



# Gospel Portraits of Jesus: A Lenten Study

## SESSION 3

*In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks of himself as Bread of Life, Light of the World, Good Shepherd, and True Vine.*

### Introduction

In this session, all of our Gospel passages are from John. There are seven instances in John where Jesus begins a statement revealing something of his identity with the phrase, “I am . . .” The four names or identities for Jesus we will focus on are: bread of life, light of the world, good shepherd, and true vine. No doubt the Jews who first heard or read the words, “I am,” were reminded of Moses’ experience of the burning bush in the Midian desert (Exod. 3:1–15) when he heard God’s call to him to return to Egypt to free the Israelite slaves. Moses resisted God’s call with several questions, the second of which was, “If I come to the Israelites . . . and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God’s answer was, “I AM WHO I AM” (3:14). This is the holy name for God, which is expressed as LORD throughout the Old Testament.

In her commentary on John, Gail O’Day writes, “The ‘I am’ sayings form the distinctive core of Jesus’ language of self-revelation in the Fourth Gospel. . . . Jesus identifies himself with symbols that come from the common fund of Near Eastern religious and human experience.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus transforms the common understanding of the concepts or images into profound, mysterious, divine references to himself as the incarnation of God Almighty.

### Bread of Life

It is important to read Jesus’ reference to himself as the “bread of life” (6:35) in the context of the whole of chap-



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ter 6. The chapter begins with an account of the miracle of feeding five thousand, the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. John’s account of the feeding is associated with one of three Passover references in the Gospel (6:4). For the writer of the Fourth Gospel the account of Jesus feeding the five thousand has all the elements of the holy meal: Jesus gives thanks and then distributes the loaves and the fishes. The miracle of the feeding provides a backdrop for what John writes later, where Jesus stated, “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 48) which has “come down from heaven” (v. 50).

John makes direct, intentional reference to the exodus narrative (Exod. 16:1–36), where the Israelites received manna from heaven to satisfy their hunger. In his dialogue with the crowd, Jesus declares, “It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:32–33). Those in the crowd responded, “Sir, give us this bread always” (v. 34). Jesus’ reply to that request was, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes

in me will never be thirsty” (v. 35). The Jewish religious authorities were offended by Jesus’ claim that he was the bread of life come down from heaven, because they knew him only as “Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know” (v. 42). From their perspective, only God could provide that kind of bread.

We need to keep in mind that the Gospel writer was part of a worshipping, believing community that had developed traditions and understandings regarding their relationship with the risen Christ. In the years after Jesus’ resurrection the community of believers was celebrating the Lord’s Supper with the breaking of bread and drinking of wine as the body and blood of Christ. John’s understanding of Jesus as the bread of life is summarized with the words of Jesus, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (v. 51). In her notes on this text O’Day writes, “To share in the eucharistic meal is not to remember or commemorate one particular event, but is to share in all of Jesus’ life, including ultimately his death.”<sup>2</sup>

This chapter of John’s Gospel is often read on the week of World Communion Sunday, the first Sunday of October. On this day, we do not just remember Jesus’ last meal with his disciples but we also acknowledge that we are invited to participate in Jesus’ whole ministry. The bread is blessed and broken for us, not just us but every follower of Christ around the world, and all of us receive it as “living bread that came down from heaven.” As believers, we receive Jesus into our lives to be blessed and empowered by him forever. Jesus is our bread of life who sustains us, nurtures us, and empowers us. Keep this in mind when you gather at the Lord’s Table on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week.

## Light of the World

The image of Jesus as the “light of the world” has its roots in the Old Testament where there are many references to light or fire symbolizing the presence of God. The first of God’s acts in creation was to declare, “‘Let there be light’ . . . and God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness” (Gen. 1:3, 4). While tending his father-in-law’s sheep in the desert, Moses encountered a bush burning that was not consumed (Exod. 3:2). In the midst of the burning (light) of the bush God spoke to Moses, calling him to lead the people from captivity. Later, in their escape from

the Pharaoh’s oppression, the Israelites were guided in their journey by a “pillar of fire by night, to give them light” (Exod. 13:21). The psalmist affirms, “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” (Ps. 27:1). In the time of the exile the prophet Isaiah wrote words of hope, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined” (Isa. 9:2).

No doubt these images would be in Jesus’ mind when he declared, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). Light is the essence of creation, as is Jesus. Light reveals, as does Jesus. Light provides guidance for the journey, as does Jesus for our journey of faith and life. Where there is light God is present. When Jesus is the light of our faith, God is present in our lives. In the midst of darkness light (Jesus) brings comfort and hope. Without light (Jesus) there is no growth and no energy for the future. Without light (Jesus) we are lost in the dark places of our world.

The prologue to the Fourth Gospel begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. . . . What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:1–5). A key point to notice in this passage is: Word, light, and life are present in the beginning and are references to the One who “became flesh and lived among us” (1:14).

## Good Shepherd

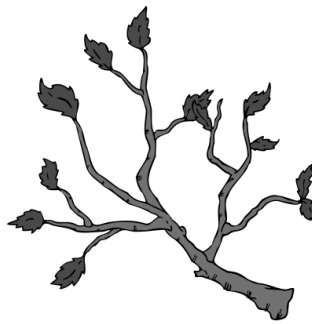
We need to read John 10:1–21 in the context of the last verses of chapter 9, where Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees of their spiritual blindness. Chapter 10 continues his address to the Pharisees by describing the role of the gatekeeper of the sheepfold, that the sheep know and will follow him but will not follow a stranger. “Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them” (v. 6). Then Jesus declared, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. . . . Whoever enters by me will be saved” (vv. 7, 9). Jesus continued with the image of caring for the sheep by stating, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11).

As with bread and light, the image of the “good shepherd” also has origins in the Old Testament. The most

familiar passage, of course, is Psalm 23, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want” (23:1). Thinking of Jesus as the *good shepherd*, read Psalm 23 by speaking the name *Jesus* in place of the word “he.” Truly Jesus provides for all our needs, leads us to green and still places, restores our soul and leads us in right paths.

Another Old Testament passage featuring shepherd and sheep is Ezekiel 34. Ezekiel was a priest who became a spokesperson for God during the time of Israel’s exile in Babylon. He proclaimed words of comfort and hope in the midst of a time of great despair and grief. Ezekiel proclaimed words of judgment against the “shepherds of Israel,” the kings of the nation whom God intended to care for the people as a shepherd cares for his sheep. The kings had been unfaithful shepherds. They had not “strengthened the weak,” “healed the sick,” “bound up the injured,” “brought back the strayed,” nor “sought the lost” (Ezek. 34:4). The shepherds of Israel, “have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep,” says the Lord (v. 8). The prophet continues through the rest of the chapter proclaiming that the Lord God is the shepherd of Israel. “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep . . . I will seek the lost . . . I will strengthen the weak. . . . I will feed them with justice” (vv. 15, 16). In the time of exile in Babylon, Ezekiel offered hopeful words from the LORD, “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them . . . and I, the LORD, will be their God” (vv. 23, 24). This is one of several references to the hope that a person of God’s choosing will once again reign on the throne of David, restoring the people to a place of prominence and peace. The chapter concludes with, “You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord God” (v. 31).

I believe that the writer of the Fourth Gospel is very intentional declaring in Jesus’ own words, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14–15). Jesus certainly had in mind the image of God as shepherd, from the psalm and from the prophet Ezekiel. Jesus, knowing his relationship with God (the Father), identifies intimately with his role as shepherd of the lost sheep and his awareness that he will be called upon to lay down his life on behalf of the sheep of his pasture. In the postresurrection account of Jesus’ encounter with Simon Peter at shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus asked him three times, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”



To abide is to remain, to stand fast, to endure with Christ. The vine is the source of life. The branches depend equally on the vine; no branch is greater than another. The purpose of the branches is to bear good fruit.

Peter responded each time with, “Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus’ reply was, “Feed my lambs,” “tend my sheep,” and “feed my sheep” (John 21:15–17).

## The True Vine

Jesus speaking of himself as the “true vine” (John 15:1–17) is the last of the “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John. The Jewish hearers of his declaration and the readers of John’s Gospel would recognize this image as connected to passages in the Prophets of the Old Testament. “For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel” (Isa. 5:7). “I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?” (Jer. 2:21). And, “Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit” (Hos. 10:1). In each instance the prophet proclaimed words of judgment from the Lord. The nation, Israel, is likened to a vine or vineyard that God has planted. God expects good fruit from the vineyard but no good fruit is forthcoming. The vines will be burned up because they have no value for any purpose since they bear no good fruit.

The passage featuring vine and branches appears in John’s Gospel during the final week of Jesus’ life and ministry, after the Passover meal where Jesus washed the disciples’ feet and before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Could it be that Jesus’ mind is drawn to the image of the vine as a result of pouring the wine of the Passover meal and walking through the vineyards on the hills between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives?

With the image in mind, that Israel is God’s vineyard, Jesus took to himself the image of vine, “I am the true vine” (John 15:1), and then developed the image further by declaring to his followers, “You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (15:5).

The word “abide” appears nine times between verses 4 and 10. This is a key concept to understanding the

nature of the relationship between Jesus and the believer. To abide is to remain, to stand fast, to endure with Christ. The vine is the source of life. The branches depend equally on the vine; no branch is greater than another. The purpose of the branches is to bear good fruit. The evidence of the good fruit is presented in verse 12, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." This is repeated in verse 17, "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

## Conclusion

All four of these "I am . . ." images have roots in the Hebrew Scriptures and are used by Jesus to reveal something of his divine nature as a link between the "old" and the "new." All four of these identities give clues as to the relationship Jesus offers to those who will follow him. He gives us the *bread of life* that will sustain us for our journey, provides the *light of life* that will show us the

way, promises to be our *good shepherd* to guide, protect, and comfort us, and declares that he is the *true vine* from which we will receive our nourishment and identity. All of these identities of Jesus call us to love one another as he has loved us.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9, *Luke-John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 601.
2. Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1920.

## DAILY BIBLE READINGS

**Sunday:** Exodus 16:1–36 and John 6:1–15

Reflect on the power of God to satisfy the needs of the people. Pray for God to provide sustenance for all who are hungry in your community and elsewhere in the world.

**Monday:** John 6:22–59

In what ways do you experience Jesus being the *bread of life* for you? Pray that God will grant to you the *bread of life* for your journey of faith.

**Tuesday:** Genesis 1:1–5 and John 1:1–14

What connections do you see between the light of the first day of creation and the Word (Jesus) being “the light of all people”? Open yourself to the light of God through prayer and meditation.

**Wednesday:** John 8:12–20

Reflect on Jesus’ words, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” How has the light of Jesus helped you in times of darkness? Thank God for the light you have seen.

**Thursday:** Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34

What do you see as the tasks of the shepherd in these two passages? Pray for the guidance of a shepherd in your walk of faith.

**Friday:** John 10:1–21

Reflect on Jesus’ words, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.” Ask God how you might be used to bring “other sheep” into Jesus’ fold.

**Saturday:** John 15:1–17

In this passage Jesus says, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” Count the number of times the word “abide” appears and read of its context regarding the relationship between the believer and Jesus. Spend a few moments meditating on abiding in Jesus and Jesus abiding in you.