

OPENING HYMN

“Now the Silence” (ELW 460)

“Gather Us In” (ELW 532)

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you called us into being out of love, stand with us as an expression of love, and promise us forgiveness, redemption, and peace as a promise of love. Help us to trust your love, and to share it far and wide. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“Do whatever he tells you.”

(John 2:5b)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- Paper and pencils, or whiteboard

Salvation now

Session two

Tangible salvation now:
Christians as bringers of wellness

BY ANNA MADSEN

INTRODUCTION

I was first exposed to the formal pursuit of Women’s Studies when I was in college in the late 1980s and early 1990s. That we even needed an academic focus on “women’s studies” switched on a lightbulb for me. The fact that there wasn’t a separate major dedicated to men’s studies was also a revelation to me. I realized that the prevailing standard—the norm—was the life, experience and perspective of a male. I began to see how women’s lives and experiences and perspectives and ways of knowing were regularly rendered diminutive by society.

For example, women aren’t actors; we are actresses. We aren’t heroes, but heroines. We aren’t drum majors; we are majorettes.

We and our history were—and often still are—hidden under the term “mankind,” rather than being equally included, as with words such as “human-kind” or “humanity.”

Even many of us women bristle at the idea that diminutive terms render us secondary or subservient to the masculine norm. Yet we see how words do, in fact, shape our understanding of the baseline, when just for fun, we imagine using the feminine terms as normative: Try calling George Clooney and Ryan Reynolds “actresses” or “Captain America” a heroine. Now try imagining Neil Armstrong saying, “That’s one small step for a woman, and one giant leap for womankind!”

Then, too, in other ways, we and our work have been rendered as less important—and as a society

we've adapted to and accepted this. Take, for example, the distinction between "art" and "crafts."

Museums certainly hold artwork by women—Georgia O'Keeffe, Anna Ancher and Amy Sherald are three examples. But by and large, *art* such as painting, sculpting and architecture has been the province of men. For most of us, it is far easier to produce a list of famous male artists than female ones.

Crafts, however, such as quilting, knitting, felting, embroidery, scrapbooking and dollmaking are somehow seen as lesser examples of art, or even another category entirely.

Yet it should not go unnoticed that these arts that are rendered "crafts" are not only the province of women, but the province of the well-being of home and family. You see, quilts provide warmth. Knitting and felting provide clothing. Embroidery provides delight. Dollmaking provides hours of imaginative play for children. Scrapbooking preserves family memories.

Women have a remarkable knack for combining creativity with critical, important work. We bring things into being that are necessities—and we do it with flair!

The Gospel of John provides a framework for empowering women to bring things into being, as representatives of the God who also brings things into being. We don't have to (and ought not to) wait passively for the work of God to happen, but rather, we can (in fact, ought to) see ourselves as instruments of God, called to do God's work.

And if anyone knows that there's work to be done, it's women. Let's get to work.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. What are some ways that you are creative, even if those ways are not typically seen as such?

2. Share briefly about one or more of your creations of which you are particularly proud.

THE HOUR IS NOW

📖 **Read:** John 2:1-12

Last month, we tackled this passage by way of the "now" found in verse 10: "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."

We are going to revisit that text, taking into account that "now," but considering Jesus' mama in verses 1-5.

It's easy to read Scripture in a very serious way, one that seems to carry the appropriate solemnity. But in fact, there's a lot of humor in Scripture. This passage is an example of that.

We don't know whose wedding this is. We do know that weddings at that time were not trivial events, and often the celebration would last a week. In this text, the meaning of the "third day" is not entirely clear. Even for someone bad at math, counting the passing of days mentioned within John 1 doesn't add up to this being the third day of the story. Maybe it refers to the third day of the wedding festivities. If so, it's no wonder that the caterers (so to speak) have run out of wine.

What is also not clear is why Jesus' mother is there. Perhaps she (in a typical role for a woman then or now!) is there as a helper, or perhaps she is there as a guest.

What *is* clear is that she is on wine detail. When the jugs run dry, she does what needs to be done: She tells her son.

Mothers have a habit of assuming that their children are the best, the most, the only ones capable of (...fill in the blank...). Mary is not alone in this regard! But in this case, it seems as if her hunch is

right.

She goes to Jesus and says, “They have no wine,” with the clear intent that he will do something about it.

His response is less than obliging. “Woman,” he responds, “what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.”

First, initially, it’s a little off-putting that he calls her “Woman.”

But as it turns out, this seems to be a common way he refers to her. Look at John 19:26, when he is on the cross and addresses her. Perhaps it is even a term of endearment. My husband, in fact, will look at me and use that term with a grin and a twinkle and, with no trouble at all, gets away with it.

As for the “what concern is that to you and to me?” portion of the verse, it’s possible that Jesus is indicating that the lack of wine is a problem, but not theirs. This would imply that Mary is there as a guest, rather than as a helper. And anyway, Jesus goes on to say it’s not the time for him to show his stuff: “My hour has not yet come.”

But here’s where the text turns a bit funny. Mary’s response? It’s not to demur. It’s not to acknowledge that he has a point. It’s not to go back to the party, muttering under her breath. Instead, she turns to the servants and says, “Do whatever he tells you.”

I like to imagine what happened between Jesus and his mama in between those two moments. I invite you to do the same.

Where I tend to come out is that the two of them are having a mama-son stare-down, after which Mary turns to the stewards and tells them to do what she knows (and now her son knows) he will tell them to do. In this flash of time, it’s as if Mary is saying: “Jesus? About that hour that hasn’t come yet? It’s *now*.”

As womanist theologian Dr. Wil Gafney writes,

In John 2, Mary, the mother of Jesus, prompts

*him to reveal himself in the miracle that is understood as the formal inauguration of his public ministry, verse 3. In so doing she leaves us with profound instructions for our Christian faith in verse 5, “Do whatever he tells you.” (from “Epiphany V” in *A Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church: Year W*, Church Publishing, 2021.)*

Mary is good at seeing three things: the need, that Jesus can meet it and that this need must be met now (immediately), rather than waiting for a later time.

📖 **Read (again):** John 2:1–12

Share aloud or reflect:

3. Has your view of this reading changed? If so, how?
4. Consider a time when you saw a need before someone else did. How did that make you feel? What did you do?
5. What can we learn from Mary (in John 2) and Dr. Gafney about our call to address urgent, pressing needs now?

JOHN’S IDEA OF LOVE

📖 **Read:** John 13:20–35

Love is complicated, regardless of gender. But for those identifying as women, the characteristics and implications of love can be even cloudier. Many of us were taught that love means we ought to lose ourselves for the sake of others. We sacrifice ourselves for spouses, children and other relationships—even to our own detriment. But the Gospel of John corrects this notion. Admittedly, John has a bit of

a fixation about love, but this leads him to a robust, healthy notion of it.

In the John 13 passage, we hear a distinct “now”—a declarative statement that anchors Jesus’ crucial announcement in the immediate moment.

When [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.” (v. 31)

Jesus’ use of now is no mere interjection, but rather a “pin” to mark an eschatological event. Judas has just left to betray Jesus. Now there is no turning back. Now Jesus knows how his next day will unfold.

What’s also interesting is that he yokes this betrayal to his glorification. His dying on the cross is precisely what will lead him to resurrection—a victory over death that is not just his to hoard, but rather his to share with everyone.

It’s no coincidence that Jesus answers a question from Simon Peter in this way:

Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow me afterward.” (v. 36)

Jesus says that Simon Peter can’t follow him “now” (to his death on the cross), but “afterward” he—we—can. We will be empowered to follow Jesus because death will no longer be a threat. We will be freed to love our neighbor radically.

In between these two messages (verse 31 and verse 36), Jesus helpfully clarifies what following him looks like: creative, life-giving love.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (vv. 34-35)

Here, John uses the Greek word for love, agape, the same word he uses to describe Jesus’ love for us in other passages of this gospel. If time allows, read these additional passages that show Jesus’ love for us:

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.

(John 10:16-18)

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

(John 14:10-11)

You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

(John 15:14-15)

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

(John 17:14)

... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved

them even as you have loved me.
(John 17:23)

CHERISHED, CONNECTED

John wants us to know that we are all worthy of God's love. That message alone is a helpful corrective to the all-too-often-absorbed idea that we as women are most worthy when we love others more than we cherish ourselves.

Still, John is clear that we are understood only by way of our connection to others. The same point can be made about healthy love. As New Testament scholar Dr. Gail O'Day writes: "The Christian community is known by how much its members love one another, not by how much they deny themselves" (Women's Bible Commentary, Third Edition: Revised and Updated, Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, p. 526).

And then there's Omid Safi, a professor of Islamic studies at Duke University, who has studied the work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as well as how love and justice connect. In his 2016 baccalaureate speech at Colgate University, Safi advised all those concerned about justice:

At home, and globally, we need you. We need you not to be successful; we need you to be great. Greatness as measured by the extent to which you are willing to put your love into the service of others.

Here is the secret no one tells you about justice: All that we mean by justice is love—when love comes into the public arena. That's all we mean by justice, that we want for other people's babies the same thing we would want for our own babies.

So let me leave you with this: You are loved. If you are sitting here, somebody has loved you. Somebody has sacrificed for you. Reach back

to them and extend the circle of love. Welcome people into that circle of compassion.

Do you remember what Jesus identifies as the mark of his followers? That mark is love. It exists because we are loved.

And as womanist theology and the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. both emphasize, love is creative.

Love can see what is not yet there...and call it into being.

Love is a force that perceives a lack of life and seeks to create the conditions for it.

Love is bold.

Love is audacious.

Love is unrestrainable.

Love identifies who we, followers of the crucified and risen Jesus, are in this very moment. Now.

Share aloud or reflect:

6. Have you ever felt like your capacity to love is a superpower?
7. Do you see love as a creative force? Yourself as a creative force?
8. Have you seen Jesus' commandment to love as a commandment to be involved in the workings, the politics, the suffering, the injustices of the world? Why or why not?

SAVED BY LOVE

📖 **Read:** John 3:16–17

One can't go to a large game of any sort without seeing someone holding up a placard that says "John 3:16." One need not even be a Christian to know that this Bible verse says: "For God so loved the

world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

But some time back, I finally saw someone waving a poster that read “John 3:17.” That verse reads: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The word “saved” is related to the Greek word *soteria*, meaning health, healing and wholeness.

In other words, Jesus came into the world to bring it health, healing and wholeness. And as followers of Jesus, we are the means through which that salvation can be accomplished. We can be bearers of health, healing and wholeness. Now.

CLOSING HYMN

“Now Thank We All Our God” (*ELW* 839)

CLOSING PRAYER

Thank you, ever-loving God, for gathering us together. Empower us with your words, your Spirit and your Easter promise that we might be ambassadors of your love in word and deed, even now. Amen.



Salvation now

Session two

Tangible salvation now:
Christians as bringers of wellness

BY ANNA MADSEN

Thank you for your willingness to help lead part two of our three-part Bible study about “Salvation now” and the Gospel of John. The word “now” not only anchors and frames Session One; it also shapes Session Two, although initially with less force.

KEY CONCEPTS

Here are seven important concepts for you to consider as you prepare to lead your group this month.

- 1. Love compels.** Encourage your group to pay attention to the way in which Jesus compels his followers—and, arguably, the way in which Jesus was compelled by his mother—to act in trust of, and in response to, his love for us. How we do that is neither monolithic nor static, but something that changes, based on who we are and the context in which we find ourselves.
- 2. Love is lived out.** All too often, the Christian message to the world has been that the point of faith is to get into heaven. But the gospel writer John challenges and even cajoles us (think of his representation of John the Baptist) to live out our faith by enacting the love of God whenever and wherever we encounter its lack in the world.
- 3. Faith shapes everything.** Most would agree that today we live in a divisive world. In the U.S., there has been a false construction of a bifurcation between church and state, in a way that may be harder to see. The basic issue isn’t whether the lines are blurred between religion and politics or social issues: it’s whether we see that our faith in God shapes everything—*everything*—which translates into whether we act, how we act, and how we love. Be prepared for some earnest conversation.
- 4. In God, we trust.** If time allows, you might consider beginning this session by pointing to Martin Luther’s Small Catechism (see *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 1160) and his explanation of the first commandment. Tell the group that Luther defines God as anything in which or anyone in whom you place your ultimate trust. Ask participants to think about what or who they ultimately trust. How does their faith in that God—especially in light of the session texts—change how they act in their respective “nows”?
- 5. Are there limits to love?** During this session, your group may find itself engaging in some interesting conversations about the line between self-giving and self-sacrificing love. When is love toxic? How does the idea that God loves us move us to self-love? Why do you think women especially often feel as if self-love is selfish?
- 6. There’s something about Mary.** Mary is often seen as passive. Her willingness to be God’s servant by birthing Jesus certainly gives grounding for that take. But Mary sings a revolutionary song in Luke 1:46-55, and her role in the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11) challenges the perception that she was acquiescent. How might a reinterpretation of Mary bring a new understanding to the role of women?
- 7. How can we make new space for women’s creativity?** Women are wonderfully creative in ways that have often gone unnoticed or

under-appreciated. How could your group help to lift up the art of women in your congregation? What are some new ways you can highlight women's art, provide space for it and create avenues to make more of it?

WAYS TO OFFER HOSPITALITY

In what ways could the women around you use some extra love? Consider that the women in your congregation and community often include:

- Lonely women.
- Single mama women.
- Women in stressed marriages.
- Women who are juggling work and children and self-care.
- Broken women.
- Broke women.

How could this Bible study help to initiate new ways of proactively loving women in your congregation and your community into health, healing and wholeness?

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. With your group, spend some time brainstorming about concerns within your community that need advocacy. Consider surveying the wider community about the needs they see. How might your group become involved in helping to meet some of these needs?
2. Create and organize an art-and-craft show around the theme of how women reflect God's love. Decide whether your art show will be a small event for the women in your study, a larger event for your congregation or an outreach to your community. If the art show will be an outreach to your community, make sure to also invite community members to display artworks during the event. You might ask contributors to share/

display works of art (remember, these can be abstract or practical) that highlight the creative love of women who are advocates. You might also call for art that reveals the everyday magnificence of women living out their faith.

SHORT STUDY (45 MINUTES)

1. (Skip the **Introduction**.) Dive right into **The hour is now**.
2. Choose either Q1 or Q2, not both. Keep discussions for these and all other questions to five minutes each.
3. (Skip Q3.) Do Q4 and Q5.
4. (Skip the five additional Bible passages at the end of **John's idea of love**)
5. Read **Cherished, connected**. (Skip Q6.) Do Q7 and Q8.
6. Conclude with **Saved by love**. Skip the **Closing hymn**.

A LITTLE LONGER (60–90 minutes)

As above, but consider adding back in the Introduction, and allowing more discussion time for some of the questions.

As always, invite participants to consider at home any of the questions the group doesn't have time to discuss. They may appreciate being able to write their responses in a personal notebook or journal for prayer and reflection. 🌿