

OPENING HYMN

“Now All the Vault of Heaven
Resounds” (ELW 367)

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you have called us
once again to gather around your
Word and one another. Bless us with
an open mind and an open heart as
we open our Bibles to read and hear
the Good News from you. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“I have said these things to you so
that my joy may be in you, and that
your joy may be complete.”
(John 15:11)

MATERIALS NEEDED

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

Salvation now

Session three

A world wanting wellness

BY ANNA MADSEN

INTRODUCTION

From its start, the ELCA has had the world’s needs
baked into its identity and mission. In chapter 4 of
the ELCA Constitution, the Statement of Purpose
includes the following:

*To participate in God’s mission, this church
shall...c. Serve in response to God’s love to meet
human needs, caring for the sick and the aged,
advocating dignity and justice for all people,
working for peace and reconciliation among the
nations, and standing with the poor and power-
less and committing itself to their needs... (4.02)*

*To fulfill these purposes, this church shall...b.
Encourage and equip all members to worship,
learn, serve, and witness; to fulfill their calling
to serve God in the world; and to be stewards of
the earth, their lives, and the Gospel... [and]...
g. Lift its voice in concord and work in concert
with forces for good, to serve humanity, coop-
erating with church and other groups partici-
pating in activities that promote justice, relieve
misery, and reconcile the estranged. (4.03)*

Relatedly, the ELCA website (elca.org) lists four
“markers” of the ELCA:

- We are church;
- We are Lutheran;
- We are church together; and
- We are church for the sake of the world.

The latter point is the focus of our study today. Under this fourth “marker,” the website explains how we as Christians understand our posture and presence in the world:

Christ has freed us from sin and death, even from ourselves, so that we can live as ministers of reconciliation in loving and generous service of our neighbors (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). In Jesus Christ, all of life — every act of service, in every daily calling, in every corner of life — flows freely from a living, daring confidence in God’s grace.

Freed by the transformative life of Christ, we support ELCA members as they give themselves freely in transforming service with the neighbor. Through a wide range of daily vocations and ministries, we nurture faith, build alliances and gather resources for a healed, reconciled and just world. As church together, we faithfully strive to participate in God’s reconciling work, which prioritizes disenfranchised, vulnerable and displaced people in our communities and the world. We discover and explore our vocations in relation to God through education and moral deliberation. We bear witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ through dialogue and collaboration with ecumenical partners and with other faiths. In all these ministries, God’s generosity flows through us into the life of the world.

The ELCA (at least on paper) sees a direct relationship between justification and justice. This means that:

- If we need God’s mercy, healing and love, so too do all people.
- If we are decreed worthy of God’s mercy, healing and love, then so too are all people.
- If all people need God’s mercy, healing and love, then in spaces where these are lacking, we are

called to enter and usher them in.

GOD’S AGENDA IS LIFE.

I am convinced that the reason we are Christians is because Jesus is risen from the dead. Without that event, we would be, well, Jesus-ians (following a wise man who offered inspiration), somewhat akin to us being Luther-ans!

But we call ourselves Christ-ians because we believe that Jesus is risen from the dead. This means that God’s agenda is not suffering, hunger, illness, loneliness and death. God’s agenda is life. This means that Jesus’ agenda is clearly God’s agenda. And this means that, if we self-identify as Christians, then we also self-identify with Christ and his agenda, which is God’s.

However, it also means that the gospel is not that our sins are forgiven—although this is true. The gospel is that Jesus is risen! Death does not win! Death is real, but life is real-er! If we reframe the gospel message to this far fuller, far richer, far more robust and expansive definition, then the gospel doesn’t only speak to sinners (yes, our sins are still forgiven), but also to those who are sinned upon... those who grieve... those who hurt... those who hunger... those who suffer mental and physical illnesses... those who feel unloved... those who are refugees... those who are oppressed.

As a systematic theologian, I’m curious about not only the specifics of the text, but how we intersect the Word and the world. Karl Barth, the late Reformed theologian, exhorted people to read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. So, our third and final “Salvation now” session will take us on a journey through the Gospel of John, but in a broader way than the two earlier sessions. We will look at the needs of the world and ways of responding to the world, by way of John’s commitment to service and fondness for joy.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. How much does your congregation emphasize mission, advocacy and service in and to the world? How do you feel about the level of engagement?
2. The Greek word that we render “gospel” is *euangelion*, which means “good news.” News is something that affects our lives. It sure seems as if there is a lot of bad news in the world. When you are surrounded by bad news, both personal and public, what most counters it? How do words help? How do actions help?

JOHN AND THE JEWS

So, true confession: If we’re talking about our favorite books of the Bible, my list would not include the Gospel of John. If I had to share my favorite *Gospel*, I would have a hard time choosing between Mark, with his clumsy Greek and his depiction of disciples who were often many things other than quick-witted, and Luke, who dedicates both his Gospel and the book of Acts to economic inequity and radical hospitality.

But John... God bless John... but his text can come off as lofty, even pretentious, and his farewell discourse is longer than a Minnesota goodbye. Most troublesome, however, is his rhetoric about Jews. His disparagement of the Jews is all the more noticeable and offensive after the Holocaust and amid an obscene rise of antisemitism in the U.S. today. To name just one recent example, according to news reports, the perpetrator of the 2018 mass shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue quoted John 8:44 in his social media profile.

 **Read:** John 8:34–47

Scholars have wrestled with John’s discourse

against the Jews. Some have pointed to a possible personal wound between the Christians of John’s day and the Jewish community as a source of his vitriol. Sometime during the 80s to 90s A.D., those Jews who opted to follow Jesus were kicked out of the synagogue. This was a deeply personal break.

New Testament and preaching scholar Dr. Gail O’Day writes that early Christians had a handful of choices in this situation. They could:

1. Remain active members of the synagogue, and thereby worship God safely. (The Jewish community was recognized by the Roman Empire.)
2. Continue to worship as members of the synagogue, but clandestinely take part in Christian communities.
3. Overtly leave the safety and the family of the synagogue and (at great personal risk) publicly affiliate with the Christians.

John opted for choice three, O’Day writes. She goes on to say that we can’t ignore the courage it took for these early Christians to remove themselves from all that felt familiar (religiously and communally) and to open themselves up to the ominous power that was the Roman Empire. She also points out that the early Christians’ dedication to their faith and resistance to threats can offer us inspiration and clarity in our own faith today. Faith is not easy. Faith demands choices. And as Star Trek fans might say, resistance is not futile.

However, John’s anger and agony surface in hostility to Jews. Like the hostility that can surface in familial betrayals and hurts, John’s indignation at his Jewish siblings becomes personal. It is profoundly distressing that many Christians and interpreters have not grasped the context which informs John’s words, nor critiqued his language, but rather have used his texts to exact retribution and justification for antisemitic bigotry.

Recall that “messiah” is the Greek translation of

a Hebrew word, *mâshîyach*. The Jews who became disciples of Jesus did so because they believed that Jesus was the one for whom their people had been waiting. However, there were also Jews then, as now, who believed that Jesus may have been a prophet, but was not the One for whom they had been waiting. For some, as holy as he was, Jesus simply did not meet the established messianic expectations. As one dear Jewish friend and mentor told me, “If Jesus is the Messiah, where is the redemption?” Before Christians judge Jews for not believing Jesus is the Christ, we would do well to reflect on enduring violence, hate, suffering and apathy in the world, and ask ourselves that same question.

Yet even as we consider this question, we find help in this same Gospel of John. It is John who offers a corrective to the Christian habit of focusing on what happens after we die. Salvation, he reminds us, is not just about the afterlife. Salvation is about the now, and our calling to participate in the now, as we, too, play a part in God’s redemptive work.

John’s testimony about Jesus, and Jesus’ utter dedication to love, is indeed revelatory of God’s agenda. While we can’t ignore the disturbing nature and the consequences of John’s words about the Jews, we can’t let this distract us from John’s message about God.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. How do you reconcile John’s Gospel with John’s treatment of the Jews of his day?

LIFE RESTORED, NOW

📖 **Read:** John 11:1–44

While Lazarus is central to the story of John 11, it is the women, Mary and Martha, who place him. We are told that they are all from Bethany—“the village of Mary and her sister Martha.” Moreover, Mary is

identified as the “one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair,” but in John’s text, this event has not yet taken place.

What’s happened here is that Mary’s reputation has preceded her placement in this text. John expects that readers and hearers already know about this remarkable moment. This part of the story is easy to overlook, just like the truth behind it: Women had power, role and influence in the early Church.

According to O’Day, Mary and Martha (like Jesus’ mother Mary at the wedding in Cana) don’t tell Jesus what to do. They tell Jesus what the need is and trust that Jesus will figure it out on his own. And—on his own timeline—he does. Let’s look at two themes here: Jesus’ commitment to healing and restoring in the immediate moment, and Jesus’ grief that healing and restoring are still necessary.

Going back to my father’s fixation on the “now” in John’s text, there’s a perplexing “now” after Jesus (finally) shows up, when Martha says: “Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him” (John 11:21-22). We see that this “now” carries weight, but its meaning is unclear. Is Martha’s “even now” directed toward Jesus as a bit of reproach?

“Okay, fine,” Martha could be saying. “So you weren’t here when you should have been. And yes, my brother died, thanks to your dilly-dally on the way here. But despite the fact he’s been dead not just one day, not just two days, not just three days, but four whole days, I know that *even now*, you could raise him up.” That’s one take on it.

Another take is that Martha’s “even now” is a declaration of faith. Because she has come to see who he is, she now trusts him as her Lord and with her brother. In this case, she could be saying: “But I know *even now* that you are the Messiah...and that God will give you whatever you ask.”

Either way, Jesus’ presence amid this profound

grief and hopelessness shifts what happens in that immediate moment.

It is worth pointing out that—despite Lazarus ultimately coming out of that tomb alive again—it is not correct to call his exit from the grave a “resurrection.” A resurrection means that someone is alive again, never to die again. Lazarus, who goes on to live and die another day, is resuscitated, not resurrected. Jesus is resurrected.

While Jesus’ presence does not save Lazarus from ever dying again, it does heal him from the death he was experiencing at that moment. Jesus’ presence also heals Lazarus’ sisters from the grief (and possibly fear, if they were dependent on their brother’s income) experienced at his loss. Jesus enters into the circumstance of death, and then does something about it straightaway.

He doesn’t wait.

He raises him in the now.

We are told that this transformative act not only benefits Lazarus and his family; it also reveals God’s agenda (v. 4). The story of Lazarus and his sisters—beginning with Jesus’ declaration that Lazarus’ healing will be for God’s glory; peppered with Jesus’ weeping at Lazarus’ death and the communal grief; and ending with a dead man unbound and alive—tells us so much about God’s intentions for us. We are not destined for death, but for life. God’s life-giving actions interject into our present. God desires not our tears, but our joy.

It is to joy that we will finally turn.

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Mary and Martha were neither the first nor the last to beg God to bring someone back from death, or the brink of it. What does your faith bring to bear in moments when you suffer despair? Does this story help or hurt?

5. If we believe that the story of Lazarus reveals God’s agenda, we who follow Jesus can both weep with those who suffer, and yet bring relief. Make a list: What are some ways in which we can abate suffering and restore life on a personal level? On a systemic level?

JESUS AND JOY

 **Read:** John 15:9–12

When I authored the book *Joyful Defiance: Death Will Not Win the Day*, I sought to differentiate joy from happiness, tether joy to lament, and provide a reason for Christians to experience and steward joy as a mark of the reign of God.

If the Gospel writer John were here today, he might not like my book any more than I like his, but at the very least, I don’t think he’d be opposed to its focus on joy. John’s Gospel mentions joy a lot. It’s a curious thing, given the level of trauma in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ story.

Christians often seem befuddled by the fact that many people opt out of Christianity. But among the reasons people cite for opting out (including, it must be said, the behavior of many Christians!), it’s also quite possible that they hear the implications of the gospel better than we do.

“Come! (Suffer; be persecuted; die in Jesus’ name!) Worship at 10:00 a.m. every Sunday!”

No wonder people aren’t flocking to church doors! Yet there must be something more to it than that. Well, John, for one, is here to tell us about it.

John wrote his Gospel at least 50 to 60 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. He and others had time to begin to absorb what the resurrection meant. The earliest Christian community believed that Jesus’ return was imminent. When by John’s time, Jesus still hadn’t shown up, the early believers began to develop a theology—a way of asking, like

Martin Luther, “What does this mean?”

One thing it meant was this: Suffering and death still happen, yet amid the bad news is good news: Jesus is risen. As real as the bad experiences are, as devastating as life can be, as much of a threat as powers and fears pose, they are not ultimate. This also means that we can face them with defiance. And what, I find myself asking, annoys and defies death more than joy?

When Jesus tells the disciples (and us) to abide in his love (vv. 9-12), he is quite aware of the risks of engaging in his mission and ministry. And yet he is... joyful?

I have long advocated for those of us who are Christians, especially in my own ELCA, to more fully recognize and embrace our calling to speak and act in defiance of hate, bigotry, white supremacy, sexism, greed and desecration of the earth. I stand by that advocacy. But John's onto something here.

God seems to love celebrating. We see this in John's first revelation of Jesus at a wedding—one where Jesus turns water into really good wine! Recently, someone from a more conservative faith tradition discussed with me the multiple prohibitions that the faithful were expected to follow. As respectfully as possible, I asked: “Is it maybe possible that it will torque God off if you don't enjoy the really good coffee or bourbon, for example?” No one is compelled to enjoy either, of course. Often Christians are more inclined to live strictly, rather than abundantly. But Gospel invites us into another aspect of God and of faith: joyful living. Here is yet another way we can reveal God's agenda: We can more intentionally, more extravagantly share, participate in and live out joy.

Share aloud or reflect:

6. Do you see a difference between joy and happiness? What about joy versus

simply repressing or rejecting reasons for grief?

7. In what ways do you live joyfully, precisely because of your faith?
8. What are some ways that your congregation can embody or incarnate joy?

CLOSING PRAYER

Risen Lord, you infuse us with new thoughts and ways of understanding you. Inspire us to steward these in our lives, so that in all that we do and all that we say, we manifest your love for the world and our joy in you. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

“My Soul Now Magnifies the Lord” (*ELW* 573) 

Salvation now

Session three

A world wanting wellness

BY ANNA MADSEN

Thank you for the extra time and effort you have offered in service for this three-part Bible study about “Salvation now” and the Gospel of John. The word “now” continues to frame our exploration of this biblical book.

KEY CONCEPTS

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

- 1. Learn more about our history.** We Lutherans have a complicated and distressing history with our Jewish siblings. The Gospel of John has been used as grounding for much of it. Consider...
 - taking time after your meeting or during a separate adult forum to help participants become more aware of recent antisemitic acts in your community, your nation and the world.
 - pointing people toward the ELCA statement to the Jewish community about our complicity in antisemitic bigotry (https://download.elca.org/ELCA_Resource_Repository/Declaration_Of_The_ELCA_To_The_Jewish_Community.pdf).
 - asking your rostered leader to talk with you about their impressions of John’s rhetoric about the Jews.
- 2. Be sensitive to those grieving.** Some who have suffered the death of a loved one may find the

resuscitation of Lazarus hurtful. In fact, this is a deeply Jewish question: How can we call Jesus the Messiah, when there is still so much suffering in the world? Be ready and open to listen to earnest questions that involve both faith and grief.

- 3. Explore what joy is—and isn’t.** Joy is too often reduced to platitudes and kitsch. What’s more, in the pursuit of joy, lament gets relegated to the sidelines or is seen as unfaithful. Invite people to have a robust conversation about what joy is and isn’t.
- 4. Consider the marks of joy.** Congregations are often marked by their service to neighbors. Food shelves, homeless shelters, rideshares, advocacy efforts, and so forth are all ways many congregations seek to be the presence of God in the world. Can joy also be a hallmark of God and of your congregation? In what ways? Encourage participants to list ideas freely; no answer is wrong.
- 5. How did you come to realize...?** Ask participants if they can recall an “a-ha” moment when they, like Mary in John 11, realized that Jesus is their Lord. Are they willing to share a little about that moment or how they felt? Have they had more than one such realization that Jesus is their Lord?

WELCOMING ALL

A discussion is better when everyone can participate. As a leader, consider ways that despair or hardship might prevent people from joining your discussion. Why might some participants not want to participate or share their thoughts? How could that hurdle be overcome?

Are you planning on serving snacks? Before you meet for Bible study (now or in the future), ask people what their favorite treats or snacks are. For this study, you might consider offering Almond Joy

bars or Enjoy Life allergy-friendly chocolate chips as one of the treats, but keep in mind that some participants may have food allergies. Make sure you find out if participants have food or nut allergies. Some people are so allergic that they cannot be in the space where a particular food is being eaten.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Think about the musicians, artists, cooks and bakers within your congregation and community. Consider the ways in which their gifts spread joy. Write a note of gratitude to one or more of these artisans and spreaders of joy.

SHORT STUDY (45 MINUTES)

1. (Skip the **Introduction**.) Dive right into **God's agenda is life**.
2. Do Q1. (Skip Q2 and Q3.) Keep discussion for all questions to four minutes or less.
3. Do Q4 and Q5.
4. (Skip Q6.) Do Q7 and Q8.
5. Skip the closing hymn.

A LITTLE LONGER (60–90 minutes)

As above, but consider adding back in the Introduction, adding Q3, and allowing a little 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. 🌿