



Teaching Guide

January–April 2021

The Connections Series Bible Study
Christian Education Resources for Adults

Connections Study Guide
Connections Teaching Guide
Connections Resource Kit
Connections Commentary

Volume 6, Number 1. Copyright © 2021 Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this material may be reproduced in any form without written permission. All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible copyright ©1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. All rights reserved. Lesson texts based on the Revised Common Lectionary, copyright © 1992 by the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT). Suggested Daily Bible Readings based on the Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings, copyright © 2005 by the CCT. Additional copies may be obtained by calling 1-800-747-3016 or from <www.nextsunday.com>.

Using the *Connections Teaching Guide*

The *Smyth & Helwys Connections Series Bible Study Teaching Guide* is designed to help you, the Bible study leader, teach lessons with confidence. In-depth background study, as well as engaging teaching suggestions, complement each other and equip you to design an enriching Bible study using the *Connections Teaching Guide* and the *Connections Resource Kit*. The *Connections Commentary*, by Dr. Brian Harbour, offers additional engaging commentary for each lesson in the *Connections Bible Study Series*.

Each lesson in the *Connections Teaching Guide* offers the following features:

Teacher Preparation Section

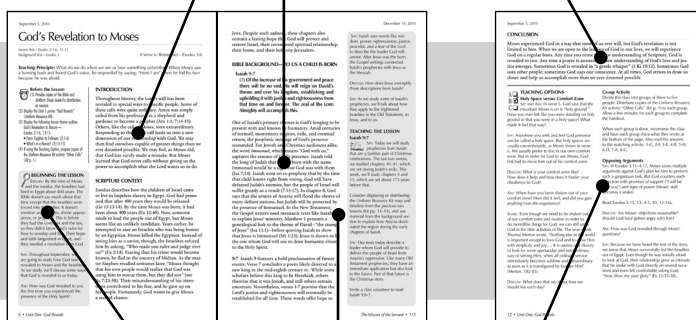
Teaching Principle — a concise statement of the lesson's theme

Introduction — helps teachers grasp the Bible study theme

Scripture Context — sets the historical, biblical, and literary context

Bible Background — expository Bible text and background study

Conclusion — final and summarizing Bible study remarks



Class Teaching Section

Before the Lesson — suggestions for Bible study preparation

Beginning the Lesson — lesson starters to gain class interest

Teaching the Lesson — class study directions by verse and section

Applying the Lesson — ideas for lesson application activities

Closing Prayer — a prayer suggestion for concluding each lesson

Teaching Options — optional discussion outlines and suggestions

The *Connections Resource Kit* is intended to encourage class participation, provide visual aids, and offer more opportunities for group discussion. Weekly *Resource Kit* handout pages complement the Bible study lessons with activities, reflection pieces, or information sheets. The *Resource Kit* also contains four large posters announcing unit and lesson titles, dates, and Scriptures to be studied.



ENCOURAGING A VIBRANT SUNDAY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

The gathering period before the Bible study lesson is an important fellowship time for both Sunday school regulars and guests. Here are suggestions for creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere (each item can be assigned to a reliable group member):

- Arrive early and ensure that the meeting area is bright, clean, and welcoming.
- Encourage joyful fellowship by providing coffee, tea, juice, or snacks.
- Be purposeful about seeking out visitors and greeting them personally. Be sure to register their attendance. Remember to get contact information so you can tell them later how much you enjoyed having them.
- If guests are unaccompanied, pair them with friendly regulars for the morning.
- Be intentional about catching up with regular class members. Enlist other members for this ministry.
- Gather the classes together for a brief general assembly.
- Start on time and keep things moving; do not repeat announcements.
- Allow class members to introduce any invited guests. Consider acknowledging other guests but be sensitive that some people do not like to be singled out.
- Share news of Sunday school and church activities.
- Offer a moment of prayer concerns and reasons for thanksgiving.
- Lead a brief time of spoken or silent prayer.
- Some groups may enjoy singing a hymn at this point in the gathering.
- Send classes off to study by introducing the day's teachers and announcing the class meeting locations.



After the day's Bible study, the adult Sunday school coordinator can call teachers for member and guest information updates. Visits or calls to that day's guests may be arranged. Special pastoral care needs among the class participants can be noted and passed on to Sunday school leadership and ministry staff. This is a good way to communicate continued interest and encourage shared ministry with Bible study teachers.

Table of Contents

NextSunday Resources
6316 Peake Road
Macon, Georgia 31210

1-800-747-3016 (USA)
478-757-0564 (Advertising)
www.nextsunday.com

Keith Gammons
Publisher

Michael L. Ruffin
Connections Editor

Kelley Land
Assistant Editor

Katie Cummings
Editorial Associate


Dave Jones
Graphic Design

Dee Kelly
Chelsea Madden
Deborah Miley
Church Relations

Elaine Sweet (Unit 1)
Courtney Stamey (Unit 2)
Eric Thiele (Unit 3)
David Priddy (Unit 4)
Lesson Writers

*Cover image: A large wooden cross
with Jesus in purple shroud cloth
outside the St. Francis of Assisi Basilica
in Santa Fe, New Mexico*

 **NextSunday**
Resources

 An imprint of Smyth &
Helwys Publishing.

UNVEILINGS

Jan 3	<i>Jesus Reveals God</i>	6
	John 1:1-18	
Jan 10	<i>God Reveals Jesus</i>	13
	Mark 1:1-11	
Jan 17	<i>Jesus Reveals Himself</i>	20
	John 1:35-51	
Jan 24	<i>Jesus Reveals a Mission</i>	27
	Mark 1:12-20	
Jan 31	<i>Jesus Reveals His Authority</i>	34
	Mark 1:21-34	

WHAT IS AND WHAT WILL BE

Feb 7	<i>Strength</i>	42
	Isaiah 40:21-31	
Feb 14	<i>Ministry</i>	49
	2 Kings 2:1-12	
Feb 21	<i>Covenant</i>	56
	Genesis 9:8-17	
Feb 28	<i>Blessings</i>	63
	Genesis 17:1-7, 15-22	

THE MEANS OF SALVATION

Mar 7	<i>The Foolishness of the Cross</i>	71
	1 Corinthians 1:18-25	
Mar 14	<i>The Loving God</i>	78
	Ephesians 2:1-10	
Mar 21	<i>The Suffering Savior</i>	85
	Hebrews 5:1-10	
Mar 28	<i>The Humble King</i>	92
	Mark 11:1-11	

IN THE WORLD TODAY

Apr 4	<i>Experience the Risen Lord</i>	100
	John 20:1-18	
Apr 11	<i>Walk in the Light</i>	107
	1 John 1:1-2:2	
Apr 18	<i>Do What Is Right</i>	114
	1 John 3:1-10	
Apr 25	<i>Live in Love</i>	121
	1 John 3:11-24	

Unit One

Unveilings

A new year is the perfect time to dive into this unit's topic. Each year I try to choose one word as a focus for my actions in the coming year. Last year I chose the word "peace." This study has inspired me to choose the word "reveal" as my word for 2021. The more I studied the lesson texts for this unit, the more my own calling grew to reveal Christ. As we attempt to know more about Jesus, we discover how we are designed to best live and serve God. In a dark January, the light of Christ calls to us. Let it be revealed.

Beautiful and challenging passages from Mark and John's Gospels bring us into this new year. In our first session, John 1:1-18 unveils how Jesus reveals God. Images of Word and light in these poetic verses display the mystery of "God with us." In our second session, the depiction of the baptism of Jesus in Mark 1:1-11 unveils how God reveals Jesus and affirms his identity. John 1:35-51, the lesson text for our third session, unveils how Jesus reveals himself to people seeking to know God. Jesus' revealing of himself leads others to reveal Jesus to people they know. In our fourth session, Mark 1:12-20 unveils a mission that Jesus gave to his followers. In our fifth and final session, Mark 1:21-34 unveils Jesus' authority through his teachings and healings.

The aim of Bible study is to focus our attention on Scripture, giving us space to reflect, question, and grow. We all need tools to help us develop a deeper understanding of Christ and our Christian purpose. I pray that you are open to this study and those with whom you share it. May meaningful connections be uncovered between your daily living and your faith in Christ.

The revelation of God in Jesus is beyond compare. Let the image of Christ shine boldly in us this new year. Through Jesus, God desires to reveal God's self to us. God longs to lead us to salvation, an abundant life here and in the life to come. This is good news for all of us. Thanks be to God!

ABOUT THE WRITER

Elaine Sveet is an ordained minister who has served in three denominations: the United Church of Canada, Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Lutheran Church (ELCA). Elaine is the founder of an online Christian community called *Chasing Abundant Life*, for which she offers live daily devotions on Facebook. She has authored numerous prayers, hymn texts, and sermon sparks featured in *Gathering* magazine. Beyond ministry, Elaine is active with her three children, who are in elementary and middle school, and her husband. You can reach her at chasingabundantlife.com.

Jesus Reveals God

Lesson Text: John 1:1-18

A Verse to Remember—John 1:18

Background Text: John 1:1-18

Other Lectionary Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14

Teaching Principle: Jesus shows us who God is.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 1 poster: “Unveilings” (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline: Jesus Reveals God—John 1:1-18
 - Word and Light (1:1-5)
 - John Points to the Light (1:6-13)
 - The Word Became Flesh (1:14-18)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.
- (6) If using the first teaching option, bring wrapping paper and tape to wrap classroom items. Alternately, wrap common household items and bring the wrapped packages to class.
- (7) If using the second teaching option, prepare copies of the handout “How the World Sees” (*Kit*, p. 1).

INTRODUCTION

January is the ideal time to explore John 1:1-18 because the beginning of a new year is a good time to renew our faith. John’s Gospel begins with the thrilling announcement that Jesus is God’s greatest revelation. The more we study and understand Jesus, the more we come to know our Creator. Our growing understanding of God can help us better perceive God’s purposes and plans for us.

Our lesson text presents Jesus as God’s divine revelation. Jesus is the Word made flesh. Before Jesus came, no one had experienced God in this way. In these opening verses of his Gospel, John prepares us to understand who Jesus truly is. As a Bible study teacher, you have the beautiful opportunity to get your group excited and ready to grow in faith. You can point them to the eternal Word of God who came to us as the human Jesus and revealed God to us.

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: John’s Gospel begins with the announcement, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (v. 1). In Jesus, God came to dwell among humanity in a way the world had never seen.

ASK: What new beginnings do you hear people talking about at this time of year? What goals do people set?

As class members call out answers, write them on a whiteboard or flip chart.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

John introduces Jesus differently than the writers of the other three New Testament Gospels. In their own ways, Matthew, Mark, and Luke make it clear that Jesus is the culmination of God’s saving purposes and actions. But John provides a cosmic dimension to the story of Jesus by identifying him with the Word of God that has always been present with God. John’s unique introduction presents Jesus as the fulfillment not only of what God has been doing throughout history but also as the pinnacle of God’s eternal purposes and plans. John’s approach highlights Jesus’ divinity.

These opening verses of John’s Gospel, which function as a prologue or overture, present some of the key themes and words that will reappear throughout the Gospel. In particular, the imagery of “Word” and “light” will occur repeatedly.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—WORD AND LIGHT

John 1:1-5

(1) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (2) He was in the beginning with God. (3) All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being (4) in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. (5) The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

1:1-3a John begins with declarations about the preexistent, eternal Word of God. He will soon say that the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus (see vv. 14-18), but here at the beginning he stresses the eternal, divine, and creative power of the Word.

We should take note of the progression in this opening verse. First, the Word was “in the beginning.” Next, “the Word was with God.” So John says that the Word has always existed and has always been with God. But the third statement in this progression is the crowning one: “the Word was God.” Before “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (v. 14), the Word was with God and was God.

In the Old Testament, the Word of God is alive and active. It is God’s creative power. In Genesis 1, which starts with “In the beginning,” God speaks creation into existence. John’s Gospel also starts with “In the beginning,” but it pushes that beginning to a time even before creation began.

John stresses the role the Word played in creation. Everything was made through the Word who becomes flesh in Jesus (see Col 1:15-16).

1:3b-5 A footnote in the NRSV alerts us to another possible way of punctuating verses 3b-4a (the ancient Greek manuscripts don’t have punctuation marks): “And without him not one thing came into being that has come into being. In him was life...” (NIV and NASB both use this punctuation). Punctuated either way, the emphasis is on the Word as the source of life. As John will go on to say, the Word became flesh to bring life—real life, new life—into the world (see vv. 12-13). The Word contains life, creates life, is life, and gives life.

SAY: Today’s lesson text declares that Jesus was a new revelation from God unlike any other.

SAY AND ASK: New habits need time to take root. How can we accept or adjust to something new?

SAY: As we discuss today’s Scripture passage, let’s listen for ways that John encourages us to pay attention to what Jesus reveals about God.

TEACHING THE LESSON

John 1:1-5



Invite someone to read John 1:1-4.

SAY: John will eventually tell us that this Word became flesh in Jesus.

ASK: Why do you think John begins his Gospel by introducing Jesus as “the Word”?

SAY: John uses poetic imagery to communicate the fact that the coming of Jesus to the world has been God’s plan throughout eternity. The Word who would come in Jesus has always been with God and is in fact God.

DISCUSS: Why does it matter that the Word is divine and eternal? Why might John present this teaching at the beginning of his Gospel?

SAY AND ASK: Since the Word was involved in creation, all physical life came to be through him. What other kind of life might the Word bring into being?

Invite someone to read John 1:5.

ASK: The darkness in this verse may be the evil forces in the world that oppose God’s will and way. John affirms that the light the Word

brings to the world overcomes the darkness. When he says that “the darkness did not overcome” the light, he may mean that because of Jesus’ resurrection, the effort to defeat him by crucifying him failed.

Ask: How does the image of Jesus as an inextinguishable light shining in the darkness affect you? Why?

Discuss: What are some of the dark areas or evil actions in our world that could use illumination and holy transformation? How can we shine the light on them?



John 1:6-13



Invite someone to read John 1:6-9.

Say: The lesson text states clearly that God sent John the Baptist to point people to Jesus.

Ask: Why might the writer want people to understand that John the Baptist operated with God’s authority, but that he wasn’t as important as Jesus?

Say: John’s role was to prepare the way for Jesus to come so that people might believe in Jesus when he did come.

Discuss: How is our ministry like that of John the Baptist? How do our lives point people to Jesus? How does our church point people to Jesus?

Say: The writer says that the Word came into the world as the light. He says, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (v. 9).

The life that the Word gives is also light. The life that comes through the Word brings light to the world. The writer will further develop the theme of light and darkness as he makes the point that Jesus is the light of the world (see v. 9; 8:12; 12:35).

The statement of hope in verse 5 says that the light brought into the world by the Word “shines in the darkness.” “Darkness” names the evil forces that are opposed to the way of God as revealed by Jesus. The Greek word translated “overcome” can also mean “comprehend” (KJV and NASB take it that way). Perhaps John has both meanings in mind: the darkness neither understood nor overcame the light. The verb tense, which indicates completed action, is probably best translated “did not overcome” (NRSV) rather than “has not overcome” (NIV). If this is the case, then John may mean that, because of the resurrection, the crucifixion of Jesus didn’t overcome the light (Smith, 54).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—JOHN POINTS TO THE LIGHT

John 1:6-13

(6) There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. (7) He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. (8) He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. (9) The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. (10) He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. (11) He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. (12) But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, (13) who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

1:6-8 “John” in these verses is John the Baptist, not the John traditionally associated with this Gospel (we don’t know who actually wrote this Gospel, but we refer to the author as John for convenience). The Gospel reports on John the Baptist’s ministry right after the prologue (see 1:19-36).

The Gospel writer has just said that the Word brought light to the world (vv. 4-5). Now he reports that God sent John the Baptist to bear witness to that light. The text makes a point of saying that John “was not the light.” This may reflect something that was happening when the Gospel of John was produced, probably near the end of the first century. At that time, some people still followed the traditions of John the Baptist (see Acts 19:1-7, where Paul encounters some people who had undergone “John’s baptism”). At any rate, the writer of John’s Gospel wants to make it clear that Jesus, not John the Baptist, is the light and that John’s role is to point people to Jesus.

John the Baptist’s role as witness is very important. He shares about Jesus so “all” will have the chance to believe through the witness he bears to the light (Jn 1:7). Jesus comes so that everyone might have the opportunity to be saved. The light is for all people. Those whom God sends to bear witness to it—beginning with but not limited to John the Baptist—make it available to everyone who hears about it.

1:9-11 The Word that comes in the flesh as Jesus is the “true light, which enlightens everyone” (v. 9a). The words “true” and “truth” are significant in John’s Gospel, occurring nearly fifty times, which is three times the combined total in the other three Gospels. The writer of John’s Gospel wants readers to know that Jesus is the authentic light of God. What does it mean for Jesus as the true light to enlighten everyone, when not everyone exposed to his light comes to believe in him? Jesus’ light reveals the truth about people, whether or not they believe in him (see Smith, 55). The painful truth is that many people have rejected him.

1:12-13 But some people did accept and believe in Jesus. To believe “in his name” is to believe in him as Jesus, the one who is the Word made flesh and in whom God most fully reveals God’s self. Those whose encounter with Jesus led them to receive him and believe in him became “children of God.” This happened because Jesus caused it (“he gave power”). Jesus enabled them to become God’s children through spiritual rather than physical birth (see Jesus’

DISCUSS: Not everyone who encountered Jesus came to believe in him. So what might it mean to say that “the true light...enlightens everyone”?

Invite someone to read John 1:10-11.

SAY: The writer says that neither “the world” (v. 10) nor Jesus’ “own people” (v. 11) accepted Jesus. Some of them did, but many didn’t.

ASK: Why might people not have accepted Jesus when he was on Earth? Why do so many people not accept him now?

Invite someone to read John 1:12-13.

SAY: Jesus empowers those who believe in him “to become children of God” (v. 12).

DISCUSS: What does it mean to become a child of God? What benefits do we gain from being God’s children? What challenges can come with being God’s children?

DISCUSS: The writer is talking about a spiritual birth that comes by the will of God. How should experiencing such spiritual birth affect us?



John 1:14-18



Invite someone to read John 1:14-18.

SAY: Until now, John has been talking about the divine Word who brought life and light to the world, who was proclaimed by John the Baptist, and who empowered those who believed in him to become God’s children. The Word’s coming

to the world is implied in much of this. But now John says it directly: “The Word became flesh.”

DISCUSS: What does the life of Jesus reveal to us about God?

SAY AND ASK: “Grace upon grace” (v. 16) probably means that we receive ongoing and abundant grace from Jesus. How do we experience such grace?

DISCUSS: God gave the good gift of the law through Moses. How is Jesus an even greater revelation of God to us?


DISCUSS: How do these opening verses of John’s Gospel prepare us to hear the story of Jesus? What do they call us to keep in mind?

SAY AND ASK: Through Jesus, we can be close to God. Through worship, we can experience nearness to God. Through the sacraments, we can be united with Jesus. Music, prayer, and the reading and preaching of Scripture are vehicles that often help us connect with God. What parts of worship help you feel closest to God? Why?

DISCUSS: Isolation is a growing issue in our world. Why do we struggle to connect? Do you want to connect more with God? Does this Scripture about Jesus as a full revelation of God bring you joy?



APPLYING THE LESSON

 SAY: Jesus was the ultimate act in God’s great salvation plan. It is clear from John’s Gospel that God has been intentional about planning out the redemption of God’s people. God’s great

conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 for further development of this truth).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—THE WORD BECAME FLESH

John 1:14-18

(14) **And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.** (15) (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) (16) **From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.** (17) **The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.** (18) **No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.**

1:14 To this point, John has been talking about the preexistent, eternal, and divine Word who brought life and light to the world, who was proclaimed by John the Baptist, and who empowered those who believed in him to become God’s children. Much of this has implied the Word’s coming to the world. But now John makes this truth explicit: “The Word became flesh.” John offers no story of the birth of Jesus as Matthew and Luke do, but in his own way he does talk about the incarnation, the coming of God in Jesus’ flesh and bones.

John also says that the Word made flesh “lived among us.” The Greek word translated “lived” in NRSV “means to take up residence in a tent” (Smith, 58; CEB translates it “made his home,” NIV “made his dwelling”). During the Israelites’ wilderness period and early years in the promised land, the tabernacle represented God’s presence among the people. Later, the temple would serve that purpose. Moreover, the Old Testament makes it clear that God’s creative Word has been active throughout Israel’s history, particularly through the prophets. But God’s revelation through Jesus is even greater, because the divine Word is enfleshed in Jesus, who is thus fully human and fully divine.

The Word made flesh who lived among us also reveals his glory. As God's "only son," Jesus' glory reflects his father's glory. God's glory is God's presence, and Jesus reveals who God is by sharing the fullness "of grace and truth" with everyone he encounters. "Grace" is the word for God's reaching out to us, and "truth" names God's ways of saving us. Later in John's Gospel, Jesus will partially reveal his glory through a series of actions beginning with his changing of water into wine at Cana and ending with his raising of Lazarus from the dead. But for the writer, Jesus' glory is most evident in his crucifixion, which shows the truth of how God reaches out to save us (Keener, 411).

1:15 This statement by John the Baptist interrupts the flow of this section, but it repeats an important matter for the writer: the superiority of Jesus to John the Baptist. People might think that, because John's ministry preceded that of Jesus, the Baptist was superior. But this verse quotes John the Baptist saying that Jesus outranks him "because [Jesus] was before" him. Indeed, as the Word, Jesus has always existed.

1:16 Jesus' "fullness," from which we receive "grace upon grace," is probably his fullness "of grace and truth" mentioned earlier (v. 14). "Grace upon grace" likely means the abounding and ongoing grace that only the Word made flesh, the Son of God, can provide.

1:17-18 The law God gave through Moses played a vital role in God's purposes. But now God has most fully revealed God's self through Jesus Christ. Because Jesus is the preexistent Word and God's unique Son, John can say that Jesus is "God the only Son." Three other times in John's Gospel, Jesus says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (5:37, 6:46, 14:9). Only Jesus can fully reveal God to us.

love leads God to plan thoughtfully, patiently, and deliberately.

SAY AND ASK: Some people choose a word to guide them in an upcoming year. This one word should focus one's actions throughout the year. What word would you choose for 2021? Why? How do you hope this one word will lead you?

ASK: How might God's intentionality inspire and inform our own?

CLOSING PRAYER



Holy God, thank you for a new year. Thank you for revealing yourself in Jesus. Help us pay close attention to Jesus so we can know you. As we come to know you in Jesus, let us grow in living, caring, serving, and giving in ways that reflect our identity as your children. Amen.

References

Richard A. Burridge, "Second Sunday after Christmas, Years A, B, C: Gospel Lesson: John 1:(1-9), 10-18," *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: The Gospels*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

D. A. Carson and Andrew David Naselli, "Gospel of John Notes," *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

D. Moody Smith, *John*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999).

Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*, rev. ed., Reading the New Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The writer of John’s Gospel proclaims that in Jesus, the Word of God, which has always been with God and is in fact God, has come into the world as a human being. He came to bring light and life into the world and to show us that God reaches out to us through service and sacrifice. God had revealed God’s self in history, particularly in God’s working through and among the people of Israel, but God had never revealed God’s self before as God does in Jesus. When the Word became flesh, God entered our world as one of us. This is why we should pay close attention to what Jesus does and says, to how he lives and dies. Jesus is the ultimate revelation to us of who God is.

TEACHING OPTIONS

- ✓ — **Guessing the Gift**
- — Wrap some regular household items. Invite class members to write down their individual guesses of what each item could be. They can touch, shake, lift, smell, or do whatever they think might give them clues. Ask class members to share their guesses.

SAY AND ASK: You may have been able to identify a Christmas gift despite the wrappings. Have you ever guessed what a gift was before you opened it? Has the way the gift was wrapped ever fooled you completely?

SAY: “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14). The purpose of the Word being enfleshed in Jesus is not to hide who God is but rather to reveal who God is. Jesus is God with us. The more we learn about Jesus, the better we will know God.

Divide the class into groups. Distribute paper and pens or pencils.

SAY: A good goal to adopt for the new year is to learn more about Jesus so we can get to know God better.

Write this question on a whiteboard or flip chart and ask the groups to discuss it and make a list: What specific actions can we take in 2021 to grow in our knowledge of and faith in God? Invite the groups to report.

Seeing What Is in Front of Your Eyes

SAY: Let’s talk about seeing. Much of the population struggles with impaired eyesight.

Distribute the handout “How the World Sees.” Invite class members to answer the True/False Questions.

SAY: Here are the correct answers:

- 1. True. 2. True. 3. False. These numbers are half of the true totals. 65.2 million people globally need cataract treatment and 6.9 million people need glaucoma treatment. 4. True. 5. True. 6. False. The rate is 4 times higher in low- to middle-income regions. 7. False. Untreated near-sighted vision impairment affects over 80% of the population in western, eastern, and central sub-Saharan Africa, while less than 10% of high-income regions like North America, Australasia, Western Europe, and Asia-Pacific suffer similarly.

SAY: Jesus was God’s self-revelation. Even though Jesus walked among the people, some wouldn’t accept him. It was as if they couldn’t see what was right before their eyes. We might say that they had impaired spiritual vision.

DISCUSS: What causes people around us to have impaired spiritual vision? Are there ways in which some people have such impairment imposed on them? Are there ways in which people choose to have limited vision?

ASK: How would your life be different if you didn’t see Jesus as the light of the world, as the Word made flesh, and as God’s Son? What can individual Christians and the church do to help people see Jesus, and thus God, more clearly?

God Reveals Jesus

Lesson Text: Mark 1:1-11

A Verse to Remember—Mark 1:11

Background Text: Mark 1:1-11

Other Lectionary Texts: Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7

Teaching Principle: God affirms Jesus' identity.

INTRODUCTION

Low self-esteem is a problem in our world. There are estimates that as much as eighty-five percent of the world's population experiences low self-esteem. Christians should be encouraged by knowing that our identity comes from being connected to our great God. In baptism, God claims us as sons and daughters of the Almighty.

The beginning of Mark's Gospel announces Jesus' identity as the Son of God. It also recognizes John the Baptist's role in preparing the people for Jesus' coming by baptizing them and urging them to confess their sin. God blesses us with the gifts of baptism, forgiveness, and a Savior. We should never forget our identity. We are God's beloved and blessed children!

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

As is the case with all of the Gospels, Mark's Gospel is technically anonymous, since the book never names its author, but for convenience, we will follow tradition in referring to the writer as Mark. Most scholars believe that Mark's Gospel is the earliest of the New Testament Gospels. It was probably written around AD 70, some forty years after Jesus lived.

One of Mark's favorite words is "immediately." This Gospel is action-oriented, with events happening one after the other and sometimes simultaneously. The writer gets straight to the point, using few words. He is clear about who Jesus and John are. John paves the way for Jesus by baptizing the people and calling them to confess their sins. He is God's messenger who makes the people ready for Jesus to come.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 1 poster, "Unveilings" (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline:

God Reveals Jesus—Mark 1:1-11

 - The Messenger John (1:1-5)
 - John's Unique Witness (1:6-8)
 - The Baptism of Jesus (1:9-11)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.
- (6) If using the second teaching option, prepare copies of the handout "Famous Actions by Ordinary People" (*Kit*, p. 2).

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. We'll be talking about how John the Baptist baptized people in general and Jesus in particular.

Ask: If you were trying to describe baptism to someone who had never seen it, how would you explain what it is? What do we see, hear, and feel when someone is baptized? What is the significance of baptism?

As class members call out answers, write them on a whiteboard or flip chart.

SAY: Jesus experienced the affirmation of his identity as the Son of God when John baptized him. In Christian baptism, our identity as God's children is affirmed as well. But Christian baptism is different from John's

baptism because we receive it in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Mark 1:1-5



Invite someone to read Mark 1:1.

SAY AND ASK: What does this opening verse alert us to pay attention to as we read Mark's Gospel?

SAY: The Romans, whose forces occupied Israel in the first century, used the term "good news" to celebrate the emperor's military victories and the phrase "son of God" to describe the emperor.

ASK: What might Mark's purpose be in using these terms?

SAY: Mark is making vital theological statements as well as powerful political statements through his use of these terms and in the subsequent verses of our lesson text.

Invite someone to read Mark 1:2-3.

SAY: Mark's Gospel is the shortest and most concise of the four New Testament Gospels. It also contains the fewest sayings of Jesus. Mark's Gospel is action-oriented, quickly moving from one scene to another. One of Mark's favorite words is "immediately." Mark includes no narrative of Jesus' birth. Instead, he presents Jesus as an adult about to begin his public ministry.

ASK: Why might Mark have chosen to begin his Gospel this way?

SAY: Mark uses passages from the Old Testament prophetic books

BIBLE BACKGROUND—THE MESSENGER JOHN

Mark 1:1-5

(1) The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (2) As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; (3) the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (4) John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (5) And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

1:1 This verse serves as the title of Mark's Gospel. Mark announces up front that he is telling "the good news of Jesus Christ" and that Jesus is "the Son of God." One purpose of Mark's Gospel is to show what it means for Jesus to be God's Son. This becomes clearest at the crucifixion, when a Roman centurion confesses that the crucified Jesus is the Son of God (15:39).

The story of Jesus is "good news," which is what the word "gospel" means. It is good news because it is a new beginning, the dawn of a new era in human history. The term "good news" was used in Roman culture in reporting the victories of the emperors. Using the words to describe the story of Jesus' victory for God makes a political statement: Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord.

The phrase "Son of God" is used in Psalms to refer to the kings of the dynasty of David (see below on v. 11). But it was also sometimes used to refer to the Roman emperors. To say that Jesus is the Son of God is to say that he fulfills God's promises to David (see 2 Sam 7:4-17) and to imply that he, not the emperor, is the true Son of God.

1:2-3 Mark begins his story of the good news of Jesus Christ by telling about the ministry of John the Baptist. He places it in the context of God's saving purposes by using words from Malachi ("See, I am

sending my messenger...”; see Mal 3:1) and Isaiah (“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’”; see Isa 40:3). John’s ministry fulfills these Old Testament prophecies, and he plays a vital role in God’s plan of salvation.

In crediting the entire quote to Isaiah, Mark uses a common ancient practice of giving credit for combined quotes to the most important source. The book of Isaiah is the most cited Old Testament book in Mark’s Gospel and in the entire New Testament. But this doesn’t mean Malachi is unimportant. The writer of Mark views John as the promised Elijah mentioned in the book of Malachi, the forerunner of the Messiah (see Mal 4:5-6).

John prepares the way for Jesus and makes his paths straight by calling the people to repent. To repent is to turn away from sin and to turn to God. Such repentance is how the people prepare themselves for the Messiah to come.

1:4-5 John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, a barren place that can also be a place of renewal. After the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness. They were there because of their rebellion, but while they were there, God formed them into God’s people. God rescued the Israelites from slavery and led them by Moses to the promised land, and along the way they became God’s people. Now John will prepare the people for their rescue and salvation by the Messiah, the Son of God.

Unlike Luke, Mark offers no backstory for John. The preacher just starts preaching. He proclaims “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 4b). John’s goal is to reconcile the people to God.

A large number of people respond to John’s call to repentance. Mark may think of this scene as a new exodus. In the exodus from Egypt, the people went into the wilderness, passed through the sea, and became a people prepared to enter the promised land. Now, the people go into the wilderness, pass through the waters of the Jordan by being baptized, and emerge as a people prepared for the new age God is inaugurating through Jesus (Boring, 40-41).

of Malachi and Isaiah to set the context for John’s ministry.

Ask: Why might Mark do this? What points might he want to make?

Say: John’s mission is to prepare the way for the Messiah to come.

Invite someone to read Mark 1:4-5.

Say: John prepared the Messiah’s way by baptizing people. His baptism was one “of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 4).

Ask: Why is it significant that the people went to John in the wilderness? What important wilderness event took place during Israel’s formation as the people of God? How might this help us think about what John is doing?



Mark 1:6-8



Invite someone to read Mark 1:6-8.

Say: John’s clothing identified him as a prophet. It reminded people of the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who was expected to return as a forerunner to the Messiah.

Ask: What do John’s words about himself and about the one who is to come after him reveal about John’s understanding of his ministry?

Say: John’s baptism of people in water prepared people for Jesus’ coming. But Jesus’ baptism of people in the Spirit brings about the change that enables people to live in the new age.

Discuss: John baptized people with water, but Jesus baptized (and baptizes) people with the Spirit.

John indicates that the baptism of the Spirit we receive from Jesus is greater than John's baptism with water. Why is this so? How can the Spirit help us live up to our baptismal commitments?



Mark 1:9-11



Invite someone to read Mark 1:9-11.

SAY: After Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends on him “like a dove” (v. 10). This event declares that Jesus has God’s power to fulfill his mission of bringing about the new age. Then Jesus hears the voice of God affirming that Jesus is God’s Son with whom God is pleased.

ASK: Why do you think that in Mark’s narrative, only Jesus sees the skies split apart and the Spirit descend, and hears the voice from heaven affirming his divine Sonship?

SAY: Readers of Mark’s Gospel know from 1:1 that Jesus is the Son of God. But unless we’ve read the Gospel before, we don’t know what it means for Jesus to be God’s Son. Mark will spend the rest of the Gospel developing that meaning. Finally, we learn that because Jesus is the Son of God, he must suffer and die.

Invite someone to read Genesis 22:1-2.

ASK: What does God ask Abraham to do to his beloved son Isaac? With this in mind, what might God calling Jesus “my Son, the Beloved” (v. 11) imply about what lies ahead for Jesus? What turns out to be the difference between Isaac’s fate and Jesus’ fate? Why is this difference significant?

BIBLE BACKGROUND—JOHN’S UNIQUE WITNESS

Mark 1:6-8

(6) Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. (7) He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. (8) I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

1:6 John’s appearance and diet identify him as a man of the wilderness. His asceticism (simple lifestyle) sets him apart from mainstream society.

John’s apparel also identifies him with Elijah, the prophet whom people expected to come back before the Messiah. The leather belt in particular is an identifying mark of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). Later in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus will clearly identify John the Baptist as the fulfillment of Elijah’s expected return. Mark is highlighting John’s critical role in God’s plan of salvation.

1:7-8 John declares the superior power of the one who will come after him. John plays *a* crucial role in the inauguration of the new age, but Jesus plays *the* crucial role. John serves Jesus. Servants untied the sandals of their masters. John places himself even below the position of a servant in his relationship to Jesus.

John’s baptism of people in water pointed to Jesus’ coming and prepared them for it. But Jesus’ baptism of people in the Spirit brings about the change that enables them to live in the new age. And only Jesus can do that.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

Mark 1:9-11

(9) In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. (10) And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. (11) And a

voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

1:9 Nazareth was Jesus’ hometown. It was located in Galilee, where most of Jesus’ ministry took place. Interestingly, those who come to John for baptism in verse 5 are all from Jerusalem and Judea; none except Jesus come from Galilee. Here, Jesus journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem to identify himself with the new age being proclaimed by John. Later, he will journey from Galilee to Jerusalem to finalize the inauguration of the new age through his crucifixion and resurrection (see Boring, 44).

Mark is evidently not troubled by the idea of sinless Jesus (see Heb 4:15) submitting to “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 4), nor by Jesus submitting to baptism by John the Baptist, which could lead people to conclude that John has authority over Jesus. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which were likely written a decade or two after Mark and which used Mark as a source, will deal with these potential problems in their own ways. Matthew has John resist baptizing Jesus and doing so only at Jesus’ insistence (3:13-15), and Luke reports John’s baptism of Jesus somewhat offhandedly (3:21).

1:10 As Jesus is coming out of the water, he sees the skies ripped open and the Spirit descending upon him. The dove is a “sign of divine approval” (Dowd, 11). The Spirit’s descent on Jesus indicates that the power of God to bring about the reign of God is in Jesus (Boring, 45). These events show that the new age of God’s reign is dawning in him.

1:11 Jesus has seen the skies opened and the Spirit descend. Now he hears the voice of God. The words the voice speaks draw from three Old Testament passages.

“You are my Son” comes from Psalm 2:7, a royal psalm in which the king is declared to be the son of God. The phrase declares that Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promises to David and that he is the long-anticipated Messiah.

“With you I am well pleased” draws from Isaiah 42:1, the first of Second Isaiah’s Servant Songs, which were

SAY AND ASK: Jesus hears God’s voice say, “With you I am well pleased” (v. 11). Why do you think God says this to Jesus at this point? Is it significant that it happens right after Jesus is baptized? Why or why not? What might it have meant to Jesus to hear these words from God?

SAY: God affirmed Jesus with the words from heaven. God also affirms us, loves us, and calls us to follow the Son of God in giving our lives in loving service. That’s what it means to be the children of God.



APPLYING THE LESSON



SAY: Jesus is the Son of God in a unique way, but we are also God’s children. Through his willing embrace of the path of self-emptying service, Jesus shows us how to live as children of God.

Divide the class into groups. Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Write the following on a whiteboard or flip chart: “Keeping in mind the Old Testament passages behind God’s statement to Jesus (Ps 2:7; Isa 42:1; Gen 22:2), what does it mean for Jesus to be the Son of God? What does it mean for us to be the children of God who follow Jesus’ example?” Ask one group to discuss the first question and the other group to discuss the second question. Invite each group to report.

SAY: What God reveals about Jesus also reveals a lot about who we are and should be as Jesus’ followers and God’s children.

CLOSING PRAYER



Holy God, thank you for sending your Son to save us.

Thank you for revealing through him who you are and how much you love us. Help us see in Jesus what it means to be your children and to live in light of that reality. Amen.

References

William J. Abraham, "First Sunday after the Epiphany (Baptism of the Lord), Year B: Mark 1:4-11, *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: The Gospels*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007).

Sharyn E. Dowd, "Mark," *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995); *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel*, Reading the New Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000).

Rikk E. Watts, "Gospel of Mark Notes," *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

so helpful to the early church in understanding the significance of a suffering Messiah.

Mark seems to draw the word "Beloved" from Genesis 22:2, where Isaac is the son Abraham loves. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, but Isaac is spared at the end. For God to call Jesus God's "Beloved" implies that Jesus is at risk. But he will not be delivered from death. He will in fact suffer and die (Dowd, 11-12). Jesus will give his life to save many people (10:45). As Alan Culpepper wrote, "The paradox of the gospel is that the mighty one is put to death, the chosen one rejected, and the servant exalted" (50).

The voice of God identifies Jesus as God's Son whom God loves. God is already pleased with Jesus, even though Jesus has only been baptized and hasn't begun his public ministry. But Jesus' baptism is important as a first step toward doing what God has commissioned and empowered him to do.

The events surrounding Jesus' baptism make it clear that he is God's Son and that God's power is with him. But in Mark's narrative, John the Baptist and the people don't see the skies splitting and the Spirit descending, nor do they hear the voice from heaven (compare Matthew's version, in which the voice evidently tells the crowd that Jesus is God's Son; 3:16-17). For Mark, this affirmation is for Jesus alone. We readers get to overhear the words of the voice from heaven, so we know more at this point than John the Baptist or the people he is baptizing.

CONCLUSION

The Gospel of Mark reveals in its first verse that Jesus is the Son of God. Mark will spend the rest of the Gospel revealing what that means, culminating in the Roman soldier's confession when Jesus dies on the cross. After John the Baptist baptizes Jesus, the Spirit descends to assure Jesus that the power of God to accomplish his mission is with him, and the voice from heaven speaks to assure Jesus that he is God's Son. The Spirit and the voice also assure readers of Mark's Gospel that Jesus is God's Son who will accomplish God's will and establish God's reign. We should view everything that Jesus says and does through the lens of his identity as the Son of God. Jesus is the Son of God in a unique way, but our baptism declares that we are also the children of God who have the Spirit of God. Jesus shows us what it means to live in light of those realities.

TEACHING OPTIONS

✓ — Green Light

□ — Invite someone to read Mark 1:9-10.

SAY: Jesus' baptism is like the green flag or light that signals "go" at the start of a car race. Jesus' ministry begins dramatically. The heavens split, the Spirit descends, and the voice of God speaks. Immediately afterward, Jesus' ministry begins.

Ask: What dramatic beginnings to the new year have you seen or experienced? What do such events say about people's hopes for a new year? What kinds of changes might people need to embrace in order to realize these hopes?

Distribute paper and pens or pencils.

SAY: Imagine the new year as a car race and your life as a race car. The green flag is about to come out. It's time for you to take off into a new year of discipleship. You know the Spirit of God empowers you. What kinds of choices do you need to make to have a successful race?

Write the following three categories on a whiteboard or flip chart: Motives, Perspectives, and Actions. Invite class members to write those three headings on their paper and to make a list of motives they need to have, perspectives they need to adopt, and actions they need to take for a year of effective discipleship. Invite volunteers to share their lists.

Discuss: How does knowing what God reveals about Jesus in our lesson text help us know who we should be and what we should do?

Ask: Why is it important that we think about these things? Why can't we just live this year as we lived last year?

SAY: Let's thank God for the opportunity to move forward in our discipleship in a fresh way.

Rising to the Occasion

Ask: When has an experience caused you to feel honored but unworthy?

Invite someone to read Mark 1:6-8.

SAY: John says he is unworthy even to untie Jesus' sandals, but he is nonetheless obedient to God in baptizing the Messiah. Sometimes obedience to God requires us to rise to the occasion and do a grand thing.

Ask: Have you ever been asked to give an important speech, lead a part of worship, or do a job at work that you felt was above you or beyond your comfort level? How do you find the courage to do big things?

Distribute the handout "Famous Actions by Ordinary People" and pens or pencils. Ask class members to complete the handout. (Answers: Rosa Parks – bus seat; John L. & Yoko O. – bed-in; MLK – Nobel Peace Prize; Candy L. – MADD; Nelson M. – 27 years in prison; Todd B. – Flight 93)

Discuss: What inspires ordinary people to undertake extraordinary actions? What empowers them to do so? If we feel God calling us to do something that seems beyond our ability, what sources of inspiration and empowerment can we count on?

Jesus Reveals Himself

Lesson Text: John 1:35-51

A Verse to Remember—John 1:51

Background Text: John 1:19-51

Other Lectionary Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Teaching Principle: Jesus pushes us to recognize who he really is.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 1 poster, “Unveilings” (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline: Jesus Reveals Himself—John 1:35-51
 - The Lamb of God (1:35-39)
 - Andrew Witnesses to the Messiah (1:40-42)
 - Philip and Nathanael Follow (1:43-51)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.
- (6) Provide a set of dominoes for the Beginning the Lesson activity.
- (7) If using the first teaching option, provide candles and a lighter.
- (8) If using the second teaching option, prepare copies of the handout “Happy or Lonely” (*Kit*, p. 3).

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: In today’s lesson text, Jesus begins to reveal his identity as the Son of God, the Word made flesh, and the Messiah. As people begin to follow Jesus, they share the good news about him.

Divide your class into groups of 3-5 people. Divide a set of dominoes evenly among the groups. Invite each group to do the following three experiments.

1. Create a line of dominoes. Cause them to fall by touching the first domino.
2. Create a bending line of dominoes. Cause them to fall by touching the first one.

INTRODUCTION

The story of Jesus’ calling his first disciples reveals the excitement of his early followers. They are thrilled to encounter Jesus, but they don’t keep this experience to themselves. They invite others to come see him. In our lesson text, we will see one disciple invite his brother and another invite a friend.

Receiving an invitation is a special and powerful experience. It is nice to be chosen. Invitations—sometimes from Jesus, sometimes from followers of Jesus—created new encounters with Jesus. As invitations were issued, the circle of disciples grew. Inviting people to come and see Jesus for themselves remains an exciting privilege for Jesus’ followers. Today’s lesson encourages us to talk to others about Jesus and invite them to come see him for themselves. Regardless of whether we receive a positive or negative response, the invitation is worth making. But if people encounter Jesus for themselves, their lives will never be the same. And if we will all stay with Jesus, we will learn more and more about who he is, who God is, and who we can be.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

John’s Gospel doesn’t directly describe Jesus’ baptism (see 1:29-34) and says nothing about his temptation in the wilderness. The story moves from John the Baptist preparing the way to Jesus calling his first disciples. The Gospels of Mark and Matthew report Jesus’ callings of Andrew and Peter, but under different circumstances (Mk 1:16-20; Mt 4:18-22), but his callings of Philip and Nathanael are found only in John’s Gospel. John focuses on the chain reaction of excitement. As one disciple discovers Jesus, he tells others about it, and Jesus’ following grows.

Our lesson text closes with a statement by Jesus about the revelatory nature of his ministry. The

next passage in John's Gospel is about the wedding feast in Cana, where Jesus turns water into wine (2:1-11). John says this is "the first of [Jesus'] signs" through which Jesus "revealed his glory" (2:11).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—THE LAMB OF GOD

John 1:35-39

(35) The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, (36) and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" (37) The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. (38) When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" (39) He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

1:35 "The next day" is the day after John the Baptist says that he is preparing the way for Jesus, the "Son of God" (v. 34). John looked toward Jesus and told his listeners, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29). On this next day, John and two of his disciples have an unexpected encounter with Jesus. It seems that John has been teaching his followers about the one who is to come after him. Two of them are with John when Jesus approaches.

1:36 John isn't concerned about convincing his disciples to stay with him (see 3:25-30). His purpose is to point others to Jesus. He doesn't tell these two followers to leave him and follow Jesus. Instead, he says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" His implication is that they should go and follow the Lamb. The term "the Lamb of God" connects Jesus to the sacrificial lamb offered for the forgiveness of sins and to the suffering lamb of Isaiah's Servant Songs (see Isa 52:13-53:12, especially 53:7). John wants his disciples to know they should follow Jesus, who will play the most important role in God's plan of salvation—greater than John's role or anyone else's.

1:37 John's two disciples seem to respect his leadership. They listen to him, believe what he says, and agree to follow Jesus. According to John's Gospel, these two are Jesus' first followers.

3. Reset your dominoes in any pattern. Put a barrier partway down the line to interrupt the dominoes. Make it impossible for the remaining dominoes to fall.

ASK: How are your first two domino chain reactions similar to the way the first disciples invited others to follow Christ?

SAY AND ASK: In your third experiment, an interruption caused some dominoes to remain standing. What keeps us from sharing our faith with others in a loving way?

TEACHING THE LESSON

John 1:35-39



Invite someone to read John 1:35-36.

SAY: "The next day" (v. 35) is the day after John the Baptist says that he is preparing the way for Jesus, the "Son of God" (v. 34).

ASK: Why does John the Baptist refer to Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (v. 35)? What is the source of this symbolism? How will Jesus take away the world's sin?

Invite someone to read John 1:37-39.

ASK: Why do you think these two disciples of John go to follow Jesus?

ASK: Why might Jesus ask these two what they are looking for? What do you think he wants them to consider?

SAY: The two followers answer Jesus' question with another question. Maybe they just want to know where he lives. But the word translated "staying" and "remained" in verses 38-39 can also mean "to

abide.” Maybe the disciples want to abide with Jesus.

DISCUSS: How can we abide with Jesus, given that he is not physically present with us?

SAY: Jesus invites these two to “Come and see” (v. 39).

ASK: Why is it important that we come and see Jesus for ourselves?

SAY AND ASK: The writer tells us that “it was four o’clock in the afternoon” when Jesus and his two new followers arrived at the place where Jesus was staying. Why do you think John notes this specific time?

SAY: John’s disciples quickly left John to follow Jesus. Maybe their first meeting with Jesus was so memorable that they remembered the exact hours.

ASK: How do you prioritize time to spend with Jesus? What routines could make it easier to carve out sacred time with our Lord?

SAY: It takes time for relationships to grow. Our relationship with Jesus requires an investment of time to help it grow strong.



John 1:40-42



Invite someone to read John 1:40-42.

ASK: When and how has someone introduced you to something good? Why did they do this? What made you want to follow their recommendation?

SAY AND ASK: Andrew is so excited about discovering Jesus that he immediately finds his brother and

1:38 Jesus asks these two new followers what they are looking for. We will soon see that Jesus has insight into people’s character and motives. He predicts many things before they happen, like who will betray him (13:18, 26). But sometimes he seems surprised and disappointed at people’s lack of faith (Mk 6:6), and at other times he is stunned by someone’s abundance of faith (Mt 8:10; Lk 7:9). Perhaps he is pushing these two new disciples to understand and articulate their own intentions.

The disciples don’t directly answer Jesus’ question. When Jesus asks them, “What are you looking for?” they reply with a question: “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Their question can also be translated, “Where are you remaining (or abiding)?” In fact, both “staying” and “remained” (v. 39) are translations of the Greek word that can mean “stay,” “remain,” “dwell,” or “abide.” Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “The Father and I are one” (10:30). Jesus abides with God, and God abides with Jesus. While these new followers may simply want to know where Jesus is temporarily lodging, this deeper meaning may be in the background. Perhaps their intention is to stay with Jesus from now on, wherever he goes. Disciples of Jesus abide with him.

1:39 Jesus’ reply to their question encourages his followers to have genuine curiosity: “Come and see.” All who wish to discover the kingdom of God and are willing to give up their lives to follow Jesus are welcome. As they experience Jesus for themselves, they will find out who he really is.

Jesus’ reply also implies a welcome. The three of them spend the rest of the day together. Wouldn’t we like to know what they talked about? Jesus will invite others to “Come and see,” but these two are the first to hear him say this. At the first opportunity, these two followers of John wisely become followers of Jesus.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—ANDREW WITNESSES TO THE MESSIAH

John 1:40-42

- (40) One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother.
- (41) He first found his brother Simon and said

to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). (42) He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

1:40-41 John’s Gospel identifies one of these former disciples of John the Baptist who begins to follow Jesus: Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother.

Andrew can’t keep the good news of meeting Jesus to himself. He runs to tell his brother Simon: “We have found the Messiah.” Andrew has no doubts about who Jesus is. The news is too good not to share, so he joyfully tells his brother what he has found.

1:42 Jesus does something unique for Simon: he changes Simon’s name. In Scripture, a name change signals a significant life change. Abram and Sarai’s names were changed by God when they made a covenant together (Gen 17:4-6, 15-16). Jacob’s name was changed to Israel after his struggle with God at the Jabbok River (Gen 32:22-28).

Jesus changes Simon’s name to Peter (the Aramaic name is Cephas; both mean “rock”) before they become acquainted. It seems that something special lies ahead for Peter. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus bases Simon’s name change on his role in founding the church: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (16:18-19).

Jesus knows people thoroughly. He knows their past and their future (see, for example, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in Jn 4:17-19). Jesus sees the possibility and potential in Peter. He will equip Peter to live into his future.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—PHILIP AND NATHANAEAL FOLLOW

John 1:43-51

(43) The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.”

(44) Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. (45) Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about

invites him to have the same experience. Who is the first person you want to tell when you have good news? Why?

SAY: Experts say the best way to invite someone to something is to bring them along with you. So rather than saying, “You should go see that new movie,” you should say, “That new movie looks great! Why don’t I pick you up at 6:00 and we’ll go see it together?” Andrew says to his brother Simon, “Come and see.” Together they come and see Jesus and stay with him.

ASK: Do you think that Simon Peter was more or less inclined to meet Jesus because his own brother invited him and went with him? Why?

SAY: Imagine what would have been lost if Andrew had kept Jesus to himself. Andrew might have chosen to focus on himself and his new developing relationship with Jesus. He must have had a love for others that motivated him to share his positive experience with Jesus.

DISCUSS: How can love motivate evangelism?



John 1:43-51



Invite someone to read John 1:43-44.

SAY: Philip, Andrew, and Peter may have all known each other.

Invite someone to read John 1:45-46.

ASK: What assumptions about Jesus lie behind Philip’s words to Nathanael?

SAY AND ASK: At first, Nathanael reacts negatively to Philip's news about Jesus, especially since Jesus is from Nazareth. What assumptions affect our initial impressions of people? Why do we need to be careful about letting such assumptions guide our judgment?

SAY: Philip doesn't argue with Nathanael about Nazareth's reputation. Instead, he invites Nathanael to meet Jesus so he can see for himself.

Invite someone to read
John 1:47-51.

SAY: Nathanael is surprised by what Jesus knows about him. Jesus' words about Nathanael reveal Jesus' divine insight into people. Nathanael is willing to have his mind changed about Jesus. He quickly moves from doubting to believing.

Invite someone to read
Genesis 28:10-22.

DISCUSS: Keeping the story of Jacob's ladder in mind, what do Jesus' words in verse 51 indicate about how he wants his followers, including us, to think about him?



APPLYING THE LESSON



SAY: Jesus still reveals himself to people. But most people who encounter Jesus today will do so through the invitation of a Christian or Christians.

ASK: How are you inspired by the example of the first disciples' commitment to invite others to follow Jesus? Are there people in your life who encourage you to be active in living and sharing your faith? Do you have faith-filled

whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." (46) Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." (47) When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" (48) Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." (49) Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (50) Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." (51) And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

1:43 In John's narrative, Jesus gains his first two disciples because John the Baptist indirectly suggests that they follow Jesus. Jesus gains his third disciple when one of the first two (Andrew) invites his brother (Peter). Now Jesus gains another disciple by issuing a direct invitation to Philip.

1:44 Philip may have already known Andrew and Peter. They were all from Bethsaida, a small fishing village located at the northeast corner of the Sea of Galilee near the mouth of the Jordan River.

1:45-46 As was the case with Andrew, Philip can't keep the news about Jesus to himself. He goes to Nathanael and tells him that he and the others "have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Philip is a bit wordier than Andrew, but he says the same thing: "We have found the Messiah" (v. 41). Philip's description connects Jesus with the fulfillment of hopes based in Scripture.

Nathanael questions Philip. He doubts if anything good or holy can come from Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. Nathanael's doubt seems to reflect a negative attitude toward Nazareth even among people from elsewhere in Galilee.

According to Matthew and Luke's Gospels, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. John doesn't include a narrative of Jesus' birth. He mentions the tradition of the Messiah's Bethlehem birth only when people are arguing that Jesus can't be the Messiah because he comes from Galilee (where Nazareth was located) rather than Bethlehem (which was in Judea) (7:41-43).

Still trying to convince Nathanael, Philip adds the invitation, "Come and see." These are the same words Jesus used with Andrew and the other disciple. Perhaps the first two disciples shared with Philip the story of their calling.

1:47-48 As Nathanael approaches, Jesus welcomes him as "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" (v. 47). This is likely a subtle reference to Jacob. In contrast to Nathanael, Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, was a deceitful character. Nathanael asks how Jesus can know this about him. Jesus explains that he saw Nathanael "under the fig tree" even before Philip invited him to come meet Jesus. The fact that Jesus saw him earlier and already knew his character is probably a sign of Jesus' divine power.

1:49 Amazed by Jesus' insight, Nathanael declares that Jesus is the "Son of God" and "King of Israel." Many first-century Jews used the title "King of Israel" to speak of their hoped-for political liberator (12:13). Jesus had great authority, but, as he will say later, his kingdom is not of this world (18:36). Nathanael now agrees with Philip's assessment of Jesus.

1:50-51 Jesus promises Nathanael that even more impressive things will happen. In verse 51, the pronoun "you" is plural, so Jesus means that *all* of Jesus' followers "will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." This saying reflects back to Jacob at Bethel, where he dreamed of angels ascending and descending a ladder or staircase between heaven and earth (Gen 28:10-22). Jesus is saying that he is now the focus and the means of God's revelation. Jesus is the living bridge between the divine and human, between heaven and earth.

friends or family who hold you accountable?

DISCUSS: The early church was committed to welcoming others. Is your church committed to actively inviting others to visit for the first time? Does your church have a plan for welcoming newcomers once they visit? Does your church have a strategy for introducing people to Jesus so they can experience him for themselves?

CLOSING PRAYER



Almighty God, thank you for sending Jesus. Thank you for his ability to see us as we are and to move us toward being all that we can be. Help us to abide in his presence so we can grow in our relationship with you. Amen.



References

- Gerald L. Borchert, "John," *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995).
- D. A. Carson and Andrew David Naselli, "Gospel of John Notes," *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).
- James M. Childs, Jr., "Epiphany," *New Proclamation: Year B, 2002-2003* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002).
- Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).
- D. Moody Smith, *John*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999).
- Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*, rev. ed., Reading the New Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005).

CONCLUSION

In his prologue (1:1-18), the writer of John’s Gospel talks about how Jesus, the Word made flesh, reveals God to us. In this week’s lesson text, the writer shows how Jesus began to reveal himself and thereby reveal more about God. Jesus’ divine insight into Nathanael indicates that Jesus knows people deeply—including us. Jesus’ changing of Simon’s name reveals that he can and will transform lives. And Jesus’ saying that his disciples will see him as a new “Jacob’s ladder” among them reveals that he is the source of divine revelation. If we want to know who God is and what God wants, we should look to Jesus. Like Jesus’ earliest followers, we are invited to have faith and be transformed. Also like them, we are called to invite others to come and see Jesus for themselves.

TEACHING OPTIONS

 **Sharing the Light**
 **Ask:** When do churches or other groups hold candlelight services? What does this practice symbolize? What are your experiences with candlelit worship? What do the candles symbolize? What message do they send? What feelings do they elicit?

Ask someone to read John 1:35-42.

SAY: John the Baptist’s two disciples shared the experience of encountering Jesus for the first time. They were bonded forever by this shared experience. Then one of them, Andrew, eagerly invited his brother Simon Peter to experience Jesus.

Discuss: Why is it important that we experience Jesus in community? How can living in community lead us to bring others into the community?

Distribute candles to class members.

SAY: As we light these candles, let us reflect on our shared experiences of Jesus. Let’s think about what Jesus means to us as a faith community. Let’s reflect on what Jesus has revealed to us about himself, about ourselves, and about God. Let’s commit to bearing witness to his light so others will be drawn to him.

After a time of silent prayer, have class members extinguish their candles.

Getting to Know You

SAY: Let’s play a game called Two Truths and A Lie.

Ask for three volunteers. Have each volunteer quickly write down three sentences about themselves. Two of these statements will be true and one will be false. Class members will try to guess which of each volunteer’s three statements isn’t true.

Ask someone to read Psalm 139:1-6. Ask someone else to read Psalm 139:13-18. (The two readings comprise the lectionary’s psalm reading for this Sunday.)

SAY: Sometimes we struggle to know what is true or untrue about people. We don’t always know people as well as we think we do. Jesus surprises Nathanael by knowing his character well. It can be both comforting and unsettling to realize that God knows us completely. God knows all our good and bad attributes.

SAY: The more we know about each other, the more we bond. The more we bond, the better we can pray for, be open with, and encourage each other.

SAY: Current data about isolation suggests that in North America, many people struggle to have even one good friend with whom they can share openly. There are many individuals who feel lonely and unknown.

Distribute the “Happy or Lonely” handout and ask class members to complete it.
(Answers: 1. Lonely, 2. Happy, 3. Lonely, 4. Lonely, 5. Happy, 6. Happy, 7. Happy)

Discuss: What actions can we take to help build new or deeper relationships so we will all feel better known and more valued?

Jesus Reveals a Mission

Lesson Text: Mark 1:12-20

A Verse to Remember—Mark 1:17

Background Text: Mark 1:12-20

Other Lectionary Texts: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Teaching Principle: Following Jesus involves service.

INTRODUCTION

In this week's Scripture passage, Jesus reveals his mission. Jesus proclaims the good news, calling people to faith and repentance.

Jesus also calls a group of disciples to learn from him and share in his mission. We should always remember that we have a purpose in God's kingdom. Each of us is important. Our faithful discipleship blesses the world and helps bring about the kingdom of God more fully. Our lesson text explores Jesus' revelation of his mission and the calling of his first four disciples. Jesus' invitation—"Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (Mk 1:17)—still stands. He extends it to us as surely as he did to Andrew, Peter, James, and John.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

Mark's Gospel was probably the first one to be written. It is the shortest Gospel, but it presents the story of Jesus in a concise and purposeful way. After describing John the Baptist's ministry (1:1-11), which includes his baptizing of Jesus, Mark's Gospel briefly reports Jesus' victorious wilderness battle against Satan's tests. Mark then goes right into Jesus' public ministry.

Jesus summarizes his mission by declaring, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (1:14). Jesus calls people to respond to his ministry with confession and belief. Only Jesus can transform people's lives, but he does share his mission with others whom he calls to be his disciples. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people," he tells them (v. 17). Jesus also calls us to be his disciples who continue his ministry.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 1 poster, "Unveilings" (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline: Jesus Reveals a Mission—Mark 1:12-20
 - Jesus Faces a Test (1:12-13)
 - Jesus Proclaims the Good News (1:14-15)
 - Jesus Calls Followers (1:16-20)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Provide hymnals or songbooks.
- (6) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.
- (7) If using the second teaching option, prepare copies of the handout "Clergy Shortage Quiz" (*Kit*, p. 4).

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: January is a time when many people make a fresh start. We might remove unhealthy foods from our kitchens. We might clear our closets of clothes we no longer wear. We might try to eliminate bad habits. Such actions are an effort to take advantage of a new year and let go of things that no longer serve us well. When Jesus calls his first disciples to follow him, "immediately they left their nets and followed him" (v. 18). To follow Jesus meant leaving their nets behind. They didn't need them anymore.

Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Write two headings on a whiteboard or flip chart: "What I Have Given Up" and "What I Need to Give Up." Ask class members to write those

headings on their papers. Under the first heading, ask them to list attitudes, perspectives, or practices they have given up to follow Jesus. Under the second heading, ask them to list attitudes, perspectives, or practices they need to give up to follow Jesus.

SAY: Following Jesus means giving up things, but not just for the sake of giving them up. Our goal is to follow Jesus. Whatever we have to give up to follow him is worth the cost.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Mark 1:12-13



Invite someone to read Mark 1:12-13.

SAY: The Spirit descended on Jesus when he was baptized (1:10). This indicates that God's power is with Jesus. Now the Spirit compels Jesus to go into the wilderness.

ASK: What happened to the Israelites in the wilderness between the exodus from Egypt and the entry into the promised land? What might be the significance of Jesus being in the wilderness for forty days?

ASK: Why would the Spirit drive Jesus into the wilderness right after descending on Jesus? What might this say about how the Spirit operates in our lives?

DISCUSS: How do we tend to think about times we experience testing? Does Jesus' experience help us think differently about such times? Can such times be beneficial to our faith development? What cautions should we exercise in thinking too negatively about times of testing? Too positively?

BIBLE BACKGROUND—JESUS FACES A TEST

Mark 1:12-13

(12) And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. (13) He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

1:12 Mark provides little detail about Satan's testing of Jesus, but his few words make quite an impact. The Greek word translated "immediately" in verse 12 appears forty-two times in Mark's Gospel, sometimes translated in the NRSV in various other ways, such as "at once," "without delay," "quickly," or "just then." Mark's repeated use of this word propels the action forward and gives the story a sense of urgency.

The Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism (1:10) now drives Jesus deeper into the wilderness. He was already there, since that is where John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing. But now Jesus will go alone and move farther into the wilderness. The wilderness is the isolated, deserted place where Jesus' testing takes place. At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit contributed to Jesus' affirmation as the Son of God. Now, the Spirit will lead him to face Satan's tests in the wilderness with the purpose of clarifying what it means for him to be the Son of God.

1:13 The number forty is significant in the Bible. It rained for forty days when Noah was on the ark and a flood covered the earth (Gen 7:12). The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years before they entered the promised land (Josh 5:6). On two different occasions, Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights receiving God's laws (Ex 24:18; 34:1-28). Elijah traveled forty days and nights to Mount Horeb on the strength of one divinely-provided meal (1 Kings 19:8). Later, forty days will pass between Jesus' resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:3). Now, Satan tempts Jesus for forty days.

Mark doesn't give the content of Satan's temptations of Jesus. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, both of which were probably produced a decade or two later than Mark and used Mark as a source, detail both the devil's temptations and Jesus' responses (Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13). Mark's Gospel offers the basic facts: Satan tempted Jesus; Jesus passed the test; angels took care of Jesus; and wild animals were present.

The wild beasts are an interesting detail. According to ancient understanding, human beings who were unharmed while in the company of wild animals must have divine favor or protection. For example, the founder of Rome, Romulus, was saved from starvation by a wolf. In the Bible, Daniel survives the lions' den (Dan 6). Psalm 91 says that God protects a righteous person from wild animals (v. 13; interestingly, according to Mt 4:5-6 and Lk 4:9-11, Satan quotes from Ps 91:11-12 when tempting Jesus to leap from the top of the temple). So one point of this reference to the wild beasts is that God protects the righteous Jesus.

In addition, we should consider that in some Jewish traditions, Adam lived in harmony with the wild animals in Eden. Isaiah envisioned the future reign of God being characterized by peace between wild animals and people (11:6-9). So Jesus being at peace with the wild animals suggests that the promised reign of God, envisioned as a return to Eden, has begun.

Mark also tells us that “the angels waited on” Jesus as he faced his test in the wilderness. This may be another connection between the wilderness experiences of the Israelites and Jesus. God sent an angel to guide the Israelites in the wilderness (Ex 23:20, 23; 32:34). God sends several angels to attend to Jesus. Mark may also have the story of Elijah in mind. As the prophet fled Jezebel's wrath, an angel provided him with food that nourished him for his forty-day journey through the wilderness to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:4-9a).

Mark doesn't say that Jesus successfully overcame Satan's tests, but Jesus begins his public ministry in the next scene, proving that he did. Jesus' mighty acts throughout his ministry will continue to demonstrate his victory over evil.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—JESUS PROCLAIMS THE GOOD NEWS

Mark 1:14-15

(14) Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, (15) and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the

SAY: Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn't give the content of Satan's temptations or Jesus' responses. Mark also doesn't say whether Jesus passed the test. But the next scene shows Jesus beginning his ministry.

Invite class members to read Exodus 23:20, 23; 32:34; and 1 Kings 19:1-9a.

ASK: How can these Scripture passages help us think about what it means for angels to wait on Jesus in the wilderness? What does this reveal about God's care for Jesus? About God's care for us?

Invite someone to read Isaiah 11:6-9.

ASK: How can this passage help us think about what it means for the wild animals to be with Jesus?



Mark 1:14-15



Invite someone to read Mark 1:14-15.

SAY: Mark mentions John the Baptist's arrest almost in passing. But he seems to find it significant that Jesus begins his ministry at the same time that John is persecuted for his preaching.

ASK: What does John's arrest imply for Jesus? What does it imply for us?

SAY: John's arrest doesn't deter Jesus. Jesus is faithful to his mission, even though he knows the danger.

ASK: Does our discipleship put us in any danger? If so, what kind?

SAY: Jesus announces, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of

God has come near” (v. 15a).

This means that in Jesus, a new era has arrived in which people can acknowledge and participate in God’s reign. We who respond positively to Jesus live in this new reality.

Ask: In what sense is the kingdom of God present today? In what sense do we await its ultimate fulfillment? How should we live in light of the fact that God’s kingdom is both present and future?

Say: After announcing that the kingdom of God has come near, Jesus declares how people should respond: “Repent, and believe in the good news” (v. 15b). To “repent” is to change one’s mind, which means to change one’s perspective on and approach to life. To “believe in” is to trust in. Taken together, to repent and believe is to commit your entire life to the good news of the reign of God that Jesus embodied.

Divide the class into two groups. Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Write the following questions on a whiteboard or flip chart and ask each group to discuss one: “How can the church call itself to repentance?” and “How can the church call our community to repentance?” Invite the groups to report.



Mark 1:16-20



Ask someone to read Mark 1:16-20.

Ask: Do any hymns or songs come to mind when we read this part of the lesson text?

Distribute hymnals or songbooks. Invite class members to look up

kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

1:14 In Mark, John the Baptist’s arrest marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Mark will later fill in the details of John’s arrest and execution in a flashback scene (6:14-29).

John’s arrest indicates that preaching the good news can and will provoke opposition. Jesus begins his ministry with the knowledge of that threat, but it doesn’t deter him. Readers of Mark’s Gospel should realize that proclaiming the message that John and Jesus proclaimed can put us in jeopardy too, but we must stay faithful.

Jesus had come from Galilee to be baptized by John (1:9); now he goes back to Galilee to proclaim the good news. Jesus will continue to conduct his ministry until he reenters Judea and begins his final journey to Jerusalem (10:1). After Jesus’ resurrection, an angel tells the women who have come to the tomb to instruct the other disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee.

1:15 As Jesus begins his ministry, we see two areas of focus take center stage. Jesus will proclaim the kingdom of God, and he will gather disciples to carry on his work after his death and resurrection.

Jesus says, “The time is fulfilled....” The Greek word for “time” here is *kairos*, which refers to a “season, significant era, or moment in time” (Culpepper, 52). The era that dawns with Jesus is significant because, as he says next, “the kingdom of God has come near.” The kingdom of God is the reign of God. It is where God’s will is done. Jesus is proclaiming the kingdom’s arrival with his words, but he will also declare it with his life, death, and resurrection. One theme of the New Testament is that the kingdom of God is present in Jesus’ first coming, but the full arrival of the kingdom awaits his future return.

Jesus follows his two-part declaration with a two-part imperative: “repent, and believe in the good news.” To “repent” (Greek *metanoia*) means to change one’s mind in the sense of altering one’s stance toward life. Responding positively to Jesus’ call to repent means having your attitudes, perspectives, and priorities

changed. It is a change of mind that results in changed behavior. To repent is to have your intellectual and spiritual horizons dramatically reshaped. To believe is a positive way of saying the same thing—to believe in the good news is to give your life in service to it (Boring, 51).

Zacchaeus is a good example of someone who repented and believed after Jesus impacted his life. Zacchaeus was a rich tax collector. After Jesus was willing to come to his home, Zacchaeus pledged to give half of his possessions to the poor and to pay back four times as much to anyone he had cheated (Lk 19:1-10).

The kingdom of God comes near in Jesus. He still calls people to respond to it with their lives.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—JESUS CALLS FOLLOWERS

Mark 1:16-20

(16) As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. (17) And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” (18) And immediately they left their nets and followed him. (19) As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. (20) Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

1:16 Jesus sees Simon (also known as Peter or Simon Peter) and Andrew fishing in the Sea of Galilee. Whether fishing from a boat or from the shore, first-century fishermen cast nets as part of their trade. These brothers are going about their usual business when Jesus steps into their lives and changes everything.

1:17 Jesus’ invitation uses language from Simon and Andrew’s work life. He calls them to “fish for people.” Jesus’ disciples will bring people to Jesus so they can experience God more fully. Jesus calls these first disciples to join in his work of summoning people to God.

hymns that reflect these verses (they might also search with their phones). Invite them to read the lyrics of songs they find.

Ask: What themes from our lesson text do the songs try to communicate? How well do you think they do so?

Say: Jesus calls Andrew, Simon, James, and John as they are going about their customary activities.

Ask: What does this say about the circumstances in which we might encounter Jesus and perceive his call? How can we learn to be alert and pay attention to Jesus as we go about our daily lives?

SAY AND ASK: Jesus tells these fishermen that they will “fish for people” (v. 17). Taking into account our vocations, how might Jesus phrase an invitation to us to join in his ministry?

Say: All four of these fishermen leave their careers behind. James and John also leave their father Zebedee behind. Following Jesus involves sacrifice. But the gain is worth it.

Discuss: What does it cost to follow Jesus? What do we gain from doing so?



APPLYING THE LESSON



Say: Jesus is courageous in his battle with Satan in the wilderness. He is brave in beginning his ministry just as John the Baptist is arrested for his service to God. The disciples also show courage in their response to Jesus’ call. Becoming Jesus’ disciples involves risk and sacrifice. Our world

continues to need committed people of faith. Jesus continues to call us.

Invite class members to reflect quietly on ways they have courageously followed Jesus, on ways they are doing so now, and on ways they need to follow him more boldly. After a few moments, lead the class to pray for courage to follow Jesus in whatever ways he leads.

CLOSING PRAYER



Lord, keep us ready to be bold and sacrificial in our discipleship. Help us give our lives to you completely so everything we say and do will invite others to enter into relationship with you. Amen.

References

William J. Abraham, “Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B: Mark 1:14-20,” *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts, The Third Readings: The Gospels*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007).

Sharyn E. Dowd, “Mark,” *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995); *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel*, Reading the New Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000).

Rikk E. Watts, “Gospel of Mark Notes,” *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

1:18 Simon and Andrew “immediately” respond to Jesus’ call. They do not need time to think about his invitation. They drop their fishing nets. They are now disciples of Jesus. He inspires prompt and complete devotion.

1:19-20 Jesus encounters another pair of brothers who are fishermen: James and John. They too are doing their usual work, this time mending fishing nets so they can continue catching fish.

Jesus calls James and John, and they leave their livelihood to follow Jesus. They also leave their father. We can imagine Zebedee standing there, marveling at his sons’ reckless action. There is indeed a cost to discipleship. Some things must be left behind so that a new journey with Christ can begin.

Andrew, Simon Peter, James, and John will become the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. Jesus will share many critical experiences with them. Here are some of the notable life moments exclusive to this small group of disciples: Jesus permits only Peter, James, and John to come with him to the house where he will bring a dead girl back to life (5:37); he takes only those three disciples with him to the mountain where he is transfigured (9:2); only the two pairs of brothers participate in a conversation with Jesus where he answers a question about the coming destruction of the temple (13:3); and, after going with the larger group of disciples to Gethsemane, Jesus takes only Peter, James, and John with him farther into the garden before he is arrested (14:33).

CONCLUSION

As the Son of God, Jesus has a mission to fulfill. After emerging from his time of testing in the wilderness, Jesus undertakes his mission. He wastes no time getting to work. We also should not hesitate to get active for Jesus. There is always much work to be done. Jesus needs his disciples—including us—to do our part.

Jesus' mission is to inaugurate the reign of God. He does this by proclaiming that in him, the kingdom has come near. To enter it, people must repent and believe, which means they must reorient their lives so that they are totally focused on serving God. Jesus calls disciples—he calls us—to join him in inviting people to acknowledge and participate in God's reign.

TEACHING OPTIONS

✓ — Context

□ — SAY: Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days. When the first readers of Mark's Gospel saw that number, they knew something important was happening. They remembered that in the story of Noah, it rained for forty days and nights. They knew that the Israelites were in the wilderness for forty years. They knew that Elijah traveled in the wilderness for forty days until he reached Horeb. When the early believers read this story, they read it in light of what God had done in the lives of God's people.

Divide the class into groups. Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Write these two questions on a whiteboard or flip chart and ask each group to discuss them and write down some answers: (1) What are some ways God acted on behalf of God's people in the New Testament? (2) What are some ways God has acted on behalf of us as individuals and as a church? Invite each group to share.

DISCUSS: How might our perspective change if we see our lives in the context of God's saving actions?

Siblings in Christ

Invite someone to read Mark 1:16-20.

SAY: Jesus calls two pairs of brothers to follow him.

ASK: What would be the advantages and disadvantages in having a sibling join you as one of Jesus' twelve disciples?

SAY: We need to be grateful for *all* of our siblings in Christ, whether we are related biologically or through our shared faith.

Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Ask each class member to write down the name of a person or persons with whom they share a special relationship in Christ. (Assure them that they won't be asked to share their answers.)

DISCUSS: What factors cause us to develop such close relationships within the family of faith? How can we appropriately appreciate such relationships while also valuing the relationships we have with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ?

SAY: It is inevitable that we will develop close relationships with certain people. But we need to take care to appreciate, nurture, and grow more close relationships. Consider how you can be a closer sibling in Christ to someone in your family of faith.

Critical Shortage

Distribute the "Clergy Shortage Quiz" handout. Ask class members to complete it. Share the correct answers (Answers: 1: b, 2: b, 3: d, 4: e). Discuss each one.

Invite someone to read Mark 1:14-18.

SAY: Discipleship is a high calling. We are all called to be disciples and ministers. The ministry we share is critical to the kingdom. We all have different roles to play in this good work. Some denominations have a critical shortage of pastors.

DISCUSS: How could our church encourage people to consider ministry as a profession? What do you think deters people from pursuing ordained ministry? What makes becoming a minister a great life's work?

Jesus Reveals His Authority

Lesson Text: Mark 1:21-34

A Verse to Remember—Mark 1:27

Background Text: Mark 1:21-45

Other Lectionary Texts: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Teaching Principle: Jesus reveals his authority through his words and actions.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 1 poster, “Unveilings” (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the lesson theme outline:
Jesus Reveals His Authority—Mark 1:21-34
 - Jesus Defeats an Unclean Spirit (1:21-28)
 - Jesus Heals Simon’s Mother-in-law (1:29-31)
 - Jesus Cures Many (1:32-34)
- (4) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.
- (5) If using the first teaching option, provide copies of your church’s annual report and your denomination’s magazine.
- (6) If using the second teaching option, prepare copies of the “Wasting Time” handout (*Kit*, p. 5). Also provide a garbage can and pens or pencils.

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: Today’s Scripture passage is about the unveiling of Jesus’ authority. It is also about how Jesus’ compassion frames the ways he exercises his authority. Jesus reveals his authority over evil and illness by healing those who are physically, emotionally, and spiritually sick.

ASK: How might we describe the realities that first-century people viewed as demonic possession? How does our increased awareness of the causes behind physical and emotional illness affect the ways we think about healing?

SAY AND ASK: Jesus constantly responds to requests for healing

INTRODUCTION

This week’s lesson text presents three healing scenes. Mark depicts Jesus as constantly active, wasting no time doing what he came to do. Jesus is focused. He refuses to be distracted. He teaches, heals, heals again, and then heals some more. Do we make good use of our time as we continue Jesus’ ministry? Do we make every moment count?

Jesus’ authority is evident in his healing actions in this week’s Scripture passage. He displays his authority through compassionate acts. We should remember that God’s power and God’s love go together. Both are evident in Jesus’ healing actions.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

Mark begins his Gospel with the ministry of John the Baptist, whose mission is to prepare the way for the coming Messiah (1:1-8). He then tells of Jesus’ baptism by John, when Jesus sees the Spirit descending, making clear that God’s power is with him, and hears the voice of God speaking, affirming that he is God’s beloved Son (1:9-11). Mark next tells us about Satan’s testing of Jesus in the wilderness (1:12-13). In its context (and in light of its expansion by Matthew and Luke), this event seems to show that Jesus is going to be faithful in carrying out his ministry as the Son of God in the ways God wants him to. Jesus then begins his preaching ministry (1:14-15) and calls his first disciples (1:16-20).

In our lesson today, Jesus begins his healing ministry, which is also the proclamation of the good news that the kingdom of God has come near. As God’s Son, Jesus has the authority to defeat the evil forces that entrap people.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—JESUS DEFEATS AN UNCLEAN SPIRIT

Mark 1:21-28

(21) They went to Capernaum and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. (22) They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (23) Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, (24) and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” (25) But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” (26) And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. (27) They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” (28) At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

1:21 Capernaum was a fishing village on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee. It seems to be where Jesus based his ministry. Like other Jews, Jesus would have observed the sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Though the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed around the time that Mark’s Gospel was written, it still stood during Jesus’ ministry. Synagogues, smaller gathering places, had long been an important institution of local Jewish worship, both inside and outside Israel. Worship in the synagogues included prayer, singing, and the reading and teaching of Scripture, but sacrifices could only take place in the temple. Also, the synagogues were led by laypeople rather than by priests. Rabbis usually taught, but any male Jewish adult could speak. Jesus takes advantage of this opportunity, apparently on his own initiative rather than by invitation.

1:22 Jesus’ teaching astounds his listeners because, Mark says, “he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” The scribes (called “lawyers” in some English versions) were the first century’s experts on Scripture. It was their job to know what the law said. In terms of knowledge and expertise, the scribes

throughout his ministry. What does this tell us about Jesus’ love for people? About Jesus’ love for us? About our love for others?

SAY: Jesus’ actions display both his power and his love. Let’s remember that these two qualities go together.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Mark 1:21-28



Invite someone to read Mark 1:21-22.

SAY: Capernaum was a fishing village on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus seems to have based his ministry there. Any adult Jewish male could speak in the synagogue, and Jesus takes advantage of the custom here.

ASK: Keeping in mind that the scribes were the acknowledged experts on Scripture in the first century, what do you think it means for the people to be “astounded” at Jesus’ teaching because it has greater authority than that of the scribes? What kind of authority does Jesus have that the scribes don’t? Considering that Mark doesn’t tell us the content of Jesus’ teaching, how might Jesus’ greater authority have been evident?

ASK: Have you ever listened to someone speak and gone away feeling sure they were right, even though you couldn’t remember much of what they said? What made you feel that way?

DISCUSS: Where does Jesus’ authority come from? How might people have been able to tell that there was something different and special about Jesus?

SAY: These days, we have access to many voices: commentators, actors,

politicians, musicians, activists, and more.

Ask: How can we be sure to give Jesus' voice the greatest authority in our lives? When we listen to people preaching, teaching, and testifying, how can we tell when a person's authority derives from a relationship with the Lord?

Invite someone to read
Mark 1:23-28.

Ask: Why do you think the evil spirit recognizes who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do? Why might it name him as both "Jesus of Nazareth" and "the Holy One of God" (v. 24)? Why does Jesus tell the evil spirit to be quiet?

Say: In the ancient world, people often viewed emotional or mental illness as the result of demonic possession. We understand the limits of such a perspective. At the same time, we know that evil can have a powerful influence in people's lives, even to the point of making them captive to it. Jesus' casting out of the evil spirit from this man shows that Jesus can and will help people who are in the grip of evil.

Ask: Why might the people regard Jesus' casting out of the evil spirit as "a new teaching—with authority" (v. 27)? How is this act a form of "teaching"?

Say and Ask: After these events at the Capernaum synagogue, Jesus' "fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee" (v. 28). What might be the positive and negative consequences of his spreading fame?



were more qualified to teach Scripture than anyone else was. Jesus' superior authority arises from his identity as the Son of God, and thus from his personal relationship with God.

Mark says nothing here about the content of Jesus' teaching. In fact, Mark contains fewer teachings of Jesus than any other Gospel. We know from these other records that Jesus' teachings were remarkable, but Mark seems to focus more on the power of Jesus' presentation, a power born of his identity.

1:23-24 Suddenly a person in need appears on the scene. "A man with an unclean spirit" is in the synagogue. Jesus, who has the Holy Spirit, now confronts this man who has an unclean spirit. We can think of the unclean spirit as representing the forces of Satan and evil. The spirit's use of plural pronouns in referring to itself underscores this idea.

The unclean spirit recognizes Jesus. It knows that he is "Jesus of Nazareth" and "the Holy One of God." It furthermore knows that Jesus has come to defeat the forces of evil. It knows who Jesus is and what he is going to do.

1:25-26 Jesus "rebukes" the spirit, commanding it to be quiet. This is the first instance of a theme in Mark's Gospel that interpreters call the Messianic Secret. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus commands people and evil spirits not to say who he is. Jesus' identity will be fully revealed only in his crucifixion. Interestingly, Jesus' closest followers will struggle to understand what the evil spirits already know about his identity.

Jesus commands the evil spirit to leave the man, and it does, wrenching the man's body one last time and screaming as it goes. Jesus performs this healing action only with words; he uses no secret rites or magical tricks. The end result is that Jesus is victorious over evil.

1:27-28 The people who see Jesus cast out this evil spirit are amazed. But notice that they call his action "a new teaching" that he carries out "with authority" (v. 27). Jesus' healing act is part of his teaching. Such acts proclaim the good news just as much as Jesus' preaching and teaching do.

Jesus' fame spreads throughout Galilee as people tell what they witnessed. They have heard and seen Jesus proclaim the good news.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—JESUS HEALS SIMON'S MOTHER-IN-LAW

Mark 1:29-31

(29) As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. (30) Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. (31) He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

1:29 After healing the man with the unclean spirit, Jesus goes to the home of two of his four disciples, Simon Peter and Andrew. The five of them go together. Perhaps this is the first time Simon and Andrew have been home since they began following Jesus. Since they are going to the home after synagogue service, they may have been going for the main Sabbath meal. Archaeological evidence suggests that this home was near the synagogue in Capernaum.

1:30 When Jesus and his four disciples arrive at the house, they find that Simon Peter's mother-in-law is confined to bed with a fever. In a time when people didn't know about germs, viruses, and infections, a fever was considered a serious illness in its own right. Did her family members tell Jesus about her illness, hoping that he would heal her? Perhaps. Or maybe they just wanted to explain why she was not fulfilling her obligations as a host.

1:31 Jesus comes to the sick woman, takes her by the hand, and lifts her up. She is immediately healed. She is well enough to serve Jesus and his disciples.

What is the implication here? Are women simply supposed to serve men in ministry? Instead of making assumptions based on our modern era, we need to keep the cultural standards of Jesus' day in mind. Then, a woman's status was tied to her ability to provide appropriate hospitality in her home.

Mark 1:29-31



Invite someone to read Mark 1:29-31.

SAY: Jesus and his four disciples leave the synagogue and go to Simon Peter and Andrew's home, which was probably nearby. They discover that Simon Peter's mother-in-law is confined to bed with a fever. Her illness prevents her from fulfilling the hostess role that brings honor in her social setting.

SAY AND ASK: Jesus had cast the evil spirit out of the man in the synagogue by speaking. Now he touches Simon Peter's mother-in-law as part of the healing process. Both methods are effective. What element does Jesus' touch add to the woman's healing?

ASK: What does personal involvement in people's lives add to the church's ministry of offering hope, help, and healing?

SAY: Jesus had the power and authority to heal. But he exercised it in compassionate ways.

DISCUSS: Jesus wouldn't have exercised power and authority without compassion. But what if we try to do this? What harm can come when the church tries to exercise the power and authority given us by the Lord, but without practicing compassion?

SAY: Our lesson text reports the first of many compassionate and merciful ways in which Jesus exercises his authority and power.

ASK: How is God's power to heal people and make them whole available to the church? How can we use it compassionately in our community?



Mark 1:32-34



Invite someone to read
Mark 1:32-34.

SAY: This was a busy day for Jesus and his disciples. In the synagogue, he both taught and cast an evil spirit out of a man. At Simon and Andrew's house, he healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Now at sundown, when the Sabbath is over, the residents of Capernaum bring many people in need of healing to him, and he heals them.

DISCUSS: How numerous and pressing are the needs around us? How do we respond to them as individual Christians and as a church? Do we need to respond more effectively? If so, how can we?

ASK: Why do you think Jesus didn't permit the demons, who knew who he was, to speak (v. 34)?

DISCUSS: How might the people of Capernaum have been different after Jesus moved on the next day to continue his ministry in other communities? How might experiencing Jesus' authority through his teaching and healing have affected them? How should it affect us?



APPLYING THE LESSON



Invite someone to read
Mark 1:27.

SAY: The people of Capernaum are impressed by Jesus. They perceive that something special is happening through him. Later in Jesus' ministry, some people will react negatively to Jesus' words and deeds. But at this point, people accept the help that Jesus offers.

Jesus had cast the evil spirit out of the man by speaking. Now he heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law with a touch. In Mark's Gospel, some of Jesus' healings will involve touch, while others will happen through his words. Jesus heals the man with the unclean spirit (1:23-26), the paralyzed man (2:11), the man with the withered hand (3:5), the Gerasene demoniac (5:8), the Syrophenician woman's daughter (7:29), and blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10:52) by speaking. Jesus uses both touch and words to heal a leper (1:41-42), to raise Jairus's daughter from death to life (5:41-42), to cure a deaf and speech-impaired man (7:33-35), to cure a blind man in Bethsaida (Mk 8:23-25), and to heal a boy who has an unclean spirit (9:25-27).

There are also instances in Mark's Gospel where someone is healed when they touch Jesus' cloak. This is the case in the healing of the hemorrhaging woman (5:28-29). And in Mark's report of people being healed in many places, he notes that people "laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed" (6:56b).

So in Mark's narrative, healings occur both with and without Jesus' touch. But Jesus' compassion seems especially evident when he makes physical contact with someone. Jesus cares for the people. He heals people because he loves them and wants to restore and redeem them all. Jesus' power and authority are obvious in his love and mercy.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—JESUS CURES MANY

Mark 1:32-34

(32) That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. (33) And the whole city was gathered around the door. (34) And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

1:32 Jesus' healing of the man with the evil spirit and of Simon Peter's mother-in-law both happened on the Sabbath. Jesus doing such "work" on the Sabbath isn't yet presented as controversial, but it will

be later (see 3:1-6). Because of rules against working on the Sabbath, the people of Capernaum wait until sundown, when the Sabbath concludes, to bring their ailing loved ones to Jesus.

People are becoming so confident in Jesus' power that they bring all who are in need to him. It seems to them that there is no end to Jesus' healing ability. In spite of this positive reception of Jesus in Capernaum, Matthew and Luke's Gospels record that Jesus later cursed the town because people rejected him (Mt 1:23-24; Lk 10:15).

1:33-34 "The whole city" is gathered around the door of Andrew and Simon Peter's family home. This suggests that everyone—even those who weren't sick or bringing a sick person to be healed—wanted to see Jesus exercise his divine power. Everybody wanted to see this Jesus, who was doing such amazing things.

Jesus meets the people's needs. The next statement may seem odd: "[Jesus] cured many" (v. 34a). Does this mean that Jesus was able to cure many, but not all, of the people who were brought before him? More likely, Mark means that the total number of people Jesus healed amounted to "many."

Jesus healed people of all kinds of diseases. He also cast out many demons. The demons knew Jesus, so Jesus silenced them (see vv. 24-25). This reflects Mark's theme of the Messianic Secret (see above).

The entire community of Capernaum sees that Jesus has the power and authority of God to heal the sick. How do we experience Jesus' power and authority? How do we continue his ministry?

ASK: How can we demonstrate our awe and gratitude for Jesus' exercise of compassionate power in our lives? How can we offer Jesus' compassionate power to other people?

SAY: We can't control how people will respond to our offer of healing and wholeness through Jesus. But we are responsible to offer these good gifts.

CLOSING PRAYER



Holy God, thank you for Jesus' wisdom and power. May his teachings and healings continue to inspire us. Help us actively show your love to others in our words and deeds. Amen.

References

William J. Abraham, "Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B: Mark 1:14-20," *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: The Gospels*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

Paul J. Achtemeier, "Capernaum," *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007).

Sharyn E. Dowd, "Mark," *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995); *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel*, Reading the New Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000).



Rikk E. Watts, "Gospel of Mark Notes," *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Jesus’ healing acts reveal his authority as God’s Son and as the Messiah. His casting out of evil spirits demonstrates his victory over the forces of evil. Jesus’ healings join his sermons and teachings to proclaim that in him, the kingdom of God has come so near that people can experience it.

Jesus’ healing acts also reveal his compassion. His healing of the sick shows that God cares about our bodies as well as our spirits. Our health matters to God. Jesus’ authority and power enabled him to do anything, but what he does is bring health to the sick and wholeness to the broken.

TEACHING OPTIONS

 **Compassion**
 **SAY:** Jesus’ teaching and healing activities proclaim the arrival of God’s kingdom. His healing actions show us that compassion lies at the heart of God’s purpose. Jesus’ mighty acts are also compassionate ones.

ASK: How does our church proclaim the kingdom of God by continuing Jesus’ ministry of compassion and healing? What specific ministries of care does our church support in the local community and around the world?

As class members call out answers, write them on a whiteboard or flip chart.

Invite someone to read Mark 1:32-34.

Divide your class into two groups. Give one group your church’s annual report. Give the other group your denomination’s monthly magazine.

SAY: Let’s do some detective work with an eye toward expanding our ministries of compassion. Explore the paperwork you have received, looking for more ministries to add to our church’s list. Considering our church’s gifts and opportunities, search for ministry ideas that might work well in our context.

Invite each group to report.

SAY: Let’s pray for the ministries we have listed. Let’s also pray for God’s guidance in establishing new ministries.

Lead the class in prayer.

Wasting Time

Distribute the handout “Wasting Time” and pens or pencils. Ask class members to rank the options.

SAY: The answers to the poll about “What Americans Report Wasting Their Time On” are (1) Scrolling social media 49%, (2) Using apps or games on phone/tablet 30%, (3) Watching TV 29%, (4) Sitting in traffic 28%, (5) Checking your phone constantly 26%.

ASK: How would you define wasted time? Are you surprised by what is *not* on the list? What could you do with an extra hour a day? Does all your time need to be productive?

SAY: Many of us are not as productive as we could be. At the bottom of the handout, write down three of your biggest time-wasting actions. (I won’t ask you to share these with the class.)

Place a garbage can in the middle of the room.

SAY AND ASK: Tear your personal answers into three separate scraps of paper. We will take turns throwing them into the garbage can. Wouldn’t it be great if we could rid ourselves so easily of the things that steal our time?

ASK: What would you do with more time?

Invite someone to read the following verses: Mark 1:21, 23, 29-30, 32.

DISCUSS: What enabled Jesus to make such good use of his time? How do you know if you have a good balance in your life between work, rest, and play?

Unit Two

What Is and What Will Be

The topic of this unit's lessons calls us to be grounded in the past and to look toward the future. In each Scripture passage, we will explore an event in the past that calls us to anticipate something in the future: strength, ministry, covenant, or blessings. As we examine these past events, we will learn about difficult experiences such as exile, a mentor's passing, natural disaster, and infertility. But such things also happen here and now. We probably know people who struggle with such issues. We may struggle with some of them ourselves. As was the case with the heroes of our faith, we are called to look toward the horizon to see where God is calling us next.

The February 7 lesson points us toward strength that is available in God. The lesson text addresses Jewish exiles in Babylon who wonder if God has disregarded them. The prophet reminds the people that their incomparable and incomprehensible God can make them strong.

The February 14 lesson reveals the importance of transitions in ministry. The time has come for Elijah to depart from his disciple Elisha. Elisha follows Elijah to the end, when Elijah is taken up in dramatic fashion to be with God. Elijah prepares Elisha to receive the ministry God has called him to undertake. Each of us is called to ministry, and each of us is called to pass our ministry on when the time is right. We can minister because God gives us the Spirit that empowers us to do so.

On February 21 and 28, we will look at two covenants in Genesis. The first, which God makes with Noah and the other survivors of the flood, is universal and not dependent on human actions. God chooses mercy over retribution, shaping a rainbow that symbolizes the promise of "never again." We can enter into covenant with God because God is faithful.

The second covenant is directed toward a particular family, though its benefits extend for generations. Abram thought he understood God's plan and promise. But then God changes Abram's name to Abraham to signify the fulfillment of a new covenant, which will come through the birth of Isaac to Abraham's wife, Sarah. This is an unbelievable blessing! We also receive blessings in line with God's purposes.

I hope we will ground ourselves in these traditions, stay put, and look up. In the practice of yoga, one of the most important things is the groundedness of one's feet. Yogis are trained to press down on the balls of their feet, the centers of their heels, the mounds of their toes, and each individual digit. Let's do some spiritual yoga. Ground yourself, take a deep breath, and look ahead to where God is calling you.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Courtney Stamey serves as Senior Pastor of Northside Baptist Church in Clinton, Mississippi. She is married to Michael Stamey, and they share life with their two sibling rescue dogs Dallas and Basil. Courtney enjoys being outdoors, and she spends much of her time in her vegetable garden, cooking, or playing disc golf. Courtney holds degrees from Gardner-Webb University and Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

Strength

Lesson Text: Isaiah 40:21-31

A Verse to Remember—Isaiah 40:31

Background Text: Isaiah 40:12-31

Other Lectionary texts: Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Teaching Principle: God gives strength to God's people who faithfully wait and watch for it.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 2 poster, "What Is and What Will Be" (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline: Strength—Isaiah 40:21-31
 - God of Creation (40:21-24)
 - Only God Is God (40:25-26)
 - Our God, Our Strength (40:27-31)
- (4) Provide paper and pens, pencils, or markers.
- (5) Provide Hymnals and/or Internet access.
- (6) If using the first teaching option, provide copies of the "Praying for Strength" handout (*Kit*, p. 6), the church or class prayer list, and highlighters.
- (7) If using the third teaching option, provide colored pencils or markers.

INTRODUCTION

Do we need strength, endurance, or both? Today's Scripture passage comes from the time near the end of the Babylonian exile. The message was originally for people who would be able to return to the destroyed Jerusalem and devastated Judah. Many of them had never been to their "homeland." The people of Judah needed strength and endurance. Circumstances sapped their energy reserves.

People feel wiped out today too. They are overworked, over-programmed, and overburdened. They can find no additional energy within themselves. In this lesson, we will learn that the strength and endurance we need come from God. Our lesson text reaches that conclusion by affirming God's identity and character.

BEGINNING THE LESSON



Ask: What is strength? What is endurance? What is the difference between them? How do these qualities relate to each other?

Draw a Venn diagram, which is two overlapping circles. (If using a flip chart, leave room for a second Venn diagram beside or underneath this one.) Write "Strength" above one circle and "Endurance" above the other. Write "both" above where the circles overlap. As class members name individuals who exemplify either strength or endurance, or both, write the names in the designated areas. Keep these answers to use later in the lesson.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

Most interpreters believe that the book of Isaiah should be divided into two or three sections composed by various authors. The historical circumstances assumed in various parts of the book occur over a two hundred-year period, making a single author impossible. Interpreters assign chapters 1–39 to the eighth-century BC prophet Isaiah ben Amoz of Jerusalem. The anonymous prophet behind the material in chapters 40–55 (or perhaps 40–66) delivered his message in Babylon near the end of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century. We refer to this prophet as Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah. Some interpreters believe that a third anonymous prophet, referred to as Trito-Isaiah or Third Isaiah, composed chapters 56–66 in Judah after the exile.

Our lesson text comes at the beginning of Second Isaiah's writings. Second Isaiah is a prophet of

consolation. Many people of Judah have been in exile for about four decades. As Cyrus the Great of Persia nears his takeover of Babylon, which he accomplishes in 539 BC, hope arises that the exiles will get to return home, where they will find a destroyed city, devastated land, and a defunct religious system. The people need to redefine who they are and to be reassured of God's faithfulness.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—GOD OF CREATION

Isaiah 40:21-24

(21) Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? (22) It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; (23) who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. (24) Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

40:21 Our lesson text picks up in the middle of a unit that begins at Isaiah 40:12. In verses 12-20, the prophet proclaims that God is greater than any reality, including nations (vv. 15-17) and idols (vv. 18-20). With verse 21, the prophet continues to declare God's supremacy over everything and everybody.

The question posed in verse 21 calls the exiles to rely on their senses and on their traditions. Each "you" in these questions is plural, so the prophet is urging the people to rely on their collective experiences with God. The prophet invites God's people to remember what they know about God. They know the truth, which is that God has always been who God is.

40:22 This verse draws on the ancient cosmology, also seen in Genesis 1, in which the sky is perceived as a dome over the earth. The prophet imagines God sitting above the dome and looking down on people, who look as small as grasshoppers from that great height. He also imagines God spreading the heavens

SAY: Our lesson text encourages us to "wait on the Lord" who provides us strength. Let's see how the concepts of strength and endurance played out for the people of Judah and how they can help us. In order to do this, we must remember God's strength and endurance.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Isaiah 40:21-24



Invite someone to read Isaiah 40:21-24.

SAY: Our lesson text comes from a prophet who spoke to the exiles in Babylon when they began to feel hopeful about returning home. The prophet encourages the exiles to remember what they should already know about God.

Ask: What stories have we been taught about God's power? What are some Old Testament stories? What are some New Testament stories? Stories from our church's history? From our lives and the lives of our siblings in Christ?

Ask: Why do you think the prophet challenges the exiles to remember what they should already know about God? Why should we remember?

SAY: The prophet proclaims God's sovereignty over creation (v. 22) and over human rulers (vv. 23-24).

Ask: Why do you think the exiles needed to be reminded of these truths about God? Why might they have forgotten them?

Discuss: What kinds of circumstances might cause someone today to forget what they know about God? What positive and negative effects can a crisis, particularly a long-lasting one, have on our faith?

Ask: What practices can we adopt to stay aware of God's power and presence? Why is it important that we do so?



Isaiah 40:25-26



Invite someone to read
Isaiah 40:25-26.

Ask: What is the assumed answer to the question in verse 25?

SAY: The exiles from Judah were under the jurisdiction of the Babylonians who had taken them into captivity. In the ancient world, people assumed that when one nation defeated another, the gods of the victorious nation had conquered the gods of the defeated nation. It stands to reason that some of the exiles reached that conclusion about their defeat and exile. The Babylonians worshiped the stars; their chief god Marduk was the sun god.

Ask: In verse 26, how does the prophet counter this line of thinking?

SAY: In the verses just before our lesson text, the prophet also showed how idols couldn't compare favorably with God.

Invite someone to read
Isaiah 40:18-20.

SAY: Compared with God, neither the gods of Babylon nor the idols that represented them amounted to anything.

Discuss: We don't believe in other gods in the way ancient people did. But do we ever give something other than God too much control over our lives? Do we ever live as if

out as if they were a curtain. God creates, controls, and rules over the universe.

40:23-24 God, whom the prophet has proclaimed is greater than all nations (vv. 15-17) and all people (vv. 22-24), now specifies that God is superior to all rulers. There is irony in these pronouncements, since the prophet's audience is in exile because the rulers of another nation (Babylon) put them there and have kept them there. But the prophet insists that God is ultimately sovereign and will eventually make the rulers powerless. These proclamations anticipate God's coming liberation of the people from exile. But for now, they are challenged to believe in God's superiority even as they are held against their will.

An earlier passage in the book of Isaiah offers an example of how God relates to rulers, even those who seem to be the most powerful. In Isaiah 10, God uses Assyria to pass judgment on others, but then the king of Assyria's arrogance brings God's judgment on the nation of Assyria too (Seitz, 343). Isaiah says, "When the LORD has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride" (10:12). Within that one chapter, God raises up a foreign power and uses it for God's purposes. The nation's leaders think the power is their own, but God humbles them and reminds them who is in charge.

The prophet assures the people that God is sovereign over the rulers of nations. This includes the Babylonian king who keeps them in exile. It may seem like these leaders have power over them, but this verse reminds the people that God has the ultimate power.

In verse 24, the prophet continues declaring God's superiority over earthly rulers. Rulers spend a long time building power and maintaining control. Dynasties may exist for generations. But from the perspective of the eternal God, reigns that appear permanent have barely gotten started. The God who created the universe is not impressed with human dynasties. To remove them, God only has to blow on them. This imagery recalls the "wind from God" that "swept over the face of the waters" at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:2) and the wind God sent to drive back the waters so the Hebrews could cross the sea after the exodus from Egypt (Ex 14:21).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—ONLY GOD IS GOD

Isaiah 40:25-26

(25) To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. (26) Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

40:25 The exiles may have compared other powers to God and decided that those powers—particularly the gods and rulers of Babylon—were greater than God. After all, Babylon had defeated Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, and exiled many of the people. But the prophet has been building a case about God’s superiority and sovereignty, so the implied answer to the rhetorical question in this verse is “No one.” No one is God’s equal! The prophet calls God “the Holy One.” To be holy is to be “set apart.” God is set apart from other so-called gods and from all earthly powers. In short, only God is God.

40:26 The prophet demonstrates the incomparable nature of God by describing God’s relationship with the hosts in the sky—the stars and other heavenly bodies.

The Babylonians worshiped the astral bodies. Their chief god, Marduk, was the sun god. But the prophet affirms that God created all the hosts of the heavens. While people living in the sixth century BC couldn’t see as many stars as our technology allows us to see (scientists estimate that we can observe about one billion trillion stars), they could look up at the sky on a clear night and know that the number of stars was beyond their counting abilities. God’s creation of the stars means that God is obviously greater than the stars are.

The prophet declares that God created *all* of the heavenly bodies. God’s creation of such a massive number of stars indicates God’s unique status and power. But God’s might and majesty are also revealed in the fact that God calls “them all by name.” God knows each astral body personally and intimately. God’s care and concern stretches to the farthest regions of the universe. God calls by name each star included in

some other “god” has overcome us and won our allegiance? How can such situations develop in our lives? How can circumstances, and especially crises, contribute to their development?

SAY: The prophet proclaims that God created all the hosts of heaven—all the stars and other bodies in the universe. He also declares that God calls each star by name.

ASK: How might this have been good news to the exiles? Why did they need to know that God knows every individual star? Why do we need to hear this good news?



Isaiah 40:27-31



Invite someone to read Isaiah 40:27.

SAY: The prophet asks the people why they complain that God ignores their plight.

ASK: Why do you think they lodged this complaint against God? Have you ever felt that God was ignoring you during a time of crisis? Do you think we should express such feelings to God? Why or why not?

Invite someone to read Isaiah 40:28-31.

ASK: Why do you think the prophet repeats the two questions he asked in verse 21?

SAY: The prophet announces the availability of God’s strength to those who are “faint” and “powerless” (v. 29). Decades of exile had worn the people down. They were emotionally and spiritually exhausted.

DISCUSS: What wears Christians down these days? Why do we need access to God’s strength?

SAY: Our lesson text calls us to look up and remember God so we can receive and live in the strength God wants to give us. Through the prophet, God reminds the exiles and us that even those who have natural strength will grow weary and faint. But “those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength” (v. 31a). Even so, waiting can be hard.


DISCUSS: Why is it hard to wait for God to give us the strength we need? What gets in the way of our being patient? How should we live while we are waiting?

ASK: What might happen if, in our impatience, we look for sources of strength other than God?

SAY: When we have to wait for the strength that comes from God, we need to live in faith and hope based on our experience with and knowledge of God. Such living will enable us to endure, even as we await the strength that will get us through.



APPLYING THE LESSON

 **SAY:** At the beginning of the lesson, we offered examples of people who display endurance, strength, or both. Let’s work with the same concept to ask about the issues in our life that require endurance, strength, or both.

Go back to the Venn diagram. If it is on a whiteboard, erase the content in the circles. If it is on a flip chart, make a second Venn diagram adjacent to the first.

the universe, so surely God personally and intimately knows each one of the exiles in Babylon. The exiles may think that God has forgotten them, but God certainly hasn’t. And if God knows each of the exiles by name, surely God will intervene on their behalf. This is a powerful message for those among us who feel displaced, ignored, and marginalized. God knows and cares about us.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—OUR GOD, OUR STRENGTH

Isaiah 40:27-31

(27) Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God”? (28) Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. (29) He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. (30) Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; (31) but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

40:27 The reason the prophet calls the exiles to remember who God is and what God does is to reassure and revitalize them. The prophet quotes the people’s complaints back to them: they claim that God isn’t paying attention to their plight and doesn’t care about them. They believe God has abandoned and forgotten them (Seitz, 346). The prophet has already addressed this issue by proclaiming God’s power and authority over human and celestial powers. He has offered the people evidence that God does see them and can do something about their situation. Now he has more to say about it.

40:28-31 The prophet offers more evidence that the people should look to God for the strength and encouragement they need. He begins with the same two rhetorical questions that he used in verse 21. This time, the questions will lead into his crowning declarations: “Have you not known? Have you not heard?”

They should know what the prophet is about to tell them, both from their tradition and from what he has just said.

Now the prophet clearly states what he has been implying about God, which is something the exiles should already know: “The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” Because of who God is—the eternal Creator of all that is—God’s resources are inexhaustible. God’s strength and understanding are beyond our comprehension (v. 28).

And one of God’s greatest gifts is allowing us the use of these resources. God doesn’t reserve them only for God’s use. The God who doesn’t faint or grow weary shares this power with those who believe in, watch for, and wait on it. Despite what the exiles think, God isn’t ignoring their distress but rather wants to give them strength from God’s inexhaustible supply. God will help those who are “faint” and “powerless” (v. 29). God gives these good gifts to those who are worn out and depleted physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The disheartened exiles need to hear this good news. It is the good news that the discouraged people of any era, including ours, need to hear.

The exiles live in a difficult situation. They are dealing with circumstances in which “even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted...” (v. 30). But God makes inexhaustible resources available so that even those who aren’t strong can endure, persevere, and overcome. To receive those resources, God’s people must “wait for the LORD” (v. 31). Waiting for God’s strength to come in God’s time is challenging. Such waiting requires living in faith and hope. But for those who do wait, God is faithful to send strength that goes beyond human understanding. It is strength that only God has, so only God can give it.

Ask: What situations, problems, or issues require our strength? Our endurance? Both? As class members call out answers, write them in the appropriate sections of the diagram.

Say: Let us pray that we will wait for and depend on God’s strength and endurance.

CLOSING PRAYER



Most powerful God, we need your strength and endurance. Sometimes we feel weary, faint, and powerless. Lift us up so we can soar like eagles. Give us patience to wait for your strength and endurance rather than trying to manufacture our own. Amen.

References

John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004).

David Forney, “The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany; Isaiah 40:21-31: Theological Perspective” Verity A. Jones, “Pastoral Perspective”; and Richard A. Puckett, “Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, year B, vol. 1, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1995).

James Muilenburg, “The Book of Isaiah: Exegesis,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 5 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1956).

Christopher Seitz, *Isaiah*, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 6 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995).

Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66, The Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1975).

CONCLUSION

The trauma of the Babylonian exile made the people of Judah question everything they thought they knew. What did it mean for them to be God’s people? How could they come to terms with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple? What if God was incapable of helping them or unwilling to do so? The exiles’ experiences wore them down and their despair exhausted them. Weakened by their spiritual crises, they needed strength that they couldn’t find within themselves. In our lesson text, the prophet calls these people to remember who God is. The God who formed their ancestors to be God’s people is the one true God who created everything. God is more powerful than any other “gods” and is sovereign over any earthly ruler. The exiles’ emotional and spiritual exhaustion may cause them to think that God can’t or won’t help them, but the prophet urges them to remember what they know: God can help. And they will soon learn that God is willing to do so.

TEACHING OPTIONS

✓ — Praying for Strength

□ — Distribute the “Praying for Strength” handout, the church or class prayer list, highlighters, and pens or pencils. If your church or class does not maintain a prayer list, consider using this activity to create one that you can use for prayer throughout this unit. Invite class members to add other names.

SAY: Let’s pray for the people on our prayer list.

Divide the class into groups of three or four people. Have each group highlight the names of five people and/or issues on the prayer list. Then have them follow the instructions on the “Praying for Strength” handout.

Gaining Strength from Music

SAY: In today’s Scripture, the prophet encourages the people of God to remember what God has done. One way we experience God’s strength is through music.

ASK: What are some songs that speak of God’s strength or endurance?

SAY: Music can help us convey the words we can’t bear to utter. Music can also open us to receive strength from God.

Distribute hymnals and ask class members to conduct a song search. Ask them to search for hymns or songs that celebrate or ask for the strength that God gives (they can also use their phones). Sing or listen to two or three of the hymns/songs.

DISCUSS: Did you find the songs encouraging? What other media can communicate the assurance of God’s strength to us?

Timeline of God’s Strength in Our Lives

Distribute colored pens or markers.

SAY: Like the exiles addressed in our lesson text, we can forget how we have experienced God’s strength in the past. Draw a timeline. Mark your birth on the far left side, and write “present” on the far right side. Then mark important times in your life.

SAY: Now that you have noted your major events, use a different color pen or marker to mark when you have experienced God’s strength.

ASK: What was easier for you to put on the timeline: your experience of major life events or your experience of God’s strength? Why do you think this is so?

SAY: We may have items or photos to remind us of the major events in our lives. But we may not have anything to help us commemorate our experiences of God’s strength.

ASK: What practices can we adopt to help us commemorate the times when we experience God’s strength? How might such practices draw us nearer to God? How might they help us develop the faithful patience we need?

Ministry

Lesson Text: 2 Kings 2:1-12

A Verse to Remember—2 Kings 2:9

Background Text: 2 Kings 2:1-18

Other Lectionary Texts: Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Teaching Principle: We engage in our own ministry that is based on previous ministries.

INTRODUCTION

Ministry can be defined as caring for people in ways that are guided by the Spirit of God. Ministry involves transitions. Our lesson text recounts the ministry transition from Elijah to Elisha. This reminds us of other ministry transitions reported in the Bible. We might think of the transitions from Moses to Joshua, from John the Baptist to Jesus, and from Jesus to the church (Brueggemann, 301–304; Leithart, 171–72).

Elijah and Elisha were prophets, called by God to speak to the people on God's behalf. The stories about these men reveal their humanity, including their frailties and faults. We are reminded that God uses flawed people, including us, to accomplish God's will. Elijah was Elisha's mentor in ministry. Whose ministry do we inherit? And who will be the heirs of our ministry?

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

Elijah was active in the ninth century BC, and the ministry of his successor Elisha carried over into the early eighth century. This was the period of the divided kingdom, and these two prophets ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel, whose capital was in Samaria.

The events in this week's Scripture passage occur at the end of Elijah's life. As Yahweh's representative, the prophet has conducted a long battle against the people's inclination to worship the gods of the Canaanites—particularly Baal and Asherah. Elijah especially challenged Israel's rulers, beginning with Ahab, for failing to be faithful to God. Now Elisha will take up the mantle of prophetic ministry, for the nation needs to continue to hear the challenge of God's word.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 2 poster, "What Is and What Will Be" (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline: Ministry—2 Kings 2:1-12
 - A Committed Relationship (2:1-7)
 - A Provisional Promise (2:8-10)
 - An Extraordinary Departure (2:11-12)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart.
- (6) If using the first teaching option, provide wax paper, black construction paper, assorted colors of tissue paper, scissors, white glue, a medium/large sized artist's paintbrush, and a worktable. Go to <https://www.isavea2z.com/paper-craft-idea-how-to-make-your-stained-glass-window/> for instructions on making the stained glass windows.

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: Today's Scripture passage tells the story of a major transition in leadership. Elisha will assume the prophetic role formerly held by Elijah. This transition, while smooth, is not ordinary. Elijah is taken up in a whirlwind to God while his protégé watches in awe and grief. Ministry can be continuous even as situations change. Let's think about some of the important ministers in our lives.

Divide the class into groups of two or three. Ask them to share stories of times when another person ministered to them. This could be an

ordained person or anyone who followed the Spirit's leading in a time of need. Invite volunteers to share their stories.

SAY: In today's lesson, we will learn about the special bond between Elijah and Elisha and about the ministry they shared.

TEACHING THE LESSON

2 Kings 2:1-7



Invite someone to read
2 Kings 2:1.

SAY: Sometimes we journey through life without knowing our destination. But Elijah knows where he is going, and we can assume Elisha knows too.

ASK: What is the goal of a Christian life? Can we anticipate all the changes and transitions that will happen along the way? How should an awareness of our ultimate goal give us perspective to deal with expected or unexpected, wanted or unwanted changes?

Invite someone to read
2 Kings 2:2-7.

SAY: At every stop, Elijah tries to get Elisha to stay behind.

ASK: Why do you think Elijah does this? What do we learn about Elisha from his responses and actions?

SAY: Every time Elijah tries to get Elisha to stay behind, Elijah tells him, "The LORD has sent me as far as" the next place on the journey.

ASK: What is significant about Elijah's phrasing? Could we say the same thing about our life's journey—that God has sent us as far as the next place? Why or why not?

BIBLE BACKGROUND—A COMMITTED RELATIONSHIP

2 Kings 2:1-7

(1) Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. (2) Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. (3) The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent." (4) Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. (5) The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent." (6) Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. (7) Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan.

2:1 The narrator tells us up front how this story will end: God will take Elijah to heaven through a whirlwind. Elijah and his disciple Elisha are traveling toward that event. Until now, Elisha has not had a major role in the narrative. While Elijah was on the run from Jezebel, God told him to anoint Elisha as his successor, and Elijah obeyed (1 Kings 19:16, 19). From that point on, Elisha became Elijah's servant (19:21). But this verse in 2 Kings is his first appearance since his anointing.

The two prophets are journeying from Gilgal. There were two places called Gilgal. One is where the Israelites camped after crossing the Jordan when they first entered the land. Joshua set up twelve stones there,

reminding future generations of the place where the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry ground (Josh 4:19-24). While this Gilgal carries great historical and religious significance, Elijah and Elisha were probably coming from a second place called Gilgal, which was in the hills north of Bethel (Bergant, 435)

2:2-3 Elijah tries to get Elisha to remain in Gilgal, but he refuses (the Hebrew word translated “leave” has the sense of “abandon”; Brueggemann, 294). So the two prophets journey together to Bethel. The name Bethel means “house of God.” This was an important ancient worship site. Abraham built an altar there when he first entered the land (Gen 12:8). It was at Bethel that Jacob had his dream of a ladder between heaven and earth (28:11-19). When the northern tribes seceded from the united monarchy, Bethel was one of two locations (the other being Dan) where King Jeroboam I established worship centers for his citizens so they wouldn’t travel to Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom (2 Kings 12:29; Bergant, 437). The biblical writers regularly condemn Jeroboam for establishing these worship centers to rival the Jerusalem temple.

A “company of prophets” lives in Bethel. Such companies were bands or guilds of prophets. In our lesson text, these prophets seem to view Elijah as their master (Brueggemann, 294). Their question to Elisha indicates that they have prophetic insight into what is about to happen to Elijah. The Hebrew phrase translated “company of prophets” is literally “sons of prophets.” A familial relationship is implied. Perhaps these prophets share in Elisha’s pain over Elijah’s pending departure.

Elisha’s response to the prophets’ question is “Yes, I know; keep silent.” He is not necessarily snubbing them. Silence or stillness (see NASB) is a faithful response when one is faced with such a monumental transition. We might assume that Elisha knew the stories of Elijah’s time spent hiding out from Jezebel. Surely Elijah would have told Elisha that we can experience God in the sheer silence (1 Kings 19:12; Allen, 438).

SAY: There is a “company of prophets” at both Bethel and Jericho. The companies of prophets at both places tell Elisha that God is going to take Elijah away from him.

ASK: Why do you think these prophets say this? How might they know what is happening?

DISCUSS: What can this part of the story teach us about how God’s Spirit works in the church today?

SAY: Elijah and Elisha are both God’s prophets. We can assume they have become close friends. They are certainly close partners in ministry.

ASK: How can we develop close relationships with mentors so we can learn what we need to know, with mentees so we can share what we need to share, and with our peers so we can keep learning from each other?



2 Kings 2:8-10



Invite someone to read 2 Kings 2:8-10.

SAY: The earlier transition of leadership from Moses to Joshua has some ties to the story of the transition from Elijah to Elisha.

Invite class members to read Exodus 14:21-22 and Joshua 3:15-17.

ASK: God parted the sea under Moses’ leadership. What does God’s parting of the Jordan River under Joshua’s leadership demonstrate about Joshua? Why was it important for the people to see and understand this?

SAY: The parting of the Jordan when Elijah strikes it with his mantle indicates that, as was the case with Joshua and Moses, Elijah has authority from God. Now, it is possible that Elijah's authority will be passed to Elisha.

Invite someone to read
1 Kings 19:16, 19-21.

SAY: God has already told Elijah that Elisha will follow him as a prophet, and Elijah has already commissioned him to do so. But there is more to do to fully equip Elisha to assume that role. Elisha requests a double share of Elijah's spirit. He isn't asking for double Elijah's power but rather for the rights of inheritance for a firstborn child. This will show him and others that he is Elijah's rightful successor.

DISCUSS: Why do you think Elijah responds to Elisha's request as he does? What difference might it make whether or not Elisha sees Elijah being taken away?

SAY: Elijah has no doubt taught and trained Elisha as much as possible, but it is up to God to determine Elisha's ultimate qualifications.



2 Kings 2:11-12



Invite someone to read
2 Kings 2:11-12.

SAY: Imagine journeying with your mentor, crossing a river on dry land, and then seeing a fiery chariot and horses separate him from you as a whirlwind carries him away.

ASK: What do you imagine was going through Elisha's mind as Elijah was taken away? How would you have felt in Elisha's place?

2:4-5 Elijah again encourages Elisha to stay behind, this time at Bethel, and again Elisha refuses. At this point, we might wonder why Elisha is so determined to accompany Elijah. Maybe he is simply faithful to his mentor. Maybe he thinks he must be present to receive Elijah's full blessing. Maybe he senses that something miraculous is about to happen and wants to bear witness to it.

Elijah and Elisha journey on to Jericho, where they again encounter a company of prophets. Jericho was significant in Israel's memory because of the way God worked through Joshua to conquer the city (Josh 6).

2:6-7 When Elijah asks Elisha to remain in Jericho, he again refuses. It is clear at this point that nothing will keep Elisha from staying with Elijah until the journey is complete. He has followed Elijah faithfully, and he will continue to do so.

Elijah and Elisha journey to the Jordan River. Fifty people from the company of prophets go with them, but they stand apart from Elijah and Elisha.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—A PROVISIONAL PROMISE

2 Kings 2:8-10

(8) Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. (9) When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." (10) He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not."

2:8 During the Israelites' exodus from Egypt under Moses' leadership, the sea parted so the people could cross on dry ground (Ex 14:21-22). When the Israelites entered the land under Joshua's leadership, the Jordan River parted so the people could cross on dry ground (Josh 3:15-17). This repeated miracle assured the people that God was with Joshua as God had been with Moses.

Now the Jordan parts again so Elijah and Elisha can cross on dry ground. This may indicate that Elijah plays a role similar to Moses, leading the people away from the influence of foreign gods (Egyptian gods in Moses' case, Canaanite ones in Elijah's). After Elijah's departure, Elisha will strike the Jordan with Elijah's robe and it will part for him. This will assure the company of the prophets at Jericho that Elisha is indeed Elijah's successor (2:14-15).

2:9-10 On the other side of the Jordan, Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him before he departs. Elisha requests "a double share of [Elijah's] spirit." Elisha isn't asking to receive twice Elijah's power. He is asking for the inheritance due to a firstborn son (Deut 21:17).

If this request is granted, Elisha will become the leader of the companies of prophets. If Elisha's request is fulfilled, it will affect his future, the other prophets' futures, and Israel's future.

Elijah knows the gravity of what Elisha is asking. He also knows that he can't grant it. The spirit is God's to give. This might remind us of the scene where James and John ask Jesus to grant that they may sit on his right and on his left. Jesus responds, like Elijah, that they are asking a hard thing, "but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared" (Mk 10:35-40). In Elisha's case, whether or not he will receive Elijah's spirit has something to do with his ability to see or to perceive what is about to happen to Elijah (Nelson, 162).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—AN EXTRAORDINARY DEPARTURE

2 Kings 2:11-12

(11) As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. (12) Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

SAY: Elisha cries out over the departure of Elijah, who has been so important in his life, the life of the community of prophets, and the life of the country. Elisha grieves his mentor. However, in seeing Elijah taken away, Elisha does receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit. The mentee has assumed the role of the mentor, and the ministry must continue.

Invite someone to read Mark 9:2-9 (the lectionary's Gospel reading for today).

SAY: Today is Transfiguration Sunday on the Christian calendar. When Jesus is transfigured, Elijah and Moses appear with him. Jesus' disciples Peter, James, and John see it happen.

DISCUSS: What do you think is the significance of Elijah's and Moses' appearance with Jesus on the mountain? Is it possible that they pass their ministry on to Jesus? What about the disciples? Does this experience help equip them to continue Jesus' ministry after he is gone?



APPLYING THE LESSON



SAY: Sometimes it can be difficult to imagine how we can minister. We may get caught up in what we think ministry "should" be or think that ministry is something only clergy do.

SAY: God has a ministry for each of us. God gives us a gift and calls us to use it. A mentor can guide us in carrying out our ministry.

ASK: How has God equipped you to minister? Are you listening to

the guidance of mentors? Are you serving as a mentor to others?

SAY: Our lesson text calls us to fulfill our ministry calling and to pass God's ministry on to others. How are we passing on the spirit of ministry in our church and community?

CLOSING PRAYER



Holy God, your call beckons each of us. Show us the people and places for whom our ministries are suited. Thank you for our mentors who model beneficial ministry for us. Help us mentor others. Amen.

References

Wm. Loyd Allen, "The Last Sunday after the Epiphany; 2 Kings 2:1-12: Theological Perspective," and Dianne Bergant, "Exegetical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, year B, vol. 1, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

Walter Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishers, 2000).

Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings*, The Anchor Yale Bible, vol. 11 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

John Gray, *I & II Kings*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970).

Peter Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006).

Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1987).

Choon-Leong Seow, *1 and 2 Kings*, The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

2:11 Elisha sees Elijah being taken away. The two are walking along, having a conversation, when "a chariot of fire and horses" comes between them and a whirlwind carries Elijah into heaven. Theophanies (appearances of God) often involve fire (Gray, 476), so this chariot and these horses come from heaven.

Because Elijah ascended to heaven without dying, he gained a special role in prophetic expectation. The prophet Malachi, whose words probably date from about five hundred years after Elijah lived, anticipates Elijah's return before the day of the Lord comes (Mal 4:5). The Gospels present John the Baptist as fulfilling the role of Elijah (Mk 9:9-13). In Jesus' transfiguration, Elijah joins Moses in appearing with Jesus. (Moses also departed this life under extraordinary circumstances, having been buried by God; see Deut 34:5-6.)

2:12 Elisha keeps watching, so he sees Elijah depart. This eyewitness experience is a condition of him receiving Elijah's spirit (v. 10). Elisha also keeps crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" His cry of "Father" indicates the deep bond between the two prophets. It might also refer to the idea that Elijah was the father of the "sons of the prophets."

The second cry, "The chariots of Israel and its horsemen," is a phrase that is later used for Elisha as well (2 Kings 13:14). This honorific phrase emphasizes God's power against foreign enemies, and it reminds the reader and Elisha that it is God, not humans, who defends Israel.

Once Elijah has passed from sight, Elisha tears his clothes, a symbol of his grief. He has journeyed all this way and refused to leave Elijah, knowing this would be the outcome. Elisha takes this moment to grieve before returning across the Jordan and assuming his role as the leader of the prophets. The verses that follow our lesson text make it clear that Elisha has indeed inherited Elijah's spirit and is equipped to continue the prophetic ministry in Israel.

CONCLUSION

This week's Scripture passage is about a transition in ministerial leadership. Elisha has been learning from Elijah for some time, but now he must assume the role of lead prophet in Israel. While the transition from Elijah to Elisha is unique in its drama, it is common in its essence. Elisha had his own ministry to carry out, but he would do so on the basis of what he had learned from his mentor. There would be differences between Elisha's and Elijah's ministries, but there would also be continuities between them. The most important continuity would be the prophetic spirit they shared as a gift from God. New times and situations require new ministries and new people to carry them out, but everything new builds on and continues what has come before.

TEACHING OPTIONS

✓ — Liminal Space

□ — SAY: As Elijah was taken up into heaven, Elisha experienced a "liminal space."

□ — Liminal space is defined as a thin space between heaven and earth where things of the Spirit seem very close and very real.

SAY: We can experience a sanctuary as liminal space. Let's honor that space by creating "stained-glass" artwork.

Distribute materials to make stained glass windows. When everyone has completed their art, ask them to gaze at it, imagining they are having a holy liminal experience.

ASK: What kind of liminal experiences have you had in real life? How have they strengthened you? Challenged you?

SAY: Elijah and Elisha intentionally traveled to the place where Elijah would be taken up and Elisha would have his liminal experience. We can plan to go to places where we expect to have such an experience too. But we also need to be alert to unexpected liminal experiences.

Persistence and Silent Watchfulness

SAY: Elisha found himself at a remarkable time of transition both professionally and personally. In a moment, his mentor was gone and his vocation was changed.

ASK: Have you experienced a time like this? What was it like?

SAY: What should we do when monumental changes occur? Loyd Allen suggests that we need to follow the example of Elisha and use persistence and silent watchfulness (Allen, 436). Elisha is persistent because he refuses to leave Elijah. He uses silent watchfulness because he asks the companies of prophets to be silent.

ASK: Is it hard or easy for us to be persistent and watch in silence? How does living through a time of change and transition affect our ability or willingness to be persistent and silent?

SAY: We live in a culture that requires quick decision making. We may feel like we don't have the time to be silent or the patience and stability to be persistent.

Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Ask class members to journal about the following items (write the prompts on a whiteboard or flip chart):

- the pace of your life
- transitions you are facing
- obstacles to being silent and persistent
- steps you can take to practice silence and persistence

Invite class members to experience silent watchfulness in prayer. Ask them to sit for one minute in complete silence, listening for God's guidance on life events or transitions they are facing.

Covenant

Lesson Text: Genesis 9:8-17

A Verse to Remember—Genesis 9:16

Background Text: Genesis 9:1-17

Other Lectionary texts: Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Teaching Principle: God’s merciful promises give us hope for the future.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 2 poster, “What Is and What Will Be” (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline:
Covenant—Genesis 9:8-17
 - Covenant Recipients (9:8-10)
 - Covenant Content (9:11)
 - Covenant Sign (9:12-17)
- (4) If using the first teaching option, provide copies of the handout “Class Covenant” (*Kit*, p. 7).
- (5) If using the second teaching option, arrange to play the song “Rainbow Connection” from *The Muppet Movie*. It can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WS3Lkc6Gzlk> or on other streaming services. Alternatively, make a copy of the lyrics.
- (6) Provide paper and pens or pencils.

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: In today’s Scripture passage, God makes a covenant with the earth. Noah and his family have just experienced the tragedy of the flood. Now God promises never to flood the earth again. As we think about this covenant, we’ll learn that God’s merciful promises give us hope for the future.

Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Divide the class into groups of 3-4. Ask each group to discuss what a covenant is and to write a one-sentence definition of a covenant. Then invite each group to present their definition.

INTRODUCTION

What do we think of when we hear the word “covenant”? A promise? A contract? Maybe your church has a covenant that you repeat on occasion or that is posted in the building. Maybe you think of a marriage or family covenant, a set of norms your family commits to. God shows us how covenants should work: both parties should be faithful. God is always faithful to God’s covenants with people, regardless of whether they fulfill their part. In this week’s Scripture passage, we see a one-sided covenant: God takes on the entire obligation. (In Genesis 9:1-7, God issues commands to Noah and his sons, but the commands are not part of the covenant presented in the lesson text.) Covenant is the “central metaphor” for Israel’s relationship with God (O’Connor, 149). We might also think of it as a central metaphor for Christians’ relationship with God through Jesus. As we work to strengthen our relationship with God, learning about biblical covenants can ground and challenge us.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

The account of Noah, the flood, and God’s covenant with the world is part of the primeval history. Spanning Genesis 1-11, the primeval history encompasses the time before the era of the patriarchs and matriarchs (Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob, Leah, and Rachel). These chapters focus on humanity in general rather than a particular people group. Initially, all is well with Adam and Eve in the garden. But disobedience brings disruption, and so much evil results that God judges the world with a flood, preserving Noah and his family. God establishes the covenant in our lesson text after Noah emerges from the ark. This covenant sets the stage for the later covenants with Abraham and at Sinai. Sadly, events

immediately following the establishment of this covenant reveal that all is still not well with humanity.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—COVENANT RECIPIENTS

Genesis 9:8-10

(8) Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, (9) “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, (10) and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.”

9:8 Here, like in verse 1, God speaks directly to Noah and his sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. In Genesis 9:17, God speaks to Noah only. The covenant God establishes here brings comfort and resolution to Noah and his family. God promises not to abandon them.

Recent events have challenged everything Noah and his family thought they knew. After this crisis, they need to hear God’s voice. Even after the destruction caused by the flood, God still speaks. As was the case before the flood, God relates to creation with “blessings, commands, and promises” (Fretheim, 398).

9:9 God has already commanded Noah’s family to “be fruitful and fill the earth” (9:1; see 9:7). This recalls the command to the first humans in Eden (1:28). The post-flood narrative is a story of re-creation. God is essentially starting over with Noah and his family. God establishes this covenant with the descendants of Noah’s sons—that is, with all humanity from this point forward.

The phrase “As for me” is a translation of the Hebrew word that means “Look” or “Behold.” It is meant to grab our attention (O’Connor, 150). God is doing something new. This will be unlike anything God has done, so Noah and his sons (and we) should pay close attention.

The word translated “establishing” can mean that God “erects” a covenant with Noah and his sons, thereby establishing a new relationship with them. It can also mean that God will “fulfill, carry out, or keep”

ASK: How did your group define covenant? What common elements do we see in our definitions of covenant?

SAY: Essentially, a covenant is an agreement between two or more parties, usually characterized by mutual obligation. The covenant God made after the flood is both similar to and different from typical biblical covenants.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Genesis 9:8-10



Invite someone to read Genesis 9:8-10.

SAY: Noah and his family have just exited the ark after the great flood. God has given them some instructions on living in the post-flood world (vv. 1-7). Now God is going to make a covenant.

SAY AND ASK: Imagine yourself being in Noah and his family’s place. What would it have meant to you to hear from God right after the flood? Why?

ASK: Who does God establish this covenant with? What is interesting about who he makes it with? What is surprising?

SAY: Any covenant God enters into is a covenant of grace. God is greater than anyone else, so God only enters into a covenant if God wants to do so.

ASK: What is the significance of God establishing this covenant with Noah, Noah’s sons, and their descendants? Why might God mention the descendants?

DISCUSS: How can we pass on our experience of God’s gracious acts to future generations?

Ask: Why do you think God extends this covenant to all the living creatures that came off the ark? Is it significant that animals can't respond to God's commitment by believing in God or by following God's commandments?

Ask: What does God's establishing this covenant with people and with animals imply about God's attitude toward creation?

SAY: The post-flood covenant is a universal covenant. That is something we should celebrate. God makes a promise to every living being.



Genesis 9:11



Invite someone to read Genesis 9:11.

Ask: What covenant promise does God make?

Divide the class into groups.

SAY: God has judged the world by destroying all life, except what is preserved on the ark, through a great flood. Now God promises never to do that again.

Ask the groups to discuss what this sequence of events might teach us about God. Ask each group to bring one question and one statement back to the class. Lead the class in discussing each group's question and statement.

SAY: One major thing we can see in this covenant promise is God's grace.

Ask: How does the promise demonstrate God's grace?

the covenant originally promised in Genesis 6:18 (Hamilton, 316). Both meanings emphasize God's role as Creator. Only the great Creator could initiate, or even imagine, the newness involved in this covenant.

God is the subject of all the verbs in this passage, so it is up to God to fulfill God's promises (Fretheim, 399). In the beginning, God created (1:1). In this new beginning after the flood, God speaks a new covenant into existence.

9:10 God's promise extends to all the animals that were on the ark. This demonstrates God's love of, care for, and devotion to God's creation. God saved these animals and values them.

This aspect of the covenant is important to Christians. Creation care is an essential part of our discipleship as followers of Jesus. At the beginning, God commanded humans to care for all of creation. In this re-creation scene, God includes animals in the covenant as well.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—COVENANT CONTENT

Genesis 9:11

(11) "I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

9:11 God is reliable, so God's establishment and fulfillment of the covenant is reliable too. Other disasters and troubles may come, but we can trust that God will never again destroy life through a flood (Fretheim, 400).

This flood was a one-time event, never to be repeated. This doesn't mean judgment won't come, but when it does, it won't be through a flood (Hamilton, 316). God's "never again" demonstrates that grace, not retribution, will be God's mode of operation (Brueggemann, 84).

This covenant makes a profound statement about God: God changes course. God places a limit on God's actions for the sake of creation's flourishing. Even if God regrets creating humans again (see 6:6), God won't choose destruction (Brueggemann, 83).

The text's teaching about God should encourage us: God chooses grace. And in choosing grace, God offers a model for us to follow: maybe we can choose to express grace too.

The material in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) was produced and edited over a long period of time. It probably came into its final form during or after the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BC.

The flood narrative offers a hopeful message to the people of that time. The exile devastated Judah and Jerusalem. The people wondered if they would ever recover. Kathleen O'Connor notes that people who survive traumatic events need to be able to interpret and reframe those events in constructive ways. Perhaps the flood narrative helped the exiles and those who returned to process what had happened to them. They could retell their own stories in light of the flood narrative (O'Connor, 158). If God meant "never again" for the flood, God might also mean "never again" for the exile.

The fulfillment of this covenant relies on God. "No 'you shall' follows 'I will'" (Hamilton, 316). Unlike other covenants in Scripture, this one has no requirement from God that the people must meet.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—COVENANT SIGN

Genesis 9:12-17

(12) God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: (13) I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. (14) When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, (15) I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. (16) When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." (17) God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I

ASK: What do Noah and his family have to do in order to fulfill this covenant? What does God require them to do?

SAY: God lays down no requirements that Noah's family and their descendants, including us, have to fulfill in this covenant. The responsibility to keep the covenant is God's alone.

DISCUSS: What might have been some good ways for Noah and his family to respond to this gracious covenant extended to them by God? What might be some good ways for us to respond to it? What would it say about us if we were to respond positively, even though we aren't required to? How can we show appropriate appreciation for the fact that God keeps God's promises?

SAY: We can trust that when God says "never again," God means it for eternity. We can take heart that God's plan for God's creation is redemption, not destruction. Perhaps we should show our appreciation, even if we don't have to!



Genesis 9:12-17



Invite someone to read Genesis 9:12-17.

SAY: God's word is trustworthy, so no sign is needed to back it up. But through grace, God designates the rainbow as a sign.

ASK: What are some other ways that nature can function as a sign of God's grace?

SAY: The rainbow is an appropriate sign because it is shaped like a bow used in archery. So when God says,

"I have set my bow in the clouds" (v. 13), it is as if God has set aside God's bow of war. It is a sign of peace between God and life on Earth.

SAY: God remembers God's promises.

ASK: If this is true, then why does God need a personal reminder not to destroy the world through a flood again (vv. 15-16)?

ASK: How does it help us to know that the rainbow reminds God of God's promise?

SAY: The promise of the covenant in our lesson text still applies to us. But we also live under the covenant that God established through Jesus.

Invite someone to read 1 Peter 3:18-22 (another of today's lectionary readings).

SAY: The writer of 1 Peter connects Noah's being saved through the waters of the flood to the symbol of baptism. Baptism is a major symbol of our covenant with God.

ASK: How does baptism remind us of God's grace? How does it remind us of our commitments?

SAY: When we witness a baptism, let's allow it to remind us of the commitment God has made to us and of the commitment we have made to God.



APPLYING THE LESSON



SAY: We observed Ash Wednesday this week, and today is the first Sunday in Lent. We are beginning a season when we focus on our need to repent.

have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

9:12 The covenant God establishes after the flood is universal. It is for the Noah, his family, and the animals that come off the ark, and it is for every generation that will come after them. It is for everyone and everything, whether or not they acknowledge the relationship God has established with them. Future covenants will be for specific people and groups of people, but that is not the case with this one. Those future covenants, such as those with Abraham and with the people at Sinai, will include obligations for them to keep. But this post-flood covenant is independent of human action. God takes on all the responsibility.

9:13 God sets the bow in the clouds as a sign. God makes this covenant with the earth; subsequent verses show that this means all people and creatures on the earth (Hamilton, 318). We can interpret the promise as extending to the entire earth, since God's pledge not to destroy the world by a flood again means that everything in nature will be safe.

9:14-16 Did rainbows exist before this time? Scientifically, we can assume that they did. But now God assigns meaning to the rainbow's appearance, giving it significance for the people's faith.

The Hebrew word used here for the rainbow can also mean a "bow" used in archery. The bow was a symbol of power in many ancient Near Eastern cultures. The rainbow was the bow and lightning was the arrow (Fretheim, 400). God is depicted in Scripture as a warrior (Ex 15:3, Isa 42:13, Jer 20:11, Job 16:14, Joel 2:11, Zeph 3:17) and even as wielding a bow and arrows (Hab 3:9) (Hamilton, 317).

The bow in the sky may indicate that God is laying down the powers of war, defending the earth with a bow, or showing "restraint in the midst of deserved judgment" (Fretheim, 400).

God says that the bow in the clouds will cause God to remember the covenant with Noah's family and with all living creatures. God is perfectly dependable and trustworthy but still promises that the rainbow will

trigger this memory (Hamilton, 319). God doesn't need a rainbow to remember, and God doesn't forget between storms. So why does God establish a personal reminder? It seems that God chooses to create a sign to demonstrate how seriously God takes this covenant.

In this act of remembering, God shows the people that God is not distant from them but rather is deeply invested in them. If we ever feel that God has forgotten us, the rainbow should remind us of God's ongoing protection and care.

Verse 16 further emphasizes how the bow reminds God of the covenant. When the bow is in the clouds, it symbolizes safety and security after stormy times. The promise of the rainbow is the promise of a future built on the reliable foundation of God's word (O'Connor, 152).

9:17 For the third time in our lesson text, God uses the word "establish." This repetition emphasizes and solidifies God's promise. God is committed to this covenant with the earth, including all humanity.

ASK: What helpful reminders does our lesson text offer as we enter the season of Lent?

SAY: We can be sure of God's faithfulness to keep God's promises. We can be sure that God loves us and cares for us. We can be sure that God wants what is best for us.

ASK: What role can repentance play in reminding us of God's promises? What role can remembering God's promises play in our repentance?

CLOSING PRAYER



Merciful God, thank you for your promises that do not fail. We are reminded of your goodness by the rainbows that follow the storms. Help us to receive your grace and to respond in gratitude. Amen.

References

Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1982).

John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004).

Terrence E. Fretheim, "Genesis," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994).

Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book Of Genesis Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990).

Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Genesis 1-25a*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2018).

E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964).

The Tennessean, "The Story Behind the Song: 'The Rainbow Connection,'" 3 October 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ka2DTKjrknc>> (accessed 6 January 2020).

CONCLUSION

We can embrace the promise that God made to Noah and his descendants. God will remember *forever*. God will be faithful *forever*. God will offer us grace over retribution *forever*. God does this out of God’s own will, power, and self-restraint. There is nothing we need to do; this covenant reaches into eternity. The narrative of the flood helped the exiles interpret their experiences of trauma. The flood can also be a helpful metaphor for other traumatic events. The “never again” is a hope and promise we can trust. Terrible things may happen, but they are not God’s doing. In this Scripture passage, God models the opportunity to change course and to move forward in a way that is creative rather than destructive.

TEACHING OPTIONS

✓ — **Class Covenant**

□ — SAY: Like a rainbow is made up of many colors, a group is made up of many types of people. In both cases, the coming together of different qualities and characteristics can create beauty. Making a covenant involves establishing norms that all parties involved agree to. In a group such as a Bible study class, a covenant can remind us of what is important. It can deepen trust among members.

Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Invite class members to make a list of three to five agreements they think a class covenant should include. Ask class members to write their lists on a whiteboard or flip chart. Then lead the class to decide which agreements they will include in the class covenant.

Distribute the handout “Class Covenant.” Encourage class members to write the class covenant on their handout.

DISCUSS: What are some differences between a covenant people make between themselves and a covenant God makes with people? What does God’s desire to enter into covenant relationships with people teach us about God? How can we follow God’s example in our faithfulness to our covenants?

“Rainbow Connection”

SAY: In 1979, Jim Henson’s vision came to the big screen in *The Muppet Movie*. The movie traces the origins of the Muppets and how they came together as Kermit travels from Florida to California to pursue a career in show business. Kermit, sitting in a swamp with his banjo, sings a

tune of dreams, hope, and friendship: “Rainbow Connection.”

Listen to the song “Rainbow Connection” or read the lyrics.

ASK: How did the song make you feel? Why did it make you feel that way? Did a particular line or phrase speak to you? If so, why?

SAY: Rainbows are signs of hope. They connect what is past to what is to come. Next time you see a rainbow, give thanks for God’s promises and ask God for increased hope for the future.

Chaos Is Not the Last Word

SAY: Commenting on our lesson text, Walter Brueggemann says, “It is clear that chaos is not the last word. The last word is retained by the One who stands outside and presides over the flood (Ps. 29:10-11). And the last word is, ‘I will remember my covenant’ (Gen. 9:15)” (88).

SAY: We all have experiences of chaos. It sometimes feels like a storm is raging around us.

Invite someone to read Luke 8:22-25.

SAY AND ASK: Even the disciples were not immune to the chaos while Jesus was present with them. If you were in the boat, how would you feel?

SAY: As the storms rage in our lives, rest assured that Jesus is with us. Because of Christ, we know that the chaos can’t destroy us.

Divide the class into groups of 2-3 people. Share a time when you felt like chaos might have the last word in your life. How did God see you through it? How did Jesus’ presence help you endure?

Blessings

Lesson Text: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-22

A Verse to Remember—Genesis 17:16

Background Text: Genesis 17:1-22

Other Lectionary Texts: Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Teaching Principle: God's blessings are worth waiting for.

INTRODUCTION

Abram was no stranger to blessings from God. He made risky changes to his life because he trusted God's promises. But in this week's Scripture passage, Abram finds God's promised blessing to be so unbelievable that he laughs at it!

Considering all that God has already done for Abram, we might wonder why he would doubt a promise from God. But don't we sometimes respond to God's promises in similar ways? Don't we sometimes find God's promised future blessings unbelievable, even when God has been faithful to bless us in the past? Don't we sometimes respond by telling God how our present circumstances make the fulfillment of certain promises impossible? Fortunately, God sees beyond present circumstances to what can and will be.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

God made two earlier promises to Abram that form the foundation for the one in our lesson text. The first is in Genesis 12:1-3, where God summons Abram to go where God leads him. God promises to bless Abram so that he, in turn, can be a blessing. The second promise is in chapter 15, where God tells Abram that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

The account of the covenant God establishes with Abram in Genesis 17 parallels the one in chapter 15. Scholars have attributed these parallel accounts to the contributions of different sources in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament). While that is likely the case, in the final form of the book, the covenant God makes with Abram in our lesson text functions as a reaffirmation and further development of the previous covenant.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 2 poster, "What Is and What Will Be" (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline: Blessings—Genesis 17:1-7; 15-22
 - A Challenge and a Promise (17:1-3a)
 - An Everlasting Covenant (17:3b-7)
 - A Serious Laughing Matter (17:15-22)
- (4) If using the first teaching option, find out if any churches in your area have a Blessing Box or if the community has any Little Free Libraries. You can locate Little Free Libraries at <https://littlefreelibrary.org/ourmap/>. Also prepare to display a picture of a Little Free Library.
- (5) If using the second teaching option, prepare copies of the handout "Blessing Template" (*Kit*, p. 8). Before class, find out if your pastor uses a particular benediction at the conclusion of worship services. If so, ask about the reasoning behind its use and where it comes from.
- (6) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (7) Make sure the classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: In today's Scripture passage, God refines the covenant with Abram. God has already promised Abram many descendants. Now God specifies that the line of descendants will begin through a son who will be born to Abram and his wife Sarai. To Abram, this promise is so unbelievable that it is laughable. Abram needs to trust that God will follow through with this blessing.

ASK: What do you think of when you hear the word “blessing”?

ASK: What promises has God made to Christians that haven’t been fulfilled yet? How can our circumstances make it challenging to believe such promises?

SAY: God knows our circumstances. God makes promises in light of the bigger picture of God’s purposes. We can learn to trust in God’s promised blessings as Abram does.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Genesis 17:1-3a



Invite someone to read Genesis 17:1-3a.

SAY: Abram evidently hasn’t heard from God in thirteen years. Ishmael is a teenager, and Abram probably assumes that he is the promised heir. Then, God appears to Abram! (Midway through our lesson text, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham. We will follow the Scripture’s use of these names.)

ASK: How would you react to God’s appearance in your life after such a long time?

SAY: God introduces God’s self by a new name: El Shaddai. With this new name, traditionally rendered in English as “God Almighty,” God reveals something new and personal to Abram.

ASK: What are some other names we know for God?

SAY: We are blessed to know God by many names. Each of us probably uses one or some names more than others. Our choices reflect our personal relationship with God.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—A CHALLENGE AND A PROMISE

Genesis 17:1-3a

(1) When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. (2) And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” (3a) Then Abram fell on his face...

17:1 In the verse right before this one (16:16), Abram is eighty-six years old. Now he is ninety-nine, so thirteen years have passed between the two verses. It’s possible that Abram thinks the birth of his son Ishmael, by his concubine Hagar (16:15), is part of the fulfillment of God’s promise to give him many descendants (15:1-6). But God has other plans.

God appears to Abram and declares, “I am God Almighty.” This translates the title El Shaddai, which literally means “God of the mountains” or “God of my breasts.” The second meaning “perhaps hints at aspects of the feminine contained in the Deity.” This name of God sometimes appears when fertility is an issue (Niditch, 74). For example, Naomi renames herself Mara (bitter) after she loses her sons because she believes that El Shaddai has dealt bitterly with her. The ability of Sarai and Abram to have a child is at issue here in Genesis 17. In parts of the Pentateuch that reflect this tradition (referred to by scholars as the Priestly source, abbreviated P), El Shaddai is the name God uses before revealing the name Yahweh to Moses (Ex 3:13-15; 6:2-3; von Rad, 198).

God challenges Abram, “Walk before me, and be blameless.” To “walk before” God means to serve God (Hamilton, 461). Walking before God will lead Abram to be blameless. Noah was also described as blameless (6:9); in his case, it was an accomplished fact (6:9). But it is a “goal” for Abram (Hamilton, 461). The Hebrew word translated “blameless” (*tamim*) means “‘whole’ or ‘perfect’ not...in the sense of moral perfection but rather in relationship to God. It signifies complete, unqualified surrender” (von Rad, 198). God wants Abram to grow into being whole and complete in relationship with God. This will involve Abram’s trusting acceptance of God’s promised blessings.

17:2 God tells Abram, “I will make my covenant between me and you.” This covenant is personal and specific. It focuses on the relationship between God and Abram. God goes on to tell Abram that God “will make you exceedingly numerous.” God promises many descendants to Abram. This reaffirms God’s promise in chapter 15 that Abram’s descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky (v. 5).

The Hebrew word *natan*, which means “to give,” is used here for God’s act in making the covenant with Abram (Hamilton, 464). The covenant with Abram is a gift from God.

17:3a Abram falls on his face, which is a sign of reverence and faith. Abram’s posture indicates his recognition that he is to walk before God and be blameless (Fretheim, 458). He commits to being in a developing and maturing relationship with God.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—AN EVERLASTING COVENANT

Genesis 17:3b-7

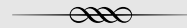
(3b) ...and God said to him, (4) “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. (5) No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. (6) I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. (7) I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”

17:3b-6 While on his face before God, Abram receives the word of God. “As for me, this is my covenant,” God says. These words emphasize God’s personal involvement and investment in this covenant with Abram. God will proceed to speak promised blessings over Abram’s life. Given Abram’s earlier reactions to God’s words, we expect him to respond with faith to what God says next.

Ask: What does it mean to you to be able to call on God by name?

Say: God calls on Abram to “walk before” God, which means to serve God, and to “be blameless,” which means to become whole and complete in relationship to God (v. 1). This is a challenge to Abram to grow in relationship with God while serving God. Abram falls on his face, a posture that indicates his willingness to obey.

Ask: Going forward, how might Abram live in order to fulfill this challenge? How should we live to fulfill such a calling in our lives?



Genesis 17:3b-7



Invite someone to read Genesis 17:3b-7.

Say: God’s words in verse 4a reveal God’s personal investment in the covenant with Abram.

Ask: As Christians, how do we know about God’s personal investment in having a relationship with us?

Say: God has previously promised Abram many descendants. In Genesis 12, God told Abram, “I will make of you a great nation...” (v. 3). In Genesis 15, God told Abram that he would have as many descendants as the number of stars (vv. 5-6). But now God expands on those promises. God also changes Abram’s name (which means “exalted father”) to Abraham (which means “father of a multitude”).

Ask: Why do you think God changes Abram’s name?

ASK: How does God elaborate on the previous promises that Abraham will have many descendants?

SAY: Abraham will experience these blessings as he faithfully follows God. As Christians, we experience God's blessings as we faithfully follow Jesus.

Invite someone to read
Mark 8:31-38 (the lectionary's Gospel reading for this week).

DISCUSS: What does it mean for us to follow Jesus? How do we follow him? What blessings do we receive when we faithfully follow Jesus?



Genesis 17:15-22



Invite someone to read
Genesis 17:15-22.

SAY: God changes Sarai's name to Sarah; the meaning is the same, but the adjustment indicates that Sarah's life is about to change. She will bear the child of the promise. When God says that Sarah will have a baby boy who will be the first step toward fulfilling God's promise of many descendants, Abraham falls on his face laughing.

ASK: What does Abraham find so unbelievable that it is laughable? Why do you think God says Sarah's son will be named Isaac, which means "he laughs"?

SAY: Infertility is a serious matter. Many couples struggle with it today. When a couple's infertility is mentioned in the Bible, it is to set the stage for the birth of a child who will play a significant part in God's purposes. In our time, we might use various medical procedures to try to overcome infertility, but Christian parents still seek

God has informed Abram of his covenant obligations: "Walk before me and be blameless" (v. 1). God has also briefly stated what God will do: "I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous" (v. 2). Now that Abram has acknowledged his commitment to God by falling on his face, God elaborates on the covenant promise. As in the covenant with Noah, there are even stipulations for God to uphold (Gen 9:8-17; O'Connor, 250). Abram can count on God's faithfulness to the covenant.

God says that Abram will be the "ancestor of a multitude of nations." Abram will be the ancestor of the Israelites, but God promises that he will be the ancestor of others as well (Hamilton, 464). Among the ancient peoples that looked back to Abram as their founder were the Edomites and Ishmaelites. In our time, Christians and Muslims regard him as their spiritual ancestor (Fretheim, 458).

God also changes Abram's name to Abraham. This alters the meaning from "exalted father" to "father of multitudes." The change in Abram's name signifies that a new chapter in his life has begun. The part of his old name that means "father" is retained in his new name. God changes Abram's name to mirror God's intentions. His old name was inwardly focused, and now it is outwardly focused (Fretheim, 459).

17:6-7 God promises Abraham that "nations and kings" will descend from him. Because the Pentateuch was completed during or after the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BC, its earliest readers knew that these promises came to pass. But they also knew that the monarchy established by Abraham's descendant David had ended (O'Connor, 247-48). In spite of this, they still have God's promise to establish the covenant with Abraham's "offspring...throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant" (v. 7). Even for exiles, the covenant is still in force. The promise that Abraham's descendants will have Canaan "for a perpetual holding" (see v. 8) applies to the exiles (O'Connor, 251-52). Imagine how encouraging this promise was to them.

In verses 9-14, God tells Abraham that all males must be circumcised as a sign of the covenant. Even exiles could participate in this sign of the covenant.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—A SERIOUS LAUGHING MATTER

Genesis 17:15-22

(15) God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. (16) I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” (17) Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (18) And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” (19) God said, “No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. (20) As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. (21) But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.” (22) And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

17:15-16 The names Sarai and Sarah both mean “princess.” Still, even this slight change signifies the beginning of a new era (Speiser, 127).

God blesses Sarah in her own right. She is crucial to the covenant’s fulfillment. Abraham and Sarah are equal partners (Sohn, 80). The sign of circumcision might give the impression that the covenant is limited to men, but God makes the covenant with all of Abraham and Sarah’s descendants, both male and female (Niditch, 75).

The first time they heard God’s promise, the couple probably assumed that these promised descendants

God’s intervention and still hope that our children will play a part in God’s purposes.

Ask: How can the church be an encouraging community for couples dealing with infertility?

Invite someone to read Psalm 22:23-31 (the lectionary’s psalm for today).


SAY: The psalm addresses the “offspring of Jacob” (v. 1), who are Abraham’s descendants (Jacob is Isaac’s son and Abraham’s grandson).

Ask: How does the psalm encourage Abraham’s descendants? How can it encourage us?

SAY AND ASK: Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” (v. 18). Why might he have said this?



APPLYING THE LESSON

 **Ask:** What do you think Abraham would say if we could ask him if God’s blessings were worth waiting for? Why would he say that? If we asked Abraham what blessings from God he actually received in his lifetime, what would he say?

Discuss: What role does patience play as we try to trust that God will bless us and our spiritual descendants the way God has promised to do? Is patience an easy or a difficult discipline to develop? Why?

SAY: God promised Abraham that nations would descend from him, and they did—but Abraham didn’t see it happen. Even so, Abraham grew in his relationship with God as

he walked before God and experienced God's faithfulness.

DISCUSS: What blessings do we ultimately expect to receive from God? What is the benefit in serving God as we live in and with our expectation?

CLOSING PRAYER



God Almighty, open our hearts to receive and to wait for your blessings. Remove from us anything that limits our reception of the good things you have for us as we await the best things. Amen.

References

"About Us," <<https://littlefreelibrary.org/about/>> (accessed 11 January 2020).

Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1982).

Terrence E. Fretheim, "Genesis," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994).

Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990).

Theodore Hiebert, "Genesis," *Theological Bible Commentary*, ed. Gail R. O'Day and David L. Petersen (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

Susan Niditch, "Covenantal Promise and Cultural Self-Definition"; Ruth H. Sohn, "Contemporary Reflection," in "Lech L'cha: 12:1–17:27," *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism Press, 2008).

Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Genesis 1–25a*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishers, 2018).

E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964).

would begin with the birth of their own biological child (15:4-5). But many years passed with no child, so Abraham and Sarah took matters into their own hands (see 16:1-16, where Abram conceives a child with their "slave-girl" Hagar). Now, though, God specifies that *Sarah* will bear the child of the promise.

17:17-18 These are Abraham's only spoken words in this passage. He responds with disbelief to God's promise regarding Sarah. He falls on his face again, but this time he is laughing at God's promise rather than accepting God's call. To Abraham, his and Sarah's advanced ages along with her infertility make God's promise seem ridiculous.

Abraham asks God to let Ishmael, the son Abraham had with Hagar, be the child of the promise. He is asking God to let him settle for the solution he and Sarah have come up with on their own. We might wonder if Abraham has assumed for the last thirteen years that Ishmael is the child of the promise.

17:19-21 God responds with a specific promise: the child will be a son, will be born to Sarah, and will be named Isaac. Isaac means "he laughs" (see also 18:12; 21:6). God's power is seen in a ninety-year-old woman bearing a child (Niditch, 76). In effect, God tells Abraham, "Yes, I am powerful enough to do this."

God then addresses Abraham's request concerning Ishmael: God will make Ishmael a powerful nation too. God makes promises and guarantees provision for Ishmael, but the covenant will continue through Isaac (Hamilton, 478).

The text reveals no communication from God to Abraham in the thirteen years between Ishmael's birth and our lesson text. We don't know that God was silent during those years, but it is possible. Now God gives Abraham a specific timeline for the fulfillment of the promise of a child born to Sarah, who will give birth "at this season next year" (v. 21).

17:22 When God finishes speaking to Abraham, God exits the scene, leaving Abraham with a more detailed and specific version of the promise than he had before.

CONCLUSION

God has blessed Abraham, but Abraham and Sarah are still childless and are now in their senior years. When God tells Abraham that in fact Sarah is going to bear a son named Isaac, who will continue the covenant, Abraham has trouble believing God's promise of this particular blessing. It is easier for him to settle for what he already has than to believe in what God has promised. Our present circumstances can make it difficult for us to believe in God's future blessings. The story in our lesson text bears witness to God's faithfulness to Abraham, to Abraham's descendants, and ultimately to God's purposes. The blessings God has in store for Abraham and his descendants are beyond Abraham's ability to imagine. So are the blessings God has in store for us.

TEACHING OPTIONS

✓ — Blessing Boxes

□ — SAY: Since 2009, Little Free Libraries have been popping up around the country.

The premise is simple: you take a book and leave a book. These libraries are sometimes shaped like little houses on wooden posts with clear doors. (Display a picture if possible.)

ASK: Why might someone be skeptical about one of these libraries? (Share information about local ones.)

SAY: We have a hard time believing that things really can be free and that people really can share. Sometimes, we hold back from giving or receiving blessings because of our own cynicism that someone will "abuse the system."

SAY: Some churches have created Blessing Boxes that operate on a similar principle to Little Free Libraries. You can take something if you need it, and you leave something if you can spare it. Blessing Boxes may contain items such as blankets, hygiene products, or nonperishable food items. (Share information about local ones.)

ASK: How is our church a blessing to people in need? How can we be more of a blessing?

Benedictions and Blessings

SAY: During the benediction, a minister will sometimes stretch their hands over the congregation in a gesture of blessing. This act of worship can confer strength on us to serve God when we leave the sanctuary and go out into the world.

Share what your pastor said about their benediction or invite the class to share their experiences with benedictions.

SAY: Spoken blessings can be powerful and transformative. All Christians can offer blessings.

Distribute copies of the "Blessing Template." Encourage the class to write a blessing and give it to someone this week.

Names Matter

ASK: Why are names important?

SAY: In today's Scripture passage, God changes the names of two people. These name changes reveal that the courses of their lives are changing.

Divide the class into pairs. Ask the members of each pair to share the meaning of their name (either first name, last name, or a nickname) with the other person. (If someone doesn't know the story behind their name, they can share the story behind a loved one's name, such as a family member, friend, or a pet.) Have everyone switch to a new partner and repeat the exercise. If class size and time permit, each person can share with everyone in the class.

ASK: How did it feel to share your name story with other class members?

SAY: To call someone by their preferred name shows respect and honor. It is a great but simple gift we can give to one another.

DISCUSS: Most of us have had our names changed to "Christian." How can we live out the meaning of our new name?

Unit Three

The Means of Salvation

How people attain salvation has been a topic of discussion in the church since its beginning. The means of salvation was a centerpiece of the Protestant Reformation sparked by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. It is still a frequent topic of lectures, sermons, and articles.

One thing that most (and maybe all) Christians would agree on when it comes to salvation is that it comes from God. This unit of lessons points us beyond what we need to do and back to what God does.

First, we will examine Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians about the foolishness of the cross. First Corinthians 1:18-25 says that the seeming foolishness and weakness of the cross are actually God's wisdom and power. God saves us through Christ's cross.

Second, we will study Ephesians 2:1-10, which will lead us to examine God's love that is revealed to us through the gift of grace. The lesson text celebrates our passing from an old way of life to a new way of life. God saves us through God's love.

Third, Hebrews 5:1-10 helps us understand the role of Jesus as the great High Priest. We will explore how Jesus fills that role through his suffering. God saves us through Jesus' suffering.

Finally, we will journey back to Palm Sunday as we study Mark 11:1-11. We will watch Jesus approach Jerusalem as the humble King. God saves us through Jesus' humility.

The topic of salvation is always worth exploring together as we seek new insights into the ways God is at work through Jesus Christ in us and in the world.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Eric Thiele is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and serves a congregation in northern Minnesota. In his free time, he enjoys spending time with his wife and dog. Being in the outdoors is a favorite pastime, regardless of the season. In warm weather, he enjoys canoeing, hiking, and kayaking, especially in the Boundary Waters. In cold weather, he enjoys cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. No matter the season, you will likely find him with a good cup of coffee in hand.

The Foolishness of the Cross

Lesson Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

A Verse to Remember—1 Corinthians 1:18

Background Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-31

Other Revised Common Lectionary texts: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; John 2:13-22

Teaching Principle: The seeming foolishness and weakness of the cross reveal God's wisdom and power.

INTRODUCTION

Was I foolish or wise? We look back on some decisions and wonder if they were foolish or wise. Our judgment of a decision's wisdom or foolishness depends partly on how far removed we are from making the decision. It also depends on how our situation has changed since that time and on what happened afterward. Like sports commentators who evaluate decisions that a coaching staff makes during the game based on the game's outcome, we evaluate our decisions based on what happens after we make them.

In this week's Scripture passage, Paul says the cross is both wisdom and foolishness. He also says the cross is the power of God. It is a matter of perspective. From a human perspective, the cross may be foolishness or a stumbling block. For God, the cross is wisdom and power. It is also a matter of results. The death of Christ on the cross results in salvation.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

Paul's first letter to the church in the Greek city of Corinth was written around the year AD 55, roughly twenty-five years after the crucifixion of Jesus. This week's Scripture passage helps set up the rest of Paul's letter as he seeks to counter his readers' social norms and assumed wisdom. Paul wants his readers to see that the wisdom and power of God are greater than established norms and wisdom.

The opening verses of 1 Corinthians reveal that divisions exist in the church at Corinth. Paul doesn't try to unify the church around himself or any other person. Paul points to Christ, to the cross, and to God's wisdom and power as the realities that can bring the divided church together. In the verse



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 3 poster, "The Means of Salvation" (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline: The Foolishness of the Cross—1 Corinthians 1:18-25
 - God's Power (1:18-19)
 - God's Wisdom (1:20-21)
 - God's Foolishness and Weakness (1:22-25)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.
- (6) If using the first teaching option, prepare copies of the handout "Sources of Wisdom" (*Kit*, p. 9).

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: In this week's lesson text, Paul argues that the cross reveals God's power and wisdom. He is determined that the Corinthian Christians experience God's power and wisdom, which can happen only through the cross.

ASK: What do people expect or demand of Christian proclamation today? What do they expect or demand of sermons or Bible studies?

DISCUSS: Why do you think people have such expectations or make such demands?

SAY: As we discuss today's Scripture passage, let's think about the expectations and demands we place on the church and its proclamation. Let's

consider how aware we are of the need for the cross to be central to all we say and do.

TEACHING THE LESSON

1 Corinthians 1:18-19



Invite someone to read
1 Corinthians 1:18-19.

SAY: Verse 18 presents the main point Paul wants to make in our lesson text. But we need to pay attention to the verse that leads into it.

Invite someone to read
1 Corinthians 1:17.

ASK: How might proclaiming the gospel “with eloquent power” distract from the power of the cross?

ASK: In verse 18, who are “those who are perishing”? How might regarding the cross as “foolishness” contribute to their perishing? Who are those “who are being saved”? How might understanding that the cross “is the power of God” contribute to their being saved?

Divide the class into groups. Ask each group to discuss this question: Why do people in the twenty-first century regard the cross as foolishness? Invite each group to report.

DISCUSS: How can you tell that people regard the cross as foolishness? Is it possible that even some professed Christians regard the cross as foolishness? How might that attitude reveal itself in people’s lives?

SAY: Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14 in verse 19. In the book of Isaiah, these words come from a section where the prophet criticizes the leaders of Jerusalem for not believing what he says about what

leading into our lesson text, Paul says that Christ sent him “to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (1:17). Paul proceeds to explain the meaning and importance of that statement.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—GOD’S POWER

1 Corinthians 1:18-19

(18) For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (19) For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

1:18 Paul knows that the cross is controversial. After all, the Romans used the cross as an instrument of torture and execution. Viewing an instrument of torture as the instrument of salvation is scandalous.

First-century Jews and Gentiles knew that the cross was the ultimate humiliation for anyone to suffer. Crucified people were despised and rejected by the Roman empire and therefore by society. The leaders of the empire crucified someone who challenged the empire’s authority in order to make an example out of that person. The cross was a warning to the followers of the one crucified: if you continue to talk and act like that person, you will suffer the same fate.

It isn’t surprising that people would think it was foolish to believe that salvation could come through a crucified person. But Paul specifies that those who are foolish are “those who are perishing,” meaning they don’t have insight into the life God makes available through the cross. Those who have such insight are “those who are being saved.” They see that the cross reveals God’s power.

How could this instrument of torture and execution be the power of God? Why would Paul make the cross the central message of his letter?

Paul’s focus is on Christ overcoming the brutality of the cross, the humiliation of the cross, and, ultimately, his death on the cross. It is through the cross,

therefore, that God reveals God's power. The cross is humiliation, but it is also the power of God because it shows just how far God is willing to go to love the world.

1:19 Paul uses this verse from Isaiah 29:14 to point to the new thing that God is doing through the cross. God's saving actions through the cross confound the wisdom of the wise and the wisdom of the world. God operates in God's ways, not in human ways.

What is this "wisdom of the wise" that God destroys through the cross?

In general, it is the received, accepted, and thus conventional wisdom that runs counter to the wisdom and ways of God. As we will see, God's wisdom operates in different ways and goes in a different direction than the world's wisdom. The cross epitomizes those differences.

One thing that Paul has in mind when he talks about the world's wisdom is rhetorical skill. Recall that in the verse just before our lesson text begins, Paul said that Christ sent him "to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power" (1:17). One of Paul's concerns is that people might substitute the wisdom of certain speakers who give eloquent presentations for God's wisdom demonstrated by the cross.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—GOD'S WISDOM

1 Corinthians 1:20-21

(20) Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

(21) For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

1:20 Paul asks where the wise, the scribe, and the debater of this age have gone. He probably doesn't intend to name three categories of people, such as Greek philosophers ("the wise"), Jewish experts on the Torah ("the scribes"), and people who engage in

God is going to do (Tull, 440). Isaiah declares that God will do away with the conventional wisdom that the leaders embrace.

ASK: How does Paul use these words of Isaiah in making his point?

SAY: Paul declares that God's wisdom as seen in the cross supersedes any other presumed wisdom.



1 Corinthians 1:20-21



Invite someone to read
1 Corinthians 1:20-21.

SAY: We should probably take "the one who is wise," "the scribe," and "the debater of this age" as referring to all of those who adhere to the world's wisdom.

ASK: What might such people have said about the cross? Why might such "wise" people outside the church have mocked the centrality of the cross in the church's proclamation? Why might such "wise" people inside the church have downplayed the cross's centrality in the church's preaching and teaching?

SAY: Paul says that "in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom" (v. 21). So it was God's plan that people not come to know God through their own wisdom.

ASK: What problems might arise if people could know God through their own wisdom? How might having this ability affect people?

SAY: This doesn't mean that people didn't know God before Jesus died on the cross. It does mean that the only reason people can know

God is that God chooses to reveal God's self to them.

ASK: How did God reveal God's self to people before doing so in Jesus?

SAY: God's ultimate self-revelation is in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to reveal God's love to us.

ASK: What does Paul mean by "the foolishness of our proclamation"? What is foolish about the content of Christian preaching? How does such preaching offer salvation to people? Why does receiving the salvation offered through such preaching require faith?



1 Corinthians 1:22-25



Invite someone to read
1 Corinthians 1:22-24.

SAY: Paul says, "Jews demand signs..." (v. 22a). The people of Israel's faith was historical—that is, God regularly revealed God's self to them in and through historical events. First-century Jewish people would have been aware that God had given their ancestors many signs of God's presence and activity among them.

ASK: What are some major signs that God offered the people in the Old Testament?

SAY: It's one thing to receive signs; it's another to "demand" them.

SAY: Paul also says, "Greeks desire wisdom" (v. 22b). In this case, he probably means the wisdom of Greek philosophy.

ASK: The Greek word translated "stumbling block" is the root of our word "scandal." Why might

debates. He is probably thinking of all who rely on "the wisdom of the world" (Horsley, 48-49). He may also have in mind preachers who try to impress with their rhetoric, thereby substituting their own power and wisdom for that of the cross.

Through the cross, God has made such wisdom look foolish. The wisdom of the world said that no one could rise from the dead and that no one could have power over death. Paul wants to remind his readers of what God has done through the cross. The cross shows that God's wisdom is superior to the world's wisdom.

1:21 In fact, Paul says, it is "in the wisdom of God" that "the world did not know God through wisdom." Why does God not want the world to know God through its wisdom? Maybe it is because if people could come to know God through their own wisdom—their own insight and cleverness—they would give themselves credit. Maybe it is because people can't really know God unless God reveals God's self to them (and God revealed God's self in Christ on the cross). Maybe it is because people who are persuaded to believe in God by a speaker's clever oratory may believe in the speaker more than they believe in God. In any case, people can't truly know God through their own or another person's wisdom.

Instead, Paul says, "God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe." God, whose wisdom exceeds all human wisdom, determined that the best way to call people to saving faith was through the kind of preaching that Paul offers.

What kind of preaching is that? Its content is "the message about the cross" (v. 18). Its methodology is simplicity: "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (2:1-2).

In God's wisdom, God has revealed God's self to us through the crucified Christ. The cross reveals God's love and grace. Preachers make God's love and grace available through their proclamation of the cross. The cross is God's wisdom. What does it say about

someone if they think proclaiming something other than the cross is a better way to share God with people? If they do so, aren't they saying that their wisdom is greater than God's wisdom? Isn't that a foolish thing to say and an even more foolish thing to believe?

BIBLE BACKGROUND—GOD'S FOOLISHNESS AND WEAKNESS

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

(22) For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, (23) but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, (24) but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (25) For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

1:22-24 Paul says that "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom..." (v. 22). In saying "Greeks desire wisdom," Paul probably has in mind philosophical wisdom that is expressed in impressive speaking.

The Old Testament has many instances of people asking God for signs. When God tells Abram that God will give him the land, Abram asks, "How am I to know that I shall possess it?" God gives him a powerful vision as a sign (Gen 15). When Moses asks God at the burning bush what he can do if the people don't believe God sent him, God gives him several signs to perform (Ex 4:1-9). Gideon asks God to prove that God will be with him in battling the enemy, first by causing a fleece to be wet with dew and the ground dry, and then by causing the reverse to happen the next morning. God also gives the Israelites many signs that they don't ask for.

We find a New Testament example of Jews asking for signs in John 2:13-22 (the lectionary's Gospel reading for this Sunday). The Gospel of John treats Jesus' miracles as "signs" that point to Jesus' identity as the Messiah. After Jesus performs his first sign by changing water into wine (2:1-11), he goes to Jerusalem, where he drives the merchants and money-changers from the temple. Some people ask him,

first-century Jews have found the idea of a crucified Messiah scandalous? Why might the cross be "foolishness to Gentiles" (v. 23)?

SAY: Paul declares that, despite how difficult it is for many people to hear it, "Christ crucified" (v. 23) is the core message of Christian proclamation.


DISCUSS: What does Paul's declaration that "Christ crucified" is "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (vv. 23-24) tell us about what constitutes true power and true wisdom? What does it tell us about God's way of making salvation available? What might it say about God's will and way for us as the representatives of Christ in the world?

Invite someone to read
1 Corinthians 1:25.

SAY: Christ's death on the cross seems to some people to demonstrate God's weakness and foolishness, but it actually demonstrates God's wisdom and power. God's seeming foolishness and weakness are wiser and stronger than anything humans can think, say, or do.



APPLYING THE LESSON

 **SAY:** Paul says that the cross reveals God's power and wisdom. He also says that preachers offer salvation to people by proclaiming the cross. The church as a whole also offers salvation by proclaiming the cross.

ASK: What kinds of attitudes, perspectives, words, and actions proclaim the cross? What kinds don't proclaim it? If we aren't

proclaiming the cross, what are we proclaiming?

DISCUSS: Why does it matter whether or not the cross inspires and informs the ways we carry out our ministry?

SAY: Today is the third Sunday in Lent, the season in which we intentionally move ever closer to the cross. As we draw closer to the cross in time, may we also do so in practice.

CLOSING PRAYER



Gracious God, as we journey to the cross during this Lenten season, help us grow in our relationship with you and with each other. May we more fully embrace your wisdom and experience your power as the crucified Christ reveals them. Amen.

References

Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

Richard A. Horsely, *1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998).

Ian S. Markham, "Third Sunday in Lent: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25: Theological Perspective," and John M. Vonder Bruegge, "Exegetical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, year B, vol. 2, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

Graydon F. Snyder, "Third Sunday in Lent, Year B: Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25," in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Second Readings: Acts and the Epistles*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

Patricia K. Tull, *Isaiah 1–39*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2010).

"What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus tells them that if they destroy the temple, he'll raise it up in three days. John says that Jesus is talking about "the temple of his body," and that after his resurrection, his disciples recalled what he said. Speaking metaphorically, Jesus offers his questioners the sign of his crucifixion and resurrection.

In contrast to the expectations of Jews and Greeks, Paul says, he and his associates "proclaim Christ crucified," which is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (v. 23a). The Greek word translated "stumbling block" is the root of our word "scandal." When we remember that "Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Messiah," we can understand why "Christ crucified" was scandalous to Jews. Who would expect a crucified Messiah? The very idea that crucifixion could be at the heart of the good news made no sense to Gentiles. A message built on the cross would be hard to proclaim in flowery language.

But, Paul declares, those who are able to hear God's call in their lives understand that "Christ crucified" is "Christ the power of God" and Christ "the wisdom of God" (v. 24). This is true for Jews and Gentiles, which means it is true for all people.

1:25 Such proclamation makes no sense to "those who are perishing" (v. 18). They don't hear the truth of the good news as it comes to them through the preaching of the cross. The death of Jesus on the cross seems to demonstrate weakness and foolishness on God's part. But, Paul says, what appear to be foolishness and weakness on God's part are in fact wisdom and power. God's seeming foolishness and weakness are wiser and stronger than anything humans are capable of saying or doing.

The cross is the means by which God chose to reveal God's love and grace to us and to make salvation available to us. It is God's way. It is God's wisdom. It is where we see and find real wisdom and power.

CONCLUSION

The cross is the central symbol of the Christian faith. We wear it around our necks, display it in our sanctuaries, and place it atop our steeples. Maybe we have grown so accustomed to seeing it that we don't think about the radical claims it makes. The cross declares that God offers salvation through the death of Christ. The cross still calls people to open up their lives to the love of God displayed in it. Human wisdom would say that God could have forced salvation upon people, but the cross shows that God's wise way is the way of self-giving love. That is the heart of our faith. It is the heart of our proclamation. We might consider to what extent it is the heart of our way of life.

TEACHING OPTIONS

Sources of Wisdom

- ✓ — SAY: People are always on a quest for
- — wisdom. We need guidance as we try to
- — live, and we seek expert advice to help us.

Distribute the handout "Sources of Wisdom" and pens or pencils. Ask class members to complete it.

Ask: What are some areas where we need the wisdom of experts? Is there anything wrong with seeking such guidance? Would we be wise or foolish if we always insisted on figuring things out for ourselves or just making our best guess, even if we are not well informed about a matter?

Invite someone to read 1 Corinthians 1:22-25.

Ask: Do you think Paul means that we should never seek or heed human wisdom?

SAY: Paul is speaking specifically of wisdom that enables us to know God. Only God can reveal God's self to us. And God has revealed God's self to us in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross. God is our source for God's wisdom, and in God's wisdom, God sent Jesus.

Ask: What practices can we adopt that will help us move toward living as those who have experienced the God who reveals God's love in the cross?

Discuss: Can God's wisdom as revealed in the cross help us evaluate the guidance we receive in making decisions about how to live? For example, can it help us evaluate the guidance we receive about our finances or about our family life? If so, how?

Eloquence

Invite someone to read 1 Corinthians 1:17.

SAY: That verse, which leads into our lesson text, helps us understand one of the issues Paul addresses in today's Scripture passage. A passage that comes a few verses after our lesson text and a verse from Paul's later letter to the Corinthians help shed more light on it.

Invite class members to read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 and 2 Corinthians 10:10.

Ask: What were some people in Corinth saying about Paul's preaching? How were they probably comparing him to other, "better" speakers?

Divide the class into groups. Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Ask the groups to read the lesson text and discuss it in light of the other verses the class has just heard. Write these questions on the whiteboard or flip chart to focus their discussion: (1) Which would Paul say is better preaching: a poorly delivered message that focuses on the cross or an eloquent message that focuses on something else? (2) Why would he say that?

Discuss: Is it possible for an eloquent message to focus appropriately on the cross? Do you think Paul would be for or against preachers delivering the best messages possible? How can preachers do so while still focusing appropriately on the cross? What might all of this have to do with non-preachers? How can our lifestyles appropriately proclaim the cross?

The Loving God

Lesson Text: Ephesians 2:1-10

A Verse to Remember—Ephesians 2:4-5a

Background Text: Ephesians 2:1-22

Other Revised Common Lectionary texts: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; John 3:14-21

Teaching Principle: Our salvation is a result of God's love.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 3 poster, "The Means of Salvation" (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline:
The Loving God—Ephesians 2:1-10
 - Life Before (2:1-3)
 - God's Mercy, Love, and Grace (2:4-7)
 - Grace, Not Works (2:8-10)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.
- (6) If using the first teaching option, prepare copies of the handout "Give Thanks to the Lord" (*Kit*, p. 10).

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: We earn some things in life. We receive other things as a gift.

Divide the class into groups. Ask each group to list things that we earn and things that we receive as a gift. Have each group report.

ASK: How does it make you feel when you earn something? How does it make you feel when someone gives you something?

DISCUSS: What motives might someone have for giving us a gift? How does the gift-giver's motive contribute to how we feel about the gift?

INTRODUCTION

We tend to stress the importance of earning what we want. Do you want a good grade in class? Then you need to study hard. Do you want a promotion at work? Then you need to demonstrate to your boss your ability to handle increased responsibility. Do you want to be a starter on the team or have the lead role in a play? Then you need to display your talent and work ethic. In short, we need to earn our way. We believe that good things come to those who work for them.

It may be difficult for us not to think in similar ways about salvation. But this week's Scripture passage, along with other passages in the New Testament, teach us that we can't and don't earn salvation. Instead, salvation comes to us by God's love and grace. Salvation is God's gift to us.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

Based on evidence within Ephesians, many scholars believe that a later writer penned this letter in Paul's name, while some scholars believe that Paul wrote it toward the end of his life. Some ancient manuscripts don't include "in Ephesus" in the opening greeting (1:1), which raises the possibility that the letter was originally a circular one, intended to be read in several churches. Since it became part of Scripture, it now addresses all churches, including ours.

In the first part of the letter (chs. 1-3), the writer invites Gentile Christians to celebrate the fact that God is including them in God's eternal purpose of salvation. In the verses immediately preceding our lesson text (1:20-23), the writer talks about God's power at work in Christ, while in our text he deals with God's power at work in the believers

(Talbert, 57). In the verses following our lesson text, he writes how God through Christ made one people out of Jews and Gentiles. In the second part of the letter (chs. 4-6), the writer calls the Ephesian believers to live in ways that befit their identity as Christians.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—LIFE BEFORE

Ephesians 2:1-3

(1) You were dead through the trespasses and sins (2) in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. (3) All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

2:1-2 The writer begins this section by describing the situation of his Gentile readers (see 2:11) before they came to salvation in Jesus Christ: their enslavement to sin deprived them of the life that God intended them to have. They were trapped in a cycle of sin that kept them from experiencing a full life.

A “trespass” is the “deliberate breaking of a known law,” while “sin” means “missing the mark.” We might think of trespasses as things we did that we shouldn’t have done and of sins as things we didn’t do that we should have done (Thurston, 108).

By living in sin, the Gentile readers of Ephesians were “following the course of this world” (v. 2a). The Greek word translated “lived” literally means “walked” (see KJV, NASB), so they were walking along the way of sin and death. The Greek word translated “course” literally means “age,” so they were living in line with the standards of their historical and social context.

Their state of being morally and ethically lost also had a spiritual dimension, for they were “following the ruler of the power of the air” (v. 2b), which means the devil. This reflects the belief of the time that evil spirits inhabited the air between the earth and the heavens, and from there they exercised influence on human beings. All of this is to say that before they

SAY: Today’s lesson text is about God’s gift to us of salvation. It is also about the motives behind that gift: God’s love and grace.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Ephesians 2:1-3



Invite someone to read Ephesians 2:1-3.

SAY: The writer opens today’s Scripture passage by saying to the readers, “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived” (vv. 1-2a).

ASK: How could they have been “dead” while they lived? How could they have “lived” while they were “dead”? What caused this condition in them?

SAY: “Trespasses and sins” includes things we do that shouldn’t have been done and things we didn’t do that should have been done.

ASK: What does such behavior reveal about a person? How does it lead to a person’s existing in a state of living death (or dead living)?

SAY: When the writer says that the readers’ former way of life involved “following the course of this world,” he is talking about the social context in which they lived that influenced them to do evil. When he says it involved “following the ruler of the power of the air,” he reflects the ancient belief that evil spirits populated the space between the earth and the heavens and influenced people to do wrong.

ASK: How would we name or describe such influences today? What forces influence people to live in evil ways and to do wrong?

SAY: The writer is evidently addressing Gentile Christians (see v. 11). Whether Paul or someone writing in Paul's name wrote this letter, the assumption is that the writer is a Jewish Christian. So when he writes, "All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh," he means that both Jews and Gentiles—in other words, all people—were in this situation.

ASK: Why should we remember that we are all in the same situation—that we are all sinners?

SAY: To live "in the passions of our flesh" means more than having physical desires. It also means to live with a self-centered perspective that doesn't take God or other people into account.



Ephesians 2:4-7



Invite someone to read
Ephesians 2:4-5.

SAY: The writer now moves from describing what his readers' situation was to what it is. What God has done in Christ makes the difference: "But God...even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."

SAY AND ASK: We know that after Christ died on the cross, God made him alive through the resurrection. What does it mean for people who were once dead because of sin to now be alive with Christ?

ASK: What do these verses name as God's motivations for taking us from death to life? Why does it matter what God's motivations are?

SAY: Because God is merciful and loving, God saves us by God's

came to Christ, the Gentiles were living under the influence of evil.

2:3 The writer now says, "All of us once lived among [the disobedient] in the passions of our flesh."

Whether Paul or someone writing in Paul's name wrote this, "all of us" implies that Jewish Christians as well as Gentile Christians were caught up in sin before they came to know Christ. It was and is the universal human condition.

"Flesh" means more than the physical body; it is "unredeemed human nature, a selfish rather than a divine life orientation" (Thurston, 109). So to live "in the passions of the flesh" is to have one's perspective and pursuits grow out of a focus on self-gratification rather than on pleasing God. Everyone lives this way before they come to know the Lord.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—GOD'S MERCY, LOVE, AND GRACE

Ephesians 2:4-7

(4) But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us (5) even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— (6) and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, (7) so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

2:4-5 The author now looks at how his readers' lives have changed because of what God has done. He declares the good news that God has done something to deliver people from giving in to and following evil influences. ("Us" in these verses refers to the writer and his readers, to Jewish and Gentile Christians. It can also refer to we who are Christians today.)

God does this because God is "rich in mercy" and loves people with "great love" (v. 4). Because God has great mercy and love, the writer says, God has saved them "by grace" (v. 5). God has done all of this because of who God is. The Old Testament regularly affirms, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and

abounding in steadfast love” (Ex 34:6; Ps 145; Jon 4:2 among others).

God’s revelation of God’s love, grace, and mercy reaches its apex in Jesus Christ. As John 3:16 (which is in the lectionary’s Gospel reading for this Sunday) affirms, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” In mercy, love, and grace, God sent God’s Son, who gave up his life to give us life.

What has God done in God’s mercy, love, and grace to deliver those who have been saved? “Even when we were dead through our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ,” the writer affirms. People who are under the influence of evil and who follow the ways of the flesh are dead. Though they are living, walking around in the world breathing, their self-centeredness and self-interest leave no room for God and other people, whose presence would bring meaning to their lives. This makes them as good as dead.

Resurrection is the remedy for death. As God brought Jesus to life in his resurrection, so God brings us to life in Christ. Again, all of this is through God’s mercy and love, out of which God extends grace to sinners. In God’s mercy, love, and grace, Christ died on the cross and God raised him from the dead. In God’s mercy, love, and grace, God raises us from our lives of death.

2:6-7 The writer further defines what it means to be “made...alive together with Christ” (v. 5). It means that God has “raised us up with [Christ] and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (v. 6). This is a spiritual reality. In a spiritual sense, people whom God has saved are already with Christ “in heavenly places.”

We should recall that in earlier verses, the writer says that before people come to Christ, they are “following the ruler of the power of the air” (v. 2), which reflects the belief of the time that evil spirits inhabited the space between earth and the heavens. But the understanding of the age was also that God lived in heaven, above those evil spirits. Therefore, God had authority

grace. This means that salvation is God’s gift. Only God can save us. Thankfully, God wants to do so.

Invite someone to read
Ephesians 2:6.

SAY: We have obviously not yet been taken to heaven to be with Christ. But the writer says that God “has raised us up with [Jesus] and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

ASK: What might it mean for us to be “raised up with [Jesus]” and “seated...with him in the heavenly places”?

SAY: This is a way to help us picture what it means to live in Christ here and now. Recall what we said earlier about the ancient belief that evil spirits lived in the air between the earth and the heavens. Since God is in heaven, God has power and authority over the spirits that live below God. This imagery depicts God giving us authority over the evil that used to beset us. God gives us power in Christ to overcome evil and sin here and now.

DISCUSS: What might our lives look like if we live in light of this great truth? What keeps us from living such lives?

Invite someone to read
Ephesians 2:7.

SAY: Our lesson text started with the writer talking about the past (we were sinners). He then talks about the present (God has saved us and raised us with Christ). Now he says something about the future.

ASK: What does he say about the future that God has in store for us? Will our lives then be different in

kind or different in degree than what they are now?



Ephesians 2:8-10



Invite someone to read Ephesians 2:8-9.

SAY: The writer earlier said, “by grace you have been saved” (v. 5). Now he returns to this subject in more detail. The bottom line is that salvation is a gift of God. Our salvation is God’s doing and not ours.

DISCUSS: What if salvation were our doing? What if we could earn our salvation? What would it do to us? How would it affect us?

SAY: But we can’t earn our salvation. We don’t need to become good enough or do enough good things to be saved.

Invite someone to read Ephesians 2:10.

ASK: How should salvation be revealed in our lives? How does this fit into God’s plan for us?



APPLYING THE LESSON



SAY: God saves us because God loves us. God sent God’s Son Jesus Christ into the world because God loves us. God loves us because God is love. God doesn’t love us because of who we are, but because of who God is.

ASK: How can we demonstrate our wonder at and appreciation of the love God shows us by saving us? How can we live in ways that show our gratitude to God for giving us eternal and abundant life? How can we focus on God and others rather than on ourselves?

and power over them. For God to raise sinners and seat them with Jesus in heaven means that they now have authority over evil spirits too. They are no longer subject to evil’s influence because God gives them the power to resist and overcome it (Talbert, 70).

This doesn’t mean, however, that the future resurrection no longer matters. Verse 7 shows us that there is still much more to come, which will be even better than our current state of new life. Even as we look forward to this glorious future, our present lives should reflect our status as those who are already alive with Christ.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—GRACE, NOT WORKS

Ephesians 2:8-10

(8) For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— (9) not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (10) For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

2:8-9 The writer earlier said, “By grace you have been saved” (v. 5). Now he repeats that phrase, adding the words “through faith” (v. 8).

Let’s remember what the readers have been saved from: the living death they were experiencing because they followed evil outer influences and self-centered inner tendencies (vv. 1-3). They have now been liberated to live fully and freely.

The faith through which the readers experience God’s saving grace could be their own faith. In that case, it is their openness to God’s saving activity in their lives (Thurston, 110). Or it could be Jesus’ faith, which would mean his “faithfulness unto death” (Talbert, 67).

In the phrase “and this is not your own doing” (v. 8), “this” could refer back to “grace,” “saved,” “faith” (Thurston, 110), or to the entire phrase “by grace you have been saved through faith” (Talbert, 67). In any case, what matters is that salvation is God’s gift

to us. We don't deserve it. God doesn't give it to us because we earn it. It isn't a reward for doing right. God's grace, mercy, and love motivate God to give us salvation.

Being saved by grace through faith means that we aren't saved by our works—by the things we do. If our works could save us, we would probably give ourselves credit for our salvation. But because salvation is a gift from God, we have no grounds for bragging about how good we are.

2:10 Good works have their place. They are not the cause of our salvation, but they are its result. As an outgrowth of the salvation God gives us through Christ, it is God's intention that we live in ways befitting who God has made and saved us to be.

Because of God's love and grace, God has made a way through Christ for us to escape a life of sin, death, meaningless, helplessness, and hopelessness. Because of God's love and grace, God has also made a way through Christ for us to receive salvation without having to earn it or be good enough to receive it. Because of God's love and grace, God offers us salvation as a gift. And because of God's love and grace, God empowers us to do good works that grow out of our salvation.

We do good works not in order to get God to save us, but rather because God *has* saved us. Our good works are acts of love that we do in response to God's acts of love for us. Because God loves and saves us, we live in ways that demonstrate our love for God and for people.

SAY: Let us keep our hearts, eyes, minds, and lives open to all the ways we can respond to God's love. By God's grace and love, let us live out our salvation.

CLOSING PRAYER



Loving God, we thank you that you make yourself known to us through your grace and love. Constantly remind us of who you are and of what you have done. Constantly inspire us to live in light of the salvation you have given us. Amen.

References

Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

Jeff Paschal, "Fourth Sunday in Lent: Ephesians 2:1-10: Theological Perspective," and John M. Vonder Bruegge, "Exegetical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, year B, vol. 2, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1991).

Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

Bonnie Thurston, *Reading Colossians, Ephesians, and Second Thessalonians: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Reading the New Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007).

CONCLUSION

We are powerless to overcome the sin that entraps and drains life from us. We can't save ourselves. Through Christ, God, who acts out of great mercy, love, and grace, saves us from sin and empowers us to live freely and fully, as God has always intended. We respond to God's gracious and loving act of salvation through Christ by loving God and loving others. We demonstrate that love by doing good works. Everything about our salvation—our liberation from sin's influence, our eternal and abundant life, and our good works—ultimately derive from God's love and grace offered to us through Jesus' death and resurrection.

TEACHING OPTIONS

- ✓ — Give Thanks to the Lord
- — SAY: Our lesson text should inspire us to thank God for all God has done for us.
- — Let's close our eyes and hear it in a spirit of thanksgiving.

Invite someone to read Ephesians 2:1-10.

Distribute the handout "Give Thanks to the Lord." Ask class members to complete Part One.

DISCUSS: What does the lesson text tell us God has done? Why should we be thankful for what God has done? How can we express our thanks to God?

SAY: The lectionary's psalm for today is printed on the handout. Let's read it together in a spirit of thanksgiving.

Invite someone to read Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22.

SAY: How might the psalm guide our thanksgiving for what God has done for us?

Ask class members to complete Part Two of the handout. Invite them to share their work, even if it is incomplete. Encourage them to continue working on their psalm of thanksgiving during the coming week.

SAY: It is good to give thanks to God with our thoughts and words.

DISCUSS: What are some ways we can thank God with our lives? What kinds of actions appropriately reflect the salvation for which we thank God?

Good Works

Invite someone to read Ephesians 2:8-10.

SAY: The writer declares that salvation comes by God's grace and not because of our works. This means that salvation is a gift of God, not a reward for our accomplishments.

ASK: How does hearing this make you feel? Why is it good news? Do you think we declare it enough?

SAY: But good works do play a role in the Christian life.

ASK: What does verse 10 say about the place of good works in our lives?

Divide the class into groups. Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Ask each group to discuss ways that individual Christians and the church as a whole can do good works. Ask them to make a list of possible individual good works and a list of possible church good works. Invite each group to share their lists.

DISCUSS: What should our motives be for doing good works? What should inspire us to do them? What shouldn't inspire us to do them? What should our attitude be as we do them? Why is it important to think about such questions?

The Suffering Savior

Lesson Text: Hebrews 5:1-10

A Verse to Remember—Hebrews 5:8

Background Text: Hebrews 5:1-14

Other Revised Common Lectionary texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; John 12:20-33

Teaching Principle: Jesus' suffering is a vital part of his identity as Savior.

INTRODUCTION

If we had lived in the first century, would we have been looking for a Messiah to come? What kind of Messiah would we have anticipated? We can't know for sure. But we can know that if we had expected a Messiah, we probably wouldn't have looked for one who would suffer and die on a cross. Evidently, few people who lived in the first century expected a suffering Savior. And yet the New Testament writers, including the one who produced Hebrews, saw Jesus' suffering and death as central to his identity and mission. In this week's Scripture passage, the author of Hebrews presents Jesus as the great high priest.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

Scholars believe that Hebrews was written late in the first century by an unidentified author. Even though we call this writing the letter (or epistle) to the Hebrews, it isn't really a letter; it is more of a sermon or theological essay.

The writer of Hebrews encourages his readers to be strong in their faith. It seems that some of them were being tempted to abandon or compromise their faith in Jesus (2:1). One of the writer's main themes is the superiority of Jesus Christ over any other revelation of God, including prophets and angels (1:1-14). One of the reasons Christ is God's ultimate revelation is that he assumed the role of the great high priest. The writer first hints at this role in 1:3b: "When he had made purification for sins..." Then, in 2:17b, he explains that Jesus became a human being "so that he might be a merciful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people." Beginning in 4:14 and continuing through our lesson text, the writer elaborates on Christ's role as the great high priest. The writer's goal with this



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 3 poster, "The Means of Salvation" (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline: The Suffering Savior—Hebrews 5:1-10
 - Every High Priest (5:1-4)
 - A Priest Forever (5:5-6)
 - The Suffering High Priest (5:7-10)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.
- (6) If using the second teaching option, prepare copies of the handout "Ministers, Jesus, and Us" (*Kit*, p. 11).

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: Today is the fifth Sunday in Lent. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday. Good Friday is less than two weeks away. We are nearing the cross of Christ. Our lesson text focuses on the cross by presenting Jesus as the eternal high priest.

Ask: What do you think of when you hear the word "priest"? What did a priest in ancient Israel do? Do our pastors or priests do similar work? How or how not?

SAY: Our unit title is "The Means of Salvation." The unit subtitle is "God's Surprising Ways." We have grown accustomed to talking and hearing about Jesus dying on the cross to bring us salvation. Today's lesson will help us think about how surprising

it is that God used the cross as a means of salvation.

DISCUSS: Is it possible to under-emphasize Jesus' suffering on the cross? Why do you say that? Is it possible to overemphasize it? Why do you say that?

SAY: Our lesson text invites us to think about how Christ's suffering is vital to his identity as Messiah and Savior.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Hebrews 5:1-4



SAY: Let's read the verses leading into our lesson text to help establish the context.

Invite someone to read
Hebrews 4:14-16.

ASK: What do these verses say about Jesus as high priest? What do they encourage us to do in light of Jesus' identity as the great high priest?

SAY: As we study our lesson text, let's look for reasons to "approach the throne of grace with boldness," knowing that we will "receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (v. 16).

Invite someone to read
Hebrews 5:1-3.

SAY: The writer of Hebrews is talking about the high priests who served in the Jerusalem temple. He wrote Hebrews late in the first century, several years after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. There has been no high priest since the temple's destruction, so the writer is talking about the role of the high priest in the past.

focus is to encourage his readers to be faithful to Christ (4:16).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—EVERY HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 5:1-4

(1) Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. (2) He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; (3) and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. (4) And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

5:1 In these opening verses of our lesson text, the writer is talking about Jewish high priests. He is discussing a role that didn't exist anymore, since there had been no high priests since the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem temple in AD 70. Even today, the role of high priest no longer exists.

The writer makes two main points about a high priest. His first point is that the high priest was human.

He writes, "Every high priest chosen from among mortals." That is, the high priest was a human being. He was "chosen" by God, but he still came from "among mortals." But the high priest was a human with a special role: he was "put in charge of things pertaining to God on [mortals'] behalf." He did holy work for holy reasons to help form a holy people.

One of the main actions the high priest took to help people in their relationship with God was "to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins." He did this on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Other priests offered other sacrifices on other days.

5:2-3 Because the high priest was a human being, he could empathize with people in their failings. Like them, he was "subject to weakness" (v. 2). He committed sins too.

The writer says that the high priest “is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward.” This seems like a harsh characterization of the people he was called to help, but the description accurately reflects the intention of sacrifices offered for people’s sins. The purpose of these sacrifices was to atone for (or “cover up”) unintentional sins (Num 15:28) committed by “ignorant and wayward” people. The phrase probably means “those who go astray through ignorance” (Bruce, 91). They didn’t realize that they were sinning. The sacrifices didn’t, however, atone for high-handed, intentional, premeditated sins (Num 15:30).

The important point is that the high priest could “deal gently” with people because of his humanity. Since he was prone to sin like all people, he was able to empathize with them instead of condemning them.

The writer is talking specifically about the ancient role of the high priest. But he expresses truths that are applicable to all ministers. Those who serve in ministry leadership positions should remember that they are also humans prone to sin, and this awareness should lead them to empathize with people and deal gently with them. These truths apply to laypeople in the church as well. Protestants emphasize “the priesthood of all believers,” so all of us should treat others gently, as we would want to be treated.

Because of his human tendency to sin, the high priest also had to “offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people” (v. 3). The biblical description of the high priest’s duties on the Day of Atonement says that he was to sacrifice a bull for himself and his family before sacrificing a goat for the people (Lev 16).

So the writer’s first point about the high priest is that he is human.

5:4 The writer’s second point about the high priest is that God calls him. He says no one would take on the role unless God called him (all high priests were male) to do so. In an ideal situation, a high priest would serve only in response to God’s call, as was the case with Moses’ brother Aaron (Ex 28).

Ask: What do these verses say about the role of a high priest? What did he do? What was the purpose of his work?

Ask: How did a high priest’s humanity contribute to his ability to fulfill his calling? How might it have hindered that ability?

Invite someone to read
Hebrews 5:4.

Say: In the Old Testament, God called Moses’ brother Aaron and his descendants to be Israel’s priests. Ideally, every high priest would be someone called by God. It didn’t always happen that way, though.

Ask: Why would it be presumptuous for someone to take the role of high priest without a call from God? How might such presumption have kept a high priest from being effective in his role?

Say: The writer is talking about the ancient role of high priests. He is not speaking about the work of modern Christian ministers. But he does say some things that all ministers should take to heart. They are also important truths for laypeople in the church.

Discuss: What does the writer say that we should all take to heart as we minister to each other?



Hebrews 5:5-6



Invite someone to read
Hebrews 5:5-6.

Say: The writer now compares and contrasts Jesus the eternal high priest with the past high priests. His purpose is to highlight who Jesus is and what Jesus does.

Ask: Why are such comparisons helpful? Can you think of any other human roles that the New Testament writers compare Jesus to?

Say: Earlier, the writer of Hebrews said that God called a high priest to the position. That was the ideal, but it wasn't always the case. Some high priests got the job through political maneuvering. But God definitely appointed Jesus. To support this point, the writer quotes Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4, both of which come from royal psalms. These psalms were used in the coronation of the Davidic kings in Israel.

Ask: What is the writer saying about Jesus in using these two quotations from royal psalms?

Invite someone to read
Genesis 14:18-20 and
Hebrews 7:1-3.

Say: Melchizedek was king of Salem (an old name for Jerusalem) and priest of God Most High. He is a mysterious figure who shows up briefly in the Abraham story and then isn't seen again. Because so little is known about him, the writer of Hebrews can use him in talking about Jesus as the eternal high priest.



Hebrews 5:7-10



Invite someone to read
Hebrews 5:7.

Say: "In the days of his flesh" refers to Jesus' earthly life. It may refer to the time of his ministry or, even more particularly, to his passion (his suffering and death).

Ask: When we hear that Jesus "offered up prayers and

To try to serve as high priest without being called by God would be presumptuous. But history tells of it happening many times. Various high priests, especially during the years that Israel was under Greek and Roman rule, assumed the role as a result of political maneuvering. Nevertheless, the only legitimate means for a person to become high priest was by God's call.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—A PRIEST FOREVER

Hebrews 5:5-6

(5) So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; (6) as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

5:5 The writer has been talking about the high priests of the past in order to discuss Christ as the eternal high priest. Now he turns his attention to Christ, whom God appointed to be a high priest.

Some high priests of the past filled their role under appointment by God and viewed their position as one of service. But others filled the role under political appointment and out of selfish ambition. Christ became a high priest not because he wanted to make a name for himself but rather because God appointed him to the role.

The writer uses two quotations from the psalms to support his contention that God appointed Jesus to be a high priest. The first comes from Psalm 2:7: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." Psalm 2 is a royal psalm, which means it celebrated God's selection of the king. Such psalms may have been used in coronation ceremonies and in observances celebrating the king's coronation. In this psalm, the king reports that God has spoken the quoted words to him.

After the Davidic monarchy came to an end with the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BC, the psalm began to be read with messianic overtones. Psalm 2:7 contributes to the words spoken by the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism (Mk 1:11; Mt 3:17; Lk 3:22). The psalm declares that the king is God's adopted son;

the voice from heaven declares that Jesus is God's Son who fulfills Israel's hopes for a Messiah.

5:6 The second psalm quotation comes from Psalm 110:4, which is also a royal psalm. In it, God declares to the king, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." Melchizedek greeted and blessed Abram after Abram won a victory over a coalition of rulers (Gen 14). Melchizedek is identified as both king of Salem (an earlier name for Jerusalem) and as priest of God Most High (v. 18). So Melchizedek was both a king and a priest.

When David conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital, he and his descendants assumed the reign of Melchizedek (symbolically at least), which included the roles of king and priest. But in fact, during the Davidic monarchy, descendants of Aaron continued to hold the high priesthood. In the period leading up to and following Jesus' life, some people—especially the Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls—expected two Messiahs, one priestly and the other royal. The writer of Hebrews uses both psalm quotes to say that the one Messiah, Jesus Christ, fulfills the expectation of both a royal and priestly Messiah (Bruce, 94-97).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—THE SUFFERING HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 5:7-10

(7) In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. (8) Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; (9) and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, (10) having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

5:7 The writer now turns to Jesus' suffering "in the days of his flesh," which means the time of his earthly life, especially during his ministry and perhaps most specifically the hours of his passion. In those days, "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud

supplications, with loud cries and tears," what event comes to mind?

SAY: The writer may be thinking of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, or he may know of other times, not recorded in the Gospels, when Jesus engaged in anguished prayer.

ASK: What might it mean that Jesus prayed "to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission"? What does it mean for Jesus to be heard? Who heard him? What does it mean for him to reverently submit? To whom and/or what did he submit reverently?

SAY: One possibility is that Jesus' prayer was answered in his successful completion of his mission that required him to be willing to give up his life.

Invite someone to read Hebrews 5:8-10.

SAY: Jesus' obedience to God and the suffering he encountered in going to the cross went hand in hand. Jesus arrived at perfection through his obedient suffering, completing his earthly mission. By dying on the cross and being exalted through his resurrection, Jesus became the eternal high priest who makes salvation available to "all who obey him" (v. 9).

DISCUSS: How can we live out the salvation given to us by the great high priest who gave his life to make it available to us?



APPLYING THE LESSON



SAY: It matters how we think about Jesus.

ASK: In using the image of Jesus as the great high priest, what does the writer of Hebrews tell us about Jesus?

SAY: One thing this image teaches us is that Jesus willingly suffered to make salvation available to us.

DISCUSS: Why is it important to remember that Jesus was a suffering Savior? How will remembering that keep us on track as we follow Jesus?

CLOSING PRAYER



Loving God, as we continue our journey to the cross, help us be mindful of Jesus' willingness to suffer and die to make salvation available to us. Help us be willing to give ourselves away in service to you and to the people who need your love. Amen.

References

F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964).

Marie E. Isaacs, *Reading Hebrews and James: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Reading the New Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002).

Edgar V. McKnight, "Hebrews," *Hebrews—James*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004).

Scott Shauf, "Commentary on Hebrews 5:1-10," *WorkingPreacher.org*, October 21, 2012, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1414 (accessed 23 December 2019).

cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death." We immediately think of Jesus' praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed (Mk 14:32-42; Mt 26:36-46; Lk 22:39-46). But the author of Hebrews may know traditions of other times that Jesus prayed in such ways.

The writer says Jesus prayed "to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission." Since God didn't save Jesus from dying on the cross, how are we to understand that claim? We know that God "was able to save him from death," even though God chose not to do so. In what sense, then, was Jesus "heard" by God? We might assume that the resurrection was the answer to Jesus' prayer, but the writer of Hebrews doesn't mention Jesus' resurrection here, although he seems to refer to it in verses 9-10.

We should probably focus on the phrase "because of his reverent submission." Jesus prayed as he lived and died: in submission to God's will. God answered Jesus' prayer by helping him be faithful no matter what happened next. Jesus' suffering was unique because of his special role, but there is also a message here for any reader of Hebrews who is suffering because of their Christian faith: pray to God, who will help you be strong in your faith.

5:8-10 When we were children, we learned obedience through suffering. If we did something wrong, the punishment we received taught us a lesson. This way of learning obedience doesn't apply to Jesus. He never did anything wrong. But as the Son of God, Jesus' obedience to God and the suffering he experienced went hand in hand.

Jesus arrived at perfection through his obedient suffering, completing his earthly mission. By dying on the cross and being exalted through his resurrection, Jesus became the eternal high priest who makes salvation available to "all who obey him" (v. 9). We obey him when we follow him in his self-giving way.

CONCLUSION

Hebrews 5:1-10 compares and contrasts the high priests of the past with the eternal high priest Jesus Christ. High priests of the past were supposed to be appointed by God, but many of them weren't, gaining the position in underhanded ways. But God definitely appointed Jesus, and Jesus successfully completed his mission. High priests of the past could empathize with the people they served because they too were human sinners who had to offer sacrifices for themselves as well as for the people. As a human being, Jesus also suffered and was able to empathize with people. But since he never sinned, he didn't have to offer sacrifices for himself. Instead, he offered himself as a sacrifice. His sacrifice of his own life through his death on the cross, followed by his resurrection, means that he is the eternal high priest who makes salvation available to us.

TEACHING OPTIONS

✓ — Light from the Gospel

□ — SAY: Today's Gospel reading sheds light on our lesson text.

Invite class members to read Hebrews 5:7-10 and John 12:20-33.

Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Write the following questions on a whiteboard or flip chart and ask class members to answer them on their papers.

How does the Gospel reading demonstrate what the Hebrew text says about

- Jesus' prayers?
- Jesus' willingness to suffer and die?
- the meaning of Jesus' death?
- the results of Jesus' death?
- how we follow a suffering Savior?

Invite volunteers to share their answers.

DISCUSS: When read together, how do these two Scripture passages help us think about what it means for Jesus to be our suffering Savior?

DISCUSS: How does this exercise demonstrate the importance of reading Scripture in light of Scripture? Of taking the entire biblical witness into account in our reading and understanding of Scripture?

Ministers, Jesus, and Us

SAY: In our lesson text, the writer compares Jesus to the high priests who served in the Jerusalem

temple until its destruction in AD 70. This is a very particular comparison. There was only one high priest at a time, and the high priest was the highest religious figure in Israel. Still, perhaps we can go beyond the high priest and think about our ministers, Jesus, and ourselves in light of today's Scripture passage.

Divide the class into three groups. Distribute the handout "Ministers, Jesus, and Us." Ask the first group to complete "Part One: Ministers," the second group to complete "Part Two: Jesus," and the third group to complete "Part Three: Us." Invite each group to report.

Write the following words on a whiteboard or flip chart:

- Self-awareness
- Empathy
- Humility
- Willingness
- Service
- Sacrifice

DISCUSS: What role does each of these realities play in Christ-like service? How can we cultivate them in our lives?

Lead the class to pray that all members of the church, both lay and clergy, will live in ways that demonstrate their commitment to following a suffering Savior.

The Humble King

Lesson Text: Mark 11:1-11

A Verse to Remember—Mark 11:9

Background Text: Mark 11:1-11

Other Revised Common Lectionary text: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Teaching Principle: Jesus’ humility demonstrates what kind of ruler he is.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 3 poster, “The Means of Salvation” (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline: The Humble King—Mark 11:1-11
 - Assignment Made (11:1-3)
 - Mission Accomplished (11:4-7)
 - Praising the King (11:8-11)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.
- (6) If using the first teaching option, provide poster board and colored markers.
- (7) If using the second teaching option, prepare copies of the handout “Planning Ahead” (*Kit*, p. 12).

INTRODUCTION

Today is Palm Sunday, the day we commemorate Jesus’ riding into Jerusalem with people shouting praises to and about him. We might imagine the scene resembling our celebration of a favorite sports team’s championship or the triumphant return of a hero. It’s like a parade.

The people no doubt expect Jesus to do more after he rides to Jerusalem, but they don’t expect what will actually happen. They celebrate Jesus for who they want him to be and what they want him to do, not for who he actually is and what he will really do. Jesus knows that suffering and death lie ahead for him. In a few days, triumph will seem to give way to defeat. We can find clues about what is to come in this story of premature celebration.

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: Today is Palm Sunday, the day we remember Jesus’ entering Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week. Good Friday, when we remember Jesus’ death on the cross, is just five days away. Jesus and his followers, along with many other pilgrims, come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. But much more is happening.

ASK: How does our church observe Palm Sunday? What is the atmosphere for our observance?

SAY: As we read and discuss our lesson text, let’s think about what the people praising Jesus expected of him. Let’s also think about our own

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

Jesus has told his disciples three times of his coming death. The first time is when Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus then explains to his disciples that being the Messiah means he must suffer, be killed, and then rise again. When Peter disagrees with Jesus’ statement, Jesus rebukes him. Jesus also explains that those who want to follow him must give up their lives (Mk 8:27-38). When Jesus tells his disciples a second time of his coming death, the disciples demonstrate their lack of understanding by arguing about who is the greatest (9:30-37). Then, just a few verses before his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus tells his disciples for the third time that he must suffer and die before rising again. His disciples James and John respond by asking to sit at Jesus’ side in his kingdom (10:32-45). Between Jesus’ third statement about his coming death and his entry into Jerusalem, he heals a blind man named Bartimaeus. Jesus tells Bartimaeus

that his faith has made him well (10:46-52). The events of Palm Sunday reveal that the disciples are going to need faith to see that Jesus' death reveals what kind of Messiah he is. They haven't understood yet. They need to have their eyes opened.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—ASSIGNMENT MADE

Mark 11:1-3

(1) When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples (2) and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. (3) If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

11:1a The Mount of Olives is on the opposite side of the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem. Bethany is on the eastern side of the mountain. We don't know where Bethphage was, but it was evidently near Bethany.

The Mount of Olives was connected with Jewish eschatological expectations (see Zech 14:3-4); that is, it was related to the ultimate fulfillment of God's purposes. Jesus begins his entry into Jerusalem there. In Mark's Holy Week chronology, on Tuesday Jesus predicts the temple's destruction, and then he and his disciples leave the temple and go to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus delivers a message about the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man (Mk 13:1-37; Dowd, 117). According to all three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus and his disciples go to the Mount of Olives after the last supper (Mk 14:26; Mt 26:30; Lk 22:39). Gethsemane was located on this mountain. According to Luke, it is also the place from which the resurrected Jesus ascends into heaven (Lk 24:50-53; Acts 1:6-12). So the Mount of Olives is important in the story of Jesus' last days.

11:1b-3 Jesus sends two of his disciples "into the village" to get a colt (v. 2). Mark doesn't tell us whether the village is Bethphage or Bethany. He also doesn't say who the two disciples are. Jesus specifies that the

expectations of Jesus. Our expectations of an event help determine how we will experience it.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Mark 11:1-3



Invite someone to read Mark 11:1-3.

SAY: The Mount of Olives lies east of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley. It offers a good view of Jerusalem, so we might imagine Jesus looking at the city, thinking about what is to come over the next few days. The Mount of Olives also played a part in an Old Testament prophet's vision of God's intervention on behalf of God's people.

Invite someone to read Zechariah 14:3-4.

ASK: How might those verses lie in the background of our lesson text?

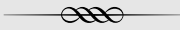
SAY: Other significant events happen on the Mount of Olives after the events of our lesson text. The Garden of Gethsemane was located on the Mount of Olives. The resurrected Jesus ascends to heaven from the mountain. So the Mount of Olives is significant in the story of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.

SAY: It is clear that Jesus intends to ride a colt that has never been ridden. The prophecy of Zechariah again provides some background.

Invite someone to read Zechariah 9:9.

ASK: How does this verse help us understand why Jesus wanted to ride a colt? What message is he sending?

SAY: Riding in a procession rather than walking was something a royal figure would do. Riding on a horse or in a chariot demonstrated military power. But riding on a colt symbolized that the rider was a person of peace.



Mark 11:4-7



Invite someone to read Mark 11:4-6.

SAY: The two disciples follow the script that Jesus gives them. They find the colt, interact with bystanders, and tell them what Jesus told them to say. Everything happens as Jesus said it would.

DISCUSS: Do you think Jesus' instructions to his two disciples about securing the colt reflect Jesus' preplanning, his foreknowledge, or both? Why?

SAY: The details help communicate the message Jesus is sending by his choice of what to ride into the city.

ASK: What message is Jesus sending?

Invite someone to read Mark 11:7.

SAY: The disciples use their cloaks to form a saddle for Jesus. We might think of it as an improvised throne.

ASK: What do you imagine might be going through the disciples' minds at this point? What would have been going through your mind if you had been there?



Mark 11:8-11



Invite someone to read Mark 11:8.

colt is one "that has never been ridden" (v. 2). This probably means it is appropriate for holy use.

Zechariah 9:9 may provide the scriptural background for Jesus' riding a colt into Jerusalem: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The connection with Zechariah's prophecy is implied in Mark, but Matthew says it outright (21:4-5; Borg and Crossan, 4). This Old Testament Scripture highlights Mark's portrayal of Jesus as the king who is victorious through humility rather than through power.

Jesus gives the two disciples instructions on getting the colt. He also tells them what to say if anyone asks them why they are taking the colt. As we are about to see, they follow the script that Jesus gives them.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Mark 11:4-7

(4) They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, (5) some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" (6) They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. (7) Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it.

11:4-6 The two disciples do what Jesus told them to do. They find the colt just as Jesus said they would. As they are untying the colt, some people ask them why they are doing so. Jesus has prepared them for this question, and they answer as he told them to. The people let them take the colt. The disciples follow Jesus' instructions, and they successfully complete their mission.

There are two possible ways to read this part of the story. The first possibility is that Jesus has made arrangements ahead of time. In that case, he arranged for someone to provide the colt and for certain verbal signals to ensure the smooth execution of the plan. Read this way, the story demonstrates Jesus'

intentionality in entering Jerusalem as the humble king.

The second possibility is that Mark presents Jesus as having divine foreknowledge of events. Read this way, Jesus is still intentional about riding a colt into the city to demonstrate that he is the humble king. In this reading, Jesus hasn't arranged everything ahead of time, but rather knows ahead of time what is going to happen. He instructs the two disciples in light of his divine insight.

Perhaps a third way of reading this part of the story—a middle way—is possible. We could read it as demonstrating both “Jesus’ powers of prediction and his royal authority to requisition what he needs” (Dowd, 118). Viewing the scene from the perspective of what we know is going to happen, we can say that Jesus acts in this way because he knows what is coming later in the week.

11:7 Having secured the colt, the two disciples bring it to Jesus. His disciples then create a makeshift saddle with their cloaks—perhaps a symbolic throne (Boring, 315)—and place Jesus on the colt.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—PRAISING THE KING

Mark 11:8-11

(8) Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. (9) Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! (10) Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (11) Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

11:8 “Many people” (v. 8) likely includes Jesus’ disciples and others accompanying him to Jerusalem for the Passover observance. The group was a collection of fishermen, women, and tax collectors who had been following him (Culpepper, 367).

SAY: People living in the Roman empire were familiar with Roman victory processions. Conquering generals and their armies would parade into a vanquished city. An emperor or a general and their forces might parade into Rome. Shortly before the probable date of the Gospel of Mark’s writing, the Roman general Titus destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. He and his father, the emperor Vespasian, later paraded into Rome. Many of the elements in Mark’s description of Jesus’ procession were part of Roman processions too. But Roman processions celebrated military power and were massive and impressive.

Ask: How does Jesus’ procession contrast with a Roman one? What message does this contrast send?

Invite someone to read
Mark 11:9-10.

SAY: We might assume that residents of Jerusalem welcome Jesus, but Mark seems to indicate that it is Jesus’ followers—those who accompanied him to Jerusalem for Passover—who praise him. Mark presents them as using words from Psalm 118:25-26 to praise Jesus. This the last of the six Hallel (“Praise”) psalms (Ps 113–118) that pilgrims sang or chanted during Passover. But the line “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” doesn’t come from Psalm 118.

Ask: Why do you think the people add this line? What does this reveal about their expectations? Who do they think Jesus is? What do they expect him to do?

SAY: The people have their expectations, but Jesus sends clear signals that they need to change them.

SAY AND ASK: Unlike the people praising Jesus as he rides the colt, we know what's going to happen later in the week. What do we know about the kind of king Jesus is?

DISCUSS: What kinds of expectations do we have of Jesus? How might we need to adjust our thinking about Jesus and ourselves to bring it in line with who Jesus reveals himself to be in our lesson text?

Invite someone to read Mark 11:11.

SAY: In Mark's narrative, this is Jesus' first and only trip to Jerusalem. He appears to behave like a tourist, looking around at the temple he has never seen before. But in fact, he is doing reconnaissance for the next day, when he will drive out the money changers and animal sellers. So this isn't the end of the story. It is the first stage in a weeklong drama of salvation.



APPLYING THE LESSON



SAY: Let's design a Palm Sunday observance in light of what we've learned from today's lesson text.

Divide the class into groups. Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Ask each group to design a Palm Sunday observance. Write the following questions on a whiteboard or flip chart to guide their discussions:

- What atmosphere should the observance create?
- What elements should the observance include?

This is the first time in Mark's Gospel that we see Jesus riding rather than walking. Riding ordinarily indicated royal authority rather than humility (Boring, 315), but Zechariah 9:9 lies in the background. It depicts the arrival of a humble king (see above on vv. 1b-3).

As Jesus rides the two miles from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem, his followers spread branches and their cloaks in front of him. Do they honor Jesus in this way all along the route? Mark doesn't say, but it is an extravagant observance (Boring, 315).

Mark's presentation of Jesus' ride to Jerusalem seems to mimic and parody the processions of Roman emperors and generals. Such leaders would ride into conquered cities with much fanfare. Their parades presented and celebrated their military and imperial power and declared their subjection of the conquered people (Culpepper, 367).

On or close to the same day that Jesus' small and seemingly insignificant procession approaches Jerusalem, the large and impressive procession of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate also draws near to the city. Along with his soldiers, Pilate would have traveled the sixty miles from his headquarters at Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast to Jerusalem to provide increased security for Passover (Borg and Crossan, 1-5).

It is likely that the Gospel of Mark was written after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. In that case, readers may have contrasted Jesus' procession with that of the conquering general Titus and his father, the newly crowned emperor Vespasian, whose triumphal entry into Rome was almost indescribably extravagant (see first-century historian Josephus, VII.V.5; Culpepper, 371).

Jesus' approach to Jerusalem makes an important point in its similarities to and differences from the Roman processions. Jesus is indeed a conquering king, but, as the unfolding events of Holy Week will make clear, his mode of conquering is the opposite of the way that is championed by the Roman empire. The empire conquers by killing; Jesus conquers by dying.

11:9-10 The people accompanying Jesus praise him with words from Psalm 118:25-26. This is one of the Hallel psalms that are collected in Psalms 113–118. The Hebrew word “Hallel” means “Praise.” Pilgrims sang or chanted these psalms during Passover.

Mark has the people shout “Hosanna,” the Hebrew word meaning “Save us,” at the beginning and end of their proclamation (Ps 118:25a). After the opening “Hosanna,” they shout the first line of Psalm 118:26: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

The line “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” doesn’t come from the psalm. It clarifies why the people think they are praising Jesus: he is the Messiah who will restore David’s kingdom. This is what they expect and declare. They probably have in mind a political and military Messiah.

But Jesus’ riding on a colt symbolizes that he is a different kind of king who exercises a different kind of authority. Horses and chariots are vehicles of war, but a colt is a vehicle of peace. Jesus will establish God’s kingdom, but he will do so by dying on the cross and rising from the dead.

11:11 The conclusion to the procession scene is anticlimactic (Culpepper, 371). The procession appears to end outside Jerusalem. Do Jesus’ followers expect the one they have just welcomed as king to begin overthrowing the Romans? If so, they are disappointed. Jesus enters the city and goes to the temple.

When Jesus arrives at the temple, he looks around. In Mark’s narrative, this is the first time Jesus has gone to Jerusalem. But we can assume he isn’t an awestruck tourist. Instead, he is doing reconnaissance in preparation for what he will do the next day (see 11:15-19). Then Jesus and his disciples go back to Bethany to spend the night.

- What truths should the observance proclaim?
 - What responses should the observance call for?
- Invite each group to share their designed observance.

DISCUSS: What challenges did you encounter in designing your Palm Sunday observance? How do you think people would receive your observance? Why?

CLOSING PRAYER



Loving God, unlike Jesus’ disciples on the first Palm Sunday, we know what Good Friday will bring, so we should be able to clearly see the clues Jesus provided about what kind of Messiah he would be as he rode toward Jerusalem. Help us to acknowledge and follow Jesus as he truly is. Amen.

References

- Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).
- M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006).
- R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007).
- David Schnasa Jacobsen, *Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 165–67.
- Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2850/2850-h/2850-h.htm>.
- Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 201–205.

CONCLUSION

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, his followers praise him as the one who comes in the name of the Lord to restore the kingdom of David. They praise him as their king. They probably have in mind a king who will drive the occupying Roman armies from Israel and who will establish a political kingdom based in Jerusalem. But in choosing to ride on a donkey that has never been ridden, Jesus indicates that his kingdom is of a different sort. He will establish God’s kingdom, but he will do so by dying on a cross. He will not seize power but will rather establish God’s kingdom by giving himself away. What does it mean for us to serve and follow such a humble king?

TEACHING OPTIONS

- ✓ — Posters of Praise
- — SAY: Our lesson text contrasts Jesus’ processional with the processions of victorious Roman emperors and generals.

Invite someone to read Mark 11:1-11.

SAY: Roman leaders rode on warhorses or in chariots, accompanied by their armies and displaying the plunder of war. Jesus rode on a colt that symbolized peace and humility. Roman leaders called attention to their military power, while Jesus called attention to the power of love and grace.

SAY: The people welcoming Jesus as he rode toward Jerusalem weren’t holding posters praising him, but let’s imagine that they were. Let’s also imagine that we’re making posters to welcome Jesus as he rides toward our community today.

Divide the class into two groups. Distribute poster board and colored markers. Ask one group to create posters that people would have made to welcome Jesus on the first Palm Sunday. Encourage them to have their posters reflect the people’s understandings and expectations. Ask the second group to create posters that we would make to welcome Jesus on this Palm Sunday. They should ponder what Jesus’ procession communicated and what the other events of Holy Week reveal. Ask them to have their posters reflect how we should understand who Jesus is and what we should expect him to do.

Ask the first group to hold up their posters.

ASK: What do these posters communicate about what the people who welcomed Jesus on the first Palm Sunday understood about him and expected of him?

Ask the second group to hold up their posters.

ASK: What do these posters communicate about what we should understand about and expect of Jesus?

DISCUSS: Why is it important that we praise Jesus for who he really is and what he really does? How should such informed praise influence the ways we live?

Planning Ahead

Invite someone to read Mark 11:1-7.

SAY: Some interpreters suggest that Jesus prearranged to secure a colt he could ride on. Others suggest that Jesus didn’t make such arrangements, but rather knew ahead of time what would happen. Either way, Jesus planned ahead for his ride to Jerusalem: he knew he was going to ride a colt. The symbolism this action communicated was vital.

Distribute the handout “Planning Ahead.” Ask class members to complete it.

DISCUSS: Why do we need to plan ahead to follow Jesus’ leadership in winning God’s victory through humble service?

Unit Four

In the World Today

In this unit, we will study what it means to belong to the holy fellowship created by the resurrected Christ. What does it mean for us to be God's people in the world today? How do we live in light of Jesus' resurrection?

In session 1 on Easter Sunday (April 4), we will focus on John 20:1-18. Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb only to find it empty. She runs back to tell the disciples, and Peter and "the other disciple" race to the scene. The empty tomb generates more than one interpretation among them. Mary lingers when the others leave, and the risen Christ appears to her. Now, she has a message to share that will change everything.

In session 3 (April 11), we will study 1 John 1:1-2:2. The author of 1 John reminds his readers of the message of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Son of God who has come in the flesh to call the world into communion with him. Walking in fellowship with God's Son means walking in fellowship with other people.

In session 3 (April 18), we will examine 1 John 3:1-10. The writer explains that those who have faith in Jesus have become God's children, and God's children don't practice sin. God's Son Jesus came to overturn lawlessness and overthrow the works of the evil one, revealing his Father's will. God's children should seek to live like Christ. In doing so, they reveal God's righteous ways.

In session 4 (April 25), we will explore 1 John 3:11-24. The writer calls his hearers to love one another. He directs their attention to Jesus, who voluntarily laid down his life for others. Jesus' radical self-giving is the foundation and model for Christian love. Christlike love has to be put into action.

In a world that lives under the shadow of sin, the light of Jesus' resurrection continues to shine through biblical books such as John's Gospel and 1 John. They teach us what it means to commune with the God of light. If we take up and embrace these teachings, the divine light will shine through us, too.

ABOUT THE WRITER

David Priddy serves as pastor of two yoked congregations, Leaflet Presbyterian and Raven Rock Presbyterian, and teaches as an adjunct at Campbell University. He has studied at Campbell University and Wake Forest University. David and his wife, Mikaela, have four children: Liam, David H., Rhys, and Madelyn.

Experience the Risen Lord

Lesson Text: John 20:1-18

A Verse to Remember—John 20:16

Background Text: John 20:1-31

Other Revised Common Lectionary Texts: Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Teaching Principle: Experiencing the resurrected Jesus changes everything.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 4 Poster, “In the World Today” (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline:
Experience the Risen Lord—John 20:1-18
 - A Not So Empty Tomb (20:1-10)
 - Mary Weeps and Weeps (20:11-15)
 - Resurrection as Recognition (20:16-18)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart.
- (6) If using the first teaching option, prepare copies of “Detecting Signs of the Risen Christ” (*Kit*, p. 13) and provide pens or pencils.

INTRODUCTION

The Old Testament tells us of God’s promises of new life for God’s people. Ezekiel prophesies of the divine breath entering into a valley of dry bones, symbolizing the coming restoration of God’s exiled people to their land (37:1-14). The prophet Isaiah speaks of a “new heaven” and “new earth” characterized by fruitfulness, harmony, and peace (65:17-25). Daniel casts a vision of a great awakening of the dead during the last days and the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked (12:1-13). These Scripture passages offer snapshots of the Lord’s plan for the renewal of Israel and the world. In this week’s lesson text, the resurrected Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. She is the first person to experience the renewal that the resurrection of Jesus brings.

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: The New Testament gives us several accounts of Jesus’ resurrection.

Invite someone to read 1 Corinthians 5:1-11 (another of today’s lectionary readings).

ASK: Can you think of a time when multiple witnesses helped people believe a story was true? Did the stories match up perfectly?

ASK: What are some advantages and disadvantages of having multiple witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection?

DISCUSS: Is there a difference between believing someone’s version of the story and knowing that the story itself is true? How do we know

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

John’s Gospel offers a unique perspective on Jesus’ aims. Whereas the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) emphasize Christ’s journey to Jerusalem, John highlights Jesus’ desire to return to the Father. John’s Gospel draws attention to Jesus’ relationship to God prior to his bodily life and highlights his status as God’s Son (1:1-4, 1:14). The theme of being a child of God lies at the heart of this Gospel, and the purpose of God’s Son is to make that status available to all who believe (1:12-13). In the verses before our lesson text, Jesus has been crucified, but his body has to be removed from the cross before the Sabbath begins. So Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, whom John seems to present as secret disciples of Jesus, prepared his body and buried it in new tomb in a garden. In this week’s Scripture passage, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early on Sunday morning. The risen Christ appears, announcing that his Father is the Father of the disciples, fulfilling the theme of sharing in Jesus’ sonship.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—A NOT SO EMPTY TOMB

John 20:1-10

(1) Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. (2) So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” (3) Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. (4) The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. (5) He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. (6) Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, (7) and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. (8) Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; (9) for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. (10) Then the disciples returned to their homes.

20:1-2 We don’t know much about Mary Magdalene. “Magdalene” means she was from the town of Magdala, located on the coast of the Sea of Galilee north of Tiberias. Jesus delivers her from seven demons (Lk 8:2). All the Gospels report that Mary witnesses his death (see Jn 19:25). In John’s resurrection story, she is the first person to see the risen Jesus.

Mary goes to the tomb on the “first day” (Sunday) before dawn. The Sabbath ends at sundown on Saturday, so she goes to Jesus’ tomb at the first opportunity. The timing of the resurrection may have symbolic overtones when one considers the importance of creation, light, and darkness in John’s Gospel (see Jn 1:1-18). Mary goes to the tomb while it is still dark, but she will experience the light of the resurrected Christ and the new creation his resurrection sets in motion.

John reports that Mary goes to the tomb alone. In the other Gospels, multiple women go to the tomb to

or believe the resurrection story to be true? What difference does such knowledge or belief make in our lives?

TEACHING THE LESSON

John 20:1-10



Invite someone to read John 20:1-3.

SAY: We know little about Mary Magdalene’s life before this story other than that Jesus rescues her from demons and that she is present at his death. Now Mary goes to Jesus’ tomb before sunrise on Sunday. This is her first opportunity to do so since the Sabbath ended at sundown on Saturday.

Ask: Why might Mary be so anxious to go to Jesus’ tomb?

SAY: Mary discovers that the stone has been removed and she runs to tell Peter and the “other disciple.” Peter is well known in the Gospels as someone who acts eagerly, though often without knowledge. The other disciple represents someone who has a close relationship with Jesus. He is also called “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (21:7). Scholars refer to him as the Beloved Disciple.

Discuss: How can these two disciples serve as examples of discipleship? What traits do they exhibit that are worthy of emulating?

Invite someone to read John 20:4-7.

SAY: We call this the story of the empty tomb, but the tomb isn’t completely empty.

Ask: What do Peter and “the other disciple” find in the tomb?

SAY: John tells us that the head cloth is rolled up. When Lazarus died, he was wrapped in similar burial garments. Jesus ordered Lazarus's head cloth removed when he came out of the tomb.

ASK: What might the removal of the head cloth in Lazarus' story suggest about the head cloth here?

Invite someone to read
John 20:8-10.

SAY: The "other disciple" goes into the tomb and "believes." The text does not say what he believes, but there are essentially three options. (1) He believes that the body of Jesus has been taken. (2) He believes that Jesus has been resurrected. (3) He believes that Christ has accomplished his mission, but does not have the complete picture.

ASK: Do you think one of these options is best? Or do you think it means something else for John to believe?



John 20:11-15



Invite someone to read
John 20:11-12.

SAY: Mary doesn't seem to notice the burial clothing. Instead, she sees "two angels in white."

ASK: How does Mary react to the presence of the angels? Do you find her reaction surprising?

Invite someone to read John 20:13.

ASK: So far, how many times has the text referred to Mary weeping?

SAY: The repeated references to Mary's weeping highlights Mary's

anoint the body (see Lk 24:1), but, in John's Gospel, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus have already completed that task (19:38-42). Although her statement "*we* do not know where they have laid him" (v. 2) might indicate the presence of others, she may be speaking for the disciples (Thompson, 411). Either way, John's Gospel appreciates personal perspective. We see this in this week's Scripture passage, as John takes account of what each disciple sees: first, Mary; then, Peter; and finally, the Beloved Disciple.

When Mary arrives at the tomb, she sees that the stone has been removed from the entrance of the tomb and rushes to tell the disciples. Even though the desire to know the whereabouts of Christ's body creates suspense, Mary and the other disciples' lack of knowledge about where Jesus is may judge them. Jesus has told his disciples throughout his ministry where he is coming from and going (7:33-36, 8:21-23; O'Day, 840).

20:3 In John's Gospel, Peter and "the other disciple" represent models of discipleship (O' Day, 840). Peter follows Jesus, confesses faith in him (6:67-69), has moments of ignorance and denial of Christ, yet loves Jesus and is responsible for taking care of Jesus' people (21:17-18). The "other disciple" is also known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (21:7). Modern scholars refer to him as the Beloved Disciple. He remains nameless; his identity is defined by his relationship to Jesus. He represents "the love and intimacy with Jesus that is the goal of discipleship in John" (O'Day, 840).

20:4-7 Both disciples run to the tomb, which is not *entirely* empty. The "other disciple" arrives before Peter and finds "linen wrappings," but doesn't enter the tomb. When Peter reaches the tomb, he sees the garments, goes in, and discovers a folded "cloth" (*soudarion*) that was on Jesus' head.

John's detailed description of the burial clothing suggests that Jesus' body was not taken as Mary assumed. Why would grave robbers undress the corpse and roll up the head cloth? The abandoned clothes hint that Jesus has risen from the dead. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, and Lazarus comes out of the tomb "wrapped in a cloth" (*soudarion*). Jesus commands that the cloth be unbound, and when this happens, Lazarus is no longer a "dead man" (11:43-44).

20:8-10 The “other disciple” eventually goes into the tomb and finds the cloth, leading him to “see” and “believe” (v.8). John’s Gospel does not specify what he believed. We can identify at least three options.

(1) The “other disciple” believed Mary’s account that the Lord’s body had been taken. This seems unlikely, given that the burial garments suggest that his body wasn’t taken—and that he may even have risen.

(2) The “other disciple” believed in the resurrection of Jesus. John employs “believed” without an object throughout the Gospel and usually it means to trust in Christ. The “other disciple” serves as a model for intimacy with Christ, and, therefore, knows where Jesus has gone (Thompson, 412)

(3) The “other disciple” doesn’t believe that Jesus is risen nor that his body was taken, but rather that Jesus has accomplished what he promised he would. John says that “*they* did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (v.9). “They” probably refers to Peter and “the other disciple” because they run together (v. 4), go into the tomb (vv. 7-8), and return to their homes (v. 10). Therefore, the “other disciple” did not believe Christ had risen from the dead. Nonetheless, the burial garments argue against the possibility that Jesus’ body was taken. Perhaps the disciple believes that Jesus has “conquered death and judged the ruler of the world” (12:31; 14:30; 16:33; O’Day, 841). Jesus told his disciples that this was his ultimate mission (12:44-50). While he doesn’t understand what has happened, maybe the Beloved Disciple believes that somehow, Jesus has accomplished his mission.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—MARY WEEPS AND WEEPS

John 20:11-15

(11) But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; (12) and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. (13) They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” (14) When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not

distress at losing the body of Jesus. She is probably wailing loudly.

Ask: Has grief ever affected you in a similar way? What are some other ways that grief can affect someone?

Invite someone to read
John 20:14-15.

Say: Mary doesn’t recognize Jesus. Failure to know Jesus is a recurring theme in John’s Gospel. She assumes that Jesus is a gardener.

Ask: Why might Mary assume that Jesus is a gardener? What might her thinking he is the gardener tell us about Jesus’ resurrection body?

Say: John makes it clear that the resurrection of Jesus hasn’t transformed him into something other than human. The tomb contains no body because the body is risen.

Ask: Why is it important that Jesus maintains his bodily form or humanity in his resurrected state?



John 20:16-18



Invite someone to read
John 20:16.

Say: Mary doesn’t recognize Jesus until he calls her by name. Calling people by name is an important theme in John. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead by calling out his name (11:43). Jesus once refers to his ministry by saying, “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (10:3).

Discuss: Would you say that Mary finds Jesus or that Jesus reveals himself to Mary? Or, both? Do you sense that you have found Jesus or that he has found you? Is this

nuance important? Why or why not?

Invite someone to read
John 20:17-18.

SAY: Mary understandably clings to Jesus, but he wants her to go and tell “his brothers” that he is going to his Father and their Father. Jesus calls the disciples “brothers” because the eleven were all male. But the language isn’t exclusive—Mary Magdalene is one of Jesus’ followers too! Christ is risen and preparing to ascend so that his disciples will become his siblings in the family of God.

Invite someone to read
John 1:12-13.

ASK: How does the resurrection fulfill the promise of John 1:12-13?



APPLYING THE LESSON



SAY: In today’s lesson text, the risen Christ tells Mary Magdalene to tell his other followers that he is ascending to his Father and their Father. Jesus’ resurrection changes his followers from a band of disciples into siblings of Christ and each another. Jesus’ resurrection also changes our identity and the nature of our community.

ASK: Does the church emphasize this aspect of the resurrection story? If so, how could we more effectively do so? If not, how could we? Why should we?

SAY: Jesus charged Mary Magdalene with sharing the good news of his resurrection with others. Jesus charges us to share it too.

know that it was Jesus. (15) Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

20:11-12 Mary Magdalene didn’t enter the tomb with Peter and the Beloved Disciple. She evidently does so only after the two disciples have left for home (v. 10). When she goes into the tomb, she sees “two angels in white.” The presence of angels at the tomb is similar in other accounts (Lk 24:3, Mt 28:2). But in John’s Gospel, the angels don’t change anything. They don’t terrify, commission, or lead Mary to believe. They don’t even have a message. They just inquire why Mary is weeping and create suspense by delaying Jesus’ appearance.

20:13 Mary continues to weep at the loss of the body. “This is not silent weeping but wailing aloud, with streaming tears as a sign of the depth of her sorrow...” (Brant, 268). This is the third of four times in this story that John uses the verb “to weep” (see vv. 11, 15 for the other occurrences). The emphasis on Mary’s weeping may attest to her great love for Jesus. In John 11, Jesus weeps at Lazarus’ death and this leads the people to say, “See how he loved him” (v. 36). Jesus anticipates this heavy grief at his departure, telling his disciples that when he leaves, they will “weep and mourn” (16:20).

20:14-15 Jesus repeats the angels’ earlier question (see v. 10), asking Mary why she is weeping. Repeated questions often drive the plot in John’s Gospel (see John 21:15-17). Mary mistakes Jesus for a gardener. She is in a garden (19:41) so this may simply be a way of saying Jesus looks like someone who belongs there. Or, this may suggest a connection with Adam, the first person, who also was called to tend a garden (Gen 2:15). Paul also draws an analogy between Adam and Jesus in his letter to the Romans (Rom 5:15). There may be hints here of the new creation that the resurrection of Jesus brings about. Regardless, the risen Christ still looks like a human being. The Gospel of John stresses Jesus’ humanity through the story along with his divinity (see 1:14), and the resurrection doesn’t change that. Even after his resurrection, Jesus bears the marks of his suffering on the cross (21:27).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—RESURRECTION AS RECOGNITION

John 20:16-18

16) Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). (17) Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” (18) Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

20:16 Mary recognizes Jesus when he calls her by name. Jesus also called Lazarus by name, bringing him out of the tomb (11:43). Now, he calls Mary and leads her out of ignorance and into knowledge of his true identity. The connection between death and ignorance is important since the failure to know Jesus is what cuts one off from life (1:3,10). John’s Gospel emphasizes that God initiates this calling process (6:44). Mary recognizes Jesus, in other words, because Jesus reveals himself to her. Mary calls him “Rabbouni,” which the narrator says means “Teacher,” though it literally means “my teacher.” This relationship will soon take on a deeper dimension (v. 17).

20:17-18 Mary “holds” (*haptou*) Jesus, suggesting that “she has flung her arms around him” (Brant, 270). Thomas will touch Jesus in Jesus’ next resurrection appearance at his invitation (20:27). The reason Christ tells Mary not to hold onto him is because both he and she have a mission. He must ascend to his Father and she must return and share the good news with the disciples.

Jesus calls his disciples “brothers” (*adelphos*) and refers to his Father as their Father (O’Day, 843). This is a remarkable statement given how John’s Gospel portrays Jesus as God’s Son. Earlier, Jesus insists that he alone is the Son of the God of Abraham (8:54-55). The resurrection of Jesus means that those who believe in him can now be children of God, fulfilling the promise of the prologue (1:12-13). For John’s Gospel, resurrection means more than a state of bodily existence after death. Resurrection draws humanity into a familial relationship with God.

DISCUSS: How can our identity as the siblings of Christ and of each other contribute to our sharing of the good news of the resurrection? How can we grow in that identity so we grow in effectively sharing the good news?

CLOSING PRAYER



God of life, you have resurrected your Son and made us your children. Even when we find ourselves unsure that you are renewing the world, inspire us by the ways you are renewing your family. Help us hear you call us by name so we might believe. Amen.

References

- Jo-Anna A. Brant, *John*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).
- Gail O’Day, *The Gospel of John*, New Interpreter’s Bible: a Commentary in Twelve Volumes (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).
- Marianne Meye Thompson, *John*, A Commentary, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The resurrection of Christ is the “first day” of God’s recreation of the world. Everything has changed. Jesus has conquered death and made it possible for people to enter God’s family. The signs of this renewal, however, are not obvious. The empty tomb makes Mary Magdalene think that someone has taken Jesus’ body. The burial garments make “the other disciple” believe Jesus has gone to the Father. Peter sees it all and goes home. Even when Christ appears to Mary, she doesn’t recognize him. But when Jesus calls her by name, she realizes who he is. He then sends her to share the good news of his resurrection with his disciples. Our lesson text reminds us that Christ is still making all things new.

TEACHING OPTIONS

- ✓ — **Detecting Signs of the Risen Christ**
- — Distribute the handout “Detecting Signs of the Risen Christ” and pens or pencils.

SAY: Peter, the Beloved Disciple, and Mary went into the empty tomb and came out with various understandings.

Invite someone to read John 20:5-10.

ASK: What did Peter and the Beloved Disciple see in the empty tomb? Why do you think the Beloved Disciple “believed” after entering the tomb? Why do you think Peter didn’t?

Invite someone to read John 20:11-12.

ASK: Why do you think that Mary Magdalene is unfazed by the two angels? How do you think you would have responded to seeing two angels in an empty tomb?

Invite someone to read John 20:8-9.

SAY: The Beloved Disciple didn’t see the risen Christ and didn’t understand the Scriptures, but seeing the burial cloth in the empty tomb led him to believe. The risen Christ might not appear to us physically, but because he loves us, he leaves signs of his presence in our lives.

Ask class members to complete the handout.

ASK: What in your life might be a sign that the risen Christ is at work? What in our church might be a sign that the risen Christ is at work?

DISCUSS: Why is it important that we pay attention to how the risen Christ is present and at work in us?

Different Perspectives on the Empty Tomb

Distribute paper and pens or pencils.

SAY AND ASK: Today we read the story of the empty tomb in John. Matthew and Luke offer different perspectives on the story of the empty tomb. Why do you think the Bible gives us multiple accounts of this event?

DISCUSS: Why might it be useful for the church to have different perspectives on the empty tomb?

SAY: Let’s listen to the empty tomb story in Matthew and Luke.

Invite class members to read Luke 24:1-12 and Matthew 24:1-12. Encourage other class members to write down the similarities and differences between the three accounts.

ASK: What do the three accounts have in common? How are they different?

DISCUSS: If someone asked you about the empty tomb, how would you tell the story? How would you explain the significance of the empty tomb?

Walk in the Light

Lesson Text: 1 John 1:1–2:2

A Verse to Remember—1 John 1:7

Background Text: 1 John 1:1–2:2

Other Lectionary Texts: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; John 20:19-31

Teaching Principle: To walk in God’s light is to live in relationship with God and with each other.

INTRODUCTION

In J. R. R. Tolkien’s famous trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, an unlikely hero named Frodo Baggins sets out on a perilous adventure to destroy an evil ring. Before he undertakes this dark journey, a motley fellowship forms to help him succeed. The hope is that coming together will prove a wise strategy. In a similar way, activists gather in numbers to promote a cause or protest a policy. And churches join with other churches to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. In today’s lesson text, though, community isn’t just a way to get something done—it is God’s plan for humanity. First John teaches us that God’s Son has come into the world and joined the human fellowship so that all people might join the divine fellowship of life, light, and joy.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

The language and themes of 1 John are similar to those of John’s Gospel and of 2 and 3 John. The author of the letter doesn’t identify himself or his audience, but most scholars believe that the same writer wrote the three letters and that someone else produced the Gospel of John. Throughout 1 John, the author speaks as a “father” to “little children,” indicating a relationship of trust and responsibility. He writes with concern for the well-being of those who will hear his words. He knows they are wrestling with false teachings about Christ and facing division in the community. For example, some community members doubt that Jesus was truly human. The author emphasizes the reality that Jesus was a living human being. He also emphasizes the need for sound relationships within the community. He highlights the seriousness of the crisis by concentrating his message around a cluster of opposites: light and darkness, truth and lies, and life and death.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 4 Poster, “In the World Today” (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline:
Walk in the Light—1 John 1:1–2:2
 - Fellowship with the Word of Life (1:1-4)
 - Walk in the Light or Darkness (1:5-10)
 - Jesus Our Advocate (2:1-2)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.
- (6) If using the first teaching option, prepare copies of “A Timeline of Daily Light” (*Kit*, p. 14).
- (7) If using the second teaching option, distribute hymnals.

BEGINNING THE LESSON



SAY: In today’s Scripture passage, the author shares the good news of Jesus Christ. The Son of God came into the world as a human being. People saw, heard, and touched him. To fellowship with Jesus is to share in eternal life. Fellowship with him also creates fellowship with others.

SAY: What relationships have formed between you and others because of your shared relationship with Jesus?

SAY: Our lesson text reminds us that no one has to be perfect to be a member of this fellowship. When we confess our sins, through Jesus we are forgiven and brought into fellowship with God and others.

TEACHING THE LESSON

1 John 1:1-4



Invite someone to read
1 John 1:1.

SAY: We hear an individual voice throughout 1 John. But notice that here at the beginning the writer uses the word “we.”

ASK: Why do you think 1 John opens this way? What is the advantage of using “we” as opposed to “I”? Who might “we” be?

SAY: The “word of life” may have two meanings. The term could refer to the person of Jesus, who is the Word of God in bodily form, or it could refer to the message of Jesus. Since the person of Jesus and his message are important, both meanings matter equally.

Invite someone to read 1 John 1:2.

SAY: When we hear “eternal life,” we may think about life that goes on forever. But eternal life isn’t just endless life. It is also life that participates in the joy and intimacy of the divine Father and Son. This sense of eternal life can be experienced right now.

ASK: Why does the author say that this life is “revealed”?

Invite someone to read
1 John 1:3-4.

SAY: The author’s purpose in writing this letter is to declare the fellowship that leads to joy, both between God and those who read or hear the letter and also between the author and this community.

DISCUSS: Because of a difference in some ancient manuscripts, some translations read “your joy” instead

BIBLE BACKGROUND—FELLOWSHIP WITH THE WORD OF LIFE

1 John 1:1-4

(1) We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— (2) this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— (3) we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (4) We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

1:1 A single voice speaks throughout the letter of 1 John, but the text opens with a plural pronoun: “We declare to you....” Maybe the author wrote as a representative of the apostles, using what scholars call “an apostolic *we*.” He doesn’t present himself as a lone religious authority but rather as a member of a community that has received a revelation from God and bears witness together. Even though the audience most likely knows the author, the lack of a title or name may suggest that his identity is less important than his message.

“The beginning” and “the word of life” recall the first chapter of John’s Gospel where the “Word” (*logos*) that existed in “the beginning” becomes flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. By the time of Christ, the term “Word” had developed a rich meaning, notably as the power that orders the universe. First John, like the Gospel of John, stresses the physical reality of this Word, describing it as something that has been “heard,” “seen,” “looked upon,” “and touched.” “The word of life” is Jesus, the incarnate Word who conquered death.

The phrase “word of life” may also refer to Jesus’ message. This is common language in the New Testament; for example, 1 Peter 1:25b reads, “That word is the good news that was announced to you.” Such a reading would suggest that the testimony about Jesus gives life to people.

Because the person of Jesus is inseparable from his message of good news, we can read the phrase in both ways at the same time. In John's Gospel, the Word becomes human, shares his life-giving words with the disciples, and prays for "those who will believe in [him] through their words" (17:20).

1:2 The life that the apostles see in Jesus Christ is eternal life. It is a life that isn't bound by biological, social, and political realities. Instead, it is fully open to God's life. In God's unique way, this life has become a human life, one that truly lives in the ordinary world that all humans experience. Even so, this life cannot be achieved by human striving. It is a revelation—a divine gift from the Father that continues to be given through the words and lives of others.

1:3-4 The word "declare" appears a third time (see vv. 1-2), a reminder that this is not a private letter. Like many New Testament letters, 1 John is a written declaration that will be read aloud to a community. "We have seen" also appears a third time, demonstrating the author's confidence in his experience of the Word, which is why he can boldly proclaim it.

The goal of declaring and writing about "the word of life" is "fellowship" or "communion" (*koinonia*). Receiving the word of life makes people open to the gift of eternal life because it draws them into the life of the Father and the Son. This life is not just a heavenly ideal that will happen "later" but also an earthly reality that can be lived "now." The coming of Jesus in the flesh establishes the fellowship of believers. Acts 4:32-35 (another of this Sunday's lectionary readings) shows how the divine community creates and shapes a human community. One cannot have communion with God without communion with other believers. First John even portrays God as a community of Father and Son (1:3) and, later, Holy Spirit (4:13).

Most Bible versions translate verse 4 similarly to NRSV: "We are writing these things so that *our* joy may be complete." This means, "If the recipients respond aright and follow the truth, the witnesses' joy will be complete" (Talbert, 16). But some ancient manuscripts read "so that *your* joy may be complete." This means that the writer and his colleagues want the readers' joy to be complete. Either way, the purpose of declaring "the word of life" is that the author and hearers may have fellowship together (v. 3). Believers

of "our joy." Is this difference important? Why or why not? If it is important, how so?



1 John 1:5-10



Invite someone to read
1 John 1:5.

SAY: The writer says that God is light and that darkness doesn't exist in God.

ASK: Can you think of any other passages in the Bible where God or Jesus is identified with light? What is significant about this metaphor?

Invite someone to read
1 John 1:6-7.

ASK: What does it mean to walk in darkness? How does doing so reveal that one doesn't have fellowship with God?

SAY: Walking in the light puts a person in fellowship with the God who is light, and it also puts the person in fellowship with everyone else who walks in the light.

SAY: Some believers are probably used to the language of Jesus' blood cleansing sin, but it sounds strange to most modern ears.

Invite someone to read
Leviticus 17:11.

ASK: What does blood represent in this verse? Why might this make it an effective agent against sin and death?

Invite someone to read
1 John 1:8-10.

SAY: Scripture and experience teach us that everyone sins. The writer

affirms that in these verses. (We will explore the complexity of this issue in the April 18 lesson.)

ASK: How does the imagery of light and darkness help us think about what it means to confess our sins?



1 John 2:1-2



Invite someone to read
1 John 2:1.

SAY: In chapter 2, the author switches from the pronoun “we” to the pronoun “I.” He calls his hearers “little children.”

ASK: Why do you think he uses this personal and paternal tone?

SAY: The writer calls Jesus “an advocate”; the Greek term means “someone called to the side of.” In our April 4 lesson, we read that Jesus was ascending to the Father. He is there now, interceding for his siblings in the faith.

Invite someone to read John 14:16.

SAY: The Holy Spirit is called the “Advocate” in this verse. Christians have an advocate in heaven and on earth!

Invite someone to read 1 John 2:2.

SAY: Interpreters have long debated the meaning of the phrase “atoning sacrifice.” Some think that Jesus’ death satisfies God’s anger toward sin. Others think that Jesus’ blood washes away sin.

ASK: What do you think of when you hear the word “sacrifice”?

SAY: The biblical understanding of atonement through sacrifice isn’t

grow in joy through fellowship with the risen Lord and with each other (Parsenios, 47).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—WALK IN THE LIGHT OR DARKNESS

1 John 1:5-10

(5) This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. (6) If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; (7) but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (8) If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (9) If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (10) If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1:5 God is the light who casts out all darkness. This message is similar to the language of John’s Gospel, which refers to Jesus as the “light of all people” (1:4) and “light of the world” (8:12). The author emphasizes the opposition between light and darkness to challenge people to choose between good and evil, which light and darkness often represent (see John 3:19-21).

1:6 Throughout 1 John, the author appeals for the alignment of a person’s word and deed—that is, do what you say and say what you do. Otherwise, one’s relationship to truth becomes suspect (v. 8). He explores this reality with the image of walking through life. He is demonstrating that existence is not static or determined by a single moment. Life is a journey with different possible paths. The repeated word “if” in this section points to the variety of possibilities. Living in a way that is like walking in darkness is a real possibility. But it is impossible to walk in darkness when one is truly in fellowship with the God of light.

1:7 If one does walk in the light, joining in fellowship with God, then one enters into fellowship with

others. Walking in the light of the Father and the Son connects us to everyone else who walks in the same light. Interestingly, sin doesn't exclude people from this fellowship; living in fellowship offers the possibility of renewal through Jesus' blood. The metaphor of light is helpful here: as light dispels darkness, the blood of Jesus covers sin.

The language of cleansing with blood may sound strange to modern ears, but it is how the Bible talks about sin and redemption. Sin partners with death and leads to death (Jas 1:15). The only way to deal with the power of sin and death is to counter it with the power of life. Blood represents life, making it an agent of cleansing (Lev 17:11). The Old Testament bears witness to this dynamic through the sacrificial system.

1:8-10 The fact that believers are not immune to sin is a complex issue in this letter (see 3:6), and we will explore it more thoroughly in the April 18 lesson. Here in chapter 1, sin appears to be a real possibility in a believer's life. The universality of sin is a key idea in the New Testament (Rom 3:23; Gal 3:22). For the author of 1 John, everyone who is outside of fellowship with God is beholden to the devil, "who has sinned from the beginning" (1 Jn 3:8).

Denying sin is a form of self-deception (v. 8). The author also declares that denying sin "makes [God] a liar" (v. 10)—a blasphemous accusation (see Paul's words in Rom 3:4). The author may have Psalm 51 in mind, where the psalmist confesses his sin while asserting God's righteousness (v. 4).

If people are honest about their moral and spiritual failings, there is provision and new possibility: through the blood of Christ, God offers forgiveness and cleansing. Again, the image of light is useful. Confessing sins is like shining a light on darkness (Jn 3:20).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—JESUS OUR ADVOCATE

1 John 2:1-2

(1) My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; (2) and he is the atoning

focused just on death. In Hebrew thinking, blood is life. The author may be saying that the entire life of Jesus, culminating in his death, takes away our sin. In this sense, Jesus has offered his life for our sins.

SAY: Jesus atones for the sins of the world. This doesn't mean everyone's sins are forgiven automatically. We are still expected to confess our sins and strive to do better. What this does mean is that Jesus' atonement and advocacy are the foundation of Christian fellowship but are not limited to the people within it. He came for all people.

ASK: What do you think of when you hear the word "world"?

SAY: In 1 John, as well as in John's Gospel, the "world" means much more than everyone. The world is the sphere of creation and life that is under the influence of the "evil one" (5:19) and stands opposed to God's love (2:15-17).



APPLYING THE LESSON



SAY: Jesus Christ is our advocate with the Father, ensuring peace and stability in our relationship to God.

ASK: Have you ever served as an advocate for someone? Has someone ever served as an advocate for you?

SAY AND ASK: Advocacy is a powerful force for social change. What needs for advocacy do we see in our society? What should motivate us to advocate for others?

DISCUSS: How can the church advocate for people, including those

outside the church, in ways that bear witness to God's love? How might we share in Jesus' work?

CLOSING PRAYER



God of light, thank you for the gift of eternal life. Open our eyes so we may see that fellowship with you means fellowship with others. In the name of your Son and our advocate, Jesus Christ, amen.

References

Peter Rhea Jones, *1, 2 & 3 John*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009).

George L. Parsenios, *First, Second, and Third John*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1991).

Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*, rev. ed., Reading the New Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005).

sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

2:1 For now, the apostolic “we” drops out of the letter and an individual voice emerges. The writer relates to his audience as a father to “little children.” The tone is one of authority, affection, and concern. Paul also adopts a parental tone in many of his letters (see, for example, 1 Thess 2:7, 11). Like a nurturing spiritual father, the writer of 1 John wants to keep those who hear his words from sinning.

Jesus is the “advocate” (*parakletos*). John’s Gospel uses the same term for the Holy Spirit (14:16). The word literally means “someone called to the side of” (Smith, 52). In the April 4 lesson, Jesus tells Mary that he is ascending to the Father (Jn 20:17). There he intercedes for those in fellowship with him. The risen Jesus continues his ministry of prayer for his people.

2:2 Interpreters have long debated the meaning of “atoning sacrifice” (*hilasmos*). One view is that Christ’s sacrifice takes away God’s anger toward sin. Another is that it takes away people’s sin (Parsenios, 66). The first view reflects the KJV translation “propitiation,” while the second reflects the RSV rendering “expiation.” It is noteworthy that both NRSV and NIV use the words “atoning sacrifice” (Jones, 44).

Some of the debate comes from the fact that when we hear “sacrifice,” we think “death.” So we tend to equate the sacrifice of Jesus with his death. While his death certainly is involved (see 1:7b), “the verse as stated can encompass the entire mission of the Son...” (Jones, 44).

Jesus’ self-offering is the basis for Christian fellowship, but it is not limited to those within it. God seeks to extend this fellowship of eternal life and light to the world. The “world” (*kosmos*) is not a neutral term for “everyone.” Here, the term means an opposing fellowship of darkness, the communion of forces that are antagonistic to the divine will (2:17) and subject to “the evil one” (5:19). Opposed to the God of life, the world is “passing away” (2:17). So the Father sends the Son to offer salvation even to God’s enemies, revealing a profound love.

CONCLUSION

The author of 1 John has encountered the word of life and wants to share that reality with others. This word of life is in fellowship with God the Father, and yet in the person of Jesus Christ it has also been revealed in the world as one of us. Thus, fellowship with Jesus opens the door to the God who is light and who releases us from the darkness of sin. Fellowship with Jesus puts us in fellowship with others, creating a new community in which life is shaped not by sin but by forgiveness. This life is eternal. The author reminds us, as part of this community, to continue to walk in the light. We won't be able to live a sinless life, but we should practice ongoing confession in order to grow closer to God.

TEACHING OPTIONS

- ✓ — A Timeline of Daily Light
- — Invite someone to read 1 John 4:12.

SAY: In saying “No one has ever seen God,” the writer affirms the insistence of biblical tradition that God is beyond our ability to see and describe. In Colossians 4:15, Paul calls God the “invisible God.” In Exodus 33:20, the Lord declares, “No one can see me and live.” But we still have to speak of God, so we use images that are familiar to us. The author of 1 John uses the image of light.

Invite someone to read 1 John 1:7.

SAY: The author says that “God is light.”

SAY: We encounter light throughout the day and night. Light dictates almost everything we do, but we often take it for granted.

Ask: How might this be similar to the attitude we have toward God?

SAY: Let’s reflect on the importance of light in our daily lives.

Distribute the handout “A Timeline of Daily Light” and pens or pencils. Ask class members to complete Part One. Invite them to share their timelines of daily light.

SAY: Now cross out half of the light-emitting objects on your timeline.

Discuss: How would taking these objects out of your life change your day? Would you be able to do your normal activities?

SAY: Thinking about the necessity and abundance of light in our daily lives reminds us of the importance of light.

Ask class members to complete Part Two of the handout.

Discuss: Do any of these primary functions of light help us understand what the author means when he says “God is light”? How does light help us understand who God is and what God does?

Christian Fellowship According to the Hymnal

SAY: We have a rich tradition of hymns that help us reflect on God and the nature of the church.

Distribute hymnals. Ask each class member to locate one hymn that praises God and emphasizes the nature of the church. Invite everyone to share their hymn. Ask the following questions about each hymn:

- What is the primary image of the church in this hymn?
- Does this image relate to an image of God in the hymn?
- How does this hymn suggest we should treat one another?

Invite the class to sing one or two of the selected hymns.

Do What Is Right

Lesson Text: 1 John 3:1-10

A Verse to Remember—1 John 3:7

Background Text: 1 John 3:1-10

Other Lectionary Texts: Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; Luke 24:36b-48

Teaching Principle: Who we are determines what we do, and what we do reveals who we are.



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 4 Poster, “In the World Today” (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline:
Do What Is Right—1 John 3:1-10
 - We Are God’s Children (3:1-3)
 - The Son of God Takes Away Sin (3:4-6)
 - Children of God or the Devil (3:7-10)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart.
- (6) If using the first teaching option, prepare copies of the handout “Psalms of Righteousness” (*Kit*, p. 15).

INTRODUCTION

Why do Christians do good works? Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16). We don’t seek righteousness to earn God’s love. We are righteous because we are God’s children, and our good works point others to our Father’s goodness. The author of 1 John establishes this truth by directing our attention to God’s Son. Jesus is the righteous one (2:1), who has been revealed to “take away sins” (3:5) and “destroy the works of the devil” (3:8). Believers in Christ have been born of God and have become like Christ. Therefore, the revelation of God’s righteousness continues in the lives of those who are God’s children.

BEGINNING THE LESSON



Invite someone to read
1 John 2:29.

SAY: This verse comes right before our lesson text. It sets the context for what we are about to read. The first “he” in the verse likely refers to Jesus, and the second “he” refers to God. In that case, the verse says that since we know that God’s Son Jesus is righteous, then we know that those who do right are also God’s children. As God’s children, righteousness is not just something we imitate; it is vital to our identity. We do what we do—live righteously—because we are who we are—God’s children.

ASK: Does this mean we always do the right thing and never do the

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

The last verse of 1 John 2 sets the context for our lesson text: “If you know that [the Son] is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of [God]” (2:29). First John 3 opens with a forceful declaration that its readers “are God’s children now” (v. 2). In the first two chapters, the author highlighted the theme of fellowship with God (1:3) and addressed his audience in family terms (see 2:12-13). Now he describes becoming part of this fellowship as being born into God’s family. This family-focused language comes at a critical moment because the author has just spoken of division in the community (2:19). Our lesson text probably refers to some of the issues the fellowship faced, like “lawlessness” (3:4) and the failure to love. The author argues that those who aren’t “children of God” are “children of the devil” (3:10). This emphasis on the boundaries of God’s family sets up the rest of the chapter, where

we read about Cain's murder of his brother—a story of division, lawlessness, and hatred.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN

1 John 3:1-3

(1) See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. (2) Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. (3) And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

3:1 In the previous chapter, the author speaks of “the love of the Father” dwelling in those who obey God's word (2:5) and “not in those who love the world” (2:16). This paternal love is more than a positive divine feeling toward humanity. It is a reality that comes into human lives and transforms them, leading them out of darkness and sin and into fellowship with God. This change is so dramatic that the author consistently refers to it as a birth (2:29), meaning a birth into God's family. Through the gift of the Father's love, one is born anew as God's child.

Later, the author connects the Father's love with the Holy Spirit (4:13-16). The apostle Paul speaks about God's love entering into believers through the Holy Spirit and making them God's children (Rom 5:5; 8:16). John's Gospel also connects the ideas of the Father's love, the Spirit, and new birth (Jn 3).

The writer doesn't say that the Father loves believers because they are now God's children. Instead, the Father's love causes believers to become God's children. They receive this love as a gift, not as something they deserve. One can't boast in achieving God's love; one can boast only in God and God's Son, Jesus. But believers can be confident in their status as God's children (2:28).

The world doesn't know God, so the world doesn't know God's children. Jesus encountered this kind of opposition, and he warned his disciples to expect the

wrong thing? If not, what could it mean?

SAY: We can learn how to act righteously by learning and following rules. But we also learn by example, by mimicking the behavior of other people.

ASK: Whose example have you followed as you have tried to live righteously? What about their way of life caused you to emulate them? What did this person's model of life teach you about Christian living? What made their example worthy of following?

TEACHING THE LESSON

1 John 3:1-3



Invite someone to read 1 John 3:1.

SAY: The author of 1 John reminds his original audience and those who read his words today that we are all God's children. We can say that we are God's children because we have been born of him (2:29).

ASK: What do you think it means to be born of God and to be God's children? Can you think of any other Scripture passages that help us understand this?

SAY: God doesn't love us because we are God's children. God's love for us makes us God's children.

ASK: It is good to know that God loves us and that we are God's children. Does our being God's children necessarily mean that people will love us or even like us? Why or why not?

Invite someone to read 1 John 3:2-3.

SAY: Even though we are God's children now, our transformation isn't complete.

ASK: When will we be transformed? Who will we look like in the future? What do you think this means? Why do you think the Bible doesn't fully describe what we'll look like?

Invite someone to read
Colossians 3:3-4.

SAY: Both Colossians and 1 John teach us that the fullness of our identity as God's children hasn't yet been revealed.

DISCUSS: How do we experience the tension between already being God's children and not yet realizing the fullness of our identity? How can this tension be a positive and creative force in our lives?



1 John 3:4-6



Invite someone to read
1 John 3:4.

SAY: The writer says that sin is "lawlessness." New Testament writers sometimes use this term in talking about times when false teaching is a problem.

Invite someone to read
2 Thessalonians 2:7-10.

ASK: How is "lawlessness" used in this passage?

SAY: In 1 John 2:18-25, the author speaks of "the last hour," the "anti-christ" (v. 18), and denial of the Son (v. 23). The author is addressing a situation in which false teachings about Jesus are a problem. Those false teachings include the claim

same (Jn 15:18-25). Being children of God doesn't make them immune to hostility. In fact, it may cause hostility.

3:2-3 In the present moment, believers can be confident that they are God's children. They can also have hope that in the future they will be transformed to be like God's child, Jesus. We don't know exactly what this means. The New Testament is unclear about how God's children will appear in the resurrection. But we can expect the transformation to be beyond our imagining.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—THE SON OF GOD TAKES AWAY SIN

1 John 3:4-6

(4) Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. (5) You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. (6) No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.

3:4 "Lawlessness" (*anomia*) often signifies sin (Parsenios, 93), specifically sin as a violation of God's commandments.

The reference to "lawlessness" could refer to "an era in which the anti-Christ appears" (Smith, 83). The writer of 1 John has already asserted that "it is the last hour" and that "many antichrists have come" (2:18). He mentions the "antichrist" again in 4:1-6. The New Testament speaks of a period in which false teachers and false prophets would arise to encourage "licentious" behavior among God's people (2 Pet 2:1-3, 17-20; Jude 1:3-4). The author of 1 John fears that a faction is working to deceive the community (2:26-27). Second Thessalonians characterizes this era with the same vocabulary, saying "the mystery of lawlessness is already at work" (2:7).

3:5 The remedy for lawlessness and sin isn't to return to the Old Testament law; it's to turn to God's Son. The author says that Jesus comes "to take away sins," which recalls his earlier statement that Christ provides "atonement" for the "forgiveness of sins" and "cleansing of unrighteousness" (2:2). This also

evokes John the Baptist's declaration in John's Gospel: "Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29). Jesus Christ is not only sinless himself; he also overcomes sin. He not only opposes sin; he is the solution to sin.

3:6 The writer continuously speaks of "abiding" or "remaining" (*meno*) in Jesus. This may sound odd to modern ears, but the language of being "in Christ" occurs throughout the New Testament (see Gal 3:26-27). In John's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the disciples abiding in him as vines abide in a branch (John 15:1-17). In 1 John, believers dwell in the Son and the Son dwells in them through "the love of the Father" (2:15), through what they have "heard from the beginning" (2:24), through Jesus (3:23), and through the Spirit (3:24). This language of abiding in Jesus reminds the hearers that even though Jesus isn't physically with them in his human body, they still share a relationship of "presence and mutuality" (O'Day and Hylen, 152).

The author makes a strong statement: people who abide in Jesus don't sin, and people who sin don't abide in Jesus. This seems to contradict what we read in 1:18: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." It also goes against human experience. While there's no perfect solution to the inconsistency (Smith, 84), there are a few possible explanations. (1) Perhaps there is a difference between committing sin (3:6) and having sin (1:8). Paul makes such a distinction (Rom 7:20). (2) Maybe there are different types of sin. The author suggests this possibility in the last chapter of the letter, where he distinguishes between sin that is mortal and sin that isn't (5:16-18). (3) The author may be suggesting that those who abide in Jesus by believing in him and practicing love (3:23) won't sin (Smith, 85). In this case, sinning means failing both to believe in Jesus and to remain in the community.

The writer is less interested in the particulars of sin and more interested in the identity of Christ. The Son of God stands opposed to sin. If false prophets are promoting a vision of Jesus that encourages sin and lawlessness, then it is not the true Jesus that the hearers have "heard from the beginning" (3:11).

that Christ didn't actually come in the flesh (4:2-3).

SAY: Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection changed everything. But some early Christians were tempted to believe that their salvation allowed them to do anything they wanted to do, even if it ran counter to what the commandments said and to what Jesus revealed as the righteousness of God.

DISCUSS: Why do you think people would believe that way? Have you ever encountered people who live as if such beliefs are true?

Invite someone to read 1 John 3:5.

ASK: How does Jesus take away sin? Why is it significant that "in [Jesus] there is no sin"?

Invite someone to read 1 John 3:6.

SAY: The author uses the language of "abiding" in Christ. The Greek word can also mean "remaining."

Invite someone to read John 15:1-17.

ASK: What image does this Gospel text use to picture our abiding in Christ? How does it help us understand what it means to abide in Christ?

SAY: The writer says that "no one who abides in [Christ] sins" (v. 6). This is difficult to reconcile with 1 John 1:8, where we are told that "if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves." Interpreters have puzzled over this contradiction. The principle seems to be that as God's Son is righteous, so God's children should be righteous.



1 John 3:7-10



Invite someone to read
1 John 3:7-8.

SAY: The writer says that believers' actions reveal their identity in Christ. On the other hand, sinners' actions reveal that they are children of the devil. The author may have in mind the false teachers who are trying to deceive the believers. But Jesus has come into the world to "destroy the works of the devil."

Invite someone to read
1 John 3:9-10.

SAY: Even though the believers haven't experienced the fullness of being God's children (see v. 2), they can, should, and do live righteously here and now.

SAY: The writer believes that the difference between God's children and the devil's children will be obvious.

ASK: How do some people reveal that they belong to the devil? How do believers reveal that they belong to God?

DISCUSS: What might be the dangers in thinking of ourselves as "children of God" and non-Christians as "children of the devil"? How can we be careful in talking about the differences between the two groups?

SAY: The main points of our lesson text are (1) that we do what we do because of who we are and (2) that who we are determines what we do.



APPLYING THE LESSON



SAY: Today's lesson text tells us that our actions should

BIBLE BACKGROUND—THE CHILDREN OF GOD OR THE DEVIL

1 John 3:7-10

(7) Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. (8) Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. (9) Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. (10) The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

3:7-8 The author again adopts a paternal tone, which indicates his concern for the community's welfare. His hearers know the truth (2:21), but he reminds them so they won't go astray. He provides a simple rule: "Everyone who does what is right is righteous" and "everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil." These "two stark options" allow no room for uncertainty or indecision (Parsenios, 92). The community must choose.

The New Testament teaches that righteousness comes through believing in Jesus Christ and his righteousness and through loving one's siblings in the faith. The writer summarizes, "we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another..." (3:23). If a person does these two things, then that person abides in Jesus, who is righteous. The author believes that Christ's righteousness is inevitably revealed in the lives of God's children. The hearers' actions reveal their identity in him.

The author intensifies the depiction of those who commit sin by introducing the devil into his discussion. In 1 John, the devil is the chief initiator of evil, "sinning from the beginning" (v. 8a) and enslaving the world (5:19). The author sees those who sin as "children of the devil," but it is likely that he has in mind the teachers who are trying to deceive the believers (Smith, 85). Like the devil who sins "from the

beginning,” these deceivers try to overthrow what the hearers “have heard from the beginning” (3:11). The deceivers’ actions reveal their identity.

Jesus, the Son of God, has come “to destroy the works of the devil” (v. 8b). Jesus makes a similar promise in John’s Gospel (12:31). Christ’s purpose is not only to make atonement for the world but also to terminate the very things that enslave it: death, sin, and the devil. Therefore, the author can confidently say that “the world...is passing away...” (2:17).

3:9 We encounter the same difficulties in this verse that we met in verse 6. The significant point is that, as children of God, believers abide in Jesus and not in the world. Being true to their origin in God keeps believers from acting like those who belong to the world. They have “a freedom that must be ratified by continually doing and willing what is right...” (Smith, 86).

3:10 God’s Son has been revealed to the world and has called people out of the world to share in his identity. Even though the fullness of this identity has not come into view (3:3), those who abide in Christ will demonstrate Christlike righteousness in the present moment. This is what the Father desires (Jn 15:8). Those who oppose Christ will reveal their loyalty to the evil one.

Envisioning the world as divided between “the children of God” and “the children of the devil” is a dangerous perspective if taken out of context. Such a perspective may lead one to demonize or feel superior to those who aren’t Christians. According to 1 John, the whole world lies under the power of the devil, who traps all human life (5:19). Freedom is only found through rebirth (3:9). The Father makes new life possible by sending God’s Son into the world because God loves the world (Jn 3:16). When we meditate on the Father’s love and the Son’s universal reach (1 Jn 2:2), then we will have a desire not to demonize or feel superior but rather to testify to all people.

reveal our righteousness. But we still sin. We are not yet all we will be someday (v. 2). In the meantime, “All who have this hope in [Christ] purify themselves, just as he is pure” (v. 3).

Ask: What spiritual practices can keep us growing toward being the best version of ourselves that we can be until we see Jesus?

Say: We are God’s children because of God’s love and grace. Because we are God’s children, we should live as God wants us to live. Living as God wants us to live shows that we are God’s children.

CLOSING PRAYER



God of love, help us embrace our identity as your children so we will do what is right. Help us do what is right so we will bear witness to what it means to be your children. Amen.

References

Peter Rhea Jones, *1, 2 & 3 John*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009).

Gail O’Day and Susan E. Hulen, *John*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

George L. Parsenios, *First, Second, and Third John*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1991).

Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*, rev. ed., Reading the New Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005).

CONCLUSION

In this week’s Scripture passage, the author of 1 John encourages his hearers to do what is right because of who they are in Christ. The community has likely experienced the presence of deceivers who advocate a freedom from the law that leads people to sin. The author reminds his hearers that lawlessness and sin are contrary to God’s will. God’s children are called to love, and love does not lead them to sin or be unrighteous. Love fulfills righteousness. This love is not an external standard that one must obey; it’s an internal reality that transforms believers into God’s children. God’s love causes people to become like God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

TEACHING OPTIONS

- ✓ — Psalms of Righteousness
- — Distribute the handout “Psalms of Righteousness” and pens or pencils.

SAY: In today’s lesson text, the writer talks about the importance of righteousness for God’s people. God is righteous. Jesus reveals God’s righteousness to us and makes it possible for us to live in God’s righteousness. The Psalms testify to God’s love of righteousness and teach us what righteousness looks like.

Invite someone to read Psalm 1 aloud while other class members follow the instructions on the handout.

ASK: What words or images stand out in Psalm 1?

Invite someone to read Psalm 15 aloud as class members repeat the exercise.

ASK: What words or images stand out in Psalm 15?

Invite someone to read Psalm 112 as class members repeat the exercise.

ASK: What words or images stand out in Psalm 112?

DISCUSS: Did you hear any overlapping words or images in these three psalms? If so, what are they? How do these words or images help you understand what it means to practice righteousness?

Invite someone to read 1 John 2:1; 2:9; and 3:7.

SAY: The writer of 1 John describes Jesus as righteous.

DISCUSS: How does Jesus fulfill the Psalms’ definition of righteousness? How should we? Why should we?

Doing Right

Invite someone to read 1 John 3:10.

SAY: The writer describes what “the children of the devil” don’t do. We can change his words to a positive statement about what “the children of God” do: “All who do what is right are from God, as are those who love their brothers and sisters in the faith.”

Write the positive version on a whiteboard or flip chart.

ASK: What do you think is right? What single words or short phrases represent what is right?

Write the responses on a whiteboard or flip chart.

Divide the class into two groups. Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Ask one group to list ways that Christians do right. Ask the other group to list ways that Christians can love their siblings in the faith. Have each group share their list.

DISCUSS: How are doing right and loving each other connected? As Christians, can we separate them? Can we do one without doing the other?

Live in Love

Lesson Text: 1 John 3:11-24

A Verse to Remember—1 John 3:18

Background Text: 1 John 3:11-24

Other Lectionary Texts: Acts 4:5-12, Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

Teaching Principle: To love is to give ourselves up for each other.

INTRODUCTION

John 3:16 is probably the best-known verse in the New Testament. It reads, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....” To love as God loves is to give of ourselves. We see the Father’s love in God’s gift of God’s Son. This same holy love leads the Son to lay down his life for the world. The author of 1 John teaches us that if we are God’s children, we too must love as the Father and the Son love, giving ourselves for others’ sake. Christians share in God’s life, but we also share our lives with our siblings in the faith. This requirement to give of ourselves can sound daunting. We might prefer to protect ourselves. The writer reminds us that even though God’s children must live sacrificially, they have a gracious Father who is ready to give them whatever they ask as they follow God’s will. They also have the Holy Spirit to remind them of their identity.

SCRIPTURE CONTEXT

Love is a major theme in 1 John. The author tells us that we are God’s children because of God’s love (3:1). He also tells us that because we are God’s children, we should love our siblings in the faith. He says that someone who claims to be in God’s light but hates a fellow believer is actually in the darkness (2:9), but “whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light...” (2:10). In the verse just before our lesson text, we read that those who don’t love their siblings in the faith “are not from God” (3:10). Now the writer will expand on this vital teaching about loving each other. He will also return to this theme in 4:7-21, which concludes with these words: “The commandment we have from [God] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (v. 21).



Before the Lesson

- (1) Provide copies of the Bible and *Connections Study Guide* for distribution as needed.
- (2) Display the Unit 4 Poster, “In the World Today” (*Connections Resource Kit*).
- (3) Display the following lesson theme outline:
Live in Love—1 John 3:11-24
 - Love One Another (3:11-18)
 - Love Makes Us Bold before God (3:19-22)
 - The Commandment and the Spirit (3:23-24)
- (4) Provide paper and pens or pencils.
- (5) Make sure your classroom has a whiteboard or flip chart and markers.
- (6) If using the first teaching option, prepare copies of the handout “Collects of Love” (*Kit*, p. 16).

BEGINNING THE LESSON



Invite each member of the class to silently read Psalm 23 (the lectionary’s psalm for today).

SAY: Psalm 23 celebrates God’s loving care of God’s people. The psalmist imagines God as a shepherd and himself as a sheep (vv. 1-4) and then imagines God as a host and himself as a banquet guest (vv. 5-6). In celebrating God’s care, the psalmist mentions the dangers faced by a person who follows God: “the darkest valley,” “evil” (v. 4), and “the presence of my enemies” (v. 5).

ASK: Have you ever sensed God leading you into a dangerous situation? Do we ever think about how following Jesus might put us in danger?

Discuss: What can it cost us when we try to practice Christlike love? How does our love bear witness to Christ and to his ways?

SAY: Our lesson text teaches us of the need to practice Christlike love, secure in the knowledge that God is with us.

TEACHING THE LESSON

1 John 3:11-18



Invite someone to read
1 John 3:11.

SAY: The author says that the command to love has been taught to his listeners from the beginning of their journey with Christ.

ASK: How has the message that we should love each other been communicated to you from the beginning of your walk with Christ?

Invite someone to read
1 John 3:12-13.

SAY: The writer uses Cain as an example of someone who didn't love his brother.

ASK: What reasons does the writer give for Cain's murder of Abel?

Invite someone to read 1 John 3:10.

ASK: How does this verse help us think about what the writer says about Cain and Abel?

ASK: People aren't likely to kill us as Cain killed Abel, but how might they display their hate (v. 13)? What might be at the heart of people's negative feelings toward those who practice Christ's love?

Invite someone to read
1 John 3:14-15.

BIBLE BACKGROUND—LOVE ONE ANOTHER

1 John 3:11-18

(11) For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

(12) We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. (13) Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. (14) We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. (15) All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. (16) We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. (17) How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? (18) Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

3:11 The author of 1 John often says that he is refreshing his readers' memory (see 2:21). Here he says that the commandment to love one another is not a new teaching, but rather comes "from the beginning." We can assume that new believers heard teachings about Christian ethics along with teachings about Christ (Talbert, 33). Later in our passage, the writer will imply that believing in Jesus and loving others are inseparable (v. 23).

3:12 The writer uses the story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-16) to illustrate his point. In the Genesis story, Cain kills Abel because God accepts Abel's offering and disregards Cain's. We might wonder what else is going on in Cain and Abel's relationship, but the writer of Genesis 4 doesn't tell us.

The writer of 1 John explains that Cain killed Abel "because [Cain's] deeds were evil and his brother's righteous." He also traces the state of Cain's heart to the fact that he "was from the evil one." In 3:10, the writer said, "The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters" (3:10). Cain, our

writer says, is a child of the devil because he doesn't do right and doesn't love his brother.

Echoing other New Testament passages, our writer describes Abel as "righteous" (Mt 23:35; Lk 11:51; Heb 11:4). Abel's righteousness leads to his death. In this sense, he resembles Jesus, although Jesus' death has a far greater effect (2:2). Curiously, the writer of 1 John doesn't mention Abel's name, instead referring to him twice as Cain's brother. Perhaps the repetition of "brother" helps drive home the author's point: children of God should love their siblings, whether biological or spiritual.

3:13 Both Jesus' and Abel's deaths demonstrate that righteous people can suffer for their obedience to God. The author previously stated that the world doesn't know God's children because the world doesn't know God (3:1). Now, the author offers an intensified description of people's response to God's children: they hate them. The world's hatred should come as no surprise, since people in the world don't have the Father's love.

3:14-15 When the writer says that believers "have passed from death to life" (v. 14a), he is talking about something that happens here and now. "Death" here means a spiritual abode, a realm synonymous with "darkness" and "the world." This dominion is known by its activities, namely, sin and evil. "Life" is also a dominion, synonymous with "light" and "Christ." It is characterized by its own activities, such as acting righteously and practicing love. So people's actions indicate whether they have "passed" from the realm of death to the realm of life. Christ declares the same thing in John's Gospel (5:24), and the apostle Paul speaks of a transfer between the two competing spheres of influence (Rom 6:13).

It might seem extreme that the author connects hatred to murder. Isn't murder worse than hatred? But Jesus says a similar thing in the Sermon on the Mount: inner anger and expressions of hatred toward someone are tantamount to murder (Mt 5:21-22). The story of Cain and Abel reveals how feelings of hatred can lead a person to murder someone.

3:16 Christians learn what love is by looking at Jesus, who lays down his life for others. Love is the

SAY: As our writer uses them, "death" and "life" (v. 14) are realms of being in this world. To pass from death to life is to move from the realm of evil, sin, and death to the realm of righteousness, love, and life.

ASK: According to verse 14, how can we tell if we abide in life rather than in death?

Invite someone to read Matthew 5:21-22.

ASK: In what sense are those who "hate a brother or sister... murderers" (v. 15a)? How does hate reveal that one lives in the realm of death rather than the realm of life?

Invite someone to read 1 John 3:16.

SAY: We know God's love because Jesus "laid down his life for us..." (v. 16a).

ASK: What does this reveal about God's love? What does it reveal about how we should show our love to others?

Invite someone to read 1 John 3:17-18.

SAY: It isn't likely that we will have to literally lay down our lives for someone. It is much more likely that people will have a need we could help address through sacrificial giving.

DISCUSS: How can we move beyond "having to" share with others to "wanting to" share with them? Do you think it is important that we make such progress? Why or why not?

DISCUSS: What does it mean to "love, not in word or speech,

but in truth and action" (v. 18)? How does Jesus show us what this means? Why is it important that we follow his example? Why is it vital that we do so genuinely and with the best motivations?



1 John 3:19-22



Invite someone to read
1 John 3:19-20.

ASK: What has the writer been saying about the kind of life a Christian should live? What does he say our lives should demonstrate? What does he say our actions demonstrate about us?

ASK: In light of what he has been saying, why might he now bring up the scenario of Christians' hearts condemning them? Do our hearts ever condemn us in the same way? What might we need to change if they don't?

SAY: The author reminds his readers that God knows everything, which should reassure them.

ASK: Why should this reassure us? What is the writer challenging us to depend on?

Invite someone to read
1 John 3:21-22.

SAY: When God's grace assures us of our relationship with God, we can boldly ask God for whatever we need.

DISCUSS: Does this mean we get absolutely anything we ask for? How does obeying God's commandments and doing what pleases God (v. 22b) affect what we receive? How does it affect what we ask for?

willingness to give ourselves up for others' sake. The world's hostility may tempt God's children to live defensively, but abiding with Christ requires God's children to live sacrificially. This risky, Christlike love isn't just an attitude that Christians imitate; it's a divine reality that lives and works within them. God's love as seen in Jesus' love indwells God's children and shapes their actions.

3:17-18 Laying down one's life sounds extreme, but this doesn't always mean literally dying. The author asks whether someone with God's love can refuse to share with a fellow believer who needs help. Giving up one's wealth and goods expresses love. But withholding help from a sibling in the faith who is in need reflects a love of the world and of the things of the world, which is incompatible with God's love (2:15a).

This example of practical, real-life, sacrificial love may reflect an actual problem in the community addressed by 1 John. Perhaps people weren't living in ways that showed the love of God. The author says that Christlike love shows itself in loving actions. The book of James makes a similar point (2:14-17).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—LOVE MAKES US BOLD BEFORE GOD

1 John 3:19-22

(19) And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him (20) whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. (21) Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; (22) and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

3:19-20 The author has drawn clear distinctions between being children of God or being children of the devil, being righteous or unrighteous, and practicing or not practicing love. He has insisted that his readers can know if they are God's children by their righteous acts, particularly their loving deeds (vv. 14, 16-17). Like us, 1 John's original readers may have wondered if they were showing God's love. Could they be confident in their status before God? We ask ourselves the same thing.

The writer says of himself and his readers that sometimes “our hearts condemn us” (v. 20). Maybe he is thinking of the absolute statements he has made about the ways children of God should live, especially about the necessity of loving their siblings in the faith and showing that love in sacrificial ways. It was and is troubling for believers to examine their lives and find themselves falling short, particularly when it comes to love. But the author says the fact that “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything” (v. 20) “will reassure our hearts before him” (v. 19). Our confidence in God should override our lack of confidence in ourselves. God knows of our faith in Jesus Christ and of our loving deeds, even if we wonder about our commitment.

3:21 This verse builds on verse 20, which said that if our hearts condemn us—if we doubt our standing with God due to our perceived lack of love—then we need to rely on God’s grace. Such reliance allows us to have hearts that “do not condemn us.”

When that happens, we can speak boldly before God. Later in the letter, the writer speaks of having “boldness on the day of judgment” (4:17). He says we can do this because “perfect love casts out fear” (4:18). When we love with God’s love as we see and experience it in Jesus, we can be bold before God like Jesus was. We can depend on God’s love, grace, and mercy.

3:22 Being assured of our relationship with God, we can boldly ask God for whatever we need. Jesus said a similar thing to his disciples (Jn 14:13-14). This doesn’t mean that Christians always get what they want when they pray. To pray “because we obey the commandments and do what pleases [God]” means that we are praying in line with God’s will. As the Lord’s Prayer leads us to pray, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10).

BIBLE BACKGROUND—THE COMMANDMENT AND THE SPIRIT

1 John 3:23-24

(23) And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. (24) All who obey his commandments abide

SAY: If we are God’s children, then we may ask for anything. But if we are God’s children, then we should also desire what the Father desires and ask accordingly.



1 John 3:23-24



Invite someone to read 1 John 3:23 and Mark 12:31.

SAY AND ASK: The writer has just said that we will receive what we ask from God “because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him” (v. 22). Now he states what God’s commandment is. He says there are two elements to it. What are they?

SAY: The importance of believing that Jesus came in the flesh is a major theme in 1 John. To believe in his name is to believe in him as he really is. Because Jesus came in the flesh, he could show God’s love by laying down his life for us. In doing so, he shows us how we are to love each other.

Invite someone to read 1 John 3:24.

SAY: What role does the Holy Spirit play in helping us believe in Jesus and live in love? Why do we need the Spirit’s help and assurance?



APPLYING THE LESSON



SAY: Today’s lesson text teaches us that we are to love one another. This love is the purposeful giving of ourselves for other people’s sake. It is loving as God loves by following Jesus’ example of laying down his life for us. Our lesson also teaches us that when we are doing what God wants

by giving our lives away, God will give us what we need.

Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Ask class members to write ways they and/or the church need to more actively love another person or a group of people. Then ask them to write a brief prayer asking God for the resources needed to love in these ways.

DISCUSS: How can we as individuals and as a church grow in Christlike love? How can we be as sure as possible that we are doing what God wants?

CLOSING PRAYER



Loving God, you sent your Son into the world to lay down his life for us. Help us follow the Spirit's leadership so that we might love as Christ loves, freely giving ourselves to our siblings in the faith. In Jesus' name, amen.

References

Peter Rhea Jones, *1, 2 & 3 John*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009).

Alicia D. Myers, *Reading John and 1, 2, 3 John: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Reading the New Testament, 2nd Series (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2019).

George L. Parsenios, *First, Second, and Third John*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1991).

Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*, rev. ed., Reading the New Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005).

in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

3:23 The writer of 1 John has said that we can ask God for what we need “because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him” (v. 22). Now he tells us that God’s commandment is twofold.

First, we are to “believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ.” For this author, having faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came in the flesh and laid down his life for us is the heart of the Christian confession. To believe in the name of Jesus is to believe in him as he really is, which means (among other things) to believe that he came in the flesh.

Second, we are to “love one another.” As the writer said earlier in our lesson text, to love one another is to be willing to lay down our lives for each other, which includes sharing our resources with those in need (vv. 16-17).

3:24 The writer has summarized God’s commandments in verse 23. Now he says that those who obey them by believing in Jesus and by loving others abide in God and God abides in them. He also says the Spirit that God has given us proves that God abides in us. This is the Holy Spirit, through whom God comes to us. The author expands on this in chapter 4, especially in verses 13-16.

CONCLUSION

In this week’s Scripture passage, the author of 1 John shows how Christian love works by comparing Cain and Jesus. Cain takes his brother’s life, but Jesus lays down his life for others. God shows us how God loves, so to love as God loves is to give of ourselves for others’ sake. The call to love is inseparable from the confession that Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh. Only by believing that he came into the world in a human life and then surrendered that life can one understand what God’s love looks like. Believing in Jesus and loving as he loves can be difficult in a world where death, sin, the devil, and selfishness still have much influence. Our writer assures us that we have access to a whole new world in Christ, one where the Father gives generously and the Holy Spirit confirms that we are God’s children.

TEACHING OPTIONS

- ✓ — **Making Collects of Love**
- — SAY: Today’s lesson calls us to love our siblings in the faith. One way that we can love each other is to pray for one another.

Distribute the handout “Collects of Love” and pens or pencils.

SAY: One practice that can guide our prayers is praying in the form of a collect. A collect is a simple prayer with a definite form. It helps us keep our desires concentrated and our words brief.

ASK: Why might it be helpful to say short prayers for others?

Go over the sample collect on the handout, pointing out its components.

Invite the class to write two collects for someone who has a need, following the outline on the handout. Encourage volunteers to share one of their collects.

ASK: What do you think of this experience? How could it be a helpful practice for you?

SAY: Pray these prayers daily for a week. You might also consider giving a copy to the people you are praying for.

Biblical Stories of Love

SAY: In today’s lesson, we learn that to truly love, we must give ourselves for others’ sake. Jesus revealed God’s love by giving his life for us. Let’s look at two other biblical examples, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, of how love reveals itself in sacrificial giving.

Invite someone to read 1 Samuel 18:1-4, the story of David and Jonathan.

ASK: What does Jonathan give David? Do you think this was costly for Jonathan? Was it an act of love?

DISCUSS: Jonathan shares his identity with David. Have you ever received this kind of gift from someone else?

Invite someone to read Luke 10:25-37, the parable of the good Samaritan.

ASK: What does the good Samaritan give the victim on the road? Does the Samaritan have any reason to do so? What does the Samaritan have to lose besides money?

DISCUSS: Have you ever been the recipient of the kind of love we see in this story? If so, how did it affect you?

Lead the class to pray to grow in love that gives itself away.



SCOPE AND SEQUENCE FOR MAY–AUGUST 2021

NECESSARY KNOWLEDGE

<i>May 2</i>	<i>Knowing God Loves Us</i>	<i>1 John 4:7-21</i>
<i>May 9</i>	<i>Knowing We Love Others</i>	<i>1 John 5:1-8</i>
<i>May 16</i>	<i>Knowing We Have Eternal Life</i>	<i>1 John 5:9-21</i>
<i>May 23</i>	<i>Knowing the Spirit Helps Us</i>	<i>Romans 8:22-27</i>
<i>May 30</i>	<i>Knowing We Are God's Children</i>	<i>Romans 8:12-21</i>

FOLLOWING JESUS

<i>June 6</i>	<i>Doing God's Will</i>	<i>Mark 3:19b-35</i>
<i>June 13</i>	<i>Hearing Jesus' Teaching</i>	<i>Mark 4:21-34</i>
<i>June 20</i>	<i>Having Questions</i>	<i>Mark 4:35-41</i>
<i>June 27</i>	<i>Trusting in Jesus</i>	<i>Mark 5:21-43</i>

A SENSE OF PLACE

<i>July 4</i>	<i>Familiar and Unfamiliar Places</i>	<i>Mark 6:1-13</i>
<i>July 11</i>	<i>Challenging and Risky Places</i>	<i>Mark 6:14-29</i>
<i>July 18</i>	<i>Deserted and Crowded Places</i>	<i>Mark 6:30-34, 53-56</i>
<i>July 25</i>	<i>Demanding and Rewarding Places</i>	<i>John 6:1-15</i>

REAL WORLD FAITHFULNESS

<i>August 1</i>	<i>Confessing Sin</i>	<i>2 Samuel 12:1-13</i>
<i>August 8</i>	<i>Mourning Loss</i>	<i>2 Samuel 18:5-9, 14-15, 31-33</i>
<i>August 15</i>	<i>Pursuing Wisdom</i>	<i>1 Kings 3:3-14</i>
<i>August 22</i>	<i>Seeking God</i>	<i>1 Kings 8:25-30, 41-43</i>
<i>August 29</i>	<i>Pressing On</i>	<i>James 1:17-27</i>

**Scripture citations and lesson titles subject to change.*