

OPENING PRAYER

God of wisdom and truth, your ways are above our ways and your thoughts are higher than our human understanding. Yet you grant us your divine wisdom, your holy Wisdom, that leads and guides us into all truth, so that we can work for justice to transform the world into your Beloved Community. Speak to our hearts and continue to broaden our insight through the wisdom that comes only from you. In the strong name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Proverbs 9:10)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- *All Creation Sings: ELW Supplement* (ACS)

MATERIALS NEEDED

God of wisdom, thank you for the gift of holy Wisdom, Sophia, to enlighten and draw us beyond our comfort zones. Thank you, God, for being patient with us as we live into our baptismal callings to work for justice and peace. Continue to empower us as we live in love and grow in faith. Encourage us to embrace your call upon our lives. Help us to remember that all that we have and all that we are comes from you. Sustain us for the journey by your Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)

Session one

Just wisdom

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

OPENING HYMN

“Praise and Thanksgiving” (ELW 689) or “O Spirit All Embracing” (ACS 944)

ABOUT THIS BIBLE STUDY

Welcome to the “Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)” Bible study. This three-session series is inspired, in part, by Jesus’ proclamations: “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36) and “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus gives us full life and freedom so that justice may abound and so that the kingdom of God (which I imagine would look something like what Martin Luther King Jr. called the Beloved Community) may become a reality. Achieving Beloved Community will be hard won. We will not accidentally become a more just society. We must be intentional if we are to eliminate oppression and embrace equity. In the words of poet Emma Lazarus, “Until we are all free, we are none of us free.” Liberation is indeed for everyone.

God desires justice for all God’s children and all creation. It is a significant part of our calling as Christians, a calling we receive through the waters of baptism. At the font, we or others make promises, and then again, in the Affirmation of Baptism, we vow to “continue in the covenant God made with [us] in holy baptism: to live among God’s faithful

people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth" (*ELW*, p. 236).

In other words, the waters of baptism call us to set the oppressed free, work for justice and speak truth to power. Working for justice is in our spiritual DNA. It is part of our Christian heritage. The prophet Micah makes it pointedly clear, when he asks in Micah 6:8: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Yet even with this undeniable instruction, we continue to wrestle with how to live into this divine mandate. Take heart, siblings in the faith, we were born—or certainly reborn—for this!

INTRODUCTION

Our first session, "Just Wisdom," delves into how God can open our hearts and minds to a spiritual understanding that is not bound by our human comprehension. Just Wisdom comes to us through reverence for our awesome God. In fact, our key verse for our first session informs us, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). Together, we will consider our faithful response to Wisdom's invitation.

In our second session, we will explore "Just Truth." Together, we will travel with Paul on the road to Damascus and experience his life-changing transformation. We will also take a closer look at how our Savior chose to share difficult truths with God's people, and we will witness his boldness in speaking truth to power.

In our third session together, "Just Hope," we'll look at our role as the body of Christ. How are we called to be co-creators with God in transforming our communities into a more just society? Filled with resurrection hope, we'll look to

the prophet Ezekiel and his miraculous encounter in the valley of dry bones, and we'll share how God's amazing activity continues to unfold in our own lives.

WHAT IS WISDOM?

Let's dip a figurative toe in a passage from Paul's letters to the church at Corinth, so this passage might serve as a centering point for us as we journey through this three-part series together. Paul writes:

*When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;
when I became an adult, I put an end to childish
ways.*

*For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we
will see face to face.*

*Now I know only in part; then I will know fully,
even as I have been fully known.*

*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
and the greatest of these is love.*

(1 Corinthians 13:11-13)

During our time together, it will be helpful to keep in mind that we all are growing and learning. Although at times God's message for us can feel destabilizing, God encourages us to venture beyond our comfort zones toward maturity. God helps us to bring about a more equitable future—the Beloved Community.

"Wisdom" can mean different things depending on context. In casual conversation, wisdom can mean common sense or practical understanding. In academic settings, however, wisdom may be interpreted as scholarly knowledge or education. In many cultural settings around the globe, wisdom goes hand in hand with community elders, who are highly respected and treated with honor and great reverence for the wisdom they've earned through lifelong experiences. For example, in the African American community, wise elders are often first to

be acknowledged, to be invited to pray and to be welcomed to the table. Throughout history, people have treasured the wisdom of those who are aged.

Then there's biblical wisdom, such as that of King Solomon. Our sacred texts teach us that God visited Solomon in a dream, to let this king know that he could ask God for anything he wanted, and God would grant it to him. Solomon did not ask God for riches and fame. He asked the Lord for wisdom in order to rule God's people with justice. God was so pleased with Solomon's request, that God not only saturated him with wisdom but also gave him longevity and wealth (1 Kings 3:3-15). The most famous display of Solomon's sagaciousness? Two women come before him, each claiming to be the rightful mother of a baby boy. Neither will give way to the other. So King Solomon calls for a sword and commands that the child be cut in half. The true mother cries out to let the baby live. The other woman accepts the king's decree, content that this will leave both women childless. King Solomon, of course, does not allow the child to be harmed, but simply, justly declares that the first woman is the infant's actual mother. The people are astounded by his brilliance (1 Kings 3:16-28). As the writer of 1 Kings later proclaims, "God gave Solomon very great wisdom...so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people....He was wiser than anyone else" (1 Kings 4:29-31 ESV).

Biblical wisdom can also refer to a literary genre found throughout our sacred texts: "wisdom books." Some examples of these are Job, many of the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. The wisdom texts in the Apocrypha also fall into this category.

But the focus of this Bible study session is the kind of wisdom that Greek translations of Scripture refer to as Wisdom (with a capital "W" in some versions of the Bible) or "Sophia." We will primarily engage the eighth and ninth chapters of Proverbs, where we have a front-row seat to watch Wisdom at

work among humanity.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

For some of us, Sophia (Wisdom) may be a familiar understanding. For others, it may be a new discovery. Still others may be reminded of a forbidden mythological Greek goddess—not at all what is meant in the Bible. In Scripture, Sophia is not a goddess, but is the Greek word for divine Wisdom personified. Take a moment to absorb this astonishing concept: Holy Scripture uses a feminine noun, in conjunction with feminine verbs, to refer to holy Wisdom as a woman! Why on earth have so many of us never heard of this before? Because, unfortunately, this feminine imagery for divine Wisdom was lost when our sacred texts were translated into English. Human language is always inadequate for encapsulating all of who God is. Every metaphor and comparison eventually breaks down when we attempt to describe the indescribable Holy One.

The Hebrew Bible or Old Testament frequently refers to Wisdom/Sophia. In fact, only four persons are mentioned more often than Wisdom/Sophia: Yahweh (YHWH, the four-letter Hebrew name for God), Moses, David and Job. I find this fascinating! We will hear that Sophia/Wisdom was present with God during the creation of the world. We will also find in Proverbs that Wisdom calls out from the center of the city, inviting all to freely receive wisdom. In the New Testament, Sophia is the word used when Paul speaks of "the wisdom of God" (Romans 11:33; 1 Corinthians 1:24; and Ephesians 3:10). What can we learn from these feminine references to holy Wisdom? Why, that from the very beginning of creation to the present time, God's vision, work and very essence include the feminine!

COMMON-SENSE WISDOM

Common wisdom gets us through many of the day-to-day situations we encounter. As a light-hearted example, one day I noticed that my two

youngest children were especially quiet—the kind of quiet that would indicate they were probably up to no good. After some Mom investigative work, I located them in the bathroom, behind a locked door, whispering. “Hey, you two,” I called out, “open this door, right now!” The bathroom door flew open and two little giggling goofballs scrambled past me and headed upstairs. When I entered the bathroom, to my surprise, everything looked basically fine, with the exception of two out-of-place items: the toilet plunger and my toothbrush. My options were: Put my toothbrush back where it belonged (nope), attempt to sterilize it (possibly) or toss it into the garbage (Friends, we have a winner!). Using the gift of common-sense wisdom, I wasted no time replacing my mislaid toothbrush. Without a doubt, I knew this was a wise decision.

Holy Wisdom, on the other hand, guides us when we do not know the way—when we are fearful or confused. Holy Wisdom can be our guide because God is not intimidated by chaos and uncertainty. In fact, God uses ambiguity as a palette for creating all that exists.

 **Read:** Proverbs 8:1-21

Divine Wisdom, or Sophia, is God-inspired. It is not bound by formal education or human common sense. This is wisdom that comes from God, not from books, nor universities, nor seminaries. This wisdom is often counter-logical, counterintuitive and countercultural.

In Proverbs 8, Wisdom is depicted as a woman who boldly proclaims, even shouts God’s invitations through a megaphone at the most well-traveled intersection in town. And Wisdom offers this priceless treasure to all.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. List at least three characteristics of holy

Wisdom (Sophia) based on this passage.

2. In what ways do these characteristics resemble the characteristics of God discussed in other passages of the Bible?
3. How are the Proverbs 8 characteristics different?
4. How does this feminine portrayal shape your understanding of the role the wisdom of God can play in the life of the church?

 **Read:** Proverbs 8:22-31

The Book of Proverbs presents the most amazing claim: that Sophia/Wisdom existed even before the creation of the earth. Sophia was there and was God’s confidante at creation! In this passage, we see that Wisdom has a relationship and a connectedness to God.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. What images, phrases or words in Proverbs 8 resonate with you?
6. What images, phrases or words, if any, surprise you?
7. Where in this passage are places of discomfort for you?
8. How does this creation story compare to the creation stories in Genesis (Genesis 1:1—2:4a and 2:4b-25)?

Now read the words from the hymn “Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom,” in the new hymnal *All Creation Sings* (ACS 971), or search and listen to a

recording of this hymn on YouTube. Share aloud or journal your thoughts about the hymn.

📖 **Read:** Proverbs 9:1-12

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). The word “fear” in this sense does not mean “afraid,” as if we were left cowering in the fetal position, terrified that we are going to hell or that we are at the mercy of a capricious and vengeful God. The original hearers would have understood the phrase “the fear of the Lord” to mean holding a deep reverence, respect, love and willingness to follow God’s guidance. Holy Wisdom is generous, welcoming and persistent. All are welcome. There are no prerequisite classes to take, no degrees, no income verification. Just enter! You have a place at the table.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. Read verse 8: “A scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you; the wise, when rebuked, will love you.” Share or recall a time when you found yourself in the role of a scoffer who was offended or a wise person who was thankful for redirection even if it was unwanted.

📖 **Read:** Luke 1:46-55

Mary’s bold, prophetic song of a great reversal could only be revealed to her through God’s wisdom.

Share aloud or reflect:

10. Which words and phrases from Mary’s song resonate with you? Surprise you? Cause you discomfort?

📖 **Read:** 2 Kings 5:1-19

SOPHIA/WISDOM FROM THE MARGINS

Naaman is a high-ranking military officer who struggles with leprosy, an infectious disease that damages the skin and nervous system. A young servant girl who works for his wife learns of Naaman’s struggles. This young girl lacks a formal education but possesses wisdom that can only come from God, and compassion—even for her captors. Knowing God and God’s power, the servant girl advocates for Naaman’s health, encouraging Naaman’s wife to send him to God’s prophet Elisha to be healed. Eventually, Naaman follows the wisdom of the servant girl, and he is healed.

The dynamics present in this story highlight several key points: First, the servant girl believes in the one true God despite being held captive by Syrians. Even when her own circumstances are bleak, she remains steadfast in her faith. Second, she bravely and boldly tells Naaman’s wife of Elisha’s power. She takes a risk in acting, but she has decided not to hoard God to herself. This act—the servant girl’s ministry—introduces Naaman and his wife to God. His wife’s willingness to listen and then act on the young girl’s recommendations saves her husband’s life.

We don’t have to look far to find examples of modern-day “servant girls.” People living on the margins tend to be cemented in subservient roles, and are expected to remain in their places. Members of the dominant culture often benefit from these unjust dynamics by (sometimes involuntarily, sometimes intentionally) restricting access to positions of power. This ongoing cycle of oppression ignores or discards the abundance of wisdom present in marginalized communities. Yet denying marginalized communities a seat at the table negatively impacts those in dominant positions as well, because the body of Christ is incomplete when wisdom from the margins remains dishonored. These dynamics can cause both oppressor and oppressed to live distanced and isolated: one from the world, and the

other from God. Siblings in Christ, liberation is for everyone.

GOD'S WISDOM REVEALED

 **Read:** Matthew 27:15-26

Every time I profess my faith in the words of either the Apostles' or the Nicene Creed, which mention Pontius Pilate, I think of Pilate's nameless wife. She only appears once in the Bible, in Matthew's gospel. Yet she is profoundly wise and woefully overlooked. I believe that all women can relate to Pilate's wife in some way. As the governor's wife, she holds a powerful position. Pontius Pilate has questioned Jesus and has found no evil in him. Pilate had the authority to release a prisoner at the Passover festival. There was a notorious prisoner, Barabbas, who, according to common sense, would not be expected to be released. Pilate thinks, wrongly, that the people will want Jesus released. While Pilate is on the judgment seat, his wife sends word to him, pleading for the life of Jesus. She attempts to use her position of power to effect change and intervene in the state-sponsored public execution of an innocent man. Emboldened by holy Wisdom, she attempts to use her privilege to interrupt an oppressive criminal justice system.

Share aloud or reflect:

11. On your own or with a group, make a list of at least three unsung or unnamed heroes of the Bible. Then list at least three unnamed heroes of world history. Now, on your own, answer these questions:
 - Who have you looked to for wisdom throughout your life?
 - Who seeks wisdom from you?
 - What is the best or worst advice you

have ever received? Did you follow it? Why or why not?

- What would your present-day self say to your younger self about wisdom and life lessons?

GETTING ON BOARD

You're probably wondering why we've spent so much energy engaging Sophia/Wisdom. Basically, holy Wisdom is essential if we are to move closer to the coming of God's kingdom (what some of us like to call the Beloved Community), as Jesus desired. As the past year has taught us, scientific, medical and academic knowledge are vital to our country and world. Likewise, divine Wisdom is crucial to fulfilling our baptismal calling to work for justice.

When I lived in Springfield, Missouri, some years ago, I occasionally used public transportation. The first time I was out late, I saw a bus approaching, but the number on the bus wasn't the right one for my destination. The driver stopped anyway and opened the doors. "Hop on," he said. "This is the last bus of the night."

This confused me, so I replied: "I'm going to the college campus."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Last bus picks up the stragglers."

Then he asked the dozen or so people on board where we needed to go. He took each of us practically to the front doors of our destinations. I believe holy Wisdom is a lot like that bus driver. She goes around, checking the bus stops, looking for the lost or the last, helping us all to arrive at our destinations. In a way, that's my hope for this study—that no one gets left behind, that we all arrive at the next destination, together.

Our next stop, for session two? Just Truth.

CLOSING HYMN

"Canticle of the Turning" (*ELW* 723) 

Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)

Session one

Just wisdom

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

BEFORE THE SESSION

Before the day of the session, take some time to prepare, not only by reviewing the session but by considering your role as a leader. You will be serving not only as a Bible study leader but as an intentional leader, one who expects to learn and hear God's voice from participants too. You, as a leader, are also a student! Approaching your group's discussion through this lens supports the Christian principle that our learning and growth are ongoing.

As you review the material you plan to cover, make a list of thoughts and ideas that come to mind. Consider sharing a personal story that aligns with the material about God's wisdom. Sharing a story of your own can be a helpful way to encourage quieter participants to share something from their own lives. It can also model how to make personal connections to the study content. As you read over this first session, make a special note by any section where you might experience disconnect or dissonance, as this may be a point where participants also express discomfort. Be prepared to receive and listen to critical feedback, and offer supportive space for participants to explore their connections with the material.

KEEP PARTICIPANTS IN MIND

Sometimes we can get into the habit of taking faith

and a background in church settings for granted. Yet the people who come to Bible studies and other congregation-related events come from all types of backgrounds and experiences. Many have been hurt by churches; still others may have little or no previous engagement with churches, the Bible or the topic at hand. Please keep this in mind as you help participants engage with the material.

To serve as a helpful guide for all, you will want to:

- Share the background/introductory information at the beginning of the session.
- Use common language (instead of church-insider language, such as abbreviations).
- Make sure to explain or ask other group members to help explain such churchy words as disciple ("a follower of Christ") and stewardship ("living as people/stewards who recognize that everything we have belongs to God").
- In later sessions, quickly recap, using no more than a few sentences, any previous sessions that some attendees may have missed.

All of these suggestions will help group members become and remain engaged in your group's discussion.

When you create a welcoming environment that brings hospitality to all who attend, it has the added benefit of communicating that your in-person, online or phone-conference setting is a space where it is safe for people to be brave, a space that is grounded in sacred love and community. If you are meeting in person, in line with health-safety guidelines, you might consider creating an altar or prayer station that individuals can take turns visiting during the session. Or you might choose to simply light some candles and softly play a recording of instrumental music in the background. Another possibility to consider would be this: As you are setting up participant seating ahead of time to allow for social distancing, consider placing chairs/tables

in a circular layout, if there is room. A circular setup (where you as the leader are also part of the circle) can be a meaningful, physical reminder that everyone is welcome, everyone is included and every voice is valued.

Remember that the opening and closing prayers serve as bookends that clearly center your time engaging with the session within the presence of the triune God and God's inspired Scripture.

CREATING SPACE FOR DISCUSSION

Part of creating a safe space for all will be to simply outline some ground rules for all to follow. You can make these available on a whiteboard, in a handout or by reading them aloud during an in-person or conference-call meeting. If your group is meeting for online Bible study, read the rules aloud, but also list them in the chat, where everyone can see them.

Here are some potential ground rules you could use:

- We will practice active listening (listening to understand, not to reply or rebut).
- We will treat all comments made as confidential, not to be shared with anyone outside of the circle of attendees.
- We will not interrupt. (However, at the beginning of the meeting you may want to have the group agree to keep comments to an agreed-upon time limit, such as two minutes, so that everyone is able to participate in the discussion.)
- We will ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak (no monopolizing the conversation).
- We will use respectful language (no derogatory words or harmful references).

Although people attend Bible study for many different reasons, serving as a Bible study leader is not about being right or providing the answers.

Our role as Bible study leaders is to create space for people to wrestle with and listen to what the Spirit is saying to them through Scripture. We do this in community by engaging with the scriptural texts and topics, asking open-ended questions and inviting people to deeply consider how Scripture intersects with the current state of their lives.

It's important to remember that Jesus desires unity, not uniformity. We, as Christians, are not a monolith. Brace yourself: It is OK if we disagree. At times, group participants may become offended or defensive. During these instances, your response as a leader will set the tone and serve as an example for how we live into the Beloved Community, even when doing so is messy.

Finally, thanks be to God for stirring your spirit to lead this study! As a leader and a student, you will find that mistakes are bound to happen. Points may be forgotten and cues may be missed, yet grace abounds! The main thing is that as Bible study leaders, we are to invite others into a grace-filled space that encourages each attendee to lean on God and each other as they navigate Scripture, faith concepts and our faith-filled discussion. Trust that the Holy Spirit (the Primary Actor) is already present and moving in your space and in the hearts of all in attendance, to provide what each participant (including you!) will need. 🌿

OPENING PRAYER

God of wisdom and new life, we thank you for your faithful presence and unyielding grace. We rejoice in the gift of your Holy Spirit, who leads and guides us into all truth. Help us continue to follow your Spirit, even through the rocky terrain of challenging revelations. Liberate us through your steadfast love, and empower us through our baptismal call, so that we may walk in your justice. Teach us to live in hope of your beloved community. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:12-13)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- *All Creation Sings: ELW Supplement* (ACS)
- Mirror or compact

Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)

Session two

Just truth

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

OPENING HYMN

“Lord of All Nations, Grant Me Grace” (ELW 716)
To become more familiar with this hymn, watch a YouTube video introduction by Robert Morehead from Hymn of the Week. Feel free to sing along as you watch. The song begins at 3:30 minutes. <https://youtu.be/3UCVnr5758k>

DEFINITIONS

Just /jʊhst/: Acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good: **RIGHTEOUS**

Truth /trʊθ/: 1. The body of real things, events and facts: **ACTUALITY**; 2. the state of being the case: **FACT**

WELCOME

Welcome to “Just Truth,” the second session of the series titled Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!). In the previous session, “Just Wisdom,” we discussed the uncommon, ancient wisdom that comes only from God. The word that the biblical Greek uses for Wisdom is Sophia. Wisdom (Sophia) was present with God at the time of creation and even now guides God’s people to just truth, God’s truth.

In this session, we’ll listen to Jesus’ words about sharing truths that are difficult to receive. Jesus

tells his followers, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). Jesus then goes on to explain that the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth. Together we will see how hard truths are challenging but necessary for spiritual growth and maturity. Spiritually mature disciples help to fulfill Jesus’ dream of a united, beloved community. But have no fear: Through God’s baptismal waters we were (re)born for this.

📖 **Read:** Luke 4:14-30 (printed below)

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

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

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

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in

your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Imagine being at the synagogue in Nazareth, where Jesus is preaching on the book of Isaiah, and watching as this religious crowd abruptly changes from an audience of attentive worshippers to a murderous mob.

Perhaps you’ve heard the saying “No one is a prophet in their hometown.” That saying originates from this biblical passage, where Jesus visits the synagogue in his hometown and begins to preach about Isaiah 61: 1-2a. Our Savior intentionally chooses this passage from Isaiah. Initially, the hearers are impressed and shower him with praise! But then Jesus attempts to reveal to the people a deeper understanding of God’s activity in and among humanity. When Jesus tells them what “the truth is,” God’s truth infuriates them. What truth is this, exactly? Jesus boldly proclaims the truth that the Good News extends beyond the people of the original covenant. Said another way, Jesus is declaring that other lives matter. And this proclamation morphs the righteous worshippers into a mob that immediately attempts to execute our Savior.

Can you see how the Good News was a message of inclusivity and diversity? This apparently

enraged the religious people of Nazareth. And this same gospel message, a message of inclusivity and diversity, continues to be met with conflict from within some congregations today. We can see this sobering, but not surprising, tension when we resist the urge to romanticize our understanding of Jesus. If we present Jesus as only a sweet savior or tender shepherd or even a babe who is meek and mild, we are forgetting that Jesus is controversial, and at times, downright scandalous. After all, Jesus later asks his disciples, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” (Luke 12:51).

In the lead-up to Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, a young lawyer tries to negotiate with Jesus the exact terms of salvation. Christians today are still trying to negotiate this. Let’s read the story of the Good Samaritan.

 **Read:** Luke 10:25-37

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Why do you think Jesus answers the young lawyer’s questions with a question and a story?
2. Do you think that Jesus’ ways of asking deeper questions and listening to stories are good ways to engage with difficult situations or challenges? Why or why not?
3. How has asking deeper questions or listening to a story helped you to consider (or reconsider) a difficult situation or challenge?

Notice in this passage the way the lawyer asks Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 25).

Jesus does not give an easy answer, but asks a

question of his own: “What is written in the scriptures?” The lawyer answers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart... and your neighbor as yourself.”

But here’s where the lawyer gets into difficulty. It seems he believes (and wants to confirm) that he is essentially a pretty good person. He asks Jesus a clarifying question, one that attempts to set parameters on God’s love: “Who is my neighbor?”

Once again Jesus does not give an easy answer, but a story—the parable of the Good Samaritan. The point of this parable is to teach us that God’s love knows no boundary or nationality. God commands us to care for the foreigner just as we care for ourselves. Yet we as Christian individuals and congregations today still struggle to accept the inclusivity of the Good News. The gospel truth, it seems, is a difficult truth.

Consider how, in the current climate of racial tensions amid many challenging national events, we strive to maintain an open posture to God’s wisdom revealed through the Holy Spirit. Keeping our posture open to God’s wisdom helps us receive the Good News even when it feels uncomfortable. But seriously, how many of us read a parable of Jesus and simply assume that we are like the ones in the parable who’ve gotten it right? How many times do we take it for granted that we’ve made the ethical choice or believed the proper thing, so we are receiving the affirmation or blessing?

Here is where remembering that the Good News is also the gospel truth can help us journey faithfully—even when we, like the people in Scripture, encounter difficult or even destabilizing revelations. For example, we may recognize the role we have intentionally or unintentionally played in a modern-day version of the Good Samaritan story. Or perhaps in the account of Jesus preaching at the synagogue in Nazareth we suddenly recognize a little of our own resistance?

Certainly, we would never want to hurl Jesus

off a cliff, not even figuratively! However, perhaps there are some of Christ's teachings that cause us discomfort; some teachings that, if we had a say, we might opt to toss out? Perhaps extending welcome to strangers? Or forgiving the sins of others? I confess that while I'm thrilled that God forgives our sins, I've also sometimes wished that forgiving other people was optional!

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Which of Christ's teachings do you think were most controversial in biblical times? Why?
5. Which of Christ's teachings are challenging for our church community today? In what ways do you see some congregations or groups addressing those challenging teachings?
6. Which of Christ's teachings are challenging for you right now?
7. Have you witnessed or read about how the church reinforces systems of sexism, racism, ableism, ageism and other forms of exclusion or discrimination?
8. Have you witnessed or read about how the church is inviting, including and lifting up the gifts of all people? Share an example.

 **Read:** Acts 9:1-22

It's hard to fathom that the apostle Paul, the person credited with writing nearly two-thirds of the New Testament, was once the villain of the story. But yes indeed, Paul was once Saul, a respected leader who "imprisoned and beat those

who believed" in Jesus (Acts 22:19), while declaring that he was acting on the highest authority in the land. Enraged by the early church, Saul pursued Jesus' followers, seeking out the early Christians and persecuting them. Saul believed he was on a mission from God. He was absolutely certain that he was doing the right thing. But he was absolutely wrong. God had to physically stop Saul from continuing in this violent direction. Jesus interrupted Saul's vision of what was right by preventing him from using his physical sight. Then God worked through Ananias, a member of the very people Saul wanted to oppress, to bring him healing. God used the person who was oppressed to open the eyes of the oppressor. And Saul became Paul. What was true for him as he began his journey to Damascus was no longer true by the time he arrived.

The writer of Acts informs us that "something like scales fell from [Paul's] eyes and his sight was restored." Removing the scales from his eyes was an act of divine healing. This healing was both physical and relational. Not only did Paul get his eyesight back, but now he could see the world and God's people in new and holy ways. This was a sign of God's grace! God's saving action changed Paul's very identity. Paul now belonged to Christ! His very existence now spoke to God's desire for radical transformation for the sake of the Good News!

THE REFLECTION OF GOD

When we consider our own motives, biases and mistakes, we may wonder if we are truly capable of such a radical transformation as Paul's. But we, like Paul, are made in God's image (a concept that theologians call *imago Dei*). Don't believe me? Look into a mirror.

As you gaze into the mirror, inhale and exhale deeply once or twice. Now close your eyes and inhale and exhale deeply a few more times. Each time you exhale, say: "God, open my eyes to your truth." When you feel ready, open your eyes and

trace the sign of the cross on your forehead. Say aloud: “I am a beloved child of God.”

As the apostle Paul learned, God calls us beyond our comfort zones. God loves us, empowers us and makes us bold so that we as Christ’s followers can do difficult things and face hard truths. When we look for characters with whom we can identify in this biblical passage, wouldn’t we like to see ourselves always serving in the role of faithful Ananias?

Yet oftentimes we are more like Paul before his conversion. We are often unable to see the ways in which good religious people might be complicit in injustices against God’s creation, people living at the margins of society and anyone we deem “other” or unworthy. “Scales” can prevent the church from seeing Christ’s vision of a united, beloved community.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. Did you know that within the ELCA, female pastors are often paid less than male pastors? There’s a name for this: “the stained-glass ceiling.” If you have a female pastor, do you know if her salary and benefits are equal to the average salary and benefits for a male pastor with a similar position in your synod? If you don’t know, designate someone to ask your pastor or church treasurer, and to find compensation guidelines on your synod’s website.
10. In what ways has God been gracious to you in removing “scales” from your eyes? Is there something you now see differently, thanks to God’s intervention? Or is there still something God may be trying to help you see? What holy work might the Holy Spirit do through you if you could “regain your sight”?

11. Journeying toward truth can be uncertain and uncomfortable. Reflect or write about a time God changed your course in a way that forced you to surrender, leave your comfort zone and rely on others.

📖 **Read:** Acts 22:17-24

In this reading, when Paul returns to Jerusalem and shares the Good News, also saying that he is being sent to the Gentiles, he is attacked and eventually imprisoned.

12. Why do you think the people attacked Paul? What do you think causes people to completely dismiss a message and even attack the messenger when they disagree with the content of the message?

LET’S GET REAL NOW, Y’ALL

The biblical accounts of Jesus’ proclamation in his hometown and Paul’s radical conversion still speak to the current realities of life. Today many people are connecting in virtual spaces for community, work, worship and education. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we and/or our loved ones have juggled home, family, job responsibilities and virtual meeting after virtual meeting. Over the last year, many of us have set up video-conferencing devices in nontraditional spaces in our homes—kitchens, bedrooms and even front porches! I jokingly say that I have a state-of-the-art home studio. But it’s not really. It’s just an odd room in our house that’s too big for a closet and too small for an office. It has no windows and no door, but you wouldn’t know it if you saw me at some point in the last year on *Good Morning America* or *ABC News*. You would only see a lovely, perfectly staged background. However, if you were to pan one centimeter in any direction, you might just see the messy truth of my life.

I’m pretty sure I’m not alone in using selective

video-conferencing presentation. Many of us feel pressured to portray a polished image to the public. We hide our dirty laundry, unmade beds and piles of dishes just outside of web-camera range. So if many of us are doing this, maybe our history books are doing it too. Perhaps the picture-perfect nation that you and I have learned about actually more closely resembles our own homes. Yes, my country, the United States of America, is arguably the greatest country on Earth. But what would we see across the landscape of this country's history if we panned the proverbial camera widely? The hard truth is that the history of our United States, much like our own virtual backgrounds, is less than perfect. Married to our glorious accomplishments and noble ideals, we also find broken treaties, blankets infected with smallpox, a Trail of Tears, chattel slavery, sexism, Japanese internment camps, voter suppression and, sadly, much more.

As a Black woman, a pastor, a mother, a wife and a community leader, I have a hard truth to share with you: Racism is alive and well, including in the church communities you know and love. What do I mean by racism? Well, while any group can experience racial prejudice or discrimination, racism is the prejudice and discrimination that are unfairly baked into society's power structures.

And there are other hard truths too. One can be nice and act in racist ways at the same time. One can be nice and benefit from a system that gives white people greater access to power and resources than people of color in the same situation.

Racism isn't rare. For every story of racism you hear from a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous or Person of Color) Christian who speaks out, there are hundreds more stories that remain unspoken.

Many of us good churchgoers advocate for ending racial injustice. But we can't hug away (or quilt away or bake away) racism. And if the majority of white Americans wanted to dismantle institutional racism, they would.

We can commit to learning more about racism

and white supremacy. We can recognize that denying the existence of racism may be driving out the prophets in our church who are speaking the truth. As Christians, facing the sins of oppression can be a painful, difficult process for us, yet doing so can remove "scales," uncover truths and lead to holy, amazing transformation. After all, each week we confess together that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. Yet God is faithful! Jesus tells us that "if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). We are called to trust the Holy Spirit to guide us with wisdom into all truth. As church together, we have a responsibility to educate and equip ourselves for this life-giving work. Hopefully, this Bible study session is one small step in that direction.

CONCLUSION

Sisters and brothers, receiving a hard truth is difficult. If you were seeking a Bible study session that affirms your goodness but does not challenge you to let the scales fall from your own eyes, you are probably less than pleased right now. Please do not hurl this author off a cliff. I am inviting you to come with me on the often-uncomfortable journey of allowing the gospel truth to transform our faith life. God's wisdom, around and within us, guides us to God's truth. Even when these truths are difficult to embrace, as in the days of the early church, we still have hope, and hope is an act of faith because "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Next month, the third and final session in this Bible study will explore "Just Hope."

CLOSING PRAYER

As a closing prayer, sing, say or listen (visit <https://youtu.be/cJdwOYF3OTs>) to the words of a new hymn, "Ask the Complicated Questions" (ACS 1005). Write down the verse that most resonates with you, and reflect on it throughout the week. 🌿

Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)

Session two

Just truth

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

Welcome to our second session together, Just Truth. Please know that this session will undoubtedly pluck some heartstrings for participants in momentous and challenging ways. We will directly address issues of systemic oppression including racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression.

KEEP PARTICIPANTS IN MIND

Let participants know that because this Bible study addresses oppression, some Biblical texts and contemporary connections may cause varying degrees of discomfort for participants. Tell participants that although some topics may feel uncomfortable at first, discussing these together is an opportunity for us as Christians to broaden our understanding and grow beyond our comfort zones. For this reason, it's also important to have all participants agree that your meeting space, whether in person or online, will be a judgment-free zone where all participants understand that God's grace always abounds.

CREATING A WELCOMING SPACE

Remember that the people who come to Bible studies and other congregation-related events come from many different backgrounds and experiences. Some have been hurt by churches; others may have little or no previous experience engaging with church, the Bible or the topic at hand.

Our role as Bible study leaders is to create space for people to wrestle with and listen to what the Spirit is saying to them through Scripture. We do this in community by engaging with the scriptural texts and topics, asking open-ended questions and inviting people to deeply consider how Scripture intersects with the current state of their lives.

To help create a safe and welcoming space:

- Share some introductions at the beginning of the session—say a few brief words about your church, your group and how engaging with the Bible through group study can help us to know God, love God and participate in God's work in the world.
- Use common language (instead of church-insider language, such as abbreviations) and explain churchy words like disciple (“a follower of Christ”) and stewardship (“living as people or stewards who recognize that everything we have belongs to God”).
- Create some ground rules for all to follow.
 1. We will practice active listening (listening to understand, not to reply or rebut).
 2. We will treat all comments made as confidential, not to be shared with anyone outside of the circle of attendees.
 3. We will ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak.
 4. We will neither interrupt nor monopolize the conversation.
 5. We will agree to keep comments to a time limit (perhaps two minutes each), so everyone can participate.
 6. We will use respectful language (no derogatory words or harmful references).

Remember: Christians are not a monolith. It is OK if we disagree. At times, group participants may become offended or defensive. During these instances, your response as a leader will set the tone for how we live into the Beloved Community, even

when doing so is messy.

After you have laid this foundation for your time together, begin with prayer and the opening hymn. Or feel free to reverse this order and begin with the song if this speaks best to your context.

TIPS FOR LEADING THIS DISCUSSION

1. Recognize that it may be difficult for people to remain open to different perspectives when they are feeling disconnected from themselves and others. Disconnection can naturally lead to a feeling of hopelessness.
2. Model and hold openness to different perspectives for them until they can join you. (When you are able to believe in the person's ability to overcome their current disillusionment, frustration or anger and to build something new, you hold space for openness.)
3. Guide group members to think about connection. Throughout your time together, remind participants that your space is sacred, you are held together as the body of Christ and you all are surrounded and supported by God's abundant grace.
4. Consider different ways of moving through the discussion questions. You may want to discuss in small groups of three. Or if space allows, write the discussion questions on a whiteboard or jumbo sticky notes posted on the walls, then invite everyone to write their answers on these. Or perhaps you might have participants journal their responses to questions. Invite some people to volunteer to share their responses, stressing your group's agreement on confidentiality.
5. Tie connection to belief. Since you have the perspective to know that God is present in both our current circumstance and our tomorrow, hope is possible. As a leader, you can be the keeper of hopefulness in this moment and in the time to come. Be prepared to receive feedback without judgment. You may hear people speak from a

place of pain, anger or disbelief. Be careful not to take any negative comments personally. If the discussions become especially heated, move to the water bowl exercise. Feel free to reiterate at any time and as often as needed that we are beloved children of God. God loves us when we agree and when we disagree. As a leader, you can help participants to connect with the emotional and spiritual wholeness that is not only possible, but inevitable when our connection is restored with others and more importantly with God. Thank you for your boldness!

“WASHED CLEAN” EXERCISE (FOR USE WHEN NEEDED)

Materials: Large bowl, water, precut strips of paper, pencils or pens for writing.

Ask participants to write their laments, sorrows, anger, etc., on precut strips of paper.

Have people ball up the papers holding their written words and throw them into the large bowl of water.

Tell participants they no longer carry this heavy baggage. Say that God has washed them clean in the water of forgiveness. (Remind them that baptism connects them to Jesus and each other.) Invite them to dip their fingers into a little water and trace the sign of the cross on their own heads.

Before or during your session: Considering lighting a candle now if you have not already done so, as light is often a symbol for wisdom, truth and hope for the future. Or, instead of a candle, as a sign of wisdom, truth and hope, consider bringing in small containers, each with a young plant seedling that is sprouting. 🌱

OPENING PRAYER

As an opening prayer, sing, say or listen to the words of a new hymn, “Let Us Enter In” (ACS 985). Write down the verse that most resonates with you, and reflect on this throughout the week.

FOCUS VERSE

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” (1 Corinthians 12:12)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*
- *All Creation Sings: ELW Supplement (ACS)*
- Notebook or journal

Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)

Session three

Just hope

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

WELCOME

Welcome to “Just Hope,” the third and final session of the Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!) Bible study. Session 1, Just Wisdom, explored God’s gift of Wisdom (“Sophia” in biblical Greek). Sophia/Wisdom is different from all other knowledge, for it can only be revealed to us by God. Sophia/Wisdom was present from the beginning of creation and is present with us today. Jesus promised that the Spirit of Wisdom would guide us into all truth, which led us into Session 2, Just Truth. In Session 2, we explored Jesus’ words to his disciples: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). Even as the disciples struggled to embrace difficult understandings, God’s Spirit of Wisdom would help them to face even what they could not bear to hear. We, too, are called to open ourselves to God’s challenging revelations of truth even when they shake us up—revealing to us or reminding us of areas where something else may have gotten in the way of our accepting God’s just and loving way. Ultimately, truth is necessary to help us mature spiritually so that we, as the body of Christ, can usher in the reign of God.

BODY AND BONES

As I was writing this Bible study, there was one week when radio, television, print and online news

seemed to offer precious little in the way of hope. Tornadoes and other severe weather ravaged parts of the United States. A subway overpass collapsed in Mexico City, killing dozens. During a religious celebration in Israel, at least 45 people were trampled to death and hundreds were injured. The COVID-19 infection rate and death toll had reached staggering proportions in India and Brazil. In the US, acts of violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) increased. And Black, brown and Indigenous communities continued to work to dismantle deeply rooted forms of oppression that had only recently become more visible to the broader population. Yet despite the news cycle, it was and still is the perfect time for hope, and not just any hope.

We can know from our very bodies, from deep in our bones, that this is a time for hope in Christ. We can consider Paul's description of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). We can travel through the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37). And in considering both the body and the bones, we see how we are revived by the power of the resurrection breath of God's Spirit.

BODY ACHES

■ **Read:** Corinthians 12:12-26

Most of us know what it feels like to experience suffering in our bodies. For some of us, aches and pains show up temporarily after a long hike or a weekend of gardening. All it may take is a hot bath, some ibuprofen and a few days of recovery to return to normal, pain-free living. But for others of us, those aches and pains are our constant companions due to arthritis, injury or other long-term medical situations. Strangely enough, when bodily pain becomes a more frequent presence in our lives, we may become more adept at hiding or ignoring that pain. Knowing how we sometimes mask our pain,

I invite you to reread verse 26 and consider the body of Christ imagery, including "If one member suffers..."

We can sometimes ignore bodily pain or discomfort for quite a while, can't we? Or we might just delay our yearly physical, our annual mammogram or our next scheduled visit (or visits) to the dentist, figuring that we can put these off. We reason that it's not urgent yet, because we feel okay or the pain is only intermittent. But then our back goes out, or we find a lump, or a tooth sends out shooting pain. And then we realize that ignoring one part of our body has caused our whole self to suffer.

How we treat our body is connected to the way we treat the body of Christ. The apostle Paul writes that when one part of the body suffers, the other parts suffer with it. When we ignore the part of the body of Christ that is hurting, we might limp along (or function without noticing the pain much) for quite a long time before we realize how deeply the suffering affects the whole body of Christ.

What if we could be more tuned in to the whole body of Christ? What if we began to recognize and faithfully act when a part of our body is hurt and requires caring, focused attention and resources? What if we listened as the Great Physician explains that the way we are walking and the shoes we are wearing are unnecessarily hurting not just our soles, but our souls? What if some parts of the body did not have to suffer as long and as deeply because the rest of the body became more responsive? What if the apostle Paul is calling the church, not just then but also now, to listen for opportunities to help restore the parts of the body of Christ that are suffering?

EARS TO HEAR

My friend Dawn shares a story about her father, Dean. Dean began to experience hearing loss almost two decades ago. Dawn remembers the onset of this condition, when she began to realize that she

needed to repeat some things, speak loudly, enunciate more clearly and make eye contact with her dad when they spoke. Her father tried a few hearing aids (and sometimes lost them), but these never seemed to give much help.

The pandemic further compounded the effects of his hearing loss. Due to mask wearing, Dean, like many others with hearing impairment, could no longer rely on the usual conversational and facial cues.

Last year, during a family visit, Dawn scheduled an appointment for her dad to see a licensed audiologist. After a complete audiological exam, this doctor programmed state-of-the-art hearing aids for Dean. When Dean placed these devices in his ears, his world changed. So did Dawn's. Dean's hearing was enhanced beyond their hopes. He could now hear normal conversations. No need to repeat words. No need to yell. Their family continues to marvel at his restored hearing.

According to this audiologist, many people start noticing hearing loss 7 to 10 years before they request a comprehensive hearing exam. Even though hearing loss leads to suffering—including challenges in social relationships and difficulty with daily functions—the rest of the body will continue to compensate for the loss until one finally seeks relief from suffering.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. How might life be different if a decline in hearing or walking were addressed much earlier?
2. Imagine what would happen if part of a human body suffered without restoration. Now imagine what happens when part of the body of Christ suffers without restoration. Share how this can happen with a physical body. Then share how

this can happen to the body of Christ.

Jesus desires unity for the body of Christ. Unity requires intentionality. Even when we are tempted to ignore members of the body whom we might label as lesser, we are called to resist that urge and tend to the healing of the whole body.

Sometimes the members of the body become disjointed and out of alignment with each other. Once, while I was preaching a sermon at a suburban congregation, I mentioned the names of several Black people who had died while in police custody. Some members were outraged and severed their memberships. One person was so incensed that I had “read their names” that she made an appointment with me to tell me that I was raising my children to be thugs. Not only would she transfer her membership, she said, but she would also withdraw her financial support to the congregation *immediately*. It was clear that part of the body of Christ was suffering violence. But it was also clear that suffering was a pain that other parts of the body thought could be ignored.

At other times, the body suffering together can be a powerful testimony to our unity in Jesus Christ. In 2005, Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Racine, Wisconsin, gave us a wonderful baby shower. That day it dawned on me that the word “shower” means more than “party” or “small festive gathering.” I had never before made the connection to actual gifts “raining down” upon people like a shower. That day we were showered with so many baby presents that we could barely fit them all into our car! Our church family overwhelmed us with their cheerful generosity and kindness. Tragically, about two weeks later, our baby girl was born early and still. The following Sunday, when Pastor Tracy shared the news of our stillbirth, some members of the congregation wept openly in the pews. Our faith community's abundant joy at the baby shower was followed by a deep, communal lament. It was just as Paul encouraged

the early Christians: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15).

Our Savior’s has since closed its doors, yet this tender memory of how our church family embodied the teachings of Paul is engraved on my heart forever. They rejoiced with us. They suffered with us. You know that popular adage, “It takes a village to raise a child”? It takes a village to mourn a child as well. These are the ways in which we can be the body of Christ for one another.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. Have you ever had a health issue or pain in your body that you ignored or overlooked? What happened?
4. Are there parts of the body of Christ that we overlook?
5. Share about a time when the body of Christ comforted you.

HOPE IN OUR BONES

Ezekiel was a prophet during the Babylonian exile. The Babylonian army had conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, leaving the people impoverished and facing multiple crises. God’s people were experiencing an identity crisis, a physical crisis and a spiritual crisis. Their trauma was so deep that it brought God’s very faithfulness into question.

📖 **Read:** Ezekiel 37:1-14

Now reread verse 11: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” When all hope is lost, God uses the prophet Ezekiel, bringing him to the valley of dry bones where he is surrounded by the skeletal remains of a mighty people now defeated. Don’t you wonder what was going through the prophet’s mind in these moments?

Confusion? Fear? Trauma?

When God poses a preposterous possibility, “Can these bones live?” (v. 3), Ezekiel doesn’t dare offer his own answer. He does the equivalent of shrugging his holy prophet shoulders. He says simply, “O Lord God, you know.”

I have to say that what happens next in the Ezekiel story gives me strength to face even my most challenging days. God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones. The dry bones come together and stand up, but there is no life in them. Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath, saying, “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live” (v. 9). So Ezekiel calls for the Great Breath to come and breathe on the dry bones. And those dry bones live! They actually live!

The Great Breath imagery hearkens back to the creation story in Genesis, where God’s Spirit broods over the waters, and the Creator blows the breath of life into humanity. Not only does Ezekiel’s prophecy reach all the way back to creation; it also reaches ahead to Jesus and his disciples in the upper room, where Jesus breathes on them and says: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). No matter how severe our valley or how dry our bones, we are never without hope. Neither are we cut off (Ezekiel 37:11). Jesus Christ is our hope. Jesus Christ will bring to life what was once dried, hopeless and forgotten.

It’s important to remember that God is greater than societal expectations and greater than human traditions. God is not limited by our narrow definitions. God isn’t even confined by our assumptions. Because of this, the hope we have deep in our bones is far beyond a fleeting wish. Our hope in Christ is real. For people of faith, hope is life-giving oxygen. It is necessary for life—as essential as food, clothing and shelter.

All of us experience times of discouragement. It is part of the human condition. Sometimes our situations obscure our vision, and hope is difficult to

discern. In these bleak moments, I encourage you to look again. Hope is there.

It can be easy to recognize hope in the rainbow after a violent storm or in the sunrise after a long, cold night. Perhaps you've held hope in your hands as you gazed into the face of a healthy newborn baby. Or maybe you experienced hope during a time of career or financial growth.

It's not as easy to see hope when tears are flowing in a hospice room or when you've been laid off from work, with no health insurance, during a global pandemic. Hope may seem absent when your marriage is falling apart or the home you've lived in for 30 years is in foreclosure. Thanks be to God, through the gift of the body of Christ our hope is bigger than our human situations.

Hope is the divine presence in our lives. Hope is dynamic, indomitable, ever-present and—like the air we breathe—it is everywhere. There is hope in the bones of life, even when they are dried up, dusty, lying in death's valley.

Through joys and sorrows, confidence and fear, scarcity and abundance, belief and doubt; in adventure or fear, unemployment or job promotion, good credit or bad, marriage or divorce, baptisms or funerals; on the mountaintop and in the valley, God breathes hope into the body of Christ—all the way down to our bones! Hope is our oxygen, so let's inhale deeply!

Share aloud or reflect:

6. Have you ever experienced a time of "dry bones," when a situation seemed helpless? Share a little about that time.
7. How was God faithful to you? How did God breathe hope into your dry bones? Can you also think of a Bible verse or story that breathes hope into your life?

Now discuss with others or journal quietly about the following topics:

8. **My Faith:** What aspects of your faith make you hopeful?
9. **God's Presence:** Where does your personal story show signs of God's presence during times of trouble?
10. **Dry Bones:** Has anything in your life ever stolen your hope for a time? How did you get it back?
11. **Family of God:** How do others support hope in your life?
12. **My Hope:** What do you hope for today that is not yet reality?

CLOSING PRAYER

God of hope, thank you for your steadfast presence that strengthens, supports and guides us into all truth. Teach us to live as the body of Christ, extending and receiving unconditional love. Encourage us and help us to encourage one another in times of tragedy and uncertainty, relying on your divine hope that abides deep in our bones. Send us forth into the world to act with your compassion and grace. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

"The Lord Now Sends Us Forth" (*ELW* 538) 

UPCOMING BIBLE STUDIES

This month we are finishing up our three-session study on Just L.I.F.E. Interested in what's next? Here's what we have in store:

FALL 2021

The gift of the Spirit

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

Celtic Christians likened the Holy Spirit not to a dove, but to a goose. In this three-session study we will go on our own divine Wild Goose chase. We'll track the Holy Spirit's actions throughout the Bible and throughout our lives. We'll explore how the Spirit moves God's people into adventures and lives we would never dare risk on our own.

SESSION 1:

SPIRIT OF GOD: REVEALER AND RESOURCE

The Holy Spirit might be the most misunderstood or mysterious member of the Trinity, but the Spirit of scripture is not shy. Together we'll uncover the bold, truth-telling Spirit active in our lives. After a quick review of the mystery of the Trinity, we'll read parts of Jesus' farewell discourse, and hear how the Spirit continues to reveal the truth of Jesus to us and to the world. We'll discuss how the gift of the Holy Spirit is a resource for God's people, giving us power we need to do God's work.

SESSION 2:

BREATH OF GOD: REVIVER AND REFORMER

The Holy Spirit is the breath of God, giving life and building community. Beginning with the breath God gave that first human, continuing

with the breath that made dry bones dance, God's Spirit continues to revive us. We will see the ways that the Spirit gives life—not just to us as individuals, but to our communities, reconciling us and forming us into life-giving communities, even in our diversity.

SESSION 3:

WIND OF GOD: REFINER AND RE-ROUTER

The Holy Spirit is the wind of God, moving us into deeper faithfulness and more authentic love. We'll see the ways in which God's Spirit moves us to bear good fruit in the world and refines us into our truest selves. We will also follow the Spirit's movements through the early church to see how the Spirit re-routes God's people, guiding us into transformed lives and renewed communities of faith.

DECEMBER 2021

Advent devotional/study

JANUARY-APRIL 2022

The kingdom of God

BY MARK ALLEN POWELL

A four-session study on the kingdom of God will kick off the new year with a look at Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God, a present and future reality. Together we'll look at Jesus' parables, and other scriptures about the present, the future and eternal life.

Visit gathermagazine.org for more exciting updates in the coming months!

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY

If you wish to provide another entry point for people, before the session begins, post three reflection questions on a whiteboard or three large pieces of paper. If you are meeting online, post these reflection questions in the chat. Here are the questions: 1. What is hope? 2. Why is it important? 3. Where does it come from?

If you are meeting in person, leave some blank space around these questions. As participants arrive in person (or join an online meeting), invite them to respond by writing one or two words per person under each question.

Later in the meeting, during a short stretch break, take a couple of minutes to share/read aloud the questions and short answers. You might say, “When you all first arrived, I invited you to share some of the basic ideas we bring to a discussion of hope. As I read aloud your written responses, what do you notice?”

After you’ve read their responses consider saying: “Now I invite you to think about not only the answers you heard, but how those answers might or might not change if you were unchurched... or unemployed... or experiencing discrimination because of your race, age, sex or gender identity... or living in a situation of domestic violence... or dealing with a major health diagnosis or life transition. How do we hope when it is most difficult?”

Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)

Session three

Just hope

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

When we as leaders enter our study group’s meeting space, we are present not only as leaders, but as intentional learners who expect to learn and hear God’s voice from other participants. In other words, when we lead, we are also students! Approaching our Bible study discussions through this lens supports a key principle of Christian education: that learning and growing are always ongoing.

As you prepare to explore “Just Hope,” review the session material you plan to cover. Note the questions participants will be asked, and as a way of preparing, consider your own responses to these questions. For example, participants will be asked to consider what aspects of faith make them hopeful, whether they have ever felt hopeless (as if their hope was stolen for a time), how people of faith support hope and where they’ve seen God’s presence in their own life story. Spend some time exploring your own thoughts about these questions. Understand that people may have different answers to these questions, depending on their life experiences and faith.

As you review the session material, make a list of thoughts and ideas that come to mind, and prepare a brief story you can share from your experience that aligns with the material. This helps participants see how they, too, can make personal connections to the content. It may also help some more reticent participants feel more comfortable with sharing. Make a special note if you experience

any disconnect or dissonance anywhere, as this may also be a point where participants may express discomfort. Be prepared to receive and to listen to critical feedback and offer supportive space.

WELCOMING ALL

Participants need to know that the Bible study setting is a safe, brave space, grounded in sacred love and community. To create an environment that communicates this safety and love, you might decide to set up a prayer station or light candles or play soft music as people enter the space. You might also consider setting up chairs or tables in something close to a circle. Circular seating is a way to physically indicate that everyone is included and all voices are valued.

As discussed in previous leader guides, do not forget that participants come from many different backgrounds and experiences. Some have been hurt by the church, while others may have little or no previous engagement with the church, the Bible or Bible study. As a leader, be ready to provide basic background information about the church and use common language (not abbreviations). Before the session begins in earnest, offer a quick recap of previous sessions for newcomers or others who may benefit from a quick refresher. Doing so will help to keep people actively engaged in the discussion.

You will also want to outline some ground rules, as with previous sessions. You can do this informally, by listing rules on a whiteboard or presentation slide or in the chat if you are using online videoconferencing.

Here are some potential safe space rules:

1. We commit to active listening (listening to understand, not to reply or rebut).
2. We understand that all comments made are confidential, not to be shared with anyone outside of the circle of attendees.
3. We will strive to not interrupt, and limit speaking time (perhaps to 1-2 minutes) to

ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak.

4. We commit to using respectful language.

Although people may attend Bible study for different reasons, leading Bible study is not about being right or providing the correct answers. Our role as Bible study leaders is to create safe, brave space for participants to wrestle and listen as they discern what the Spirit is saying to them through these holy texts. We do this by asking open-ended questions and actively listening to participants' responses. We also encourage participants to deeply consider just how the Scripture or topic intersects with the current state of their lives. Finally, while it is important for groups to share aloud, opportunities for journaling or writing responses help those who need more time to process and reflect to participate in a meaningful way.

Remember: It's okay if we disagree. Jesus desires unity, not uniformity. Christians are not a monolith. We are on a faith journey together, yet participants may become offended or defensive at times. In these instances, your response will set the tone and serve as an example for living into beloved community, even when doing so is messy.

It may help you to picture the opening and closing prayers as bookends for our Bible study sessions. Beginning and ending with prayer centers us and reminds us of our purpose: to grow to know more about the Triune God and God's inspired Scripture, and to put our faith into action.

Thanks be to God for stirring your spirit to lead! As leaders (who are also students), we are bound to make some mistakes, forget some points or miss some cues. Grace abounds! In your grace-filled space, encourage people to lean on God and each other as they navigate concepts and discussion questions. Trust that the Holy Spirit (the primary actor) is already present and moving in the hearts of all participants, and that all are receiving what they need. And that includes you! 🌿