

The Form of the Word

**Study Two in The Ekklesia Project's
Congregational Formation Initiative**
Basic Strokes Series

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Session 1: Fitting Scripture's Pieces within a Framework	7
Session 2: The Beginning	11
Session 3: The End is the Beginning	14
Session 4: The Call of Abraham	17
Session 5: A People	21
Session 6: Land and Jubilee	26
Session 7: Holiness	30
Session 8: Idolatry	33
Session 9: Steadfast Love	36
Session 10: Jesus the Redeemer of Israel	40
Session 11: Death and Resurrection	43
Session 12: The Spirit and Scripture	47

Introduction

Welcome to this study on the shape of Scripture. Whether you have been reading the Bible for a long time or just beginning, thinking about the *shape* of Scripture may seem strange. One of the first things to do in this introduction is to explain what people might mean when they talk about the shape of Scripture.

Just looking at the table of contents of your Bible is enough to indicate the great variety of texts within the covers of this book. Each of these books on its own rewards the time and effort invested by attentive, prayerful readers. Even so, the more one engages the individual pieces of Scripture the more one is faced with the question, "How do all of the books of the Bible hang together?" Is there some sort of overall framework that can help communities of believers grasp a common story line that unites the individual books of the Bible? When we talk about the shape of Scripture we are talking about just such a framework within which Christians might fit the diverse writings that comprise the Bible. The shape of Scripture is a way of talking about how all of the different books of the Bible hang together.

You might well wonder: is such a framework really necessary? One of the aims of the first session is to provide some answers to that question (though it may take a couple of sessions to address it adequately). Here in this introduction we will explore ways of answering this question by situating Scripture as a whole into an account of what God is doing in the world from creation through to redemption. That is, we will consider Scripture's relationship to our salvation and to God's desires for the world. These considerations may also help to answer this "why" question.

It is a fundamental precept of Christianity that God has given us Scripture as part of God's plan to bring us to salvation. Let us try to unpack what such a claim might mean.

First we need to think a bit about what Christians mean by "salvation." This may be a thorny topic for any congregation. There are a variety of ways in which Christians, even those sitting next to you, might talk about salvation. Moreover, various Christian groups have their own distinctive terms and phrases when it comes to speaking about salvation. What is said here should not contradict those terms and phrases. At the same time, the things mentioned here are central components of all accounts of salvation worthy of the name Christian. Thus, one might want to say *more* than we will say here, or to say it in a different way, but Christians are committed to at least this much.

For all Christians, salvation is a gift from God that is connected to the ultimate ends or purposes for which God created us. Whatever else and however else Christians speak of these matters, they all affirm that God created us for communion, fellowship and friendship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and with each other. We are, so to speak, created for life with God, to become part of the Trinitarian family. If this is why we were created, then salvation involves being brought to that goal for which God created us. It is also true that because of our sin, we cannot reach this goal on our own. If we are to reach it, we will need God's help. God's help is revealed to us decisively in the life, death

and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Of course, we learn all of this in Scripture. There we read of the scope and nature of God's desires for us, the extent to which our sin frustrates those desires, Christ's decisive intervention on our behalf, and the ways we are to live together in the light of that intervention.

Christians recognize that Scripture is one of the gifts God gives us to fulfill God's desire to bring us to salvation. As we read, engage and ultimately embody the words of Scripture, God brings us to our proper end or goal in Christ. In this respect, Scripture is an instrument of God's will to save us. Along these same lines, Saint Augustine in the fifth century called Scripture the vehicle which carries us to our true home along the road created by Christ.

Scripture is also unique among God's gifts in that it *both* plays a role in God's plan of reconciling all things in Christ (2Cor 5:19) *and* it is the place where that plan is authoritatively and dramatically revealed. In fact, we Christians find ourselves in a happily circular situation regarding our involvement with Scripture and our lives with God. A discerning understanding of God's plan of salvation enables Christians to read and embody Scripture in ways that allow God to draw us into our proper place in that plan. We might think of this as being given a part in a drama and provided with a script from the director. Rightly inhabiting our place in God's drama of salvation enables us to perceive the movements of that drama more clearly. This enables us to understand Scripture better. A better, deeper understanding of Scripture draws us into ever deeper friendship with God and with others. So it goes until this drama is brought to its conclusion.

Knowing the contours and movements of God's drama of salvation will help us both to understand Scripture better and to take our place in that drama more fully. In this light, the aim of this study is to introduce you to this drama of salvation as it is laid out in Scripture. Over the next several weeks you will examine the central episodes of this drama. You will also explore some of the passages in Scripture where these episodes are most clearly displayed.

It is also important to recognize that there are other alternative ways or frameworks for appropriating Scripture. This has been true from the very beginning of Christianity. Some of these ways are problematic. That is, they present the drama of salvation in ways that ignore or deform important aspects of Christianity. For example, some early readers of Scripture found an account of two Gods, the God of the Jews and the divine character, Jesus. Indeed, they found that the passion accounts indicated that God and Jesus were enemies. They assimilated those two gods into the vast variety of gods characteristic of Greco-Roman polytheism which included such divine and quasi divine figures as Nebro, Saklas, Harmozel and the 365 Archontes. Once this happened it was fairly easy for these interpreters of Scripture to absorb and transform Christian views into the dominant philosophical and cultural viewpoints of the day. Christianity became one more form of philosophical speculation; certainly not something one might die for.

This all may sound like a story from another galaxy, but it all happened in the second century. We know these readers of Scripture as Gnostics and they represented a very powerful challenge to Christian faith and practice. The only way to counter this way of reading Scripture was to have an alternative framework for holding together Scripture in ways that maintained the integrity of Christianity. If you want to read more of this you can look at Irenaeus' of Lyon's book, *Against Heresies*.

Although we may not be tempted by this particular form of Gnosticism, it is often easy for Christians to interpret Scripture in such a way that they end up assimilating Christianity into one of the dominant philosophies or ideologies of our day whether it be nationalism or consumerism or forms of New Age spirituality.

Having looked at a brief example, of an inappropriate framework for reading Scripture, it is important to also note that there are, however, a large number of ways of presenting this drama that are quite appropriate and yet different from what is presented here. The best way to discern the differences between what is appropriate and inappropriate is to become proficient readers and practitioners of Scripture. The better we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest Scripture, the better we will be able to evaluate different ways of presenting the scope or framework of Scripture.

You may well have already done some study of the Bible as a whole. This study will be different in that it will not take you through each book individually, introducing you to themes and data related to each book of the Bible. The objectives of these studies are somewhat different:

Objectives of this study as a whole

- 1) This study aims to help you develop an *organizing framework* for approaching Scripture.
- 2) This conceptual framework will help fit the various pieces of Christian doctrine together in a way that is both *Scriptural and faithful* to the central beliefs and practices of Christianity.
- 3) This study will provide you with the opportunity to discuss central features of Scripture with *fellow believers* from your congregation.
- 4) This study invite you to see yourself as a participant in the *ongoing drama of salvation* as revealed in Scripture.
- 5) This study will allow you to reflect on ways in which your congregational life fits into and helps you better understand both individual episodes in God's drama of salvation and *the shape of Scripture as a whole*.

Planning and Organization

The following five points will explain how this material is organized into specific sessions and how each session might be structured. It is crucial to recognize, however, that this curriculum will not teach itself. This material presumes that the groups using it have

been graced by the Holy Spirit with one or more wise leaders who can use this material in their own ministry as teachers within Christ's body. These materials cannot stand on their own as a substitute for such leadership.

- 1) Each session will begin with a prayer designed to direct your thoughts and hearts toward the theme under discussion.
- 2) Each study begins with some comments to help set the scene for that particular study. These can be read in advance or together as a group.
- 3) You are then invited to read some passages of Scripture that help to illustrate a particular episode in the drama of salvation found in Scripture.
- 4) You are then invited as a group to discuss specific questions related to the reading and to your personal and congregational life with God.
- 5) Each session will close with prayer.

Groups may want to enlarge upon or rearrange some of these elements in the light of their particular needs and experiences.

Norms

It is always helpful to reaffirm how we listen, talk, and interact with one another as we engage in Bible study. The following norms are invaluable in shaping a communal study process. As a group you may want to add to the list. Let us declare that it is OK to:

- 1) Be informal; to call each other by first names; to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.
- 2) Participate in determining when and where the group will gather, and then support the group through responsible attendance and participation.
- 3) Be involved in making assignments and completing assignments as agreed.
- 4) Take responsibility for our own learning: feel free to ask questions when confused and to make contributions when inspired.
- 5) Share and test our ideas with the group even before they are fully developed, so that others will be encouraged to share their thoughts as well.
- 6) Question the ideas being proposed in the group or in this study material, but also question our own ideas and assumptions.
- 7) Treat this study process as a wonderful and unique opportunity for spiritual growth, as a chance to think and pray together, and to clarify thoughts about who we are as the church.
- 8) Practice our best active listening skills; to be open and receptive to others.
- 9) Build on the ideas of others in the group to help ideas stretch and grow.
- 10) Expect that while we will learn personally, we will also learn and grow as a group.

Session 1: Fitting Scripture's Pieces within a Framework

Opening Prayer

Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
Help us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them,
that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ;
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Book of Common Prayer, proper 28

Setting the Scene

Many of you have been reading Scripture for years, and you know that studying the Word of God brings both comfort and challenge. Others may have tried to develop a habit of Scripture study only to struggle with the many complexities of the Bible. Be assured, you are not the first to struggle this way. Even the first followers of Jesus grappled to understand how the life and death of Jesus fit into their understanding of Scripture (which, for them, would have been the Old Testament). It was only after the resurrection that Christ "opened their minds to understand the scripture" (Luke 24:45). These Jewish disciples of Jesus, for whom the Old Testament was the only Bible they knew, came to see those texts anew in the light of the resurrected Christ. The resurrection provided the key that enabled them to fit the pieces of the Old Testament together in a new and unanticipated way. As they were guided by the Spirit to a new and deeper understanding of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, they developed a new framework for approaching Scripture. They were able to see old, familiar verses in new and life-changing ways.

Read Acts 8:26-40

- 1) What is at the root of the Ethiopian's struggle to understand Scripture?
- 2) What does he need?
- 3) How does Philip open the Scripture to the Ethiopian?

- 4) Have you ever had a moment when someone else (either in person or through something written) has helped open up a confusing passage to you? If so, please share some of that experience with your group. These moments help reinforce for us the truth that Scripture is best read together as part of our common life together in Christ.

If you have time, here is another, more complex, exercise.

Setting the Scene

The example of Acts 8 provides us with a story where a biblical character, Philip, makes use of his beliefs about Jesus to look back on an Old Testament text in a new light. Here is another exercise related to the importance of fitting Scripture within a framework. This time it involves the question of how our predecessors in the faith held together crucial and essential claims from the Old Testament and the New Testament.

From the very beginnings of the church Christians have maintained that the OT is just as much a part of Scripture as the NT. Indeed, it was the only Scripture Jesus, Paul and Peter knew. Since they all treated the OT as Scripture, how could those who came after them do differently?

In the multicultural, religiously plural world of the first century, Jews stood out from all other groups for their commitment to the singularity of God. There was one God; all others were simply pretenders to be avoided.

The first followers of Jesus were all Jews, and shared this commitment to the one God of Israel. Even as more and more non-Jews joined the church, the church retained its commitment to the OT and its unrelenting insistence that there is only one God worthy of their love and worship. These Christians also asserted that Jesus Christ was God. They did not believe that Jesus became God--somehow gaining a promotion through his death and resurrection. Rather, Jesus, they believed, was always God (as John 1 and Phil 2:5-11 assert).

Jesus is God; there is only one God (the God whom Jesus calls Father in the gospels). The Bible is unflinching in asserting both of these things, however, it explains how to hold these two (seemingly incompatible) assertions together. What is required, and what the later doctrine of the Trinity provides, is a more developed, scripturally regulated framework that allowed Christians to assert both divine singularity and to locate Christ fully within God's singular identity. For most Christians, the doctrine of the Trinity can seem like a very confusing set of assertions that may be fascinating to theologians but really make no difference to everyday life as a Christian. But one hopes this study and the scriptural texts it examines will help us see that the doctrine of the Trinity, hammered out

Session 2: The Beginning

Opening Prayer

Sovereign over all things,
we acknowledge this universe was made for good,
yet we tremble when vast systems shift and crumble
despite our efforts to control them.
Forgive our vain attempts to turn your gracious order to our profit and victory.
Guide us in the ways of peace and reconciliation
that we may enter into your unending and joyful reign.

<http://www.webofcreation.org/Worship/liturgy/november07.htm>

Setting the Scene

In the introduction we briefly explored the notion that we were created for "communion," "fellowship," or "friendship" with God. These are all terms that the Christian tradition has used to summarize God's purposes and deepest desires for creation. Each of these terms, however, really stands as a sort of summary of those texts in the Bible that describe much more richly and dramatically the ends for which God created us.

When we turn to Scripture for an account of God's purposes and desires for us, it is natural to start at the beginning – Genesis. In this study we will do just that. In the next study we will look at various accounts of the end of things to see how those accounts develop and broaden our understanding of God's purposes and desires for us.

Before starting, we should note that many churches and locales and even denominations may be caught up in fights over evolution and creationism. This study is not directly concerned with those issues. Long before the Scopes trial, St. Augustine (in the 5th century) indicated that Christians probably should not hold views about creation that put them irreconcilably at odds with the best science of their day. This is because in order to understand certain verses in Genesis well, one needs to recognize that they assert *that* God created all things and *why* God created all things. These verses are not primarily interested in *how* God created. When science tries to answer the "who" and "why" questions it may be saying more than the evidence warrants. When Christians use Genesis to answer the "how" question, they may be asserting more than these texts do.

Although it is possible to argue that the creation of humans in the image of God is the climactic moment of creation (Gen 1:26-27), we would do well to focus on the seventh day as the climax of creation. It is there that we learn why and for what purpose God created. The seventh day is the day of rest. Unlike the other six days, it never ends. There is no evening and morning. Thus the seventh day both marks the end of God's creative activity and indicates the purpose for which God creates. God created us for

rest. This is not to say that the couch potato is the most godly form of life! Instead, when we say that God created us for rest, we need to take our cues from the subsequent description of life in the Garden.

First, think of the relationship between God and humans. God is said to walk in the Garden in the cool of the day (3:8). God converses with the humans face to face, as it were. These are images of extraordinary intimacy between God and humans. God and humans enjoy unbroken community and communication. In addition, the humans do not have to struggle to find food and water. Creation is bountiful. The humans do not have to protect themselves from the elements. Humans do not have to fear the animals and the animals do not fear the humans. God, humans, and creation, are all in their proper relationship to the others and to themselves. Right relationship between God, humans and creation is at the heart of the Hebrew word *shalom* or peace. When we say that God's purpose in creating is that all things should enjoy rest, the rest of the seventh day, we mean that God desires us to live in *shalom*.

To understand this better it may help to think in terms of the Sabbath. The Hebrew word for seven is *shabbat*. The sabbath or *shabbat* simply refers to the seventh day. If you know observant Jews and have seen their sabbath practices, you get a little sense of the rest for which God created us. All of the work and anxieties of the week are put aside. The day is devoted, on the one hand, to study, prayer and restful contemplation of God and, on the other, to enjoyment of family and friends.

Of course, the peaceable rest of creation does not last long, as Genesis 3-11 makes clear. We will look at that soon. At this point it is sufficient to recognize that God's purpose in creation, God's deepest desire for us, is peaceable rest, a perfect Sabbath.

Read: Gen 1:1-2:24

- 1) Creation is repeatedly characterized as "good." What does this tell us about God? What does this tell us about creation?

- 2) After each day of creation we are told that "there was evening and morning." This is true of each but the seventh day. What might this mean?

- 3) How would you characterize the relationship between God and the first man and woman? Does that say anything about God's deepest desires for humans?

- 4) It appears that the first humans do not have any material needs. What does that say about God's desires for humans?

- 5) What aspects of your congregation's life and worship help you to understand and enjoy the rest God wants for us?

- 6) Are there aspects of your life or your congregation's life that keep you from enjoying God's *shalom*? Explain.

Closing Prayer

Living God,
we are beset on many sides by distractions and detractors:
those who would have us place our hope in appearances, in wealth and power.
Help us to keep you in the center of our sight,
that we may hold fast to what is life giving, and live in your grace.

<http://www.webofcreation.org/Worship/liturgy/november07.htm>

Session 3: The End is the Beginning

Opening Prayer

O Lord our God,
splendor and honor and power are yours by right.
You have created all things,
and by your will they exist and have their being;
O Lamb that was slain,
with your blood you have redeemed for God,
from every family and language, people and nation,
a kingdom of priests to serve our God.
To him who sits on the throne, and to Christ the Lamb,
be worship and praise, dominion and splendor, for ever and for evermore.
Amen.

Adapted from Rev 4:11; 5:9-10,13

Setting the Scene

In the previous session we looked at God's deepest desires for humanity as revealed in Gen 1-2. If you know much about Genesis, you know that the peaceable harmonious *shalom* for which God created us does not last very long. Indeed, one could read Genesis 3-11 as the story of how humanity becomes ever more captivated by violence, power and domination (see Gen 6:11-13).

God's desires for us, however, do not change. In this study we will look at several passages that reflect on the way things will look at the end of time, when the redemption of the world is at hand. Even though the contexts and the images have changed, these passages, nevertheless, make it plain that God's deepest desires for humanity, as displayed in the garden, will ultimately be brought to fruition.

One place we see this is in the Prophets. If you are familiar with prophetic writings you know that they are filled with long passages describing the sin, oppression and injustice that mark the life of the people of God. They also anticipate God's coming judgment. What is sometimes less well known is that despite this coming judgment, the prophets also speak to God's coming redemption.

One of the fullest accounts of God's coming redemption, however, comes at the very end of the Bible, at the end of the book of Revelation. In Revelation we see that what begins in a garden ends in a city, the New Jerusalem. If you look at the central sets of relationships in the Garden -- God and humans; God and creation; humans and creation and humans with each other -- it is clear that the New Jerusalem described in Revelation

brings God's deepest desires for humanity as seen in creation to fruition, restoring everything to its proper relationship to God, itself and to others.

The intimacy between God and humans is restored. Instead of walking in the garden and speaking with the humans face to face, Rev 21:3 indicates that God will dwell with humans, "God himself will be with them." There is no significant distance between God and humans and no need for sacrifices (see v.22 "I saw no temple in the city for its temple is the Lord, the Almighty and the Lamb."). The damage brought into the world through human sin is healed (22:2). Despair, sadness and death are all defeated and the shalom of the garden is restored. The city has walls and gates, but these are not for protection and security. Rather, they are there simply for beauty's sake to adorn the city properly. Peace between nations is established and all of the world now gives glory of the Lord.

Although the idiom or setting has shifted from a garden to a city, God's deepest intentions and purposes for humanity and world are completed here in the New Jerusalem. Of course, a great deal takes place between Gen 1-2 and Rev 21-22. The remainder of our sessions will present one way of filling in the events that come between creation and redemption. The aim will not be to touch on every single episode of significance; instead we will try to illustrate some of the larger movements of the drama. As you begin to internalize the grand scope of Scripture you will start to develop a sense of how any biblical passage you might study can be fitted into this drama. One of the chief goals of *The Form of the Word* is to help you learn how to fit both your reading of Scripture and the shape of your own life and the life of your congregation into this drama.

Read

Isa. 2:1-4; Isa 65:17-25; Amos 9:11-15 and Rev. 21-22:5

- 1) Based on these passages, what will be some of the main characteristics of the world when it is redeemed?

- 2) Do you find any foretastes of this coming redemption in your own life and experience? Offer some concrete examples.

- 3) Are there any aspects of your congregational life and worship that provide foretastes of this coming redemption? Explain.
- 4) Do these accounts of God's redemption have any impact on the way you and/or your congregation live in the world today? How so?

Closing Prayer

O Ruler of the universe, Lord God:
Great are the deeds you have done, surpassing human understanding.
Your ways are always righteous and true, O ruler of the ages.
Who can fail to pay you homage, Lord, and sing the praises of your holy Name?
Only you are the Holy One.
All nations will draw near and fall down before you, because you are just and your holy works have been revealed.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.
Amen.

Adapted from Rev 15:3-4

Session 4: The Call of Abraham

Opening Prayer

Steer the ship of our lives, good Lord,
to your quiet harbor, where we can be safe from the storms of sin and conflict.
Show us the course we should take.
Renew in us the gift of discernment,
so that we can always see the direction in which we should go.
And give us the strength and the courage to choose the right course,
even when the sea is rough and the waves are high,
knowing that through enduring hardship and danger in your name
we shall find comfort and peace.

Adapted from Basil of Caesarea (c. 329-379)

Setting the Scene

The heavenly city of the book of Revelation is not nameless, but neither is it called the city of God. It is the “New Jerusalem,” recalling the name of a city that already existed. Jerusalem was the center of worship for the people of Israel, the Jews. The New Jerusalem links the redemption of the world to God's relationship with a particular people. In this session we will begin to explore the significance of this. To do this we must begin with Abraham.

The story of Abraham and his family begins at Gen 12. You will recall that the shalom of the Garden is broken by human sin. The humans disobey God, eat from the forbidden tree and are expelled from the Garden (Gen 3). Because of Adam's and Eve's sin they are alienated from God; they are also alienated from creation and forced to struggle in order to survive. Humans are also alienated from each other. For example, in Gen 4 we read about the first murder. From this point on we get a picture of a world that is increasingly marked by violence and vengeance. By the time we get to Gen 6 the world "is corrupt and filled with violence." The world now exemplifies the very antithesis of the peace for which God created it.

In the light of human violence, God sends a great flood. On the one hand, there is clearly a need for some sort of purge and renewal of creation. On the other hand, if God were simply to eliminate everything and start again from scratch, it would mean that humans were capable of ultimately thwarting God. The flood allows both a cleansing and

renewal of creation (Gen 7:11-2; 8:17; 9:7 use language that draws directly on Gen 1-2) yet it also retains continuity with the world God initially made.

Noah and his family are not long out of the Ark before things start to go wrong again. Gen 9:18-28 very delicately relates what appears to be an act of sexual violence that brings curses on one of Noah's sons, Ham. Through the line of Ham, we meet Nimrod, the founder of the city of Babel (10:10). Although there seems to be a new-found solidarity among humans, it is solidarity based on pride and fear (11:1-4). It comes as no great surprise that God acts to separate these people from each other. Things seem poised to lapse into violence again when we are introduced to Abraham.

In Gen 4-11 God addresses the brokenness of creation and the scope of human violence in a grand way. This is not successful. God seems to shift gears in Gen.12 to focus on one man, Abraham. There are two important things to recognize about Abraham. First, there is nothing about Abraham that makes him worthy of God's choice. Indeed, the first words he speaks in Genesis are about conspiring with his wife to lie about her status in order to save his life (cf. 13:11-13). God's choice of Abraham is simply that: God's gracious choice. Yes, Abraham believes God and follows. He grows into a man of great faith and faithfulness, but that is not how God finds him initially. The importance of this becomes clear when we recognize that the aim of God's choosing of Abraham is to bring a blessing to all the families of the earth (12:3). God opts to bless this one man and his heirs as part of God's plan to bring a blessing to all the nations and thus to bring about God's best intentions for creation.

If Abraham's faith or righteousness made him worthy of God's choice, then we would have to be equally worthy to participate in God's blessing. Instead, when God calls Abraham he is just like us. As Paul will note later on (Rom. 4:1-25), we, Gentiles and Jews, participate in the blessings promised to Abraham through faith, just as "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Abraham was not righteous in advance of this.

The precise shape of God's blessing of Abraham is made clear in the covenant God makes with Abraham. This covenant is presented most fully in Gen. 17. There are several crucial characteristics of this covenant that we should note: First, this covenant is "everlasting" (17:7). There is nothing Abraham did to earn this blessing and there is nothing he or his heirs can do to revoke it. God is willingly, graciously bound to Abraham and his heirs forever. More concretely, God promises Abraham descendents, and land. Much of Genesis through Joshua can be read as the story of God bringing these promises to fruition. In addition, God promises, "to be God to you and your offspring after you" (Gen 17:7-8). This is a promise of God's faithful abiding presence throughout time and place. This promise is reiterated in the resurrected Christ's promise at the end of Matthew, "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).

In making these promises God would appear to be laying out the course of events for much of the rest of Scripture. In one sense this is true. In another sense, however, it becomes clear that God's plans for the ways things should unfold often takes humans by

Session 5: A People

Opening Prayer

Let us sing to the LORD for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and my might and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God and I will exalt him.
The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name.

Adapted from Exodus 15 1-3

Setting the Scene

God's covenant with Abraham includes three central promises: Numerous descendants, land and the promise to be their God forever. The rest of Genesis can be seen as a series of attempts by the book's main characters to bring the first of God's promises to fruition. At the same time these human efforts are consistently brought to naught by a God who works in unexpected and unpredictable ways to sustain the promises of the covenant. For example, contrary to custom and expectation, God works through the younger son in order to multiply Abraham's descendents (Isaac and Jacob are both second sons, Joseph is the 11th of 12). Despite the human scheming, jealousy and deception that marks much of Gen 12-50, God preserves and multiplies the heirs of Abraham. At the end of Genesis when Joseph finally has a chance to exact revenge upon his brothers for all they had done to him he offers mercy instead. He summarizes this central theme of Genesis when he notes, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people as he is doing today" (50:20).

By the end of Genesis the people of Israel are both numerous and prosperous. They are not, however, in the land God promised to give them. Rather, they are in Egypt where they enjoy a special status because of Joseph's special status. At the beginning of Exodus we read an ominous verse, "Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Ex 1:8). This new king or Pharaoh apparently does not recognize the debts and obligations he owes to Joseph and Joseph's people. He views the Israelites as a large and potentially unstable alien population in the midst of Egypt. In Pharaoh's eyes the Israelites have become a threat to Egypt's stability. He attempts to deal with this by enslaving the Israelites and trying to exterminate them.

God steps into this situation to rescue the Israelites from destruction and to lead them into the Promised Land. There are numerous significant elements to Exodus. For our purposes, three are particularly important: The revelation of God's name to Moses and to

the people; the revelation of God's powerful deeds on behalf of Israel and the revelation of God's love and care for Israel in giving the law.

In Exodus 3 God appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush. God calls Moses to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out from slavery and genocide into the land God originally promised to Abraham. Moses is quite reluctant to take this on. In 3:13-15 he speculates that the Israelites will want to know that name of this God who is calling them out of slavery. Moses wants to know the name he should use when he speaks to the Israelites about God. God responds by revealing a name comprised of four Hebrew letters. Hence, this name is sometimes referred to as the tetragramaton (Greek for “four letters”). Because human lips are sinful, Jews do not pronounce this name. It seems to be connected to the verb “to be” (Hence, the phrase "I am who I am" in 3:14). Modern scholars often use the English designation “Yahweh” to refer to this name (adding vowels to aid in pronunciation). Most English translations of the Bible will use the word LORD in large or small caps to indicate the original Hebrew four-letter name of God. There is a rich literary tradition in both Judaism and Christianity reflecting on and contemplating the various aspects of God's name. For our purposes, this name, Yahweh, provides a distinct identity for the God of the Israelites: Yahweh is distinct from all the other named gods of the ancient world.

Indeed, one, but by no means the only, way to look at the first half of Exodus is as a battle between Pharaoh, the god-king of Egypt, and The LORD (Yahweh), the god of a rag tag group of slaves, led by a fugitive. When Moses first goes to Pharaoh and tells him that The LORD has called the people out of Egypt and Pharaoh should let them go, Pharaoh replies, "Who is the LORD the I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go" (Exodus 5:2). Pharaoh, arguably the most powerful man on earth and a god in his own right, throws down the gauntlet in this verse. Then for the next 10 chapters, through a series of mighty acts, the LORD displays a comprehensive mastery of and superiority to Pharaoh. This mastery is so complete that the LORD can even control Pharaoh's heart.

When the law is first given to the people of Israel, it is significant that the commandments begin, "I am the LORD your god who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me." The giving of the law presumes God's mighty and even terrifying acts on behalf of Israel. This is to remind the Israelites that the LORD has spared nothing in order to redeem Israel. This is a work of great power, but also a work of steadfast love. The commandments recall that steadfast love and they provide the people of God with instructions about how to live with God, each other and the world, in order to keep that loving relationship in good working order.

In addition, by linking the commandments to God's deliverance of the Israelites, we are reminded that in settings such as Moses' and our own, where there are many gods vying for our time, attention and allegiance, only the LORD is worthy of such a commitment from us. Redirecting our attention and affections away from the LORD is a basic goal of all types of idolatry. This is why idolatry is the central and most persistent threat to Israel's and the church's relationship with God. As we move forward in our session, we

will look at idolatry and how it works to frustrate the drama of God's redemption of the world.

The Name of God

Read Exodus 3:1-15 and Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

- 1) Why do you think it was important for Moses to learn God's name? What other biblical stories have you encountered in which someone's name (or name change) was significant?

- 2) Is there a link between God's name and God's nature? What might be some of the connections between learning God's name and belief in one God?

- 3) What does it mean—concretely, specifically—to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind? What aspects of your congregation's life and worship help you better love God in this way?

- 4) What makes it difficult to love God this way?

God's Mighty Acts

Read Exodus 12:1-27; 13:3-10 and Deuteronomy 26:1-10.

These passages indicate what is most important for the Israelites to remember about God's actions in Exodus.

- 1) What do these summaries tell you about God's actions?

- 2) If you were an Israelite how do you think you'd feel when you read these passages?

- 3) What significance do these texts have for our life together as Christians?

The Commandments

Read Exodus 20:1-17

- 1) Does it make a difference to your understanding of these commandments to see them in the context of all that has come before in Exodus? How so?

- 2) How would you describe the role of the Ten Commandments in the life of your congregation? (For example, does your congregation regularly read or recite the Ten Commandments? Are they ever alluded to? In what contexts?)

- 3) In light of the larger context of the commandments (God's covenant with Israel; the exodus event), what do you think about the display of the Ten Commandments in public places?

- 4) Why do you think most people generally view the commandments as directed toward individuals rather than toward the community's life together?

- 5) Are there aspects of your congregation's life and worship that help you to focus your attention, time, and actions solely on God? Do you think it's possible to focus your attention, time, and actions solely on God all by yourself? Why or why not?

Closing Prayer

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.
Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.
You, LORD, have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.
O that our ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!
Then we shall not be put to shame, having our eyes fixed on all your commandments.
We will praise you with an upright heart, when we learn your righteous ordinances.
We will observe your statutes; do not forsake us.

Adapted from Ps.119:1-8

Session 6: Land and Jubilee

Opening Prayer

Almighty and most merciful God,
you command us to offer food to the hungry and to satisfy the needs of the afflicted:
Grant that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart,
that, following in the steps of your blessed Son,
we may give of ourselves in the service of others
until poverty and hunger cease in all the world,
and all things are reconciled in the reign of Christ.

From a bidding prayer to end global poverty, <http://www.e4gr.org/mdgs/1.html>

Setting the scene

Eventually, the Israelites come to occupy the land that God wants to give them. The gift of the land is a difficult blessing to appreciate properly. The land is a concrete manifestation of God's care and faithfulness. The land also provides particular occasions for the Israelites to stumble in their walk with God and in their common life.

For example, on the one hand, the land provides bountiful sustenance for the people. It is a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex 3:18 and elsewhere). This is clearly what God wants. On the other hand, the agricultural economy of the ancient world is very fragile. Pests, drought, storms, and marauding armies can ruin a harvest. In these cases subsistence farmers begin a downward spiral into destitution and ultimately indentured servitude, as they have to sell their only asset, the land, in order to feed themselves and their families. As some slide into poverty, others may end up growing rich as they profit from the desperate circumstances of others. Such situations are the breeding grounds for the kinds of corruption and injustice denounced by the prophets.

Through a variety of laws and policies regarding indentured servitude and land ownership, it is clear that God does not intend long-running generational poverty. The most striking set of these laws and policies appear in Leviticus 25 with its description of the Jubilee year. The Jubilee year is a massive prescription for recalibrating the Israelites' economic life so that the poverty into which people can easily fall in an ancient agrarian economy does not continue generation after generation. The premise that underwrites the Jubilee year is the notion that the land belongs to God, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Lev.25:23). By commanding the Israelites to observe the Jubilee, God reminds them that the land is not really theirs. More importantly, Jubilee prescribes the kind of life together that the Israelites are to embody so that they might properly serve as a light to the nations. The Jubilee commands indicate that the people are called to a life of dependence on God and

each other, a life of generosity and sharing that keeps a light hold on individual possessions.

We do not know how and to what degree the Israelites observed the Jubilee year. It is easy to imagine that the powerful and rich, those who had the most to lose in this economic recalibration, would not have been eager to enact these commands.

For Christians, it is striking that when Jesus begins his first recorded preaching in Luke's gospel he announces that the "year of the Lord's favor," which is a reference to the Jubilee year, is being fulfilled in him (see Luke 4:16-30). The common life that God desires for Israel is given flesh and blood in the life and ministry of Jesus and those who follow him. Both in the book of Acts (especially chapters 4-5) and in some of Paul's letters (1Cor 11:17-34) we see that earliest Christians struggled with varying degrees of success to embody Jubilee in the particular contexts in which they found themselves. In our own world Christians have invoked notions of the Jubilee to urge debt forgiveness for developing countries. (See Kelly Johnson's CFI conversations on economic practices). All of these are attempts to live in the light of the Jubilee presumptions that the land is God's and we are tenants and aliens. God's provision of the land offers the blessing of sustenance and the invitation to a rich common life of sharing and generosity. This blessing brings with it the all too ready temptation to hoard and keep the land's blessings for oneself.

There is one more difficult blessing associated with God's giving of the land. This has to do with the sense of place and home that comes with the land. Think of how you feel when you return home after a long trip. Even if the trip were a wonderful vacation, it is always good to be home. Life in the Promised Land brings to an end the wandering that first began when God called Abraham to leave his home and family (Gen 12). For Israel, to live in the land is to be reminded daily of God's faithfulness. The land provides a very concrete way of participating in the intimacy that God desires to share with Israel and, though Israel, to share with all the nations.

It also becomes easy for Israel to assume that God feels just the way they do about living in the land. They even come to think that God sets up house in the land. Assuming that God lives in the land with you brings with it the temptation to think that you now have the world's best watch dog. The Israelites even begin to think, "God would never let anything bad happen to us in the land. God would never let anything happen to the Temple. It's God's house. Where would he go?" But God's commitment to the land is not like this. The prophets make it clear that unless they live well in the land, unless the Israelites "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8), God will not let them remain in the land. God does not need the land in the way the Israelites do. Life in the land is inextricably tied to the mission God has given Israel. This mission is part of God's plan to draw the whole world to God, as the world sees the beauty of Israel's life with God. When the Israelites abandon that mission, when Israel's life with God becomes distorted and ugly and threatens to distort the world's view of God, they are exiled from the land.

Closing Prayer

Lord,
we are rich in goods and possessions.
We pray that you would protect us from setting our hope on the uncertainty of riches.
Help us to place our hope in you,
who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.
Shape us so that we may be rich in good deeds,
generous and ready to share through the grace of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Adapted from 1Tim 6:17-18

Session 7: Holiness

Opening Prayer

Dear Jesus,
help me to spread your fragrance everywhere.
Flood my soul with your spirit and life.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly
that all my life is a radiance of yours.
Shine through me and be in me
so that every person I come in contact with
may feel your Presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me but only You.

John Henry Newman, <http://www.rc.net/wcc/newman1.htm>

Setting the Scene

Even after they enter and occupy the Promised Land, Israel's life with God and with each other is a process of formation, a process which can be instructive for Christians, too. Unlike the previous sessions, the themes of this session are not confined to a single book or chapter of Scripture. Instead, we will draw on a variety of texts from the OT. One could easily substitute other texts for those we will examine here. These texts represent a significant and widespread set of themes and episodes in God's drama of redemption.

We begin with God's declaration, "You shall be holy because I am holy" (Lev 19:2). This seems like a rather tall order, and it is. If we have any strong reactions to holiness, they are often negative ones. Both inside and outside the church we are pretty quick to detect and reject self-acquired holiness as nothing more than superficial airs of piety. (Nobody described this false type of holiness better than the writer Flannery O'Connor. You might enjoy reading her short story "Revelation" as preparation for this session). Given the abundance of pseudo holiness in our world, can we think about and attempt to embody a more authentic sort of holiness? To do so we will need to think about holiness in the light of our previous sessions.

The claim "You shall be holy because I am holy," indicates that holiness is one of those qualities of God's which God wants for us. Holiness is not simply a demand; it is one of God's desires for us. We can see the importance of this if we remember that our participation in the drama of God's redemption of the world is both preparation for and sharing in an ever deepening friendship with God. God's ultimate desire for us is the type

of unbroken intimacy that characterized life in the Garden and that will characterize life in the New Jerusalem.

Holiness, then, is tied to God's desire for friendship with us. There are many types of friendships, but friendships of the best sort are based on holding important things in common--having a common love and a common goal. God's call to holiness is an invitation to love what God loves. In this way our growth in holiness enables us to enjoy a deeper level of friendship with the one who is "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8).

If we think about holiness as loving what God loves, we might find some concrete examples of this in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). In the first verses of Matt 5 Jesus proclaims what we know as the "beatitudes." These verses are distinguished by their repeated use of the term "blessed" (e.g. Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . . Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God . . .). These are not direct commands to become poor in spirit or peace makers. Rather they are declarations about citizens of the kingdom of God who are highly valued by God. The Beatitudes give us a concise list of some of the particular citizens of the kingdom God loves. If we are to become holy, we are invited to love these people, too. Indeed, loving the peacemakers, for example, may actually help form us to become peacemakers.

Even if we understand the important role holiness plays in fitting us for friendship with God, it does not remove the fact that holiness is not one of our natural tendencies. Remember that we humans through our sin have damaged (but not obliterated) our friendship with God and our capacities for holiness. Nevertheless, through Christ, God has restored our capacities for holiness. Holiness, then, is both God's call to us and one of God's gracious gifts in Christ.

Even so, we should not think of holiness as a one-time achievement, as a state of being we reach once and abide in forever. Rather, holiness is more like a muscle. The more it is exercised the larger it gets, becoming stronger and more flexible. It is, however, easy to confuse conventional signs of piety such as church going, hymn singing, tithing and public praying with true holiness. Holiness is connected to these and many other practices, but it cannot be reduced to these practices. True holiness manifests itself in the comprehensive devotion of our attention, words and deeds to God. As the prophets of Israel repeatedly stress, proper forms of worship, apart from daily attention to justice and compassion, do not please God (see Amos 5:21-24). Holiness involves the whole of life. Happily, then, as we grow in holiness in one aspect of our lives, it tends to lead us to grow in other areas, too. Also, as Amos makes very clear, failure in one area tends to cause failure in other areas, too. As we will see in the next session, this is one of the things that makes idolatry so insidious.

Session 8: Idolatry

Opening Prayer

Take, O Lord, and receive
my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will.
All that I am and all that I possess, You have given me:
I surrender it all to You to be disposed of according to Your will.
Give me only Your love and Your grace;
with these I will be rich enough, and will desire nothing more.

St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556)

Setting the Scene

Although Israel is called to holiness, the people repeatedly turn to idolatry. Despite warnings from various prophets, it becomes apparent that idolatry is a difficult habit to recognize and an even harder habit to break. Israel's idolatry brings God's judgment. This judgment often takes the form of military reversals or defeats at the hands of the surrounding peoples. Most disastrously, this happens when the 10 northern tribes are defeated by the Assyrians in 722 BCE and are never heard from again. The southern kingdom of Judah is defeated by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The best and the brightest of the Judeans are taken into exile. The bulk of the peasant population is left behind to scratch out a living by whatever means they can. The Temple in Jerusalem is destroyed and it appears that the covenant is in jeopardy.

In future studies you will examine how God's steadfast love for Israel shines through even Israel's idolatry and the judgment that such idolatry brings. Idolatry, however, is the focus of this session. It is probably safe to assume that none of us has ever sacrificed an animal or anything else to a god. If that is primarily what idolatry is about, then it will seem very hard for modern people to identify with Israel's idolatry, to see it as something into which we, too, might fall.

One of the most important things to recognize about idolatry is that idolatry is easy. Even though idolatry is easy, it is also important to remember that nobody wakes up one morning, looks out the window and decides then and there to become an idolater. Idolatry is something that happens gradually, through a series of small, seemingly benign or even prudent decisions that we make over time. These decisions slowly and gradually divert our attention away from God.

Here is how we might imagine it happening: An Israelite farmer wishes to trade olives for wheat with his Moabite neighbor. They agree on terms and then the Moabite informs

the Israelite that Moabites always seal business deals with a sacrifice to one of their gods of commerce. The Israelite resists; the Moabite says that he does not care if the Israelite believes in any of these gods, but insists that sacrifice is necessary to seal the deal. The Israelite relents. Nothing happens. No bolt of thunder from heaven strikes them dead. Over time they continue to trade; both of them prosper. Perhaps they decide to merge their business interests by marrying the Israelite's son to the Moabite's daughter. Of course, weddings also require sacrifices. By this point, the Israelite is accustomed to compromising on these matters. After all, he doesn't really believe in Moabite gods. After the marriage, there is the question of how the children will be raised. After watching his own father compromise his devotion to the one God of Israel, it is a straightforward matter for the son to do likewise. And so it goes. A series of clever business moves, a wise and prudent marriage, a flexible parenting arrangement all work together to dilute and divert the attention of three generations of Israelites from the single minded focus on God that their law commands.

Idolatry is not so much a single decision to stray from the worship of Israel's God to another god or gods. Rather, idolatry is first and foremost a failure of attentiveness. When our attention on God lapses, we no longer see clearly how our day to day lives can draw us away from God. Indeed, if the prophets are correct, even if we do not formally abandon the worship of God, our day to day lives can draw us so far away from God that God no longer recognizes our worship. In such cases, God treats the Israelites worship as if it were no different from idolatry.

Jesus tells his followers that the first and greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all your soul and all your mind" (Matt 22:37 quoting Deut 6:5). The rest of the passage in Deuteronomy speaks about how important it is to remember this commandment daily. This is because so many aspects of our lives--our jobs, families, hobbies, even our church commitments—can slowly work to divert our attention from God. When this happens the stage is set for us to fall step by step into idolatry.

Read Isa 58:3-7; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:8.

- 1) How do these passages characterize the differences between holiness and piety?

- 2) What is the importance of this difference for our own lives of discipleship?

- 3) Can you think of an example from your life when a series of seemingly small and benign decisions led you to compromise something important about your faith? Explain.

- 4) What things or activities in your daily life most distract you from God?

- 5) What aspects of your congregation's life and worship are particularly helpful in keeping your attention regularly focused on God? How specifically do you find these helpful?

Closing Prayer

Lord,
create in us a deep and persistent desire for you so that we may say with the Psalmist:
As the deer longs for the water-brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God.
My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God;
when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?

Ps. 42:1-2

Session 9: Steadfast Love

Opening Prayer

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

Know that the LORD is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Ps. 100:1-5

Setting the Scene

Because idolatry often happens gradually and in the midst of regular patterns of worship, it is difficult for the people of God to recognize their own idolatry once they slip into it. God sent prophets to point out the ways in which Israel's life and worship had deviated from what God desired.

The first task of the prophet is to point out to the people of God the ways in which God views them. The great majority of prophetic activity is to offer God's analysis of the life of the people of God. These analyses point out the various ways in which aspects of the life of God's people led them to divert their attention away from a single minded focus on God. They had lapsed into idolatry. The faith they confessed and their day to day lives did not match up with each other.

For the most part, the people of God did not recognize or accept the prophets' analysis; their idolatry blinded them to the real state of their relationship with God. Therefore, they felt no need to change their ways. This is one of the great ironies reflected in prophetic literature: At those times when we are most in need of a word from a prophet, we are least able to recognize and respond well to what the prophet says.

Repeated rejection of prophetic warnings brings about God's judgment on the Israelites. The most decisive form of that judgment is military defeat and exile at the hands of Israel's enemies. These events are also foreseen by the prophets.

Even when the prophets are proclaiming God's judgment on the people of God, there are also promises of restoration and redemption. God's covenant with the people is everlasting. There is nothing that Israel can do to stop God's love for and commitment to

them. These promises of redemption are particular reminders of God's steadfast love, a love that cannot be broken. Indeed, the Psalmist reminds us that God's "steadfast love is better than life" (Ps. 63:3).

We have all probably had the experience of making promises or commitments we regret. Even when we have promised freely and willingly, we get to the point when it is our turn to live up to our end of the bargain, and we find that we would prefer to do almost anything else. Nevertheless, because of our well-developed sense of duty; or a concern over our personal integrity or because we fear the consequences, we go ahead and fulfill our obligations. It is not so with God.

Much of the story of Scripture can be told as the story of God's faithfulness to the promises God made to Abraham and his kin. We will misunderstand a central aspect of this story and a fundamental part of God's character, however, if we think of God's faithfulness in terms of our own commitments to our promises. God does not stick by Israel because God has to. God is not boxed into a corner by God's own rash promises in the ways that we might find ourselves boxed into a corner. God is faithful to Israel because God loves Israel. Although it is true that the faithfulness that comes from obligation is better than unfaithfulness, the faithfulness that overflows from God's love is better than life itself.

This is particularly astonishing in the light of Israel's persistent turning away from God. Repeatedly throughout Scripture, however, it becomes clear that there is nothing the people of Israel can do to stop God from loving them. That love is what generated God's promises in the first place. Even when God's love is reflected in judgment of Israel, that judgment is designed to restore and renew Israel's relationship with God. It is God's steadfast love that promises the redemption and restoration of Israel, so that all the nations will be blessed because of what they see in this extraordinary love that God shows to Israel.

When presented with a scenario such as this, Christians typically have two related questions: First, doesn't God love everybody equally? Secondly, what does this love for Israel have to do with the church?

The first question can be answered fairly directly here. We can begin to answer the second question here, but it will also come up in some of our future sessions. Yes, God loves all humans. This is part of what it means in Genesis 1:26 when God creates humans in the image of God. Moreover, this is not a half-hearted love. God loves humans without hesitation or reserve and there is nothing humans can do to stop God loving them.

However, this truth can remain fairly abstract. As it turns out, Scripture reveals that God wills to love us in a very particular way. Remember that God does not need to create; God's creation flows out of God's love. That love creates us for shalom in the garden. That love also calls Abraham to be the father of a particular people and to be a blessing to the nations. In and through that love God wills to become bound to Israel through an

- 5) What are some of the dimensions of your congregation's life and worship that connect you to God's steadfast love? Again, seek to be specific.

Closing Prayer

O Lord,
because your steadfast love is better than life, our lips will praise you.
We will bless you as long as we live;
we will lift up our hands and call on your name.
Our souls are satisfied as with a rich feast,
and our mouths praise you with joyful lips when we think of you in our beds, and
meditate on you in the watches of the night.
Our soul clings to you; your right hand upholds us.
We thank you for your steadfast love.
Amen.

Adapted from Ps.63:3-8

Session 10: Jesus the Redeemer of Israel

Opening Prayer

O come, O come, Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
Who orderest all things far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach us in her ways to go.
O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory over the grave.
O come, Thou Key of David, come,
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.

Words from the hymn by John Neale

Setting the Scene

For Christians, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus mark the climax--but not the end point--of God's action in bringing the world to its proper end. It is, therefore, also the climax, but not the end, of God's dealings with the people of Israel. In this study and the following studies, we will not explore the gospel accounts from beginning to end. Rather, we will explore the contours of a framework within which we Christians can read the gospels in ways that will enhance our understanding of and participation in God's drama of salvation.

Paul tells us that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son" (Gal 4:4). We do not know all of the things that accounted for the "fullness of time." We do know that that world into which Jesus was born was controlled by Rome. The land promised by God to the people of Israel was, yet again, under the control of a world power.

For the most part the Romans liked to rule through trusted local authorities. Herod the Great (37-4 BCE) was one such ruler. Herod was in charge when Jesus was born. Herod died shortly after Jesus' birth. He was succeeded by his son, Archelaus. Archelaus proved to be inept as a ruler. Hence, by the time of Jesus' death, the Romans had installed one of their own, Pontius Pilate, as governor.

Although we do not know exactly what fulfills the time from God's perspective, we do know that Roman occupation presented the Jews of Jesus' day with a rather acute question: How should the people of God live faithfully before God while also under Roman occupation? As one might imagine, Jews developed a variety of answers to this question, ranging from accommodation to violent resistance and most things in between. Most of the engagements Jesus has with his fellow Jews in the gospels always have this question about faithful life before God hovering in the background.

The beginnings of stories often tell us crucial things about their chief characters. The gospels are no different with regard to their chief character, Jesus. Among the four gospels in the New Testament, Matthew and Luke contain accounts of Jesus' birth. These gospels show very little interest in the actual birth process. Rather, they devote a great deal of space to fitting the birth of Jesus into the ongoing drama of God's dealings with Israel. In speaking of Jesus' beginnings as they do, the gospels point us in the directions we should look in order to understand and respond to the subsequent life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The accounts of Jesus' birth remind us that Jesus comes as the redeemer of Israel and not, in the first instance, to start a separate religion called Christianity. Christians are reminded of this each time they call Jesus the Christ. Christ is the English form of the Greek word *Christos*. *Christos* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *meshiach* or Messiah. To call Jesus the Christ, is to identify him as the Messiah, the redeemer of Israel. Once we recognize this, we are challenged as readers of the gospels to have our understanding of what it means to be Israel's redeemer shaped by the subsequent words and deeds and death and resurrection of Jesus. At the same time, we are challenged to grant Jesus' words and deeds authority because we already know who he is. In answer to the question of how to live faithfully before God in the particular context which Jesus shares with all his Jewish contemporaries, Jesus' answers will trump all others because he is "Emmanuel, God with us" (Matt 1:23).

Read: Luke 1:46-55; 2:25-32 and Matt 3:13-17.

- 1) What sort of expectations about Jesus would these announcements have set up in the minds of his contemporaries? How does reading these texts now shape your own thinking about the coming of Jesus into the world?

- 2) Think of how our society celebrates the birth of Jesus. What sort of expectations about Christ come from the ways in which society celebrates Christmas?

- 3) How do these texts counter the cultural norms and practices associated with Christ's birth?

- 4) How does your church prepare for and celebrate the birth of Jesus? In what ways are the themes in these texts from Luke and Matthew central to your celebration of Christmas?

- 5) How does your church's preparation and celebration help you to understand Jesus better? How does it shape your discipleship?

Closing Prayer

Almighty God,
you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word:
Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen.

Collect for the 1st Sunday of Christmas, Book of Common Prayer

Session 11: Death and Resurrection

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross
that everyone might come within your saving embrace:
So clothe us in your Spirit that we,
reaching forth our hands in love,
may bring those who do not know you
to the knowledge and love of you;
for the honor of your Name.
Amen.

Collect for Morning Prayer, Book of Common Prayer

Setting the Scene

Remember that we began this study by looking at salvation history's beginning (creation) and the end (restoration) in quick succession. We will follow the same pattern with regard to Jesus. Of course, the life and teaching of Jesus are crucial for Christians. The reading and studying the gospels should be a regular part of a Christian's life. Nevertheless, this study has focused on a framework for Scripture and ways that such a framework can shape and enliven our reading of Scripture.

Having briefly covered the birth and beginnings of Jesus in the previous session, here we focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christians have a variety of ways for faithfully understanding the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus; we will examine some of the most common and important ways without assuming that we will have looked at everything that can be said. Indeed, as John's gospel reminds us, "If everything Jesus did were written down, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (21:20).

Although the first century was very different from our own, we can be fairly confident that the Roman authorities would not crucify you for wandering around the countryside urging everyone to love their neighbors. Nevertheless, the Romans did crucify Jesus. Moreover, they did so with the approval of both the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and a significant portion of the population of Jerusalem.

These three groups were probably opposed to Jesus for different, but overlapping reasons. The Romans were concerned about anybody who might threaten the civil order. Anyone who drew crowds in the way that Jesus did was suspicious. They probably did not care

very much about what he was teaching. The fact that he was gathering large crowds of Jews in Jerusalem at a particularly volatile time would have been enough to get the attention of the Roman authorities.

The Jewish authorities were concerned because they understood the radical implications of the words and deeds of Jesus. For example, when Jesus chases those selling sacrificial animals and those changing money from the Temple, he was not primarily making a statement about the presence of commercial interests in a religious place. Rather, he was symbolically (and temporarily) shutting down the sacrificial system. He was in effect claiming that one need no longer offer sacrifices for one's sins because the Messiah was at hand, freely offering God's forgiveness. The Temple was no longer needed as a place of sacrifice because the Son of God was at hand. Recall also Jesus' forgiveness of the paralytic at the beginning of his ministry (Matt 9:2-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26). There again Jesus acts as if he can freely administer God's forgiveness apart from the recognized practices of repentance and sacrifice in the Temple.

Forgiveness of sins outside of the system of sacrifice in the Temple is one, but by no means the only, way in which Jesus' actions and words made it clear to his Jewish contemporaries that he was claiming to be the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us, and that people should respond appropriately and follow him. From the perspective of other devout Jews such as the Pharisees, Jesus was a dangerous heretic, teaching falsehoods regarding the most important matters of Jewish faith and practice.

It is harder to know why the crowds turn against Jesus. Within the space of a few days they go from shouting "Hosanna to the son of David," to "Crucify him." This change may have something to do with their expectations of what the Messiah should be and do and their growing disappointment with Jesus' failure to live up to their expectations.

When Jesus dies on the cross the Romans are rid of a troublemaker and the Jews are confirmed in their judgment that this man was a heretic and deceiver of the people. Of course, the resurrection changes all that. First and foremost the resurrection is God's vindication of the life, teachings, and freely willed self-offering of Jesus. The resurrection is the decisive instance of the Father shouting to the world, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

In addition to these ways of looking at the resurrection, the New Testament writers take the resurrection to be the climactic moment in God's restoration of shalom as all things become reconciled to God in Christ (2Cor 5:16-21). The resurrection testifies to the ultimate defeat of the death and its power over us (Rom 5:12-21; 1Cor 15:50-56). The resurrection confirms that Jesus is Lord and that all things will ultimately be subjected to him (Phil 2:9-11; 1Cor 15:20-28). The resurrection bears witness to the fact that in Christ God's promise to Abraham to bless all the nations is fulfilled as Jews and Gentiles are joined into one new body in Christ (Eph 2:11-22). The vindication of Jesus who freely takes on suffering in obedience to God is a sign that God will also vindicate the suffering that believers willingly take on in obedience to Christ (1Peter 2:20-25). Finally, Jesus'

offering of his life back to God in obedience to the Father's will is taken to be a sacrificial offering that ends all future sacrificial offerings (Heb 9:26-28;10:10-12).

Read: Heb 1:1-4 and Rom 1:1-6.

- 1) How do these texts connect Jesus' resurrection to God's being as triune? To the history of Israel?

- 2) Where do you see in these passages from Hebrews and Romans something of the overarching "framework" we've been suggesting?

- 3) Does your congregation emphasize particular aspects of the resurrection? If so, which ones? How is this emphasis played out in your life together?

- 4) Do you personally tend to emphasize particular aspects of the resurrection? How do they impact your understanding of Jesus and how you live out your faith?

- 5) How does your congregation celebrate the resurrection? (You do not have to limit yourself to Easter here).

- 6) How do those celebrations help you understand Christ's resurrection?

Closing Prayer

Alleluia, alleluia.

Christ, rising again from the dead, dies now no more:
death shall no more have dominion over him;
for in that he died, he died once:
but in that he lives, he lives unto God,
alleluia, alleluia.
Amen.

Adapted from Rom 6:9-10

Session 12: The Spirit and Scripture

Opening Prayer

O God, the Holy Ghost,
who art light unto thine elect:
Evermore enlighten us.
Thou who art fire of love,
Evermore enkindle us.
Thou who art Lord and Giver of Life,
Evermore live in us.
Thou who bestowest sevenfold grace,
Evermore replenish us.
As the wind is thy symbol,
So forward our goings.
As the dove, so launch us heavenwards.
As water, so purify our spirits.
As a cloud, so abate our temptations.
As dew, so revive our languor.
As fire, so purge our dross.

Christina Rossetti (AD 1830-1894), <http://www.churchyear.net/pentprayers.html>

Setting the Scene

This will be the final session in this study, and so it is fitting to conclude with the Holy Spirit. As we saw with the resurrection, there are numerous and profound ways to think about the Spirit. For our purposes we will focus on two aspects of the Spirit's work.

The resurrection is the climactic moment in God's drama of salvation. It provides the conclusive testimony that God's plan to restore the shalom of creation involved taking on human flesh, living and dying as one of us and conquering death in the resurrection. Although this marks the climax of God's drama, the last act, the full restoration of shalom in the New Jerusalem (which we examined earlier), has yet to be enacted. Christians today live in a world that is marked by the resurrection on the one hand, and, on the other, by the movement in God's time toward the consummation of all things when "the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ." In this time between resurrection and consummation Christians are called to live out their lives in Christ as the church. The pouring out of the Spirit upon the believers at the feast of Pentecost is traditionally seen as the birthday of the church (Acts 2:1-47).

The presence of the Spirit in the lives and communities of these first believers confirmed for them that the resurrected Christ had not abandoned them. They belonged to Christ and Christ promised not to leave them without his presence in the form of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the first thing to note about the Spirit is that the Spirit is God's gift to the Church to aid, encourage, guide, direct and empower believers as they negotiate their way through the world. This leads to the second aspect of the Spirit's presence that will be particularly relevant to this session.

The confessional documents of all the large Christian denominations recognize the importance the role the Spirit plays in reading, interpreting and embodying Scripture. Indeed, it would appear that all Christians grant that the Spirit plays a significant role in all true scriptural interpretation. This is so, even if these documents do not really spell out *how* the Spirit plays this role or how to discern Spirit directed interpretation from other sorts. We will not resolve these large matters here. We can, however, begin to think about the role of the Spirit in reading Scripture by briefly examining some themes in John's gospel.

In his last meal with his disciples Jesus promises them that the Spirit will help them to carry on as faithful followers of Jesus after his death, resurrection and ascension (Jn 14:18). Jesus promises that the Spirit will enable the disciples to "remember all that I have said to you" (14:26). Moreover, Jesus indicates that he has more to say that the disciples simply cannot bear yet. The Spirit will make these things known, too (16:12-15). Reminding and speaking of what is "more" are activities of the Spirit that enable the followers of Jesus to continue the mission Jesus started and that we are to continue.

"Remembering" the words of Jesus, however, is not simply a feat of Spirit-inspired memory. For example in John 2:13-25 Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for Passover. He drives out the money changers and those selling sacrificial animals. This leads the disciples to "remember" Ps.69:10 ("Zeal for your house will consume me."). Later when asked by what authority Jesus has done these things he responds, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (2:19). Although nobody seems to understand this comment at the time, John notes, "When, therefore, he was raised from the dead, his disciples *remembered* that he had said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken" (2:22).

We find a further interesting example in Jn 12. As Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final time there is great cheering. Jesus is welcomed as the "king of Israel" (12:13). Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. This leads John to make a reference to a passage drawn from Zech 9:9. We then read, "His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered these things that had been written of him and had been done to him" (12:16).

What seems to be the case is that although they did not understand Jesus' actions at the time, after the resurrection and the sending of the Spirit, the disciples come to understand Jesus' actions by means of the OT citation *and* to understand the citation in the light of Jesus' actions. "Remembering" here involves being enabled by the Spirit to connect an

- 4) What specific aspects of your congregation's life and worship help or encourage you to participate in the work of the Spirit? Explain.

Closing Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit,
and send down from heaven the ray of your light.
Come, Father of the poor,
come, giver of gifts,
come, light of our hearts.
Best consoler, sweet host of the soul, sweet refresher;
rest in work, shade in heat, comfort in tears.
O blessed light, fill the innermost hearts of your faithful.
Without you nothing is in us, nothing innocent.
Wash what is soiled,
water what is arid,
heal what is wounded.
Bend what is rigid,
warm what is frigid,
straighten what is crooked.
Grant to your faithful who trust in you, your sevenfold holy gift:
the reward of virtue, final salvation, eternal joy.
Amen, alleluia.

From Mass for Pentecost, http://www.beliefnet.com/story/192/story_19247_1.html