

Main Points • *Who Is Jesus? What a Difference a Lens Makes*

Judy Yates Siker
Suggestions for Leaders by Lynn Miller

Introduction

Who do you say that I am?

- The answer depends on context and perspective.
- Christians universally confess the Nicene and Apostles' creeds, which declare Jesus, God's only son, as Lord and Savior.

According to Scripture

Mark 8:27–30

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, **“But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”** And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Matthew 16:13–20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” **He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”** And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

Christologies (the study of Jesus Christ)

“Different Gospel writers express different **Christologies**. Their portraits of Jesus express one or the other of these ways of defining Jesus' identity (p. 5).”

What Do Presbyterians Believe?

According to the PC(USA) Book of Confessions*

At the heart of all confessions is the earliest confession of the New Testament church, “**Jesus is Lord**” (p. viii).

The **Barmen Declaration** speaks for the best intentions of the whole Reformed tradition when it says, “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is **the one Word of God** which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death” (p. xiii).

All the confessions in the book share the same convictions about Jesus Christ as the **one truly human and truly divine Mediator, Lord, and Savior** (p. xvi).

Scot's Confession (3.08): That same eternal God and Father, who by grace alone chose us in his Son Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world was laid, appointed him to be **our head, our brother, our pastor, and the great bishop of our souls.**

Nicene Creed	Apostle's Creed
<p>We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.</p>	<p>And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.</p>

Confession of 1967 (Inclusive Language Version)

9.08: **In Jesus of Nazareth true humanity was realized once for all.** Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, lived among his own people and shared their needs, temptations, joys, and sorrows. He expressed the love of God in word and deed and became a brother to all kinds of sinful men and women. But his complete obedience led him into conflict with his people. His life and teaching judged their goodness, religious aspirations, and national hopes. Many rejected him and demanded his death. In giving himself freely for them he took upon himself the judgment under which everyone stands convicted. God raised him from the dead, vindicating him as Messiah and Lord. The victim of sin became victor, and won the victory over sin and death for all.

Brief Statement of Faith

7–26: We trust in Jesus Christ, **fully human, fully God.** Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.

According to the PC(USA) The Book of Order**

F–1.02 Jesus Christ Is the Head of the Church

F–1.0201: The Authority of Christ

Almighty God, who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, has given to him all power in heaven and on earth, not only in this age but also in the age to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body. The Church's life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ's ongoing life and work.

F–1.0202 Christ Calls and Equips the Church

Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission in the world, for its sanctification, and for its service to God. Christ is present with the Church in both Spirit and Word. Christ alone rules, calls, teaches, and uses the Church as he wills.

F–1.0203 Christ Gives the Church Its Life

Christ gives to the Church its faith and life, its unity and mission, its order and discipline. Scripture teaches us of Christ's will for the Church, which is to be obeyed. In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

F–1.0204 Christ Is the Church's Hope

In affirming with the earliest Christians that Jesus is Lord, the Church confesses that he is its hope, and that the Church, as Christ's body, is bound to his authority and thus free to live in the lively, joyous reality of the grace of God.

F–1.0205 Christ Is the Foundation of the Church

In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Christ God reconciles all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross (Col. 1:19–20). In Christ's name, therefore, the Church is sent out to bear witness to the good news of reconciliation with God, with others, and with all creation. In Christ the Church receives its truth and appeal, its holiness, and its unity.

G–2.0101 Christ's Ministry

The Church's ministry is a gift from Jesus Christ to the whole Church. Christ alone rules, calls, teaches, and uses the Church as he wills, exercising his authority by the ministry of women and men for the establishment and extension of God's new creation.

**The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 1, Book of Confessions (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly), 2014.*

***The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 2, Book of Order 2015–2017 (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly), 2015.*

Key Words

Christology: The study of Jesus the Christ

- High Christology: Emphasis on the divinity of Jesus
- Low Christology: Emphasis on the humanity of Jesus

Messiah: Anointed one

Jewish understanding of messiah: The messiah will ingather the exiles, restore religious courts of justice, end evil, sin and heresy, reward the righteous, rebuild Jerusalem, restore the line of David and restore Temple service. He is a great human leader, like King David. Not a savior. Jewish people do not believe in Jesus because he did not accomplish these tasks.

Messianic Secret: A literary device used most often by the author of the Gospel of Mark in which Jesus asks people not to tell anyone about his messiahship. Examples of this include, among many others, Mark 1:43, 44 and 3:12.

Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke (from the Greek word meaning to see together)

About the Study and the Title (see the inside front cover)

On February 7, 2012, the Presbyterian Women Churchwide Coordinating Team Bible study committee selected the theme Who Is Jesus? as the topic of this year's study. On March 15, 2013, a new committee chose Judy Yates Siker to be the study's author. The committee directed Judy to write a study that used scripture to explore how we learn who Jesus is. Judy developed the idea of the many lenses through which we see and discover Jesus' identity.

These **lenses**, or perspectives, are Judy's method for approaching the ways that Jesus is understood and known. This approach helps us see that the question who is Jesus is answered by our personal understandings, circumstances and experiences, as well as by the understandings, circumstances and experiences of others, from the Gospel writers to those in other faith traditions.

"We do not all answer the question in the same way. . . . we answer it in different ways at different points in our faith journeys (p. 6)." Exploring the question through a variety of lenses makes a difference. Our answers are enriched; our faith is deepened.

Enriching the Journey

- Keep a journal
- Read a variety of translations
- Read the recommended scriptures for each lesson, particularly the key scripture
- Study the key idea, which reveals who Jesus is through each lens
- Study the art for each lesson

Possible Timeline for Writings

Paul's writings	50–66
Hebrews	64–65 (80s)
Mark	65–75
Matthew	80–100 (75–85)
Luke/Acts	60–80
John	75–140

Boring, Eugene. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox), 2012.

Lesson One: According to Mark

Background Scripture: Gospel of Mark (or Mark 1–8)

Key Scripture: Mark 8:27–33

Key Idea: Jesus is not the messiah they expected, but he is indeed God’s Son.

About the Art

The Healing of the Blind Man at Bethsaida (Mark 5:22–26) by Julia Stankova, 2010, Bulgaria.

Julia Stankova worked as a mining engineer until she quit her job and dedicated her life to painting. She studied at Sofia University and obtained a degree in theology in 2000.

Lens

A late first-century persecuted Jewish audience who held an **apocalyptic worldview**—they thought the world was going to end. They are looking for the messiah described in Jewish scripture.

Who is Jesus?

He is the suffering Son of God, and he will meet you in your suffering.

“When I painted the healing of the man born blind, I also started to see; I came back to life together with Lazarus; I took my place in the queue behind the apostles waiting for Christ to wash my feet, too. . . . In this way Christ also healed me.”

Main Points

The Earliest Gospel

- Mark is the earliest Gospel, probably written between 68 and 70 CE, 30–40 years after the death of Jesus. Material from Mark was used to write Matthew and Luke.
- **Lens:** The Gospel was written so many years after Jesus’ death because many in that day held an **apocalyptic worldview**—they thought the world was going to end. It was urgent to share the good news. But, when the world did not end in their generation, and people who were alive while Jesus was on earth were beginning to die, it became critical to write the stories down (p. 14).
- The Gospel writers wrote for the communities for whom the stories are told, so we learn about Jesus **and** the particular communities.
- Mark begins with stories of Jesus as an adult, rather than a birth narrative. He has come to be baptized by John. When John baptizes Jesus, we learn he is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God (1:11).

Powerful but Misunderstood

- Jesus often urges those whom he has helped to tell no one (1:34; 3:12; 5:43). Scholars call this idea the **messianic secret**. Mark includes it in his Gospel more often than do the other writers (p. 15).

A Turning Point?

- **Key Scripture (8:27–33):** We move from the awkward miracle story (healing the blind man) to Jesus’ questioning his disciples about who people say that he is. Jesus has been misunderstood by everyone, including his disciples. He asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter says the right thing: “You are the Christ!” (8:29). He then provides the first **passion prediction** (p. 15, see below).

- Jesus’ attempts to explain to the disciples just what it means to be Messiah, as he lays out for them what this ministry entails. Scholars call these **passion predictions** (8:31–33; 9:30–32; 10:32–34) because they point to the future. Peter rebukes Jesus for saying the messiah must suffer and die, but Jesus rebukes Peter back, calling him Satan.
- This passage explains the struggles of discipleship. Like the man born blind, they begin to “see” who Jesus is. Peter is even able to say the correct words: “You are the Christ.” But Jesus’ response to Peter lets us know that, though they see, they do not yet see clearly.
- Jesus continues to teach the disciples who he is. In Mark 9:30–32, is the second passion prediction, and in 10:32–34 the third. His explanations increase in intensity, but the disciples are still unclear. Their actions following each prediction (8:32, 33; 9:33–37; 10:35–40) demonstrate their misunderstanding. They are not focused on Jesus but on themselves (p. 16).

Messiah Redefined

- Mark devotes one third of the story (chapters 11–16) to the passion narrative.
- **As we explore the identity of Jesus through a variety of lenses, it is important to pay close attention to each presentation. As we move from Mark to the other Gospels, we will see that they are going to tell the same story of crucifixion but not paint the same portrait of Jesus** (p. 16).
 - Misunderstood teacher
 - 14:1—hostile leaders
 - 14:10–11—hostile followers
 - Betrayed leader
 - In 14:32–42, Jesus and his disciples are in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is “distressed, agitated . . . deeply grieved, even unto death.”
 - In the trial scene, while the forlorn Jesus is silent before the high priest, Peter (one of the inner circle) betrays his teacher, just as predicted.
 - Son of God
 - The torn temple curtain after Jesus’ last breath shows nothing separates us from the presence of God illustrating that Jesus is the son of God.

Jesus as the Suffering Son of God

- **Who is Jesus? He is the suffering Son of God, and he will meet you in your suffering.** For an audience undergoing persecution, for a group of Jesus’ followers in the late first century, this must have been good news indeed (p. 17).
 - Jesus didn’t fit any of the expectations of the Jewish messiah.
 - He was a teacher and healer who managed to upset people at every turn, whose ministry was misunderstood by many, including his own disciples.
 - He did not fit the preconceptions or descriptions of “messiah,” but Mark assures his readers and us that Jesus is indeed God’s Son. He is one who came and lived as we do, endured suffering and betrayal, doubt and fear, and meets us in our humanity. He is the one we turn to in times of trouble and sorrow. He has experienced human suffering and can help us through our own.

Lesson Two: According to Matthew

Background Scripture: Gospel of Matthew (or Matthew 5–7; 13)

Key Scripture: Matthew 13:51–53

Key Idea: Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah whose teaching opens the kingdom of heaven to us here and now.

Lens

First-century Jews seeking to understand how to survive outside the Temple

Who is Jesus?

The long-awaited Jewish messiah

About the Art

In My Father's House

by Ric Darrell, 2014, United States. Ric used an image from the 1977 miniseries, *Jesus of Nazareth*, by creator/director Franco Zeffirelli and Lions Gate Films, as the inspiration for *In My Father's House*. Ric is an artist, sign painter, and retired military personnel living in North Carolina.

Main Points

Pride of Place

- Although written after Mark and the writings of Paul, the Gospel of Matthew provides a smooth transition from the writings of the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) to the writings of the New Testament and was placed first in the New Testament (p. 21).
- In this “most Jewish” of the Synoptic Gospels, we see **Jesus presented as the long-awaited Jewish messiah** (p. 21).
- Gospel was written sometime between 75 and 85 CE (some scholars put this date as late as 100 CE), after the Jewish War (66–70 CE), a major revolt against Roman occupation, and after the destruction of the second Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE.

Jewish Text to Jewish Audience

- **Lens:** The destruction of the Jewish temple, which caused a dramatic shift in Judaism, as the people turned from sacrifice to scripture, from temple worship to the synagogue.
 - With the temple gone, it was difficult to know how to be a faithful Jew. This Gospel is the story of Jesus told through the **lens of Jews seeking to understand how to survive as Jews in this post-70 CE destruction**.
 - Jewish Gospel presenting a Jewish Jesus for a Jewish audience. In many ways, this Gospel is our most Jewish one (later we'll see that John's Gospel is also very Jewish) (p. 22).
- **Genealogy:** In Matthew 1:17 the author sums up what he has just explained, and the point is made clear to his first-century audience: Jesus is the culmination of generations. Jesus was born “in the fullness of time,” with just the right pedigree in the line of King David.
- **Fulfillment passages:** The author relates part of the story, then ties it back to the Hebrew Scriptures. See, for example, 1:22, in which Jesus' birth is shown to be the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 7:14), or 2:15, in which the holy family's flight to Egypt is said to be the fulfillment of the prophet Hosea (Hos. 11:1) (p. 23).
- The Jewish audience would understand Jesus' references; his audience was struggling with separating from the synagogue.

- Matthew 5:17 (5:17–20 is a passage found only in Matthew): “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”
- Emphasis in Matthew’s Gospel on offering gifts at the temple and following the laws.
- Insider knowledge: phrases, words idioms (23:5b: phylacteries, fringes)

Jesus as Teacher

- One significant aspect of Jesus’ ministry is his role as teacher. This is highlighted, in part, by the fact that within the narrative are five blocks of teaching, not unlike the five books of Moses in the Jewish scriptures (p. 24).
 - Introduces Jesus as a teacher in Chapters 5 through 7, in which Jesus goes up on a mountain (as did Moses) and gives a new law (as did Moses).
 - Content: the coming and present kingdom of heaven.
 - Textual signals: “Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying . . .” (5:2); he follows this with teachings of Jesus and adds as closure other signals such as, “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things . . .” (7:28).
 - Jesus teaches
 1. what the kingdom is and will be (Sermon on the Mount, 5–7);
 2. how to prepare and what to expect as they help bring in the kingdom (Instructions to the Disciples, 10);
 3. many aspects of the kingdom (parables, 13);
 4. what kind of life is expected among those who are/want to be part of the kingdom (Community Rules, 18); and
 5. the need to be ever-ready, ever-watchful for the in-breaking of the kingdom (in the apocalyptic language, 24 and 25).
- **Key scripture:** Jesus asks his closest followers, “Have you understood all this?” They respond in the affirmative, and he declares, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (13:52).
 - By teaching them not only what the kingdom is, but also what they are called to do, Jesus is training the disciples to be “scribes for the kingdom” (p. 25).
 - It is not enough for us to merely **understand** the good news of the Gospel. We, too, must be willing **to live into and from this good news**, and, like Jesus’ disciples (for we are his disciples!), **be messengers** of the good news.

Lost to His Own

- **In-house debate and origins of anti-Jewish Christian thought:** Many Jewish leaders who heard Jesus, or heard about Jesus, were becoming more and more displeased with his interpretations of the law and thought he must be stopped.
 - These texts, which reflect a difficult period in the history of Judaism have been misused throughout history to support anti-Jewish ideas and actions far beyond the time and ministry of Jesus and the writing of the Gospel (p. 26).
 - The in-house debates range from derogatory remarks to venomous hate speech.
 - Matthew’s Jewish–Christian community clearly felt the rejection of Jesus as the Jewish messiah, and Matthew turns this rejection back on the Jewish leaders

- We must deal with these slanderous remarks from Jesus about the Jewish leadership of the day, as well as the complete (27:25) rejection of Jesus by his own people. Matthew's is an uncomfortable Gospel at times, but we must do our best to understand these elements of our sacred text.
- The Gospels serve as mirrors reflecting the concerns of the community at the time they were written. The Temple has been destroyed for the final time—what does it mean to be a good Jew outside the Temple and sacrificial system? Some chose to follow Jesus' teaching, others kept to traditional beliefs (messiah had not yet come) (p. 26).
- Messianic Jews (followers of Jesus) and traditional Jews (faith evolved into modern rabbinic Judaism) condemned and denounced one another.
- What we see is an intimate look at the in-house debate between two groups of people devoted to Judaism, as each group understood it to be (p. 27).
- The mistake that many Christians have made over the centuries is to take the in-house Jewish debate from the first century, adopt its animosity and use it to denigrate Jews across time (p. 27).

Jesus as the Long-Awaited Messiah

- **Who is Jesus?** Throughout this complex and highly personal Gospel, we find a portrait of Jesus as the long-awaited Jewish messiah.
 - As was true in Mark's account, this requires a redefinition of messiah.
 - As Matthew demonstrates how Jesus redefines messiah, he shows Jesus in sharp contrast to the Jewish leadership.

Lesson Three: According to Luke

Background Scripture: Gospel of Luke (or Luke 1–4; 14:12–24; 16:19–31)

Key Scripture: Luke 4:16–21; Acts 2:22–24

Key Idea: Rejected by his own, Jesus, prophet of God, turns the world upside down with his teachings.

The Art

The Triumphal Entry

by Sadao Watanabe, 1974, Japan

Sadao, born in Tokyo, Japan, in 1913 (d. 1996), was a printmaker of biblical images in the *mingei* (folk art) tradition of Japan. He became a Christian at age 17.

Sadao used natural materials such as handmade paper and mineral pigments to place biblical subjects into a Japanese context. “I would most like to see them [his prints] hanging where people ordinarily gather, because Jesus brought the Gospel for the people.”

Lens

Through Luke and Acts, Luke told the story of the persistent prophet who gathers followers to carry the good news into the birth of the church.

Who is Jesus?

God’s prophet who brings a radical message of inclusion for the outcast and reversal of fortune that will accompany the coming kingdom of God.

Main Points

Luke, Learned “Historian” and Story Teller

- Luke most likely used Mark as a source
- Resembles writing of ancient historians (style of Josephus)

Jesus, the Rejected Prophet

- The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are a two-volume set by the same author. In the first volume, Luke tells us of the life and ministry of Jesus; in the second, he tells the church’s early days (p. 34).
- **Key Scripture:** Luke 4:16–30
Throughout the Gospel of Luke Jesus is a prophetic figure. Luke 4:16–30 is Luke “in a nutshell.” Luke 4 includes the story of Jesus’ inaugural sermon at Nazareth.
- **Who is Jesus?** Luke 4:16–30
 - The author lays out the answer to “Who is Jesus?” and sets the stage for the Gospel of Luke and for Acts. In the early part of his Gospel, Luke gives his version not only of Jesus’ first sermon, but also of the “rejection at Nazareth” (Mk. 6:1–6; Mt. 13:54–58). Luke 4:16–30 encapsulates the story of the prophetic Messiah who will be rejected (p. 34).
 - In his home synagogue, Jesus tells the story so that hearers will comprehend his message: He stands up to read, someone hands him a scroll, he unrolls the scroll and reads the words of Isaiah, then rolls up the scroll, hands it back, and sits down. Then he says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:21).
 - Jesus is basically repeating what his mother Mary introduced in her song of praise to God, the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46–56).
 - Luke 4:16–30 is the quintessential presentation of **Jesus as God’s prophet**.

- Jesus is admired by his listeners until he says God sends prophets to people outside of Israel. This, in a nutshell, is the story of Jesus in Luke, a prophet of God, rejected by his own, as so many other prophets of old had been rejected. Jesus comes in line with the prophets who have come before him and whose ministry reaches (eventually) beyond the Jews to the Gentiles. While this doesn't happen in Luke's Gospel as much as in Acts, Luke uses the story of Jesus as a prophet to carry the story from the Hebrew Bible to Jesus and the church (p. 35).
- Surely, this is a significant element of the story, and we will see, as we study Luke and Acts, that Jesus may be rejected, but God's plan for salvation will not be deterred by human failure and rejection (p. 37).
- **Women** also find special inclusion in Luke—from Mary and Elizabeth in Luke 1–2 (only they are given a voice!), and the women who accompany Jesus and the disciples in Luke 8:1–3, to the wonderful story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 (p. 37).
- **The prophet Jesus brings with him a radical message of inclusion of the outcast and reversal of fortune that will accompany the coming Kingdom of God (p. 37).**

Lesson Four: According to John

Background Scripture: Gospel of John (John 1; 9; 10)

Key Scripture: John 9:1–7

Key Idea: Jesus and God are one.

In the Beginning

- John reaches for as many titles and metaphors as he can to portray Jesus as more of a divine figure than a human one (p. 41).

John and the Synoptics

- Synoptics all offer a picture of the man Jesus whose life and ministry led his followers to see him as the Christ (p. 41).
- Presenting three distinct portraits of Jesus through three distinct lenses, the writers of the Synoptic Gospels all offer a picture of the man Jesus whose life and ministry led his followers to see him as the Christ (p. 42).
- The Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels share a common framework—both are about Jesus and the disciples, Jesus teaches and heals in both, and in both he is put to death and is raised from the dead (p. 42).
- John tells the same story about the same Jesus, yet, through John’s lens, Jesus is markedly different from the Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels.

No Secret Here

- The Gospel of John does not continue the messianic secret pattern.
- Within the first chapter alone, Jesus is presented as the divine Word made flesh, revealing the glory of God. John the Baptist bears witness that Jesus is the “Lamb of God” who takes away the sins of the world. Other names:
 - King of Israel
 - Son of God
 - Son of Man (probably equivalent to the personal pronoun I)
 - Personification of Jacob’s Ladder
- **Who is Jesus?** The lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.
 - The Lamb of God language is especially significant, as it shows the Gospel of John presenting Jesus as the Passover lamb. Only in John’s Gospel does Jesus die on the Day of Preparation for the Passover feast. For John, Jesus is the true meaning of Passover.
 - John added the meaning of the most sacred Jewish observance, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which has everything to do with forgiveness of sin. And so, for John, Jesus is the true meaning of both Passover and Yom Kippur—Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world (p. 43).

Conflict with Jewish Leaders

- Jewish leaders agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the messiah would be put out of the synagogue (Jn. 9:22; 12:42). In this regard, John reflects what was going on

Lens

John, the spiritual Gospel, tells the same story about the same Jesus as the other Gospels, but Jesus is markedly different from the Jesus in the Synoptics.

Who is Jesus?

Jesus is the Word of God made flesh who dwells among us. He is the Passover lamb, the true meaning of Passover and Yom Kippur.

toward the end of the first century, when heated debate took place between the followers of Jesus and the Jewish leaders in the synagogue (p. 44).

- Nowhere can the identification of Jesus with God be more clearly seen than when Jesus uses the very name of God to identify himself—John 8:58: **Before Abraham was, “I am.” YHWH** (transliterated Hebrew from Exodus) (p. 45).
- **I am statements**
 - Bread of Life (6:35)
 - Living bread that came down from heaven (6:51)
 - Light of the world (8:12)
 - Good shepherd (10:11)
 - The resurrection and the life (11:25)
 - The way, the truth, and the life (14:6)
 - The true vine, and my Father is the vine grower (15:1)
- The I Am sayings together show Jesus in John’s Gospel provides the sustenance for life (bread, light, drink) as well as the guidance that leads his followers into the fullness of life (the good shepherd, the gate, the way/truth/life, the resurrection and the life). God provides all of these things through Jesus, not only at a surface level but at a very deep level (p. 46).
- **Key scripture: John 9:1–7**

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, **“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”** When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

Surface and Depth

- John shows the contrast between surface and deeper meanings of words, and the realities to which they point.
 - Samaritan Woman (4:10): Water to drink vs living water
 - Man born blind (9): physical sight vs spiritual sight
- In these ways, among others, the Gospel of John is constantly seeking to draw hearers to a deeper understanding of Jesus, so it is called the spiritual Gospel.
- The Gospel of John concludes with a blessing on those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.
- **Who is Jesus?** the Word of God made flesh, who dwells among us.

Lesson Five: According to Paul

Background Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:1–2; 2 Corinthians 5:17–20; Philippians 2:1–4; Acts 18

Key Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18–25

Key Idea: Paul stresses the centrality of the cross of Christ in understanding true discipleship.

About the Art

The Death of Jesus

by Nicholas T. Markell, 2014, United States

Nicholas is an artist and icon painter working in St. Paul.

He studied visual arts and explored the relationship

between artistic expression and spirituality. He later studied for ministry.

“The event of the crucifixion finalized Jesus’ earthly life of love and sacrifice. Through the cross Jesus conquers death and overcomes the power of evil. In this icon, Jesus’ death is imaged as a sign of hope. His spirit is taken up to God the Father on the wings of the Holy Spirit, imaged as a dove.”

Main Points

- Paul’s letters were written before the Gospels (during the 50s and 60s).
- Paul’s lens, first and foremost, is the cross. The Gospels are focused on the life and teachings of Jesus; Paul is focused on the risen Christ.

Reading Others’ Mail

- Paul’s writings are letters to particular congregations about specific issues. We are trying to determine from these letters particular teachings about Jesus (p. 51).
- Limited information about the life of Jesus from Paul’s letters: born of a woman (Gal. 4:4), of the lineage of David (Rom. 1:3), born under the law (Gal. 4:4), had a group of followers (1 Cor. 15:5), died on a cross (Phil. 2:8) (p. 51).
- The information we get from Paul about Jesus is about the risen Lord, the Jesus Paul met on the road to Damascus.

A Bit of Background

- The Gospels were written after Paul’s letters.
- The Gospels provide a narrative about the life and ministries of Jesus; Paul’s letters assume the audience knows this information.
- The Gospels are sacred stories about Jesus; Paul’s writings are **occasional letters** about issues in particular Gentile churches.

Some Larger Contexts

- Paul was a Jew living in a Greco–Roman world. He came from the Diaspora (outside of Palestine), spoke and wrote Greek as his first language, and, by his own account, was very zealous for the Jewish law and very opposed to the earliest followers of Jesus (Gal. 1:1–14) (p. 53).
- Paul had a transformative experience that caused him to believe he should preach the Gospel message to the Gentiles.

Lens

Paul’s lens is the lens of the cross. The Gospels focused on Jesus’ life and ministry; Paul focuses on the risen Christ.

Who is Jesus?

Jesus is the crucified and risen Jesus, the Messiah whose death and resurrection break all the rules of messiahship.

- Paul’s Gospel message, free of law observance, caused the first major split within the formative Christian movement. Had God’s mind been changed about the Jewish law? (p. 53).
- The debate about the status of the Jewish law became the most important battle within earliest Christianity. It contributed significantly to the eventual separation of Judaism and Christianity into two different forms of the Jewish faith, with Judaism emphasizing observance of Mosaic Law (especially in the aftermath of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, a short time after Paul was executed in Rome), and Christianity emphasizing belief in Jesus as the messiah who would soon return to usher in God’s final kingdom (p. 53).

Paul’s Letters—a Brief Overview

- Of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament, thirteen of them are letters attributed to the apostle Paul.
- Generally accepted: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and 1 Thessalonians.
- Disputed: 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Colossians, Ephesians

1 Corinthians—The Big Picture

- People in the Corinthian congregation were fighting over many things.
- Paul made contact with the Jewish synagogue in Corinth and persuaded some of its leaders that Jesus was the Messiah. This caused significant tension within the synagogue there.
- The city of Corinth itself was a very important trading center in the ancient Mediterranean world.

The Life of the Cross

- The cross is the most fundamental symbol of the Christian faith. It has been so from the very beginnings of Christianity (p. 54).
- Constantine made Christianity legal and the preferred religion of the Roman Empire. It took an imperial endorsement of the faith before Christians started displaying the cross as a symbol of faith, even though all Christians knew that the cross of Jesus was at the heart of Christianity (p. 54).
- To first-century audience, the cross would have communicated:
 1. Jesus is not the Messiah because he died
 2. The Romans defeated Jesus
 3. Jesus suffered a shameful and scandalous death
- God had called Paul to take the message about Jesus to the Gentiles. How ironic that Paul ended up embracing two heretical ideas—that of a crucified Messiah and that of a law-free mission to Gentiles (p. 54).
- From Paul’s perspective, the cross is at the heart of the Gospel message because it reveals a God who embraces humanity in all of its sinfulness and redeems humanity through the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection (p. 55).
- The cross reveals a God who so identifies with human suffering and the pain caused by humanity’s own inhumanity that, in Jesus, this God takes on the power of sin and the power of death, and transforms it all into life abundant (Rom. 5–6) (p. 55).

- The cross is counterintuitive for humanity. For Paul this is the beauty and scandal of the Gospel (p. 55).
- Who can understand a God who suffers for the ungodly? And yet who but God can redeem us? What kind of God is God? One who suffers utter humiliation at the hands of his own creation, only to bring life from death, and reconciliation from alienation (see Phil. 2:5–11).
- **Key Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18–25**
 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.
- For Paul, the cross demonstrates the foolishness and weakness of human striving and human judgment, revealing instead the wisdom and power of God. Paul’s contemporaries, Jew and Greek alike, saw nothing but a stumbling block and foolishness in the cross (p. 55).

Who is Jesus?

- For Paul, **Jesus is the crucified and risen Jesus, the Messiah whose death and resurrection break all the rules of messiahship.**
- For through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God’s self is made known to humanity. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, our eyes can be opened to the amazing depth of God’s mercy and to the radical inclusion of God’s grace.
- **Lens:** No, this is not the same portrait of Jesus that we saw in the Gospels, for Paul’s lens is a lens of the cross.

Lesson Six: According to Hebrews

Background Scripture: Book of Hebrews (especially Hebrews 1–6, 12–13)

Key Scripture: Hebrews 12:1–2

Key Idea: In the book of Hebrews the author encourages believers to hold fast to their faith in times of adversity, to remain firm in their commitment to Jesus who has run this race before us and now reigns in glory with God.

About the Art

Because He Lives We Can Face Tomorrow

by Ovide Joseph Bighetty, 2002, Canada

This is one of 17 paintings by Cree artist Ovide in the touring exhibit *Kisemanito Pakitinasuwin: The Creator's Sacrifice* commissioned by Indian Metis Christian Fellowship.

“Our connection is to the Creator more than the historical Christian tale. We gain an interrelation with the Creator who is not only a healing sacrifice and embodiment of forgiveness, but also one who is in harmony with the spirit of the earth, the water, and the animals of our world.”

Main Points

- Hebrews is not a gospel or a letter. It is more of a homily (sermon) addressed to those who are growing weary in the faith, in need of assurance and comfort as they struggle over whether they have made the right decision by choosing to follow Christ.

Orientation to Hebrews

- Hebrews is an eloquent testimony to the significance of God's revelation in Jesus. Some are suffering persecution; others are recanting their faith. Hebrews makes it clear that those who renounce their faith will not find an easy way back in (p. 59).
 - Hebrews 12:12–13: “Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”
 - Hebrews 2:3 seems to indicate a second generation of Christians (c. 60–90 CE), one that was still in the process of emerging from the synagogue.
- **Supersessionist** language in the New Testament (for example, in the book of Hebrews), must be kept in its context. These early Jews were becoming separated by belief in, or lack of belief in, Jesus—separated into what would become known as Rabbinic Judaism and Messianic Judaism (later known as Judaism and Christianity) (p. 60). The earliest Christians did not anticipate this divergence.

Jesus Is Greater

- One prominent feature of the book of Hebrews is the effort made to show that Jesus is greater than any mediating figure who came before him in the Jewish tradition.
- Hebrews 1:1–3
Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things,

Lens

We are called to be strong in the faith, and through this lens, we are able to see the person and work of Jesus, the one who makes that faith possible.

Who is Jesus?

Jesus is the Christ. The writer of Hebrews demonstrates the majesty, grandeur, and perfection of Jesus, but also the relational, personal Jesus.

through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:1–3).

1. Audience is living in the last days
 2. Something radically new has happened in the person of Jesus; only Jesus is God's son.
 3. Jesus is God's agent of creation and bears the image of God.
- Jesus is greater because he alone is God's son. Jesus' true home is with God, but he is fully human.

Jesus as Sinless Sacrifice

- 4:15 Jesus is "yet without sin."
- Jesus alone can represent all of humanity to God, and then represent God to all of humanity.
- So Jesus was viewed as a perfect sacrifice—that is, a sinless sacrifice. Only in this way could he be an appropriate sacrifice to atone for human sinfulness. This is how the sacrificial mindset of the earliest Christians, including that of Hebrews, worked (p. 62).

Jesus the Pioneer of Salvation

- He has been sent by God to identify with humans as brothers and sisters. In this way, he can sympathize and empathize with people (p. 63).

Jesus the Great High Priest

- Perhaps the most important (and unique) image of Jesus in Hebrews is that of the great high priest (4:14). The Jerusalem Temple provides the context for understanding this.
- This is the context for understanding Jesus as the "Great High Priest" mentioned in Hebrews. Only Jesus, as one unblemished, could enter the true, heavenly, Holy of Holies, not the copy in Jerusalem. And only the perfect Jesus could offer a sacrifice without at the same time needing to make atonement for his own sins (p. 63).

A Priest Like Melchizedek

- Melchizedek makes only two appearances in the Bible, once in Psalm 110:4 ("You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.") and once in Genesis 14:18, where he figures as a priest of God, in relation to Abraham.
- Melchizedek is greater than Abraham; the sole descendant of Melchizedek, according to Hebrews, is Jesus.

Perfector of the Faith

- Key Scripture: 12:1–2:
Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.
- The great cloud of witnesses includes all of the faithful who have endured and gone before, the heroes of the faith listed in Hebrews 11. If they could withstand their many trials, so can the audience of Hebrews take heart and stand firm in their faith.

- They can do this because Jesus is the perfecter of their faith.

Who is Jesus?

- Jesus is the Christ. The writer of Hebrews goes to great lengths to demonstrate the majesty, the grandeur, and the perfection of Jesus. Yet, this Jesus is one who can relate to us in our earthly circumstances.
- **Lens:** Through the lens of this first-century writer, we are called to be strong in the faith, and through this lens, we are able to see the person and work of Jesus, the one who makes that faith possible.

Lesson Seven: According to the Non-Canonical Gospels

Background Scripture: Matthew 1–2; Luke 1–2

Key Text: See highlighted excerpts from the non-canonical gospels within the lesson

Key Idea: The four canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are not the only gospels written by early Christians. Other stories about Jesus circulated in the early centuries of Christianity, offering us stories of the “missing years” of Jesus and, more importantly, information about the diversity of early Christianity.

About the Art

Jesus Gives Life to Birds, artist unknown, 1120, Church of St. Martin, Zillis, Switzerland

The story of Jesus giving life to the birds is from the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. It is illustrated on one of the ceiling panels in the twelfth-century Romanesque Church of St. Martin in Zillis, Switzerland. It is one of 153 painted wooden panels that illustrate Biblical stories, mythical creatures, events in the life of Christ, and episodes from the life of St. Martin of Tours.

Main Ideas

- The four Gospels in the canon are not the only gospels that circulated during early Christianity.

A Word of Explanation

- Jesus, is seen and understood beyond the bounds of our own New Testament.
- It is my hope and prayer that by exploring such a wide variety of lenses we might come to a clearer understanding of who Jesus is to each of us, and develop a deeper appreciation for the variety of ways others see Jesus today (p. 69).

Putting It All in Context

- Canonization, the process by which we arrived at our authoritative books of the New Testament, was a long, arduous—indeed, messy—process that reveals the diversity and fluidity of early Christianity. The process extended across several centuries (p. 70).
- There was no attempt in the early years of Christianity to create a canon, in part because early Christians had the Jewish Scriptures, which were written and oral, and in part because this was a largely apocalyptic movement that anticipated the imminent return of Jesus and the end of the world as they knew it (p. 70).
- There was quite a lot of material written, including letters, gospels, apocalypses, and so on. Originally, there were no lines drawn around what was authoritative, and what was not (p. 70).
- There was no list of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament until 367 CE, when it appeared in the Easter letter of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria.

Lens

Non-canonical writings show a variety of lenses that may provide a clearer understanding of who Jesus is to each of us and help develop an appreciation for the variety of ways Jesus is seen.

Who is Jesus?

Early Christians had a variety of responses to the question, just like modern Christians. They, too, were trying to figure Jesus out.

- In 1546 at the Council of Trent that the Roman Catholic Church affirmed once and for all the full list of twenty-seven books as accepted and unalterable, in addition to an authoritative list of books comprising the Old Testament.

More Than One Kind of Gospel

- Within the body of non-canonical texts are a number of writings identified as Gospels.

Infancy Gospels

- The birth/infancy narratives in Matthew 1 and 2 and Luke 1 and 2 are our only biblical sources of information about the birth and early years of Jesus. Early Christians filled in the gaps.

Infancy Gospel of Thomas

- The canonical Gospels Matthew and Luke include narratives about the birth of Jesus, but Luke adds a story about Jesus in the temple at age twelve (Lk. 2:41–52). There is no other information about Jesus from birth to the beginning of his ministry.
- The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, probably written in the middle of the second century, offers 20 stories of Jesus as a boy, ages five through twelve.
- The stories show Jesus as a healer, miracle worker, prodigy who amazes his teachers. The gist of this infancy Gospel is to affirm the power, wisdom, and divine blessing of Jesus—even in his boyhood.

Infancy Gospel of James

- Also known as the Protoevangelium of James (before the Gospel).
- Unlike Matthew and Luke, with their emphasis on the birth of Jesus, the author focuses on Mary's purity and God's mission to bring Israel redemption through her.

Passion Gospels, Sayings Gospels, and More

- These writings elaborate upon stories in our canonical Gospels and offer a different interpretation of some of the stories of Jesus.
- There are Gospels, sayings Gospels, Jewish Christian Gospels, and others. The passion Gospels are collections of stories that elaborate upon or offer differing viewpoints on the life and death of Jesus.
- The Gospel of Peter is a passion narrative that exonerates Pilate for the death of Jesus. There is a strong anti-Jewish character. It also presents Jesus as if he did not suffer, which represents the Docetic brand of Christianity that says Jesus was not really human because bodies are bad. Later this was considered heretical.
- The Gospel of Thomas (Didymus or twin Thomas) is a source with 141 sayings of Jesus. The author claims to be Jesus' twin. Some sayings seem accurate, some seem in the gnostic tradition.

Who is Jesus?

- These writings are significant because they teach us something about early Christianity. Early Christians had a variety of responses to the question, just like modern Christians do. They were trying to figure out who he was and how to talk about him.

Lesson Eight: According to the Other Abrahamic Faiths

Background Scripture: Genesis 12:1–4; Matthew 1:1; Galatians 3:6,7; 4:23–29

Key Scripture: Galatians 4:23–29

Key Idea: The major Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) all share the patriarch Abraham in their traditions and comprise the three major monotheistic religions in the world today. While Jesus is the Christ, the messiah, for Christianity alone, it is important to understand how Jesus is viewed in the other two religious traditions.

About the Art

The Ascension of Christ, Seyyid Loqman As

The *Zubdat-al Tawarikh* is a richly illustrated manuscript of the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire, written and illustrated by Seyyid Loqman Ashuri. huri, 1583, Ottoman Empire, Turkey. The *Ascension of Christ* illustrates the text that says Felicianus, who was chosen by the Jews to execute Jesus, “was suddenly given by God the appearance of Christ and he was executed instead. Christ, on the other hand, was ascended to heaven, lifted by two angels.

Main Points

Through the Lenses of the Other Abrahamic Faiths

- The three major monotheistic religions of the world—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all share the patriarch Abraham in their traditions. Although he plays a different role in each tradition, he remains the tie that binds the three together (p. 79).
- For Jews, Abraham is the founding father of the faith, called by God into everlasting covenant.
For Christians, Abraham was not only the patriarch of the people of Israel, he was an exemplar of faith and the spiritual forebear of Jesus.
For Muslims Abraham is the first in a line of prophetic figures (including Jesus) called by God, before God called Muhammad.

Judaism and Jesus

- Judaism is the first and oldest covenant tradition with God.
- The Christian belief in the messiah comes from Judaism. The earliest Christians were Jews who believed that the messiah had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.
- While we often equate the Old Testament with Hebrew or Jewish Scriptures, there are some differences. The Hebrew or Jewish Scriptures contain 24 books.
 - The Catholic Old Testament includes seven books known to Catholics as the Deuterocanon (Apocrypha), which appears in some Protestant versions of the Bible.
- In Judaism, the concept of messiah carries with it the hope of a descendant of David coming in the “end days” to bring Israel back to power, restore Jerusalem, and redeem

Lens

Christianity’s sister Abrahamic faiths: Judaism and Islam.

Who is Jesus?

In Judaism, views vary from failed messiah figure to rabbi and teacher in the prophetic tradition. In Islam, a prophet of God born of a miracle and able to perform miracles with God’s permission, but not the son of God.

Israel, all in keeping with God's covenant promises to David, as found in 2 Samuel 7 (p. 80).

- **Who is Jesus?** Jesus was a Jew, and we have no reason to believe that he set out to create a new world religion. He was born a Jew, followed Jewish law, and died as a Jew. So why did some in his day consider him to be the messiah and others—then and now—did/do not? Jesus did not meet any of the criteria for messiah that existed in the Judaism of his day (p. 81).
 - While Jesus himself did not teach a new religion, his followers soon began to espouse teachings that conflicted with the Judaism of their day. Judaism was strictly monotheistic, but non-messianic Jews found Christians to be idolatrous, worshiping a human being as if he were divine. Also, Paul was welcoming Gentiles, people who did not observe Jewish law.
 - From the Jewish perspective, the followers of Jesus had violated the two basic pillars of the faith—belief in one God and upholding Jewish law (p. 81).
 - The Jewish community has varying opinions on Jesus. He is mentioned a few times in the works of the ancient historian Josephus, but these passages may or may not be authentic. Mentions in historic Jewish texts are also debated, as the references to Jesus are unclear.
 - Jesus is not referenced in Orthodox Judaism, and rarely in other expressions of Judaism. Since the Holocaust and the resulting development of Jewish–Christian dialogue, more conversation about Jesus from a Jewish perspective has surfaced.
 - Rabbi Barry Leff says Jesus was a rabbi and a teacher in the prophetic tradition, but not a prophet as the era of prophecy ended with Malachi (The Neshama Center, Israel, <http://www.neshamah.net/2011/12/a-jewish-view-of-jesus.html>).
- Any ties between Jesus and Judaism stem from the fact that Jesus' Jewish followers taught others about this Jewish teacher through the lens of Jewish scripture. However, those Jews who followed Jesus ultimately left the fold of Judaism and Christianity became a separate monotheism (as Christians saw it), one that declared that the messiah longed for in Judaism had arrived in this man Jesus (p. 82).

Islam and Jesus

- Islam originated in the seventh century with the prophet Mohammed (570–632 ce). The Quran, the sacred text of Islam, does, in fact, contain several stories of Jesus and of his mother, Mary (p. 82).
- Although his birth was miraculous, his life was that of a human being—a very special human being, to be sure, but a human being, nonetheless, not an incarnation of God.
- Quran 19:30–35
“It is not befitting to (the majesty of) God that He should beget a son. Glory be to Him! When He determines a matter, He only says to it, ‘Be,’ and it is.”
- **Who is Jesus?** The Muslims, then, consider Jesus to be a messenger of God who is to be numbered among the prophets of God . . . he was born by a miracle and able to perform miracles with God's permission.

- In the view of Islam, Jesus is not the Son of God. In Islam, there is a strong belief in the oneness of God. If God is one, there is no room for the perception of Jesus as part of a Trinity.

In Conclusion

- It is also important to have an idea of how others who have strongly held beliefs in their own religious tradition view and understand the most significant person in our faith tradition.
- We can each play a part in creating gracious space for all and in advancing the common good.

Lesson Nine: According to Contemporary Cultural Interpretations

Background Scripture: Matthew 15:21–28; Luke 10:38–42

Key Scripture: Matthew 15:21–28

Key Idea: Each of us who reads the New Testament is an interpreter of the text; how we interpret depends in part on our own identity. Not only does the context and perspective of the writers of the NT determine the answer to the question “Who is Jesus?” but also the context and perspective of the reader/interpreter.

About the Art

En la Cena ecológica del Reino (The Ecological Supper of the Kin-dom) by Maximino Cerezo Barredo, 1980, Spain

Maximino is considered one of the foremost painters of the liberation theology movement. In 1977 he attended a course at the progressive Pastoral Institute of CELAM (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, or Latin American Episcopal Conference). While there, he met several Latin American theologians and became engaged in liberation theology. His murals are located in Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Mexico, Italy, and Portugal.

Lens

The context of the scripture reader. In this case, a Mexican woman looks at the story of the Canaanite woman begging for Jesus’ mercy.

Who is Jesus?

Jesus emerges through conversation between the biblical writing and the biblical reader, mediated by long tradition and personal experiences.

Main Points

- As we become more and more conversant with our sacred text, we begin to understand that to seek the meaning of a text is not as useful as seeking what New Testament scholar Brian Blount calls “meaning potential.”
- This way of approaching our Bible acknowledges the reality that every reader is an interpreter standing within his or her own community. Each interpretation is a conversation between the biblical writing and the biblical reader, most often mediated by centuries of tradition and the immediate experiences and situations of the reader (p. 87).

Reading through a Mexican American Lens

- Leticia Guardiola-Sáenz is a woman who was born and raised in what she calls the “borderlands of the U. S. empire,” the northern borderlands of Mexico. She explains how her own cultural context impacts her reading of Matthew 15:21–28.
- In the scripture, A Canaanite woman (a non-Jew) comes to Jesus and begs for mercy for her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus is silent, but ultimately tells her his work is not for her. Though the disciples try to get Jesus to send her away, she eventually changes his mind and heals her daughter.

A New Reading

- Guardiola-Sáenz looks beyond the typical interpretations of the story. She understands what it is to be defined as “Other” in a society, what it is to be sent away and not

allowed a voice. The woman will not be denied a hearing before Jesus. She will not take no for an answer. She will not be denied a place at the table (p. 89).

- A culturally sensitive reading suggests that, rather than succumb to being dehumanized yet again, the Canaanite woman stands firmly in her place and leaves Jesus speechless. The woman is able to awaken Jesus to the dehumanization that she has experienced, and the result is that she humanizes Jesus (p. 89).

Reading Through Your Lens

- Siker suggests we take some time with your group to try an exercise in reading from our unique place.
- In the spirit with which we have been approaching the text throughout these lessons, please read this story again as if you are reading it for the first time.
- See page 90 for the exercise.

Conclusion

- If we are afraid to bring our real selves to the reading, how can God speak to us today?
- The Bible is a living text; God continues to speak to us through it, so the Bible continues to have meaning for us in our time and our place. If we are willing to accept that our own life experiences impact the biblical narrative, then we are more likely to be open to what others have to say, as well.

Before You Go

- Who is Jesus and who, through Jesus, is God calling you to be?