promise Jesus makes in this chapter. God loves us. God loves us and will always be with us. Even when we don’t get it. Even when we don’t understand. And God calls us, with the help of the Advocate, to share this news with all the world.

### To Consider:

1. What are some of the questions you have about who God is and how God acts in this world? To whom do you turn when you have such questions?
2. In what ways does the Holy Spirit work through you to proclaim the good news of God’s love? Who is one person you can share this good news with this week?

*O God, when we struggle with questions we cannot understand, remind us that we are rooted in your love. Empower us through your Holy Spirit to proclaim this love to all the world. Amen.*

The Rev. Todd Cutter is the University Pastor and Director of Spiritual Life at Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, NC. He enjoys traveling, cooking, running, and spending time with his wife, the Rev. Sara Cutter; daughter, Amelia; and dog, Belle.



## Unity and Embrace

This chapter of John's Gospel is a thoughtful prayer from Jesus who wants to leave well and wants the best for his disciples and the larger community. Jesus prays as the final act of the last supper before his arrest and crucifixion.

He knows things are coming to a head and he longs for oneness and unity among his disciples and the larger community of those who believe. For his disciples, Jesus asks for protection "so they may be one, as we are one (v11)." And for

the larger community, Jesus claims he has given the glory given to him "so that they may be one, as we are one (v22)." Jesus later says that this unity is a piece of the world knowing that God sent Jesus out of love!

In both instances, Jesus uses his relationship with God as the model for what unity and oneness look like. We certainly need a model of unity in our world. It seems that we have disunity and division on the one hand, and we have false unity and conflict avoidance on the other. But the oneness shared by Jesus and his Heavenly Parent does not fit in either of our misguided categories of unity. Instead, the oneness they share is a mutual indwelling and mutual struggling—it is a mutual loving of one another and creation. Nothing is overlooked or skimmed over in this model of unity; there is no disagreement when love is at the core. There is no hierarchy, no power struggle, no assimilation. There is no othering, no one excluded, and no one left behind.

Jesus longs for oneness and unity. A unity that levels the playing field, where equity and justice abound. A unity where we are all known and welcomed into the fold. A unity where there is mutual indwelling and mutual aid and mutual love. A true unity for all, that needs God's protection because it is so radical and so countercultural. A oneness with no erasure because there is only room for embrace.

### To Consider:

1. Where am I experiencing disunity or false unity in my life?
2. How is God calling me to mutual indwelling and embrace following the example of Jesus and God?

*Gracious God, call us to a oneness where we are all rooted in your love and grace. Lead us to a unity that is so radical there is no erasure of your image in anyone, but there is a loving embrace for everyone. Amen.*

Pastor Athena is one of the pastors at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Cary, NC. She enjoys gardening, exploring nature, throwing pottery, and playing soccer.



## Great Dread

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I would often wake in the morning with an enormous, aching feeling of dread.

When I read John's 18th chapter, I can't help but remember this dread. The new death-count each week, the new stage of depression or mania or anxiety that took hold of us all. The ways that fear and hopelessness kept manifesting in new and newly horrific ways as we sorted through the

week's news of murder of black and brown people by police, COVID-19 infection rates, poverty, disconnection, loneliness—all the sins of our collective were in broad and violent display. Chapter 18 of John is such a display of the worst of humanity—the steps to the cross are paved with deception, betrayal, and confusion.

In the last line of the chapter, Pilate asks, "What is truth?" As we know, the truth is not as simple as it should be. The truth of Judas' long friendship with Jesus is overturned when he leads the soldiers to the garden where he knew Jesus would seek refuge. The truth of Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial becomes reality and even Peter must have heard the accusation in the cock's crow that day.

Perhaps, on this side of that day in the garden we can read this chapter as a step towards our great mystery of faith, but on that day, in that place, there is no good news for those paving the way to the cross. Maybe for all that we have survived, it does us good to linger in the helplessness for a while and remember that on the road to glory we may also lose hope and connection, we may betray and deny, but Jesus is with us in the struggle, a steadfast love in the face of the worst of humanity.

### To Consider:

1. Do you find yourself wanting to skip ahead of this chapter of John? How is reading about the betrayal of Jesus helpful in understanding our relationship with him?
2. What is the truth of your faith that you have denied in order to be safer or more accepted? How might you reconcile the denial?

*Holy Love, you have been with us on the hardest roads of our lives. We have denied you and yet you still show up in love for us each day. Help us to be faithful members of our communities, leaning on you when we falter, and trusting in your coming glory and restoration. Amen.*

Heather Bachelder is the vicar at Lutheran Church of the Epiphany in Winston-Salem, NC. Heather and her spouse live in Winston-Salem, NC with their overly-adored dogs, Xenakis, Fred, and Lucy. Their children have flown the coop and are living fun lives in the northeast for now.



## The Liturgy of John 19

We have reached the climax of John's Gospel. Jesus, having already been arrested by the chief priests and taken to the High Priest Caiaphas' house, is brought before Pilate. Jesus then goes from Pilate to the cross for crucifixion and Jesus utters several words from the cross. In the historical Christian tradition, there is a liturgy known as the *Seven Last Words of Jesus*.

Throughout the liturgy, there are several readings from the Gospels about Jesus' final words. The Gospel chapters that produce the most sayings for the service are Luke 23 and John 19. John 19 has the more famous passages: "I am thirsty," Mary and John entrusted to each other, and "it is finished" (vv26-30). In these short sentences, Jesus describes the transition of family and entrusting Mary and John to each other. Next, Jesus describes the basic human need for thirst, and Jesus, in his last moments of thirst, receives sour wine from a hyssop branch. Lastly, he says, "it is finished" (v30). Jesus's death happened when his spirit left his body.

The next section (vv 23-37) wraps up the rest of John's Gospel from the previous section. First, Jesus is raised up on the cross signifying his glory which was first echoed back in John 12. John 12 describes the kind of death Jesus would die also serving as the glorification (v32). Next, John places the crucifixion of Jesus on the day before the Day of Preparation, again signifying the death of Jesus in terms of a Paschal sacrifice. Jesus, who on the cross took the sins of the world away—this same Jesus was the Paschal lamb who died unblemished (vv33-37). John the Baptizer earlier described how Jesus is the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world (1:29-34). John intricately wraps together the other themes of his book into John 19. Lastly, Jesus is buried in a garden tomb.

When thinking of this story, the narrative of the crucifixion is often wrapped up in the final sections, yet John manages to weave all strands together.

### To Consider:

1. What feelings or thoughts manifest when you read John's narrative of the crucifixion?
2. What character stands out most for you in John 19?

*Holy God, by your Holy Cross we are saved. Amen.*

Thomas Johnston recently finished his second year of his Master of Divinity program at Trinity Lutheran Seminary at Capital University, and he will be heading off to internship in the fall to serve as pastoral intern at Calvary Lutheran Church, Fort Worth, Texas. He is an avid reader, amateur astronomer, and burgeoning theologian. Thomas also has two kittens, Graypaw and Tiny, who are delights in his life and constant alarms.





## Recognizing Jesus

John 20 tells stories of Jesus, fresh from the grave, appearing to his disciples. This Jesus, who they had all just seen murdered by the State then wrapped in burial cloths, was now standing before them, just as he had days before when he walked beside them. However, this Jesus was both the same and completely different.

In these encounters of Jesus, it is clear the disciples didn't initially know who Jesus was.

Maybe this was because they weren't expecting to see him—not alive. Instead, they were expecting to see his lifeless body in the tomb, but not him alive outside of it. Maybe their grief was too strong to recognize Jesus. We all know what it's like when grief alters what we see or experience. When grief forms over us like a thick fog—blocking out any trace of what is in front of us. We are so encumbered by the grief that all we can see or experience or know IS the grief. It takes over each of our senses. Disconnecting us from anything outside of it.

In addition to the disciples not expecting to see Jesus and their minds being overcome by grief, perhaps this Jesus who stood before them looked different than before. Maybe he had changed—as tragedy tends to change a person. Maybe his countenance was different after hours of being crucified. Maybe he was transformed by the resurrection. His face changed into the way it was when he previously stood on the mountain top—transfigured by the beauty of God.

Whatever the case, Jesus was recognized by Mary and his other disciples once he called their names. He was recognized by Thomas once Thomas put his hand in his scars. These two intimate acts show us that Jesus comes towards us. That even when we push him away, he goes after us. That as his sheep, we recognize his voice. And as our shepherd, he goes to any lengths, even to re-injure himself in the pressing of his bruises, to make himself known to us. Always.

### To Consider:

1. Can you name a time when grief completely clouded your experience of what was right in front of you?
2. Can you think of a time when you were pushing Jesus away and still he came after you?

*Dear Jesus, thank you for always coming after us. Thank you for the ways you speak to us, calling us by our name, drawing us nearer to you. In your name, Amen.*

The Rev. Nikkeya Berryhill is a pastor and mission developer from the Midwest. She is currently serving part time as an Associate Pastor at Christ the King in Cary, NC and part-time as a mission developer with the NC Synod. She loves creativity, visioning, dreaming, and helping people see a new way.





## End of the Road

Well, this is it. It's the end of the road for this summer's *Journey with John*. Even John knows it and is tying up the loose ends of the story for us.

There's the story about the giant catch of fish from Peter and other disciples who had gone back to their fishing day-jobs after Jesus's death. There's the story about Jesus cooking up some of the catch Peter and the others' breakfast on the beach. There's the conversation with Peter where Jesus asks him three times if he loves Jesus—a kind of re-do after Peter denied Jesus during the

night of his trial. There's the seeming prediction of Peter's martyrdom. There's the final question about the Beloved Disciple and their relationship with Jesus. There's the statement that the Beloved Disciple is the one writing all of this down—and that the whole world cannot, could not, will not contain all the books that could be written about Jesus.

The Gospel of John, if you haven't yet noticed, jumps around a lot in the story of Jesus' life and ministry. Early in the Gospel, in 2:22, we learned that Jesus was going to rise from the dead. The stories that John shares in common with the other three Gospels are all out of order. AND there are a bunch of stories and teachings that are nowhere to be found in the other Gospels—Lazarus anyone? It's a skippy, bumpy, curvy, up-and-over-the-mountains kind of journey. The kind I remember from my childhood days of road trips across the country (before some of the interstates were even built).

There's one theme that draws through this whole chapter. It's a theme that, in fact, runs through the whole Gospel of John. And it's just two words: Follow me! "Follow me," is the last thing Jesus says to Peter after hinting at Peter's mode of martyrdom. "Follow me!" is the last thing Jesus says to Peter after Peter asks about a rumor that the Beloved Disciple would not die. "Follow me," is what Jesus says as he meets the disciples in John 1:35–51. "Follow me," is an invitation we hear throughout the Gospel as the stories and teachings wash over our lives, our faith, our perceptions of who we are as beloved ones in God's creation. Note, though, that "Follow me" is not an invitation to literally do everything that Jesus did—after all, even the Gospel says that's an impossible task, unless you are the embodied Word, Jesus.

"Follow me," is an invitation to continue the journey through wilderness and plains, on stormy seas and smooth-sailing water, in our work, in our play, and in our rest. And when we accept that invitation, we are never alone on the journey. We are drawn into the new command to love one another. "Follow me!" The end of this road is only the beginning of our journey with Jesus.

### To Consider:

1. When have you heard the question Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" How does Jesus' love help you hear the invitation to "Follow me"?
2. What have you learned about Jesus in your own faith journey that has helped you see how much bigger God is than you thought?

*Christ our road and our companion, draw us closer to you as we journey through faith. Give us trust to try one more time, like the fishing disciples. Give us wisdom to repair relationships like Peter. Give us courage to forge new paths like the Beloved Disciple. Give us humility to know that we know only part of your story. Give us perspective to know the whole world cannot contain you. Amen.*

Katherine A. Shaner lives in Winston-Salem where Karl Bark, her dog (although don't call him that), has graciously allowed her to live in his house. In order to pay for Karl's kibble, she works as the Assoc. Prof. of New Testament at Wake Forest Univ. School of Divinity and a rostered ELCA pastor. She is also a member of the Engage the Bible Task Force—with Karl's blessing, of course.