

## OPENING PRAYERFUL HYMN

*"I Am the Bread of Life" (ELW 485)*

## OPENING PRAYER

Speak to us, great I AM, as you spoke to Moses. Burn in us as you burned at your holy mountain. Abide with us as you have always abided with your people and with all of creation. You are the one who is faithful from generation to generation. You are the one who journeys with us and goes before us to show us the way. You are the one who is and is to come. You are the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In your name, we pray. Amen.

## FOCUS VERSES

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.' " God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations." (Exodus 3:14-15)

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*
- Optional: Video supplement at [gathermagazine.org/resources](http://gathermagazine.org/resources)

# God's name, God's promise

## Session one

God who abides: Bread, light and vine

BY HANNAH HAWKINSON

## INTRODUCTION

The shepherd stands, watching a fire blaze within a dry bush, without destroying it. Out of the bush, a voice calls his name: "Moses, Moses!" Hearing this, the shepherd replies: "Here I am."

Telling him to come no closer and to remove his sandals on this holy ground, the mysterious voice declares: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

As Moses stands on this holy ground, he hears God speak again from within the fire, saying: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey..." (Exodus 3: 4-8a).

Moses asks what he should say when the Israelites ask him for the name of the God of their ancestors. God responds: "I AM WHO I AM." God directs Moses to tell the people: "I AM, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations" (Exodus 3:13-15).

A more accurate translation of "I AM"—God's holy name and promise—is "I AM WHO I AM, and I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." One little name—I

AM—contains all of time and space... all that was, is and will be... all of God’s promise. Throughout the generations, even as God’s people forget God’s promises and wander in the wilderness, and even as kings and empires rise and fall, I AM is with them, leading them to a land of promise. Just as Moses witnessed on Mount Horeb, God’s holy fire burns in the least likely of places, calling God’s people by name, reminding them to whom they belong, and whispering God’s name and promise: “I AM.”

Jesus takes God’s name and promise, joining in the whispers of that holy fire, when he declares: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35), “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12), “I am the gate for the sheep” (John 10:7), “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11), “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25), “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), and “I am the true vine” (John 15:1).

What is Jesus telling us when he says “I am” — echoing God’s holy name and promise? Where do we find ourselves in God’s holy name and promise? This three-session Bible study will help us explore these questions.

### Share aloud or reflect:

1. Which of Jesus’ “I am” statements stick out for you? Why? Do you find that it surprises, comforts, confuses or challenges you?

### I AM WHO I AM

📖 **Read:** Exodus 3:1-4:17

What’s in a name? The Book of Exodus introduces us to two midwives: Shiphrah, whose name means “beautiful,” and Puah, whose name means “radiant.” Their circumstances are anything but beautiful and

radiant. Shiphrah and Puah, along with all their family, friends and neighbors, are enslaved by a merciless ruler, Pharaoh. Fearing an uprising, he demands that Shiphrah and Puah use their trusted role to commit the unthinkable: “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him” (Exodus 1:16). But Shiphrah and Puah refuse to follow these orders. Instead, they ensure that all the children in their care survive, and they lie to Pharaoh, putting their own lives on the line to protect the people. God’s beauty and radiance shine through Shiphrah and Puah.

In Exodus 2, we meet a baby boy and his mother. Although she is unnamed here, we learn later (Exodus 6:20) that her name is Jochebed, meaning “glory of God.” Jochebed places her baby boy in a basket on the river, bravely sending him into an uncertain future. With this risky move, Jochebed defies Pharaoh, trusting God’s promises. And God is glorified by her resistance.

Pharaoh’s daughter discovers Jochebed’s baby, adopts him and decides to name him Moses, “because...I drew him out of the water” (Exodus 2:10). In Hebrew, Moses means “draws out.” A name of transition, it represents his being drawn out of one place and one family into another, delivered from certain death to new life.

Years later, when a grownup Moses flees into the wilderness of Midian to escape Pharaoh’s deadly wrath, God meets him face to face—not at a majestic vista or a holy temple, but at ordinary, dusty Mount Horeb. (The name “Horeb” means “wasteland” or “desert.”) Horeb is where God calls the one drawn out of water by name: “Moses, Moses!” (Exodus 3:4) And Horeb is where, for the first time, God reveals God’s own holy and sacred name—a name that out of reverence our Jewish neighbors never speak.

God's sacred name consists of four letters that biblical scholars call the *Tetragrammaton*: YHWH. However, the English translation of YHWH, "I AM," does not capture its fullness and complexity. In Hebrew, YHWH has both a present meaning and a future meaning. It encompasses all of time and space. And it is more than just a name. YHWH is also a promise—God's promise to be in all times and places, and to journey with God's people forever.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

2. Take a little time as a group to introduce yourselves, sharing your names with each other. What does your name mean? If you are not sure, search for its meaning online.
3. Does the meaning of your name resonate with you? Why or why not? Do you have a nickname you like better?

**I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE.**

 **Read:** John 6:30-59

Jesus has already been given many names: Immanuel ("God with us"), Messiah ("Anointed one"), and Jesus ("God saves us"). But after a long day of feeding five thousand hungry souls and a long night of walking on the water, Jesus gives himself a new name. "I am the bread of life," he declares. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). Did you catch it? Jesus is taking up God's holy and sacred name, the very same name revealed to Moses at the burning bush. This is easy for us to miss when reading English translations. But for the listeners and readers of Jesus's time, this was impossible to miss. It was a huge deal.

By taking God's holy and sacred name as his

own, Jesus reminds listeners then and now of God's promises across the generations. He invites them into the story of God's love and liberation. He invites them to remember who they are—and who God is. His listeners ask for a sign and remind him of the gift of manna in the wilderness. But Jesus, who has just fed them physically and spiritually, says, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." Not understanding, the people complain, wondering aloud how he can say so, when they know his mother Mary and father Joseph.

"Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died," Jesus tells them. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:49, 51). Jesus declares who he is and what this means for God's people. Jesus reminds them that God will not fail them now, in their physical and spiritual hunger. Jesus *himself* is the bread of life—he is the incarnation of the great I AM, the living bread coming down from heaven to sustain God's people.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

4. How does hearing that Jesus is the bread of life shape your understanding of Holy Communion?
5. One of Martin Luther's teachings was that scripture interprets scripture. Luther encouraged people to study scripture with a broad view of the whole biblical narrative, noting where scriptures agree and disagree. Where does Scripture invite us into the joy of holy clarity? Where does it invite us into the blessing of holy conflict? Are there places where it invites us into the tension of holy mystery?
6. Take turns reading aloud Exodus 16:1-36,

Matthew 6:19-20 and Psalm 78:21-29. How do these passages help us to consider what Jesus means when he says, “I am the bread of life”?

## I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

 **Read:** John 8:12-20

Jesus has been speaking to a crowd at the temple during and after the Festival of Booths, a week-long celebration of God’s faithfulness after the Israelites’ escape from Egypt. During this festival, which involved ceremonies for light and water, Jesus declared that he is the Messiah, the anointed one, God’s beloved Son. Jesus called out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.” (John 7:37).

In John 8, Jesus now shows the people what the identity of God’s beloved Son looks like in action. He protects a woman from an angry crowd. Surrounding her are religious leaders who seek to use the law of Moses to entrap Jesus. The leaders claim the woman has been caught in the act of committing adultery, yet they do not bring the man who engaged in the alleged adultery. Everyone is waiting to see what will happen: Will Jesus support the angry crowd’s push for capital punishment, violating the Roman law that only the empire can carry out such a sentence? Or will he tell the crowd not to stone her, violating the teachings of the Torah?

As always, Jesus rejects human binaries, inviting all—even the leaders and the crowd—into a new way of grace. “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,” Jesus says (John 8:7). The crowd, which had been struggling to see the boundless love of God, slowly peels off, one by one. Jesus says to the woman that he does not condemn her, but to go and sin no more. Then Jesus tells the people: “I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Jesus is not only the bread of life, sent to sustain God’s people in their need, but the light of the world—a beacon of truth, justice, peace and love for all. In the face of the world’s judgment, brokenness and fear, Jesus invites us and all creation to join him in the light of life.

## Share aloud or reflect:

7. Scripture interprets scripture. Read the beginning of the Gospel of John (1:1-9). How does this shape your understanding of Jesus telling the crowd, “I am the light of the world”?
8. Imagery of “light” and “darkness” appears throughout the Gospel of John. In equating darkness with evil, we perpetuate anti-Blackness, ignoring so much of Scripture! Can you think of instances in scripture (Genesis 1:1-2, 1 Samuel 3, for example) and in life where darkness, blackness and night are good and holy? As a group, try making a list of words and images that represent the goodness of light without portraying darkness as evil.

## I AM THE TRUE VINE.

 **Read:** John 15:1-17

After washing the disciples’ feet, a gesture of hospitality usually performed by servants, Jesus gives them a new commandment: to love one another as he has loved them (John 13:31-35). He promises that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will come to “teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). Then Jesus proclaims: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the

vinegrower” (John 15:1). A little later, he says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

In his life, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus abides with us as a vine abides with its branches. Even in the stillness and silence of the tomb, we are never alone. Jesus journeys with us, completely and unreservedly, out of love—the love of God our vinegrower, Christ our vine, and the Holy Spirit our Advocate. We are called to bear the fruit of God’s love by loving one another.

### Share aloud or reflect:

9. Scripture interprets scripture. Read Isaiah 5:1-7. How do these words from Isaiah help to shape your understanding of Jesus saying, “I am the vine”?
10. We, as branches of the true vine, are commanded by God to bear the fruit of love. In the coming days, what fruits of love can you receive and share? How can you abide with your community as God abides with you?

### GOD’S NAME, NOW AND FOREVER

First given to Moses in the barren wilderness of Horeb, God’s holy name and God’s holy promise, I AM, echoes throughout the scriptures and across time and space. When Jesus takes up this name and promise, he proclaims that he is both the Son of God and God’s very self.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty (Revelation 1:8).

God’s name—God’s promise—is not just for Moses and the Israelites, for the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, for the strong and the mighty, for the

insiders. God’s name, God’s promise, is for all the world, including us. We too are woven into the story of God’s love.

Jesus, the Word made flesh, proclaims that God’s abundant love never fails. God will never stop abiding with our broken and beautiful world. Jesus teaches us that the bread of God “is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:33). Reassuring and directing us, Jesus says: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9).

May we root ourselves in the good news of Christ, our true vine. May we receive the bread of life with joy. And may we follow the light of the world with courage, loving and abiding with our beautiful, broken world, just as the great I AM loves and abides with us.

### CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you are the bread of life... the light of the world... and the true vine. Nourish us when we are exhausted. Guide us when we are lost. Abide with us when we are lonely. Draw us into your beloved community and send us out to love others as you have loved us. In your name, we pray. Amen.

### CLOSING HYMN

“Enviado Soy de Dios, Mi Mano Lista Está /The Lord Now Sends Us Forth” (*ELW 538*) 🌿

# God's name, God's promise

## Session one

Bread, Light and Vine

BY HANNAH HAWKINSON

### OVERVIEW

In this three-part study, we'll dive deep into a part of our scriptures that is frequently overlooked: God's name, which is "I AM." Wherever you see "the LORD" capitalized in your Hebrew Bible (Old or First Testament), that's actually God's name—holy and unspeakable. God's holy name, "I AM," is everywhere in Scripture, yet it we too often miss it.

Throughout these sessions, we'll look at what the "I am" statements in Scripture mean for our biblical ancestors and for us today. We will learn how God abides with us (March), protects us (April), and leads us into abundant life (May).

In this first session, we'll explore how God first chooses to reveal God's name, not in pomp and circumstance to a king or emperor, but on an ordinary day to Moses, a refugee shepherd. We'll then jump ahead to the Gospel of John, where we see Jesus take up God's name and promises with his "I am" statements.

### TIPS FOR LEADERS

**Optional beginning and ending:** Consider starting and ending the session with two or three minutes of intentional silence before offering an opening (or closing) prayer. Explain that you will lead the session and serve as the group's timekeeper. You may wish to light a candle and dim the lights. Invite participants to make themselves comfortable, as you sit together in silence.

You could offer words like:

*In this time of silence, let God's presence wash over you. Even if our minds wander, God meets us with love wherever we find ourselves.*

**A note about light and dark language:** Leaders will find it important to address the ways that John's frequently-used language of "light versus darkness" has been (and continues to be) warped to support the evils of racism and white supremacy. Because this language is central to John and many scriptures, it is important to name this reality. When we talk about John's metaphor of light and darkness, it is critical to include other perspectives on the goodness of darkness and night throughout scripture. One excellent resource to share is a children's book, *God's Holy Darkness* (Beaming Books, 2022), written by Sharei Green and Beckah Selnick, with illustrations by Nikki Faison.

### "Scripture interprets Scripture" discussion

**questions:** Throughout the study, you will notice that several discussion questions begin with the phrase "Scripture interprets scripture." This was a central teaching of Martin Luther, who encouraged people to study the scriptures by taking a broad view of the entire biblical narrative and noting how various passages are in conversation. As we do so, we can ask:

1. Where do the scriptures agree, inviting us into the joy of holy clarity?
2. Where do the scriptures disagree, inviting us into the blessing of holy conflict?
3. Where does studying these scriptures together offer nuance, inviting us into the tension of holy mystery?

All three sessions provide opportunities to enter into this practice. If participants wish to go deeper, here are additional biblical passages to explore with the “I am” statements:

- “I am the Bread of Life”: Matthew 6:19-20; Psalm 78 (especially verses 21-29); John 4:1-42
- “I am the Light of the World”: Matthew 5:14-16; 1 John 5:6-12; Deuteronomy 19:15-21
- “I am the True Vine”: Psalm 80; Ezekiel 17:1-10; John 13:31-35

**Making real-world connections:** As a group, talk about ways that you could better abide with one another, your congregation and your community. For example, you or your group could participate in your congregation’s visitation ministry, bring a home-cooked meal to a friend who is sick or lonely, volunteer at a local cooling center, or volunteer at an overnight shelter.

#### SHORTENING SUGGESTIONS

The entire study can be completed in a 90- or 120-minute session or a series of weekly half-hour to one-hour studies. Larger groups can break up into pairs or groups of three for discussion. Here are some shortening suggestions:

#### SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Ask group members to read the entire study before they come.
2. After a time of silence, do “Opening hymn” and “Opening prayer.”
3. Ask participants to each name one thing they appreciated in the study, and one question they would like to discuss.

4. Spend the remaining time discussing the questions raised by your group.
5. After a time of silence, end with the “Closing prayer” and the Lord’s Prayer.

#### A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)

This “book report” format works especially well with medium- to large-sized groups.

1. After a time of silence, sing “Opening hymn” and pray “Opening prayer.”
2. Break into 4-6 smaller pairs or groups. Assign each group to do 1-2 sessions of the study (“Introduction,” “I AM WHO I AM,” “I am the bread of life,” “I am the light of the world,” “I am the true vine,” and “Conclusion”). Ask them to read and discuss their session for 15 to 20 minutes. (Feel free to adapt: If you don’t have enough people for six groups, you could ask if one group could do both the introduction and conclusion.)
3. Conclude with three- to five-minute presentations from each group about what they see as the takeaways from their section.
4. After another time of silence, end with “Closing prayer,” the Lord’s Prayer, and “Closing hymn.” 🌿