

OPENING PRAYERFUL HYMN
“Lead Me, Guide Me” (ELW 768)

OPENING PRAYER

Holy, loving and gracious God, your son Jesus came among us that we may have life and have it in abundance. Yet for so many of us that abundant life can feel far away. Lead and guide us and all creation from fear to love, from anxiety to peace, and from death to life. You are the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In your name, we pray. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26a).

MATERIALS NEEDED

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

God’s name, God’s promise

Session three

God who leads us: Resurrection and life

BY HANNAH HAWKINSON

INTRODUCTION

The man of unclean lips (see Isaiah 6:5) is struggling to believe that God has sent *him*. How foolish he had been, shouting, “Here am I; send me!” (Isaiah 6:8) In the bright light of day, the task seems overwhelming. God had asked Isaiah to give the people a message they did not want to receive, proclaim God’s judgment on wayward kings, and speak God’s truth to the kingdom of Judah as the threat of exile grew. How could he possibly do such a thing? He was only one man, and a flawed one at that. Why had God made *him* a prophet?

But God had called out to Isaiah. God had appeared in glory and “blotted out” his sins to prepare him to serve (Isaiah 6:7). Isaiah has his work cut out for him. Soon there will be a horrible day of judgment— “a day of tumult and trampling and confusion in the valley of vision, a battering down of walls and a cry for help to the mountains” (Isaiah 22:5).

Isaiah is faithful to God’s call. To the people who are crumbling under the weight of their own brokenness and sin, Isaiah proclaims:

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt...The wine dries up; the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. (Isaiah 24:5-7)

Despair, judgment and suffering loom large in Isaiah's heart and mind. At times, the weight may have felt too much to bear. No matter how eloquently he speaks and pleads, the people refuse to listen. In grief, Isaiah cries out to God.

Even then, Isaiah proclaims, there is hope. God is present. And God keeps God's promises. The vine will be fruitful again. Abundant wine and rich food will flow, not only for the people of Judah, but for all people (Isaiah 25:6). God's flourishing, new, abundant life was not only possible, but certain.

[God] will destroy...the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the covering that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the LORD GOD I AM will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD I AM has spoken.” (Isaiah 25:7-8)

God, whose name is I AM, promises to lead all creation into abundant life – not by avoiding our struggles, but by entering them and transforming them into something new. Nothing — not even death — will separate us from the love of I AM, who promises to be with us forever.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. When abundant life feels far away, lament and grief are part of our faith practice. For what do we grieve today? How do you cry out to God in lament?

HE WILL SWALLOW UP DEATH FOREVER.

📖 **Read:** Isaiah 25:6-10a

Let's begin with a little background. Isaiah is one of our most important prophets. He declares God's judgment and promises during a brutal religious and political conflict between Israel, Judah, Assyria

and Syria. The Book of Isaiah follows God's people over hundreds of years, through good times and bad, exile and return, judgment and redemption, grief and hope. It testifies to God's enduring promise to be with God's people.

The Book of Isaiah is a combination of at least three separate sources. Working backward, the last portion or "Third Isaiah" (chapters 56-66) is thought to be a compilation from various writers after 538 B.C.E. when God's people return from the Babylonian exile. "Second Isaiah" (chapters 40-55) comes from 587-538 B.C.E., when an unnamed prophet proclaims God's comfort to the people during their exile. "First Isaiah" (chapters 1-33 and possibly 34-39 as well), dates to the actual prophet Isaiah, who preached in Judah from 742-700 B.C.E.

So, the Isaiah 25 passage we just read comes from the prophet Isaiah, who proclaims God's promise to people languishing under the weight of sin and death. Led by corrupt kings who reject God's holy covenant, God's people turn away from God and their neighbors. Instead of making peace, they fight wars. Rather than work toward unity, they sow seeds of discord. Instead of caring for creation, they let it languish. Refusing to stand with the most vulnerable, they exercise power with impunity to further their own plans. God's people fail—just as we fail in our own time. "The wine dries up," Isaiah tells them. "The vine languishes; all the merry-hearted sigh" (Isaiah 24:7).

But thanks be to God, this is not the end. The prophet proclaims the enduring promise of God's holy name. Empty tables will be full again. Dry vines will flourish. Deep sighs will turn to rejoicing. The great I AM promises that God's people will enjoy an overflowing feast where there had been only scarcity, life where there had been only death, and freedom where there had been only bondage.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. Isaiah's vivid language is an invitation to

our senses. In your own words, how do you think God's holy feast will look, feel, taste and smell?

3. Scripture interprets scripture. Read Isaiah 25:6-10a again. Then read Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. Where do Paul and Isaiah sound similar? Where do they seem different? How do the two passages work together to shape your understanding of God's word?

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE.

📖 **Read:** John 11:1-44

Before traveling to Bethany, Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus' illness "is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (John 11:4b). If this unsettles you, you are not alone. Why wasn't Jesus there for Lazarus? How could he just let his friend die? How can God allow our suffering, grief and death? Why doesn't God restore all creation to abundant life, with a snap of God's fingers?

"Lord," Martha cries out, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). Who among us has not felt the same? We too can find ourselves saying: "Lord, if only you had been here, I wouldn't be in this mess. This would not have happened!"

To help with our confusion, Jesus gives us another "I am" statement that clarifies what God's glory really means. Jesus says:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26a).

As a first-call pastor, I had confidently proclaimed these words at funerals, memorial services and burials,

until they had become almost too familiar—even rote. That all changed when a lifelong member of the congregation I was serving died in his late 20s after complications from surgery. As I read Jesus's words by his graveside, I realized how shallow my resurrection hope had been—dependent on dying well and after a long, full life. That day, all I could manage was to proclaim Jesus' promise through my tears. When I admitted this to a colleague, her words lodged in my heart. "Resurrection doesn't mean anything when times are good and all is fair and life is simple," she said. "Jesus was right there, weeping with all of you."

And she was right. Jesus' proclamation of God's holy name and promise—"I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25)—neither erases nor invalidates our pain and grief, or Jesus'. Jesus doesn't turn away; in fact, he does the very opposite. "When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping," John tells us, "he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'" (John 11:33-36).

Even in the midst of grief and death, the promise of God's holy name endures. God promises us abundant life that will never end. Even in the deepest grief, Martha responds to God's promise with authentic faith:

"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (John 11:27).

We do not have to jump ahead to the good news of resurrection. We don't need to pretend that our suffering and grief are not real. Like Martha, we can simply say that we believe. This is enough.

Joining us in our grief, Jesus holds us in love (John 11:35, 38). God can handle our grief. God leads us through it, out of death and into resurrection life,

calling, “Come out!” (John 11:43).

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Scripture interprets scripture. Read John 20:1-18. Share a similarity and a difference between John’s account of Jesus’ resurrection (John 20) and the raising of Lazarus (John 11).

I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE.

📖 **Read:** John 14:1-14

This passage begins what biblical scholars often refer to as Jesus’ “farewell discourse” –a farewell speech that stretches across four chapters of John. Jesus’ words are an intimate farewell to the friends who have accompanied him throughout his earthly ministry. Just a quick glance over chapters 14-17 reveals that Jesus has a lot to say, including an “I am” statement we explored in Session 1: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower...” (see John 15).

This farewell speech has a common theme: Jesus’ loving unity with God the Father, who welcomes all. We hear both Jesus’ teachings and the prayers he gave at the Last Supper, before his betrayal. Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit and give his peace (14:25-27). Acknowledging their pain, Jesus invites them to hope, saying, “your pain will turn to joy” (16:20). Describing God’s welcome, he says: “The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God” (16:27). Jesus prays for loving unity with God for them and all of us, saying: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 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 17:22-23).

Now let’s go back to chapter 14, where Jesus’ words, “I am the way, the truth and the life,” are often highlighted in a way that misses the point of this

passage and the entirety of Jesus’ farewell speech. Bearing in mind the theme of loving unity, let’s look at Jesus’ message again:

Jesus said to him, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know[a] my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (vv. 6-7)

“I am the way, the truth and the life” is not about drawing lines between who does and who does not belong in the God’s beloved community. If you think about it, Jesus’ ministry has never been about building walls to separate insiders from outsiders. Instead, Jesus is inviting the disciples and us into the abiding love, enduring promise and abundant life that God, whose name is I AM, has prepared for us and for all of creation. I AM is the way, leading us to abundant life; I AM is the truth, keeping us in right paths; and I AM is the life, inviting and welcoming all to the abundant life God has prepared.

“I will come again and will take you to myself,” Jesus says, “so that where I am, there you may be also” (14:3). And lest the disciples think that this promise is only for them, Jesus declares that God’s house has “many dwelling places” that Jesus is personally preparing (John 14:2). The message is clear: God’s love and welcome is broader than the disciples can imagine! There is more than enough room for all.

And it is only when Thomas questions this, and asks how to follow Jesus to that holy dwelling place, that Jesus takes up God’s holy name and promise, to say:

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know[a] my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

These words don’t appear out of nowhere—they

are Jesus' comforting response to his friend's earnest question. Jesus assures him and us of God's abiding love through Jesus on the difficult journey to abundant life.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. People often hear this passage read aloud at funerals and memorial services. Why do you think that is? How might John 14:1-14 comfort people who are grieving?
6. Scripture interprets scripture. Read 1 John 3:18-24 and compare it with John 14:1-14. Where do they align? Where do they diverge?

HOW CAN WE KNOW THE WAY?

"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (John 14:5)

Who has not joined Thomas in asking that question of Jesus? I know I have. Our lives and our world are complicated and messy. The way forward is often anything but clear. We suffer from pain and illness in body, mind and spirit. We lament our dashed hopes and deferred dreams. We yearn for reconciliation and healing in our relationships—including those relationships shattered beyond repair by trauma and broken trust. We regret our mistakes and failures, often crumbling under the weight of grief and shame. We struggle with hopelessness and apathy in the face of evil. We watch as violence tears families, friends and communities apart. We hear our human family's blood cry out from the ground as wars and conflicts rage. We try to resist our culture's relentless tide of hatred and fear. We know God calls us to love and serve our neighbors, but we are not sure where to start in the face of such immense suffering. We want to open ourselves to the pain of the world, but it is simply too much. We begin to close ourselves off,

crying out to God in exhaustion and grief: "How can we know the way to your abundant life in the midst of all this?"

In loving response, God, whose name is I AM, calls out to Moses and us from the burning bush. God whispers to prophets then and now. Jesus, God's son, preaches, teaches and heals God's people. Jesus tells us that the reign of God is coming near and reminds us that we, too, are woven into the Great I AM's story.

To all who hunger, Jesus promises us: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). To all who wander, Jesus finds us, proclaiming, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). To all who are vulnerable, Jesus protects us, saying, "I am the gate for the sheep" (John 10:7). To all who are afraid, Jesus declares, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11). To all without hope, Jesus promises, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). To all the lost, Jesus pledges, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). To all who are lonely, Jesus says, "I am the true vine" (John 15:1).

The promise of God's holy name is proclaimed by prophets across the generations, by Jesus, who invites all into God's abundant life, and by each of you. God's holy name and promise is for you. God is at work through you. Receive and share this good news with joy and hope. Thanks be to God!

CLOSING PRAYER

Thank you, God, for weaving us into your story of promise. Be with us now and always. Protect us now and always. Lead all creation into abundant life. We ask this in your holy name—the name of the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

"I Am the Bread of Life" (ELW 485) 🌿

God's name, God's promise

Session three

Resurrection and Life

BY HANNAH HAWKINSON

INTRODUCTION

When your group discusses Jesus' words, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26), resist the temptation to skip over the reality of pain, grief and lament. How might you follow where Jesus leads? Jesus proclaims the hope of the resurrection while also dealing tenderly and honestly with people's grief and pain. The hope of the resurrection and the promise of God's abundant life, arise not in spite of, but *out* of death and grief.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

A note about language: Leaders will find it important to address the ways that the language John frequently uses to refer to God's chosen people—"the Jews"—has been weaponized to justify anti-Jewish rhetoric, hatred and violence. Remind participants that Jesus, Lazarus, Mary, Martha, the gathered crowd and the disciples—not to mention John himself—were all Jewish. John's use of the phrase "the Jews" does not refer to the Jewish people as a whole. Rather, it reflects conflicts within the Jewish community in John's time and place. More on this topic can be found in the introduction and study notes on the Gospel of John found in *Lutheran Study Bible, Second Edition* (Augsburg Fortress, 2025).

"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 you lead the "Scripture interprets Scripture" discussion questions, 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?

Want to go deeper? Add these passages:

- "He Will Swallow Up Death Forever": Exodus 24:9-11; 1 Kings 19:1-18; Revelation 21:1-5a
- "I am the Resurrection and the Life": 1 Kings 17:8-24; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 6:1-14
- "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life": Psalm 25; Matthew 7:7-11; John 17:1-26

MAKING REAL-WORLD CONNECTIONS:

Where in your community are neighbors suffering? How might you share God's abundant life with them? For example, could you raise funds or put together a neighbor kit for Global Refuge (globalrefuge.org)? Volunteer to clean kennels at an animal shelter? Organize files for a local nonprofit? Ask local nonprofits about their needs. Then discuss with your group and agree on a collective action.

SHORTENING SUGGESTIONS

The entire study can be completed in 90 or 120 minutes, however, here are some shortening suggestions:

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Ask participants to read the study before you meet.
2. Do “Opening hymn” and “Opening prayer.”
3. Ask each participant to name one thing they appreciated in the study and one question they’d like to discuss.
4. Discuss the questions raised by your group.
5. End with the “Closing prayer” and the Lord’s prayer.

A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)

1. Do “Opening hymn” and “Opening prayer.”
2. Break into 4-5 smaller pairs or groups. Assign each group to spend 25-20 minutes reading and discussing 1-2 sessions of the study (“Introduction,” “He Will Swallow Up Death Forever,” “I am the Resurrection and the Life,” “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” and “How Can We Know the Way?”).
3. Conclude with three- to five-minute presentations from each group about the takeaways from their section.
4. End with “Closing prayer,” the Lord’s Prayer or “Closing hymn.” 🌿