

GOOD WORD Schedule
“Themes in the Gospel of John”
October, November, December 2024

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GOOD WORD 2024.4	Signs that Point the Way
Lesson #1 — October 05	John 2:1–11; 4:46–54; 5:1– 5:1–47
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Follow the Signs

Leading Question: When was the last time you felt a subtle nudge to do something?

There are signs everywhere, from the traffic signs that tell you how to act on the road, signs directing you in an airport, and signs telling you the name of streets and stores. If you're hungry, you look for the sign of your favorite place to eat. If you're lost, you try finding a sign telling you where you are and how you can get to where you want to go. But signs don't work in a vacuum. If you're not paying attention, you won't see them. Also, if you're focused on something specific, you may overlook other signs that would be obvious to you.

Question: Do you believe in mysterious or symbolic signs? Are these signs real? Should you follow them?

John's Gospel is selective.

Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.
(John 20:30-31)

John's Gospel is unique.

- John's Gospel has a point of view different from the other Synoptic Gospels
- materials are selected and arranged in a particular order
- emphasis is on specific aspects, events, etc., while minimizing or excluding others

John's Gospel is for contemporary readers.

The Gospel has in view primarily those living in the second century AD who would receive this text, those who had not been part of the life of the earthly Jesus. Thus, the Gospel was written **for us**, and it addresses us as **readers**. It insists on being read or heard. That is how it will achieve its goal.

John's Gospel has a purpose.

John's Gospel is intended "so that you may believe." Throughout this Gospel, the word "faith" is never used. John consistently uses the verb "to believe," as the exchange between the teacher Jesus and his followers is never something that can be obtained, accomplished, or owned. It's a relationship that never ends or only gets deeper over time. It's a love relationship, a friendship that can't stand still without becoming stagnant. ... Since the Gospel is supposed to mediate, facilitate, and sustain this relationship, reading it regularly is necessary. Just as lovers or friends never stop talking even after they have shared all the "news," so too are Jesus and his followers engaged in a continuous conversation that is mediated by the Gospel text, much like letters and phone calls moderate

conversations between friends who are physically apart. The evangelist assumes that we will read and reread the Gospel. This is how our relationship with the Gospel will change and grow.

John's Gospel is well-organized.

John 1:1–18	Prologue
John 1:19–12:52	The Book of Signs: Jesus' Public Ministry
John 13:1–21:22	The Book of Passion: Jesus' Last Words, Death, and Resurrection
John 21:23–25	Epilogue

John's Gospel is filled with themes and symbols built on the number 7.

7 titles for Jesus:

1. Lamb of God (1:29)
2. Son of God (1:34)
3. Rabbi (1:38)
4. Messiah (1:41)
5. Jesus of Nazareth (1:45)
6. King of Israel (1:49)
7. Son of Man (1:51)

7 "I AM" statements:

1. I am the bread of life (6:35)
2. I am the light of the world (8:12)
3. I am the gate (10:7)
4. I am the Good Shepherd (10:11)
5. I am the resurrection (11:25)
6. I am the way, the truth, and the life (14:6)
7. I am the true vine (15:1)

7 signs:

1. Water into wine (2:1-11)
2. Healing of the official's son (4:46-54)
3. The healing by the pool (5:1-15)
4. Feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15)
5. Walking on water (6:16-21)
6. Healing of the blind man (9:1-41)
7. Raising of Lazarus (11:1-45)

John presents Jesus' miracles in a significantly different way than the Synoptic Gospels do (Matthew, Mark, Luke). In John, the term "signs" (*semeia*) is used instead of "wonders" or "miracles" to describe these events.

Question: Why does John write about signs instead of miracles? What do the signs signify for Jesus' ministry?

Jesus expressed an earthy, semiotic theology by materializing his message through various media, including images, stories, actions (stilled storms, healed limbs), and objects like spit, fig trees, bursting baskets, etc. He was a master semiotician. You might even say that Jesus' ministry was more a semiotics ministry than a preaching, teaching, or healing ministry. (Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*) (Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and the communication of meaning)

The signs indicate that Jesus is a messenger from the Father. However, some challenge or even “test” Jesus and are exposed as unbelieving or unable to interpret what the signs mean.

New Testament professor Paul N. Anderson (George Fox University), writes in his book, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, about the puzzles we are confronted with in this Gospel. One of the most notable aspects is how it presents the signs of Jesus as both “diminished and embellished” (p. 31-32):

One one hand,

- Jesus' signs lead people to believe in him (2:11, 23; 4:53; 6:2, 14; 11:15, 45, 48; 12:11, 18-19; 20:30-31). John includes what is arguably the greatest of Jesus' miracles—the raising of Lazarus from the dead as a sign act (11:1-45).
- The performing of signs is to confirm that Jesus has been sent from God (3:2; 7:31; 9:16; 10:41-42)

On the other hand,

- Dependence on signs is rebuked (4:48; 6:26), and belief without having seen Jesus' signs is called “blessed” (20:29)
- Those presented as desiring a sign before believing are labeled as non-believing in John (2:18; 6:30), and some refuse to believe despite Jesus' signs (12:37).

Question: What do you make of someone who gives mixed signals?

Question: How do the conflicting messages about Jesus' signs lead one “to belief” in Him (John 20:30)?

GOOD WORD 2024.4	Signs of Divinity
Lesson #2 — October 12	John 6:1–15, 26–36; 11
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Signs of Divinity

Leading Question: What persuades you about Jesus as a divine being?

Nowhere in the New Testament is Jesus presented as more thoroughly human and more thoroughly divine than in the Gospel of John. Consider these polarities pointed out by Prof. Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel* (p. 26-27):

On one hand, Jesus' divinity is pronounced in John:

- The glory of Jesus is testified to from the beginning of the Gospel (1:4; 2:11; 11:4; 14:13; 17:1) and his “glorification” is emphasized extensively (1:51; 3:14; 6:62; 8:28; 12:23, 34; 13:1)
- Jesus is equated with God in John 1:1-2 MS 18 and is called “my Lord and my God” by Thomas in John 20:28. Likewise, the “I AM” of Exodus 3:14 is used to point to Jesus in John 8:58—a perceivedly blasphemous claim (see v. 59)—and Jesus’ appearance on the lake is presented as a theophany (6:20).
- Further, the divine certainty and sway of Jesus are featured (1:47-51; 2:24-25; 4:17-19; 5:41-42; 6:64; 13:1-3): Jesus knows full well what he will do and what is going to happen to him (6:6; 13:1, 3; 16:19, 30; 18:4; 19:28); his adversaries cannot arrest him unless his time has arrived (7:30; 8:20); and people experience themselves as being “known by the divine” in their encounters with Jesus (1:48; 4:19, 39; 5:6; 9:38; 10:4, 14, 27; 20:16; 21:7).
- Jesus is presented as God striding over the earth in John.

On the other hand, Jesus' humanity is unmistakable:

- The incarnational “flesh” of Jesus is insisted upon in John (1:14; 6:51, 53-56), and his humanity is acknowledged by others (1:45; 10:33; 18:5-7).
- His human family references are clear (1:45; 2:1-12; 6:42; 19:19, 25-27), and not even his brothers believed in him (7:5).
- Out of his side flow physical blood and water (19:34), and Thomas is allowed to touch Jesus’ flesh wounds with his finger and hand (20:27). Further, Jesus weeps at Lazarus’ tomb (11:35); his heart is deeply troubled (11:33; 12:27; 13:21); he groans (11:33, 38); on the cross he thirsts (19:28); and he loves his own (11:3, 5, 36; 13:1, 23, 34; 14:21; 15:9-12).
- The fleshly, pathos-filled Jesus is also a reality in the Johannine text.

Question: Do we need the miraculous signs to convince us of Christ’s divinity? What is it that convinces you that Jesus is divine?

Question: Are John's signs proof of Jesus' divinity or is there something more that John wants to tell us?

See: Jesus as the "I AM" — Jesus in the Present Tense

Question: What is the significance of Jesus' "I Am" Statements?

"I am the bread of life" (John 6:35, 48)

Jesus spoke this shortly after feeding the five thousand, and the crowds demanded more free food. But Jesus did not want to continue satisfying their appetites. He wanted them to understand that physical food only temporarily filled hunger, whereas He was the only One who could fulfill them spiritually. He was explaining that He is the bread of life. Manna met the Israelites' physical necessities in the wilderness, but only for a while. Christ will satisfy our spiritual wants forever. People who believe in Jesus have life. Manna in the wilderness provided temporary sustenance, but those who ate it eventually died. Jesus offers the bread of life, which leads to eternal life.

"I am the light of the world" (John 8:12)

Jesus made this statement at the Feast of Tabernacles. At this feast, a massive candelabra was lit in the temple's women's courtyard. It reminded the Israelites of the pillar of fire that guided their ancestors through the wilderness. Jesus made this comment shortly after forgiving, rather than condemning, a woman who was accused of being caught in adultery.

"I am the door" (John 10:7, 9)

Jesus said this during a conversation with the religious leaders, in which he condemned them to be unsuitable shepherds. Shepherds led their flocks into stone enclosures every night to protect them. These constructions had no doors. To avoid predator attacks, the shepherd would sit or sleep in the opening. Thus, Jesus described His care and unwavering love to those who are His. This comment also confirms what He said in John 14:6 about being the only way to reach the Father. The only way to enter God's "sheepfold" or "family" is through Jesus - the door or gateway.

"I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11, 14)

This statement described Jesus' selfless love for His people. Unlike a hired man who will flee and leave a flock unprotected to save his own life when a wolf approaches the sheep, He will not desert His sheep but will maintain watch over them. In John 10:15-16, Jesus stated, "I lay down My life for the sheep." In Psalm 23, David called the Lord God his shepherd, and in John 10, Jesus refers to Himself as the ultimate Good Shepherd, about to give His life for His sheep.

"I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25)

Following the death of Martha's brother, Lazarus, Jesus spoke words of hope to her. In the following verse, He reinforced His declaration, "And whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:26). Death evoked feelings of despair, hopelessness, and finality until Jesus spoke those magnificent words and demonstrated them by resurrecting His deceased friend. According to 1 Corinthians 15:55, death no longer has a sting since Jesus has defeated the grave.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6)

When the disciples were perplexed by Jesus’ remarks about heaven, Thomas asked: “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” Jesus told him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:5, 6). Jesus describes here his departure and promise to send the Spirit to take his place. The disciples can trust his promise that he will not leave them alone, for he is “the way, and the truth, and the life.

“I am the true vine” (John 15:1, 5)

The imagery of the vine follows after the call, “do as the Father commanded me” (14:31). The commandment is first about bearing fruit but at the same time the image of the vine offers a picture by which the disciples may see themselves as able to do as commanded because of their connection to the vine. The image is first a description of Jesus’ relationship with the Father, and only after that a picture by which the disciples may see their relationship with Jesus. This is key in the mutual abiding between Jesus, the Father, and the disciples.

Question: Why are these bold statements important?

Even though the Gospel of John ascribes to Jesus full equality with God, it also contains the theme of voluntary subordination. Jesus is dependent on God for his message (7:16; 14:24), his life (5:26; 6:27), his power (5:30), his authority to execute judgment and give life (5:21-29), his disciples (6:37, 44), and his glory (17:1).

GOOD WORD 2024.4	The Backstory: The Prologue
Lesson #3 — October 19	John 1:1-18
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: The Power of the Word

Leading Question: What image does “the Word was God” convey for you?

The prologue is the most profound statement about Jesus’ identity in the New Testament, identifying Jesus as the “Word” (*logos*). The Greek term *logos* had a conceptual background in Judaism and in Greek philosophy. In the Old Testament, God’s word is the dynamic force of his will. The psalmist declares, “By the word (*logos*) of the Lord were the heavens made” (Psalm 33:6). God speaks and it is done (Isa 55:11). In Greek philosophy, *logos* was used of the divine reason which brought unity and order to the cosmos. The Jewish philosopher Philo identified the *logos* as the messenger of God, mediator between God and creation. Similar imagery appears in the personification of Wisdom found in the book of Proverbs (Prov 8) and later Jewish Wisdom Literature (Sirach; Wisdom of Solomon). Wisdom was present with God before creation and comes to teach human beings.

Question: What are you wondering about when you read the first words in John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word”?

Some have suggested that the prologue is an early Christian hymn which was incorporated into the Gospel. As a hymn, “In the beginning” stirs up resonances to the creation text in Gen 1:1. These words do not only start a book, but they set out the theological themes that are central to the Gospel of John. What follows is going to have something to do with creation. God is about creating, about life, about abundant life. God is a life-giver at every turn in this story. So is Jesus. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” reveals where Jesus came from, his inherent relationship with God, and his identity as God.

One of the most intriguing characteristics of the poem’s initial verses is how it uses a method known as “staircase parallelism,” in which each line builds on the one that comes before it. This is done by repeating the last word of the previous line as the first word in the following line. This is easier to see in Greek, but literally translated, it goes like this (note the repeated words at the end and beginning of lines, which are underlined):

In the beginning was the Word;
 And the Word was with God;
 And God was the Word....
 In him was Life;
 And the Life was the Light of humans
 And the Light shines in the Darkness
 And the Darkness has not over come it.

In the Gospel of John, the term *logos* was probably chosen because of the rich conceptual Greek and Jewish background.

The Gospel takes up the *logos* of the Greek stoics, links it to the Jewish “theme of creation by word and turns it into a cosmic code and then into a person ... The *Logos* in John corresponds to Wisdom in Proverbs. As in the case of Wisdom, the identity of the *Logos* traffics between the ‘what’ and the ‘who,’ between an abstraction and a personification. But John presses further: the Logos is not mere personified metaphor but an actual life-and-blood person, the divine made carnal (John 1:14)” (William P. Brown, *Sacred Sense*, p. 114).

Theologians call this, High Christology. The New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman writes about the prologue, “Jesus was the incarnated Logos that was equal with God in the beginning, before the universe existed; he was the one who created the universe. And that one became a human. It’s an amazing poem.”

It is not through the transmission of facts about God that Jesus makes God known to humanity. Rather, it is through the personal, incarnate revelation of Jesus that God becomes known to humanity. This is the bold and fundamental claim that the Gospel of John makes.

The Life-giving Power of the Word

As in the Genesis account of creation, God creates through speech. The audacious claim of John’s Gospel is that God’s life-creating speech-act, which called the entire universe into existence, is to be identified with the Word-become-human-flesh, to whom the rest of the Gospel narrative will bear witness: Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, God as creator serves as bookends for the entire Gospel. In John 20:22, Jesus appears to the disciples as they huddle behind locked doors. He “breathes on them” the Holy Spirit. In the Greek language, this is the same verb used in Gen 2:7 (*emphysao*, Septuagint), “the LORD God formed the human being from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.” God’s life-giving, creative activity surrounds the Gospel of John.

Question: What might be the implications of the Word “becoming flesh” for us who are of “flesh”?

Question: What other metaphors do you recognize in John 1:1–18 and what do they evoke?

Question: What persuades you about Jesus in the prologue of John’s Gospel?

Perhaps it is not first about a Christology, but about **humanity’s response** to Jesus as the Light being welcomed to becoming children of God—a gift offered to all who believe in his name. This is seen in the structure of the prologue where verse 12 is at the center: “But all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” From that standpoint, the whole emphasis of the prologue is the response of faith to Jesus as the Word and Light, to which all are invited as children of God.

GOOD WORD 2024.4	Witnesses of Christ as the Messiah
Lesson #4 — October 26	John 1; 3
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Witnesses of the Messiah

Leading Question: How comfortable are you with being a permanent bystander or witness for someone else?

*There came a man sent from God, whose name was John.
He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him.
He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.
(John 1:6-8)*

A key term in the Gospel of John is the word “witness,” which appears 14 times in the Gospel. The purpose is to show that Jesus is God in the flesh and messiah. To do this, the writer marshals an impressive array of witnesses.

Question: Who are some of the witnesses in John’s Gospel?

1. John the Baptist, “He came as a witness, to testify about the Light” (John 1:7).
2. Those born of the Spirit testify, “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen” (John 3:11).
3. The Samaritan woman who went throughout her town giving her witness, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:29).
4. The scriptures, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39).
5. Jesus is giving his own testimony, “If I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going” (John 8:14).
6. The Father, “The Father who sent me bears witness about me” (John 8:18).
7. Jesus works, “The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me” (John 10:25).
8. The people, “So the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to testify” (John 12:17).
9. The Spirit, “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me” (John 15:26).
10. The disciples, “You also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning” (John 15:27).
11. The disciple whom Jesus loved, “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true” (John 21:24).

Question: What is the role of a witness for Jesus?

At the heart of being a disciple is to be a witness, to give testimony. John announces, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29). The principal act of discipleship is to point to Christ and say, “Look, there he is,” so that others may see him. While it seems that Jesus comes after John, John testifies, that in fact, Jesus is before John because in the beginning was the Word. John realizes his place fully, that his sole role in this story is to witness to Jesus, to reveal Jesus to the world. In this Gospel, John recognizes that he is not the baptizer. He is a witness to Jesus’ baptism. In John’s Gospel to be baptized is to be baptized by God by the giving of the Spirit, who “**abides**” or “**remains**” (**menō in Greek**) with the baptized Jesus. This word is used 40 times in the Gospel of John and is the essential term by which to describe the relationship between Jesus and God, between Jesus and the disciples, and between the believer and God.

The Identity of Jesus

The identity of Jesus is a critical theme in the Gospel of John. The reader of the Gospel knows that Jesus is God’s son, but there is more here, Jesus is the unique revelation of God in the flesh, the incarnate Word. The origin of Jesus is at stake, for where Jesus comes from will be questioned over and over again in the Gospel’s discourses. When Philip and Nathaneal discuss the origin of Jesus, the answer “from Nazareth” is not fully correct, unless one recognizes Jesus as from “the beginning with God” (John 1:1, 45, 46). In Gethsemane, too, when Jesus asks the soldiers who come to arrest him, “Whom are you looking for?” (John 18:7), the answer, “Jesus of Nazareth,” is only part of the truth. The question is, will the readers and the believers be able to see that Jesus is both from Nazareth and from God. The Gospel writer will not let go of either truth because at stake is the declaration: **Jesus is the I AM in the flesh**. To choose one, or to see only one and reject or weaken the other threatens the essential argument of the entire Gospel.

Even, the reference, “Son of Man” (1:51), used so often in Mark and the other Synoptics is a title that in the Gospel of John gets to be reinterpreted to say, God became flesh, “the Word became flesh” (1:14). Unlike in the Synoptics, the disciples do not witness the heavens opening at Jesus’ baptism with the Spirit descending on Jesus. Rather, they are witnesses to the heavens opening and God’s very Self coming down and dwell among them on earth.

Nicodemus: John 3:1–21

Question: What do you make of the setting of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus?

A striking encounter by night evokes images of a painting by Carravaggio, with a dramatic contrast between darkness and light. Nicodemus, a respected Pharisaic elder, comes to Jesus, perhaps out of conviction, perhaps out of curiosity. He may evoke the stance of many of the Jewish interlocutors of the evangelist. In his dialogue with Jesus, he encounters a mysterious answer to his curiosity. Jesus tells him that he must be “born again/from above” (the Greek word *anōthen* means both). Misunderstanding this utterance in the crudest, material form, a puzzled Nicodemus evokes further responses from Jesus that point the way in which heavenly “rebirth” occurs, by focusing with eyes that truly see on a sight that heals, the Son of Man “lifted up” like the serpent in the desert at the time of the Exodus. Through that experience, and perhaps through a ritual action (water and the spirit), a human life can be transformed, light can break into darkness.

Question: What does the image of the “son of Man” likened to the serpent on the staff of Moses convey?

Question: What is the relationship between “water” and “spirit” in the discourse? How do these terms relate to other treatments of “water” and “spirit” in the gospel?

Question: What is the context of John 3:16?

John 3:16 is part of the larger discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus. In the discourse, Jesus compares entering God’s kingdom through birth. The Spirit, like a mother giving birth, is the source of new life: humans are born “from above” (John 3:8). John’s Gospel claims that humans have lost their identity as God’s children and tells how the spiritual experience of “birth” restores this identity through the Spirit’s “labor.” The picture of birth in John 3:3-7 is similar to that of light in John 3:19-21. Indeed, birth is the journey from darkness to light.

The passage also provides the metaphor of ascent and descent (John 3:13). Jesus descended from heaven at his incarnation and will return to heaven on the cross. Just as the elevated form of the serpent healed the people who were bitten by snakes in the desert, Jesus grants new life through his “ascent” on the cross (John 3:14-15; Numbers 21:5-9). The wording links to the cross as the culmination of Jesus’ incarnation, where the complete revelation of divine glory is manifested.

GOOD WORD 2024.4	The Testimony of the Samaritans
Lesson #5 — November 02	John 4
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: The Witness of the Samaritan Woman

Leading Question: Does a personal relationship with Jesus always feel good and comfortable?

There could be no character more opposite to Nicodemus than the Samaritan woman at the well.

Question: What are some of the contrasts you can draw between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman?

Question: What do you make of the detail that “it was necessary” for Jesus to go through Samaria on his journey from Judea to Galilee (John 4:3-4)? Is it just a geographical detail? Is it a theological necessity? (Remember: “God so loves the world ...”)

Question: What is the significance of Jacob’s well as the site of meeting between Jesus and the woman?

Question: What is the significance of the time of day?

This commentary writes about the bright time of day and its meaning as follows:

“The woman at the well meets Jesus at the lightest and brightest part of the day, when the sun is the highest in the sky and there is the most sunlight possible. Many commentators interpret this odd time to draw water as a statement about the woman’s morality. She arrives at the well at noon because she does not want to be seen by others; she’s embarrassed by her questionable past or she has been ostracized to come to the well when no one else is around. Such curiosity makes little sense for this Gospel where issues concerning morals, values, and what we would equate with sin, are of little significance. For John sin has nothing to do with past actions or present indiscretions. Sin is a synonym for lacking a relationship with God. To cast judgment on the perceived “sin” of the woman misconstrues what sin is for the Fourth Evangelist. The reference to the time of day points to the theological theme of light and darkness, with darkness representing the realm of unbelief, and light, the realm of belief. The fact that the Samaritan woman meets Jesus at noon invites hopeful anticipation of this conversation. The guiding question should be, how will she do in the conversation with Jesus? This detail suggests that she may very well fare better than her counterpart in Nicodemus.” (Karoline M. Lewis, *John*; Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary, p. 55).

Question: How does the ironic disconnect between Jesus and the woman work? How are they each understanding “living water”?

Question: Why does Jesus ask about the woman's husband(s)?

Jesus' reason for asking about her husbands is not to condemn her for her past. She is not a "five time loser" or a tramp as many sermons still claim. There is no proclamation of forgiveness for her questionable morals. There is no exclamation of judgment for her assumed sin or sexual impropriety. Yet she is continually blamed for her plight and charged with behavior for which there is no textual or historical proof. (Lewis, *John*, p. 59)

"I have no husband." Her brief statement is heartrending. It is not only a statement about her marital status but an assertion about her marginalized status. She is a woman, a Samaritan woman, without a name, who has been married five times. To have been married five times in ancient Palestine would be evidence of circumstances completely beyond the control of any woman at that time. Likely widowed or divorced ... for trivial matters, but more likely because she was barren. ... that would mean that she would not have family to turn to in the case of being widowed, which would further exacerbate her dependent status. The fact that she is currently living with a man not her husband does not correspond to a modern-day "shacking-up" or "living in sin." Rather, her situation was probably a levirate marriage. By law (Deut 25:5-10), the brother of the dead husband was obliged to take in his dead brother's wife, either by formal marriage or by living arrangements of some kind. (Lewis, *John*, p. 60)

In the Gospel of John, it is a theological necessity to acknowledge the gravity of the woman's predicament at the well. Jesus' revelation to her is not merely that he is aware **about her** family situation; rather, he knows what it means to **be her**. The incarnation itself would be taken less seriously if Jesus were to refer to her in any other way than the manner in which she has been thoroughly defined up to this point. Additionally, her reality and identity will undergo a significant transformation as the conversation advances.

Remarkably, Jesus reveals the entirety of who he is, in all of its intimacy, vulnerability, and awe, to her:

The woman said to Him, I know that Messiah is coming, He who is called Christ; when that One comes, He will declare all things to us.

Jesus said to her, I AM, the one speak to you.

(John 4:25-26)

The woman returns to her city and invites her people, "Come and see" (John 4:29). These are the same words Jesus gives as an answer to the question the first two disciples ask, "Rabbi, where are you staying? ... "Come and see" (1:39).

Question: Does the presence or absence of the disciples of Jesus contribute anything to the story?

In response to the women's invitation, the people leave the city and are on their way to meet Jesus. In the meantime, there is an interruption. The encounter with Jesus is postponed ... The disciples believe that Jesus must be hungry and push him to eat. Jesus responds ambiguously which then leads to a literal interpretation. The humor should not be lost in this interchange for in humor there is also truth. The questions of the disciples "Did you bring him lunch?" "No, did you?" "When did he eat?" expose

their confusion. The use of misunderstanding in the Gospel of John is more than just a rhetorical, grammatical, or syntactical device; it is intended to underline how truly amazing everything is. It emphasizes the improbability of what is being offered theologically: that God chose to become human.

Question: What is the result of the woman's testimony?

The Samaritans respond to the woman's invitation to "come and see" by going to Jesus and inviting him to "stay" with them. "And he stayed there two days" (John 4:40). But the verb is not simply "stay," it is "**abide,**" (**menō**), which functions as a synonym for relationship with Jesus. To abide with Jesus is to be in an intimate relationship with him. The Samaritans do not ask Jesus to just hang out for a few hours. They are speaking the primary language of relationship. As a result of this abiding, "many more believe because of His word" (John 4:41).

Abiding and believing are synonymous, and the first persons beyond the first disciples to experience this relationship with Jesus are Samaritans. We are once again reminded of 3:16, "For God so loved the world." This entire story of Jesus in Samaria is an embodied presentation of what this verse means. Jesus, the Samaritan woman at the well, and her villagers have acted out what God loving the world looks like. (Lewis, *John*, p. 65)

The final confession of the Samaritans about who they perceive Jesus to be is nothing short of incredible. The only time Jesus is called "savior" in the entire Gospel of John is here and by outsiders. Nicodemus was not capable of seeing this possibility of Jesus' identity and not even the disciples will name Jesus as "savior." (Lewis, *John*, p. 66)

GOOD WORD 2024.4	More Testimonies About Jesus
Lesson #6 — November 09	John 1:32–36; 3:25–36; 5:36–38; 6:51–71; 7:37–53
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: The Scandal of Jesus

Leading Question: Have you ever felt offended by something Jesus asked you to do?

The miracle of the loaves and fish is recounted in all four Gospels. According to John’s account in chapter 6, this miracle becomes a “sign” pointing beyond itself on a much deeper level. Jesus left after feeding the people and crossed to the other side of the Sea of Galilee but was pursued by the crowd who asked for further miracles. They eventually found him in the synagogue in Capernaum. Here, John’s Gospel tells us, Jesus began teaching about his body and blood, and this sermon caused an intense conflict: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (John 6:52). Jesus’ answer becomes even more outrageous:

*Truly, truly I say to you,
unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood,
you have no life in yourselves.
He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life,
and I will raise him up on the last day.
For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink.
He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.
(John 6:53-56)*

Many of his disciples said: “This is a hard word. Who can listen to it?” (John 6:60).

Question: Why eat Jesus? Why not just eat *with* Jesus?

Note two things happening here:

1. Rather than the ordinary Greek term for eating (*phagein*), Jesus uses the verb *trogein*, which means literally “to crunch or gnaw.” It is typically used to describe the way animals consume their food—an indelicate tearing and chewing of flesh. Jesus uses this hyper-realistic verb four times (John 6:54, 56, 57, 58). In addition, it is good to consider the background about eating flesh and blood:

*Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; ...
Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.
(Gen 9:3-4)*

*You shall not eat the blood of any creature,
for the life of every creature is its blood.*

Whoever eats it shall be cut off.
(Leviticus 17:14)

*Only be sure that you do not eat the blood;
for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the meat.*
(Deut 12:23)

The prophet Ezekiel speaks of birds who will swoop down on the enemies of Israel and eat their flesh and drink their blood:

*You shall eat the flesh of the mighty,
and drink the blood of the princes of the earth. . . .
You shall eat fat until you are filled, and drink blood until you are drunk.*
(Ezek 39:18-19).

Finally, a popular Aramaic saying of Jesus' time identified the devil as the "eater of flesh."

If the prohibitions we have rehearsed had to do with the consumption of the bloody flesh of animals, how much more offensive must Jesus' words have been, which encouraged the eating of his own human body. Hence the viscerally negative reaction of Jesus' audience.

NOTE: Flesh with blood wasn't forbidden for being dirty or disgusting, but for being holy as life is holy—all life including animal life—and belongs to God.

2. Rather than stop the disillusioned disciples and attempt to explain himself, Jesus lets them go. He watches them leave and turns to the Twelve, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Peter responds for the group: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

*My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink.
He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood **abides [menō]** in Me, and I in him.
As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father,
He who eats Me, he also will live because of Me.
This is the bread which came down out of heaven,
not as the fathers ate and died.
He who eats this bread will live forever.*
(John 6:53-58)

Question: What do you think of Jesus' even more forceful words?

Question: Where is the clue in these words that builds the transition from the concrete to the spiritual realm of relationship with Jesus?

*But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them,
Does this because you to stumble?
What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?
It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing;
But the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.
(John 6:61-63)*

GOOD WORD 2024.4	Blessed Are Those Who Believe
Lesson #7 — November 16	John 8:54–58; 12:1–8; 19:4–22; 20:19– 31
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Signs Faith versus Blessed Faith

Leading Question: What do you need to believe?

The tension between signs faith and belief without having seen is a curious one in John’s Gospel. On one hand, Jesus’ signs are featured with prominence in order that people might believe that Jesus is the Messiah. On the other hand, Jesus rebukes the seeking of signs, and those who believe without having seen are considered blessed.

The Anointing of Jesus

The anointing of Jesus, like previous sign acts in the Gospel of John, is described in a single verse, indicating that the significance of the anointing extends beyond the act itself. The depiction of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus foreshadows the footwashing in the following chapter later, prompting a direct contrast between Mary’s gesture for Jesus and Jesus’ act for his disciples. As a result, the foot washing must be seen in light of Mary’s devotion and love for Jesus. The same verb is used for Mary’s wiping Jesus’ feet (12:3) and Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet (13:5).

Question: What is the significance of Mary’s “pound of very costly perfume of pure nard” (John 12:3)?

Karoline Lewis, in her commentary on John 12 writes that the anointing of Jesus should be first and foremost experienced as an act of abundance. For every detail in verse 3 points to an expression of profuse love. A pound of ointment, costly perfume, pure nard, the fragrance filling the entire house, exceeds any and all expectations. The perfume is expensive, but we do not find out just how expensive until Judas’ reaction in verse 5, when we learn that it is 300 denarii. This is a ridiculous, absurd cost, when one day’s wage was one denarii. Mary spent a year’s wage on this display of affection and love for Jesus. The perfume is made of pure nard, not spiced with other ingredients, and reserved to anoint only people of honor. Nard originated from a plant, *Nardostachys jatamansi*, indigenous to India. It is important to understand that this is not just Mary’s way of thanking Jesus for raising her brother from the dead. To simplify her act as only gratitude overlooks the connection to the footwashing in chapter 13 and discounts the larger theme of abundance throughout the Gospel as a whole. Mary’s act foreshadows Jesus’ act, and his act recalls hers. The proximity of these two displays of abundant love demonstrates the extraordinary reciprocity that is assumed between Jesus and the believer, between the believer and Jesus, which Jesus will articulate in its fullest expression in the Farewell Discourse (John 14–16).

Question: Considering Mary’s act as a foreshadowing of Jesus death, what is the meaning of the fragrance filling the entire house?

Karoline Lewis' remarks are insightful here:

That the fragrance of the perfume permeates the entire house calls to mind both the stench of death, of Lazarus and of Jesus, and the smell of abundant grace. A preacher might build on this detail, the way in which a smell can literally seep into every nook and cranny of a house, into your clothes, into your skin. Mary's extravagance does not erase the smell of death but matches it, a metaphorical depiction of how the life that God provides will be present even in the reality of death (*John*, p. 166).

Note: Judas is present in the house that is filled with the fragrance "of abundant grace."

*But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said,
Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?
(John 14:4-5)*

But he is not mentioned here for the first time. He appears without his name in Jesus' speech about those who do not believe:

*But there are some of you who do not believe.
For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe,
and who it was that would betray Him.
(John 6:64)*

Question: How is Judas different from Mary?

Judas shows feigned concern about the amount of money he says is wasted and should be given to the poor. But then we learn that he is a thief (John 12:6). As a thief he does not give money, he takes it away from the poor. Judas is Mary's counterpart, in contrast to Mary who has given all she had for Jesus. Furthermore, Judas is a nonbeliever, detached from Jesus even though he is one of his disciples, whereas Mary is a believer, close to Jesus. The presence of Judas in the middle of Jesus' anointing is heartbreaking. "It reminds us of the duality of discipleship in this Gospel and the contrast between abundant grace and disbelief" (Lewis, *John*, p. 167).

Thomas

*But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.
So the other disciples were saying to him, We have seen the Lord!
But he said to them, Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails,
and put my finger into the place of the nails,
and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.
(John 20:24-25)*

Question: How do you feel about Thomas' response to the news about the resurrection?

“Thomas gets to say what we all want to say, the truth of what we do not want to admit., how difficult it is to believe in Jesus whom we have never encountered for ourselves” (Lewis, *John*, p. 248).

Verse 27 is remarkably ambiguous:

*Reach here with your finger, and see My hands;
and reach here your hand and put it into My side;
and do not be unbelieving, but believing.*

Question: Did Thomas do as Jesus asked? Or was seeing Jesus in the flesh enough for his confession?

The narrative in John 20 is not clear “and invites an individuality of encounter for every believer. What each believer, each disciple, will require for recognition of Jesus’ identity will differ. Is seeing enough? Hearing? Touching?” (Lewis, *John*, p. 249)

Question: In what way is relationship the key to believe?

According to John, to take the incarnation seriously means an individual encounter between Jesus and the believer. A cookie-cutter belief is not enough.

In the colloquial wording this is the story of “The Doubting Thomas” because most Bibles render Jesus’ words as, “do not doubt but believe.” But, the actual word used is *apistos*, literally “unbelieving,” which is in harmony with the entire theme of the Gospel about being in the light or in the dark, about being in a believing relationship with Jesus or withdrawing and walking away (John 6:66). Jesus invites Thomas to move from darkness to light, from a lack of relationship to intimacy. According to Karoline Lewis’ commentary on Thomas’ story (p. 249), it is necessary for us to correct our interpretation about the Doubting Thomas, because this Gospel does not deal with doubt or uncertainty. “To be in between is to be alone, on your own, without the presence of others, neither in one place or the other. ... This extreme dichotomy for John of either/or is not a matter of exclusion but a radical claim about inclusion.” To be incarnated demands relationship in community.

Thomas answered and said to Him, My Lord and my God!
(John 20:28)

Question: What does Thomas’ twofold designation of Jesus mean?

The testimony of Thomas is the ultimate witness to who Jesus is. Jesus is both Lord, emphasizing his humanity, his role as Rabbi, and his earthly ministry, and God. To assert Jesus as Lord and God is to hold together what was stated in the prologue, the humanity and divinity of Jesus. In addition, Thomas’ expression is personal with the use of “my,” a possessive pronoun, in order to express the intimacy of relationship not an individualized theology.

GOOD WORD 2024.4	Fulfilling Old Testament Prophecies
Lesson #8 — November 23	John 5:17, 20, 36–40, 46, 47; 8:12–30
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: The Father’s Testimony

Leading Question: Have you ever waited for something important to happen and it felt like a life time?

Healing on Sabbath (John 5)

There were many who were sick—the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed—all aying at the pool gate of Bethesda. The man who was ill for 38 years was singled out. The length of time that the man has been ill, in the context of a human life span in the first century, suggests that he has been sick virtually his entire life. This includes his life-long dependance on others for support on a daily basis. Jesus asks, “Do you want to become well?” The man’s answer speaks to the age-long drama of humanity, “Lord, I have no one!” (John 5:7).

Question: How does the man’s illness reflect the human condition? How does Jesus respond to this condition?

Bethesda is the man’s Loneliness Hospital. “No one comes when I ring the call button,” “no one helps me out of bed;” and this happens inside a well-established health care institution with medical staff all around. For 38 years the man had gone unnoticed, overlooked among the many, all kinds of people stepping over him. “Rise, take your mattress, and walk!” ... said Jesus on the Sabbath day. The man walked with his mattress on his back while law-abiding passers-by raised their eyebrows. Later that Sabbath, the man identified the Bethesda physician and offered his name to his interrogators.

*For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus,
because He was doing these things on the Sabbath.
(John 5:16)*

Question: Commentators conclude that the man was not a good fellow, and some even say that this time Jesus healed one who did not deserve it. What do you think about this interpretation?

In answering the challenge regarding his healing on the Sabbath, Jesus speaks of his commissioning by the Father. The Jewish leaders, however, accuse him of “making himself equal to God” (John 5:17-18). Over the rest of the chapter, Jesus explains that all of his authority is derived from the Father. Following closely in ancient tradition, to honor the Son is to honor the Father who sent him, and to dishonor the Son is to dishonor the Father (John 5:23). In this way, the Gospel of John presents Jesus as fulfilling the Torah.

Another tension between Jesus and the Judean leaders over the Father-Son relationship happens when he is accused on John 18:13 of being like the presumptuous prophet spoken of in Deut 18:20. They say, Jesus is testifying about himself and thus disqualifying his validity. In his defense, Jesus offers a

multiplicity of witnesses: the Father, the Spirit, his words and works, and the words spoken by Moses and the Scriptures. The witnesses should attest that his Father sent him.

*And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me.
You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form.
You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent.
You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life;
it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.
I do not receive glory from men; but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves.
I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me;
if another comes in his own name, you will receive him.
How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another
and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?
Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father;
the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope.
For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me.
But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?
(John 5:37–47)*

Question: What is the occasion, the setting, and the time when Jesus speaks these words? How does considering the context help to make better sense of what Jesus says?

Question: In what way is the reference to Moses crucial to understanding Jesus as the incarnate Son of the Father?

John and Judaism

The presentation of “the Jews” in the Gospel of John has been one of the most problematic in the history of biblical interpretation, especially when it is combined with Matthew’s presentation of the crowd in Jerusalem crying out to Pilate, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matt 27:25). This has emerged within Christianity as theological anti-Semitism and has contributed to the tragic suffering of Jewish people in the Christian world. However, it is important to note three things:

1. Both gospels, Matthew and John, are written by Jewish authors advocating a Jewish Messiah to largely Jewish audiences living in Jewish communities and practicing Jewish beliefs and behaviors in times of fellowship and of conflict.
2. The particular Greek term *Ioudaioi*, used in the Gospel of John, which is mostly translated as “Jews,” should be rendered more accurately as “Judeans.” The inadequacy of simplistically translating “the Jews” instead of “the Judeans” is quite obvious when one considers that **everyone** in the narrative is Jewish except for the Romans and the Greeks. **Everyone** is Jewish including the disciples, their families, the Galileans, and the Judeans. They all are also Semites, which includes the Samaritans (who according to John 4 come to believe in Jesus). Therefore, to think of Jewish people in general as the enemy of Jesus of Nazareth is then a thorough misreading of the Gospel of John. Nonetheless, this has taken place in the long history of Christian interpretation of John’s Gospel.
3. The most troubling text is John 8:44: “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.” This verse has a sad history of horrible anti-Semitic sentiments and actions.

Therefore, it is important to carefully read this verse in the context of John 8:31-59, with an explicit awareness of John's strong rhetoric and appeal similar in language to the prophet Hosea and the wider prophetic notion of the lawsuit of the Lord against Israel. For further study on this specific text and topic, I recommend the following three articles:

- a. Steven Motyer, "Is John's Gospel Anti-Semitic?" (New Testament Lecturer, London School of Theology; <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/is-johns-gospel-anti-semitic/>)
- b. Adele Reinhartz, "Children of the Devil": John 8:44 and Its Early Reception (<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110671773-004/html?lang=en>)
- c. Kathleen Gallagher Elkins, "The Jews as "Children of the Devil" (John 8:44) in Nazi Children's Literature" (https://brill.com/view/journals/bi/31/3/article-p374_006.xml)

GOOD WORD 2024.4	The Source of Life
Lesson #9 — November 30	John 1:4, 12, 13; 6:61-68; 10:10; 14:6
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Life in Abundance

Leading Question: What metaphor do you like to use to describe life?

The Gospel of John begins with God as the life-giver: times.

In Him was life, and the life was the Light of all people.
(John 1:4 NRSV)

The theme of life appears with the Greek word *zoe* 36 times in John’s narrative and uses word pictures or metaphoric language to describe “life” and “eternal life” like, light, a well of fresh water, bread, Jesus’ flesh, Jesus’ blood, and Jesus’ words.

In John 6:1-15, Jesus takes five loaves of bread and multiplies them to feed 5,000 people. But that is not all. His disciples gather twelve baskets of leftovers after everyone has been fed, which demonstrates the generosity of the gift of bread. Overwhelming abundance is a theme in John. People needed bread to survive another day, and Jesus gave them bread, and then spoke of himself as the one who can nourish them not only on a daily basis, but for all time.

Question: What comes to mind when you think of the wonder of manna in the wilderness?

In relation to the “bread of life” metaphor Jesus brings up the manna in the wilderness, and then makes the straightforward statement, “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died” (John 6:49). The blatency of this statement stands in contrast to, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever” (John 6:51). Jesus then makes the boldest statement yet, “and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Note: Jesus opens up the gift of life for the entire world, the universe, this is the Greek word *kosmos*. There is no boundary set for the gift of life. Life is for all, everywhere, and in abundance. When the Word becomes flesh, eternal life is gifted to the entire universe. It looks like light, it feels like fresh water, and tastes like bread. It is shared with the world in the flesh, in the blood, and in the words of Jesus. And so, when Mary encounters the resurrected Jesus in the garden, she does not return to the disciples to offer a doctrinal summary. Rather, she personalizes it. She embodies and gives voice to her belief, “I have seen the Lord!” When the Greeks ask, “Sir, we would see Jesus” (John 12:21), they too articulate this essential theological theme of the Gospel of Life in an experiential way. “We would like to see Jesus,” not just learn about Jesus.

At the water festival on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus proclaims the celebration of God’s abundant provision of living water from the top of the Temple in Jerusalem.

*On the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying,
If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.
He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said,
From his innermost being will flow rivers of bliving water.
But this He spoke of the Spirit
(John 7:37-38)*

This powerful assertion made to the festive crowd recalls Jesus' one-on-one conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well:

*Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst;
but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.
(John 4:14)*

Question: Which of the following verses about life speaks to you in a transformational way?

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have **eternal life**.”

John 5:24 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has **eternal life**, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into **life**.”

John 6:35 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of **life**; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.”

John 6:40 “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have **eternal life**, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.”

John 6:68 Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of **eternal life**.”

John 8:12 Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of **life**.”

John 10:10 “I came that they may have **life**, and have it abundantly.”

John 11:25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the **life**; he who believes in Me will **live** even if he dies.”

John 20:31 “These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have **life** in His name.”

GOOD WORD 2024.4	The Way, the Truth, and the Life
Lesson #10 — December 07	John 14:1–6
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Jesus, the Only Way

Leading Question: How do we know the way to God?

In postmodern times, one of the most important discussions in Christianity is whether salvation, or *soteriology* (*soteria* in Greek means "salvation"), is particular or universal. Is salvation only through Christ? If there are other ways to reach up to the Father, then why did the Son have to come and die? Interestingly, the Gospel of John is the most important source for this very question about Christian particularity or universalism. In John 14:6, we read that no one can come to the Father except through Jesus. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the Gospel we read that the Light that enlightens everyone was entering the world (1:9), calling everybody to respond to salvation through faith, whether or not one knows Jesus' story. How can the Light of Christ be accessible to everyone and "darkness has not overcome the light" (1:5) while Jesus remains the only way to the Father? Again, we have a riddle on our hands.

On one hand,

- The true Light that enlightens everyone is Jesus (1:9), suggesting *universal* access to God's saving work; and Jesus has many sheep that are "not of this fold" (10:16)

And yet,

- Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, without whom no one comes to the Father (14:6); believing in him affords eternal life (3:16; 20:31).

To understand both of these claims we should ask why both of these claims are made.

Question: What is actually claimed when it is said that all who come to God do so through Jesus?

Question: In what way do all have access to the illuminating activity of the eternal Christ?

Question: Is the first claim prescriptive ("all people must...") or descriptive "(this is how it happens for everyone...")?

Consider this: If the sole hope for humanity is God's redemptive initiative, which Jesus Christ—the Way, the Truth, the Life, and the Light—was and is eschatologically, "the difference is not that of one religion over another religion, but one of **revelation over religion. Might the issue pivot on the insufficiency of human initiative, which religion represents, and the all-sufficiency of the divine initiative, which Jesus embodies?**" (Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 35; emphasis mine).

Read: John 14:1–6

Question: How does Jesus' "I AM the way, the truth, and the life" statement answer Thomas' question?

John 14 contains Jesus' words about his impending departure. Jesus comforts his disciples and promises that he is going to make rooms for them in the house of the Father. He asks for their trust in him, "Believe in God, and believe in me." The "dwelling places" he promises are only meaningful when they are considered as being in the intimate presence of God, or 'at the bosom of the Father', for the word is again the verb "to abide." However, like the majority of the characters in John's Gospel, Thomas interprets Jesus' promise about dwelling places literally. "Jesus, where are you going? We need a map, a chart, or something that will direct us to the correct place." In this way, the Farewell Discourse is identical to the other dialogues and discourses in the Gospel. There is always a shift from misunderstanding to knowledge of who Jesus is revealing himself to be. But here, the stakes appear higher. For every time Jesus' words, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" are removed from the conversation between Jesus and Thomas, and from Jesus' final alone time with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion, this particular "I AM" has been turned into a statement of evidence and proof for one's salvation. Every time this specific "I AM" is removed it is also misappropriated. When that happens, this "I AM" statement contradicts every other "I AM" statement in the Gospel of John. "I AM the way, the truth, and the life" ends up symbolizing God's judgment and exclusion. "No one comes to the Father except through me" —instead of being a promise—turns into an exclusionary declaration.

Question: What difference does this make for the Gospel if it is understood as a promise instead of a statement of exclusion?

GOOD WORD 2024.4	The Father, the Son, and the Spirit
Lesson #11 — December 14	John 14:10, 24; 16:7–11; 17:1–26
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Inseparable Companionship

Leading Question: What is your preferred way of thinking about the Trinity?

John's Gospel has been a significant source for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity from the patristic period to the present. The Fourth Gospel contains the most comprehensive raw material for this doctrine, but also the most highly developed patterns of reflection about the oneness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus' Farewell Speech in John 14–16 is especially rich in this regard.

After Jesus' response to Thomas, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6), another disciple speaks up, one from whom we have heard very little so far. This is Philip, and John's Gospel contains only one other record where Philip speaks. It is when the people are hungry and Jesus asks Philip, "Where should we buy bread so that they may eat?" Philip's answer seems reasonable, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little" (John 6:7-8). Here, in John 14, Philip says,

*Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.
Jesus said to him,
Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip?
He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, Show us the Father?
Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me?
(John 14:8-10)*

Question: How would you describe the Father to someone like Philip?

*I will ask the Father,
and He will give you another Helper [parakletos] to be with you forever;
that is the Spirit of truth,
whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see or know Him,
but you know Him because He **abides [menō]** with you and will be in you.
I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.
(John 14:16-18)*

Question: Why would the disciples be like "orphans" when Jesus leaves?

Question: How does the Helper (*parakletos*) fit into the life of an orphan?

Pneumatology (study of the Holy Spirit) in the Gospel of John is multi-faceted and is not given as a doctrinal formulation. The Spirit descended on Jesus as a dove, generates new life, acts sovereignly and unpredictably, quenches spiritual thirst, and permeates true worship of God, who is Spirit.

Three chapters in John's Gospel, that stand out for their unusual identification of the Spirit as the *parakletos*. In chapters 14 to 16, Jesus is the first speaking of *another parakletos* (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; cf. 1 John 2:1).

English Bibles variously translate the word *parakletos* as Comforter, Advocate, Counselor, and Helper. The *parakletos* is "one who is called along or beside" to help out in any situation where there is a need. In the works of Philo and the rabbinic writings a *parakletos* is an advocate and intercessor. A *parakletos* was especially needed when a child became an orphan after the death of the father or both parents (In modern Hebrew of today, this work of the *parakletos* is retained with the *paraklit* as a solicitor or attorney). Rabbinic tradition further relates that when disciples of a famous rabbi mourned the death of their rabbi, the disciples considered themselves as fatherless and as orphans. This context is helpful in understanding the language and imagery Jesus uses when speaking of the Holy Spirit as a *parakletos*.

Who is Philip?

Jesus' promise of the Paraclete is given in response to a specific request made by Philip, "Lord, show us the Father," and then he added, "and it will be enough for us." What a strange request of a disciple who had accompanied Jesus for three years, who had heard Jesus speak of the Father and watched him do the works of the Father!

But before we continue to make judgments about Philip, we must consider the things we learn about Philip from the Gospel of John:

1. **Name and location:** Philip is Greek (meaning, "horse-lover"). He does not have a Jewish name. Philip lives in Galilee (John 1:43–46), and holds the name of the ruler Philip the Tetrarch (son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra of Jerusalem), who ruled in Galilee between 4 BCE to 34 CE. What does the name tell you about Philip?
2. **Call to discipleship:** John writes about Jesus, "He purposed to go to Galilee and found Philip" (1:43). The finding of Philip did not happen by chance; it was intentional and purposeful, and happened after a careful search; this is what the Greek word for "to find" indicates. What does Jesus' way of searching for Philip mean?
3. **Family/relations:** Among the twelve disciples, Philip is unique. According to the Gospels, every disciple is identified as being related to someone else. The relationships are given as, a brother, a father, or a specific party or group of people. Philip is without anyone, alone! How does this change your way of thinking about Philip's question?
 - Simon Peter and Andrew (brothers, sons of John)
 - James and John (brothers, sons of Zebedee)
 - Matthew and James (brothers, sons of Alphaeus)
 - Nathanael, called Bartholomew (meaning "son of Talmai")
 - Judas Thaddaeus (son of James)
 - Thomas, called Didymus (meaning "twin")
 - Simon, the Zealot (belongs to the party of the zealots)

- Judas Iscariot (son of Simon Iscariot)
 - Philip, ———
4. Language: Philip speaks twice in the Gospel of John. First, “Money is not enough to feed all these people” (John 6:5-7). Second, “Show us the Father, and it will be enough” (John 14:8, 9). Philip uses the word “enough” both times when he speaks. Could this be an indication or, in the typical way of John’s Gospel, a “sign” that reveals something about Philip? Perhaps it tells of what Philip has missed all his life? According to psychologist James Pennebaker, the words we use often reveal who we are (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ethical-wisdom/201403/how-the-words-we-use-reveal-who-we-are>).

Question: What picture does the Gospel of John paint about Philip?

Question: How does this help us to understand the work of the Helper?

Here is the unusual in Jesus’ Farewell Speech to his disciples. No rabbi ever has been able to promise to his disciples that they would not be left as orphans. No rabbi would say: “I will come to you” (John 14:18).

GOOD WORD 2024.4	The Hour of Glory: The Cross and Resurrection
Lesson #12 — December 21	John 18:33–19:5; 19:17–27; 20:1–18
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: The Crucified and the Risen Jesus

Leading Question: Where do you see God today?

In his book *Night*, Elie Wiesel describes a scene from the concentration camp in Auschwitz:

One day, as we returned from work, we saw three gallows, three black ravens, erected on the Appelplatz. Roll call. The SS surrounding us, machine guns aimed at us: the usual ritual. Three prisoners in chains – and, among them, the little pipel, the sad-eyed angel. The SS seemed more preoccupied, more worried, than usual. To hang a child in front of thousands of onlookers was not a small matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was pale, almost calm, but he was biting his lips as he stood in the shadow of the gallows.

This time, the Lagerkapo refused to act as executioner. Three SS took his place. The three condemned prisoners together stepped onto the chairs. In unison, the nooses were placed around their necks. “Long live liberty!” shouted the two men. But the boy was silent.

“Where is merciful God, where is He?” someone behind me was asking.

At the signal, the three chairs were tipped over. Total silence in the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.

“Caps off!” screamed the Lageralteste. His voice quivered. As for the rest of us, we were weeping.

“Cover your heads!”

Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were hanging out, swollen and bluish. But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing... And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking: “For God’s sake, where is God?”

And from within me, I heard a voice answer: “Where is He? This is where – hanging here from these gallows.”

The Cross

This brief commentary focuses on those features in the crucifixion narratives that are unique to the Gospel of John:

1. In John's Gospel, Jesus carries his own cross. There is no Simon of Cyrene compelled to assist Jesus when he is weak from flogging by carrying the crossbar to the crucifixion site.
2. The account of the crucifixion is briefly narrated, "when the soldiers had crucified Jesus" (John 19:23). The brevity with which Jesus' crucifixion is described is similar to the descriptions of Jesus' signs. The sign, here the crucifixion itself, is not the primary focus, but what happens around it, the details and the dialogue.
3. Mary, the mother of Jesus, appears only two times in the Gospel of John, first at the wedding at Cana and then at the cross. She brackets the life of Jesus, demonstrating his humanity and the need for her presence. Without her Jesus would be alone. He does not cry to his father from the cross, but he needs his mother, who has been there for him from the first sign to the last. The mother of Jesus is the Gospel's embodiment of what abiding means and looks like. It is about being there.
4. The disciple whom he loved, similarly, signifies that discipleship is first and foremost about abiding, about relationship, about presence. Anything short of that presence is theologically insufficient for the Gospel of John.
5. "I am thirsty" (John 19:28). Unlike in the Synoptics, here Jesus asks for a drink. He utters a basic human need, but one that he is able to fulfill (John 4). In this way again, the Gospel of John holds together theologically Jesus' humanity and Jesus' divinity.
6. "It is finished" (John 19:30). Everything is brought to its intended goal. The totality of Jesus' purpose of making God known as God in the flesh who lays down his life.

The Resurrection

We, the readers of John's Gospel, have not witnessed the resurrection. None of us claim to have been present at the empty tomb. However, because we **hear** the news, we are more blessed than the eyewitnesses, as Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen but have come to believe" (John 20:29).

John makes it clear that the account of the resurrection begins in a garden, where Mary Magdalene confused Jesus for the gardener. We've already learned that everything in John's Gospel has a purpose. This includes Mary who does not instantly recognize the gardener as Jesus, but she will when she hears his voice calling her by name. Again, the power of the Word is at work (see John 1:1-3). Gardeners, after all, cultivate life; they work with the old to raise up the new, and only God can raise up a body from the dirt ("human from the dust of the ground," in Hebrew, *adam* from *adamah*, Gen 2:7).

"Gardeners are in fact practitioners of resurrection, of bringing forth new life from below, from out of the rich, decaying, organic soil. The human from the humus" (William P. Brown, *Sacred Sense*, p. 135).

"By recalling the first garden in his resurrection account, John invites us to wonder, to imagine new life, resurrection, in this second garden. ... Mary's mistake is no mistake after all. John has her testifying to the saving, creative, resurrecting presence of God even before she recognizes Jesus as the resurrected one" (William P. Brown, *Sacred Sense*, p. 135).

GOOD WORD 2024.24	Epilogue: Knowing Jesus and His Word
Lesson #13 — December 28	John 21
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Knowing Jesus

Leading Question: What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?

Question: Can you think of any events in your life that seemed bad at the time but in hindsight were meaningful?

The last chapter in the Gospel of John contains Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius. One recognizes here multiple resonances with themes occurring throughout the Gospel. The disciples have returned to their job of fishing, and it is into the ordinariness of daily life that the resurrected Jesus reveals himself. The Gospel provides a list of names, including Nathanael of Cana, the disciple we met in the first chapter, and the location of Cana, the place celebrating the joy of life and relationship from John 2. And so we are nudged to go back to the beginning and reread the stories about Jesus and the disciples. Similar to the wedding in Cana where Jesus provided an abundance of the best wine for the wedding, here at the end of the narrative we hear about an abundance of fish.

Question: What other elements do you recognize in John 21 that resonate with themes in the Gospel of John?

Peter

Peter's matter-of-fact words come across quite humorous, "Well then, I guess I will go fishing" (John 21:3). The others follow and board their boats. What is the intention here? Do they think to go back to being "regular" disciples? "But the ascension of Jesus will necessitate a reevaluation of what discipleship means," says Karoline Lewis (*John*, p. 254), and then continues,

It is not an accident that their fishing expedition occurs at night. As we have noted throughout this commentary, night or darkness symbolizes the realm of unbelief, and day or light the realm of belief. The detail that Jesus stands on the shore at daybreak points to the possibility of what now might be seen, realized, and believed. Jesus is still the light and it will be in light that the moment of recognition will happen. Jesus states the obvious, "You didn't catch anything, did you?" with the disciples equally obvious response, "You got that right." This brief interaction postpones the moment of realization and reminds us of the critical role that conversation and dialogue have in coming to believe who Jesus is. Jesus again states what should be painfully evident. "Did you try the other side of the boat?" There is an honesty and openness here for which the disciples have long asked, a desire for plain speech. Now, they catch an abundance of fish. When the Beloved Disciple says, "It is the Lord!" we realize that it is in Jesus' demonstration of abundance, a sign of grace upon grace, that the moment of recognizing Jesus happens. ... The resurrected Christ will be seen in displays of abundance. The ascended Christ will be known when his disciples establish opportunities to experience abundant grace.

Question: Why does Jesus ask Peter three times, “Do you love me?”

The three-fold question and answer dialogue between Peter and Jesus is critical for understanding what discipleship means in the Gospel of John. To reduce the interaction to Jesus’ forgiveness of Peter and his rehabilitation as a disciple after his failure of loyalty toward Jesus in the Temple court is not adequate and minimizes the importance of the interaction. The question, “Do you love me?” (John 21:15-17) recalls how Jesus expresses what love means in his Farewell Speech (Greek *agapao* and *phileo*). “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). Jesus then asks Peter to be the good shepherd for the sake of God’s love for the world. In fact, Jesus asks Peter to be the “I AM” for the flock, paying the same price with his life that Jesus paid.

To be the “I AM” in the world may seem initially like an overstatement, even blasphemous. God is the one and only “I AM” and Jesus was the “I AM” because the Word was God. This is true ... only God can be God’s presence in the world. Yet, for the Gospel of John, discipleship has to be more than modeling Jesus or thinking “what would Jesus do?” The understanding of discipleship presented in the Fourth Gospel relies on the theological promise of the incarnation. It takes the incarnation seriously so much so that the combination of our humanity and the inbreathing of the Spirit of God means that we do indeed embody the presence of God in the absence of Jesus. This does not mean that we are God. It means that God relies on us, on disciples, to witness in the world God’s love, with the entirety of our beings. This concept of discipleship underscores the oneness and unity of which Jesus spoke in the Farewell Discourse (John 17:23).