

Gospel of John

PROLOGUE - THE WORD BECAME FLESH. 1

October 18

John 1:1-5. Christ the creator

John had moved to Ephesus and served there as the leader of the Asian churches. By the time he decided to write up his memories, he had become a cross-cultural person who was well aware of how the gospel needed to be preached to the Hellenistic world. He set out to adapt his Jewish story into something universal.

It also seems that he wanted to fill in stories missing from previous accounts. He added material, including six miracles not found elsewhere. He added one-on-one dialogues, longer arguments with opponents, and a long discourse and prayer with his disciples at the last supper.

He began with the Greek notion of the Word, and connected it to Creation and to Christ, starting with a declaration that he is the one who spoke all things we can see into being. His book repeatedly connects Jesus with light.

Do I see Jesus in creation?

October 19

John 1:6-8. Jesus the Tabernacle

The poetic and symbolic style of John comes through clearly in this first section. He compared Jesus to the arrival of light and John the Baptist as a witness to that light. He mentioned becoming God's child through new birth, an image he will develop more.

He says the word became flesh and lived with us. The Greek word he uses is the same one the Greek translation for the Old Testament uses for the tabernacle. This sets up an important theme in how John structures his book. He goes from the outside to inside of the tabernacle and connects Jesus to different furnishings. For example, Jesus is called the Lamb, and those were sacrificed outside on the altar. He is called the Water of Life and there was a laver outside for cleansing. Inside there was Bread and Light, and he is both of these.

Later we learn that John was acquainted with the high priest (John 18:13). Perhaps there was some family connection, but we see an attachment to the Temple and its worship stronger than in any other gospel. The other gospels spend most of their time in Galilee and the north until the final crisis, but John repeatedly shows Jesus going to Jerusalem and the Temple for prescribed feasts.

Do I see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament Temple imagery?

October 20

John 1:19-28. John the Baptist

Throughout the book there are complex discussions of who Jesus is. In this first discussion with John the Baptist, the religious leaders discover that he is not claiming to be the Messiah, but he clearly identifies himself as someone who is preparing the way for a greater figure. What the nature of this greater figure might be is not yet clear, but over the course of the book he will be identified as Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, and a miraculous healer.

John will reappear in dialogues, but his gruesome death is left out. The synoptics give us details of his arrest, imprisonment and beheading. Luke gives us details of his birth and his family. All of them focus on his baptismal work, and his clarity in seeing that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Do I see Jesus through John's clear lens?

October 21

John 1:29-34. Lamb on the Altar

John identified Jesus as the lamb of God, a reference to the first item in the tabernacle courtyard. On the altar the lambs and other sacrificial animals were killed, and prayer for reconciliation with God was made. Each of these symbols of items in the tabernacle form a backbone to the structure of John's book. To reflect that structure and the chain that runs through the Gospel, these sonnets take the last line of one poem and use it as the first line of the next one.

Christ entered time and space and tented here

To make all the ancient symbols living, real.
Messiah and master, making things appear
As living things, his nature to reveal.
Where the tabernacle crossed, John said
"Look here! This man is the Lamb of God!"
I can't see Christ as a beast which bled.
My eyes are dim, and it is blurred, odd.
John saw clearly the outline of the tent.
The altar at the entrance. Faintly, I see
Christ pinned down, broken, beaten, bent.
Oh, Lamb of God, please come close to me.
Your death gives life, and you are what I give.

Please, I want your gift that I might live.

Do I see and appreciate Jesus as a sacrificial lamb?

October 22

John 1:35-44 The new disciples

We learn from John that the core start of Jesus' leaders came from people recruited by John the Baptist. Andrew and an unnamed other (might this have been John?) went to follow Jesus when John the Baptist pointed him out as the lamb of God.

Andrew recruited Peter and then Jesus called their hometown friend, Philip. Philip went to call Nathanael. John never told the story of how he and James were added to the group, but the other gospels do. It was more networking since those brothers were business partners with Andrew and Peter and left their fishing to follow him.

Am I willing to use any networks I am part of to encourage people to come to Jesus?

October 23

John 1:45-51 First conversation: Nathanael

John introduces conversations that have important spiritual depths. As in many other things, there are seven of these and this is the first. I have identified them in the titles to try to show John's complex interlocking structure. He not only has seven conversations, seven miraculous signs, there are seven feasts in Jerusalem, seven prophecies of resurrection, seven instances of saying "I am..." with an added image, seven identifications of himself with light, and seven times he cites himself as a witness. In short, there are seven instances of seven different things.

This can hardly be an accident, and since he uses precisely the same technique of "seven sevens" in the Revelation. We see that he is a highly symbolic thinker who is drawing on the idea of perfection contained in that number. In short, he is the most poetic of the the gospel writers.

In Jesus' encounter with Nathanael, there is an allusion to his ability to see into hearts and actions, his promise that something very much like Jacob's experience in seeing angels ascending and descending to heaven will be given his followers, and his delight in a man who enjoyed some private meditation time under a fig tree. For a reflective man, what an astonishing fulfillment meeting Messiah must have been.

Nathanael

Under a tree

Thinking, meditating
Hoping a future king would come
Dreaming

Do I spend time meditating like Nathanael?

October 24

John 2:1-12. First sign: Water to Wine

John made a point of saying that this miraculous sign was the first display of Jesus' glory, and the disciples believed in him. The ordinary situation of a wedding of a family friend became the occasion for something extraordinary. The large water pots recall the laver in the front of the tabernacle for washing, and had become customary for observant Jews to use in their homes. But to take water to wine is startling.

Jesus' family is central in this story with Jesus' mother playing a role by asking for his help.. The final lines of the story say he went back to Capernaum and was with his mother, his brothers, and his new disciples. In a few chapters the family relationship becomes more fraught, but here all still seems to be well.

Later, at the crucifixion, Jesus will entrust the care of his mother to John, and so they doubtless shared their memories through the years. Tradition identifies a particular house in Ephesus as that of Mary. A logical possibility that she moved there with John or perhaps she died in Jerusalem before he moved there. How must it have been for Mary to see her son, who she knew was unique, begin to make his supernatural power more public?

What experiences in my life started me moving toward belief?

October 25

John 2:13-17. First feast: Passover

Three feasts in Israel were supposed to collect all as pilgrims to Jerusalem, and John showed Jesus honoring this by going there for Passover. The other gospels put the temple cleansing at the end, but John put it as Jesus' first act of restoration of true worship. He began his story by connecting Jesus to this beautiful place of worship.

In a future passover, Jesus would be condemned, would become the Passover lamb, and would incorporate every part of the temple symbolism into himself. It was fitting that a necessary purification of the symbol of God's presence on earth be done, just as it had been done so repeatedly in Old Testament stories. Now the real presence of God was entering there.

Passover commemorated the liberation from Egyptian slavery, the great symbol of God's saving power for his people. Jesus opened the way for us to become part of this tradition of liberation.

Have I experienced the liberation Jesus brings?

October 26

John 2:18-23 First Resurrection prophecy: the temple

The other gospels give three instances when Jesus predicted his death and resurrection, with the disciples grieved and confused by the prophecy of suffering, and completely bewildered by any reference to resurrection. John instead gives seven prophecies that focus on suffering and resurrection.

The first is in the other gospels and was used as evidence against him in his trial. It is that if the temple were destroyed, he could raise it up in three days. John said that after Jesus was raised, they remembered this and believed Jesus and the scriptures. John reinforced his theme that Jesus encompasses all the Temple/tabernacle imagery with this explicit identification of Jesus with the temple.

Jesus, you could look ahead--
There were seven times you said
That you would rise from the dead.

"Destroy this and in three days
This holy temple I will raise."
No one understood this phrase.

Do I find believing in Jesus' resurrection easy or a challenge?

October 27

John 3:1-21 Second conversation: Nicodemus

This conversation is the source of one of our most familiar ways of sharing why Jesus came and what he did. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16). It is the source of the imagery of being born again as the necessary step to enter the kingdom. We owe a great debt to this Pharisee who was willing to go against the critical spirit of his fellows, and actually try to understand the message Christ brought.

Nicodemus
Coming at night
Curious, inquiring

Hoping, needing to hear the truth
Wondering

Am I open to ask questions and listen and not pretend I know it all?

October 28

John 3:22-36 Jesus is Messiah

This is news: Jesus' disciples were also baptizing. Though ambiguous here, John 4:2 clarifies that Jesus himself was not baptizing. When asked about this, John the Baptist not only showed no jealousy, he said that Jesus must become greater and he less and less.

He then gave testimony of Jesus' uniqueness:

- he came from above
- he is greater than anyone else
- he tells what he has seen and heard
- he was sent by God
- he speaks God's words
- God's Spirit is on him without measure
- he is God's son, loved by the Father
- he has been given all authority.

Those who respond to him in belief will receive two great gifts:

- we will discover God is true
- we will have eternal life

There is no ambiguity and John knows that Jesus is God.

Have I believed and discovered that God is true?

October 29

John 4:1-9 Third conversation: Samaritan woman

Jesus kindness to foreigners and women and unrespectable people is all together in this encounter. She had at least three strikes against her, but from his point of view she was the perfect one with whom to share that he was Messiah.

They were in a place with a lot of prophetic significance. Jacob had dug this well, his son Joseph was buried there, and now their greater son was revealing himself there. It stood in simplicity as a place where the true God could reveal himself. In contrast, the City of Samaria had been built up and renamed Sebaste by Herod the Great. He built a temple there to Caesar Augustus. But, as usual in the gospels, this type of idolatry was ignored.

Samaritan
At the old well
Giving Jesus water
Hoping, needing a fresh start
Longing

Do I believe Jesus can give me a fresh start?

October 30

John 4:10-42 Water of Life

As the spirituality of the conversation deepened, Jesus told the woman that he had living water. Already in the miracle at Cana we saw a possible reference to the laver at the entrance to the tabernacle, but here Jesus made an explicit reference to himself as the meaning behind that symbol.

*"Please, I want your gift that I might live
Without having to haul from this well,"
She said, believing his word that he could give
some living water. Could she tell
He was offering something unseen?
"A potion: removes stains, grime will go,
Struggle marks vanish, leaves you clean."
There's a fountain in the courtyard where
People wash and every guest rests
At home in this comfortable outdoors
A weekly respite from life's contests
and the trouble that it pours.
That he has living water is quite true.
Jesus acts to make something new.*

Do I feel Jesus' living water flowing in my life?

October 31

John 4:43-54 Second sign: Nobleman's son⁶

Jesus power to heal is not limited by needing to stand next to someone and touch them. He proved it here and this serves as a great reassurance to us who cannot see him standing next to us. That does not matter, he can still heal or meet whatever needs we have.

God's signature in creation

Is the love in all he designs,
And we can know and believe,
Seeing all Jesus' signs.

Do I see the signs of Jesus' power in the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of my life?

November 1

John 5:1-3 Second feast: Holy day

The holy day is not specified, but once more Jesus chose to be in Jerusalem to celebrate as one of the community of faith. In that context he was near the Temple and then went to a particular set of pools known for having healing properties.

It might have been Pentecost, since the three "required" feasts were Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. We have Passover mentioned as the first and sixth feasts, tabernacles as the fourth (John 7), and the feast of Hanukkah (John 10) which was created between the end of the Old Testament and Jesus' arrival as the fifth. If it was Pentecost there is a beautiful parallelism that shortly after the Ascension when the disciples received the power of the Spirit on Pentecost, John and Peter healed another lame man near the Temple as Jesus would do at this point.

Healing is so strongly associated with the gift of the Spirit that it is an exceptionally appropriate feast on which to heal someone who had not been helped by the existing resources.

Archaeologists have found what they believe to be the pool of Bethesda, and it has an image of an angel descending. Far more important though, was the arrival of Jesus at this time and place.

Do I have the vision to be looking for people to who need healing?

November 2

John 5:4-15 Third sign: Lame man

At a place intended for healing, Jesus encountered a lonely ("no one to help me"), chronically ill (38 years) man. "Would you like to get well?" Jesus asked. "I can't sir" he replied, perhaps giving a picture of a chronically depressed person with little hope. But Jesus healed him anyway without any particular expression of faith on his part.

Many of us have emotional or physical wounds that do not end. Chronic illness of some kind dampens our hope that healing is possible--illness has just plain gone on too long. Perhaps we even lose our will, and certainly our expectations, that we can be healed.

But our discouragement and helplessness can be overcome. We can see dramatic changes after many years without change. This sick man did not know Jesus could cure him. He was putting his hope on getting into the pool, but Jesus intervened. He can do the same for us.

Am I praying in hope for those with chronic illness?

November 3

John 5:16-23 Son of God

In John there is no disguise. Jesus' identity was made very clear and declared openly all the way through the gospel. He repeatedly identified God as his Father which made the Jewish leaders determined to kill him for blasphemy. He expounded on the relationship between Father and son:

- the Son only copies the Father
- the Father loves the Son
- the Father tells him everything he is doing
- the Father leaves judgment to the son

Because of this relationship:

- We will be astonished
- He will raise from the dead

We have a choice whether to honor the Son. If we do so we honor God the Father. If we do not, we dishonor the Father.

Am I honoring Jesus as God's Son?

November 4

John 5:24-30 Eternal life

Jesus promised unending life and no condemnation for those who believe in him. When we believe, we pass from death to life. John never quoted Jesus speaking of the Kingdom of God. Instead, he quoted longer and more complex discourse about having new life that comes from God.

If the synoptics built on Israel's story, the promise of a perfect peaceable kingdom and the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises was an appropriate way to present Jesus. But since John was speaking to people without that background and understanding, he looked for ways to explain Jesus to them. Jesus had used images from nature to explain himself, and John focused on those. In this case he placed attention on the wonder of life that is all around us.

He looked ahead to when all the dead would be raised, the obedient to eternal life, those who had done wrong to judgment. John universalized the message and selected language that he thought his listeners could grasp. His language of life versus death paralleled many aspects of being in or out of the kingdom. It is not just in the future we will have eternal life, Jesus said we can have it starting now.

Am I already living conscious of my unending life?

November 5

John 5:31-40 Witnesses

Jesus validated himself by saying he had five witnesses in his favor. 1) John the Baptist, 2) His teachings, 3) His miracles, 4) God the Father, and 5) the Scriptures.

All of these validated that he was truly God's son. The fact they were having trouble believing in him raised doubts about their relationship to God or about their understanding of scripture.

At that time the Emperor Caesar Augustus called himself a Son of God. The reference was to his predecessor Julius Caesar who was deified on his death, and Augustus was an adopted son. This title gave him special validity and since ancestor worship was part of the culture, it did not seem shocking. Here Jesus puts himself in the same league as the emperor, but he is claiming the God of the Old Testament as his father. That was shocking for his Jewish listeners.

The idea that someone can simultaneously be man and God, and can be God himself as well as the Son of God, is hard to grasp. We tend to question all of these things, and we need to see if we think these witnesses validate Jesus.

Do I believe these are valid pieces of evidence for who Jesus is?

November 6

John 5:41-47. Moses' testimony

Jesus said that though they claimed to rely on Moses, he could tell they did not mean it. If they did so they would have recognized him. Everything in the first books of Moses repeatedly pointed to Christ. The law, the sacrifices, the tabernacle, prophecy of a future prophet like Moses, and many more things were direct preparation for Jesus.

Why can't you see it? Jesus wondered, It was because they were looking at life in a worldly fashion that valued human reputation more than love. Christ said, "Your approval or disapproval means nothing to me.". He was not working from the standpoint of human reputation, but rather God's approval. This is a model for us as well; we will make better judgements if we aren't trying to earn favor with others.

Do I recognize Jesus in the books of Moses? Do I emulate Jesus in seeking God's approval, not human approval?

November 7

John 6:1-15 Fourth sign: Feeding the 5000, Third Feast: Passover

We have read this story three times before, but now John put it in a different context. In the structure of his book we are in the Holy Place and the table of the bread and wine is our next stop. Further, he will go on to share a long discourse about how Jesus is that bread. But first, he told the story of this miracle of provision close to the upcoming Passover, yet another reference to the feasts, and an appropriate time for providing bread to the people.

Jesus acts to make something new.

"These crowds are hungry and they must be fed."

Said Jesus as the children's' hunger grew.

"Where can we go to buy these people bread?"

He already knew what He planned say--

And by speaking make something real.

We drink the bread and wine and in this way,

His daily bread transfigured can now heal.

Just as for the hungry crowds today,

Christ welcomes any who are needing to be fed.

Such hospitality! It is his way

To give himself to us as living bread,

in moments that we recognize as grace.

His spirit is present in this special place.

Do I believe that Jesus can do the "impossible" things that are challenging me right now?

November 8

John 6:16-21 Fifth sign: Walks on water

The seven signs John selected show the extent of Christ's power over all aspects of created life were: 1) Water to wine showed his ability to manage the chemical changes that underpin our lives, 2) Healing the nobleman's son from a distance showed that he controls life fully, not merely through some kind of physical connection, 3) Healing the man who was lame showed control over the muscles and bones of our bodies, and 4) Multiplying bread showed his control over replicating DNA. This fifth sign showed his control over weather. He would then 6) heal a blind man showing control over the intricacies of sight, and finally 7) he would raise a man from death.

Chemistry, life, bodies, DNA, weather, our senses and brains, death. This is a compelling portfolio for a miracle worker. We may have a struggle understanding miracles, but since our sciences are catching up to some of these things, we cannot suppose they are impossible. These signs were given that we might believe.

Do I believe that Jesus is the powerful creator able to interact as he wills with his creation?

November 9

John 6:22-34 Bread from heaven

All the gospels tell the story of the feeding of the 5,000, but John is the only one who includes the detail that it was almost time for the annual Passover. This is significant to his theme of how Jesus' life fits symbolically with the temple and its observances. Unleavened bread was eaten at Passover and for the following week. So in addition to being the Passover Lamb, Jesus was also the bread. The yeast, symbolizing sin, was left out, making the imagery work.

This discourse followed that event, and in John's symbolic way of thinking he easily connected providing bread for hungry people, bread and wine in the temple, manna, and the Passover bread and wine. All of them symbolize Jesus.

One gets the impression of a persistent, greedy crowd who wanted to find Jesus so they could get more free food. They got into boats, went various places, and finally tracked him down. Jesus corrected their quest for food and said they needed to be looking for eternal life. Bread from heaven is something Moses did not give, but God gave. He then declared that he is the true bread from heaven.

Do I experience being nourished daily by Jesus as the bread from heaven?

November 10

John 6:35-59 First "I am..." Bread

John did not present parables from Jesus, but he used many elemental metaphors that describe him. These familiar things are part of our daily lives, things we can see and feel, but which are now imbued with spiritual significance and attachment to God himself. The idea that Jesus is bread not only reminds us of our daily bread, it goes back to the imagery in the tabernacle where there were holy loaves set aside for the priestly meals. And it looks forward to the last supper when Christ took the bread and said that it was his body. This then is part of our ongoing experience of God's presence.

The line that follows Jesus' declaration that he is the bread of life, is a promise: "whoever comes to me will never go hungry." He promises complete satisfaction. When we are restless and hungry for something different in life, it is good to remember this promise. Given John's

purpose of connecting Jesus to our daily lives, we also notice and appreciate our daily bread, and make the spiritual connection to his satisfying spiritual nourishment.

Freshly risen rolls with the yeasty smell
Crusty loaves out of the oven
Warm slices slathered with jam
And I am filled, contented!
Jesus, you nourish me.

Do I see the symbolism of Christ's self-giving in my daily bread?

November 11

John 6: 60-71 Son of Man

Never having mentioned the calling of the twelve, here their identity as a group is assumed. Simon Peter and Judas are included, and Jesus already knew Judas would betray him. He was already referred to as a "devil.". This foreshadows Luke and John's assertions that Satan entered Judas to carry out the betrayal.

It says many of his disciples deserted him because it was too hard to accept the idea of eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood. But Judas still hung around and Jesus did not make him leave. Peter had a more positive reason for staying: there was nowhere else to go for the words of eternal life.

Jesus added to the mystery by saying that they would see the Son of Man ascending. The imagery comes from Daniel 7 where the Son of Man ascended to heaven and went before God's throne. We can see now that this was a prophecy of his ascension after his resurrection, but to the disciples at this point it was just one more mystery.

Do I believe Jesus is the only one where I can get the words of eternal life?

November 12

John 7: 1-13 Fourth feast: Feast of Shelters

Here we see a sad interaction between Jesus and his brothers. They didn't believe in him, and they scoffed at his miracles and dared him to prove himself. How disheartening that those who knew him well were so disbelieving.

Jesus said it was not the right time and he intended not to go to Jerusalem where he had already aroused so much opposition. But then he went and stayed out of public view. There was a lot of discussion about him--some favorable, some unfavorable. People knew, however, that the leaders disapproved of him.

A line that stands out is "now is not the right time." It seems we must learn that timing matters and be sensitive to God's call to do things at the right time. Trying to have a ministry when it is not God's time is discouraged by Jesus' example.

Am I willing to try to discern God's timing?

November 13

John 7:14-24 Sabbath

Jesus must have decided the time was right, because he began teaching mid-festival. The leaders were angry with him for healing on the Sabbath. He defended himself by saying what he was teaching was from God.

A piece of evidence he raised to justify giving life through healing on the Sabbath was the practice of circumcision. This was so important and so tied to the eighth day that it superseded any Sabbath rules. Could healing not fall into that category of things that supercede the rules? Elsewhere he pointed out that animals were cared for on Sabbath, and an accident with an animal would be dealt with, and that is was a day intended to bless and bring life.

It is hard for us to understand how they could have been so rigid about this. But we also have our points of rigidity and our demands that people follow rules to demonstrate their orthodoxy.

Where are my points of rigidity?

November 14

John 7:25-36 Second Resurrection prophecy: Can't follow me

The evidence that Jesus was Messiah was contested. Twice in this section the leaders tried to arrest him, but could not. When he said "you won't be able to come where I am" they supposed he spoke of traveling to another country, but he spoke of going back to heaven.

The puzzlement and confusion of the leaders will become even more murderous and their actions will expedite this return to heaven. But for any of us who believe, the promise is "seek and you will find" not "you will search and not find me.". In John 14 he promised he would go and prepare a place for us and would come and get us.

"There's a reason I was sent.
But you'll wonder where I went."
No one could tell what he meant.

Do I have confidence I will see Jesus in heaven?

November 15

John 7: 37-39 Gift of the Spirit

John has a particular emphasis on Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit. References to the Spirit, particularly in the last supper discourse, are many, giving us a rich theology of the Spirit. John, as a mystical poetic personality, perhaps understood and delighted in the promise of the Spirit in a way his more mundane colleagues missed.

Here is a beautiful image of the Spirit as water flowing out from us. I can picture this as something like a white water rafting river that is energetic, joyful, and carries us along so fast it feels risky and exhilarating. The life-giving, abundant waters of God's love, grace, power, and peace flowing freely out of us is what we desire for all who believe in Jesus. No bitter water, only joy.

Am I asking for the rivers of the Spirit to flow out of my life?

November 16

John 7:40-55 Who is he?

We humans like to jump to conclusions and often do so based on some pre existing framework. We suppose we know things that a little investigation would disprove. Here the leaders took the Malachi prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and misused it against Jesus. If they had asked, they might have discovered that Jesus had been born there. But they preferred not to find out and to stick to their assumption he was not the Messiah.

Since they knew he came from Galilee they considered that sufficient evidence to discredit him. Nicodemus proposed talking to Jesus and finding things out, but they did not want to bother. The temple guards had backed down from arresting Jesus and the leaders mocked them, saying that the experts knew more than the ignorant crowds to whom he was appealing. We are in danger when we are so sure of our expertise that we are not willing to inquire, learn and actually analyze new information.

Am I closed minded or am I willing to ask questions and get more information?

November 17

John 8:1-11 Jesus' mercy

This story, unique to John, shows Jesus' compassion for a sinful woman in the face of her angry male accusers. The man who had been with her was absent, though Leviticus 20:10 said both man and woman caught in adultery must be put to death. In Deuteronomy 22:22-24 stoning was prescribed if the woman was a virgin.

In this ugly and sexist scene, Jesus diffused the potential violence by saying only those without sin could throw the first stone. They left, and the only one who was without sin offered forgiveness rather than condemnation.

The Law's guidance mattered, but was not the whole story. For example, the adulterous David and Bathsheba received forgiveness rather than the death penalty as they repented. Hosea showed mercy to his adulterous wife, buying her from slavery rather than organizing her death. Jesus repeatedly called the religious leaders toward flexibility and love that took the whole story of the Old Testament into account, rather than one proof text. They could not hear the message.

Am I merciful to those who have violated sexual boundaries?

November 18

John 8:12-20. Second "I am..." Light

Jesus taught in the temple and though they had recently tried to arrest him, they could not do so, because spiritually it was not yet the right time. He declared himself to be the light, and if they would follow him, they would not stumble. Though they accused him of false claims, they did not understand that he claimed God as his Father. When they finally grasped that, they felt completely justified in condemning him to death for blasphemy. (John 19:7)

In the previous chapter he had gone to the Festival of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, and one cannot help but wonder if this was why light was so strongly in his mind. At that festival there were four large menorahs set up on 50 foot high pillars in the temple courtyard and the light shone out over the city. The people camped in their tents in the valley, and the candles in the evening surely gave a vision of beautiful light.

For us, too, the experience of light reminds us of Jesus and reminds us that he asked us to be people who shine out to the world to draw others to him.

Sky the color of the Virgin's robe,
Billowing glowing Ascension clouds,
Sunlight outlining clouds with gold,
And my heart cries glory!
Jesus, you shine into me.

Am I walking without stumbling with Jesus as my light?

November 19

John 8: 21-30 Third Resurrection prophecy: Can't follow

Jesus had not been arrested because "his time had not yet come.". Once more he told the leaders he would be going where they could not come. Now they wondered if he was thinking of suicide.

That Jesus was going where they could not follow challenged their thinking. He would be entering a kind of life that is something the world had never seen before where he could appear and disappear, disguise his appearance, eat food and be touched, but gravitate up and out of their sight.

He prophesied that they would kill him on a cross. Three times he repeated "you will die in your sins(s)." That could change if they would believe in him. Many listening to him did believe. We have the same choice, either to believe in him or to die in our sins. It is a stark choice where it is easy to see the better option.

Have I believed in Jesus?

November 20

John 8:31--38. Truth

The epigram, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free" is applied far outside the bounds of adherence to Jesus. But if we take this speech seriously, we realize that Jesus was saying we are slaves to sin and his truth can free us from it. We can be transformed by Jesus' words. He repeatedly claimed in John his words were direct quotes from his Father.

Abraham had also been set free from sin by faith. If the people had truly understood that, they would have placed less emphasis on their physical descent from Abraham, and more on his spiritual example and being spiritual descendants.

Have I been freed from sin by Jesus' truth?

November 21

John 9: 1-12 Sixth sign: Blind man

Jesus reiterated that he is the light of the world. He did this in the context of healing a man born blind, bringing him literal light. The disciples supposed this affliction came from either his sin (in the womb?) or that of his parents. Jesus said no, that the purpose was to demonstrate God's power.

The Pool of Siloam where Jesus sent the man to wash is known to archaeology. It was for ritual washing before temple observances, and had been built by Herod the Great. It was about the size of two football fields. The blind man must have been experienced and resourceful in

getting around to go on his own. His walk to the pool was a walk of faith and it was rewarded. His acquaintances could not believe it was the same man.

They mystery healer was still a mystery even to the one healed. But he knew God's power had transformed his life.

Do I believe God's power can touch my needs and those of others I care about?

November 22

John 9:13-34 Controversy over the healing

We've seen that Jesus identified himself as the light, and then he healed a man blind from birth and let light flood into him for the first time. In the Holy Place the light from the candlesticks would later be used by John in Revelation as symbolic of the light coming from different churches. The following poem draws from all of these things.

*His spirit is present in this special place.
we see in the light and can perceive
The nuances in each person's face.
A mystery substance--light--lets us believe
That anything outside is even there.
So ordinary. Known. What is this thing
That is a ground of comfort and of care?
A mystic candlestick is brightly shining.
In here is food and safety. In this light
subtly suffused, we're surrounded by
One who claimed to be the light. Our night
Is opened up to what is real and why.
We see, like the man who was born blind,
Christ is all, the one that love will find.*

Has Christ opened my blind eyes?

November 23

John 9:35-41 Jesus reveals himself

The mystery healer found the healed blind man and asked if he believed in the Messiah, the Son of Man. When Jesus revealed himself, the man worshipped him. Jesus applied blindness to the spiritual arena and the Pharisees realized he was speaking of them. The problem, he responded, was that they were convinced they could see.

Are we not in the same danger of assuming our theological rightness and spirituality? But if we are humble enough to admit we cannot see, Jesus can open our eyes.

Do I believe Jesus can transform my spiritual blindness?

November 24

John 10:1-10 Third "I am...": Gate

Jesus compared himself as the gate to the sheepfold, the way in. He will compare himself to the shepherd who leads his sheep in, contrasted with thieves who break in by coming over the wall. The sheepfold is an image of safety, and Jesus is the means by which we experience security. The gate keeps out danger, and he ends with the promise that inside, in safety, he gives us abundant life.

An iron gate in a stone wall
If opened, one goes into a garden
Chairs set comfortably under trees
And I am at peace.
Jesus, you open a safe space for me.

Do I trust Jesus' protection?

November 25

John 10:11-16 Fourth "I am...": Shepherd

The Old Testament patriarchs were shepherds, David was a shepherd, and in Psalms and the prophets God identified himself as a shepherd. Best known and best loved of these references is Psalm 23. God is described as one who provides, gives rest, guides, protects, comforts, heals, exalts, and blesses. Jesus gathered all this imagery to himself when he said he is the shepherd.

A small black lamb beside the road
Apart from the other sheep,
A small boy claims him
And I delight in the tenderness.
Jesus, you pick me up.

Do I see myself as a lamb in Jesus' arms?

November 26

John 10: 17-21 Fourth Resurrection prophecy: Power to take up my life

Jesus said he was laying down his life that he could have it back again. He repeated that he was laying down his life voluntarily and had the power to take it back. People were divided between thinking he was crazy or that he was a miracle worker who needed to be listened to.

In the seven resurrection prophecies, Jesus repeated the theme in different ways:

- 1) The temple of his body would be raised (2:19)
- 2) Listeners cannot follow him (7:33-34)
- 3) Listeners cannot follow him (8:21)
- 4) He will take back his life (10:17-18)
- 5) He will enter glory (12:23)
- 6) He will enter glory (13:31)
- 7) His disciples will see him again (16:16)

Do I believe in the wonder of the resurrection?

November 27

John 10: 22-30 Fifth feast: Hanukkah

Hanukkah, familiar to us today as one of the highlights of Jewish celebration, was established to commemorate the victory over a wicked king. He had defiled the temple, but once he was defeated and his idolatry removed, the multiplication of consecrated oil to continue to light the temple was seen as a miracle to celebrate.

Jesus was asked if he was Messiah and replied, "I've already told you, and you don't believe me.". In this context he offered a comforting line for those who had believed in him: "my sheep recognize my voice."

The idea that God still speaks to us in our hearts and we can discern that from amidst all the thoughts we have, gives us hope and peace. Then came more comforting words, "they will never perish" and "no one will snatch them away from me.". As part of Jesus' flock, we are safe.

Do I rest in the security of my relationship with Christ?

November 28

John 10:31-42 Stones to kill

This is the second time the leaders picked up stones to kill Jesus. In John 8:59 they picked them up in the temple. Their contention was that he was blasphemous, and claiming to be God. In John, the offense for which he would be condemned was already clear at this point.

They once more tried to arrest him. More than any other gospel, John emphasized the ongoing tension between Jesus and the people at the very top of the religious hierarchy. All the gospels speak of their desire to kill him, but John cites six unsuccessful attempts to arrest him. (John 7:30, 32, 44-45, 8:20, 10:39, 11:57). The seventh attempt was successful and led to his crucifixion. (John 18:12).

If I face opposition do I live with a certainty that God is still in control of my life?

November 29

John 11:1-15 For God's glory

It is a mysterious thing that there is such a thing as illness that is for God's glory. This is what Jesus said of his friend Lazarus' illness. He promised it would not end in death, so the disciples accepted a delay in going to Bethany. Nor did they see much in Jesus' comment he would wake Lazarus. It made sense that good sleep was part of recovery. So Jesus had to explain that Lazarus had died.

But it was a temporary and reversible death. In applying this, there are moments in our lives when someone may be extremely ill, even close to death, but we have an inner gift of certainty they will recover. This dramatic recovery does bring glory to God for those who see his grace and mercy.

Do I see any recovery of health, even smaller ones, as an occasion to give glory to God?

November 30

John 11:16-24 Fourth Conversation: Martha

Thomas, a realist, could foresee death for all of them if they headed back to Jerusalem, but was willing to take the risk. Martha, another realist, expressed her sadness that Jesus, a great healer, had allowed his friend to die. But despite her disappointment, she still trusted him. Both of them must have suffered from a well-developed streak of pessimism. But they both persisted in their relationship with Jesus, showing that underneath that strata of gloom was a deeper strata of faith.

Martha

Finding her friend

Telling him her brother's dead

Uncertain why he had not come

Resigned

Do I allow my faith to overcome my pessimism?

December 1

John 11:25-27 Fifth "I am...": Life

It is in the context of his conversation with Martha that Jesus gave the fifth "I am...". He explained that he is resurrection and life. He brings life out of death, and he is the source of all life as our creator. Every day of our lives is a gift we should not take for granted, and over and over we are protected from dangers that could threaten to take our lives. When we are rescued, we have an even deeper appreciation of what a joyful gift we have been given.

A health crisis

Hovering between life and death

The great reprieve and longer life.

I am overcome with gratitude.

Jesus, you keep our hearts beating.

Do I appreciate the great gift of life?

December 2

John 11:28-37. Jesus' compassion

Mary had not yet anointed Jesus' feet, but was identified by this act at the beginning of the story of Lazarus. Perhaps John had told her story often enough that this was a natural way to think of her. Mary made the same statement Martha had: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.". Her tears moved him, and he also wept.

He doubtless treasured Mary's attachment to him and his teaching. In Luke, not any other gospel, we are told of her sitting at Jesus' feet to listen to him and his defense of spiritual receptivity. Her heart had been broken by her brother's death, and Jesus' heart was broken with her. We need to have this same tender heart for our friends and share their grief in times of loss.

Is empathy natural for me, or is it an area where I need to learn more?

December 3

John 11:38-44 Seventh sign: Lazarus raised

Jesus' question is an inspiration for many situations in our lives: "Didn't I tell you that you will see God's glory if you believe?" In this case, the glory was the miracle of resurrection. Jesus had already raised a widow's son and Jairus' little daughter, and in the Old Testament there were Elijah, Elisha, and Elisha's bones that had raised people from the dead. Jesus' resurrections would be the seventh in scripture, but with a difference--he would never die.

For me, it is a reminder to always look for God's glory, always keep my eyes open to what God is doing if I believe.

Where have I most recently seen God's glory?

December 4

John 11:45-54. A death sentence

One would hope that such a great miracle would inspire people to believe in Jesus, and for some, it did. But others made a point of letting the religious leaders know. They were already angry at Jesus, and they saw only negative political implications if his followers increased. The high priest proposed what he thought was a good solution: Let this one man die for the people. None of the other gospels have this story, showing John's inside knowledge of the high priest's more private doings, and setting up the contrast between the perfect high priest, Jesus, and a corrupted priesthood.

John made a point that this was God's spirit prophesying through the high priest. What a beautiful interpretation John gave us: "Jesus' death would be...for the gathering together of all the children of God scattered around the world.". This strikes me as the ideal missionary verse for our time. He sees all people as his children who need to be regathered to him.

How can I help gather God's much loved children to him?

December 5

John 11:53-57

John's focus on the Temple, the priesthood, and Jerusalem now took on an ominous tone. The high priest had proposed a death sentence on Jesus, Passover was coming, and people wondered if they would see Jesus. In the style of authoritarian leaders everywhere, they let it be known that his whereabouts should be immediately reported.

But Jesus stopped his public ministry and went into seclusion in a small village named Ephraim. It was thirteen miles north-east of Jerusalem, with a higher elevation that gave a broad view of the surroundings, including the city. From here he would once more return to Lazarus' home in Bethany and then to Jerusalem.

Withdrawal from conflict may be wise and necessary, and yet if a showdown needs to happen, we need to brace ourselves and act with courage.

Am I willing to step aside and avoid conflict? Am I willing to re-engage also?

December 6

John 12:1-11 Mary's anointing

Jesus' friends prepared a dinner in his honor on the Saturday before his Sunday entrance to Jerusalem. The gratitude they felt for Lazarus' healing was poured out as their different personalities dictated. Lazarus sat at the table and talked to Jesus, Martha served the food, and Mary came with an extravagant gift of perfume.

Mary's dramatic gesture of love and prophetic meaning filled the house with fragrance. Paul made the analogy that our lives are a fragrance presented to God, and to those being saved it is like a life-giving perfume. To those who are perishing, like Judas in this instance, it is a smell of death and doom. (II Corinthians 2:15-17)

Christ, by being anointed, is shown to be like the sweet smelling incense of the tabernacle that was offered up to God.

*Christ is all, the one that love will find.
And Mary found him and fell at his feet
And with her alabaster jar she signed
The death and burial he soon would meet.
The scent of death in the room, the cost,
Offended one who failed to understand
That his life would soon for us be lost.
And by the scent new life he would command.
So in the temple, incense warm and sweet
To a holy death could see ahead.
Past and future here with her could meet.
Her honor comes from what Christ said,
Behind the smoke and scent was meant to be
A rich curtain to a mystery.*

Is my life being poured out in extravagant love for Christ?

December 7

John 12:12-19 Triumphal entry

John gave an explanation of why the crowds were so large when Jesus entered Jerusalem. It was the story of Lazarus' resurrection that had served to gather so many. The Pharisees had already tried to arrest Jesus six times, but now they said "we're lost!". Jesus had the backing of the crowds and they were afraid.

John quoted Zechariah 9:9 which predicted the King would arrive on a donkey's colt. John acknowledged that one can be seeing something with one's own eyes and yet not really grasp

the significance. He said it was only later they realized they had seen these scriptures come true.

Do I see significance beneath the ordinary explanations of daily life?

December 8

John 12: 20-50 Fifth resurrection prophecy: enter glory

Jesus' prediction of his resurrection is here with two very clear predictions of his death: 1) he is like a wheat seed planted which transforms into a great harvest, and 2) he will be lifted on a cross and bring all to himself. A voice from heaven affirmed that God has brought him glory and will do so again.

In this final public discourse themes we have seen elsewhere are reprised: non-Jews seek him out, he urges the disciples to follow him and give up their lives, he says he is the light, and he prophesies death and resurrection. His listeners objected that Messiah is supposed to live forever, not die, the same misunderstanding that left his disciples so confused.

John concluded Jesus' public ministry with a lament. People did not believe despite all he had done, as was predicted by Isaiah. Even some who believed did not want to go public because they cared about their reputation. In his final appeal Jesus said he is the image of God. He is light. He came to save. He spoke the Father's words with the Father's authority. He could not have been more clear in declaring himself the Son of God. The people found it all hard to believe, and often we have their same difficulties.

Do I have a hard heart or has my heart understood who Jesus is?

December 9

John 13:1-17 Sixth feast: Passover

John reinforced Luke's emphasis that Jesus knew he was heading for death at the Passover. All the symbolism of a lamb killed to preserve their lives, and the liberation from slavery that had been an historical experience would come together in all that was about to happen to him.

Jesus knew that the Devil had entered Judas to prompt betrayal. What is new, not in any of the other gospels, is the account of his washing their feet to reinforce once more his message that servant leadership was what he desired from them. The section begins by saying that he now showed them the full extent of his love.. The washing clearly symbolized service and love, but also in the conversation he explained it was about washing away sins.

Just as baptism symbolized purification, priests in the Old Testament had to wash hands and feet before serving in the tabernacle (Exodus 38:19,20). These disciples were to be a new

priesthood serving the world, purified by Jesus. The Catholic church institutionalized this practice as part of Holy Thursday observance, with the priest washing some selected congregants' feet.

Do I give and receive humble demonstrations of love like this?

December 10

John 13:18-30 Judas' betrayal

There are numerous Psalms that speak of betrayal by a friend, and Jesus quoted one of them (Psalm 41:9) that was particularly appropriate for a meal: "The one who shares my food has turned against me.". Even when Jesus gave Judas bread as a sign, and told him to "do it now" the others were confused. It says Satan entered Judas when he ate the bread, and he left at once.

Judas' choices and compromises, the work of evil on him, and his tragic separation from Jesus are captured in the phrase that he was "going out into the night.". Have I or any I care about made tragic choices of "going out into the night" leaving family or friends and being entangled in destructive things?

Who do I know who is struggling that I can pray for or reach out to today?

December 11

John 13: 31-38 Sixth resurrection prophecy: enter glory

Jesus once more said he was going where they could no go, and in response to Peter's protests, warned him of his denial. He explained that the time had come for him to enter into his glory. God would be glorified by what would happen to him.

Jesus gave a new commandment. It built on the old commandment of love for God and neighbor. The commandment was to love others who love Jesus, just as Jesus has loved us. This love we are to have is not always easy, especially since our human natures are seriously annoying and incompletely redeemed. But we can pray for one another, encourage, comfort, give, forgive, care for, bring joy, resolve differences, try to work together, not be judgmental, etc. All of these are good practices!

Is there a practical step I can take to love others today?

December 12

John 14: 1-14 Sixth "I am...": The Way, Truth, Life

As Jesus continued his discourse, he used the beautiful imagery that he is the way. It is appealing to think of life as a journey, full of adventures, and it is comforting to think that grounding that journey is Jesus who knows the best path for us.

Jesus declared clearly that those who have seen him have seen the Father. Once more Jesus made a lavish promise that we can ask for anything in his name and he will do it. He said we will do greater things than he has because he can work on our behalf from heaven. Our skepticism regarding this often has more to do with our desire to see things happen right now than with the fact that over time, remarkable things do happen beyond what we could have imagined.

A gorgeous hike through a path in the wood,
Wildflowers, oaks, an escaping creature
Friends enjoying time together on the way
And my heart leaps up at the beauty of it all.
Jesus, you show me where to walk.

Do I have a sense that I am on a journey with Jesus?

December 13

John 14:15-31 God with us

Jesus made seven wonderful promises here. He said he would send the Holy Spirit would will counsel and teach us; he would be raised to life; he won't abandon us but will come to us; he will be in us and us in him; God and Christ will love us; he will give us peace that lasts; and, the prince of the world has no power over him.

These serve as the basis for a healthy and joyful life that has meaning and purpose. He promised the Spirit will be an ongoing presence with us. These lavish promises are an encouragement at any time, but particularly serve as an antidote to when we feel alone, afraid, or anxious.

Which promise most meets my current reality?

December 14

John 15:1-8 Seventh "I am...": Vine

Jesus said our lives are to be an extension of his. He is the life-giving vine and we grow from him and give out fruit which brings glory to God. Our closeness to him allows us to ask for anything and in one of many over-the-top promises, we will get what we ask for. Perhaps the qualifying aspect is whether we are joined to him and his words are in us. That doubtless shapes what we ask for.

Rows of grape vines tied to stakes and twine
Dark branches like little crosses
The wine bottles ready for tasting
And we overflow with laughter and joy.
Jesus, you fill us with high spirits!

Am I living in union with Christ?

December 15

John 15:9-25 Love

John's gospel makes love one of his great themes with 42 references, compared to 14 references in Matthew, 8 in Mark, and 14 in Luke. Here we have a passage where love is made our great goal. Jesus has loved us, the Father has loved him, we are to remain in Christ's love through obedience, just as he remains in the Father's love. He asked us to love one another as he has loved us. He ended by saying that we are his friends, and the greatest love is shown in laying down one's life for friends, as he would do for us.

While love is what we are called to, Jesus warned us that we must be prepared for rejection. There are two competing loyalties at work: love for the world and love for Christ. If people love the world, they will hate the challenge Christ represents to their values. Since he was persecuted, he said we need to be willing to be persecuted also. He quoted Psalm 69:4 saying that this scripture has been fulfilled: "They hated me without a cause."

We need to be sure the irritation we are to others is truly "without a cause". It is far too easy to be self-righteous and condemning, things Christ says are wrong, and then interpret the negative feedback as persecution. We can examine ourselves and our motives when we are rejected, but the inner strength to evaluate the validity of critique is necessary, and Jesus wants us to be able to let unmerited criticism just roll off.

Is love my greatest goal?

December 16

John 15:26-27, 16:1-15 Holy Spirit

Jesus' promised the Spirit as our counselor and the one who can help us discern the truth. The Spirit will reveal to us whatever Christ wants him to. There are sixteen references here to the actions of the Spirit when we count the pronouns referring to him. His work includes telling us about Christ, coming from Christ, convicting of sin, righteousness and judgment, guiding us into truth and bringing glory to Christ.

It is interesting that while the other gospels emphasize Jesus' power over evil spirits, John never did. There are no exorcism stories in this gospel., though there are accusations from Jesus' opponents that he is demon-possessed. Jesus denied it and said they dishonored him with the accusation. The gospel and Jesus' instruction has more emphasis on opposition from human beings. Perhaps this variation on how Jesus' story is told can help us have balance and not jump too quickly to the demonic as an explanation for something.

Do I sense the strong work and presence of the Holy Spirit in my life?

December 17

John 16:16-33 Seventh resurrection prophecy: won't see me

Jesus' promise that he would leave them and then they would see him again seemed mysterious to the disciples. We see clearly that he was talking about his death and resurrection, but they did not yet understand. He compared what would happen to him as the struggle and joy of giving birth. Another lavish promise is given that we can ask for things in his name.

When he said he would leave the world and return to the Father they thought they understood. He warned them they would scatter and leave him alone, but he finished with the triumphant phrase: "I have overcome the world."

He told them that when they saw him again they would have wonderful joy, a word repeated five times regarding the response to resurrection.

Do I live in the joy of the resurrection?

December 18

John 17:1-26 Prayer to the Father

Jesus began his prayer by saying the time had come. Previously he had said it was not yet time, but now it was. And what was it time for? His desire was to be glorified so he could give glory back to God. He said he brought glory to God through his obedience. Now he wanted to return to the glory of heaven. As he prayed for the disciples he said they were his glory.

Each of these thoughts is something we also can pray for ourselves. We desire God's glory on us so that we can give glory back to him. We want to bring him glory through our obedience until we go to the glory of heaven. And we desire that those we influence to follow Christ will experience these things, because they are our glory.

Jesus becomes very mystical in this prayer. For contemplatives a goal is to experience union with God which overflows in great love. Jesus asked that all of us would experience this

oneness with him and with one another. He asked that as he and the Father are one, we would also be in him. The result of such supernatural grace is that others come to believe.

He asked that we would be filled with his joy and would become pure and holy. The most often repeated word, however, is glory. Jesus desired that his glory would be given to us. As used in scripture, glory refers to radiance, beauty and splendor. The idea that these are to be part of who we are is something to aspire to.

Do I desire oneness with God, his love flowing through me? Do I desire that my life bring glory to God?

December 19

John 18:1-27 Arrested

We learn something more with each retelling of the story. Here we learn that Jesus and his disciples had gone many times to this particular olive grove. We learn that not only were there Temple guards, what is described in the other gospels as an armed mob is described here as a Roman battalion.

These soldiers were there under their commanding officer (verse 12), and they would have been from Fort Antonia next to the temple. How many of his 600 men he brought, we do not know. When Jesus identified himself, they fell to the ground, a moment of his spiritual power affecting them. He appealed for his disciples not to be arrested, and they fled. But first Peter cut off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant. The name is new, and all this inside information regarding the high priest, his followers, and his relationship of influence with the Roman cohort show once more John's particular knowledge of the temple.

The "other disciple" who went with Peter and could get into the courtyard because he knew the high priest is probably John. He referred to himself obliquely several times in the gospel. This is the only gospel to include this episode with Annas. Annas had been high priest, but then his five sons held the office and now his son-in-law Caiaphas was in that role. But Annas doubtless still served as a powerful figure behind them all.

There was an uncomfortable interaction, and Jesus was struck in the face for what was perceived as disrespect. He defended it as being truthful and so gives us an example of what we would call non-violent resistance. Jesus was bound once more and sent to Caiaphas.

Do I see the wisdom of nonviolent resistance to corrupt but powerful figures?

December 20

John 18:28-40 Before Pilate

The uneasy relationship between Jews and Romans is demonstrated here. They needed the Romans to authorize Jesus' death, but they needed to stay out of the headquarters to be pure enough to celebrate Passover. John reported their declaration that they were there to seek the death penalty.

Jesus' dialogue with Pilate resulted in Jesus' declaration that he is a king who brings truth to the world. Pilate responded, "What is truth?". We today can also be skeptical that truth can be known. Like Pilate, we query "What is truth?". But Jesus said that all who love truth will recognize the truth in what he says.

Do I recognize truth in Jesus?

December 21

John 19:1-16 Sentenced

John adds to our understanding of what happened that after having Jesus whipped and a crown of long, sharp thorns put on him, Pilate brought him out and said "Here is the man!" He specifies that it was the leading priests and temple guards who shouted "Crucify him!". They had been wanting to arrest him or stone him and had repeatedly failed. Now they persuaded Pilate he would have trouble with Caesar, and he agreed to the crucifixion.

Pilate went through the process of thinking Jesus was not guilty and saying so, to telling Jesus he had power to release him or crucify him, to presenting him ironically as the Jewish King, to turning Jesus over for crucifixion. The leading priests showed how much they had lived with a worldly and compromised position when they say "we have no king but Caesar."

Both Pilate and the priests were engaged in moral compromises against their consciences. We too, can be tempted to do what is convenient or to go along with powerful people. Instead, we are called to be firmer in our convictions.

Do I give in to temptations to compromise?

December 22

John 19:16-27 Jesus' mother

John repeats what we have read in the other gospels about the crucifixion, but he adds something completely new. No one else wrote that Jesus' mother was at the cross along with her sister, Mary Magdalene, and standing next to her was John.

John uses the locution "the disciple he loved", something he will repeat in the final episode of the book, Jesus gave his mother to John and John to his mother, and he then took her into his home.

This image of Jesus' mother at the cross has inspired so many works of visual art, including Michaelangelo's great "Pieta" where she held Jesus in his lap after he died. This deep connection between a suffering mother and suffering son adds to the pathos of the crucifixion. It also offers a comforting model for any mother who has ever grieved over a suffering child.

Do you suffer with those who suffer as Mary did?

December 23

John 19:28-37 Death

I am filled with holy awe that God could engineer a situation in which he would die, identifying with what is our ultimate fear. It is in the other gospels we learn that the temple curtain was torn from the top when Jesus died. In the structure of the temple this curtain was between the holy place where the priests could go, and the Most Holy Place where the ark was present. Jesus' flesh is compared to the veil in Hebrews with the announcement that through his death he has opened the way for us to the Most Holy Place.

A rich curtain to a mystery

Torn from the top when Jesus died,
And as his flesh was torn to be
An opening to God. Jesus cried.
The veil had kept the sanctuary's heart
A separate and quiet holy space.
But Jesus let himself be torn apart
And welcomed us into this perfect place.
"Come in! Welcome friends! This is now
Your home. All I have is yours," he said.
"The past is reversed and will allow
New life to grow from what was dead."
Jesus opened up the curtain wide,
And joyous angels stood on either side.

Do I see how Jesus' death opened the entrance for us to God's presence?

December 24th

John 19:38-42 Burial

Just as Jesus experienced death with us, he experienced being in the womb. This severe humbling represents joining us in our great limitations. Jesus had just compared his death and resurrection to the process and pain of giving birth, followed by the wonderful joy of a new person in the world. (John 16:21). This womb-like time would result in his becoming the

firstborn from death, and the firstborn of all creation. This moment was that time of quiet after the hard passion of labor, before the final joy of birth.

As we celebrate the incarnation, God in the flesh among us, we can see that his birth is closely linked to his death in God's redemptive purpose. But both are anticipating the greater joy of the resurrection and ascension to heaven where he now rules at God's right hand. These great events in Christ's life are fundamental to our faith. We do not make them, however, our only focus. We want to live in the gospels, hearing his teachings, seeing his miracles, and so becoming more deeply acquainted with who this God of ours really is.

Do I celebrate the mystery of the incarnation?

December 25th

John 20:1-10 Seventh feast: Unleavened Bread

As we celebrate Christmas, we see the moment of the resurrection as the climactic purpose of the incarnation. Just as there were angels at Jesus' birth, there were angels again to announce the resurrection, though they are not mentioned here in John's account. The first day of the week after the Passover began the week-long feast of Unleavened Bread which celebrated liberation from slavery, and is a fitting image of resurrection and the new life that begins, with our sin (the yeast) removed.

Joyous angels stood on either side

Of the empty tomb just as they stood
Around the holy ark. Jesus died
And rose again, evil banned by good.
We celebrate this triumph every week.
We surround Jesus' throne with praise.
And musicians give the words we seek.
With bread and wine a glass we raise
To toast his victory, recalling when
Ancient pictures became real in time
By painting mystic pictures once again.
Together old and new create a rhyme.
It tells us there is nothing now to fear.

Christ entered time and space and tented here.

John himself was probably "the other disciple" who ran to the tomb with Peter in response to Mary Magdalene's news. He went in after Peter, but he says "he saw and believed." This was the first moment that he grasped that Jesus and all the scriptures had said that Jesus would come to life again. This moment of belief transformed his life, and his intrinsically poetic nature began to see the deeper meaning of everything he and the disciples had experienced.

Do I believe in the incarnation? Do I believe in the resurrection? How does this change me?

December 26

John 20:11-18 Sixth conversation: Mary Magdalene

Mary had been delivered by Jesus, participated in his ministry, stood at the cross, and now she wept, not only at his death, but at the disappearance of his body. But then Jesus spoke to her and she recognized him once he said her name.

If we can hear God speaking in our hearts, there is a great comfort in knowing that he is calling our names. We respond to his intimate personal care for us by clinging to him, just as Mary did.

Mary

Weeping and looking

Hearing an unknown voice

Suddenly recognizing him

Overwhelmed

The women in the other gospels, and Mary Magdalene here, are the ones who were given the opportunity to first share the good news of the resurrection. She went and found the other disciples and said "I have seen the Lord!". May we also have the kind of closeness that makes it natural for us to tell others Christ is alive.

Do I have this kind of personal connection with Christ?

December 27

John 20:19-23 Receive the Spirit

Jesus appeared to them, and the locked door was no barrier. He gave them gifts that are the same gifts he continues to give to us today: peace, the task of being sent into the world as he was, the Holy Spirit, and the power to offer forgiveness. Over the next forty days he continued to teach them about all of these things.

These are the same things we need if we are to carry out good ministry anywhere. We need to live with God's peace. We need to know we have a purpose and a way of blessing others. We need the wisdom, guidance, and power of the Holy Spirit. We need to know that we can, in fact, encourage anyone anywhere anytime that forgiveness is available.

It says Jesus breathed on them to receive the Spirit. But an even greater experience of being filled with the Spirit came to them on Pentecost. This encourages us that there may be multiple

times and multiple types of experiences for receiving God's Spirit in our lives. We can daily ask for that refreshing.

Have I asked God's Spirit to fill me so that I can live as he desires?

December 28

John 20:24-31 Struggling to believe

Thomas' doubt of the resurrection is a comforting reminder that the disciples were normal people who needed evidence. When confronted with Jesus' presence, he believed. We can take comfort in Jesus' response, "Blessed are those who haven't seen me and believe anyway," and apply it to ourselves.

John went on to write that his intention for his book was that we readers might believe Jesus was Messiah. The great mystery of the resurrection opens our hearts to seeing the world in a new and joyful way, full of hope. Jesus somehow went through locked doors, demonstrating that resurrected bodies have curious properties. But he was no ghost, and shortly he would cook breakfast for them on the beach and share a meal.

We are encouraged to continually look at life through this new reality of resurrection with wide-open eyes, full of wonder.

Do I recall the wonder of Jesus resurrection each day?

December 29

John 21:1-14 Breakfast on the beach

Luke told us that the fishermen that first followed Jesus after he helped them with an overwhelming and unexpected catch of fish. Now John gave us a repetition of a miraculous catch after Jesus' resurrection.

This is one of my favorite gospel stories, perhaps because I love being at a lake or ocean, and love fires on the beach. Or perhaps I like the intimacy of Jesus cooking breakfast. I am intrigued by the specificity of 153 large fish, so I wonder if John was the one who counted them. Every picnic is a tiny reenactment of this picnic.

By the sea in the morning
Sun shines through woven clouds
Orange, like fire.
The sunrise is smoldering coals,
A fire glowing,
And the smoke-gray clouds linger.

Gray water gashed by white waves,
The clouds clustered on the horizon,
Water wandering in the wind.
Then the comforting call comes
"Have some breakfast!"
And we are home.

Do I see Jesus as a host at our meals?

December 30

John 21:15-21 Seventh dialogue: Peter

The conversation between Jesus and Peter had to happen. Though we learn elsewhere that Jesus spoke to Peter privately, this public reconciliation helped wipe out the denial with three humble affirmations of love.

John had been there for the denial, he now heard the reconciliation, and perhaps this prepared him to be a bold teammate with Peter after Jesus' ascension. He, in fact, lived longer than any other disciple, and Peter did suffer martyrdom. But John made a point that Jesus never said he would not die. He finally declared himself without a third-person reference, but as the one who saw these things and recorded them.

He and Peter and all the disciples became people who fed Jesus' sheep out of love for Jesus. This call applies to us as well. We walk in Peter's footsteps, reconciled to Jesus even if we have failed, and able to feed others.

Peter
On the lake shore
Eating Jesus' breakfast
Knowing that everything had changed
Reconciled

Do I see myself as someone who can feed others spiritually?

December 31

John 21:22-23

John: Jesus, our High Priest

John, you perceived poetry and pattern
You connect creation and Christ
You saw substance in symbols
You discerned depths of death

You reflected, remembering reality
You were there--
 Drawn as a discerning disciple
 Marking a meaningful meal
 Across the cold courtyard
 In crucifixion's cruel crucible
 Taking the tomb's testimony
 Basking in breakfast on the beach
 Seeing as a suffering servant
Your words and witness win.

John, the last of our gospel writers, had a particular fascination with the temple and symbolically connected Jesus to every aspect of the temple. One of the great Old Testament themes was the priesthood and how their work served to connect God and man. Jesus was the complete fulfillment of all of those images, and John gave us such a rich sense that a priest and a pastor is also a poet. He leaves us with the strong sense of security that we are brought into God's presence through Jesus. We do not need to be afraid; he loves us completely.

Do I worship Christ as the fulfillment of all the temple imagery: a place where we encounter God, the reality behind each image, our sacrifice, our priest?