

OPENING HYMN

“Gather Us In” (ELW 532)

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you have been with us from before the dawn of time and will be in the fullness of it. Be with us now, gracing us with your presence, opening our hearts, minds, and imaginations to welcome you into our Bible study time together. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“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.” (John 2:10)

MATERIALS NEEDED

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

CLOSING PRAYER

Thank you, Holy God, for calling us together and being with us for this time of study and reflection. Be with us now in our departing and as we serve you now, more edified in our faith by this time with each other and with you. Amen.

Salvation now

Session one

Promised salvation now:
Jesus brings wellness

BY ANNA MADSEN

INTRODUCTION

Who hasn’t found a maxim—a short, pithy truth, proverb, or adage—to be helpful, affirming, and even centering? Like:

“Many hands make light work.” (Fantastic for teaching children about cooperation, for example)

“Still waters run deep.” (A perfect tagline for an introvert *writes the introvert*)

“Don’t put the cart before the horse.” (Solid advice for those of us who let anxiety drive a decision rather than giving circumspection a whirl at the wheel.)

But sometimes, instead, they can mess you up.

Way, way back in my college days, a heartthrob of mine left for a semester abroad. I fretted to my friends that he’d come back either with a new love on his arm or no love for me in his heart.

A well-intentioned friend consoled me with: “Don’t worry, Anna. Just like they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

Immediately, I exhaled...but then a second pal slowly said, “Well, that could be true...but there is that other saying that makes the opposite point: ‘Out of sight, out of mind,’ so...maybe stick with ‘Patience is a virtue?’”

A bit like the paradox of competing maxims, the word “now,” as the gospel writer John uses it, has different meanings that convey opposite truths. This Bible study focuses on “now,” a small word that packs a significant punch and suffuses John’s gospel. As we’ll discover, for John, the word “now” is

not about competing truths, but rather complementary ones. Together we'll see how the notion of "now," rounds out a deeper, more robust understanding of our Christian calling and our Christian hope.

NOTICING "NOW"

This little linguistic fixation of John's, namely the way he regularly uses the word "now," would have slipped right past me, if not for my father. It's awfully easy to pass over a lowly three-letter word.

But as it happens, my father, George Madsen, is a retired biblical scholar. Dad's dissertation was dedicated to John's use of *nūn* (pronounced nun) and *ἄρτι* (pronounced arti) two Greek words meaning "now."

In Dad's thorough, mind-bogglingly detailed review, he noticed that of the 150 times that *nūn* is used in the New Testament, 30 of these instances (more than in any other single New Testament book) occur in the Gospel of John alone, followed only by the Gospel of Luke, which has 12.

The word *arti* occurs less frequently, and yet its use is also concentrated in John, where it shows up 12 times—a full third of the 36 times that "arti" appears in the New Testament.

Something does appear to be going on with John and the notion of now.

Although my father's work was published in 1972, nowadays many of us churchgoers are more ready to consider that God's reign is as much about today (the here and now) as it is about heaven (the there and then).

So we dare not underestimate the "now" of John. A simple, powerful word, "now" overturns our assumptions—about God, and about the structure of the Church and our role in it.

JESUS AND "NOW"

In daily life, we tend to use the word "now" as a filler. We say: "Now I get it!" or "Come on, now." Even in the Bible, "now" shows up in ordinary, mundane

ways, as in, "Now that day was a sabbath" (John 5:9). John also uses "nun" or "arti" in this manner.

But the word "now" mostly does some heavier semantic and theological lifting in the Gospel of John.

First, every time in John that *nūn* or *arti* appear, Jesus is involved. To be clear, this does not mean that every time Jesus shows up, a "now" does, but rather that every time a "now" shows up, Jesus does too.

Second, on almost every occasion where a "now" appears, something critical occurs in the lives of the people around Jesus. The word "now" is present when something is about to occur that will change not only the life of a person or a group of people, but their understanding of life itself. And this life-changing aspect of "now" impacts even those who are not already following Jesus.

Third, especially in the "Farewell Discourses" found in John 13-16, these instances of "now" are directly tied to the experiences of the disciples and of Jesus.

So, this first session focuses on Jesus' emphasis on his immediate presence in people's lives. We'll investigate Jesus' words and actions, to learn how these convey his conviction that the present moment matters to God, and within the reign of God.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Can you think of times when truths are held in tension? Using paper or a whiteboard, try to create a list of examples of times when different, legitimate claims may speak both for and against a circumstance, decision or perspective.
2. What are some of those different, legitimate claims?

3. How do you find yourself resolving or reconciling varying takes?
4. Lutherans love the “both/and.” We are famous for embracing both saint and sinner, both the “already” and the “not yet.” How might this “both/and” tendency affect the way we read and interpret scripture?

📖 **Read:** John 2:1-11

We don't have to flip too many pages into John's gospel to get to Jesus' first miracle—one that is only retold in John. It's the wedding at Cana (2:1-11). And in verse 10, we get our *arti* or “now”: “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 [ἕως ἄρτι (*eus arti*)].”

The first portion of this text, my father points out, has gotten all sorts of attention. Scholars have considered how the steward's words might be a way of joking with Jesus (a sort of “You big lug! You trickster you!” along with a friendly arm punch), or an expression of irritation directed at him (along the lines of: “Seriously, man: My reputation could have used your help here. Also, if you're going to have the good stuff, at least let us be sober enough to appreciate it!”). Not as often, some scholars have made an alternate point, that perhaps this steward was duplicitous—someone perfectly happy to have the guests drink bad wine without even knowing that good wine was to be had. In this case, perhaps Jesus both spoiled and revealed the ruse.

Often, the attention given to *arti* or “now,” if it received any attention at all, was simply to set it in contrast to “then”—the time, early on, when bad wine was served up to the guests.

But what if the “now” is the pivot point of the whole text?

What if the “now” at the end of this Bible passage is directly tethered to the word “hour” [ὥρα (*hora*)] mentioned at the beginning of this passage in verse 4? That's when Jesus said, “My hour has not yet come.”

In other words, this now is not simply pointing to another hoist of wine glasses, this time around filled with the good stuff. This “now” points to Jesus as the revelation of the inauguration of the reign of God.

WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?

Let's look at the text more closely. Things are a bit more complicated because of some unique facts related to this water-into-wine sign.

First, as I mentioned before, only John gives us the story of the wedding at Cana. Of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), the first three are also referred to as “synoptics”—“optic” meaning “seen” and “syn” meaning “together,” because of their many correlations and similarities. Matthew, Mark and Luke do not contain this first miracle.

Moreover, here (unlike every other instance of a wonder in John) the gospel writer offers up no internal interpretation. The miracle stands on its own. But it doesn't stand alone. Chapter 1 sets the stage for it: John the Baptist is in the house.

John the Baptist was sent to tell the people something new: “He himself was not the light but he came to testify to the light” (John 1:7). John the Baptist was adamant that people understand he is not the Messiah; on the other hand, his cousin sure is! “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” he says. (John 1:29, also 1:36).

“Messiah” is a word that means “the one for whom we are waiting” or “the promised one.” As in, we have been promised that the Messiah would arrive, and now, the One for whom we have been waiting is here! Right after we read about John the Baptist, we hear about the calling of the disciples, and then we lose the John the Baptist thread until the middle of chapter 3. The wedding at Cana is

smack dab in the middle of all of this, a pivot point in the story.

And that brings us to the water. For those who are unaware of or not rooted in Jewish traditions, it's easy to overlook the significance of the water that Jesus commands to be poured into the jars. This isn't water intended for washing the dinner dishes. It isn't water to be offered as refreshment for guests. Neither is it to be used to water plants. This is water for ritual purification, water set aside for a sacred purpose, according to Jewish law. This water, holy water, becomes the sign that *now* the Messiah is present.

It reminds me of another instance in which awareness of Jewish traditions makes all the difference in understanding a biblical passage. In the Book of Revelation (7:4 and 14:1), a different John, John of Patmos, writes about 144,000 people who are marked with the sign of God. Some folks have interpreted that number as a mark of exclusion, as in "only 144,000" will be claimed by God. But no: that's not what this indicates. Instead, this number represents an unfathomable, all-encompassing number. Why? Because in Jewish thought, 12 is considered the perfect number. Think about it: 12 tribes of Israel, and later the 12 disciples. And if 12 is perfect, just imagine 12 x 12! And then multiply that by a whopping 100,000! Then you have 144,000—something mind-blowing!

Similarly, having purified water, water dedicated to honoring the Lord, is certainly something to behold. But if that *water* is turned into *wine*, by someone who speaks on behalf of the Lord (who might even be the Lord), something marvelous is afoot, right here, right now!

John uses the wedding within the gospel account to point to the unfolding story of Jesus and God's continuing action in the world. That Jesus is Savior isn't something to be revealed later. That Jesus is Savior begins to be revealed right here in the midst of this history.

So, water is important, of course. Pure water, no less. But it's as if John is telling us, wait until you taste that wine. In fact, try it now!

Share aloud or reflect:

5. Tell about an "A-ha" moment or share about a time when you suddenly saw something ordinary in extraordinary light. What made you marvel?
6. Imagine yourself in the biblical story. How would you feel or act if you saw God's power transform water (John 2) in a miraculous way? Now how would you react if you witnessed God transforming people (Revelation 7 and 14) miraculously in front of you?
7. What do you do now, in real life, when you see something miraculous? What would it take to be open to the miraculous in the now? Where, even now, have you seen miracles happen?
8. What constitutes a miracle?
9. Spend a little time dreaming of what God's reign now might look like, with new capacities to perceive. ELCA congregations in Utah, Colorado, California and other states are experiencing scarcity of water right now. To what degree are you aware of this? Does this affect you personally? How might your life change if you saw water, not as something ordinary or taken for granted, but as a gift with a sacred purpose?
10. The Church of Latter-Day Saints has given about 20,000-acre-feet of water

rights (one acre-foot is enough to supply water for 2-3 U.S. households a year) to the Great Salt Lake to help supply more households with water). What are ways that we in the ELCA could consider sharing literal water of life as well?

11. Now imagine that suddenly, you can see the mark of our loving, creator God on all people, including you! Would the way you talk to, talk about and care for yourself and others become more loving and creative? What if your entire congregation or community could see God's mark on everyone? What might the sign of God's generous love inspire us to do as a church? As a community? How might we take greater notice of God's work to transform all creation? Might we delight in finding more ways to participate in that work?

📖 **Read:** John 5:1-17

Late civil rights icon and U.S. House Representative John Lewis, an ordained minister, loved Jesus, perhaps because Jesus, like Rep. Lewis, knew how to “get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”

Jesus serves up some trouble on the Sabbath—the very day when Jews are supposed to be making nothing at all, let alone trouble. In fact, the synoptic gospels highlight Jesus' trouble-making habit. A careful study reveals that when Jesus finds himself the center of some prickly attention, he justifies his actions in a couple of ways:

First, he bases his actions on *humanitarian grounds* (see Mark 3:1-6; Matthew 12:9-13; Luke 13:10-17). For example, in Matthew 12, Jesus exclaims, “How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.”

Jesus makes a similar argument in Luke 13: “You hypocrites,” he bellows. “Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”

Other synoptic texts assert the righteousness of healing on the sabbath, based on *theological grounds*. When the Pharisees rebuked Jesus for picking up grains of wheat to satiate the disciples, Jesus helped them recall a hungry David and company eating the bread of the priests (1 Samuel 21:1-6).

The Sabbath Day healing in John, chapter 5, follows this same pattern of retort. Here, Jesus encounters a man who has been suffering for 38 years. Although the nature of the disease isn't clear, there is an indication that he was among people with various disabilities. (Please note the offensiveness of the NRSV's use of the word “invalid,” and how this word exacts harm and insult to those with disabilities). Jesus found the man near a pool renowned for its healing properties, but in a case of “so close and yet so far,” the man could not make his way into the water.

Until Jesus said, simply, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.”

And he did, and did, and did. As a mama of a son in a wheelchair, the majesty and the unfathomability of this moment makes me teary-eyed.

But in our texts, certain religious people—those who dedicated themselves to a traditional faithful interpretation of the mandates of God—were displeased. They saw Jesus' act of healing as a breach of the fidelity they were bound to preserve.

Jesus responds to their complaints by saying: “My father is still working, and I also am working” (John 5:17). But the NRSV text's rendering has hidden something from us with “is still.” In this instance, the original Greek text means “is now”

(ἔως ἄρτι), as in, “My father *is now* working, and I am also working.”

As we read on, we see that Jesus’ response doesn’t work out too well. In the next verse, they want to kill him. Why?

Because Jesus identifies himself with God. This is audacious.

In verse 18, John spells out the breach: “For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.”

Jesus not only names himself as God’s son, but also identifies himself *as acting as God*.

However, we need to pause here, especially during these days of blatant, rising anti-semitism, and highlight how texts like this have been fodder for vicious harm against Jews.

There are many problems with the way that Jews are represented in Scriptures and in Christian history—not least of all in Martin Luther’s words and influence.

While the reasons for antisemitism, which some have based in Christian scripture, should never be legitimized, they should be understood. In this case, if we do not take time to understand, we run a grave risk of missing how seriously the Jews took their faith. To their minds, steeped in Scripture and tradition, Jesus was committing blasphemy. His claims were audacious and dangerous. They sought to protect their understanding of God, and even God. Believing that Jesus was offensive to their understanding and to God, they saw him, therefore, as a threat.

The gravity of the moment is all the more obscured because the *arti* or “now” of 5:17 implies not a passing of the baton (i.e., the idea that God has been working up until now, and now Jesus is taking over), but rather that God has been working up to and through this particular moment and, *in the very incarnation of Jesus, continues to work*.

And yes, that means even on the Sabbath, because that’s God’s prerogative.

Jesus leaves no doubt that this is the case that he’s making—that he’s the presence of God incarnate—when he says: “For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man” (5:26–27).

The judgment rendered here is that the man, who was once in want of restored well-being, picked up his mat and walked. God is a God of health, healing and wholeness. In this healing, and in other signs and acts of wonder, Jesus reflects God’s redemptive agenda. To say it another way, in these actions of Jesus, God is present *now*.

Once we grasp that Jesus ushers in God’s reign even now, our understanding of God changes, and therefore, our very lives change too.

Share aloud or reflect:

12. When you think of Jesus, do you think of him actually present? If not, why not? If so, how and when, and does that conviction affect the way you engage in particular moments and make decisions in and about your life?
13. What are some positions you’ve encountered in the past that have threatened your faith or your theology? On what grounds did they trouble you? What was your response? Did you find at any time that your opinion or view changed?

CLOSING HYMN

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

Salvation now

Session one

Promised salvation now:
Jesus brings wellness

BY ANNA MADSEN

OVERVIEW

First, a heartfelt thank-you for leading your group in this study! This entire Bible study focuses on one small word, “now,” and the role it plays throughout the Gospel of John. “Now” is a small word but, as we will see, not an innocuous one.

Here are a few observations for you as a leader about this word and this study, especially as it pertains to people’s responses to it:

1. This session lays the groundwork for the idea that Jesus is active in every present moment. As followers of Jesus, bearers of his name and servants of his word, we are called to represent Jesus in the “now” of life. This can be empowering, intimidating and challenging, all at once. As a leader, be attentive to how Bible study participants are hearing the import of Jesus being not just a focus of our future but a calling within our lives now.
2. The John 5 passage about Jesus healing the man who lay on a mat near a pool is, indeed, a revelation of Jesus as the anticipated one, the Messiah. But as the mama of a son who suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI), I’m deeply attentive to how healing texts can be comforting and encouraging, but also wounding and hurtful to people.

For example, though I confess I haven’t brought my son to a healing pool, I have brought him to a pool of healers, and yet still he suffers the

consequences of his brain injury. Where, then, is God as healer here? Additionally, members of the disabled community are right to point out that non-disabled people are quick to label their disabilities as needing healing, when in fact, they can be strengths, sources of identity and even superpowers. It can be argued that people’s “ableism” needs to be healed as much as, if not more than, many disabilities.

As a leader, you can be alert to the many responses participants may have to this story, and in leading this conversation, you can cultivate awareness.

3. **Hospitality:** As always, ensure that your meeting space is accessible and is a safe space for conversations. Please note that this Bible study may be particularly interesting to those who
 - are restless with the church.
 - ask how faith is relevant today.
 - wonder how their religious beliefs can connect with the goings-on of the day.

I encourage you to invite newcomers to attend this Bible study, get to know other group members and be present with each other, as we find ways together to explore this restlessness, longing and questioning.

If you are serving food, remember to offer safe food options for all (including those who must avoid sugar or allergens).

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. **Ice-breaker activity:** As people are gathering, before your meeting starts, ask them to think about the times they believe they have seen God in action. Invite them to share these stories aloud or write them down in a journal. Be prepared to hear stories that might inspire awe, emotion and

even a reorganization of thinking about how God works.

2. **Helpful vocabulary:** If you have time, you can begin this session by introducing some theological words that come up in the study. These are good words to know for anyone interested in Bible study. While at first some will be unfamiliar or strange, these words will become more familiar over time:

Eschatology: Eschatology is the study of the fullness of time and of God’s work in history. This word is often used when we talk about the time after Jesus returns, or when we talk about the nature or the essence of God’s reign.

Messiah: This word is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word *mesach*, meaning “anointed one” or “chosen one.” Jewish tradition expected that the Messiah would be the one fulfilling certain revealed expectations, namely that the temple would be rebuilt, peace would be restored and Jews would be reunited in Israel. Because these have not occurred, Jews do not accept Jesus as the messiah, though they see him as a servant of God. However, the early Jewish converts to following Christ believed that Jesus redefined the expectations and that Jesus was, in fact, the one for whom the Jews had been waiting all along.

Pericope: A pericope is a succinct passage in Scripture that captures a certain story or thread of thought.

Synoptic: In this word, “syn” means “with” and/or “alike” (think about *synthesis* [a pulling together of ideas], *synonym* [a word that means the same thing as another word]). The ending, “optic,” means to see (think of an optical department or an ophthalmologist). Matthew, Mark and Luke

are called the Synoptic Gospels because they are extraordinarily similar, in contrast to the Gospel of John, which is unique in its language, discourse and many of its stories.

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

Keep all discussion short, allowing for only one or two responses for each question. You might also consider asking participants to reflect on the questions at home and create a private Facebook page (or the equivalent) for them to share short written reflections at a later time.

1. (Skip the **Introduction**.) Dive right into **Noticing “now.”**
2. Do Q1. (Skip Qs 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.)
3. Do Q7.
4. Do Q8, if time allows. (Skip Qs 9 and 10.)
5. Do Q 12. (Only do Q 13 if time allows.)
6. (Skip the closing hymn.)

A LITTLE LONGER (60–90 minutes)

As above, but for each section of questions, consider adding one additional question of your choosing. For example, you might wish to add Q3 after discussing Q1 for several minutes; after Q5, perhaps add Q7.

If time is still an issue, keep discussions to five minutes each. For Q8, participants can be asked to offer up a one- or two-word description of what constitutes a miracle.

Invite participants to consider the other questions at home, perhaps writing their responses in a notebook or journal for personal reflection. 🌿