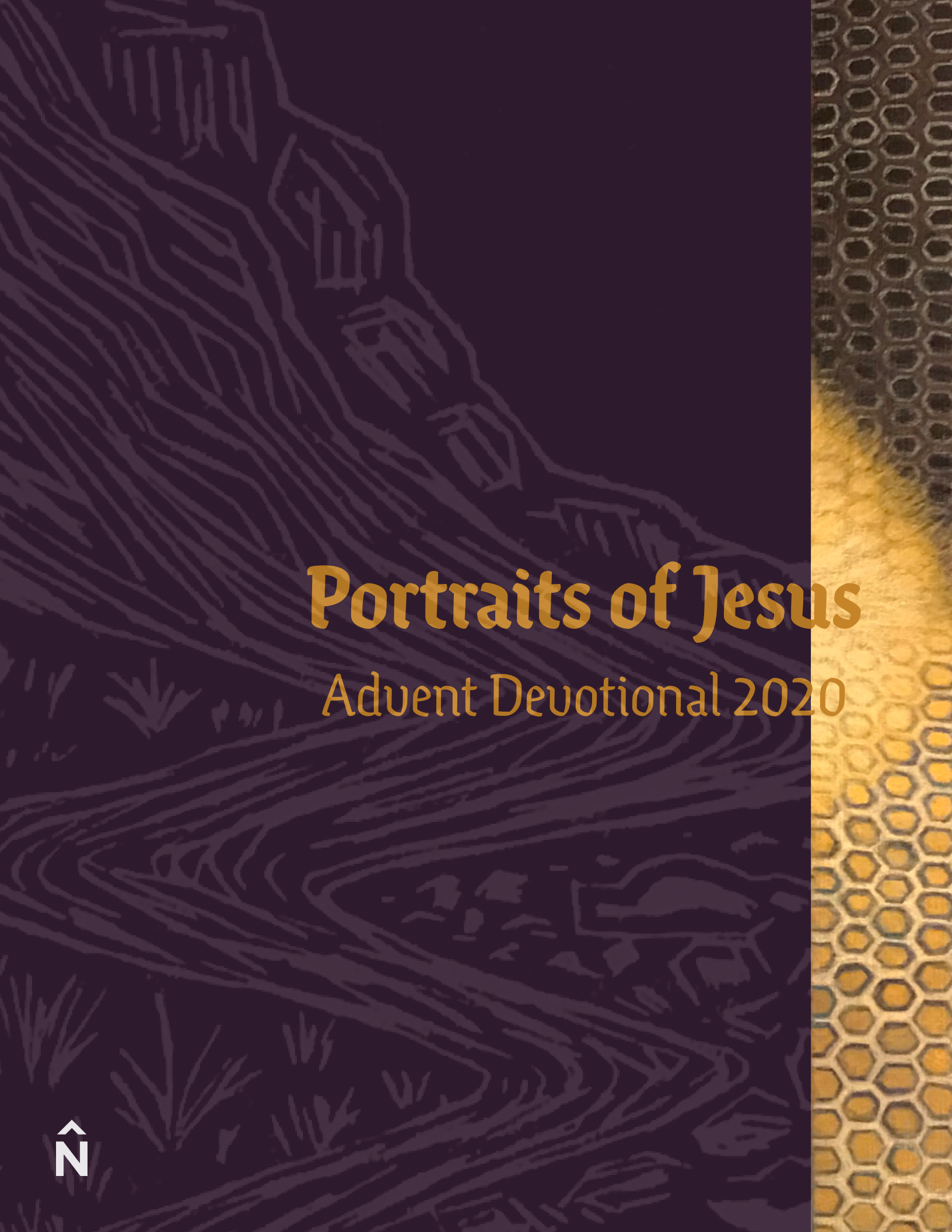




Portraits of Jesus

Advent Devotional 2020





Table of Contents

Introduction: Portraits of Jesus

Week of 11/29 - Saturate Reading Plan: Luke 23-John 4

Creative Word: John 1:1-5

The Bridegroom: John 2:1-12

Zealous Prophet: John 2:13-25

Master Teacher: John 3:1-21

Living Water: John 4:1-42

Week of 12/06 - Saturate Reading Plan: John 5-10

Life Changer: John 5:1-10

Bread of Life: John 6:1-15, 27-40

Defender of the Condemned: John 8:1-11

Light of the World: John 9:1-41

Good Shepherd: John 10:1-21

Week of 12/13 - Saturate Reading Plan: John 11-16

Pivot Point: John 11:1-57

Mary's Lord: John 12:1-8

Betrayed Friend: John 13:18-38

The Way: John 14:1-14

The Vine: John 15:1-18

Week of 12/20 - Saturate Reading Plan: John 17-21

Unity's Source: John 17:6-26

Man of Peace: John 18:1-14

Innocent Convict: John 18:28-19:16

Gentle Master: John 20:11-29

Introduction: Portraits of Jesus

Advent 2020

In his landmark book, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger argues that every piece of art carries with it a way of seeing. “Painters reconstruct what they see with brush marks on canvas.” Photographers select the angle, lighting, and scene. Likewise, the viewer of art has a way of seeing that draws on their life experience and culture. Berger’s theory makes sense of the wordless experience of wonder that we have when we gaze at a portrait, reflect on the subject’s immortalized facial expression or posture, and find we have a window into their character or inner world, centuries later.

Similarly, the gospel authors intended to enrich our way of seeing Jesus by leaving us an array of portraits that reflect the experience of walking and talking, living and working with him. As we see Jesus heal and feed people, teach, laugh, serve and even crack a whip, we have windows into his character. This year the Advent Devotional aligns with the schedule for the Saturate Reading Plan, which has many reading the four gospel accounts over the last four months of the year. We hope this focus on the gospels sparks in you a renewed way of seeing Jesus that results in a deeper love and devotion.

John tells us, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” (1:18) If we have seen Jesus as the Bread of Life, then we know God our Father as the source of nourishment for hungry bodies and searching souls. If we have seen Jesus as our Fellow Mourner, we can be sure that we never bear our losses alone. As we meditate on Jesus’ life, may we be captivated. And may we be stretched by one another’s way of seeing Jesus and find a deeper unity, rooted in who he is for us.

Sincerely,
Sarah Bartley, Betsy Crowe, and the NSCBC staff



Jesus - The Creative Word

John 1:1-5 | Ben Friedman

A few years back, I stumbled across a Facebook post from a high school classmate, who had recently become a New Age life coach. He asked: “What would you do if you knew the universe had your back?” A fascinating phone call ensued because I was intrigued by his provocative question, and I had questions of my own: did he think that the universe—that vast expanse of stars and galaxies—had a personality? If it did, what made him think that it was positively inclined towards us? How would we find this out? If we could answer “yes” to these questions, what peace and assurance it would give us—what boldness!

What if we realized, however, that Christianity makes an even more provocative claim than this? In the first chapter of his gospel, John tells us that *in the beginning* there was God, and with him was *the Word* (John 1:1-3), and through this Word all things—including this entire universe—were made. In John’s day, many would have understood the *Word* (*logos* in Greek) as the *logic*, or the laws and principles that permeated an orderly, yet impersonal universe. And yet this Word was not an *it*, but a *he*—a *he* who created all things and wields all things for our good. Behind all the laws of this universe is the towering presence and power of God’s eternal son, Jesus. Water freezes at 32°F because of him, and light travels at 186,282 miles per second at his command.

In other words, there is a person holding together this universe, and that person is unswervingly *for us*. He is so completely for us that he took on human flesh and moved into our world. As John writes: *The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.* (John 1:14-16)

What would you do if you knew that God was for you?



Meredith Free, Creative Word



Albert Decaris, Lithograph from *Jesus en son temps* by Daniel-Rops
(Editions des Deux-Rives: 1953) <http://sacredartmeditations.com/life/detail/8>



Jesus - The Bridegroom

John 2:1-12 | Porter Sprigg

It was the bridegroom's job to plan the wedding party and ensure that there was enough wine for all the guests. The groom in this story failed.

Have you ever hosted a party where things went wrong? Maybe you ran out of food or maybe Uncle Henry wouldn't stop talking about politics. Whether it's something we do, or something totally outside our control, our attempts to host the perfect get-together can fail. The bridegroom in John 2 was facing disaster at his own wedding, as running out of wine would have been a great source of shame and embarrassment. Our lives can be like that too.

We try to host our own party. Through our own willpower and ingenuity, we set out to build a life of joy, fulfillment, and personal growth. Eventually, those efforts fall flat. We can feel like a failure of a host with an empty wine cellar. In place of joy and transformation, we feel disappointment, and even shame. This is when we must realize we are not the host of the party. We need Jesus to step in and show himself to be the true bridegroom, the true host. He not only changed water into the best wine of all, but provided it in super-abundance – over 100 gallons of exquisite wine, the best of the best. That's what our God does. He provides grace and joy—in excess. By producing so much wine in ceremonial washing jars, Jesus made an incredible statement. In him is joy and in him is cleansing.

Jesus can't just be a guest at your party. He needs to be the groom, the host, the provider. We all must let go of our relentless, self-driven pursuit for approval, security, and control. Jesus is in charge. His own blood is the wine that saves us from shame and guilt and changes us into new creations.

Do you believe that the same Christ who transformed water into wine can make you new as well? What would it look like for him to become the host of the party? In prayer, name an area where you can surrender control.



Jesus - Zealous Prophet

John 2:13-25 | Jeffrey Arthurs

It was Passover—late March or early April—a pleasant time of year in Jerusalem. But inside the Temple, things were not so pleasant. The smell of animals and the clinking of coins indicated that the people had lost sight of the Temple as a “house of prayer,” and had turned it into a “den of robbers” (Luke 19:45). So, Jesus made a whip out of rope and drove the moneychangers out along with the lowing oxen and bleating sheep. He took his stance as one of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and critiqued the lifeless formalism of their religion. The people asked him what authority he had for doing such things. After all, the leading priests permitted them to do a little business on the side there in the Temple environs, but along came a yokel from Galilee with a whip! “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” (v. 18) His answer? “Destroy this ‘temple’ (his body) and I will raise it in three days” (v. 19). Now that’s a sign! “I will die, but then three days later, I will come back to life.”

For years no one could figure out what he meant, but “when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this,” and they believed (v. 22).

Have you believed? If not, you might wonder, as the people of Jerusalem wondered, “Who does this guy think he is? He rolls into my life and starts rearranging the furniture. He wants me to give up everything to become his disciple? He wants me to forgive whom? Who does he think he is?”

He is the messiah, the shepherd-warrior-king in the line of David, who came to regather the nation of Israel and to open its doors to Gentiles. That’s who he thinks he is. And the resurrection proves that God his Father thinks so too. Do you believe?



Bernadette Lopez, Jesus overturns the tables in the temple - Jésus chasse les vendeurs du Temple
<http://www.evangelie-et-peinture.org/index.php/evangile-maison/evangile-selon-luc/449-jesus-chasse-les-vendeurs-du-temple>



Jesus - The Master Teacher

John 3:1-21 | Sybil Coleman

Each semester I look into the faces of students in my *Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare* class. I see young adults from 10 or 11 different majors, freshman through seniors from different cultures and political persuasions. I realize I need to know each student to determine the best way to teach them. Therefore, by the end of the first week each student submits a personal description paper.

Unlike myself, Jesus knew the heart of every person. He understood what their questions meant. He knew how to reach each one individually. Nicodemus represents one of the individuals Jesus taught. Jesus understood Nicodemus, listened to his questions, had a dialogue around his questions, and moved from elementary to complex concepts by moving from dialogue to discourse.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus at night. Why? We don't know! Whatever the case, Nicodemus asked these questions: "How can I enter the Kingdom of God?" "How can these things be?"

As Master Teacher, Jesus knew that Nicodemus was looking for more than information. He was asking heart questions that his mind could not answer. He came to Jesus knowing Jesus was a teacher come from God for no one could do the signs He did unless God was with him. He came because he thought this man could possibly satisfy the restlessness of his heart.

Teachers want their students to have an "Aha!" moment when knowledge connects with life. As Master Teacher, Jesus desired this for Nicodemus. He ultimately led Nicodemus from knowing the basic teachings of the temple to meeting/knowing the One of whom the Old Testament spoke. Jesus invites Nicodemus to come to the light — to accept the truth in His teaching—to embrace a new thought—to reframe past assumptions.

We teach daily by listening, by asking appropriate questions and providing time for reflection and possible transformation. Who might you listen to this week with a heart to understand—a child, a friend, a neighbor, a family member?



James Tissot, Interview between Jesus and Nicodemus (Entretien de Jésus et de Nicodème)

Opaque watercolor over graphite on gray wove paper, Image: 9 1/8 x 7 in. (23.2 x 17.8 cm).

Brooklyn Museum, Purchased by public subscription, 00.159.64 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 00.159.64_PS2.jpg)



Rebekah Steele, Living Water



Jesus - Living Water

John 4:1-42 (7:37-38) | Richard Wallace

If you've ever been on a strenuous hike without enough water you'll know just how distracting it is to go thirsty. It's all that's on your mind each step you take! And it's not like a pain or ache that your body will heal itself. The only thing that will satisfy is a long, refreshing drink.

Thirst is a good way to describe those distracting desires in life that don't go away with time, only with satisfaction. Perhaps these months during the pandemic have unearthed some of the things you thirst for—stability, companionship, attention, purpose?

What are the things you thirst for? And how do you seek satisfaction for your thirst?

In John chapter 4, Jesus has a conversation about thirst with a Samaritan woman, appropriately next to a well. Jesus moves very quickly past a surface-level conversation about water and dives into her deeper thirst. Jesus identifies her desires. He reveals he knows that she has had five husbands and the man she is currently with isn't her husband.

How do you diagnose this woman's thirst? Perhaps she craves love, but is trying to draw from the wrong well. She keeps trying different men, but the repeated pattern shows that there is no lasting satisfaction there.

Instead, Jesus shows her the way to true and lasting satisfaction of the deepest kind. All people are made for relationship with God. Each of us has a deep, eternal thirst for him. Only by getting to know Jesus more and being filled more with his Spirit will we know true and deep satisfaction in this life and through to eternity. Knowing Jesus and experiencing him more is the joy and vitality of ever-lasting life!

From what wells are you trying to draw satisfaction? (Jeremiah 2:13) How is Jesus living water for you? How are you finding satisfaction in him?

Jesus - Life Changer

John 5:1-10 | Beth Pocock

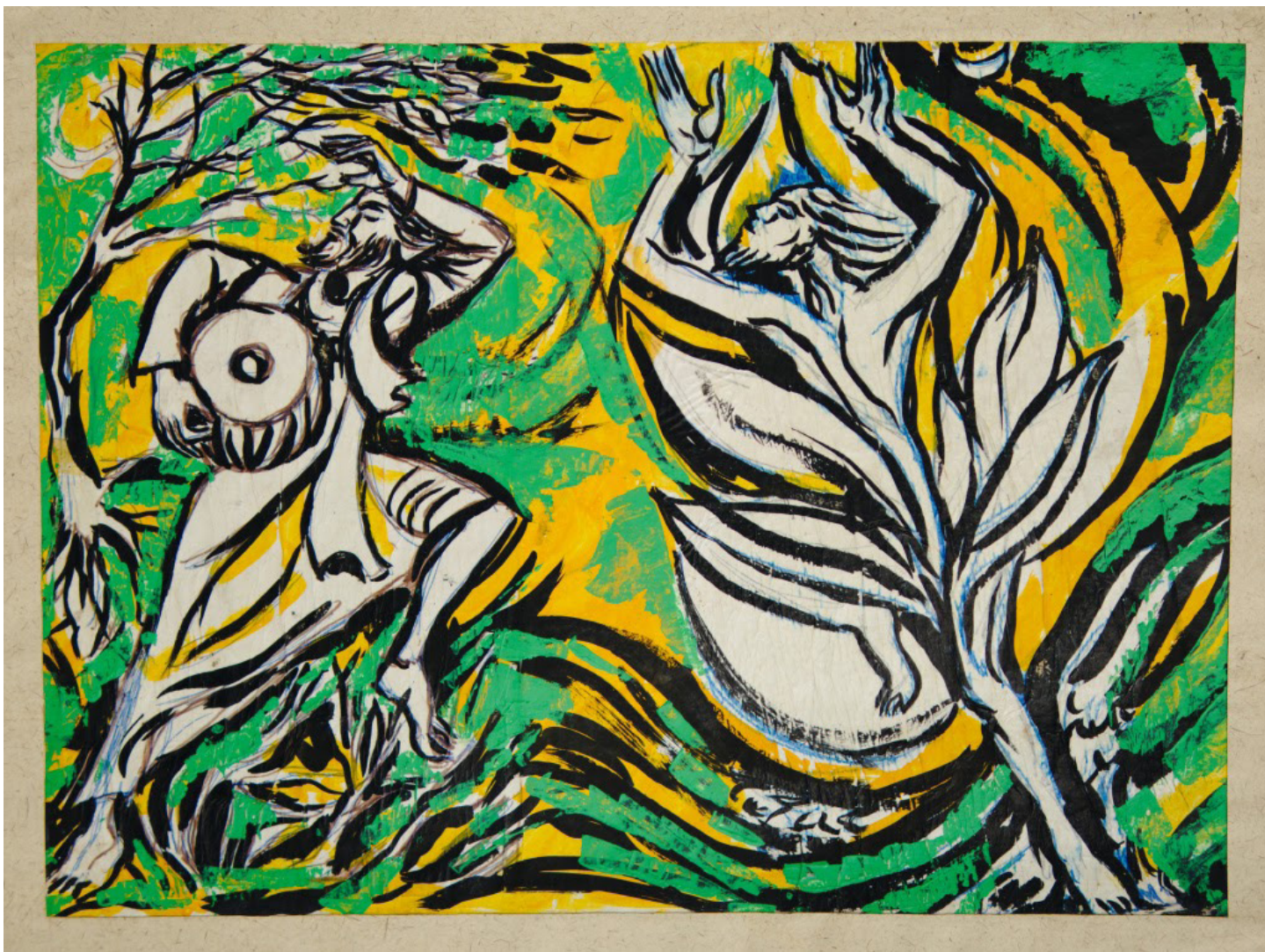
I've always had a tough time with those Magic Eye pictures. You've probably seen them. You start looking at a regular two-dimensional scene and then try to relax your focus. Suddenly a three-dimensional horse or dragonfly shows up. Everyone in the room exclaims "Oh, I see it now." Except for me. I'm left still looking at a mass of colored dots. It's all a question of being able to focus correctly.

The story of the lame man at the pool points out the importance of focus. Each character in the story is paying attention to a different reality. An invalid for 38 years, the man's focus has been narrowed by years of discouragement and despair. He is centered on his past failures ("Someone always beats me") and present weakness ("I have no one to help me"). On the edges of the crowd, the Pharisees are blinded by their focus on clever human theologies and their community standing.

But, like His father, Jesus refuses to lose his focus on the human heart. "Do you want to get well?" There comes a time in all of our struggles when we need to refocus our attention on the grace of God standing right in front of us. We are brought to a place of hard decision. Do we want to change or do we really just want sympathy? Will we take an honest look at ourselves or focus on our excuses? Are we willing to look beyond our own failures and weakness and see Jesus standing before us, ready and willing to heal and to set us on our feet?

God's presence and work can be easy to miss. Early believers created a simple exercise to help them refocus on God at the end of the day. It involved remembering the conversations had, the people met, the struggles faced, the beauty seen and then asking the Lord to move our focus back where it belongs: to see him and recognize his work in our lives.

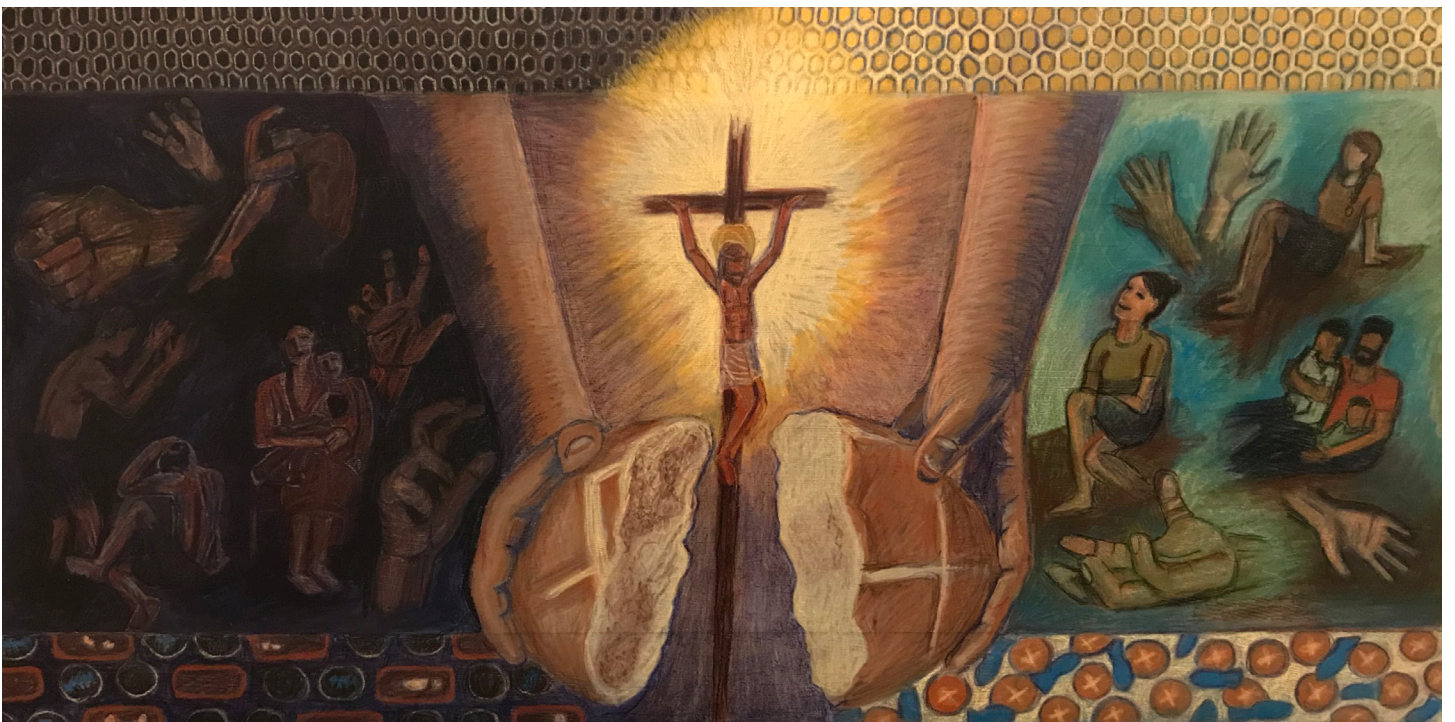
Ask yourself: "Where was the Lord working in my life today?"



Jyoti Sahi, Lord of Creation

1982. Gouache on paper, 14 3/4 × 20 in. Collection of Victoria Emily Jones.

<https://artandtheology.org/2020/10/25/roundup-jesus-as-dancer-the-daily-prayer-project-ethnoarts-in-indonesia-and-more/>



Rebekah Steele, Bread of Life



Jesus - Bread of Life

John 6:1-15, 27-40 | Lianna Sours

The enormity of this miracle is almost lost on me because I can't recall a personal experience of such a large gathering.

The place where I can enter into this story is smaller. I identify with the boy. He handed his lunch to Jesus only to watch Jesus do better and bigger things than he could have imagined. The boy gave Jesus bread, but Jesus showed everyone that He was the Bread of Life. The bread and fish satisfied many hungry bellies that day and Jesus satisfied many hungry souls.

In 2019, I welcomed my first daughter through foster care into my family. In some ways, I feel like the boy. It was like I heard Jesus asking, "Where are we going to find enough homes for children who need a family?" I didn't have enough to "feed five thousand," but I handed Jesus what I had and now I am watching Jesus do something better and bigger than I imagined. Our church family reminds me of the disciples in this story. Just like Jesus handed out the bread to five thousand through his disciples, Jesus has been handing himself out through and to the men and women and boys and girls of our church as they serve in response to the foster care crisis. Jesus satisfies the one who gives and the one who receives.

As I pray for children in foster care and the precious families they represent, I choose to believe this for them, too. There is no participant in a foster care story that is out of reach of the grace of God. We are all alike in our need for this Bread.

When I start with the small, I can then begin to grasp a little bit of the enormity of the truth that the Bread of life is for everyone. No one goes away hungry. Jesus is satisfaction for every hungry soul.



Jesus - Defender of the Condemned

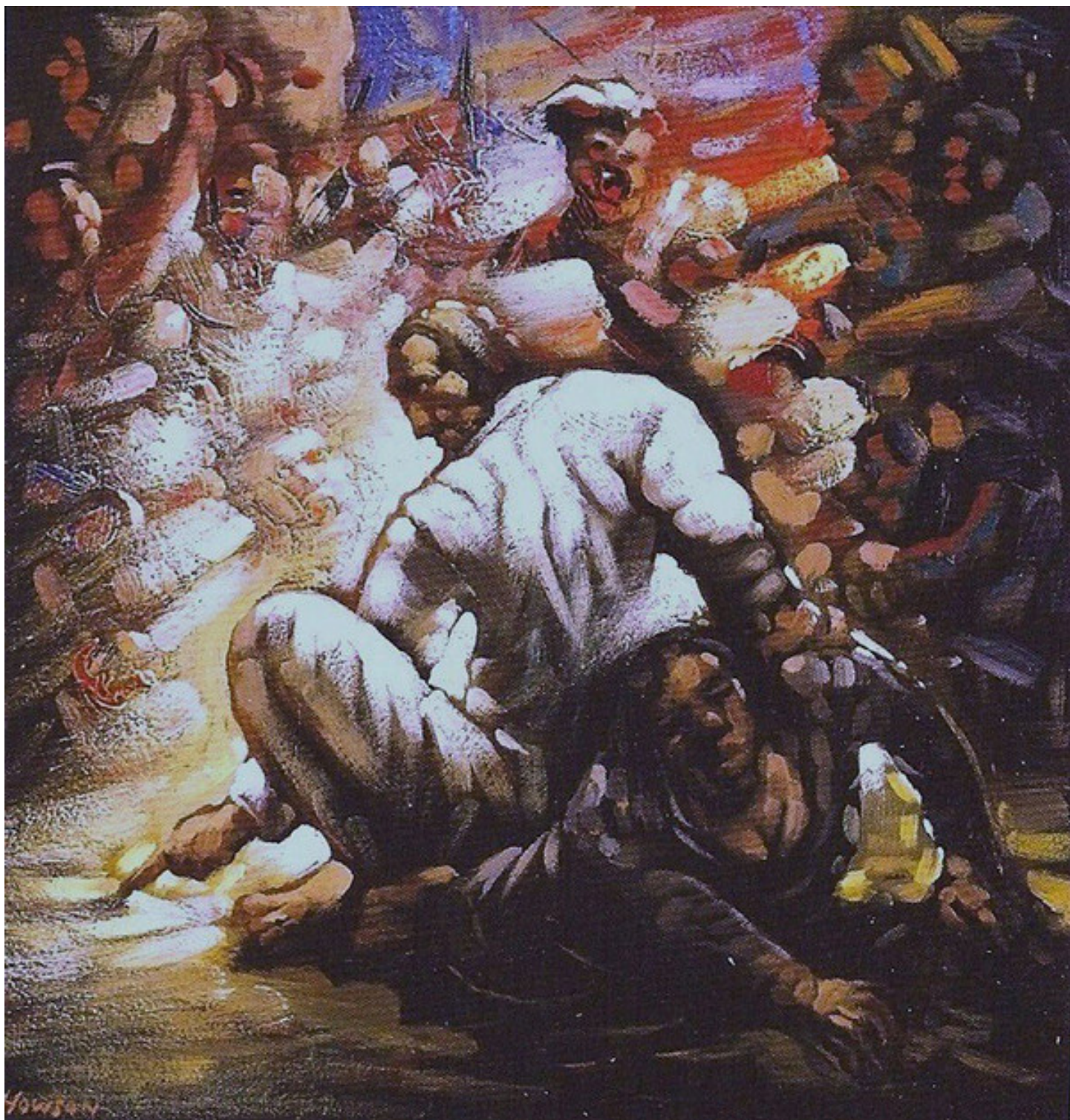
John 8:1-11 | Jessi Rennekamp

I'd been caught in the act. The underlying anger and bitterness I harbored against all humanity had finally, irrefutably manifested itself. I'd been called out by two co-workers within a week for my attitude in two different situations. I felt like the woman of this passage—dragged to the Temple courts, surrounded and accused (not unjustly), with my sin hanging visibly around my neck like an albatross. I replayed the conversations in my head, which triggered memories of other broken relationships. I thought of the angry comment I muttered at a fellow T passenger, the roommate who had once been a close friend but now only saw my flaws, the forgiveness I withheld from my dad for more than two years.

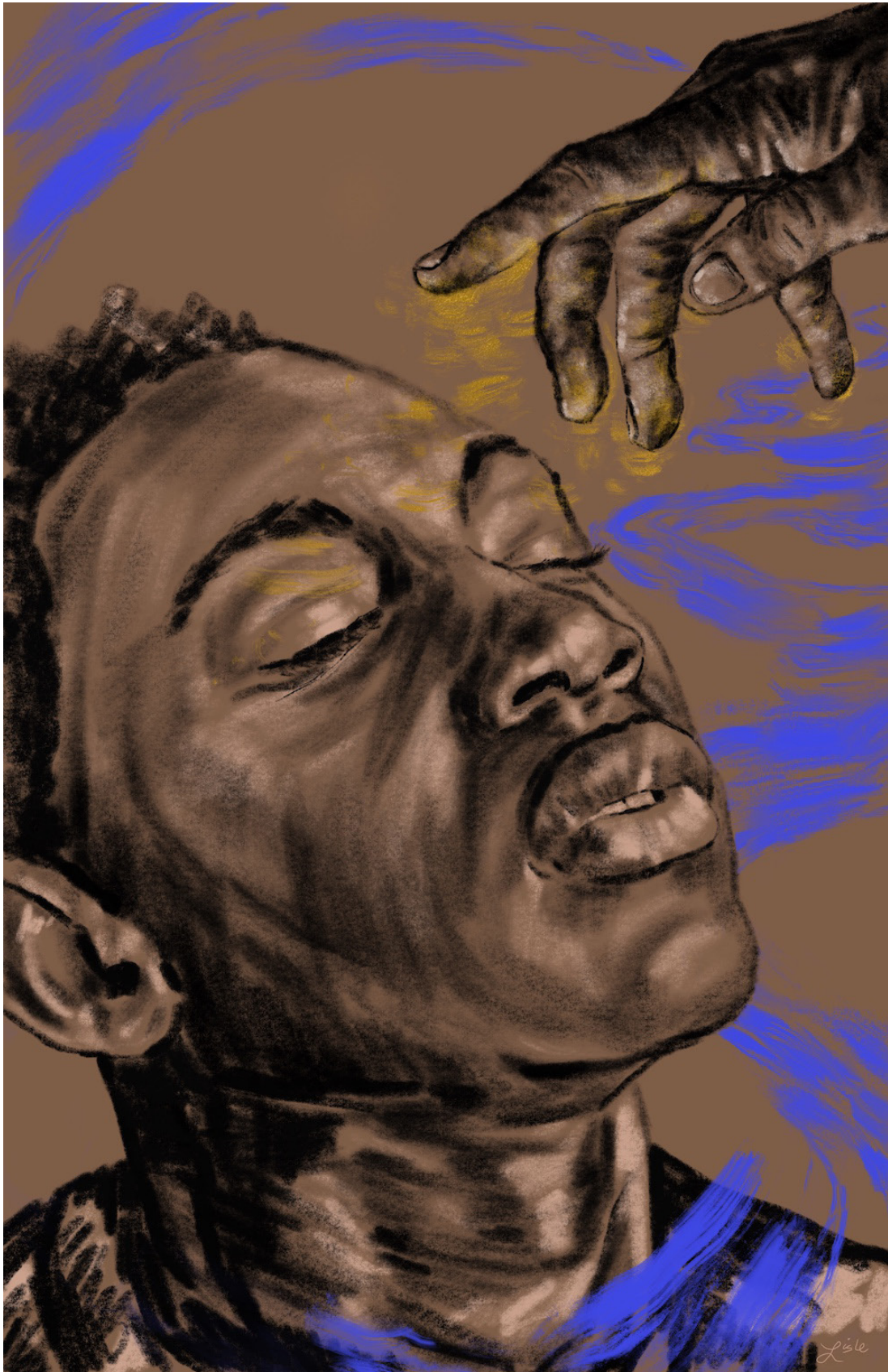
At this time, I discovered the practice of meditating on Scripture in a way that placed me in the midst of the action, experiencing it with all my senses. I found myself returning to the story of the woman caught in adultery. Confessing my sin through this story made my excuses fall away, demanding honesty about who I'd hurt. I imagined their faces as the ones who dragged me to the court. In the midst of my shame stood Jesus—the perfect one, the only one with every right to throw the first stone. Yet instead of judgment in his eyes, I saw gentleness. Though his eyes penetrated deep into my soul, seeing every intimate detail of my sin, he looked at me with love, compassion, and understanding. His love also refused to let me keep my bitterness and anger. He called me to change, showed me the way, and promised me the rescuing power I needed to live in a different way.

This is the true meaning of grace. “I do not condemn you, my daughter,” he said. “Go and sin no more.” It is truly his kindness that leads us to repentance—even when our own hearts condemn us.

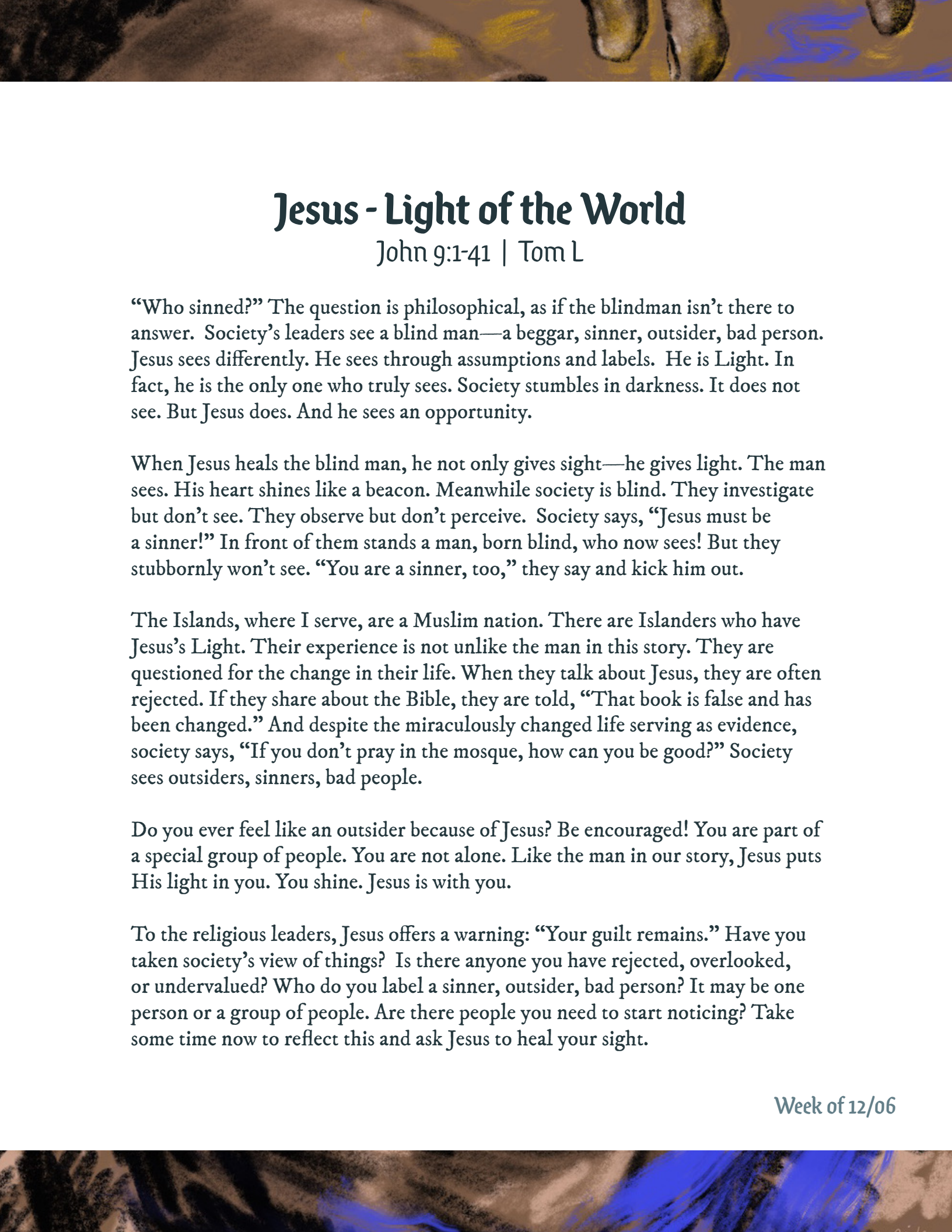
Are there any hidden sins you need to bring to light to experience Jesus' grace?



Peter Howson, Giclee print, Christos Aneste painting series
<http://sacredartmeditations.com/life/detail/24>



Siloam, Lisle Gwynn Garrity
© A Sanctified Art



Jesus - Light of the World

John 9:1-41 | Tom L

“Who sinned?” The question is philosophical, as if the blindman isn’t there to answer. Society’s leaders see a blind man—a beggar, sinner, outsider, bad person. Jesus sees differently. He sees through assumptions and labels. He is Light. In fact, he is the only one who truly sees. Society stumbles in darkness. It does not see. But Jesus does. And he sees an opportunity.

When Jesus heals the blind man, he not only gives sight—he gives light. The man sees. His heart shines like a beacon. Meanwhile society is blind. They investigate but don’t see. They observe but don’t perceive. Society says, “Jesus must be a sinner!” In front of them stands a man, born blind, who now sees! But they stubbornly won’t see. “You are a sinner, too,” they say and kick him out.

The Islands, where I serve, are a Muslim nation. There are Islanders who have Jesus’s Light. Their experience is not unlike the man in this story. They are questioned for the change in their life. When they talk about Jesus, they are often rejected. If they share about the Bible, they are told, “That book is false and has been changed.” And despite the miraculously changed life serving as evidence, society says, “If you don’t pray in the mosque, how can you be good?” Society sees outsiders, sinners, bad people.

Do you ever feel like an outsider because of Jesus? Be encouraged! You are part of a special group of people. You are not alone. Like the man in our story, Jesus puts His light in you. You shine. Jesus is with you.

To the religious leaders, Jesus offers a warning: “Your guilt remains.” Have you taken society’s view of things? Is there anyone you have rejected, overlooked, or undervalued? Who do you label a sinner, outsider, bad person? It may be one person or a group of people. Are there people you need to start noticing? Take some time now to reflect this and ask Jesus to heal your sight.

Week of 12/06



Jesus - Good Shepherd

John 10:1-21 | Russ Bjork

I recently watched a documentary about first century shepherds. I realized how little I previously knew about them. One of the main tasks of a shepherd was to protect his flock from predators and thieves—sometimes at the risk of his own life. During the day, a shepherd could use his staff to fend off attackers. At night, the flock slept in an enclosed pen with a low wall having a single opening. In a village, there might be a gatekeeper whose job it was to only allow a legitimate shepherd access to the sheep. (John 10:3) In the open field, the shepherd himself might sleep in the opening, using his body to protect the sheep. Jesus referred to Himself as the “door for the sheep.”

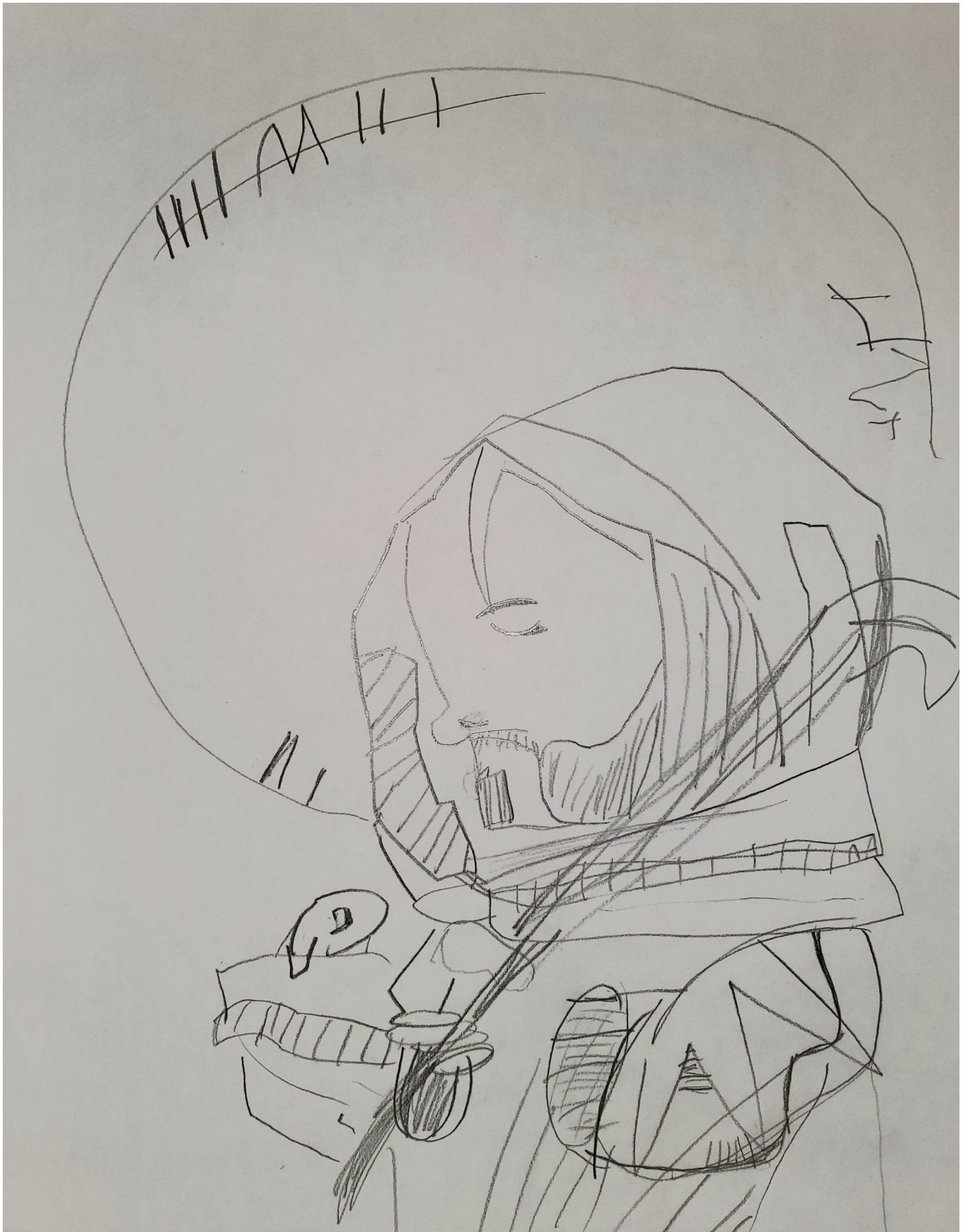
Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd. Why did Jesus apply this term to Himself?

First, Jesus is recalling the many places in the Old Testament that liken God—and godly leaders like King David—to shepherds. As our Good Shepherd, Jesus watches over us the way a good shepherd watches over his sheep.

Second, Jesus contrasts Himself with a hired man who does not really care about the sheep and tries to save his own skin when danger comes. Instead, Jesus was “willing to lay down his life for the sheep,” an idea mentioned five times in this passage. That’s exactly what He did. In this way, He stands in contrast to the religious leaders of his own day—false shepherds who rejected Him for the sake of their own pride and system of values.

Finally, just as a sheep recognizes and trusts only its shepherd’s call, so Jesus’ sheep trust Him and His leading in their lives. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:28)

Do you know the sound of Jesus’ voice as He watches over you and leads you? Do you trust it?



Callia Range, Good Shepherd



Meredith Free, Jesus – Fellow Mourner

Jesus - Pivot Point

John 11:1-57 | Jim Pocock

In this passage, Jesus is many things—a fellow mourner, a miracle worker, a sacrificial life-giver. Moreover, raising Lazarus is the pivot point of Jesus' ministry. This miracle, the last of the seven signs in John's gospel, is the point of no return. It hardens the religious leaders' resolve to kill him. The raising of Lazarus also means everyone else in the world must also pivot from here on out—everyone must either radically follow Jesus or completely reject Him.

Let me share how this happened for my friend Chris.

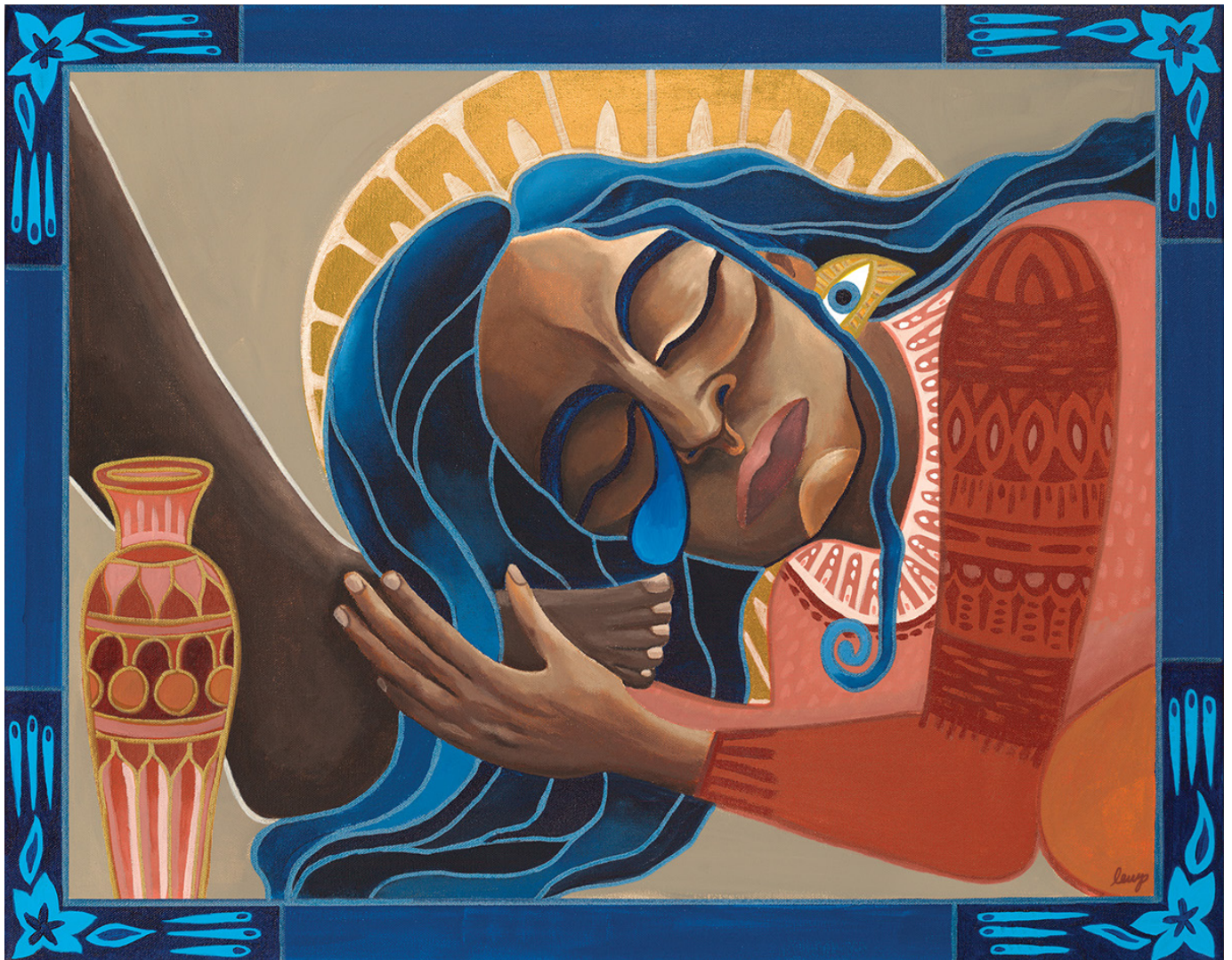
Chris is a Jewish man, a husband and father, and a prominent business leader. One morning over coffee, he told me he wanted to look into Christianity. Chris had never read the New Testament. I suggested he read the Gospel of John in one sitting. When we next met, I asked him what one thing stood out the most. "Chapter 11," he said decisively.

"The whole book pivots right here. Jesus raises this guy from the dead, and no one can deny it—Lazarus is walking around, meeting people, and because of him a lot of people believe."

He then talked about how the religious and political leaders refused to believe, because they knew it would cost them their place and their nation, and for them, that was unthinkable. So to protect their own standing, they decide to kill Jesus, and later on they decide to kill Lazarus too. Chris looked me in the eye and said, "These guys had the truth staring them in the face, but instead of believing it, they go for self-preservation. At any cost."

He continued, "I've seen the dark side of human nature, both in life and in business – how people will do what they know to be wrong because it profits them personally. But I can't do it. I won't live a lie. Jesus looks like the truth to me, and I'm all in."

John says that the miracle is recorded for a singular purpose, "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name." Over the centuries, thousands have received new life by believing in Jesus. Chris is one of them. His life pivoted that morning, and he has been faithful in God's Kingdom ever since. May all who read this gospel similarly have clear sight, not willful blindness, and the courage to choose accordingly.



Anointed, Lauren Wright Pittman
© A Sanctified Art

Jesus - Mary's Lord

John 12:1-8 | Sarah Bartley

Mary of Bethany lived near Jerusalem with her siblings Martha and Lazarus. She is likely single in a culture where women's lives were perilous without a husband, brother, or father. Jesus welcomed Mary—an apparently average woman—as a disciple, even as it defied social expectation. (Luke 10) We next meet Mary grieving at Lazarus' tomb. (John 11) If she and her sister are left alone, his loss had profound implications for their wellbeing. Before raising Lazarus, Jesus weeps at Mary's side.

The events at the tomb in Bethany put a target on Jesus' back. That tension hangs in the air even as Jesus and his disciples celebrate with Lazarus. Mary throws herself in total, unabashed gratitude at Jesus' feet. Her devotion is on full display as she anoints him—possibly pouring out her inheritance in an act of prophetic anticipation of his death. Here Mary provides a foil for Judas who, though one of the twelve, will lose the battle of competing devotions.

The narrative moves on but the question remains: What to make of Mary's act? After eating the passover meal, anticipating his betrayal, Jesus searches for a symbol to give his disciples. This symbol would show them—and every future generation of Christians—the posture of discipleship. Jesus undresses, picks up a towel, and washes their feet. Without a word, Jesus points a third time to Mary as an exemplary disciple. (John 13)

What is it like to see Jesus through Mary's eyes? It is hopeful to realize that Jesus sees beyond status and nurtures instead loyal, empowered humility.

In his brief but towering 1949 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, theologian Howard Thurman examines Jesus through the eyes of people who, like Mary, find “their backs against the wall.” This portrait has fanned the flames of my love and devotion to Jesus. You may also find it an excellent companion as you complete your reading of the gospels this year.



Jesus - Betrayed Friend

John 13:18-38 | Melissa Zaldivar

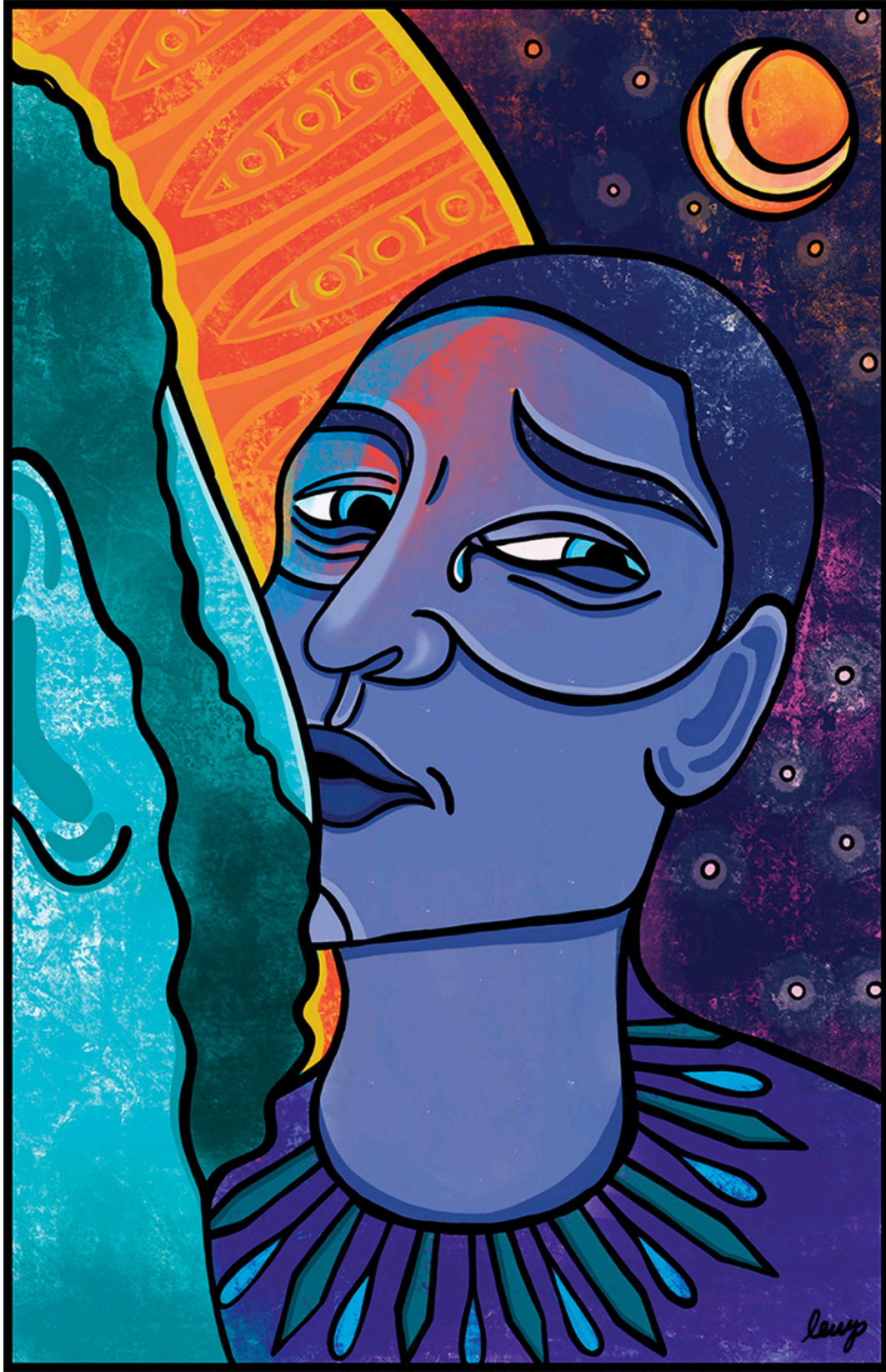
At some point, we've all felt betrayed. It could be a big friendship falling out, or a breach of trust on a smaller scale. In my life, I can think of a few times this has happened and I'll be honest: I never saw it coming. I was blindsided by the comment or the hurt that came my way.

So it really shocks me that Jesus knew exactly what was about to go down when he says, "One of you will betray me." He knew who it was and how it would happen and yet, he let it happen. He didn't beg Judas to change his mind, even though he knew this betrayal would lead to his own death. And then, what does he do?

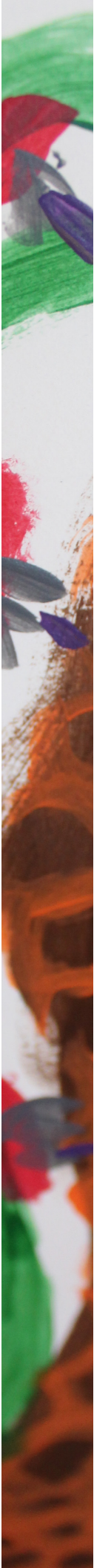
He charges them to love one another. To be kind and care for and encourage one another. If someone with nothing to lose tells us to be kind, we may listen. But if a man experiencing major betrayal—by one of his own followers—can say it? Surely we should take heed. Because Jesus has a way of knowing the ugly parts of the story and choosing to lay down his life for us anyway.

We aren't commanded to love as long as people are loving us back, we are commanded to love.

When I think back to the times I have felt hurt or betrayed, what always rises to the surface is the reality that Christ is the only one who never does that. Humans are, well, human. Everyone I love has hurt me in some way over the course of our relationship, even if it was just a misunderstanding we later worked out. If only those who never hurt me are counted worthy of my love, I'll never love anyone. Rather, I can be wise in my approach but still care for that person by wanting their best or praying for healing in the places they need it most.



The Kiss, Lauren Wright Pittman
© A Sanctified Art



Jesus - The Way

John 14:1-14 | Ted Child

One beautiful fall day, I went for a walk with my 5-year-old daughter. We skipped along a path in the woods behind our condo, scampered over large rocks and crunched the fallen leaves that blanketed the ground. Eventually, we exited the other side of the woods, looping back on a road that brought us to the main entrance of our complex.

Though I could see our condo, I held her hand and asked, “Lindsay, do you know the way home from here?”

“Nope”, she glibly replied.

“Uh oh, are you at all worried about that?” I asked, feigning concern in my voice.

“No, Silly, you’re with me and you know the way!”

Wise words from a 5-year-old.

In contrast, in John 14, Jesus’ disciples felt lost and troubled. Jesus had just rocked their world, breaking the news that He was about to leave them to return to His Father, and telling them they knew the way to the place he was headed. When Thomas objected that they didn’t know the way, Jesus replied, “I am the way.”

I don’t know about you, but I am a Google Maps guy. I like to hear that authoritative, computerized voice telling me that I should turn left in one mile and then not think about it. And I often wish God would just as clearly say at times, “The answer to your deep question is 500 feet ahead and on the right.” Here’s my conclusion: I think He cares about directions and destinations, but I think He cares even more about turning us into people who trust Him along the way. And that’s all we need to know today. He is the great I AM, and He promises His presence, His comfort, and His Spirit as we hold His hand and trust Him to lead us home, Silly.

Do you feel lost and uncertain of the way? Confused in an increasingly complex world? What are specific concerns He is calling you to trust Him with today? How might you invest in learning the way of Jesus in the coming year?



Silas Bartley, The Way



Emmy Short, *Cling*



Jesus - The Vine

John 15:1-18 | Christine Seibert

“We are human beings, not human doings” —Attribution varies

I don't know about you, but I like to go. I like to do. Checklists abound in my life, and I always have a new way to fill any downtime. I'm not good at taking time to pause and reflect. I get so caught up checking off the “producing fruit” box on my to-do list that I let myself get disconnected from the vine. Jesus says, “No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.” Cart before the horse and fruit without the vine? Not a good plan.

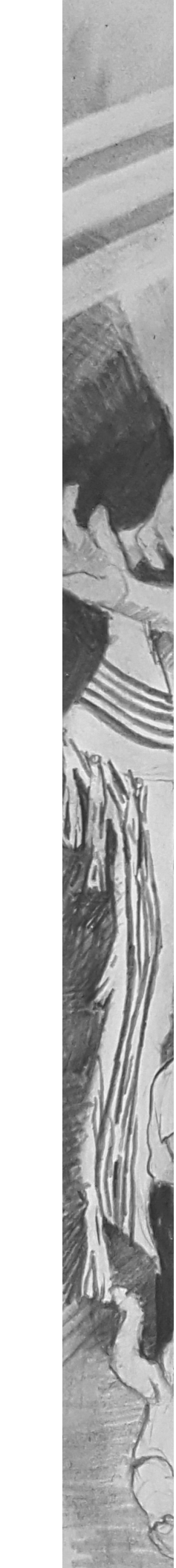
Jesus describes himself as the vine. His followers are branches that grow out of the vine. Among other things, this means that we draw life and nourishment from him as the source. He generously channels to us the nutrients and sustenance that we need to bear the fruit of his kingdom—the kingdom fruit of justice, peace, beauty, and goodness. To receive this nourishment, we need to remain in him. We need to root ourselves in his life-giving word, love, and commands. As we draw life from Jesus' desires and follow his way, our to-do lists are transformed into his.

Remaining in Jesus helps us learn to listen for the Holy Spirit's guidance. There are always a million things we could do to share God's love and advance His kingdom. It takes time to listen for the voice of the Spirit, so that we can be at the right place at the right time to be the hands and feet of Jesus in this world. Let us become people who choose to remain, listen and submit our desires to Jesus, so that his life can flow through us to the world, producing not just fruit, but lasting fruit.

How can you remain in Christ today so that you bear his fruit?

Week of 12/13





Jesus - Unity's Source

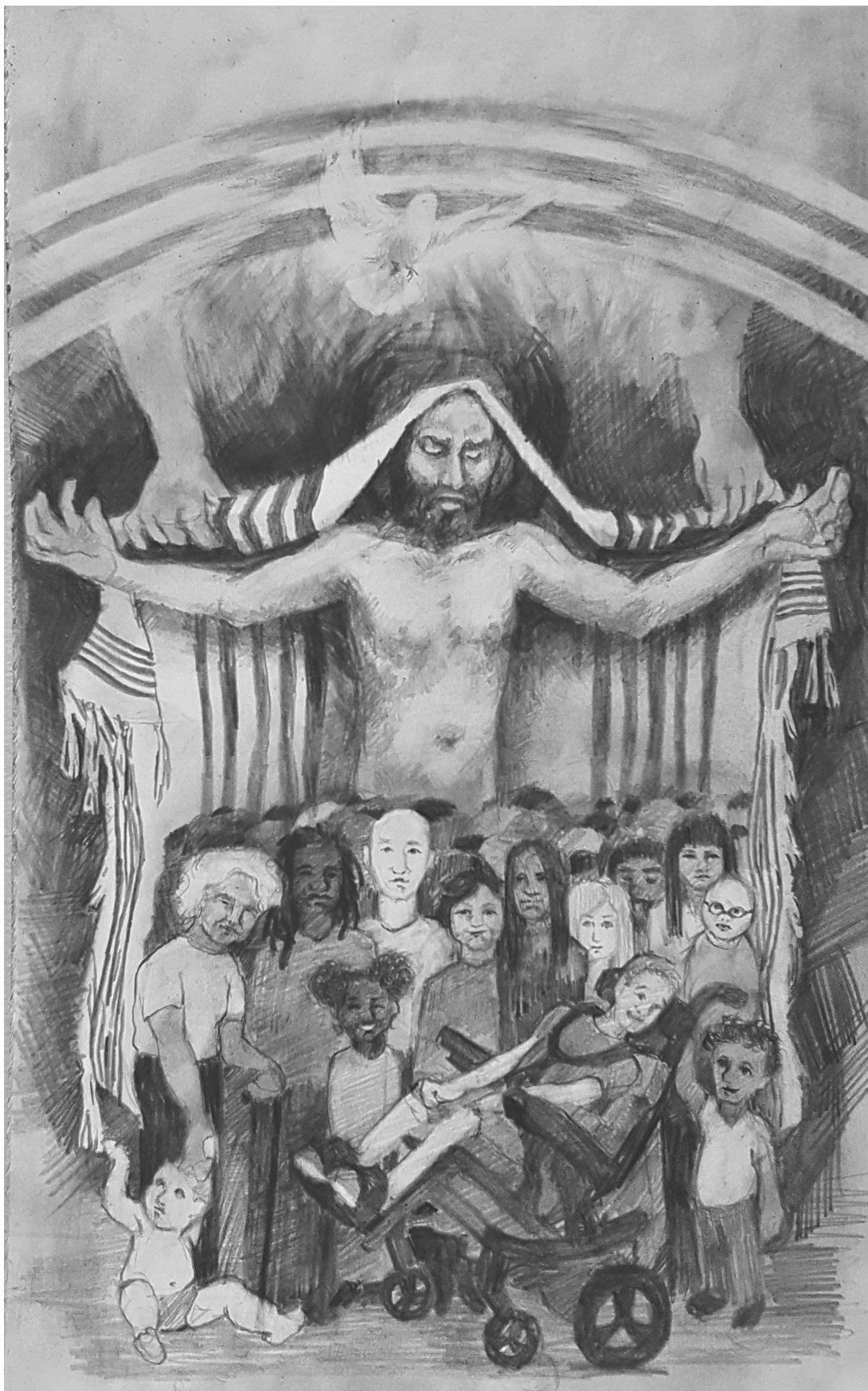
John 17:6-26 | Ellie Wiener

We are a beleaguered people. A pandemic has frayed our social fabric; political discourse devolves into pejoratives that further polarize; natural disasters batter communities; the world over, citizens take to the streets over failures of leadership and social injustice; negotiated truces seem a meager match for historic hostilities. When one looks upon these formidable reminders of our fragility, failure, and fragmentation, the temptation looms all the stronger to retreat behind the insulating walls of our own little kingdoms.

If the concept of unity seems otherworldly, good—it should. In John 17 Jesus presents a dazzling kaleidoscope of glory, love, and union that resides in the divine. And let us not forget: this intimate prayer of Son to Father occurs on the cusp of the cross, the occasion of their excruciating alienation. But this mystery is great: the triune God would put his unity to work for the life of the world. In the loving exchange between Father and Son, the Son by his death gives to the Father those the Father has given him. (John 17:6, 9-10, 21-23, 26)

Friends, our unity was never meant to be generated by our friendly dispositions or haunting fear of loneliness; no, our unity already is because of a three-in-one God who in love chose to be for us. As Jesus prayed, he knew he was about to create that unity in his own body on the cross. Our unity is not a static reality but as dynamic as our triune God—unity gaining momentum as we focus our lives together on Jesus.

Like God's unity, our unity is meant to be for the world—to demonstrate that God will enfold those he loves in his own life. (John 17:21-23) Steep yourself in the staggering truth of John 17 until your heart sings. Beseech the one who has united us and now intercedes for us. In that unity go, together, sent and sanctified for the life of the beleaguered world. (John 17:16-19)

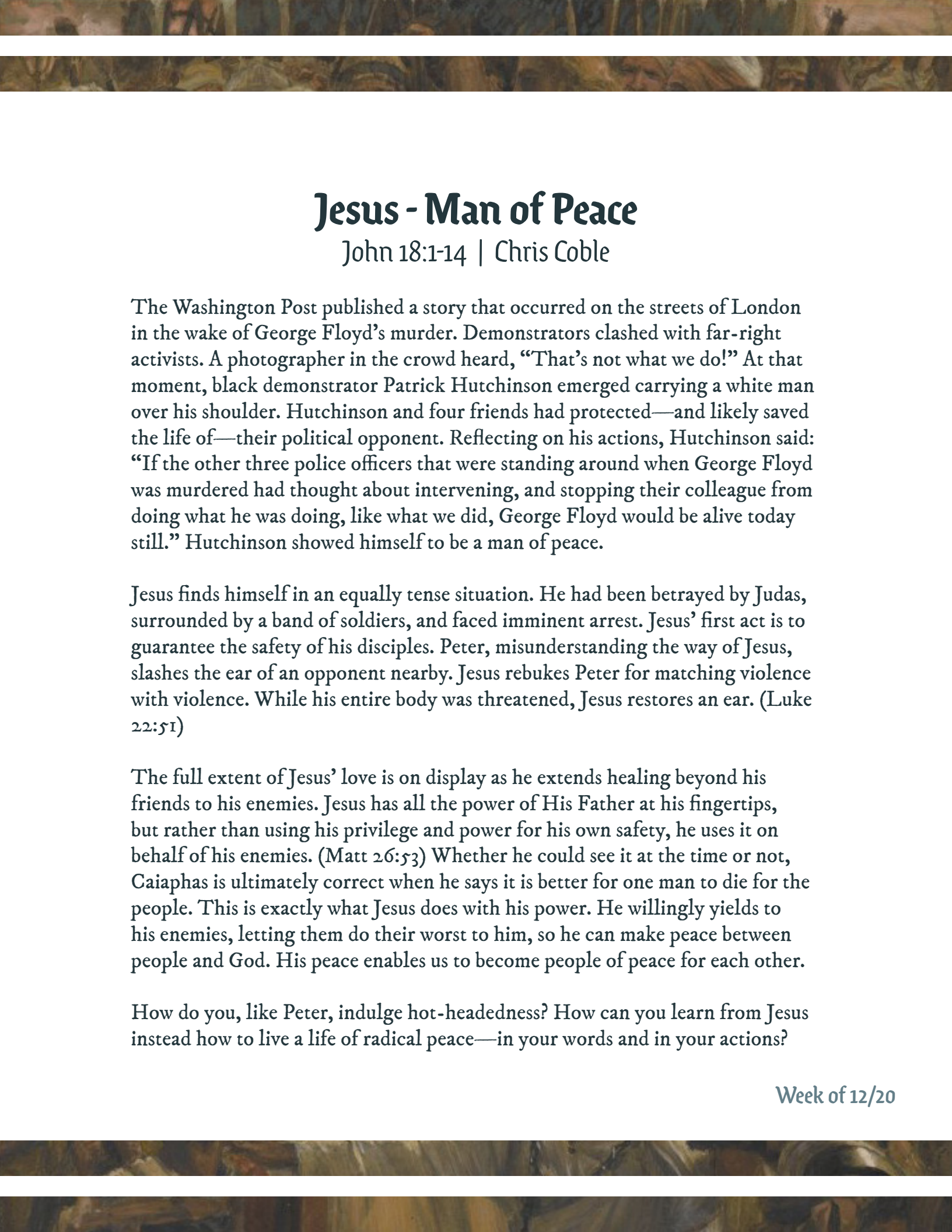


Meredith Free, Unity's Source



James Tissot, The Healing of Malchus

Online Collection of Brooklyn Museum; Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 2008, 00.159.239_PS2.jpg



Jesus - Man of Peace

John 18:1-14 | Chris Coble

The Washington Post published a story that occurred on the streets of London in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Demonstrators clashed with far-right activists. A photographer in the crowd heard, "That's not what we do!" At that moment, black demonstrator Patrick Hutchinson emerged carrying a white man over his shoulder. Hutchinson and four friends had protected—and likely saved the life of—their political opponent. Reflecting on his actions, Hutchinson said: "If the other three police officers that were standing around when George Floyd was murdered had thought about intervening, and stopping their colleague from doing what he was doing, like what we did, George Floyd would be alive today still." Hutchinson showed himself to be a man of peace.

Jesus finds himself in an equally tense situation. He had been betrayed by Judas, surrounded by a band of soldiers, and faced imminent arrest. Jesus' first act is to guarantee the safety of his disciples. Peter, misunderstanding the way of Jesus, slashes the ear of an opponent nearby. Jesus rebukes Peter for matching violence with violence. While his entire body was threatened, Jesus restores an ear. (Luke 22:51)

The full extent of Jesus' love is on display as he extends healing beyond his friends to his enemies. Jesus has all the power of His Father at his fingertips, but rather than using his privilege and power for his own safety, he uses it on behalf of his enemies. (Matt 26:53) Whether he could see it at the time or not, Caiaphas is ultimately correct when he says it is better for one man to die for the people. This is exactly what Jesus does with his power. He willingly yields to his enemies, letting them do their worst to him, so he can make peace between people and God. His peace enables us to become people of peace for each other.

How do you, like Peter, indulge hot-headedness? How can you learn from Jesus instead how to live a life of radical peace—in your words and in your actions?

Week of 12/20



A Choice, Lauren Wright Pittman
© A Sanctified Art



Jesus - Innocent Convict

John 18:28-19:16 | Nick and Rachel Cotton

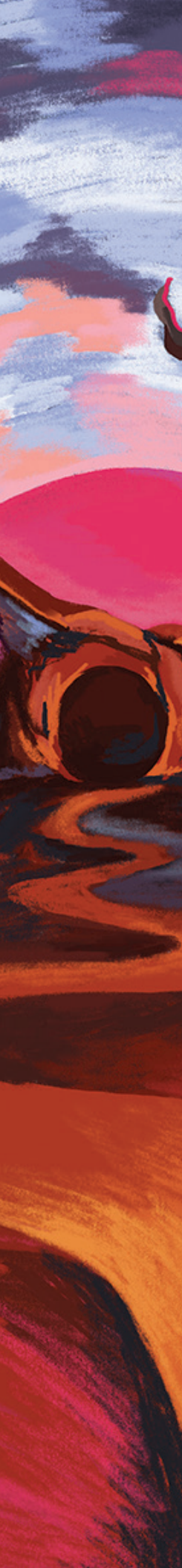
The tension of this passage is as old as time—who holds power and how will it be used? In the case of Jesus, the religious leaders have found him guilty of blasphemy, but lack the authority to take his life. The Roman government has the authority to execute him, but Pilate believes that Jesus is innocent. Three times, Pilate states that he does not find Jesus guilty of any crime that would deserve death.

The Roman Empire, whose power rests in Pilate, has the greatest authority and impact on the lives of the people. And yet, Pilate cannot compel a straight answer from Jesus or from those bringing charges against him. Jesus and his accusers answer Pilate's questions with more questions or statements that question Pilate's authority. When Pilate asks Jesus to defend himself by saying "You won't talk? Don't you know that I have the authority to pardon you, and the authority to—crucify you?" Jesus replies, "You haven't a shred of authority over me except what has been given you from heaven."

At first, Pilate appears to take this responsibility seriously: he makes two attempts to pardon Jesus. But he caves under pressure. Whether to preserve what little popularity he has, or to avoid a riot, Pilate ultimately cedes to the will of the crowd. Conversely, Jesus chooses not to exert the full extent of his power and authority. He could have saved himself. But, he replies, "My kingdom doesn't consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But I'm not that kind of king, not the world's kind of king." Instead, Jesus chose to yield his authority in order to forgive and rescue the very people who condemned him.

Pause and reflect: What authority has God given you? How do you use it to further your own interests? How can you use it to promote peace and reconciliation with those around you?

Week of 12/20



Jesus - Gentle Master

John 20:11-29 | Debbi Tuck

I was recently building a snowman with a 3 year old. It was an interesting dance of helping and not helping. She is at the stage where she “wants to do everything by herself.” In one moment, she would announce, “I can do it myself,” but in the next breath she would be asking for help because she couldn’t actually do it herself. As we rolled the last ball and put it on top as the snowman’s head, it occurred to me that I am still a lot like that!

If I am honest with myself, I like to have a plan, be in control of how things go and “do it myself.” Submission often comes hard for me. So I find myself in this constant back and forth of trying to be my own master and in control while also recognizing that I am woefully inadequate and in need of help! If there is anything that this season has reminded me, it is that I am not in control. I think that this is why the portrait of Christ in this passage resonates with me so deeply.

Mary has come to the garden with a plan. She is looking for the body so that she can finish the task of preparing it that they were unable to complete on Friday. And into this picture, steps Jesus, the man Mary has known as “Rabboni,” or teacher and master. Mary does not recognize Jesus at first because she is looking for the wrong thing. Even though Jesus taught his followers again and again that he had to die and rise again, she is not looking for a risen Lord, but a broken body -- a corpse. I love and am humbled by Jesus’ response to Mary. He does not berate her or scold her, but comes to her in gentleness and love, calling her by name, asking her questions and not giving up until she finally recognizes Him!

Jesus responds to us in the same way, gently calling us and pursuing us until we recognize Him. Will we do that, today?



Fullness of the Tomb, Lauren Wright Pittman
© A Sanctified Art

Special thanks to:

Sarah Bartley, coordinator

Betsy Crowe, editor

Emmy Short, designer

All contributors of text and artwork



NORTH SHORE

COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH