

Who Is This Jesus?

Biblical Windows for Followers and Seekers of Christ

These materials are provided for those gathering to pray, grounding ourselves in biblical visions of the Jesus we are seeking to come to know more clearly, love more dearly, and follow more nearly in our lives.

What does it mean to be in relationship with Jesus?

It means more than to believe some ideas or assertions about Jesus. We can do that about politicians, bosses or workers, superstars, or public figures of any kind – and yet never have a relationship with any of them.

Having a relationship with Jesus is deeper than having a belief about him or a belief in him. Having a relationship means getting to know someone deeply, entering into regular contact and conversation, following someone and inviting someone to trek alongside, and getting to know others who also know this same someone and swapping stories.

Here are texts from scripture that we all will read over this next year. We will immerse ourselves deeply in them, putting ourselves in the scene as we see Jesus in his life, teaching, essence, and purpose.

We believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that his outpouring of love on the cross is for all people (see John 3:16-17), and that Jesus calls us to follow him in a way of Christian service. We believe that God as known in Jesus Christ is above all nations, races, ethnicities, and languages.

What will it be like for us as we open ourselves more fully to being in relationship with this Jesus, who changes lives?

There are people who have been distorting who Jesus is, attempting to turn him into a modern-day Ares or Mars (gods of war), Thor or Zeus (gods of thunderous power). This is dangerous and outright blasphemous. But each of us may have our own ways of distorting who Jesus is.

It is best for us to let Jesus be Jesus, and to get to know Jesus as he is.

The texts selected strike us as getting to the heart of the Gospel, and as showing us a range of perspectives on who Jesus is.

There are 16 different texts, each opening a window into who Jesus is, what Jesus desires and does, and what Jesus calls forth in us. The readings are organized into four sets of texts. Each reading is preceded by a brief paragraph that opens a way of hearing the text, and followed by questions to consider prayerfully.

Over the next year, pick at least nine of these texts, starting with all three in the first set of texts and then choosing at least two from the next three sets. Each month, for at least nine months, read and meditate deeply on one of these texts.

How to read and meditate deeply? Put yourself into the setting. When Jesus asks a question, respond yourself and enter into conversation with Jesus. When there are many people, let yourself sense what other people are thinking and feeling, and note how Jesus responds. What are the desires, purposes, and deepest concerns of this Jesus whom we seek to follow? Let them sink in, spoken directly from Jesus.

For leadership groups in congregations and across the diocese, read one text per month over at least nine months of the year, together. Do this at your meetings. Make time to hear Christ speaking to you and listening to you. Speak with one another, seeking what Jesus desires, invites, and calls from your communities of faith.

Whether alone or in groups, pray before you begin each reading. Leave time of silence for intimate personal reflection and prayerful conversation with Christ. Use the questions to help you move further into getting to know Jesus – and yourself – more deeply. In groups, open time for conversation with each other about who Jesus is to you together as a community, and who Jesus is calling you to be as a community of faith.

Let these texts truly be windows for you into seeing Jesus. Write notes for yourself as you read, listen, pray, and converse with these texts. You might also include things such as walking in your neighborhood as you pray, responding with art or creative activity, incorporating music or singing, or inviting others to hold prayerful vigil space with you.

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Prayers as we seek to know Jesus

Lord Jesus Christ, you said, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” help us each day to see you more clearly, follow you more nearly, and love you more dearly, that we may be grafted more and more into your divine life and bear your good fruit, for the transformation of this hurting world. AMEN.

(Diocesan Prayer, 2023)

Lord Jesus, as I read and listen to these beloved sacred texts, open my mind and heart to see you more clearly and come to know you more deeply, that I may love and adore you more and more, and follow where you lead me and walk with me each day. AMEN.

*Jesus is with us, not as a warrior or empire-builder,
but as a servant, calling us to join in serving one another.*

Windows for Seeing Jesus

What Matters to Jesus

Luke 4:14-21 - Jesus declares his purpose

John 18:33-46 – Jesus speaks to the powers of this world

Philippians 2:1-12 - Jesus empties himself for all

How Jesus' Desires and Interests May Challenge Our Own Assumptions

Mark 8:27-38 – Jesus may not be the Messiah you're looking for

Mark 10:35-52 – Jesus asks a question twice

Matthew 26:37-46 – Jesus refuses a violent response

John 13:1-20 – Jesus becomes a servant and calls us friends

What It Is Like to Open Ourselves Fully to Relationship with Jesus

Luke 24:13-35 - Jesus meets us on the road and opens our minds and hearts

John 15:1-16:4 – Jesus invites us to abide with him

Song of Songs 2:8-13 – Waiting eagerly for the Beloved One

Galatians 3:26-28 – All our allegiances and identities change in Jesus

Ezekiel 36:24-28 – God brings us together from all nations in the bonds of love

Matthew 25:31-46 – The Jesus we meet in those who need

Seeing and Following Jesus the Christ, Whose Heart Is Love

Colossians 1:9-23 – Jesus holds all creation and mends all rifts

Mark 12:28-34 – Jesus names what matters most

Matthew 5:1-12 - Jesus calls us to a new way of being

I John 4:7-11 – Jesus the true model for our loving one another

What Matters to Jesus

Luke 4:14-21

– Jesus declares his purpose

In this passage, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah to make a declaration about himself and his purpose. The whole Gospel of Luke shows how Jesus lived, and these words here were at the heart of Jesus' life and ministry. Listen to his purpose.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

Jesus re-enlivens the words of Isaiah by saying he fills it full of new meaning. What might it have felt like to hear Jesus saying this and then watching him do these things during his ministry?

How does Jesus' work of bringing good news to the poor, release of captives, recovery of sight, freedom for the oppressed, and favor for all humanity and creation show up today? Where do you see this happening?

John 18.33-36

– Jesus speaks to the powers of this world

Here in the later chapters of the Gospel of John, Jesus has been forced before Pilate, the regional governor, by people who are calling for his death. So, Jesus is brought up before the political and governmental powers of this world. Listen to his response.

Then Pilate entered the headquarters* again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews*?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew*, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews*. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.'

* the Judeans / a Judean

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or both of these questions:

What kind of kingdom is Jesus' kingdom? What does he mean that it is "not from this world"? What does Jesus mean by this world, when talking to Pilate?

If followers are not called to respond by fighting as Jesus says, how are they called to respond? What does this mean for followers of Jesus today?

[**Note:** Recent scholarship invites us to read "the Jews" as "the Judeans" when referring to the religious & political leaders and context of its day and history. "The Jews" does not refer to our current Jewish siblings, nor Jewish siblings after the year 150. Anti-semitism is contrary to the Gospel and our relationship with Jesus.]

Philippians 2.1-12

– Jesus empties himself for all

In his letter to the Christians in the Greek city of Philippi, Paul calls these followers of Jesus to live out of the spirit of love, and then writes a breathtaking summary about Jesus as the Son of God who gives himself away completely and does not grasp at power. Let these words sink in about who Jesus is.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

Paul encourages hearers to share in mind and heart in the same love and spirit of humility. What kind of love and humility do you see in Christ Jesus? What does this show you about the very heart and soul of Jesus?

How does Jesus empty himself, and how does God fill that empty space? What is it like for you to empty yourself completely for others? What barriers get in the way of giving yourself away? How do you hear and respond to this call to follow the way of Jesus?

Paul's words are for a community of faith, together. Where do you see your own faith community, together, living according to this way of Jesus? Where might you be falling short? Where might you ask for God's help in following Jesus in this way, together?

How Jesus' Desires and Interests May Challenge Our Own Assumptions

Mark 8:27-38

– Jesus may not be the Messiah you're looking for

We join with the disciples on the road with Jesus, in Mark's Gospel where Jesus moves quickly and amazing things happen "immediately." Jesus takes the time on the road with his disciples to ask them how they perceive him – and then tells them where he is heading. Jesus has a pointed exchange with Peter. Listen to his clarity.

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.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

What is Jesus saying about his path?

How do you answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Enter the conversation with Jesus. How does Jesus respond to your answer?

What does Peter want Jesus to be? What does he want Jesus to do? How does Peter try to reshape Jesus and his message?

How do you hear Jesus' words about giving up one's life, denying oneself, taking up one's cross?

How does your faith community, together, answer Jesus' question? And, how does your faith community, together, seek to take up the cross given to you?

How do you, together and individually, really feel about Jesus?

Mark 10:35-52

– Jesus asks a question twice

In this passage from the Gospel of Mark, we find different people approaching Jesus with a desire. Jesus asks the same question, twice. Pay attention to what Jesus asks each time, and how he responds differently to each request.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

How do you come to Jesus? What is the desire of your heart that you bring?

What is different between how James and John approach Jesus, and how Bartimaeus approaches Jesus?

Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" Can you speak aloud what you want of Jesus? Enter the conversation with Jesus.

In your community of faith, how do you approach Jesus and each other?

Matthew 26:47-56

– Jesus refuses a violent response

We are with Jesus after the Passover, as Jesus prays and asks his disciples with him to pray, before he is seized and carried away to trial. His disciples have brought swords, in fear for safety. Put yourself into this scene, fully. Watch how Jesus responds to his betrayer, his violent defender, his followers, and the aggressive people who have come to take him down.

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.' At once he came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?' At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.' Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

How does Jesus meet his betrayer who pretends warmth?

What is Jesus' response to violence, even violence in defense of him?

Imagine being Jesus, choosing not to call on heavenly forces for rescue, and facing into the brutal reality ahead. What is going on in your heart and mind?

In your faith community, how have you handled hard conflict and mean-spirited situations? What kind of path does Jesus open for you?

John 13:1-20, 33-35

– Jesus becomes a servant for us, calls us to love

We join Jesus in the upper floor of a home where he shared the Passover meal with his disciples, only hours before he was betrayed and seized. Jesus does something to show us something about himself and about what he wants us to become in ourselves for each other. Listen to his example.

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.'

...

...'Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that

you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

Who is Jesus in this scene? What does Jesus show of himself to us?

How do you respond to Jesus wanting to wash your feet? Are you squeamish? Can you imagine opening yourself up to this tender care? Can you imagine letting someone you admire and adore bend down to wash your feet?

In yourself, and as a faith community together, what are you willing to open of yourself to serve and be served in this way? What barriers are in the way that deserve attention in prayer and gentle correction?

What It Is Like to Open Ourselves Fully to Relationship with Jesus

Luke 24:13-35

– Jesus meets us on the road, opening minds & hearts

We join followers and friends of Jesus after he has been killed and his body laid to rest. We have lost Jesus, and are wandering the roads away from the city, trying to understand what we have experienced and what we now have heard that unsettles us. The risen Jesus comes near, walks with us, listens, and responds. Watch and listen to how Jesus enters the scene with us.

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

How does Jesus meet us in our wandering?

How does Jesus help us recover our senses?

How do we see Jesus now? How do we help each other see Jesus now?

John 15:1-21; 16:2b-4

– Jesus invites us to abide with him, calls us friends

The words in this portion from the Gospel of John show us the centerpoint of Jesus' relationship with his disciples, and the centerpoint of Jesus' invitation to how we relate to him and to each other. We are all part of him, who holds us all together and nurtures us. Abide in love, even when there is threat of hatred. Let these words of Jesus sink in.

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

'If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "Servants are not greater than their master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me...

'I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling... Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

What does it mean to abide with someone you love? What changes in the focus of your life, your energy, your goals and concerns, when you abide with someone?

What changes in your life – individually, and together in your faith community – when you abide with Jesus?

What is it like for you to hear Jesus – One rejected by the world – call you a friend? To hear that Jesus chooses you?

Song of Songs 2:8-13 **– Waiting eagerly for the Beloved One**

Christian readers of the Song of Songs over the ages of the Church have found this ancient love poetry expressing something of the passionate love and desire between the human soul and Christ Jesus. When you read and hear this text, consider what it means to wait with eagerness for one you love, and what it means to open yourself to abiding and being close with one you adore. We can glimpse here a bit of Jesus' deep love for us, and awaken ourselves to our own yearning for this kind of closeness with Christ the Lover of all humankind.

The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.

My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.

Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.

My beloved speaks and says to me:

'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;

for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land.

The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.'

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

Can you imagine Jesus loving you so closely and passionately, like a lover? How does it strike you, being adored and embraced and desired so completely by God, through Jesus who is Emmanuel (“God-with-us”)?

What do you want to say, in love, to Jesus? What is your conversation like with God Incarnate who is in love with you?

What does it mean to you to be “on fire” with love for Jesus and with the love of Jesus for others?

Can your community of faith welcome and speak of such passionate love of Jesus for us – and do this while also clearly making sure that your spaces and times with each other are safe and respectful?

Galatians 2:19b-21, and 3:26-28

– All our allegiances and identities change in Jesus

What kind of community does Jesus gather? Paul writes to Christians in Galatia that they need to remember how Jesus Christ set them free from division, hostility, and enforced conformity to any particular culture’s religious or social expectations – they are a diverse community brought together and held together by Jesus. In Jesus, there is no nationalistic or culturally restricted religious identity.

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

.....

...For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

What is this new type of community that Jesus gathers?

What identities are so important to you that they are hard to set aside or let go of? Can you imagine letting go of what you think is central to you, and letting yourself become “not I, but Christ who lives in me.”

What does it feel like to be part of a diverse community with no division and hostility? Is this possible? How is Jesus calling us to work together to develop communities like this – in the church and in our towns and cities?

Ezekiel 36:24-28

– God unites us from all nations in bonds of love

The abiding and closeness of God with us in Jesus is not just something personal or for small groups of believers. This abiding is an invitation to all people across all cultures and nationalities - and it is at the heart of God's yearning. When Jesus says, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have yearned to gather you as a mother hen gathers her chicks” (Luke 13:34), he is speaking locally of God's great yearning for all people everywhere. Hear the yearning of Christ Jesus.

I will take you from among all nations, and gather you from all lands to bring you home.
I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and purify you from false gods and uncleanness.
A new heart I will give you and a new spirit put within you.
I will take the stone heart from your chest and give you a heart of flesh.
I will help you walk in my laws and cherish my commandments and do them.
You shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

How much does God yearn for all people and seek them? What does God desire and promise for all people – for you, for your neighbors, for your enemies, for those not much in your awareness?

Individually, and together, can you sense what this “new spirit” and “heart of flesh” will be like as gifts from God? How does Jesus show you and open the gate for you to that new spirit, and to having a heart of flesh instead of a heart of stone? What is Jesus opening up in you already? What remains closed, waiting to be opened and softened?

Matthew 25:31-46

– The Jesus we meet in those who need

Jesus opens visions of God’s kingdom. This powerful vision in the Gospel of Matthew brings Jesus’ teaching and parables to a big finish, when all the nations – not just individual people, but nations – stand in judgment before Christ Jesus. The final judgment does not come down to whether or not the nations believed correctly, but how the nations lived and the choices they made. Where does Jesus say we will meet him, now and until the end of the ages?

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I

was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

Where have you met Jesus and served Jesus, in others you have served? Where have you missed meeting Jesus, or seen Jesus but turned away?

Is the Jesus we meet among the poor, naked, imprisoned, hungry, thirsty, or sick a beautiful Jesus?

There is a calling to each of us to respond with loving kindness and care in our own lives. And we can sense the calling for our faith communities to respond, together. But, if this is Christ’s judgment of the nations, how are we called to seek to shape the focus of our region, our states, our nation?

Seeing and Following Jesus the Christ, Whose Heart Is Love

Colossians 1:11-23

– Jesus holds all creation and mends its rifts

Paul’s letter to the Christians in the region of Colossus gives us an amazing vision of Jesus Christ in his transcendent, everlasting essence. This Jesus, who loves tenderly and passionately, who empties himself, is before all things, the source and holder and healer of all things, and the

complete image and full nature of God. Take your time as you read, and let your mind and heart expand to begin to catch a glimpse of Jesus in the fullness of his being.

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

When have you experienced awe in someone's presence, or in the presence of something, where what you begin to see is how vastly more complex and deeper and larger that person or creature is than you ever realized?

Can you keep this vision of Jesus Christ who is everlasting and all-holding, as you consider every text you have read so far, and as you recall the moments of his birth, his baptism, his ministry, and his death and resurrection? What changes for you, as you hold this vision in your mind and heart?

What can we say or do, and how can we be – individually and together – to open this vision of Jesus Christ to people?

Mark 12:28-34

– Jesus names what matters most

In the midst of any religious, political, cultural debates that various folks bring to Jesus, we come to the most central and heartfelt question: What is most important? What matters most to God in all of this? Jesus answers – and by now, the answer does not surprise us. But Jesus urges us to

take stock of our lives and our decisions day by day, in light of these two great commandments. Let what matters most to Jesus sink in.

One of the scribes came near and heard them [Jesus and the religious leaders] disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbor as oneself",—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

How do you see Jesus live what he says is most important? How do your own priorities align with those of Jesus?

What question do you want to ask Jesus? What is on your heart to know and understand Jesus' perspective? Ask, and open the conversation.

If the leaders of our faith community were to get into a discussion and dispute with Jesus, what would it be about? What would we be saying, and what would Jesus be saying and asking?

What do you imagine it is like to live so fully into loving God and others? What is it like to pour yourself into loving with everything you've got – everything you feel, desire, perceive, think, and devote yourself to?

Matthew 5:1-12

– Jesus calls us to a new way of being

Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" gives us a deep center of his teachings, and shows us the path for living as his followers. These words came to some of the first Christians during a time of early persecution, and helped remind them how to keep living in the spirit of Christ, even in the face of suffering, cruelty, and injustice. Listen to where Jesus focuses his disciples' attention, in a world where very different values were being promoted.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or both of these questions:

Whom does Jesus say are particularly dear to and beloved by God? What is Jesus saying to the world of ancient Rome, and to our world today?

If we approach Jesus' teachings on blessedness not as a list but a whole picture, what does it look like for us to live this way?

How do you hear these words of Jesus directly, speaking to you individually and to your community of faith? Where is Jesus calling you to adjust your focus and perspective?

In what ways does it impact our varied communities when we, as individuals and groups of people, choose to live by these words of Jesus in our society?

I John 4:7-11

– Jesus the true model for our loving one another

The writer(s) of the letters of John focus repeatedly on love being at the heart of every community of faith. It is in the community of faith that we learn to love with the love of God through practice with each other, even if the world around us is chaotic and filled with hate. But we can only glimpse love by seeing how God loves us and the whole world by sending Christ Jesus into our midst.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God.

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is Love.

In this the love of God was revealed among us,

that God sent his only Son into the world,

so that we might live through Jesus Christ.

In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us

and sent his Son that sins might be forgiven.

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought also to love one another.

For if we love one another, God abides in us, and God's love will be perfected in us.

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

Consider one or more of these questions:

If Christ Jesus, as Emmanuel ("God-with-us"), loves all of creation and all of humanity so much as to come abide with us, embrace us, and forgive all that we have done to wander away from Love, then what kind of love are we to show each other if ever we are to come to know God?

What does all-embracing love look like, in your life – individually, and together in your faith community?