

REVEAL

THERE'S MORE TO
THE STORY.

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The Reveal: a 7 week study on John 6-9

Introduction

Revelare is a Latin word that means to draw back the veil, reveal, uncover what is hidden; *revelum* is an Old French word meaning to show forth, to display or communicate. The concept behind this seven week study on John is that Jesus reveals himself to his disciples and the world by his miracles, which are called signs in John's gospel. Jesus also uses metaphors in his teaching to reveal himself. Both in his words and actions, Jesus reveals his identity to any who will listen. Like his first disciples, Jesus is calling you and me in this study to listen and discover true life in Jesus as well as our missional purpose.

Week 1: November 8, 2015

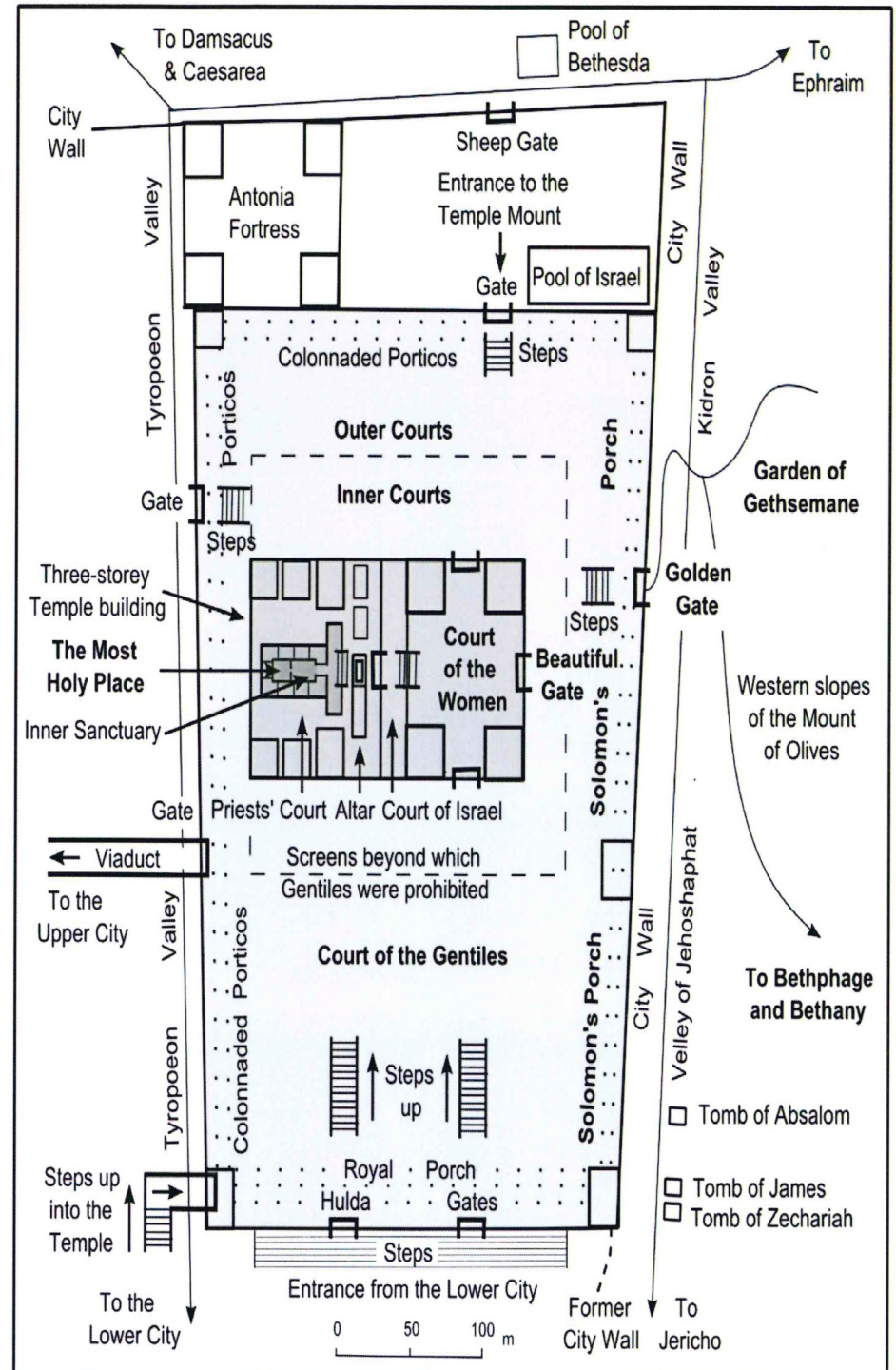
Read: John 6:1-34

Find

The nursing home room felt cramped with family members of all ages. One granddaughter was sitting on the edge of the bed doing what she knew best in showing love to her dying grandmother and that was doing her nails. A son-in-law was taking orders on coffee for family members and doing his part in dashing off to the cafeteria and helping the weary remain awake for the last few steps of the dance to death. Others stood, sat, talked, laughed and waited.

At the center of it all stood Bob, the faithful husband right alongside his wife of a lifetime. As I press into the age of 60, there are less and less couples who have been married longer than I have lived but Bob is one of them. Resolute, quick witted and overflowing with fascinating stories galore from his life, Bob worked to make sense of how to say good bye to his adoring companion through life. There was some special unspoken "magic" in the eyes of these two as I have watched them look at each other at various visits in the past.

Appendix 3: Map of Jerusalem Temple



circular pattern, making sure to cover the preceding staples until entire wreath is covered.

- Glue purple and pink paper to empty toilet paper rolls.
- Using hot glue, attach mini muffin papers into ends of toilet paper roll candles.
- Using hot glue, attach 'candles' to wreath toward center of wreath.
- While glue is still hot, encircle bottom of candle with glitter pipe cleaner.
- Do the same at the top of the candle to mask the joint of glue between the construction paper and muffin paper.
- Insert tea lights into muffin papers at top of candle.
- Using hot glue, attach green and red beads around 'boughs' of wreath for desired effect.

But what do the candles mean and represent? What do we tell our kids about them as they light them?

On the first Sunday of Advent, the first blue/purple candle is lit. This candle is traditionally called the "Prophecy Candle" in remembrance of the prophets, primarily Isaiah, who foretold the birth of Christ. This candle represents **HOPE** or expectation in anticipation of the coming Messiah. Each morning or night when you either read Scripture and/or pray, light your candle.

Each week on Sunday, an additional candle is lit. On the second Sunday of Advent, the second blue/purple candle is lit. This candle typically represents **LOVE**. Some traditions call this the "Bethlehem Candle," symbolizing Christ's manger.

On the third Sunday of Advent the pink candle is lit. This candle is customarily called the "Shepherds Candle" and it represents **JOY**.

The fourth and last candle, oftentimes called the "Angels Candle," represents **PEACE** and is lit on the fourth Sunday of Advent.

Watching Bob respond to his wife in these closing moments felt sacred in its own way.

It was a sidebar conversation. It came out of the blue. One of Bob's daughter's pulled me aside to ask a few questions about death and dying because she had never done this before. As we talked about her questions, it seemed some peace came over her. Then she told me a fascinating story of a coin-shaped angel keepsake engraved with the saying "You are my precious angel" that her mom had given her which she accidentally tossed into a Salvation Army kettle at Christmas time. Realizing what had happened, she went back to grocery store and left her name and phone number in case they found her keepsake.

It was nine months later, two days before her mom died, when she received a phone call that the Salvation Army had found her keepsake. She and her dad drove to the Salvation Army Church and retrieved her angel keepsake. Was it a coincidence? What was obvious is that Bob's daughter was touched by this series of occurrences that fell into place which put this keepsake back into her life in the last moments of her mom's life.

The story of Jesus action of multiplying the fish and loaves for over 5000 hungry people reveals his compassion, power and raises the question of his identity. Of all the miracle stories of Jesus, this is the only one that appears in all four gospels. This indicates the importance of this miracle or sign as part of the message of the early church. Jesus was revealed to a crowd of people in this meal and miracle. While nothing is said about a later distribution and feeding on the twelve basketfuls of bread nor who took the bread home or where the baskets came from, it says to *gather up so that nothing may be lost* (6:12). If Jesus cares so much about a morsel of bread, how much more does he care about people apart from faith and community?

In January 2015, my wife Jody lost the diamond in her ring. She looked all over the house and could not find it. Concerned but not worried, Jody went to the jeweler knowing that it was under warranty. Panic filled her mind

when she learned that her warranty had lapsed because she was a month late in getting her ring checked. In other words, replacing the diamond was on us!

Frantically, Jody searched every nook and cranny and prayed as she looked throughout the house but to no avail. Finally, resolved to the fact the diamond was lost, she broke down in tears as she told me later that evening as we sat on the couch in the family room. "Well," I said, "when we set aside enough money someday, we will replace it." Having the truth out in the open, Jody got up to pop something into the microwave when she found the diamond laying on the counter right in front of the microwave door. She went from painful regret to exuberant praise in the blink of an eye! There was a whole lot of shouting, crying and shaking going on. Jesus said that there is great joy when the lost is found (Luke 15:9-10, 32)!

Gather up the fragments left over (barley loaves), so that nothing may be lost (John 6:12). Jesus spoke these words which are ripe with meaning. Like a daughter opening up her grandmother's attic trunk, let us peer inside this powerful story of the feeding of the 5000 and examine each treasure within. To get the idea how important this sign or miracle is for Christians, it is the only miracle that is included in all four gospels (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17). It is also noteworthy that unlike the other three gospels, John does not include the words of consecration of the Passover meal (Holy Communion) as do the other three gospels (Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:14-23). In John 13:1 we find Jesus sharing a meal at a table after washing the disciples' feet but it is not the Passover meal.

Rather, it is in the story of the feeding of the 5000 in John that has elements within that may be remnants of the communion meal. While Protestants often refer to the Last Supper as Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper, Roman Catholics refer to the meal as the Eucharist; a Greek word for *thanksgiving*. *Eucharist* is the word used in the Greek during the consecration of the Passover meal when Jesus took the cup and gave thanks (Matthew 26:27; Mark 14:23;

If you have a crèche (the nativity characters) this is a perfect time to read the Nativity story from the gospel of Luke chapter 2 and encourage your child or children to retell the Christmas story using the characters from the Nativity scene. If you do not have a crèche, you can simply read and retell the story each night. This helps the family to wait with anticipation for the true meaning of Christmas and the coming of Christ.

Supplies needed:

- 1 – 10" paper plate (you can also use the 8-1/2" size)
- 4 – empty toilet paper rolls
- 1 – sheet purple construction paper
- 1 – sheet pink construction paper
- 3 – sheets holiday green construction paper
- 2 – sheets lighter green paper (construction or copy paper will suffice)
- 4 – glitter pipe cleaners
- 4 – mini muffin papers
- 4 – candles (if necessary, these can be replaced as needed)



Directions:

- Trace children's (and parents' if desired) hands on both shades of green paper and cut out. You will wind up with approximately 20 – 25 paper hand tracings. These will become the boughs of your wreath.
- Cut 1 pink and 3 purple pieces of paper measuring 4-1/8" x 5-3/4". These will cover your 'candles'.
- Paint the back of your paper plate with green paint and allow to dry.
- Cut a circle the size of a small to medium glass out of the center of the paper plate. This gives your wreath its shape.
- Decorate the hands (boughs) with glitter glue, if desired.
- Decorate purple and pink candle covers with magic marker or glitter glue if desired.
- Staple green hands (boughs) onto the paper plate, in a

Appendix 1: Family Prayers

Family Meal Time Prayer:

*Thank you for the world so sweet,
Thank you for the food we eat,
Thank you for the birds that sing,
Thank you God for everything. Amen*

Family Bed Time Prayers:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
Angels watch me through the night
And keep me in their blessed sight. Amen

God in heaven, hear my prayer.

Keep me in your loving care.

Be my guide in all I do.

Bless all those who love me, too. Amen

Appendix 2: Advent

Advent is a four week season of preparation for Christmas in the church. Advent literally means to come. We are to prepare our hearts and lives to celebrate God coming to be one of us in the person of Jesus. Candles help us mark the weeks of Advent in the church and home during the darkest month of the year with its light. As families, we need all the help we can to counter the secular push of Santa and gifts, material things which can overpower the gift of Jesus, the Savior of the World, the source of this holiday. It takes discipline to set aside time in this busy season to remember the story of Jesus and pray.

How to make your own Advent wreath as a family:

Advent is coming up! Your family doesn't own an Advent wreath? That's okay, you can make one together! This simple homemade wreath is completely made by your family, which makes it even more special, right? Below is one way to create an Advent wreath together as a family. You could also purchase a Styrofoam circle at a craft store, cut four holes and space and place your candles. You could also split a log in half and drill four holes on the rounded top of the log and place your candles in the holes.

Luke 22:17, 19). Some experts in the gospel of John think that if the author of John's gospel had one of the other gospels to refer to it was Luke. This is one of the stories where you could see some corollation between Luke and John. While in Matthew and Mark Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks and distributes it followed by the thanksgiving over the cup, Luke first takes the cup and then the bread and over both gives thanks (*Eucharist*). In John 6, Jesus takes the loaves and gives thanks and gave them to the people.

A second word used in John 6:12 to *gather* is the liturgical word for the church coming together as a community of faith to worship God. The Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, written about 120-140 A.D., represents an early church catechism to teach the Christian faith. Regarding the bread of the Eucharistic meal it says: *As this broken bread was scattered on the mountains, but brought together was made one, so gather your Church from the ends of the earth into your kingdom,"* (9:4). As we sometimes sing in worship: *As the grains of wheat once scattered on the hill were gathered into one to become our bread; so may all your people from all the ends of earth be gathered into one in you, (ELW 465).*

The last word of note in John 6:12 is *fragments* or broken pieces. This same Greek word is used when the bread is broken as part of the communion meal. *There was an ancient custom in Palestine of breaking bread with the hands rather than cutting it with a knife. At meals, whether ordinary family meals, special meals with guests or ritual feasts, e.g., the Passover or the beginning of Sabbath, the head of the house gave thanks, then breaks bread and hands the pieces to those who sit at table with him. The breaking of bread is simply a customary and necessary part of the preparation for eating together. It initiates the sharing of the main course in every meal,* (Gerhard Kittel, Editor, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume III, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1965, pp. 728-9). Offering a prayer of thanks followed by breaking the bread, let's eat...what a nice table ritual.

With four grown children, I have done my share of bleacher time watching basketball, soccer, softball, baseball, track meets, cross country, tap and ballet performances, gymnastics, you name it, we loved every minute of it. As good as it is, 99+% of our kids will not end up as professional athletes. What our kids now value most were the Christian family rituals we refused to sacrifice like sharing a meal together each day, offering thanks before we ate, and evening family devotions (reading Scripture or a devotional book we picked up at church some of the times, but always some prayers and a Christian song or two that we memorized). Our grandchildren are now learning these same prayers and songs we learned from our parents. I share this with you not to boast like look at our great family, but rather to encourage young families to create or establish Christian rituals.

We pass on to our kids what we value most. When it comes to the Christian faith, our kids can force us to learn more about our faith because they ask curious questions! Being as active in your church as you are able is a great way to teach your kids that God matters most. Worship, prayers, reading from the various children's and youth Bibles we hand out at our church, praying, and singing faith-based songs all teach what it looks like to follow Jesus. You will find prayers and other ritual suggestions in the appendix to this booklet.

The theme for this weeks' reading is Find: *Gather up the fragments so that nothing may be lost*, John 6:12. The only other time *lost* is used in John's gospel is when Jesus is at the table with his disciples on the night before he died on the cross: *While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled*, John 17:12. God loves the world and everyone and everything in it that he sent his son Jesus. Life is most importantly about relationships. God works through you and me to reveal the love of Jesus to people we love and know. May God bless our witness so that people distant from God and his church may find their way to faith in Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. What has God revealed to you in John 9?
2. What has God shown you in this Reveal study?
3. How are you responding?
4. Who do you see that God wants to shower with his mercy?

Notes

Symbolically, the Pharisees drove the man who was healed by Jesus out of their presence (9:34). In many communities near the end of the first and the beginning of the second century in places like Asia Minor, the synagogue and church separated.

A third reason this story was used to teach new converts to Christianity the faith is because of the confession of faith this man makes. The Pharisees asked the man who could see: *Do you want to become his disciples* (9:27)? Despite the words of the Jews who said: *Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind* (9:32), the man testified: *I was blind, now I see* (9:25). Finally, most importantly, the man confessed: *Lord, I believe. And he worshiped him* (that is Jesus, 9:37).

There is a subtle nuance in the washing and healing that I have missed: *Go and wash in the pool of Siloam (which means the one who has been sent)*, 9:7. All throughout John, Jesus has been speaking about the fact that God has sent him. Jesus instructs the man to go to the pool that bears his name as the sent one! When we come to be washed in the pool of baptism, we too are washed in the water of the sent one. From that pool we are sent to return with others who need to be washed, loved, and receive mercy from Jesus.

Get on it! When Jesus says the day to work only lasts so long and then comes the night (9:4), it refers to life. You and I do not know how many years we will live (day) but at some point in time we will die (night). *We must work the works of him who sends us* (9:4). You and I sent to do God's work. Do you see that in your life? Jesus says: *I came...so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind* (9:39). Open our eyes Lord to see the opportunity to bring all who cannot see you so their eyes may be open to see, believe and follow you.

After the crowds of people who were following Jesus ate their fill of fish and bread, they went looking for Jesus the next day (John 6:24). None of us know who is searching for something or someone more in their life. The crowd found Jesus (6:25). Today, God uses people like you and me to point people hungry for a deeper meaning, or a new beginning, or spiritually thirsty to our Lord.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does your faith ritual look like each day? Do you pray or read Scripture at a certain time or in any special place in your home? If not, how would you like that to look in your daily life?
2. If you are a couple or have a family, what are our daily faith rituals? If you do not have any right now, what would you like that to look like?
3. Share a story of something you lost and later found. What did you do when you discovered this item was lost? How did you react when it was found?
4. Who have you been praying for that may be in need or may be searching for the Lord and his church? How have you been a witness to your faith?

Notes

Week 2: November 15, 2015

Read: John 6:35-71

Mirror

Mother Teresa said: *I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him. I serve because I love Jesus.* As Mother Teresa loved and served the “least of these (Matthew 25),” she revealed the love of Jesus to them. As the founder of the Missionaries of Calcutta, India in 1950, Mother Teresa and her community served the most impoverished for forty-five years. They built homes for orphans, nursing homes for lepers and hospices for the terminally ill in Calcutta. Mother Teresa’s organization also engaged in aid work in other parts of the world.

As people all over the world looked at Mother Teresa’s life, they saw such compassion within her for all who suffer, they saw Jesus in her. It is interesting to note in the quote from Mother Teresa above, she saw Jesus in all who suffer. When people look at our lives, who do they see we reflect? More directly, when people look my life, who do I reflect?

It is this particular question that has caused me reflect deeply. Sometime over the last nine years, if you have read what I have written or heard me speak, you have heard me talk about the ultimate importance of relationships: with God and our neighbors. The truth is that I have invested way more time in relationships at Grace and in our neighborhood than I have with my wife Jody. I have allowed and chosen to spend more time in evening meetings with groups and individuals, in writing and in work, to the point where my best assessment is that during the normal work week of Monday – Friday, we average at best one quality hour per day.

As far as loving myself and taking a full day off per week, you could ask Jody or my staff and they will tell you I have chosen to work. Grace did not ask me to work in that way. It is my own doing. This must and will change. My point is that I have failed recently to be a good model for you as your

Law of Moses. As in the previous miracle, Jesus demonstrates that mercy is more important than Sabbath rest.

The man who was blind from birth did not know who Jesus was nor did he ask to be healed. Jesus acted in mercy, spat on the ground, made a mud pack and rubbed it on the man’s eyes and sent him to the pool of Siloam to wash. *Then I went and washed and received my sight,* (9:11f) said the man now healed. Jesus healed this man who did not believe in him as evidenced by the fact he did not even know Jesus’ name when questioned later by the Jewish leaders. While faith in Jesus plays a role in an open and receptive heart and mind to the power Jesus to heal, Jesus is not restricted to healing only a person who believes. The mercy of God blesses whoever God wants to bless!

John 9 holds a special place in the early church as an important chapter used to instruct new converts to the Christian faith who are preparing for baptism. One of the ancient practices of the pre-baptismal ritual is to perform a renunciation of evil and the ways of evil. Symbolically facing the West where the sun sets and darkness results, the pastor says: *Do you renounce the devil all the forces that defy God; Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God; Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God? If so say, I renounce them.* In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the priest still spits on the ground in the West as a symbolic action of the exorcism of all evil. This action is linked with stories of exorcism like Mark 5 and Jesus action of spitting on the ground in John 9.

As second reason this story was linked to baptism is that the healing happened as the man obeyed Jesus and went to the pool to wash in its water. As he washed his eyes his eyes were opened and for the first time in his life he could see. Those who saw the miracle debated it (9:8-12). They turned him over to the religious leaders, the Pharisees who questioned this man (9:13-23). Any who dared to believe in Jesus were removed from the Jewish community (9:23). The Pharisees questioned him a second time (9:24-34).

a lodge member on why I should join. My casual observation is that there are Odd Fellows, Masons, Elk, Eagles, Moose and even Fred Flintstone's order of the Water Buffalo, to name a few. I've stayed out because I have never known why I should join. I liken this to people who have never been invited nor known why Jesus and his church are so important.

Secondly, in reading John 9, there is a back story to the tension you notice between Jesus and the Jews of which he was one. The twelve disciples and the early followers of Jesus were all Jewish. As the story of Jesus was shared in wider circles, some gentiles (non-Jews) came to believe and wanted to be part of the Christian community. Back in first few years of the Christian community, Christ followers worshiped in the temple, participated in the synagogue and met in homes to eat the Lord's Supper together. Due to Roman persecution, the inclusion of gentiles and misunderstanding about this meal Christians celebrated, tensions between Jews and Christians grew. John's gospel was written during this time and this tension is reflected in many stories involving Jesus and the Jews.

It is important in reading John 9:22 for instance, that removing Christ followers from participation in the synagogue actually happen at least some twenty years after Jesus died and rose again. This is a later development written back into the text because it had meaning for the Church written in Ephesus who was reading this gospel. In our day, where anti-Semitism has resulted in the persecution and death of millions of Jews, as Christians, we must stand with our Jewish sisters and brothers against any religious persecution. Violence in word or action against another religion is not the way of Jesus. With that said, as you read John 9, you hear overtones of the nasty attitudes being spoken as Jews and Christians go through a religious separation.

Like the healing of the paralytic in John 5, the healing of the blind man in John 9 happened on the Sabbath. Instantly, the setting for this miracle tells you that there is going to be a conflict with the Jewish leaders about Jesus disregard for the

pastor that care for myself and for my family as vital relationships matter.

How can I love God if I fail to love myself enough to take Sabbath consistently? How can I love God if I do not prioritize time with my spouse with whom I have made a marriage covenant? These are my challenges. Others of us fall on the opposite side of this question and that is how can I love God when I invest all of my non-work time on myself or my family and rarely if ever come to worship or have personal or family devotions by reading Scripture and entering into prayer? Either way, we need a "come to Jesus" meeting and get life and our priorities ironed out. Neither way I described in this paragraph is how God desires nor intended life to function best. Both of these ways of doing life are out of balance. Speaking for myself, I need to go to God's garage and get myself rebalanced! How about you?

We discover the love and mercy Jesus has for all people and as we experience that truth together in a Christian community where we love and serve the Lord and our neighbors. The irony is that I need to come to Jesus to get rebalanced in my life just as someone distant from the Lord and his church needs to come to Jesus to belong, believe and become all that God intends.

Jesus says, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty, John 6:35. Coming to Jesus to listen, believe and live (follow) is so vitally important that it is said many times in John that it screams for your attention (John 5:39-40; 6:35, 37, 44-45, 65). These are a few of the compelling words of Jesus that inspires us to risk sharing our faith and inviting people to worship with us: eat, drink, find what you are looking for in life in the Life-giver, the Bread of Life: Jesus.

Here is a summary of Jesus words in 6:37-40 written by C.K. Barrett: *I have come down to do not my will but the will of God who sent me. It is God's will that none whom he has given me should perish, but that they all should receive life and be raised up at the last day. Therefore I will receive and raise up every one who 'comes to me,' since he is the Father's gift to me and it*

is the Father's will that I should do so, (Barrett, The Gospel According to St. John, Second Edition, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1978, p. 293). In John's language, Jesus became human to bring people to God through faith in him. He called people to himself, taught them how to live and they brought others to Jesus.

People: some are glass half-empty and others glass half-full folks; some think of possibilities others think about potential problems; some enjoy experimenting other prefer to do the tried and true; while some are always grateful and others pointing out imperfection. Bible stories are filled with words of gratitude and the complaints of others. The complaining in John 6:41 may be tied to the complaints of the Jews to Moses in the wilderness around the manna (daily bread) God provided in Exodus 16. Jesus said: *This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread which your ancestors ate, and died.*

But the one who eats this bread (that I give as the Bread of Life) will live forever, John 6:58. Still the complaining continues in 6:61 and 7:12.

The truth is that some complaints are not only valid but helpful when the intent is to improve and work collaboratively toward a solution. In what way does solving this complaint advance God's mission in our community or the world? In John 6:60-71, the disciples of Jesus began to question if they could accept the difficult teachings of Jesus. To what extent do you think the complaints of the Jews in 6:41-51 and their inner dispute over Jesus teachings 6:52-59 impacted the anxiety among Jesus followers? Have you witnessed one individuals worry shared with a group turn into a wave of worry? Fear is a fire that multiplies faster than the national debt!

Jesus did not cower to the anxiety of his followers. Rather, he stood his ground and never compromised the truth for the sake of popularity. In fact, Jesus threw fuel on the fire and called out any who lacked faith in John 6:64. As a result, many disciples left him 6:66. The crowd was thinned

Week 7: December 20, 2015 (Advent 4)

Read: John 9

See

Relationships that unravel can really bring out our dark and ugly side. Jail time, protracted custody battles, glares, stares and the uttering of swears, nothing surprises me. What is most disturbing is when children get caught in the crossfire. I have seen a dad who had nothing to do with his kid during the time he and his partner were together jump in with both feet in court to fight for his rights as if he was a gold medal winning father of the year candidate. On the other side, there are people in their twenties and thirties still see counselors trying to undo what was done to them as child. Memories are not easy to heal. The stain of pain runs deep in the brain of children.

It is not only couples that split and act out in nasty ways, churches have acted in vile ways as well when they divide. It seems to be human nature at its lowest state, Christian or not. The Reformation, which Lutherans and other Protestants celebrate on the eve before All Saints' Day was church dividing. Neither sides acted kindly toward each other. While Lutherans would claim that this was a victory in restoring the supremacy of the Word of God, the church as a united witness for Christ was damaged. Americans love choice and we could say that having so many brands of Christian churches is a good thing. However, historically churches have competed and spoke some disparaging words about other Christians. Yes, they will know we are Christians by our love!

Why am saying all of this? Here are several reasons: first of all, is it really any wonder why someone who has grown up without being part of a church would find it hard to figure out why there are so many expressions of Christianity? For example, growing up in rural America, I was never exposed to the idea of lodges – the organization, not to be confused with a ski lodge or a motor lodge aka motel. I have never been invited nor involved in conversation with anyone who is

done that as a couple, it will feel awkward at first and that is ok. It did not prevent you from practicing love-making! Keep on sharing, discussing and praying. It will get better in time.

Finally, pray for people who you know are struggling in life and maybe struggling with God. Wait for the right God moment and allow the love of Jesus to flow through you. Do not worry if the words are jumbled or you fail to say it the way you imagined. God takes what we say and do and blesses it beyond belief. This is a practice too – telling others about the amazing life-changing love and mercy of Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. What is capturing your attention in this reading?
2. What disciplines of the faith are you more comfortable with and which ones not so much?
3. Why does worship matter to you as a Christ follower?
4. Who could use the love of the Lord today?

Notes

out and on a positive note, it would take less fish and loaves to feed them. Those who dared to believe that Jesus was the bread of life remained.

Discussion Questions:

1. Jot down some notes on what you found most helpful in this reading from John 6. What did you find most helpful or something you need to consider more?
2. There is much in John 6 that it is easy to skate over because it is complex and repetitive. What questions have arisen from your reading?
3. In what way, if at all, does the “come to Jesus” writing speak to you? What may be holding you back from opening your life to Jesus? Or, what may need to be re-balanced in your life?
4. Over the years, the church has been more interested in attendance numbers than measuring impact on individual lives. As attendance numbers in many churches are dropping, what do we make of that trend? In the last part of John 6, how does that story impact your thoughts? Besides numbers of people, how can you measure impact? Does it matter?

Notes

Week 3: November 22, 2015

Read: John 7:1-31

Harvest

We love to eat! Our big events in life like birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, weddings, funerals, retirement events always involve food. We begin our days around the table and return from school or work back to the dinner table. As we gather around food, it often is a time to catch up around the day, to laugh and reconnect. Our need to eat and replenish our body, as well as the enjoyment of good food leads to a space and time to talk. This is a perfect moment to restore the faith ritual of giving thanks to God together in a table grace: *Come Lord Jesus, be our guest. Let this food to us be blessed, Amen. God is great. God is good. And we thank him for our food, Amen. Great God. Good food. We give you thanks, Amen.* (See Appendix 1 for more prayer ideas for your use with your family).

With our need to eat and our love of food, autumn becomes a celebration of the ingathering or harvest of an abundant variety of grains and vegetables. Out of this story of ingathering comes the tradition in the United States of Thanksgiving: a pause to give thanks with family and friends around abundant food and football. *O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever,* Psalm 118:1.

The Jews have a rich tradition of festivals to celebrate life and the action of God woven into the fabric of the Jewish story. One of the most popular and fun festivals in Jesus day was the harvest festival called the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles or in Hebrew: Sukkot. (To get a quick overview of all the pre-exilic Jewish festivals, read Leviticus 23). The seventh month (the months of the Jewish calendar are determined by the new moon) of the sacred calendar is also the first month of the civil calendar called Tishri (September/October). Tishri is a busy Jewish month marked by New Year's Day on the new moon (called Rosh Hashanah or the Feast of Trumpets, Leviticus 23:23-25).

A part of my ministry that I find so fulfilling for myself are my relationships and conversations with individuals breaking free from a life of addiction. What do I find so helpful? I get to listen to stories of people who have lied to themselves and to others, sometimes for years, that they do not have an addiction. Many of these friends, old and new, have been through treatment numerous times knowing that they really did not intend nor desire to change their life. It is only when a person really wants to change and perhaps to remain alive know he or she must change, that they find the power to admit that they are powerless to change. *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.* (Galatians 2:19b-20).

As a church, we must die to ourself as well in order that we can rise to Christ in this new day to accomplish his will and purpose for Grace Lutheran Church in this time and place. This includes me as your Senior Pastor who must die to himself so that I can rise to rely on Christ's vision not mine, on the Spirit's power and not my own strength. By our own power and vision we will fail. God has a plan of loving and serving both God and our neighbors.

It begins with you and me. As we gather to worship God, come ready to give and receive. As we give our life through song, prayer, offering and praise, God speaks into our life. Worship is an attitude and attentiveness to the Lord which is expressed through our voice as we pray, affirm our faith and sing praises to God. When we come with open hearts, we leave changed by God! It does take practice to learn how we open our hearts to God in a communal setting. It's ok to cry when the Spirit touches our hearts! It's ok to sing out of tune – I do it all the time! God does something among us as we allow God access to us. Many of you have heard me try and fight what is pulling at my heart – but that is ok!

We are strengthened as a believer when we practice studying God's Word and praying during the week, both individually and with our family or friends. If you have not

imagination to prepare our minds for strong performance. As we visualize in our minds how we want perform, we are rehearsing it in our thoughts.

Jesus taught his disciples how to live, minister and teach others to follow by applying the spiritual practices and instructions of Christ. John 8:31-36 is the gospel reading for Reformation Sunday. This reading underscores the vital importance of studying and applying the teaching of Jesus to our lives. This is what it means to be a disciple: we follow and live the teaching of Jesus. To be Christian likewise means we follow and live by the teaching of Christ Jesus. Christian and disciple are interchangeable. To live Christian implies that Jesus teachings inform and direct our practices in life. *If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples* Jesus said (8:31). Martin Luther was so convinced about the importance of studying and knowing the Word of God that he spent months and years translating both the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament into the language of the people, which for him was German. Luther wanted his fellow Germans to hear and read the Word of God in a language they could understand.

Jesus' Word always demands a response. Either we have ears to hear and understand and thereby follow or we ignore it by turning a deaf ear. We sometimes get confused by language and think that by doing a duty like attending worship is fulfilling our religious obligation. In this way of thinking, we get that hour obligation done and then can move on with what matters. Jesus invites us to believe in him and to participate in his way of life: living life in the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is about a cross on which Jesus died and sets us free from our sin, guilt and shame to discover the amazing love and mercy of God (8:34-36). That phrase has been used so often in the church that the tire has almost no tread for some of us. But until we die to ourselves and our self-centered living, it will remain a religious fact and not a life-changing encounter with the crucified and risen Lord.

Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement follow 10 days later, 23:26-32 and the Feast of Booths lasts a week and follows just 5 days after Yom Kippur, 23:33-36.

The Festival of Booths is an eight day festival of harvest with no labor on the 1st and 8th days. The booths were constructed of leafy branches and Jews from all nations would return to Jerusalem and slept and ate in these booths as a reminder of the forty years their ancestors wandered in the wilderness. It was a real family camping trip with all of your relatives while telling stories of distant times. Jerusalem sits atop a hill called Mount Zion and the countryside surrounding the walled city had small farming plots, olive groves, but not a sufficient forest to provide all the branches for each returning family scattered all over Israel and the Roman Empire to build booths in which to live for the week. Each family more than likely brought their own bundle of leafy branches from home. (See Appendix 3 for a map of the temple area).

Nehemiah describes the Jews quest to gather the leafy branches of myrtle, palm, and olive trees when the exiled Jews returned from Babylon (Nehemiah 8:14-16). It is this setting of the Feast of Booths in which John chapters 7-8 are set. In the midst of this celebratory environment of a harvest feast, John reveals clues of what lies ahead for Jesus: looking for a chance to kill Jesus (7:1, 19, 25); sneaking secretly (7:7, 10); a cloud of fear pursing peoples' lips (7:13); Jesus own brothers do not believe in him (7:5); and an implication of Jesus ignorance, aka uneducated (7:15). It sounds like Johnny Raincloud waiting to throw a storm fit on Jesus' parade. It put a real damper on the Festival.

Let's peer a little closer at a couple of verses in the reading: Jesus says: *I performed one work, and all of you are astonished. Moses gave you circumcision (it is, of course, not from Moses, but from the patriarchs), and you circumcise a man on the sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man's whole body on the sabbath? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with*

right judgment (John 7:21b-24). Jesus was on a collision course with strict observers of the Mosaic Law. What action bears most importance in the end: the work of obedience or mercy? Jesus is referring back to the healing of the paralytic at the pool in John 5. While faithfulness to God matters, acts of mercy in Jesus' name win every time.

On the flip side, God is always faithful to love and hear our prayers yet it is our experience of God's mercy that touches our lives most profoundly. Mercy listens deeply to pains and struggles in our lives. It is mercy that digs deeper than what the surface story may indicate and sifts through the noise to hear the desire of our heart. Pulled out of the depth of mire, the tears of mercy can wash away the filth and stain of the past because God's eyes see the beauty that lies hidden deep within. In honesty, all our hearts yearn to connect on that level with the mercy of God. We must overcome our natural fear of being exposed so we can risk entrusting our deepest self to God.

Jesus words point us to this judgment of God which does not look at appearance as we as humans so often do. Jesus looks at our heart. God gifts us with strong minds that can accomplish and discover amazing things. Yet it is our heart that must not be ignored at the cost of being overrun by all our thoughts. The heart knows what matters most in our life, in our week and in our day. It is deep within our heart that lies our passions in life. When we attend to our passion, relentless waves of energy and creativity in thought emerge. Give an idea (perhaps a God-inspired dream) a chance, and watch the gift of life sprout anew!

Better yet, parents, teachers, neighbors, and grandparents, we give the gift to a child when we listen and ask curious questions enough that children dare to believe that who they are and that their dreams matter. When we give love and attention away, it multiplies, heals and releases God-given creativity and energy. If only we could look with our heart and not our eyes, we may be amazed at the beauty we miss because we dismiss it when we make a quick determination based on the outward appearance of a child. We could miss

Week 6: December 13, 2015 (Advent 3)

Read: John 8:31-59

Practice

Consider for a moment, if you or someone you know has recently gotten married, just how much work, time and money goes into the production of a wedding: the ceremony, the recording of that event and the picture locations selected prior to the reception, the meal, the toasts and cake and finally the DJ and the dance party. On the legal side, it is the ceremony, the promises exchanged in the presence of witnesses and the signing of the legal paperwork that make it all good to go with the state. The rest is the fun frosting. Costly yes, fun, but not essential legally.

Prior to that wedding, if it is a faith-based wedding involving one of our pastors, we require an online assessment filled out by both the bride and the groom. This becomes a planning and discussion tool to strengthen their relationship. It works with communication skills, conflict resolution styles, and decision-making. Most couples go through this process and find some help but are most eager to get to the planning of the ceremony portion of the work.

We rehearse the night before the wedding to hardwire what the ceremony is supposed to look like into all the participants' minds. This is how it will look. This is where you stand. Step by step, this is how your wedding ceremony is going to take place. The goal is to enable the wedding party to relax on the wedding day knowing how it will all fit together.

NFL teams work all year round to remain in shape, to get stronger, quicker, and in film study, to be smarter. Once training camp is over and the regular season begins, more time is spent in film review and study, walk-throughs for each particular team, game plans solidified, and bodies cared for to heal and be ready for game day. Imagining each play and anticipating situations are used by football, baseball, golf and most sports to prepare. God gave us an

*heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*²⁹ *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls,* Matthew 11:28-29.

Discussion Questions

1. What stood out to you as you read John 8:12-30?
2. In what way do you find Jesus referring to himself as light as helpful for your life?
3. The Greek word for world is *kosmos* which is used 9 times in Matthew, 3 times in Mark and Luke but 67 times in John. What does that mean and why is it so important in this fourth gospel?
4. How are you living out your baptismal covenant to let your light shine so people you know and meet can see Jesus in you?

Notes

it as well based on what we know about the parent of the child. Give a child a chance, shower them with love and attention, help them to find the right direction, give encouragement liberally and watch them grow.

Discussion Questions

1. What caught your attention as you read? Why?
2. Who comes to mind as someone who showed you mercy?
3. In what way do you like to give encouragement?
4. What is your take home from this week's study?

Notes:

Week 4: November 29, 2015 (Advent 1)

Read: John 7:32-8:11

Cheers

Comparison is one way that we make choices, judgements and decisions. What features of this car do we like over and against that car? How do the prices compare? What are the benefits of going to church today verses sleeping in or going out and doing something with our family? We could also compare religions and the offerings between churches. Jesus is often compared with other leaders, secular and people of faith. Because many of the early church who received John's gospel were Jewish, a subtle comparison runs through John between Moses and Jesus.

What about the other prophet and great Jewish leader Moses? In Exodus 4:20 it tells the story of Moses who put his wife on a donkey and he and family headed back to Egypt, where his own Jewish people lived in slavery, in order to answer his call from God. Zechariah 9:9, often read on Palm Sunday as the precursor to Holy Week, describes the future king of the Jews as riding on a donkey, the foal of an ass. While God provided manna or bread like the morning dew on the shrubs for the Jews to eat in the wilderness in the days of Moses, Jesus took the five barley loaves, gave thanks and God multiplied the bread to feed five thousand people. As God brought forth water from a rock in the wilderness from the tap of the staff of Moses (see Exodus 17), Jesus invited all who were thirsty to come to him and all who believed in him to drink of the living water that would forever quench their soulful thirst. In this last section, it reminds us of the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman (see John 4:10-14; and also check out Isaiah 12:3).

Whenever John says that Jesus *cried out* (7:37), we need to pay attention to what Jesus said. All who are thirst are invited to *come to Jesus*. Chris Rice wrote song entitled the *Untitled Hymn* and the lyrics of the third verse together with the first chorus are:

back-filling streets behind us that we were not all equally excited. Claustrophobia, anxiety and a resulting headache determined that we needed to get out of there and go home some two hours before midnight. While it was amazing how far we had to trek and how long it took to get home, I think in hindsight if we had stayed for the countdown party, it may have taken us well into the night to get home. It was still a blast to experience New Year's in Manhattan!

I know that I have never seen so much light as Times Square on New Year's. The jumbotron screens, live bands playing on well-lit stages, the normal light blast from all the forest of skyscrapers on the intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue in Manhattan, as well as generators running special lighting for all the holding pens packed with people, it did not feel at all like night. This is not quite what I imagine as I think about the temple lit up by four Menorahs, but the courtyard must have been packed with people celebrating (maybe not with the glow sticks and horns of New Year's Eve) with dancing, chanting Psalms and singing songs.

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life, Jesus said (John 8:12). New York is able to use electricity to light up a city like no other in the world. John the writer of Revelation said: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband... And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light* (Revelation 21:1a, 23).

Jesus is the light for our life. He comes to us to fill us with the light of truth, joy, peace and contentment. As we open our lives increasingly to the Lord, his presence grows within us filling us with his character. When we feel the shadow of fear, worry, unsettledness, or despair etc., we are wise to invite Jesus into that moment and we will find relief. Jesus says: *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying*

night, distant from God and the church, you and I are to be torch-bearers befriending and inviting people to come, walk with us in the light as we keep our eye focused on Jesus the Light. Remember these words from our baptismal ritual: *Let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.* (Matthew 5:16).

Water and the Word of God claim us in the covenantal action of God in baptism. Water was used as a libation (Middle English root which means to "pour out." Libation means to pour water or wine on the ground as an offering in a sacred rite. Yes, it has a more common notion of an alcoholic drink, but that is not its original meaning) during the Feast of Booths and was the first ritual done each day of this feast. The Jewish priests would retrieve water from the pool of Siloam passing through the throng of festival goers and return to the temple courtyard. In last week's reading we focused on water pouring forth *rivers of living water* from the heart or belly of believers (7:38). While this water Jesus is speaking of refers to the joy and power of the Holy Spirit (v. 39), we see once again how Jesus fulfills Scripture by being the light and giving the Holy Spirit, the flowing river of water so important to the Feast of Booths.

One of my favorite New Year's Eve was when Jody and I went to New York City to visit our son and daughter-in-law several years back. I was thrilled as we rode the bus to Times Square to eat dinner and get in line for the count down. We strategically discussed how much water or soda we should drink during dinner knowing that bathrooms were going to be a challenge with millions of people crowded together in Times Square. When we entered the fenced in corral where we would stand for the next five hours body to body, I could not stop smiling and laughing as I enjoyed the whole scene. If my brain could record all the stories my eyes and ears were taking in as I looked and listened to all the people around me, I could have written volumes of books. There were stories galore. I was in extrovert heaven!

Not all of my family are wildly extroverted and it became clear as the energy grew with the masses of people

*Sometimes the way is lonely
And steep and filled with pain
So if your sky is dark and pours the rain, then
Come to Jesus
Come to Jesus
Come to Jesus and live!*

These words resonate with the spirit of 7:37-38. While all people are invited to come to Jesus, the metaphor for belief in Jesus is drink up the living water he offers. These verses are set on the final day of the week long feast of Booths where the Jews have slept on the ground in their make-shift shelter to recall the 40-year journey of their ancestors with Moses in the desert. Water is scarce in a desert yet thankfully Moses had been in training for desert leadership when he spent years watching his father-in-law's sheep in the desert

(see Exodus 2:15, 21-22; 3:1). As a nomadic shepherd, Moses would have learned from Jethro's family how to read the desert to find food and water for the sheep. These desert survival skills would serve Moses well in preparation of leading the Jews to trust God and his leadership to survive.

A weak and small illustration of the joyful celebration of finding water to drink amid the arid heat of the desert is my selective foray into marathon running. I have an early boarder line stage 3 kidney failure. That basically means if I take care of myself and drink plenty of water my kidneys are golden! My kidneys tell me by way of pain if I am under saturated. Running long distances especially on consistent elevation incline on hot days drains my body water away quickly. Signs for upcoming water stations or even mileage are not consistently noted along European marathon courses. With kidneys screaming for water, it is a "cheers, clink, drink, and celebrate" with other station goers when I finally hit those water oasis along the way.

This story is but a glimmer of the water party that must have erupted when these hot desert goers finally came upon a real oasis where there parched throats could be irrigated with refreshing life-restoring water. There are logistical problems

in this story as you consider the numbers of people identified as being part of the exodus: 600,000 men plus children (Exodus 12:37); with some suggesting with women and children it would exceed 2 million. How do you distribute water to that many people at an oasis while preventing the cooling off diving in and pollution the water with sweat and dirt? There seems to be no historical record of an economic collapse at this time in Egypt when the loss of such a large slave work force would have had significant impact. In the 38 years the Jews are said to have spent around Kadesh-barnea, there is no archeological evidence of human presence during this time period.

While I acknowledge these challenges to the story of the wilderness wonderings, the story of the Passover remains central and powerful for the Jews today, for Jesus and for his church. Drinking water is essential for all of animal life including humans. It was especially important for the exodus Jews as Moses led them to new sources of water.

Barrett offers a helpful insight on verse 38: *Christ is himself the fountain of living water, but it is a valid inference that the believer, being joined to him, is also, in a secondary way, a source of living water*, (ibid., p. 328). In a real sense, as we ingest the living water of Jesus, believe in him, we are a vehicle carrying Christ wherever we go and whoever we meet.

When you study a river like the Colorado River and stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon and look at the work of all these years that have cut deeper and deeper into the rock, you see the power of force as well as the effect of time. We rarely see how gradually God, our life experiences, prayer, the Scriptures, worship all contribute to cut our hearts deeper into the bedrock of God's love and grace, form our Christian character, strengthen our endurance, and give us boldness in confident faith.

The point that remains of upmost importance in 7:37-38 is that God desires everyone to be included in Christ and in his gathered community on earth, the church. He offers each

Week 5: December 6, 2015 (Advent 2)

Read: John 8:12-30

Light

Jesus speaks the second of his seven *I am* sayings to reveal himself to all who will listen. The parallels between Moses and Jesus continue in John's gospel with the *I am* sayings as God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush when Moses asked who are you and God said my name is Yahweh or Jehovah in the King James which is in Hebrew: *I am* (Exodus 3:14). In John 8:12, Jesus says: *I am the light of the world*. Again, during the wilderness time of Moses, the Jews followed God in the desert by night with a pillar of fire or light and a cloud by day (Exodus 13:21).

Light was an important part of the Feast of Booths during which Jesus referred to himself the all-encompassing light for all people. During the night time of the feast, four large Menorahs were lit which shed light on the whole courtyard. All night long there was a torch dance by participants to the music of a flute while the Levites chanted the Psalms of Ascent: Psalms 120-134. While this was a religious party, it was a festive party filled with food, drink, and song. If you skim through these Psalms keeping in mind that for about 600 years before Jesus (the U.S. is only 239 years old), the Jews were under outside control the Babylonian, Persian, Greek and now Roman Empires, you can appreciate their prayers: for God's protection (121); for their sacred city Jerusalem (122); for harvest joy – which fits well for this feast (126); for the downfall of their enemies (129); and the final Ascent Psalm (134) which is a night praise song sung outside the temple.

Jesus is the source of life and a life-giver which releases light for our life to all who follow and believe in him as Messiah (John 1:3-4). It is in this trust relationship with God through Jesus that we no longer need to grope in the darkness of our fears and anxiety, but rather walk in confidence that Christ is with us as we trek in the light (John 8:12c). For each person who lives under the shadow of

3. Think of a time when God may have quenched your deepest personal thirst. What were the factors in your story that helped that to happen?
4. Who comes to mind that could really use the mercy, compassion and love of Jesus through you?

Notes

person the living water, the faith of eternal life that begins now as we drink and believe. We are fragile clay cups offering this gift of living water to each thirsty person we meet and with whom we share life. As we follow Jesus with our life, practicing prayer, worship and meditation on the Scriptures, we are bit by bit changed and transformed. We offer what we ourselves have received: we invite you to believe, to drink the living water and come and worship with your new family in Christ.

Jesus reached out beyond his own people group, the Jews, to the outsiders, the Greeks who had been dispersed throughout communities (7:35). Even a story added much later to John's gospel, the unnamed woman dragged by men to Jesus while her lover was let off the hook (John 8:1-11), shows Jesus compassion for all people who have fingers pointed at them by their community. He disarms her enemies and challenges her with a life change. The mercy of Jesus knows no limits. It takes real courage to extend a hand of friendship to a person others, and maybe even our friends, have gossiped about because of one thing or another. What Jesus does so well is his ability to look beyond all the wagging jowls and snarling teeth to give outsiders a chance, maybe even a second chance. Our mercy as followers of Jesus can offer hope to many who our neighbors have wanted to exclude.

This week marks the beginning of a season in the church calendar called Advent. While it is an often overlooked season in our society, it offers a helpful focus for us as Christians and for our families. (See Appendix 2 for ideas for home celebration of Advent).

Discussion Questions:

1. What strikes a chord with you as you think this reading? What is it about this that has meaning for you?
2. In what way is God flowing through your life like a river of living water? Or, are there some dams that need to be removed so that God may flow more freely in and through your life?