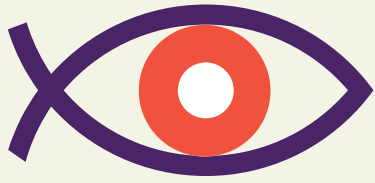


**SEEING
THROUGH
THE EYES OF
JESUS**

**STUDY GUIDE FOR
INDIVIDUALS OR LEADERS**

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SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF JESUS

**Calling us back to
the central focus of
our Christian faith:
The Risen and
Living Jesus!**

STUDY GUIDE

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SESSION 1: MISSING JESUS

Luke 2:41-52 and Matthew 14:22-33

At the heart of this text from Luke 2:41-52 is a terrifying reality. Jesus is missing. At age 12, Jesus has traveled with his family from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. When the celebration is over, the family leaves to return home, completing the first day of travel before they make the discovery that he is not present. They first search for him among the group of travelers and, when they don't find him, they return to Jerusalem and spend three days looking there before Jesus is finally found in the temple among the religious leaders. For nearly a week, Jesus is missing from his family and their traveling party.

This is terrifying enough. But there is an even more subtle truth present in this text as well. There is a period of time in the text when Jesus' parents believe he is with them, when in fact he is not as we see in the haunting phrase found in Luke 2:44: "assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey." In that day of their lives, Mary and Joseph believe Jesus is with them. They believe they are with him. They go about their business in the mistaken understanding that he is present. Only later do they discover that he is not. Scholars have engaged in comprehensive analysis of how it came to be true that Mary and Joseph somehow lost Jesus. That analysis is intriguing. But for now, our interest is not so much on how this came to be, but instead on this twin reality.

Jesus is missing. They did not know it.

There is a powerful lesson for Christians today at the intersection of these truths. We can take for granted that Jesus is present among us, that we are paying attention to him, that we are engaged in his work only to discover that he is missing, that we are not sufficiently focused on him, that we are so distracted that we find in hindsight we weren't really seeing him or paying attention to him. We can take his presence and our awareness of it, for granted.

It is also fascinating that in this text, when Mary and Joseph finally find Jesus, their first response is to accuse him of creating the terrifying reality in which they have found themselves—these days they have spent frantically searching for Jesus after discovering he was no longer with them. As they see it, he wasn't where he was supposed to be. They believe he was in the wrong. "Why have you treated us like this?" they ask him. But their question masks a deeper truth. They were separated from him because they made an assumption of his presence. They became distracted by other things. They were preoccupied with other interests. He had slipped out of focus.

Regardless of what we make of the position in which Mary and Joseph find themselves, or how they got there, the truth remains that as disciples of Jesus it

is our responsibility to be focused on him. We are called to follow him, which means we need to be persistent in seeking him out, being where he is, joining him in his work. Following Jesus cannot flow from an assumption that we are where he is. When we become his followers, and join a community of other Christ-followers, we commit to being actively focused on Jesus, following him where he leads, and participating in his life in the world. If we lose sight of Jesus, if we get distracted by other things, then we are called to repent from the distractions and renew the promise we made when we first became disciples.

This text from Luke 2 is pivotal for Christians right now. We live in a world where it is incredibly hard to stay focused on Jesus, where we are at great risk to take for granted that we are with him and to become distracted by other things. Those other things are not always subtle. There are many powerful forces at work around us that want our primary attention, that occupy our imaginations, that beg for our allegiance.

Several years ago, Johnny Pierce, then the editor of *Nurturing Faith*, made the provocative suggestion that Jesus was missing from so much discussion among Christians. He pointed out that even the Barna Group had engaged in a study of evangelical Christians which operated under the definition that “practicing Christians are defined as 1) attending church in the past month and 2) considering their Christian faith ‘very important’ in their life.” Furthermore, Barna said that practicing Christians believe these six things:

1. absolute moral truth exists
2. the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches
3. Satan is a real being or force and not merely symbolic
4. a person cannot earn their way into heaven by trying to be good or by doing good works
5. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth
6. God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today.

Do you see it? Notice what is missing from this definition of Christian faith. There is no mention of actively following Jesus in the present. Christian faith is reduced to modest institutional involvement (i.e. attend church once a month) and agreeing to a set of precepts. There is no active attention

to the presence of Jesus, no continued commitment to following Jesus, no understanding that Christianity is a way of life that consists ultimately in following the Risen and Living Jesus. There is no language about any ongoing relationship with Jesus or commitment to his stated mission in the world. Jesus is missing, and not only that, a sustained commitment also to following him is not mentioned at all. None of the categories at the heart of Barna’s assumptions actually require the Gospel, the Great Commission, the Great Commandment, Good Friday or Easter Sunday.

The reality of a missing Jesus is not confined to Barna’s categories. Increasingly we come to define Christian faith in its varieties by political affiliations or other commitments. And, we are living in a cultural moment that is filled with pressures and has cultivated a catastrophic level of exhaustion that has weakened our senses and made it much harder to pay attention, while increasing the likelihood that we take Jesus’ presence for granted while actually not paying attention to where he is.

In this regard, this moment for the Church is even more like the scene we see in Matthew 14:22-33 than the reality described in Luke 2. Matthew 14 tells the story of the disciples on a boat on an incredibly stormy sea. The disciples are straining against the wind and the waves all night long. They are exhausted. They are distracted. When Jesus comes toward them walking on the water, they do not recognize him. They think he is a ghost. Even when he is present, they cannot see him at first. That’s how tired, worn out and distracted they are.

One of the oldest images which Christians have used to describe the Church is that of a boat at sea. In some seasons, including the time in which we are living, it is not hard to identify with the condition of those in that boat as recorded in Matthew 14. The Church right now is besieged by many different adverse winds and waves. The acute strong wind of the persisting coronavirus pandemic challenged absolutely everything about how congregations carried out life together and almost everything about how we individual disciples lived our faith in the world, not to mention all the ways it has challenged and changed every other aspect of our lives. We are also caught in the midst of the adverse winds of terribly broken and partisan public spaces, where discourse of anger,

hate, distrust and demonization is on full display. This has become even more evident during the pandemic and, as 2021 turned to 2022, that has not changed.

We are also reckoning with the unmistakable impact of centuries of racial and economic injustice. Increasingly, it is not just that congregations and individual Christians are being battered by these adverse winds, we are being invited to participate in them. Too often the speech and actions of the Church sound too much like political discourse at its worse. Too often in our history we have found ourselves participating in and benefitting from injustice.

And the more we are worn down by the wind and the waves, the harder it is to see Jesus and to resign ourselves to the impossibility of doing anything. Before any of these winds were at their current strength, congregations were also challenged by lesser but unmistakable winds that have often caused us to believe that we have less capacity for mission and transformation than we once did.

We live in a moment when we may be even more at risk than Mary and Joseph for not being aware that we have wandered away from where Jesus is. We are in that risk in our personal faith journeys. We are at risk in the lives of our congregations. We live in a time much like the stormy seas of Matthew 14,

where it is easy to be exhausted and resigned, and unable to recognize Jesus, even if he walks toward us. There are formidable winds that blow against us, strong forces seeking our full allegiance which also have the power to distract us. We feel those adverse winds all around.

So, this is a time to ask:

Is Jesus missing because we have wandered away from where he is?

Have we allowed ourselves to accept a lesser definition of what it means to be Christian? Does that definition distract us from a heightened focus on Jesus?

What are the winds and waves that most distract us from being focused on Christ?

Are we so battered by winds and waves that we might not recognize Jesus even as he stands among us or walks toward us in the storm?

Can you remember a time in your own life and faith when you became aware that Jesus was missing because you had stopped paying attention to him?

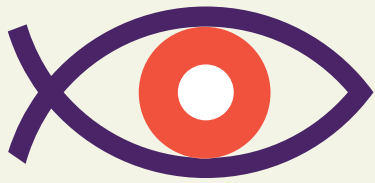


SESSION 1

1. What are the most prominent distractions in your life? What most often takes your gaze away from Jesus?
2. How did you react to the six points of doctrine listed in the study from the Barna Group? Do you agree with them? Disagree with any? How would you recreate them to focus the points on Jesus?
3. Has your attention to Jesus changed since the coronavirus pandemic disrupted our lives in March 2020?
4. When do you feel Jesus is closest to having your attention?

Invitation to Prayer

Take a moment to practice a breath prayer. Breath prayers are simple repetitive prayers that are said while inhaling and exhaling. One traditional prayer is to say “Jesus Christ, Son of God” while inhaling and “have mercy on me a sinner” when exhaling. Or, you can say “Jesus Christ” as you inhale and “Son of God” as you exhale. Choose one of these prayers or another set of short statements, and practice slowing your breathing while praying. Continue to breathe in and out as you repeat the words. Focus on the words. Focus on your breath. Invite Christ into your attention.



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SESSION 2: JESUS IS LORD

*Matthew 14:22-33; Matthew 16:13-20;
Hebrews 12:1-2*

At the beginning of this series, we reckoned with the terrifying possibility that we might be missing Jesus. The experience of Jesus' parents and family leaving Jerusalem without him and not realizing till after a day into the trip that he was not present among them, forces us to ask when have we taken the presence of Jesus for granted and when have we assumed we were following Jesus only to find out we were not. In what ways is Jesus missing from our lives, our congregations and our public witness?"

In this session, we place the terrifying possibility next to the primal Christian confession. In Matthew 16, we find the account of Jesus' conversation with his disciples at Caesarea Philippi. After a series of questions, Jesus asks his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responds, perhaps for himself or perhaps on behalf of the group, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

When Jesus hears Peter's confession, he replies, "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hades will not prevail against it." Some scholars believe that Jesus means that Peter is the rock on which the church is built, others suggest that the confession is the rock on which the church is built; but either way it is undeniably the case that the confession "Jesus is Lord" is primal, foundational and catalytic for the life of the church.

Before we go further, we need to remember that Jesus and his disciples have this conversation at a pivotal moment in their ministry together. The Galilean ministry, with its large crowds and dramatic miracles, is coming to a conclusion. Following the retreat to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus and his disciples will embark on a journey to Jerusalem. Not long after Peter's confession and Jesus' response, Jesus will begin talking about all that awaits in Jerusalem. It is clear that what is immediately ahead for Jesus and his disciples will be very different from and, in many ways, vastly more challenging than the chapter that they are closing. So, we should not be surprised that Jesus wants to begin that journey by focusing his disciples on what matters most—namely, who he is and what their relationship with him is to be.

We enter this series in a dramatic time of change and transition in the life of congregations and in a tumultuous time in the life of our nation and the world. The road we have travelled since the coronavirus pandemic began in March 2020 has not been easy; but with time, the challenges within us and around us have only intensified. We are still discerning what it means to be faithful to Christ in the midst of a turbulent and difficult time. The public health pandemic first forced us to reimagine everything about Church and the larger context of that pandemic has forced us to wrestle with ultimate questions about faith, witness, justice and

mission. The challenges still persist. Just as Jesus engaged his disciples around ultimate questions at Caesarea Philippi, so we are called to ask ultimate questions now and return to the catalyzing question and the primal confession on which the church was established. Who do we say that Jesus is? Jesus is Lord!

The pages of the Gospel after Matthew 16:13-20 make it clear that the disciples really struggled to remain focused on Jesus. There is conflict between Peter and Jesus about what it means for Jesus to be Lord. There are arguments among the disciples about which of them is the greatest and who will have the most power. Jesus has to explain three different times what is ahead in Jerusalem. On the Mount of Transfiguration, God goes to extraordinary lengths to get the attention of Peter, James and John and try to refocus them on who Jesus is and what their commitment to him is.

And that struggle didn't begin after Caesarea Philippi. Our text from Matthew 14, which we first considered in the introductory session, is a powerful illustration of how hard it is to stay focused on Jesus, especially when storms come, waters rise and adverse winds blow. First, the entire company of disciples in the boat do not recognize Jesus walking toward them. Then, when Peter sees it is Jesus and is invited to walk toward him on the water, he struggles to maintain focus on Jesus.

In challenging times, it is especially difficult to maintain focus on Jesus. There are even more than the normal number of risks that distract us and that could leave us like Mary and Joseph as recorded in Luke 2, missing Jesus after taking our focus on him for granted. But in adverse, challenging, changing times, it is more important than ever that followers of Jesus remember our primal confession "Jesus is Lord" and keep our eyes fixed on him.

After all, "Jesus is Lord" is not just the confession Peter made at Caesarea Philippi. It isn't even just the confession of faith Thomas made after Easter. It is the profession of faith we Christians made when we were baptized in the name of the Trinity and entered into the life of the church. Do you remember your experience making a profession of faith in Jesus? Can you remember what it was like to stand in the waters of baptism, make the declaration "Jesus is Lord" and

be plunged underneath the waters? Do you remember who baptized you? Can you remember what the water felt like, first as you went under and then as you stood in the baptistery?

It has been more than 40 years since I was baptized as a nine-year-old child. But I still remember well the conversations with my parents and my pastor about wanting to become a follower of Jesus. In those days, those of us who had that interest were invited to be part of a Saturday morning discipleship class hosted by our pastor for further conversation about what such a commitment would mean. This meant that a large group of us made a profession of faith on the same Sunday, and were baptized at Wake Forest Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, NC, on the same day.

I still have clear memories of so much that happened on that day. In that profession of faith and baptism, I committed my life to Christ, and in those waters, I was overtaken by a grace and power that has carried me ever since. Increasingly I realize that the remainder of my life is a working out and growing in what happened in those waters on a January day in 1979. The journey that began there led to a call to ministry and some incredible opportunities to serve, and has also included some unbelievably difficult challenges. In some seasons I have done better than others in remaining focused on Christ.

What is undeniably true is that when I responded to Christ's invitation, made that profession of faith and received the gift of baptism, I declared that Jesus would be my Lord. I found myself making a statement remarkably similar to the one Peter made at Caesarea Philippi.

What does it mean to declare that Jesus is Lord? What does that mean for you? For me? For all of us who have made that statement? Surely it means that Jesus will be the highest authority in our lives. It has to mean that all other authorities, commitments, responsibilities and opportunities have to have lesser power in my life than Jesus. It means that I am a follower of Jesus before, above and beyond any other identity marker. It means that I am a follower of Jesus above and beyond any political affiliation, national citizenship, social interaction or other attachment.

From the beginning, "Jesus is Lord" has been a political statement in the purest sense of that word. In the time

Jesus lived on earth, there were emperors who wanted to be addressed as Lord and God. When I declare that Jesus is Lord, I am rejecting the notion that any emperor, king, president or governor is the highest authority or greatest power in my life. When the early church sang the hymns of Revelation in the presence of Roman government representatives, announcing that Jesus is “King of kings and Lord of lords,” don’t you think the powers got nervous? Do you think they might have been accused of being political?

Notice also that we speak the confession “Jesus is Lord” in the present tense. That makes the statement always current, always demanding, always decisive. We do not say “Jesus was Lord.” We affirm “Jesus is Lord,” which ultimately affirms that Jesus is not a person who lived historically, taught brilliantly, died factually and has now taken his place among the great leaders of history. Instead, to confess that Jesus is Lord is to know that Jesus is not buried in a borrowed tomb, but rather rose triumphantly, is alive, has gone ahead of us, is calling us, challenging us, meeting us, renewing us and even coming to us on the choppiest waters of our lives. This means the confession “Jesus is Lord” is not something we utter once and then move on. Instead, it is a confession we renew each day of our lives by growing in faith and joining our lives to Christ’s mission.

Heard in all these ways, it becomes clear that Jesus is Lord does not mean that Jesus is one among many authorities in my life. It does not mean that Jesus is an important part of my life. It does not mean that I serve Jesus only when it is convenient or beneficial or fits neatly within other commitments of my life. To declare that Jesus is Lord and receive baptism are not just rites of passage like getting a driver’s license or graduating from high school. No, to declare that Jesus is Lord is to say that Jesus is the highest authority, the greatest power, the very center of my life, work, witness and family life. To declare that Jesus is Lord is to reject all rivals.

If Jesus is Lord, then it is Jesus to whom I pay ultimate attention in all circumstances. Jesus is the focus of my life. It is Jesus who shapes my perspective, defines how I understand the world, speaks to me in the pages of Scripture, challenges me in the devastating injustices of this world and opens me to a life that really is life.

Because you and I have said that Jesus is Lord, it means that we are committed to living life with our eyes and our hearts focused on him. These texts from Matthew’s Gospel come to us as a gift and a challenge in the midst of changing, challenging, difficult times. They call us back to the foundation of our faith, not only to Peter’s primal confession but to the one each of us made. They require us to consider the full meaning of the confession that Jesus is Lord. They ask us to renew not only our baptismal promise, but the very core of our faith. They call us away from lesser pursuits and destructive allegiances. In these definitive days, they force us to reckon with the questions: To whom am I paying attention? For whom am I living my life? Do my life, my words and my deeds, live out the promise I made when I gave my life to follow Jesus?

They give us these questions individually; but these texts also force us to wrestle with them congregationally. What would it mean for your congregation to live out of an overwhelming commitment to Jesus and a sustained focus on him? What other authorities would that force you to resist? From which temptations would you need to seek deliverance? What institutional concerns would be reframed? What would be possible that is otherwise impossible?

As we ask those questions, we might consider singing the hymn “Take My Life and Let It Be Consecrated Lord to Thee” as a renewal of our confession.

And we might take even more seriously the call we read in Hebrews 12, written in its own season of anxiety and persecution. “Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and run with perseverance the race set before us, looking unto Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Instead of missing Jesus, or taking our discipleship for granted, what might it mean to live as people whose eyes are fixed on Jesus? How do we maintain such focus? What powerful change might that mean for us, our congregations, our communities and the world? To those questions we will give our attention as this series continues.



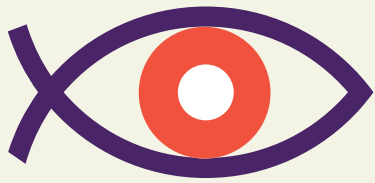
SESSION 2

1. In 100 words or less, state who Jesus is to you. Do the same in 50 words, then in 20 and then in 10.
2. Reflect on your baptism experience. Who baptized you? When? Where? What was the meaning of that experience for you at the time? Has that meaning changed?
3. What does it look like on an average day for Jesus to be Lord of your life? What are the different areas of your life into which you can invite Jesus as Lord? How can intentional attention to Jesus affect your routine life?
4. How does the Lordship of Jesus impact your political outlook and participation?

Invitation to Prayer

This week, we invite you to explore different positions of prayer. Reflect on your words about who Jesus is and imagine how you might bodily approach Jesus. Try praying standing with arms outstretched, or lying prostrate on the floor. Assume a position that most easily helps you connect with the Divine.

In your prayer, bring the different areas of your life before Jesus. Allow yourself to imagine what those areas look like with Jesus as Lord.



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SESSION 3: REALLY SEEING

*Matthew 14:22-33; John 15:1-11;
Galatians 2:19-20*

Being a Christian is about more than making the declaration that Jesus is Lord once on the way to baptism. And it is even more than a daily renewal of that confession in word and deed. At the heart of our faith is the experience of really seeing Jesus and growing in that vision. Really seeing Jesus is the beginning of a whole new life and witness.

Notice a different aspect of Peter's experience on the choppy waters described in Matthew 14. Like all the other disciples, at first, he doesn't even recognize Jesus walking toward him. Being unable to recognize Jesus essentially means that Jesus is missing from his sight even though he is actually present. But then, when Jesus speaks to the disciple community, Peter sees him for the first time. He makes a request: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Many scholars and preachers have suggested that Peter is out of place in making this request of Jesus. They suggest it is another example of Peter's impulsive nature, perhaps even a desire to be at the center of attention. But I disagree. Peter does not step out of the boat on his own. Instead, he asks for permission. He does not step into the wind or waves in his own initiative or by his own power. Just as earlier beside the same sea, when Jesus said "Come, follow me," and he began to follow Jesus, so now Peter awaits Jesus' command before beginning to move. When Jesus speaks, he steps forward.

Similarly, Peter has just lived through an experience of sharing in the feeding of thousands of people. In Matthew's narrative, Peter and the other disciples are not spectators to this miracle, but participate in it actively. Is it any surprise now that Peter, beginning to see Jesus, wants to join him in a miracle again? That he believes such is possible?

Finally, the first responsibility of any disciple is to be "with Jesus." In Mark's account of the call of the disciples, being present with Jesus is the first descriptor of the essence of discipleship. Peter doesn't ask to walk by himself on the water, or go off in his own direction. Instead, he asks permission to come to Jesus, to be with Jesus, to be in the place disciples are supposed to be. Once Jesus is in the boat, later in the text, the place for a disciple is undeniably with Jesus on that boat. But until then, when Jesus is on the stormy seas, discipleship requires a desire to be with Jesus in the storm.

If Peter's request is not impulsive, could it be that it is a first sign of the way that really seeing Jesus causes us to think differently? To live in a different definition of what is possible? Is it possible that we resist this understanding of Peter's actions

because we prefer to live in the status quo of a faith that leaves us in safety? That allows us to stay in the boat? That doesn't have to consider that following Jesus might one day require us to speak in new ways, see in different ways, step out in bold ways, and find ourselves right in the midst of what Jesus is doing in the world, even in the midst of a storm?

Peter's journey does not end in the moment he steps on the water. Briefly he finds himself walking on the water just as Jesus is stepping on the same waves. The text tells us that as long as Peter has his eyes fixed on Jesus, he is able to keep walking without falling. Put in a different way, the moment Peter becomes distracted by the wind and the waves and no longer has his eyes fixed on Jesus, then he falls and begins to sink.

So, in this text we begin to discover the real power of actually seeing Jesus. Seeing Jesus causes us to see everything else differently. Seeing Jesus gives us a different definition of what is possible for us in his power. Seeing Jesus encourages us to step out in times in which we would otherwise retreat or cling to safety.

Why is that true? What is it about the experience of seeing Jesus that causes us to see and act differently? Seeing Jesus is about more than physical perception. Instead, it is a deep and transforming observation. When we really see Jesus, when we focus our attention on him, when we open ourselves to his life and power, he begins to change us. This is a truth Jesus anticipates when he teaches that "the eye is the lamp of the body, so if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light." Jesus knew that the things we really see, the people to whom we really pay attention, the ultimate commitments around which we orient our lives, transform us from the inside out. Really seeing Jesus changes us deep within.

Paul established a very similar perspective when he wrote to the Galatians: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." When we truly join our lives to Christ, when we see him deeply, he begins to live in us. This means as we grow more and more in him, we come to see more as he sees. As we see as he sees, as our vision is transformed and our inner beings are renewed, we are different.

For all these reasons, I have come to believe that when Peter really saw Jesus walking on the choppy waters of the Sea of Galilee, when his eyes were first really fixed on Christ, when he saw him with greater depth and clarity, he saw his own past and present differently. He found himself asking questions he would not have otherwise imagined and taking steps that would have otherwise seemed either reckless or impossible.

But what about Peter's "failure?" Isn't it true that after walking a few steps on the water, Peter began to sink? Didn't Jesus have to rescue him? Those things are absolutely true. But I don't believe they are a sign that Peter should have never left the boat. Instead, I believe they prove that truly seeing Jesus requires sustained growth in faith, and even the support of a community. We cannot go from the life that was only possible in our own power and a life that is uniquely possible in Jesus in an instant. It takes practice. It requires the grace of Jesus. There will be moments when we need Christ to lift us out of the water so that we might have our vision restored even more so that we can walk further. The Gospel in this is that when we are distracted, and when we slip and fall, Jesus is present with us and restores us. In that grace, Peter's journey continued. There were more painful days to come. But on the other side of Good Friday and Easter, a day came when Peter stood on a different kind of choppy waters, in the presence of all of the rulers and powers of first century Jerusalem and declared his faith with boldness. (That's actually the word that Acts uses to describe the ministry of Peter, John and the other disciples after Christ's resurrection.) Luke can't resist pointing out that when the authorities see that boldness in Peter, they know he is a companion of Jesus.

Don't you see, the same boldness Peter first showed briefly on the waters of the stormy Galilean sea is present in full measure as revealed in the early chapters of Acts. As Peter's vision of Jesus has become clearer, he is being transformed in compelling ways so that he sees, thinks, speaks and acts differently. What we see on the stormy sea is a first step, an initial rehearsal. Over time, there is growth and unmistakable transformation.

For all these reasons we shouldn't be surprised that the Gospel of John tells us that on the very last night of Jesus'

life, he invited Peter and the other disciples to “abide in me as I abide in you,” and went on to add “those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit, but apart from me you can do nothing.” Abiding means remaining in Jesus, living with Jesus, knowing Jesus more personally. The word invites us not to a momentary encounter but to a lifelong journey. Like Peter, we all need time, space and grace in moments of failure as we come to see Jesus more powerfully and know him more completely.

Just as Peter didn’t reach that point in a moment, neither did Paul. From his dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road until the time he could write Galatians and offer the testimony that Christ lived in him, there was much life and experience. Really seeing Jesus until Jesus changes us is the journey of a lifetime, not merely the experience of a moment.

I am still learning what it really means to see Jesus and be remade, held in the power and grace of his sight and presence. So far along the way, I have discovered that I come to see Jesus more clearly in worship, both through the experience of hearing sermons and by the holy privilege of preparing and delivering them. Long before I was called to preach or ever had the chance to live into that calling, I encountered Christ in music in worship and came to see him in much more powerful ways. Along my journey of

faith, I have come to see Jesus more clearly in the midst of participating in his mission, serving in the communities where I lived and in other parts of the world. In challenging and difficult times, I have known the power of being lifted out of the storm by Jesus through the hands and love of holy friends who refused to let me fall, and in whose words and deeds I came to see Jesus more clearly. I have learned (and am still learning) that really seeing Jesus requires thinking, feeling, praying, acting, serving and living. It requires a willingness to step out before I feel ready. It requires a willingness to stand and act in the face of challenge and opposition. Really seeing Jesus and being remade by him are the catalysts for bold faithfulness.

This is true for each of us in our personal journeys with Christ. It is also true for congregations. Aren’t our congregations called to be the kinds of communities that help people see Jesus more clearly, that make space for us to take the holy risks required to grow in Christ, that offer grace when we fall, and that encourage us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, knowing that when we really see him everything changes?

As followers of Jesus, we are not just called to declare our faith as a confession. We are called to really see him until he changes us. That is an incredible adventure of grace.

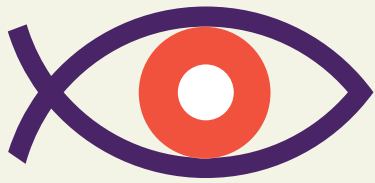


SESSION 3

1. Do you think Peter was too bold in stepping out on the water?
2. Reflecting on your life, how has your way of living and your outlook changed as you have seen Jesus more clearly?
3. Remember a time when you stumbled in following Jesus. What happened? How did that impact your journey forward?
4. What are some times and places when you feel you see Jesus most clearly? How often are you able to be in those circumstances?
5. When do you sense your view of Jesus blurring or fading? What brings you to that place? How can you find your way out?

Invitation to Prayer

This week’s questions involve a lot of reflection on your life and journey. It may have brought up difficult or troubling memories. We invite you to spend time journaling today about your reflections and what emotions they have brought up in this process. Write out your memories of these experiences and bring them to God as a remembrance in your journey together.



SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF JESUS

**Calling us back to
the central focus of
our Christian faith:
The Risen and
Living Jesus!**

STUDY GUIDE

AUTHOR:

Paul Baxley

SESSION AUTHOR:

Harrison Litzell

www.cbf.net/eyesofjesus

SESSION 4: THE DANGER OF DISTRACTION

Matthew 14:22-33; John 15:1-11

In our last session, we noticed the real power of seeing Jesus. Seeing Jesus is about more than superficial perception. It is a transforming observation in that the more we focus on Jesus, the more he grows in us and defines the way we see, think, feel and act. Carefully considering that truth allows us to begin to imagine the remarkable life that is possible for us and for our congregations if we “fix our eyes on Jesus” (to quote the preacher to the Hebrews).

But what happens when we are distracted? This is a powerful and pertinent question, that brings us back to our foundational text in Matthew 14:22-33. As long as Peter is focused on Jesus, he is able to walk on the water toward Jesus. He is able to share Jesus’ life, ministry and mission. But his focus does not hold. There are damaging winds and powerful waves and, when Peter begins to pay attention to them, he slips and falls into the watery chaos. So, we begin to see the danger of being distracted. When Peter no longer sees Jesus, he is consumed by the chaos and dominated by the distractions.

In John 15, Jesus explains the danger of distraction differently. There, he teaches his disciples that whoever abides in him is able to bear much fruit. In those farewell discourses found in John 14-16, we find that those who abide in Jesus, who remain in Christ, who focus their attention on him, can do anything. But, then there is the opposite truth: “Apart from me,” Jesus says, “you can do nothing.” Those who do not abide in Jesus have no capacity to participate in his life or share his mission. Like a tree that bears no fruit, they can only be gathered up and burned. “Abide in me” is the phrase Jesus uses to describe a life focused on him. Apart from that focus, there is danger.

In these days, we need to pay attention to Jesus’ teachings regarding the danger of distraction. If really seeing Jesus opens transformative possibilities for our life and faith, being distracted and unable to see is just as damaging at the other extreme. Like Peter who was surrounded by the wind and the waves, Christians and congregations today are surrounded by forces seeking to distract and undo us. We should begin to ask ourselves: What are some of those distractions in our world? What are the forces that could keep us from really seeing Jesus?

Even as we allow that question to sit in our hearts and minds, we need to remember that this danger of distraction is illustrated not just by Peter’s experience walking on the water. It is also affirmed by Hebrews, where the preacher calls us to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely” in order that we might run with perseverance the race set before us. What there

described as “weight and sin” are distractions that hinder our faithfulness. And, we read in Colossians 2, that Paul several times appeals to the Early Church not to fall prey to what he describes as “elemental spirits of the universe,” but instead to live their lives in Christ, rooted and built up in him. To read Colossians 2 more carefully is to recognize that Paul groups a wide range of forces, pressures and philosophies within this category of elemental spirits. His teaching in the epistle is the same as the lesson we receive watching Peter on the water. He is a vivid example of the power of elemental spirits, of wind and water, to distract us from Christ and disconnect us from his saving, transforming power.

So, what are the elemental spirits of the universe that are at work today? What are the forces that distract us? That keep us from really seeing Jesus and keeping our eyes fixed on him? What are the winds that blow around us and the waves that rise in our lives? How do these forces work in our personal faith and in the lives of our congregations? I want to suggest several of which I am increasingly aware and invite you to reflect on what you see.

First, I notice an increasingly rapid pace of life that blows with power in our lives. Throughout my adulthood, I’ve noticed the pace of life becoming more intense. Many of us work more hours and try to attend to more responsibilities with every succeeding decade. In my years as a minister in congregational settings, I observed that we were encouraging our volunteers to take more and more responsibility in more and more areas of church life. In congregational life, it is much easier to add a new ministry than it is to eliminate one that was once necessary but may be so no longer.

At the same time, I watched children and youth being encouraged to do more and more different things in the hopes not only of having a well-balanced life, but also a really appealing application when it came time to go to college. In the coronavirus pandemic, as many people experienced even further blurring of the lines between home, work and family life, the pace intensified. As we have to do more and more and try to do more and more, our capacity is stretched to the limits and it is difficult to do anything well. Also, the ongoing changes in economic life mean that more and more people are working multiple jobs in order to provide for their families. The rapid pace of our lives gives us less space to ask big questions, prioritize, or pay sustained attention

to anything and in the midst of all of that, it is hard to pay attention to Jesus or even make space for the habits and practices that cultivate attention toward him.

Not only are we experiencing an increasingly rapid pace in life. we are also challenged by constant access to “information” and “connection.” The dawn of 24-hour cable news nearly a half century ago followed by the advent of the internet several decades ago and the rapid proliferation of social media mean that most of us are always connected to media. Increasingly, our society is segmented around sources of news and information. Social media sites direct us to postings and places that conform to our already established positions. Children gain access to the powerful and problematic world of social media at younger and younger ages, almost certainly before there is sufficient emotional or mental maturity to navigate its complexities alongside seizing its opportunities. More and more, text messages and emails are used for communication that previously would have taken place by phone or even in person.

Undeniably, there are wonderful opportunities and transformative innovations bound up in this increasingly connected world. But there are also incredible dangers. In recent years, we’ve seen these means of constant connection and information used to divide people and to reinforce prejudice. Beyond all that, these devices are more and more the focus of our attention, so much so that if you are in a restaurant or any other public place, you are very likely going to see more people looking down at a device than up at the world around them. While those devices can include apps that help us see Jesus, they also contain tremendous power for distraction and division. I’m confident that if Paul were writing to the Colossians today, he’d describe much of this culture of connection as an elemental spirit of the universe.

It is not just the rapid changes in our larger culture that have the power to distract us. Sometimes the way we think about faith can also be a distraction from how Christ is really seeking to work in our lives and our congregations. For example, the notion that faith is one part of a balanced life is an incredible distraction right now. In their work on the current religious faith of American Christians over the last several decades, sociologists like Christian Smith and theologians like Kenda Creasy Dean have described the dominant faith in our culture as “moralistic therapeutic

deism,” which essentially believes that God’s greatest desire for us is that we be happy, and that faith is an important part of our lives that gives us a certain set of moral values. But this kind of faith is shallow and empty compared to the discipleship to which Jesus calls us. The Jesus we meet in the Gospels not only has the power to feed the multitudes and walk on water, he also has the power to invite us into that work with him, as Peter begins to learn. Jesus’ desire is not just that we be happy or attain a basic moral code. He isn’t even interested in being one allegiance among many in our lives. Our primal profession of faith is not that Jesus is among multiple authorities in our lives, but rather that “Jesus is Lord.” To believe that Christ is but one part of a balanced, happy life, or that Christ exists to give us a basic set of values is to be dangerously distracted from what Christ is really about in the world and what Christ is calling us to do.

Furthermore, sometimes this dominant understanding of faith leads to the development of the assumption that faith is a private matter without public consequence, that the substance of our faith is our personal beliefs and our internal spirituality. While personal spiritual practices are essential for maintaining a focus on Jesus, these interior elements of Christian faith are not the sum of Christian faith. Jesus calls us to join him visibly in the world, to be salt and light, to be a visible community, to engage the great challenges of our time. To limit faith only to private matters is another way of thinking about faith that can become an elemental spirit of the universe that distracts us from really following Jesus.

No discussion of adverse winds and distracting waves in our culture can be complete without naming the terrible brokenness in American public spaces. Over the last half-century, political processes have become more and more partisan and more and more divisive. Blended with the abuses of social media, the partisan divide is incredibly destructive at almost every level and intensely distracting. Constant messages invite us to define our lives based upon allegiance to political personalities and agendas. The tone of public discourse turns us against one another and causes us to demonize anyone who thinks differently. Not only is our politics characterized by demonization and destruction, it is also increasingly incapable of accomplishing objectives that serve the common good. All around us is evidence of deep

social problems, persistent injustices and urgent needs. But the political system is increasingly incapable of dealing with these challenges.

From the perspective of faith, the greatest danger associated with our increasingly partisan environment is the co-opting of faith by political forces for political purposes. This danger is reinforced when Christians, particularly Christian leaders, allow themselves to be used by political leaders or to believe that political power is the ultimate power in the world, when all around us the truth is that politics is accomplishing less and less.

For more and more people, a primary identity is now found in a politician or a political party. That is not a new challenge. In the time of Jesus, the Roman Emperor wanted to be worshiped as a god and Christians were persecuted in many places if they refused to declare that their primary allegiance was the empire.

The danger of excessive political tribalism was especially demonstrated by the genocide in Rwanda. In his book, *Mirror to the Church*, the African theologian Emmanuel Katongole offers a theological assessment of how the most evangelized nation in Africa in the 1990s came to experience a horrific slaughter as tribes turned against one another, so that Christians who worshiped together one Sunday were slaying one another within days. His grim assessment: “The blood of tribalism ran deeper than the waters of baptism.”

As Christians and congregations, our identity is to be found in Jesus Christ and him alone. All other allegiances are to be far diminished in comparison to him, and understood in light of our commitments to him. We are to live as people who see Jesus more and more deeply so that we come to see more and more as he does. In this world, there are so many elemental spirits at work, so many adverse winds blowing that, like Peter, we are often challenged to stay focused on Jesus long enough to really live in his power.

The danger of distraction, particularly now, is intensely real. How do we keep our eyes on Jesus? We will turn next to that question.

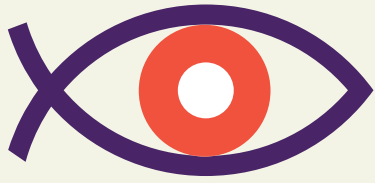


SESSION 4

1. Are there forces in your life deliberately distracting you from Jesus? What are they?
2. Read Colossians 2. What stands out to you? What questions arise for you? How can you pursue those questions further this week?
3. Reflecting on the past three years, what has been the pace of your life? Who or what drives that pace? Is the current pace of your life helpful or harmful to you?
4. Do you have the resources necessary to disrupt the distracting forces in your life? If your pace is harmful, do you have the resources necessary to correct it? If not, what needs to change for you?

Invitation to Prayer

Life is busy and can quickly fill with activities. Even a calendar full of good things is still a full calendar and that can be draining. This week, we invite you into silence. Sit in a quiet place and sit in stillness. If you are accustomed to this practice, follow your typical patterns. If you are unaccustomed to silence, set a timer for a short space as a reasonable goal (one or two minutes). Focus on your breath and allow thoughts to pass through your mind without grabbing hold of them. Slow your pace and sit in silence.



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SESSION 5: “A COMMUNITY TO CHECK OUR VISION”

*Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 8:22-26;
1 Corinthians 13:11-13*

In the last two sessions, we have explored two very different, but equally powerful truths. On the one hand, when we really see Jesus, we are transformed. We have access to a life that really is life, a life that is far more abundant than anything we could ask for or imagine, a life that consists in sharing the very ministry and mission of Jesus himself. On the other hand, when we are distracted, we sink. We do not bear fruit. When we lose sight of Jesus, we find ourselves operating in our own strength and power, which are not nearly enough.

As we have also learned, our lives as Christians are not so much ones of immediate fulfillment, but instead are a journey in which we daily live more fully into our profession of faith that Christ is the highest authority in our lives and in our congregations. Because we are on such a journey, we are like the man Jesus encounters as recorded in Mark 8. At first, the man is completely blind. Jesus begins his work of healing; but the healing is not immediate. The man sees, but not completely. Instead of seeing people clearly, the objects in his vision look like walking trees. It is only after Jesus intervenes again that the man is able to see fully.

We should pause and reflect on Jesus’ encounter with the blind man. Not only does the text tell us that our sight is restored through a journey, but that it is not just a momentary experience; there is so much more here. When Mark describes the final intervention, he not only tells us that Jesus touches the man’s eyes, he also describes the truth that Jesus looks intently into those blind eyes. Before the man can really see, he has to be really seen by Jesus. There is an unmistakable connection between being seen by Jesus and his really being able to see. Jesus looks at the blind man, looks deep into his eyes, and it is the combination of seeing and touching that leads to the restoration of sight. So, we begin to discover that the kind of intense seeing that Jesus wants to produce in us is a reflection of, even an extension of, his own sight. “Because it is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me.” It is also no longer I who sees, but Christ who sees in me so that my seeing is an extension of his. My seeing is restored as he sees me. As I remain focused on him, I come to see everyone else as he sees.

But this healing of a blind man also makes it clear that our sight is not restored by our effort alone. We learn that the blind man in Mark 8 cannot come to see in his own agency. His sight has to be restored by the healing sight and touch of Jesus. When his sight is imperfect and incomplete, he needs Jesus’ sight and touch just as much as when he was completely blind. In the same way, if we are to come to

really see Jesus and see through eyes made whole by Christ, we need to live our lives in the constant presence of Christ. Christ restores our vision as we make ourselves available to him in prayer, in the devotional reading of Scripture, in the worship of the Church, and even in mission.

I began my life in ministry as a youth minister. Back in the 1990s, the focal point of a whole year in the youth ministries of the congregations I served was a summer mission trip. We spent months preparing youth and adult chaperones for that 10-day experience, and then considerable energies carrying out the mission projects around which the trips were built. In the preparation and in the implementation, we made significant space for reflection. Three decades later, informed by more life and ministry experience, there are things I would do differently. But in the course of those mission trips, I learned a powerful truth: Sometimes our vision is healed in the midst of participating in Jesus' work in the world.

Many nights on those mission trips, I would invite teens to reflect on the question: "Where have you seen Jesus today?" Then I would listen as one after another would offer a testimony of how they had seen Jesus at work in the life of some person they had met, or experienced Jesus' presence or come to see Jesus more clearly because of what had happened in that day. In those days each year, those of us on that trip were paying attention to Jesus in ways more substantive than on many other days. From those experiences, I learned that we can see more clearly when we immerse ourselves in the mission Jesus gave us, and that the practice of asking (even praying) the right questions can be used by Jesus to restore our sight.

We experience the redemption and restoration of our seeing when Christ encounters us in worship, spiritual formation and even in mission. Reading Scripture, praying, singing hymns, serving in our communities are all ways that Jesus restores our sight and even checks our vision. But another truth that emerges from Scripture, my youth ministry experiences and I dare say all of our experiences in faith, is that community with other Christians is essential. Now that Christ is risen and ascended, we encounter Jesus both through spiritual practice, but also through the body of Christ, which is the Church. When the Church lives faithfully, we experience Christ's healing touch through relationships within and beyond our congregations.

From the early beginning of the Church this has been true. Following Jesus was never intended to be a purely individual experience. From the first pages of the Gospels, it is clear that Jesus knew that following him would require a community. Staying focused on him would require the support of other believers. That's why Jesus' call is always not only to him but also to community. From the beginning, there was always Simon and Andrew, James and John, Paul and Priscilla and Timothy. We have been drawn into a community to follow Jesus so that we can help one another see, check one another's vision, be instruments of Christ's healing touch for one another's eyes, and encourage one another to keep paying attention to Jesus. I've experienced the power of genuine community and holy friendship across my journey of faith and I imagine you have as well.

We've spent much time in Matthew 14:22-33. We've seen the power of being focused on Jesus and the danger of distraction. But today I want you to notice a missed opportunity in the text. The way the story reads, when Peter is walking toward Jesus on the choppy waters, the other disciples are silent. We don't know if they even noticed what Peter was doing. Could they have been straining at the oars so hard they did not see? Or were they watching in silent disbelief? Was anyone calling out to Peter, challenging him to get back in the boat where he belonged?

What might have been different if the other disciples had called out to Peter with words of encouragement? What might have been different if his fellow believers had supported him? If they in word and deed had cried out to him and said: "Keep paying attention to Jesus. Keep looking into Jesus' eyes"? Might Peter have been able to walk on those waves longer if at least some of his friends had encouraged him?

In his powerful book, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer celebrates the necessarily communal nature of the Christian life. In a passage from that book that has stayed with me since I first read it, he affirms that the Christian always needs access to Christ in his brother's heart because sometimes Christ in his own heart is not strong enough. When we are prone to wander, to slip and fall, we need others who are also following Jesus to support us, to encourage us, to challenge us, to embrace us and to help us stay in the way that leads

to life. If we are really to abide in Christ, if we are to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, we need others walking with us who can help us.

What has to be true for a church to be that kind of community? What sorts of relationships do we have to foster? What qualities must exist? Wouldn't it require us to be committed to being in relationship with each other? Wouldn't we need to cultivate honesty, vulnerability, transparency and trust? Wouldn't congregations need to be communities marked by the fruit of the spirit and the kind of love Paul described in I Corinthians 13?

What must be true about me to receive Christ's healing through a community that checks my vision and helps me see Jesus? Don't I have to be a person who is honest about my own need for help? The blind man we meet in Mark 8 certainly was. Even Paul in I Corinthians 13 acknowledged

that he saw through a glass darkly; in those words, there is a necessary humility. If I believe I see perfectly and know everything, then I'm not likely to believe I need the touch of Jesus directly or through sisters and brothers in Christ. I have to be humble enough to recognize that while I see more than perhaps I once did, I still need Christ to help me see more clearly. Neither our current political climate nor even many dominant faith expressions these days encourage that kind of humility; but it is absolutely essential to authentic growth in faith.

Without that humility, without a community that can help me see more clearly and point me more and more to Christ, at best I will find myself sinking with Peter. But, held by Christ's astonishing grace and surrounded by a community of holy friends, I can see more faithfully, live more gracefully and be part of a truly abundant life. That is true for each of us and for our congregations.

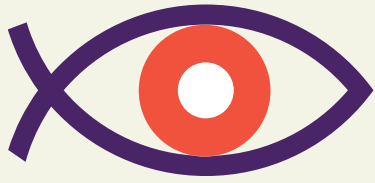


SESSION 5

1. The poet Donald Hall, upon the death of his wife, poet Jane Kenyon, said, "We did not spend our days gazing into each other's eyes . . . most of the time our gazes entwined as they looked at a third thing." How does your gaze entwine with Jesus' gaze? What "third" things do you gaze at together?
2. Where have you seen or encountered Jesus today?
3. How does your community impact your view of Jesus? Has your view of Jesus changed because of the community in which you live and move?
4. How can we more fully foster authenticity and trust in our church communities?
5. Where in your life, in or out of a church setting, do you experience authentic and trusting community?

Invitation to Prayer

This week, we invite you to share a prayer with someone in your community. It can be a prayer of thanks, request, praise or anything else. Write a prayer, record yourself on your phone, or sit with a friend and share a prayer together. Approach Jesus in community.



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SESSION 6: SEEING JESUS AND CLAIMING JESUS' MISSION

Matthew 14:22-33; 28:16-2; Luke 4:26-30

We have previously identified the powerful truth that when Peter really sees Jesus and remains focused on him, he is able to join Jesus in walking on water. In other words, seeing Jesus allows Peter to share Jesus' life, participate in his mission, and live in his power. Matthew 14 provides the first glimpses of this, as Peter and the other disciples join Jesus in feeding the multitude and then Peter joins Jesus in walking on the water. By the early chapters of Acts, Peter is preaching with a boldness that gives him away as a companion of Jesus; he is healing the sick just as Jesus did. Early in Acts, we see that Peter is seeing Jesus more steadfastly and experiencing more and more transformation.

Seeing Jesus intently transforms us from the inside out. Paul describes this transformation in 2 Corinthians 5, when he testifies that when "anyone is joined to Christ there is a new creation." In that same passage, he says that this new creation means that we no longer see Christ or others from a human point of view. We no longer see from our own limited, myopic perspective. Our vision is no longer constrained by our surroundings, our instincts, our brokenness or our sin. But instead, our vision is redeemed so that we see Christ, ourselves, others and the world as Jesus sees.

Seeing as Jesus sees should lead us to act more as Jesus acts. Seeing Jesus draws us into Jesus' mission in the world. Those of us who grew up Baptist (particularly in the southern U.S.) naturally first think of texts like Matthew 28:16-20 when we consider Jesus' mission. After all, in those verses we receive a "great commission," namely to go and make disciples among all nations, baptizing in the name of the Trinity, teaching people to observe all of Jesus' commandments. In that commission, the Church receives a mandate to share the Good News, to invite people to follow Jesus, to equip people to grow as disciples of Jesus. That Great Commission is absolutely the foundation for Christian evangelism. To hear that commission is to know that we cannot opt out of sharing the Good News or inviting people to join us in following Jesus.

But there is more going on in this text than we might first think. British Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes points out that the phrase "baptize in the name" of the Trinity can just as well be rendered "baptize into the name" of the Trinity. In baptism we are not just identified with the Triune God. We are drawn into the very life and mission as we find ourselves "participating in God." (That's actually the title of the book in which Fiddes sets forth his Trinitarian theology.) To participate

in God is to share the life of God, just as Peter shares the life of God in Jesus Christ as he walks on the choppy waters and even more as, in Acts, we see him healing the sick. When we are baptized, we are drawn into the life and mission of God. When we follow the Great Commission, we invite others into that same life.

What is the substance of that life? What is the character of that mission? Into what are we plunged when we offer ourselves to Christ? Luke 4 records that Jesus makes a clear and unmistakable announcement of what his mission is.

He announces, using a text from Isaiah 61:

“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, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jesus’ mission is clearly about the transformation of human lives. We see Jesus across his ministry bringing good news to the poor, releasing captives, freeing the oppressed and announcing God’s favor through his words and deeds. Jesus is deeply invested in forgiving sin, healing disease, and drawing people out of isolation into community. Watching Jesus at work, it is clear that he is particularly interested in those who are living in poverty and those who are most excluded from the larger culture of his time. He is notoriously unwilling to give up on people whom others detest. (Think about the repeated charge that he spends too much time with “tax collectors and sinners.”) He even announces at one point that “the first will be last and the last shall be first.”

Mary gives us some anticipation of the physical, embodied, transformational nature of Jesus’ mission when she sings ahead of his birth that “he has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

We already are being pushed beyond a false conflict that sometimes emerges in discussions of Christian mission. Too often, debates break out between proponents of evangelism and proponents of what some call social ministry. Is our calling to invite people to faith in Jesus Christ and

equip people to be disciples or is it to participate in the transformation of the world by meeting human need and lifting up the oppressed? The answer to both is yes. We are called to invite people to follow Jesus and equip people to live as disciples. But we are also called to join Jesus in his transformation of the world. That transformation is physical and concrete, not just spiritual and internal. Faithfully and clearly understood, there is no conflict between evangelism and acts of transformation. There is also no choice. We cannot refuse the one or the other and be faithful to Jesus. Inviting, equipping and transforming are all integral to Jesus’ mission in the world, because all of them are present in his life and ministry. Furthermore, we cannot invite people to follow Jesus if we are not doing so ourselves by participating in the mission he named for himself and for which he set the Church into existence. An evangelism worthy of the name of Jesus must come from a place of growth in Christ and participation in Christ’s mission. The most compelling invitations rise from people being transformed into the likeness of Christ and who are being used by Christ to transform the world.

The Christian mission necessarily leads to transformation. It absolutely leads to actual engagement with people who are living in poverty, who are experiencing oppression, who are being pushed aside by powers and principalities. We should not be surprised that the Christian mission involves actual, physical transformation because in Jesus Christ, God became human, lived a fully human life, experienced the suffering of the world, and got close enough to us to know us and our struggles. The Gospel is not that God remained at a safe distance or became disconnected, but rather that God entered our space fully in the person of Jesus. The Gospel begins when God takes bodily form and it ends with the announcement that the broken, battered and destroyed body of Jesus has been raised from the dead. The incarnation and the resurrection tell us that physical experience matters to God, that the redemption of our bodies and our existences is part of the redemption God is seeking in the world. We cannot take that Gospel seriously and ignore the physical needs of those around us.

Our communities today are like the communities in which Jesus lived. There is hunger and poverty. We are all at least physically close to people who are held captive by racial and

economic injustice. There are powerful elemental spirits in our universe, and even deficient theologies, that are being used to keep people in poverty and oppression. Jesus has given the Church the mission of bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor in this moment.

Sometimes that calling seems impossible for the likes of you and me. After all, the challenges are overwhelming, and it is easy for the Church (especially in this moment) to feel inadequate. But Matthew 14:22-33 reminds us that when we really see Jesus, he gives us the power and the capacity to join his life even when it is otherwise unimaginable that we could ever walk on water or persevere in the face of adverse winds.

There are other voices in our world that immediately protest that the kind of mission Jesus gives us amounts to politics. Sometimes folks will even say: "Stop talking politics and start preaching the gospel." But Mary's song before Christ's birth and Jesus' mission statement in Luke 4, combined with the lived example of Jesus' ministry, all make it clear that this work of actual transformation is the Gospel. And, while politics at its best will have to play a role in lifting people out of poverty and injustice, this mission belonged to the Church long before any political party existed, or even before the nation existed. There are many examples in history as well as in the present, of congregations and communities of believers leading the way toward the transformation of communities in ways that embody the Lord's Prayer that "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

So, as we see Jesus more clearly, we come to see our surroundings more clearly. We find ourselves being drawn

more and more into the mission Jesus named in Luke 4. In reflecting on this truth, I find myself remembering a moment at a CBF General Assembly more than a decade ago. One of the preachers in that particular year was the South African Methodist Trevor Hudson. In his sermon, he took issue with the old song, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace." Hudson held up the concern that this song could lead to a misreading of the Gospel, a conclusion that real closeness to Jesus would cause us to pay no attention to the things of earth. So, he proposed an alternative wording: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely clear in the light of his glory and grace."

When we really see Jesus, we see our communities and the world as he does. We see poverty and injustice as he does. We see isolation and alienation as he does. We see brokenness as he does. We see ourselves and one another as he does. We see clearly. And we are called to act.

So as people who are coming to see Jesus more clearly, we will ask ourselves: Where in our communities do we see poverty? Where do we see racial or economic oppression or injustice? Where do we see people languishing in isolation? Where do we see suffering? Where do we see people who have been given up on by everyone else?

Then, when we see, we will not be able to keep from helping, as individuals or congregations, but compelled to act as Jesus calls. Peter reminds us: If the winds are blowing, the waves are billowing, the elemental spirits are festering, if we but focus on Jesus, he will give us the power to walk into the midst of his mission and participate in God's transformation of all things!

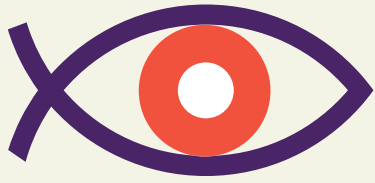


SESSION 6

1. What are your memories of hearing the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) taught? As you think about this passage, what thoughts or feelings are brought up for you?
2. Reflect on the words of Jesus from Luke 4:26-30. How does this declaration of Jesus' mission relate to the way you see Christianity lived and discussed today?
3. What do you think of Trevor Hudson's proposed wording for the song? Does it deepen your relationship to Jesus or distract you from Jesus?
4. Choose one question from the end of Paul's devotion. Answer it as specifically and locally as you can. Think about the community of which you are a part and both the challenges and gifts found there.

Invitation to Prayer

This week, we invite you to offer your deeds as prayer. Reading through the texts for the week, or reflecting on the questions of this session, be an answer to prayer for someone. Reach out and be a voice of comfort. Give (in time or money) to a cause that brings good news to the poor. Allow your offering to God to be one of action and care for those in your community.



SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF JESUS

**Calling us back to
the central focus of
our Christian faith:
The Risen and
Living Jesus!**

STUDY GUIDE

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SESSION 7: SEEING JESUS: TRANSFORMING ME

Romans 12:1-2; Philippians 2:5-11

To see Jesus is to see ourselves, our communities, and the world through his eyes. To see Jesus is to be claimed by the same mission for which he came to the world. In our last session, we allowed texts from Luke and 2 Corinthians to help us see that mission just as Mary imagined it and Jesus described it. To be a disciple of Jesus is to follow him in bringing good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to the captives. That's not a political agenda. It is the mission of God in the world. The community best suited to fulfill it is the Church of Jesus Christ because it consists of those who are coming to see Jesus and the world more and more clearly and, at the same time, are given the power to participate in Jesus' life.

In this session, we ask ourselves: What needs to change within me as I come to see Jesus more clearly and join more fully in his life and mission? Two texts from Paul's letters help us reflect on that question. First, there is the compelling challenge of Romans 12: "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind," so that you may know the will of God. Similarly, in Philippians 2, we hear the call to "let the same mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus." Both texts use a word that is translated "mind" in English. So, if we don't know better, we are prone to assume that Paul is asking us merely to change the way we think.

There's no doubt that there are many places where a change in our thinking would be an important step in seeing Jesus more faithfully and joining his mission more fully. But before we limit our reflection to thought alone, we need to remember the truth conveyed in Steven Fowl's commentary on Philippians. There, he reminds us that the word translated "mind" in Philippians is best rendered "way of thinking, feeling and acting." The word doesn't speak just of the realm of intellect, but the entire interior being of a person; it encompasses feelings as well and it recognizes that how we think and feel determines how we act.

Several sessions ago, we encountered Jesus' teaching that the eye is the lamp of the body and that what we see determines what is found much deeper within us. We acknowledged in general that as we come to see Jesus more intently, our inner lives are transformed so that they are more like him. That transformation is what Paul is seeking in these challenging words to the Romans and the Philippians. That's why these texts force us to ask the question: What needs to change in me as I come to see Christ more clearly?

As we begin to ponder that question, we need to remember that seeing clearly can be invigorating and inspiring. But it can also be intimidating. The same light that shines can also burn. I'll never forget hearing Chuck Poole preach as a visiting minister in a congregation I served in North Carolina. In that sermon 15 years ago, he quoted a phrase he attributed to the novelist Annie Dillard: "Where true light shines, a special terror falls." Similarly, when Jesus describes the work of the coming Holy Spirit in his final words to his disciples as recorded in John, he says that the Spirit will comfort us and guide us into all the truth; but he also says the Holy Spirit will convict. Really seeing Jesus for the first time, or with deeply greater clarity, can profoundly challenge ways of thinking and feeling that are presently at work within us.

Sometimes those are ways of thinking and feeling that we do not want to release. Sometimes they don't want to turn loose of us. Sometimes those ways of thinking and feeling are like adverse winds blowing within us. Seeing Christ can challenge existing ways of thinking and feeling. Seeing others and the world more as Christ sees can be convicting and challenging.

As we come to see Jesus more and more clearly, where are our ways of thinking and feeling most challenged? Where is there significant conviction? Where is Jesus' transforming work the most important within me? Where in me is the greatest resistance to the way of thinking and feeling we see in Jesus?

Perhaps in these days some of us are challenged by the demand to place Jesus above all other allegiances. Because so many authorities vie for our attention and lay claim to our hearts, it is not easy to turn away from others to place Jesus above all. Think of all the other allegiances (national citizenship, political party, political leaders, personal ambitions/accomplishments, employer, educational institutions) and then ask: "What would it mean to see Jesus above, before and beyond all these others? What would it mean to allow his life and teaching to define how I relate to, respond to and interact with all of these others?"

Perhaps some of us struggle to see poverty or oppression as Jesus does. What prejudices or preconceived notions do we carry in our hearts and minds about those experiencing poverty? Did you grow up hearing that people are poor because they are lazy or because of some other failure on

their part? Did you grow up in the middle or upper class, separated physically from those in poverty, or at least without any meaningful relationship with people caught in poverty? Did you grow up providing help to those in poverty without ever actually getting close enough to know stories of those who are poor or discover what you could learn?

I first discovered the power of subconscious preconceived notions about poverty when I was a high school student. The church of which I was a member allowed our gymnasium to be used by the community as a winter emergency shelter for those who were homeless. Not only did we provide space, but members of the congregation volunteered to staff the shelter overnight. This meant we shared meals, stories and physical space. The first time I volunteered, I spent more than an hour listening to a person tell the story of how he became homeless. As I listened to him talk, I felt an inner burning regarding my current ways of thinking and feeling. I'd never been explicitly taught that people end up homeless because of personal mistakes; but hearing his story made clear how much I did not know and it opened my eyes to begin to see homelessness and poverty more as Christ does.

Much later in life, I served another congregation that was deeply invested in ministry with people caught in hunger and poverty. One evening our church hosted a panel presentation on "the changing face of homelessness and poverty." I still remember watching the changing expressions on the faces of people in our church and community as leaders of several community ministries described the growing number of homeless persons who were working multiple jobs and who could still not afford a place to live. Those persons caught in homelessness were working more hours than many of us. There was conviction and challenge, burning and changing of ways of thinking and feeling.

Part of reality in many parts of the American religious landscape is that congregations are not only racially segregated, but also economically segregated. A relatively small number of Christians worship in spaces where believers who are exceptionally wealthy worship next to believers who are poor (much less have a relationship with). This makes it incredibly difficult for us to experience the power of Jesus' words, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat," much less to recognize the community embedded in Jesus' blessing in Luke: "Blessed are you who are poor."

Poverty is not separate from the life of the Church; poverty is part of the Church's experience. For this reason, Christians who are not poor must not see the poor as "other" than us, but rather as sisters and brothers in Christ, to whom we are joined in baptism and in the life of God. Really seeing Jesus compels us to see poverty differently; and sometimes that new way of thinking and feeling convicts us. How might your ways of thinking and feeling about poverty be challenged and changed by seeing Jesus more clearly? By seeing as Jesus does? How might you and I act differently as our ways of thinking and feeling change? What does it mean to really follow Jesus as Lord in the face of growing poverty and economic disparity?

For others of us, seeing racial difference as Jesus does is also a source of conviction. Jesus' first disciples struggled with Jesus' view of Samaritans, who were actually racially and religiously different from Jesus' Jewish disciples. But Jesus established community with a Samaritan woman, used her witness to start a disciple community among Samaritans, and then told a powerful story that held up a Samaritan as an exemplar of faith. An African man, Simon of Cyrene, becomes the last person to take up a cross and follow Jesus in the Gospel narrative. When Christ is risen and ascended and the Holy Spirit falls, it falls on people from every nation who speak every language as it did on the Day of Pentecost. When the first Christian missionaries were sent from Antioch of Syria, the sending church was racially and ethnically diverse. So, it should be no surprise that later on Paul would write the Galatians that "in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek," and that he would write the Ephesians that in his death, Christ tore down the dividing wall of racial hostility between Jew and Gentile.

The story of the ministry of Jesus and the life of the early church is not one of elimination of racial difference. It is certainly not a story of one race, tribe or ethnicity being elevated over others. It is instead a story, as Brad Braxton writes in his commentary on Galatians, of the end of discrimination and demonization based on racial difference. Racial and ethnic diversity reflect the creative intention of God and the very image of God. Christ draws us all into a community not of sameness, but of shared focus on him and abiding love for one another.

To see in that way, to see racial and ethnic identity as Jesus does, challenges me to wrestle with the very different ways of thinking and feeling about race and ethnicity in our world. Put bluntly, seeing Jesus clearly requires renouncing white supremacy. Seeing Jesus clearly invites us to ask Jesus to cleanse us from the sin of prejudice based on race. Seeing Jesus clearly compels us to resist voices and forces in our world that seek to foster racial division. Seeing Jesus clearly convicts those of us who are white not only to repent for ways we may have perpetuated white supremacy, but also forces us to reckon with the ways structures created to support white supremacy have given us advantages that do not exist for black people, particularly those who are descendants of enslaved persons.

If, as Paul wrote the Galatians, we are all the children of God, how do we treat one another as children of God? How do we come to terms with histories of prejudice and white supremacy? Through our words, our actions, our gifts and our investments, can we repair the devastations of many generations? The long history of racial injustice in the United States reveals that white supremacy and prejudice are also ways of thinking, feeling and acting that have structural as well as emotional dimensions. The way of thinking, feeling and acting we see in Jesus calls us to sacrifice for the sake of faithfulness, to exhibit resilient love in the face of hatred, and to use our words and or deeds to move first our own lives and then our communities toward the way Jesus sees racial and ethnic identity.

When we take such steps, we also discover how much we can learn from Christians who are from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and who grew up in different places. Too often Christian mission and white supremacy, or Christian faith and western culture have been dangerously intermingled. The Christian faith is truly global. The Risen Jesus has gone ahead of us and is at work among people all over the world. In all of those places and languages there are opportunities for us to serve and share faith; but there are also opportunities for Christians from the United States to learn, be challenged and grow. As we grow in thinking, feeling and acting more as Christ does, we find beautiful ways new sisters and brothers can be part of an expanding community that checks our vision and helps us see even more clearly.

How does really seeing Jesus challenge previous ways of thinking feeling and acting? How am I being drawn into a way of thinking, feeling and acting that is more like Christ? What in me is being challenged? What needs to change? How am I being invited to grow so that I might offer myself more and more to Jesus' mission in my community, my work and all of my life? How might my faith grow until my life could really sing the song:

Take my life and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee.
Take my moments and my days;
let them flow in endless praise.

Take my hands and let them move
at the impulse of thy love.
Take my feet and let them be
swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my voice and let me sing
always, only, for my King.
Take my lips and let them be
filled with messages from thee.

Take my silver and my gold;
not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect and use
every power as thou shalt choose.

Take my will and make it thine;
it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart it is thine own;
it shall be thy royal throne.

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee.

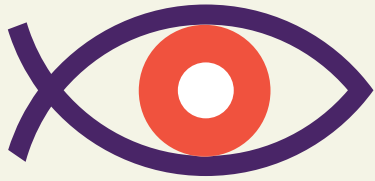


SESSION 7

1. What needs to change within you as you come to see Jesus more clearly and join more fully in his life and mission?
2. Do you experience the Spirit as a source of comfort and conviction? What experiences spring to mind when you think of the Spirit?
3. Where is your greatest resistance to the movement of Jesus?
4. Reflect on a time in your faith journey when you changed your mind about something in your life. What brought about the change? How has that change impacted your journey? What role did the Spirit play in that moment?
5. How can we come to terms with the histories of white supremacy and invest in repairing the devastation wrought over generations? What is our responsibility to this work as Jesus-followers?

Invitation to Prayer

For our time of prayer this week, we invite you to walk outside and be in conversation with Jesus. Allow your mind to wander through your concerns, hopes, dreams, dreads, etc. As things come to mind, offer them to Jesus to see if they are close to his gaze or far away. As your walk concludes, say a word of thanks.



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SESSION 8: SEEING JESUS: TRANSFORMING CONGREGATIONS

*Matthew 14:22-33; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27;
2 Corinthians 5:16-21*

As congregations today we have to feel a lot like those disciples did on the stormy sea as described in Matthew 14:22-33. We face so many challenges, and they are well-chronicled by pastors, lay leaders, denominational officials, consultants and sociologists. It is hard to create an exhaustive list of the adverse winds, threatening waves and destructive elemental spirits that are at work all around us. Congregational life and the position of congregations in our communities and even in the personal lives of disciples of Jesus are changing dramatically and were doing so even before the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic only intensified all the changes within and challenges around.

In this incredibly difficult and challenging moment, what would it mean for our congregations to be so renewed through focus on Christ that we could step out of the battered boats in which we have been traveling and join Jesus in his mission and life? What would it mean for us to see our communities through the eyes of Jesus so much so that we had to act in them just as Jesus did? What would be required for us to embrace Jesus' calling with new clarity in this time? Instead of allowing our vision of the present and future of our congregations to be defined by our challenges or sense of scarcity, could we see our gathered congregations as Jesus sees us and in so doing discover renewed passion and purpose? Might really seeing Jesus be the beginning of a renewal, even a reformation, in the lives of our congregations?

Before we go any further, we need to be clear about how Jesus sees congregations. The first clue we get for this is found in the earliest Gospel (Mark), when the writer describes the duties of the 12 apostles. Those apostles, who would become the foundation of the Church, were given three tasks. They were to be "with Jesus," to "proclaim the message" and "cast out demons" (Mark 3:14). In other words, by being in relationship with Jesus and by being where he is, they were to join his ministry of preaching and miraculous transformation. Jesus gave them this identity even though they had no particular qualifications, and in spite of a whole host of liabilities and challenges that we see emerge as we get to know them better through the pages of the Gospels. Jesus clearly saw the apostles as an extension of his ministry and mission.

As we saw last session, this vision is confirmed and even expanded just before the ascension, when Jesus entrusts a much larger disciple community with the Great Commission, calling them to make disciples in all nations, to baptize, teach and encourage, to know of his presence with them always. So, just as in the beginning, he called the disciples to be with him and at the end, he promises to always be present with his Church. Always always means always. Always means that Jesus is with his Church in the face of pandemics and cultural shifts and internal transitions and intense social upheavals. Jesus never leaves us alone in storms. He is always coming to us and giving us the gifts and power we need to do what he needs us to do in order to extend his mission and ministry.

From the beginning of the Gospel to the end, the disciples who would become the foundation of the Church are entrusted with the same message, ministry and mission as Jesus himself. No wonder Paul would later write to the Corinthians that the Church is nothing less than the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12). Then, after a terrible and challenging season in the life of the church in Corinth, when his own authority and leadership had been challenged, Paul would still be so bold as to declare that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” But now “God has entrusted” the message and ministry of reconciliation to us.

God was in Christ! God is in us! The shifting of the location of God’s activity is dramatic: the Triune God was at work in the earthly ministry and life of Jesus. Now the Triune God is at work in the Church. With a great flourish, Paul punctuates 2 Corinthians 5 with the announcement “we are ambassadors for Christ.”

Paul writes as one who sees the Church as Jesus sees it. Just as Jesus had not limited Paul’s life and ministry because of his failures or shortcomings and just as Jesus did not give up on Peter when he began to sink, so now Paul sees the church at Corinth through the eyes of Jesus and calls those believers to live into the fullness of Christ’s vision, to share Christ’s message, ministry and mission so that through them, waves, winds and spirits might be conquered—not by force or might—but instead by relentless, resurrecting love.

Do we see our congregations as Jesus sees us? Do we see our lives together through the eyes of Jesus? If so, we will begin to recognize the extraordinary capacity of congregations gathered together—not because of intellectual agreement or political persuasion or sheer convenience or even some social media algorithm—but rather by a God who is in the business of raising the dead and making all things new.

One of the first definitions I ever heard of a Baptist church, though well intentioned, has become one of the silliest I ever heard. I can’t remember who first told me that a “Baptist church was a community of like-minded believers.” That’s just crazy. What holds us together is not agreement. It is the God who raised Jesus from the dead, who sent the Holy Spirit, who invited us to come to him, and who even now equips us so that we might walk on the waves of the stormy chaos of our time and join Christ’s transformation of the world.

One of the elemental spirits blowing in our time that particularly threatens congregations is this effort by so many to turn congregations into outposts for one political party or another, so that congregations are red or blue (like all the other spaces in our world). But the congregations Paul started in the middle of the first century were diverse in beautiful and challenging ways. Those first believers came from all walks of life. They were they racially and ethnically diverse and had to learn, sometimes through failure, how to share life together.

There are many communities in the United States today where Cooperative Baptist Fellowship congregations are some of the last places where people gather who don’t all vote, think and understand life in exactly the same ways. Is that challenging? Yes. Is it new? No. It goes all the way back to the first discipleship group that followed Jesus while trying to sort out life as a community of fishermen, tax collectors and zealots. And it certainly existed in Paul’s congregations, so much so that he had to write passages like I Corinthians 13 and Colossians 3:12-17 to help them discover a path toward a life together when all the elemental spirits were trying to blow them apart. But when disparate groups find ways to stay together, not by becoming a community defined by

the superficial “virtues” of tolerance and moderation, but by seeing Jesus more clearly, by speaking to one another honestly, by sharing faith in vulnerable community and steadfast love, then they find even new ways to carry on in their life together as a witness to the message and ministry of reconciliation.

From the very beginning, the Triune God has been seeing so much more in congregations than we often see in them and in ourselves. Imagine how those first disciples felt in Acts 1, when Jesus told them that they, that small group of terrified believers, would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. It was unimaginable—except in the power of God. It must have seemed as crazy as one disciple stepping out of a boat to walk on a stormy sea! It requires a faithful boldness to see our life together as congregations as Jesus sees us and then begin to live according to that vision.

During these days of the coronavirus pandemic, I believe I have come to see congregations more and more as Jesus does because I have been inspired by the remarkable faithful agility exhibited by congregations and their leaders throughout the pandemic. I have been awed by the courage of pastors and lay leaders who have lifted their voices to preach a gospel of love, to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives, even in the midst of all the terrifying winds of hatred and division that have blown among us. I have seen congregations find new ways to use their financial, physical and other resources toward healing, repair and renewal in their larger communities. It is as though in the midst of the storms, we began to summon a willingness to respond to Jesus’ summons to get out of the boat and be with him on the water.

Can you see your congregation as Jesus sees? Not in denial of the challenges, but held tight by the promise that Jesus made to always be with us, undergirded by the conviction that for Jesus always really means always. Can you open your eyes and see all the unique gifts you have been given to encourage one another in faith and to join Jesus in his mission of love? How can you use your collective voice for the holy purpose of Jesus’ mission? How can you use your resources? Your facilities?

I’ve reached the conclusion that one of the biggest challenges faced by many congregations is that we underestimate our capacity to be agents through whom the Lord’s Prayer finds an answer in our communities. I believe a congregation gathered by the Triune God and placed in a particular community is uniquely equipped and positioned to further Christ’s mission.

How is your congregation positioned to bring good news to the poor? To offer release to those held in captivity by racial injustice as well as those who are held captive by the dangerous heresy of white supremacy? How is your congregation poised to offer community to people who feel isolated, alone and ignored? How might your congregation be positioned to bring people together across your community to work for the common good and the healing of the broken fabric of our society? In what ways is Jesus asking you to step out and walk with him in the midst of the storms?

Each one of us comes into a Baptist congregation by either making a profession of faith in Jesus and being baptized, or by renewing our profession of faith as we seek membership in that church. This means that the very center of our life together is Jesus and our faith in him. What would it mean for us to see him, ourselves, our communities and our calling so clearly that faithfulness to him is always our highest priority?

If we did, we would find ourselves speaking boldly, acting redemptively, and sharing a kind of life that would be a witness to an extraordinary life that is only possible because God raised Jesus from the dead, sent the Holy Spirit, invited us into the midst of the divine life, constantly equips us for bold faithfulness so that we can participate in Christ’s transformation of the world. We would begin to walk, live, love and serve like Jesus right in the midst of the storms. Our congregations would be transformed, and we would be in the midst of that transformation.

When Jesus looks at us, that’s what he sees. Will we see him clearly enough to join in? How might we begin to practice stepping out on the storms? What opportunities do we have to speak, act and live?



SESSION 8

Rather than working through questions this week, we invite you to invest in community. Find some way to connect with others, whether in your faith community or outside it. It should not be an evangelistic opportunity nor does it need to hold any solemn conversation or reflection on these sessions. Simply enjoy being together and know it is for community that you are made.

Here are some ideas:

1. Call or reach out to a friend and ask how they are. If they are nearby, invite them to a local park for a walk together.
2. Host someone (or many someones) for a meal in your home.
3. Find an event in your community (farmer's market, music event, theater program, block party, etc.) and attend. Keep an eye out for people who are alone or meet up with friends and enjoy the larger community.

Prayer

Jesus, as we continue to follow you, may we keep our eyes focused on you. May our eyes be open to those hurting around us so that we will respond. May our eyes look at people as your creation and give them the love they deserve. May we open our eyes to the world and see the beauty you have made for us to enjoy. And may we open our eyes wide to see that we are a reflection of you, having been made in your image which makes us not just special but loved all the days of our lives. It is in the name of the giver of life, Jesus, that we pray together, Amen.