


JANUARY & FEBRUARY
SMALL GROUP SERIES



*Who do you
say I am?*

AS TOLD BY THE GOSPELS

SESSION 1: THE LAMB OF GOD

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

Welcome to our first small group discussion of 2021. During January and February, we are going to continue answering Jesus' question: *Who do you say I am?* It's our hope that these sessions continue the journey that we began during our services over the past couple of months and help deepen our understanding of Jesus Christ.

The Bible verse that we read was John the Baptist's profession as he saw Jesus approaching. He wanted the people there with him to behold - to see - **the Lamb of God**. What did that mean? He perceived Jesus to be the sacrificial lamb who could resolve the problem of sin, not only for the Jewish people, but for the entire world. He recognized Jesus as the One whom the Old Testament pointed to. So to deepen our understanding in recognizing Jesus as the Lamb of God, let's take a quick look back into the Old Testament.

When we look at the Bible in its entirety, it's amazing how the Old Testament connects to the New Testament and how often it alludes to Jesus' life and sacrifice. One instance of this is the Passover Feast and the Last Supper. We may already know that when Jesus and His disciples gathered at the Last Supper, they were together to celebrate Passover. However, it is more than just a coincidence that the Last Supper happened to be during Passover. We can look all the way back to Exodus 12, when the Passover Feast was instituted, to see how that moment was a foreshadowing for what Jesus would do for all humanity.

Passover was first established before the Israelites fled Egypt to escape slavery, as we can read in Exodus 12:11. Here, God states that the Passover meal should be eaten in haste and with all of their things ready so they could leave Egypt quickly. After this initial Passover Feast when the Israelites left Egypt, Passover was celebrated every year as a remembrance of their freedom and is still celebrated by Jewish people today.

The first and last portions of Exodus 12 are God's instructions to Moses and Aaron on how to celebrate the Passover meal. His specific directions are what reveal the connections to His Son, who would come to earth many years later to give His life for our sins.

In Exodus 12:3 and 4, the Lord instructs Moses and Aaron to tell the Israelites, *"On the tenth of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for the lamb, let him and his neighbor next to his house take it according to the number of the persons; according to each man's need you shall make your count for the lamb."* From these verses, we can see that the lamb is given great significance; it is to be shared as the main part of the Passover Feast among many people. We can draw a parallel between this Passover lamb and Jesus as the *new* Passover Lamb. Jesus is often referred to as the Lamb of God, as seen in John 1:29, and also as "our Passover" by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:7. Why is the image of a lamb applied to Jesus? Not only does the animal represent the meekness and gentleness of Christ, but just as the Jewish people would bring a lamb to the priest as an atonement for their sin, Jesus was brought before God as a sacrifice on behalf of man's sin. One difference however, is that while the Jews' sacrifice was repeated, Jesus' sacrifice was once and lasts for all time. We are reminded of this every time we celebrate Holy Communion and hear these words during the consecration, *"the once brought, eternally valid sacrifice of Jesus Christ."*

The Exodus verses also put a focus on the sharing of the lamb. The lamb is not meant for just a few people, it is meant to be divided by many, even sharing it with a neighbor's family. This is true of Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb. He did not die for the sins of one person, but for the sins of *all people in all times*.

Isaiah also paints a strong picture of the Messiah's sacrifice, further cementing Jesus as the Lamb of God: "*He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent*" (Isaiah 53:7). Jesus is the Lamb of God because He is both the sacrifice presented to God and the sacrifice provided by God, removing the world's sin and taking it upon Himself alone. There are additional references in the Bible that show us that Jesus is indeed the Lamb of God, and you are encouraged to seek out these passages in your discussion to continue deepening your understanding of who Jesus is. The better we know Him, the more we marvel at the wondrous grace and love of our God, and greater our desire will be to become who He has created us to be.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who gave His life to give us life. *Behold the Lamb of God.*

SESSION 2: OUR SAVIOR

So when the Samaritans had come to Him, they urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. And many more believed because of His own word. Then they said to the woman, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world" (John 4:40-42).

In our session today we respond to the question of who Jesus is with the answer, **Jesus is our Savior**. *Savior* is a name for Jesus that means *He saves His people from sin*. That's why God's plan of coming and dwelling amongst us came into being. Recall what the angel told Joseph about Mary's pregnancy, *and she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins* (Matthew 1:21). And then recall the message of the angels to the shepherds in Luke 2:11, "*for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*" This great news announced so long ago should continue to facilitate feelings of incredible joy in our hearts because each one of us is a sinner who is in need of a Savior. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) and none of us can save ourselves. Born to all who accept Him in faith is a Savior. Do we understand why we need a Savior? And are our hearts filled with joy and peace because we know that we have a Savior?

It's so important that we recognize our need and that Jesus is our Savior. But it's possible, even after meeting Jesus and knowing our own sinfulness that we might not recognize Him as our Savior. The Bible passage that we heard at the beginning of this session came from the conclusion of Jesus' experience with the Samaritan woman. Jesus met her alone by the well and during their conversation she recognized that there was something different about Him. He was a Jewish man speaking to a Samaritan woman. He came to the well without a bucket to draw water and asked her for a drink. Jesus revealed to her intimate details about her life. And despite Jesus telling her plainly that He was the Christ, she still was uncertain. When she returned to her village and spoke to the people about Him she wondered and asked the question "could this be the Christ?" She had come face-to-face with the Savior and struggled to recognize Him fully. Jesus spoke to her about her struggle to recognize Him: In John 4:10 we read: *Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."* It's possible to come near to the Lord and miss recognizing Him and the gifts He wants to share. Those

who recognize and believe in Jesus Christ as the Savior receive the gift that satisfies the desire of the soul, the Spirit of God. How has your life been changed by your recognition of the gift of God in Jesus Christ your Savior? What effect has the “living water” had on you?

Even with her lack of understanding, many believed in Jesus after hearing her testimony. Many Samaritans sought after Jesus and spent two days with Him. The result of their listening to Jesus, was their proclamation that He truly is *the Christ, the Savior of the world*. It would be an incredible experience for us if we could meet with Jesus face-to-face today and listen to Him speak. We can experience His voice in the divine Word and sacrament and we can become convinced again and again that He truly is our Savior.

Our Savior, Jesus Christ, saves us from our sin. For some, this might be a disappointment because there are so many other things that cause us to struggle. We often hear about how the Roman dominance over the Jewish people is what they were hoping to be saved from. How disappointed some may have been that Jesus didn't come to set them free from the rule of Rome. How disappointed some may have been when they realized that the Savior didn't just come to deliver the devout Jewish people, but also the Samaritans and other Gentiles. Are we disappointed today that Jesus saves us from our sin and not some of our earthly struggles? Are we disappointed when we see someone not like us accepting the invitation of the gospel? Remember what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman about the living water. Through faith in Him, He not only saves us from the entrapment of sin, but also shares with us that living water that works to sustain, empower, equip, and edify. Through the incredible gifts given to us by our heavenly Father we receive what we need to overcome our struggles. We just have to recognize what He has shared with us and engage with His Spirit to put these gifts into action.

Jesus is our Savior! Because of this, we have reason every day to celebrate Him, grow in His likeness, and give glory to God.

SESSION 3: THE COMPASSIONATE ONE

Welcome to our third small group discussion in this series. In the first two sessions this month, we looked at two different responses to Jesus' question, *who do you say that I am?* - You, Lord, are the Lamb of God, and You are our Savior. Jesus gave His life on the cross to save us from our sins and to give us hope for eternal life. In this session, we'll dive deeper into an aspect of Jesus' nature that led Him to the cross - **His compassion**.

One definition of compassion is *sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it*. Note that compassion is not just sympathy or pity. True compassion combines recognition and concern with help. Jesus Christ is the greatest example of one who shows true compassion. He doesn't just see us in our suffering and feel sorry for us—He alleviates our suffering. Christ's compassion always *leads* to something.

In both the Old and New Testaments, Jesus is described as being **full of compassion** (Psalm 116:5, James 5:11). We can find evidence of this truth throughout the New Testament. For this small group, we'll focus on His example of compassion found in Matthew 9:35-37:

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when He saw

the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few."

Verse thirty-five highlights the extent of Jesus' compassion, shown through His teaching, preaching, and healing. In the ninth chapter of Matthew alone, there are seven examples where Jesus showed compassion toward those in need. In verse two, Jesus heals a paralytic and forgives him of his sins. In verse ten, we find Jesus eating, and presumably preaching and teaching, at a table full of tax collectors and sinners. In verse twenty-two, Jesus heals the woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years. In verse twenty-five, He raises to life the daughter of a ruler named Jairus. In verse twenty-nine, He gives sight to blind men. And, in verse thirty-three, He heals a mute and demon-possessed man. In each of these examples, note that Jesus' compassion leads to action.

However, there is a difference between these examples and the seventh example of compassion outlined specifically in verse thirty-six. In the previous examples, Jesus heals various physical conditions - blindness, immobility, muteness, even death. In verse thirty-six, Jesus' concern is over something much greater - the state of the soul. Here, Christ was *moved with compassion* because the people were without a shepherd. The scribes, Pharisees, and religious leaders were not providing what was needed for their souls, and so the people were destitute, wearied, and of poor spiritual health. This was Jesus' greatest concern, and the deepest source of His compassion.

The action that results from Jesus' compassion toward this great multitude, and from His concern over there being plenty to harvest but only few laborers to do the harvesting, can be found in verse thirty-eight: *Therefore, pray the Lord of harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.*

Here, Jesus' compassion leads to a call for prayer. He sees that there is a great need for shepherds - those who can guide and lead the people spiritually - and so He instructs His disciples to pray earnestly for this need to be met by God. What a beautiful example of compassion the Lord Jesus gives us!

As Jesus' disciples today, it's important that we pause and consider our own compassion. Is our compassion a reflection of the compassion of Christ? Do we not only recognize need and suffering, but also seek to alleviate it? Compassion is a true mark of Christian character. Certainly, we can't heal as Christ healed, or teach as Christ taught. Only He can fully alleviate suffering, and only He has words of life that can truly satisfy the soul. However, there is much that we *can* do. A kind, healing word or gesture can go a long way toward alleviating suffering. Taking some time to listen to someone or to just *be with* them can also make a considerable impact. And, as Christ clearly showed us, so can prayer. Often we think that a grand gesture is needed or required, when what Christ is really calling us to do is pray.

In this New Year, may the Lord increasingly open our eyes and hearts to the needs and suffering of others, and may we be filled with the compassion of Jesus Christ.

SESSION 4: THE HUMBLE SERVANT

Hello! And welcome to our fourth session of the series, *Who do you say I am?* In today's session we'll delve into the account of Jesus washing His disciples' feet and see what we can learn from it as His disciples today.

Jesus' earthly life was characterized by His selfless love, and one of the expressions of this love was **His service**. He served His Father and the people with whom He shared life and, through His example, He also taught us how we can show our love for Him and for our neighbor. During His work on earth, Jesus repeatedly instructed His disciples that selfless service and humility are the ways of His kingdom. This was also one of His last teachings, as He gathered with His disciples before the Feast of the Passover for the last meal that He would have with them.

In chapter 13 of the Gospel of John, we can read about this account, which begins with a brief introduction that the hour of Jesus has come, emphasizing His love for His disciples. *When Jesus knew that His hour had come... having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end* (John 13:1). Jesus, being fully aware that the "hour" has come, that He would return to the Father, and be betrayed by one of His friends, performs a solemn and deliberate act: He washes the feet of the twelve.

In Jesus' time, when a guest arrived at a meal, it was common for the host to provide water so that they could wash their hands or feet, or have someone else wash them. Washing the feet of the guests was not only done for hygienic purposes, it was also a symbolic recognition of honor and social standing. As a rule, this task was assigned to a slave or a servant. Furthermore, the washing of feet was normally done before the meal. It appears, however, that Jesus washes the disciples' feet after the meal had begun, as we can read in John 13:3-5, *Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.*

The fact that Jesus carried out this act at an unexpected moment served to highlight the importance of the act itself; this teaching was fundamental to a life of discipleship. Moreover, Jesus' service in this event is emphasized by the fact that He *girded Himself*. This is what servants and slaves customarily did at the time. However, when Jesus shares His reflection on what He has done, He calls Himself "Lord and Teacher," as we read in verses 14 and 15: *If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.*

Although He washes the feet of the disciples, He is still their Lord and Teacher. In this sense, nothing has changed. However, Jesus was not promoting His status above theirs. Rather, He is expressing His lordship in His self-debasing service, and demonstrating that the extent of love He calls us to manifests itself in service to our neighbor.

The call to serve that the Lord addresses to each of us does not mean that we need to alter our occupations, professions, or roles in society. It also does not mean that we need to change our personality or who we are. Rather, He calls us, regardless of our status or position, to demonstrate our love for our neighbor through humble service, genuinely looking out for the well-being of others.

Paul reminds us that this instruction of Jesus Christ for His disciples still applies to us today - *...not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider*

equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (Philippians 2:4-7 NIV).

This mindset of Jesus is how He expects, and explicitly instructs, His disciples of all times to align their lives. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, condescended out of love for us. He possessed all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18), and yet He became Man, lowering Himself to serve all.

God has predestined that all those whom He foreknew should ... *be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren (Romans 8:29)*. It is His will that all His children develop a servant's heart, such as that of our Lord and Teacher.

SESSION 5: THE TRUE VINE

Welcome back. To continue our series exploring who Jesus is, this session will look at one of His seven "I Am.." statements, "*I am **the true vine**...*"

As Jesus' public ministry was ending, He gathers His intimate disciples around a meal and addresses them in what is commonly referred to as His "farewell discourse," found in John chapters 13-17. In the farewell discourse, Jesus not only addresses their questions and fears about His impending death, He also instructs them to stay the course, which involves remaining in Him.

In John, chapter 15 verses 1 through 4, we read: "*I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.*"

This language of the vine and branches is tied to Israel as the desolate vineyard we can read about in the Old Testament. Isaiah 5:1-7 identifies Israel with a vineyard that is well taken care of by God and consequently is expected to bear much fruit. Instead of living up to God's plan, Israel brings forth bad fruit. From Isaiah 5:4, "*What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?*"...and continuing with verse 7, *For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.*

With this statement, Jesus is making a claim that He is the new Israel and that He is redeeming their history and fulfilling Israel's destiny, the destiny of God's people. Jesus is bringing with Him the possibility of a flourishing and fruitful life, where Israel had originally dried out and offered nothing on the vine.

Jesus reiterates that He is the vine, and the instruction to abide in Him with John 5:5, adding that "*... for without Me you can do nothing.*" So, what does it mean to abide? Although the word *abide* is used 10 times in the first ten verses of John 15, it isn't necessarily a word that is used much in modern conversation. We may think of "*abiding by the laws*" which in that context means to obey or stay within an established system. This is true, and Jesus is instructing His disciples to obey what He has taught them, but He is also drawing them further...to invite them into a deeper understanding of what it means *to abide*. Jesus is inviting them not just to follow the laws, but to endure, remain, dwell, and be present.

To simply *be* with Him and continue in His teachings. To stay intimately connected, as branches are connected to the vine.

Various verses in this passage provide clues on how to stay connected - how to *abide in Him*. Verse 7 explains, *“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you...”*. So, we must let the words of Christ dwell in us. We should have a life-long desire to more and more know and understand the words of Christ - what He said and why He said it. Of course, being a Christian isn't just about knowing historical phrases, either; we need to apply the instructions and words of Christ to our lives. This leads us to the next clue on how to *abide in Him*, found in verse 10, *“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.”* Abiding in Him means that we know and allow Christ's words and motive of love to shape our worldview and our decisions in every area of our lives. Discipleship and obedience to God truly becomes our lifestyle.

Jesus also explains in this passage that the result and evidence of truly abiding in Him is that we produce fruit. We can only produce fruit, true fruit that matters, when we are connected with Him as the true vine. To be a branch in the vine means we are united to Christ. As we abide in Him, His life flows through us and produces fruit, causing us to recognize that we cannot produce anything worthwhile on our own. Remember verse 5, *“for without Me you can do nothing.”*

Being a disciple that glorifies God is not just about “doing” Christian things, but rather “being”, or *abiding*, in Christ. It is not our responsibility to worry about the harvest - God is responsible for the outcome. We are called to simply abide in Him. When we abide in Christ, we as branches are connected to the true Vine so that the Father, as vinedresser and gardener, can produce the fruit in us that He wants.

SESSION 6: THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Welcome to the last session in our current series: *Who do you say I am?* Today we're going to explore Jesus as the Good Shepherd, mentioned in John 10. Let's start there, with the words of Jesus:

*“I am **the good shepherd**. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd”* (John 10:11-16).

What does it mean that Jesus is the Good Shepherd? There are a few relevant points in the verses we just read. First, He **gives His life for the sheep**. This is an act of love, because Jesus does so willingly. It is a foretelling of His sacrificial death on the cross. A hireling flees when there is danger or risk, but the shepherd is willing to take risks, even to the point of death, for those in his care.

Second, **He knows His sheep** – He is *attentive* and compassionate to all. And **He is known by His sheep**. Jesus is *accessible* to those that follow Him. This is not just passing knowledge, but a deep and abiding relationship, as Jesus compares our relationship with Him to His relationship with His Father.

Finally, **there will be one flock and one shepherd**. Jesus died for all, He calls to each one (...*they will hear My voice*), and gathers everyone to Himself (...*them also I must bring*).

We can also look to Psalm 23 to see what kind of shepherd Jesus is: *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

This passage is well known, but sometimes misunderstood. *I shall not want...* perhaps we have thought this means that Jesus gives us everything we need or want. We believe this is not what the Psalmist is saying. Maybe the addition of one word could give some clarity: **Because** *the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.* Rather than speaking of gratification, it speaks of contentment, trust, and being satisfied in what the Lord provides; moreover, not wanting more than what He gives.

His sheep are well placed; *in green pastures* and *beside the still waters.* We can be satisfied in what our Shepherd provides, and live gratefully in His provision. The sheep are well led; *He leads me besides still waters...* and *...in the paths of righteousness.* However, in order to come to these good things, the sheep must follow; they must look to the Shepherd, and allow Him to lead their ways through His word and guidance. Further, we can understand that being led in *paths of righteousness* means that what the Lord decides is right and good for us; it is the right path.

The Shepherd's presence gives strength and encouragement. Even when *walking through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.* The rod and staff refer to the shepherd's crook, under which the sheep passed to be counted, or by which anything harmful was driven away.

You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies... Our Shepherd provides, even in the midst of our enemies. Who are our enemies? Perhaps in the last few months we have battled many: the virus, uncertainty, grief, unemployment, loneliness. Yet, Christ abundantly provides – as the Psalmist expresses *...my cup runs over.* How does He provide? When we see the Lord as our Shepherd, we view our lives with a different perspective. The last verse of the Psalm gives us an illustration of what this prayer has done for its writer; it has given him hope, comfort, joy, and courage – *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.* After moments spent reflecting on and in conversation with his Good Shepherd, he is strengthened, and resolves to ever remain with Him.

What does this mean for us?

First, we can rest in the knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love and care of Jesus Christ, our Shepherd. Second, like the psalmist, we can spend time getting to know the Good Shepherd better - through Scripture, through prayer, through the preached word, through quiet reflection, and through our fellowship with each other. Clearly, we cannot be the shepherd Jesus is, but we can learn from and imitate His character as the Good Shepherd. We can make ourselves *attentive* and *accessible* to those around us. We should not act like the fleeing hired hand, but instead, accept the responsibility we have to those around us; to care for, protect, lift up, and give of ourselves for them (1 John 3:16, John 15:13). When we think on and learn from our Good Shepherd, we will live in humility, gratitude, openheartedness, other-mindedness, and with unsparing generosity.

We hope these last two months have opened up new understandings of Jesus Christ that will change and strengthen you in the year before us.