

I Am The Way

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places...I will come again and will take you to myself... And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

John 14:1-7 ESV

There are times in our lives when we struggle to see or to understand why things happen. We simply can’t make sense of some things. Our hearts become troubled!

Thomas never shied away from acknowledging what he didn’t understand and he was a full-on, in-person disciple of Jesus—one of the “Big 12.” This is encouraging to me. It gives me permission, to be honest, too. “How can we know the way?”

Jesus’ response to this question and to all our questions is both simple and profound. It may raise as many questions as provide answers. But the astonishing claim that Christians make is that God, in solidarity and love, drew near to us in flesh and blood, took on our human limitations, experienced pain and suffering and even death. In this, Jesus shows us a way to be in relationship with God, other humans, and the creation. Jesus reveals the truth of God’s love and mercy, and frees us from fear of death by showing us that life is from God and in God and that life brings change, but never ends.

The way of Jesus is the way of justice, love, and peace. As we practice these Jesus virtues we are already on the way, held in the truth, and free to live without fear. Hear Jesus say to you today, “You know the way... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Ginger Gaines-Cirelli
Senior Pastor

What is Being?

Be still, and know that I am God.

Be still, and know that I am.

Be still, and know.

Be still.

Be.

Almost twenty years ago I became interested in and started practicing Centering Prayer, an ancient practice of Christian meditation, and have done so off and on since. One of the challenges I have had with it in the past is that my mind tends to go into overdrive and wander quite often, and this challenges my ability to get into the calm and meditative state.

When I started the practice again recently, I decided to try the reduction of Psalm 46:10 above, aligned with my breathing. This has helped in getting myself focused for the sessions.

I attended a Jesuit College in Upstate New York, and in one of my philosophy classes my senior year the entire grade was based on a paper answering the question “What is being?” The focus of my paper was on being gay, quite risky at a Catholic school at the time, and I wasn’t sure how the priest who taught the class would react. His response was simply a slight caution that my sexual orientation was only a part of who I was, and that it shouldn’t be the only thing I focused on.

When I relate this to who Jesus is as part of the Holy Trinity, the “I am” is always going to be a mystery, never fully knowable. I think that is why the Centering Prayer is working for me. I can never fully know who God is, and I don’t have to think about it. I can just sit comfortably with Him / Her in meditation, and feel unconditionally loved.

Andrew Lee

Jesus in His Own Words

*Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

John 20:29 ESV

I am...

holding out my hands to catch you when you are falling,

protecting you from danger,

rejoicing with you when you rejoice,

keeping you in my loving care,

comforting you when you are brokenhearted,

listening to you when you pray,

always showing you love.

Jesus tells us, "Remember that wherever you go and whatever you do,
I am always with you."

"But Jesus," you say, "I can't see you. If I can't see you, how do I know
you're really there? I can't feel you or hear you either. If only I could feel
your hand on my shoulder or hear your voice in my ear, then I would
know you are really with me."

"My beloved child, look at the rainbow after the thunderstorm and you
will see me. Let the warm sun shine on your face and you will feel me.
Listen to the birds as they sing in the trees and you will hear me. Let
all of these things and all of the other good and beautiful occurrences
in your life assure you that I am with you every day and every minute
of the day."

Jill Neuendorf

Always More

Jesus declared what he was – bread, light, gate, a shepherd, a vine, the truth, and resurrection. That’s a long list, and he could have stopped his teaching at one of them and we would have understood. He tells us he’s the bread, and we understand that he’s a source of nourishment and eternal welcome. That would have been enough for us to understand, right?

And yet he said more about who he was and in ways we could see and feel. I read this as Jesus telling us that there’s always more—more ways to understand him, more ways to understand ourselves, more ways to worship. He’s more than we think he is, and it’s part of our call as Christians to keep learning and growing.

The Jesus we have in our minds is our idea of Jesus, but it is not the full face of God. We are called to seek and understand all the I Ams, especially the ones we don’t typically think of. There’s always more to Jesus, and always more to our faith.

Beth Scott

My Expectations of the Great I AM

“I AM THE KING!”

“I AM THE MESSIAH!”

“I AM GOD!”

These are some of the “I am” statements that I’d expect to hear from the omniscient, omnipresent Ruler of the World. But the fact is, none of these declaratives are recorded in the book of John as being said by Jesus. Instead, we have “I am the gate,” and “I am the good shepherd.” Excuse me ... but what?

And let’s be honest, there are some folks who have tried to turn the “I am” statements of Jesus into hard and fast rules that define “who’s in and who’s out” of Christianity. Cue the traditionalist’s rendition of the song, “I Am the Way.”

But what speaks to me most about all of these statements is how Jesus defies my expectations when it comes to telling me who He is. Instead of proclaiming Himself as a king, a savior, or a ruler, He chooses to be humble, relatable. I think Jesus is reminding me to see Him in the world around me, in the everyday – the ordinary. The vine, the gate, the bread, the light--these are all common images, and none of them really conjure up thoughts of “GOD the ALMIGHTY.”

Despite my expectation that Jesus should declare Himself as the King, the “I am” statements are about more than just identity, power, or exclusivity. Instead, these statements tell me that Jesus is available to ordinary people on an everyday basis. Rather than declare His own power or glorify Himself, Jesus shows me that I don’t need to be noble to reach Him. And in surpassing selfish expectations, these statements convey that Jesus is necessary to sustain life.

Hannah-Alise Rogers

Metaphors that Define Ourselves

Metaphors help us understand concepts and people. In the excellent book *The Certainty of Uncertainty*, Mark Schaefer explains religion as metaphor, not just for Jesus but for the belief system that we call Christianity.

Among the metaphors used in the Bible for Jesus is “I am the vine.” In *The Spiritual Formation Bible* (p. 1422), David Watson writes about fruit growing from a branch attached to a vine. The branch “passes on all the necessary nutrients from the vine.” Jesus as the vine enables us branches to yield fruit nourished by our love for one another – evidence of God in the world.

This made me think about my own metaphor. I tried “I am a branch” and thought about my family. Each branch keeps the family alive by generating fruit that nourishes love for one another.

Each of us is a branch in our own way. One way I support my family is preparing a yearly family Christmas letter. For 19 years this letter has connected 40 families in four countries, many of whom will attend a reunion in 2020.

Sources other than the Bible can call attention to values through metaphor. Whenever I hear Josh Groban sing, “You Lift Me Up,” I tear up because I rely on people who lift me up to “be more than I can be” alone. This metaphor prompts me to express my gratitude more often to those at Foundry who are examples of God’s love at work in the world. Thanks be, for example, to all who have contributed fruit to this booklet, a branch of Foundry’s vine of communication about God’s love in the world.

What metaphor defines you? Try one and then explain what it means. I hope the process leads you to fruitful self-understanding and action.

Barbara Cambridge

Living Water

Where would you get living water?

John 4:11 GN

The Samaritan woman asked this question during her encounter with Jesus at Jacob's well. She was an outcast who had to retrieve her water separate from the village's respectable women. Yet, she was one of the first to perceive and enthusiastically share who Jesus was: "I am he [the Messiah]."

As a Christian, I have dry spots. My well of incompleteness is sometimes too deep. There seems to be nothing with which to draw Jesus' living water. As a beloved child of God, I should be happy in meekness, for the meek will inherit the earth. But today it appears that hatred, derision, doubt and despair are everywhere. All of these behaviors are contrary to what Paul superbly defines as "love" in First Corinthians.

So how can meekness embodied in Christian love overcome hard, cruel reality? Recently, I returned to valued meditations that relate to water and realized that water and love share many similar characteristics. As drops, water is weak and yielding. Drops united can become relentless waves or rushing rivers that cut gorges and turn mountains into sand. Like water, love cleanses, transforms, and never gives up.

My true nature is to live in love and hope. Life stagnates when fear and hatred prevail. My spiritual dehydration is alleviated when I remember that love starts with me. Even as a small drop it can become the boundless wellspring from which God's love flows.

Prayer:

O Lord, help me, your beloved child, be a relentless small drop of your living water. Let me quench the thirst of those around me and help soak the dry patches in the world. Then, as Jesus promised, may those who hunger and thirst after righteousness be filled. Amen.

Joe Steller

I AM—The Fullness of My Spirituality

Jesus said to them... before Abraham was, I am."

John 8:58 ESV

I was once in a car that rolled. I observed the entire accident in "perfect peace," as if watching a film. I recognize now that the intensity of the event resulted in an equally focused present awareness that elevated me from thoughts to the realm of purely conscious awareness. This rooted me in peace that passes understanding and awakened an understanding of "I am."

In *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle offers further insight:

"God did not say [to Moses] I have always been and I always will be. That would have given reality to past and future. God said, I AM THAT I AM. No time here, just presence."

"I AM" represents what language cannot--the fullness of spirituality, the pre-existing eternal ever present NOW.

We are both "being"-- formless spirit manifested in the presence behind our thoughts-- and "human"--mortal forms occupying a form-filled world. Jesus's liberation reveals connection with our timeless spirit whose nature is solely NOW.

Our liberation is becoming aware of the divine within us, accessing it, and living from it. The life of Jesus is our example.

Karl Marshall

Meantime

I am torn, parched, and tattered
Unaware, foggy, deluded
I am isolated, anxious, and
scattered
Confused, weary, excluded

I feel, wait, no I don't feel
I am feel-less, hopeless, and
respite-less
I am climbing an endless,
mountainous hill
I am carabiner-less, emergency
pack-less, and reckless

I am the p r e s s u r e
Now l o s t in this barren desert
I am watching the ground fissure
As I wander (and wonder) around
in the dirt

Breaking the ground beneath my
feet
Realizing that I am the dirt
Realizing that I am quite the feat
And I know the purveyor of worth

I am because of eternal
"I am" ness
"I am" in the fullness of "I can't"
I am neither un-vined, nor
shepherd-less
Oh dear Planter, I am the plant

Dirt, sun, and water
Attention, love, and care
I am child, son, and daughter
Of theirs

I am gleam and a sliver
A stepping stone
I am a holy tremor
A rattling bone

I am in the archway of grace
From the gallows to the ether
I am a student of the Gate
I am a Truth reaper

"I never wasn't"
Always reassures the Way
Except when it absolutely doesn't
And it feels more like an affray

Like something to defend
Almost incomprehensible
In the wake of the sea of pretend
I am unphased, i n v i n c i b l e

I am waiting...here...again
For a lesson in the temptation
For an echoing amen
And for unfathomable liberation

Reverence in the solemnity
Remembrance with integrity
But...
Shouting a *Mise en abyme* of
"I am," in the meantime

K.C. Van Atta-Casebier
Director of Family Ministries

Bread of Life

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

John 6:35 NIV



Jesus, like bread, is essential for eternal life.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you for blessing those of us who hunger and thirst for righteousness. You alone satisfy our needs. Amen.

Ta-Chen Wu

After the Miracle

It is Passover. Jesus wants to feed the large crowd of people who seemed to have “nothing” to eat. Large amounts of food appear. Five small barley loaves and two fish ultimately fed thousands.

Some interpret the “feeding” story as the telling of a miracle. The reader is left to decide whether much food was “created” from a small amount, or the people present learned the miracle of sharing. Some have argued that learning to share is the greater of the two miracles.

John’s gospel goes further than the others, using action, dialogue and monologue. The action is the feeding of thousands. It is followed by dialogue, where Jesus challenges some people from the crowd who went out of their way to find him the next day. The dialogue is followed by a long monologue, spoken by Jesus who uses the “I Am” figure of speech—in this case, I am the bread of life.

Through this figure of speech, the author seems to take the reader to a deeper, more introspective level. Meditate upon John 6: 35-38 CEB and see where it takes you:

Jesus replied, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I have told you that you have seen me and still don't believe. Everyone whom the Father gives to me will come to me, and I won't send anyone away who comes to me. I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but the will of him who sent me.

Prayer:

May you, your friends and loved ones have life-enhancing experiences this Lent!

Chuck Kluepfel

The Bread that Satisfies

Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

John 6:35 NIV

This scene takes place soon after the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus and his disciples have crossed the lake and are in Capernaum. The crowd has clamored for a miraculous sign so that they can believe him. How about manna from heaven like their ancestors had? And send it every day.

Isn't that just like us humans? Never satisfied! They did not understand that the bread Jesus offered was bread to assuage the hunger in their souls. Have you ever noticed that often it is the people who have the least who are the most joyful? Hal and I traveled to Africa with a group of fellow Methodists in 1986 before the age of cell phones and before Nelson Mandela was released from prison.

Two scenes stand out from that trip. One was of school children who had waited for hours, unsure when we Americans would appear. They welcomed us with poignant songs of faith that "the Holy Spirit would come down and Mandela would be free." The other was when Hal and I accompanied his brother and sister-in-law, who were living in Nigeria at the time, to a birthday party in a remote village thrown by grateful villagers for a worker from the World Health Organization. Their love and joy was infectious!

This is not to condone poverty. That we allow fellow human beings to lack clean water, medicine and adequate food must make God weep. Jesus cried out against injustice and those in power crucified him for it.

Prayer:

Gracious God, help us to remember that you have given us the bread that fills our souls. May we use this wondrous gift to work for justice. Amen.

Janet Garman

In God's Kitchen

I am the bread of life.

John 6:35 NIV

As I write this, I am hopping trains all over the UK on a work trip. The two words most entered into my mapping app are station and bakery. This bakery kick started when I stayed in the home of a British family early in my trip. They baked bread every day. Carbs, be doomed!

After 57 years, I have at last surrendered...to the smell of freshly baked bread! And to the taste of it lathered with butter or jam or naked in its bready goodness! I have come face to face on this journey with the truth: that bread is the best thing ever to come out of a kitchen. And since Indian restaurants now rival English pubs in sheer number, I have further concluded that hot Naan is near the top of the bread hierarchy... truly glorious.

It isn't as if I've discovered DNA or something new. Rather, this is rediscovery. This is grounded in something people have known for millennia, in something I have known but never articulated. So a very old saying of Jesus takes on fresh meaning, for me.

As I walk through the chilly damp to the station in the predawn shadows, a door opens just ahead in the alleyway. Light shines onto the cobblestone. The smell of bread baking hits me, just seconds before God invites me into her kitchen. (Think Mrs. Patmore's accent.) "Come in here, warm up your bones, the bread is just out of the oven, here's a chair for you. Put your coat over there. There's another train in an hour. Don't be in a hurry, Paul."

She knows my name. She was... expecting me.

"Please, make yourself at home. And eat up."

Then She sits back on her kitchen stool and watches me with love.

Paul Nixon

Helpers and Angels

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life... you have seen me and still you do not believe.

John 6:35-36 NIV

From time to time throughout my life's journey, I have ignored God's presence. Or, maybe I simply forgot that God is always there carrying me and providing for me at each point on the journey. God and only God brought me through many missteps.

I tend to become insecure, doubting and blaming when things do not go as I planned. At those times I ask, "Where is God in this?" I tend to think I am abandoned. I feel lost and call out, "Where are you God? Why I am feeling so alone?" Looking back at those times, I can see that I went out on my own without taking time to talk with God. I did not ask for God's guidance and help. I simply tried to manage everything myself.

As I take time to pray and listen I am directed to reflect and observe how God provides for me in times of difficulty. I can see that God placed helpers and angels in my path while I was full-time parenting five children, and going to school full-time, and holding down a full time job. God-sent assistance came at the right time, at the right place.

I've come to believe that what God did in the past, God will do again. I need to be present in the now, trusting God is always with me and remembering that God's time is not always my time. I have to be patient. Once I begin trusting, I am more able to identify the helpers and angels that God places around me.

Prayer:

If you, Lord, had not been here, where would I be? Thanks for carrying me through and forgive my doubting.

Fay Allen

What Sustains

Jesus said, 'I am the Bread of Life'. The person who aligns with me hungers no more and thirsts no more, ever...This is what my Father wants: that anyone who sees the Son and trusts who he is and what he does and then aligns with him will enter real life, eternal life.

John 6:35-40 MSG

In this day and age of weight-consciousness, many of us try to eliminate bread from our diets—or at least to reduce its consumption. Yet, since the dawn of civilization, most people sought out their daily ration of bread. Giving up bread seems contrary to basic human experience.

So in this time of plenty for many of us, the thought of seeking “daily bread” may seem a distant, antiquated allegory. We want different, we want more. More personal tech, another step up on the organizational ladder, bigger this, more of that.

But what the Gospel of John conveys to us today is that bread, at its essence, is no different than it was nearly 2,000 years ago. That Jesus is the bread of life, the source of true sustenance far beyond what bread, fish or anything else can provide. When we feel down, Jesus offers us spiritual uplift. When we or people close to us are struggling with health issues, Jesus provides hope. When disappointment invariably strikes, Jesus provides a balm.

Jesus, the Bread of Life—all that He taught us and still teaches us daily—is what sustains.

Prayer:

In this season of Lent, help me center myself on what truly sustains me, what gives me real life, eternal life. Help me to make changes in my daily routine that better align with Jesus, the bread of life. Amen.

Michael Lawson

Jesus, the Gate

Early morning is my joy at meeting Jesus, the Gate, Son of the Living God. I praise you. I thank you that the latch is lifted, for quietness and confidence is my strength (Isaiah 30:15). The immediacy of your love is like a sparrow in flight expecting a limb. I am in a state of wonder. Your Grace abounds.

A different state of wonder is the pain that I share with my 26-year old-invalid grandson: his condition is unknown by medical science. He was unable to continue his studies at the University of Delaware in order to receive necessary home care. He is unable to live a normal life. I am a beggar for his health.

John Masfield's poetic hymn, "The Call of Christ," has been a favorite of mine since I was a teenager:

*O Christ who holds the open gate,
O Christ who drives the furrow straight,
O Christ, the plough,
O Christ, the laughter of holy white birds flying after.*

Prayer:

Christ Jesus, let me stay near your Gate. To Whom else do I go? It is You I love and trust. Amen.

Sunny Branner

Raising Sheep

*I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.
They will come in and go out, and find pasture.*

John 10:9 NIV

As a child in the 1950s, my parents provided many opportunities for my brothers and me to learn about animals. One of our neighbors was the owner of a large sheep farm. His wife called my mother and asked if I would be interested in caring for an orphan lamb. When Mom asked me, I pleaded with her to let me raise it. Later, the neighbor delivered the tiny frail critter to me. It was in a pasteboard box. Mom helped me fill a pop bottle with warm milk and fit a rubber nipple on the bottle. The lamb required a bit of coaxing to latch onto the nipple, but once it did, it was gangbusters.

I was on call 24/7 to watch over the lamb. In a week, the box was too small. A portion of our garage was outfitted with a pen. The lamb was allowed to romp and eat grass in our backyard. It grew in size, but it was always dependent on me or a member of my family who pitched in to assist me. At night it did not automatically go into the garage. It had to be taken indoors. And so it went for three months. After the lamb was weaned, it was returned to the farm. I was only a little sad to see it go. I learned a lot about being a shepherd. Sheep require constant care. I was exhausted!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for watching over me throughout all the stages of my life. I would not be here doing what I'm doing, if you had not been my shepherd. Amen.

Stephen Roberts

The Shepherd's Voice

In 2013, I had the wonderful experience of visiting Israel. Our tour group saw places of great significance to both Jews and Christians. I'll never forget the sight of storks flying past our bus, camels wandering out in the open not far from the Dead Sea, and flocks of sheep and goats herded by young men.

Jesus apprenticed as a carpenter in his youth but also understood much of what it meant to be a shepherd, particularly a good one. Throughout history and in cultures that have raised sheep, it has always been true that sheep learn to know and respond to the voice of the one person on whom they depend. A stranger attempting to call them, even using the same words and phrases as the shepherd, will only be met with indifference or a bewildered stare.

If we belong to Christ, we have His promise that we will hear and know His voice too (John 10:3). There is great comfort in this, amid the many voices that claim to speak on Jesus' behalf, and try to compel us with shame or guilt to believe exactly as they do, base on our political affiliation on what they have chosen, and vote for the candidate they support. This sort of coercion is not how Jesus leads His flock. We cannot audibly hear Christ's voice the way His friends, disciples, and audiences did on Israel's green hillsides and by the Sea of Galilee. But we have the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who will never contradict our Lord.

If I have an ongoing peace in my heart about what my alliances and choices at the polling place should be, I rest in confidence that I have heard the voice of my Shepherd, and will not be persuaded to follow any other.

Prayer:

*Shepherd of my soul,
I give you full control;
Wherever you may go
I will follow.
I have made a choice
To listen for your voice;
Wherever you may lead, I will go.
Amen*

Ruth Brown

Wrestling With The Flock

Long-held Biblical imagery can be challenging, especially the metaphorical ones such as Good Shepherd and trusting sheep. As a child, I can remember literature showing Jesus holding a lamb, leading a flock of sheep. Obviously, Jesus is our Shepherd and we, humankind, are the sheep. The Shepherd is our guide and protector, all day and night.

The intimacy of this relationship is so great that He calls his sheep by name and they respond to his voice only. The sheep, however, are prone to going astray. They serve as the emblem of meekness and submission and are basically defenseless.

This image of vulnerability is troubling for me as an African American woman because helplessness can mean sudden death. I must be vigilant to systematic predators of greed and hateful thinking that threaten the well-being of my children and grandchildren, my church, and my race, while remaining adept at sensing spiritual awakenings to God's gifts.

How can I do that? Must I stay close to the flock, depending on Godly intervention to make my way clear? In other words, how do I follow the Good Shepherd when the larger community is at such peril? How do I operate in the deafening noise of everyday life, yet function through my head and heart to know God? How do I experience the profound, the permanent, the transient, the real, and the unreal in this beautiful, messy world? These questions consume me.

Prayer:

Lord, help me to hear your voice as my Shepherd.

Help me stay connected and integrated in your Word.

May I heed your warnings when danger lurks.

Help me navigate spiritual ambiguity and paradox.

Help my family to thrive and grow through life's struggles.

Guide me when this physical journey ends.

May it be so. Amen.

Even When We Wander

*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep 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 NIV

It seems to me that shepherding is a heroic leadership position. To hear a description of the work is to learn of unfailing devotion and care to a valued flock of intelligent beings in search of basic needs in an often perilous environment. Relationships develop; there is a trans-species understanding between the shepherd and sheep. What a marvel shepherds are! No wonder Jesus chose the shepherd as a metaphor to explain himself to the Pharisees, and to us.

I identify as a sheep spiritually, grazing on faith for much of my life and always looking for the pasture where I could be nourished. I think of fellow sheep out there grazing with me and taking turns leading, following, and getting out of each other's way. Being part of a flock is comforting but not always enough to satisfy one's yearnings. I used to think of that wandering as spiritual exploration. It was in fact my underdeveloped spirituality moving outwardly, lost and wanting for a guide.

I'm grateful that the Good Shepherd came for me, found me, and lovingly showed me that the way forward started inward. I'm glad our relationship respected the urgency of my plight when times were dark and gently nudged me toward answers that were always there within.

Prayer:

Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, revealed in us. May we guide ourselves and others as You have guided us. Amen.

Joanne Steller

Light of the World

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 8:12 NIV



Hundreds worship on Christmas Eve at Foundry UMC.

Prayer:

Thank you, Jesus, for inspiring people at Foundry United Methodist Church to be bearers of your light in the world. Amen.

Ta-Chen Wu

Light Bearers

If you attend Foundry's 9 a.m. service, you have probably seen me helping one of our children light the altar candles. Some are tall enough to do it themselves, but many require an extra hand to get the candle lighter to the right angle to catch the wick. I can only imagine what it looks like from the pews, as it often takes a few times per candle for the children who are almost but not quite tall enough to do it by themselves.

We light the altar candles to symbolize Jesus with us in our time of worship. When I served as an acolyte as a teenager, I was taught to offer great reverence, always bowing before the cross every time I passed it. I still try to do so when I am serving solo as an acolyte. However, with the 4- and 5-year-olds, I decided years ago that teaching seriousness is not what is needed. Rather it is a time to allow the children to delight in one of the basic elements of creation, fire and the resulting light. It is a time to let them know that no one is too young to be an active part of the worshipping community.

In John 8:12, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." Not just the light of one place, or one people, or one age group, or one skin color, or one anything, but of the **WHOLE WORLD!**

And the good news is that the whole world includes you and me. The light is not just out there somewhere else, but it is here among us. Sometimes we bring the light into a space and sometimes others bring the light for us. Where is God calling you to be a light bearer?

Rev. T.C. Morrow

Orchid Season

I have been growing orchids since I was 17 when I bought my first epiphyte at the Darke County Fair with my cousin Gail. We visited the orchid lady every day in Greenville, Ohio that summer. Back then, I learned the challenges of orchid care: water, light, air, and fertilizer—all in the right combination. That plant grew but never flowered. Sadly, it died when I left for college because no one knew how to care for the fussy bloomer while I was away.

Fast forward 30 years, and I have a collection of miniature orchids in my apartment. My place is small and faces the side yard. But I have one east-facing window. I have learned how to nurture orchids to bloom year after year, although the light is not ideal. The plants get lanky as they reach for the rising sun.

One summer, my neighbor living in the apartment above me installed an air conditioner. The heat kicked off by the AC killed my entire orchid collection. I now know that I have to keep that window shut during the hot summer months.

Orchids stretching for the light remind me that Christ is the Light of the World. Plants strive to move towards the warmth of the glow—to flourish—grow—and flower. It is not easy work and it can take years.

*I want to walk as a child of the light
I want to follow Jesus
God sent the stars to give light to the world
The star of my life is Jesus
In Him there is no darkness at all
The night and the day are both alike
The Lamb is the light of the city of God
Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus*

Lyrics by Kathleen Thomerson

Bill McLeod

Reminiscing About My Life

*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find;
knock and the door will be opened to you.*

Matthew 7:7 NIV

After a career in advertising sales at *The Washington Post*, I remember the many challenges I overcame and accomplishments I achieved. At my current stage in life, it is time for me to sort through a lifetime of memories and make decisions about the road ahead.

While inspecting a myriad of boxes filled with keepsakes, memories rush forth. My Washington Post in-house newsletters containing stories about projects and colleagues. Work related kudos from satisfied advertisers for my guidance in perking up their ads. The teamwork and camaraderie my colleagues shared when completing projects on deadline, and our celebrations for exceeding job goals.

Throughout my adult life I have been blessed with travel opportunities. Who can resist learning about the art and culture of exotic countries, eating tasty meals, exploring off-the-path sites with new friends, and snapping photographs of special moments? And for many years I ushered at Arena Stage and collected playbills. What a collection I have!

So many meaningful objects have been stashed in boxes. Sorting through them is a chore. What to hold and what to cast away? I think of Jesus. He made every minute count in his short but very eventful life. He taught, healed and sought solace for meditation. He was dedicated to his mission on Earth from beginning to end. In contrast to my life, he did not accumulate objects. Things of importance to him were carried in his heart and mind. That's a goal I would like to emulate, with God's blessing.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, may we explore, seek answers, and discover your guidance for every chapter of our lives. Amen.

Diane Seeger

Light

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 8:12 NIV

During a visit to Seattle, my mother was not feeling well, and I convinced her to see the doctor again. She did not let me be part of the conversation and reported she would stop lifting the garage door.

At 3 a.m. she woke me, and soon we sped off to Providence hospital for emergency surgery. Thank God for everyone around her--medics, driver, emergency doctors and ICU nurses, then family and social worker.

After an operation in a room with sallow light and syncopated breath machine, my prayers to God were begging for healing, please please. When God appeared so bright white around Mom's packed body, I slumped against the wall: You can have her if you want. I released in awe and love. I stayed for six weeks based on the new Family Leave Act. My mom recovered and lived for four years in her house and nine more years in a group home, thank God.

Jeanette Barker

Simply Look Up

Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."

John 8:12 NLT

I am grateful to live in the Maryland suburbs, far from city lights or tall buildings that could block my view of the stars in the evening. After long work days, just looking up for a few moments at a spectacular night sky can quickly center me with God.

I'm a full-time business consultant periodically juggling demanding care-giving responsibilities for my dad who is in declining health and providing support to my lovely stepmother, his faithful wife and primary caregiver. I can get utterly exhausted from all the expectations that I place on myself and those I allow others to put on me too. Sometimes, I'm also still grieving multiple significant life losses: my precious mother, brother, both my grandmothers. I can quickly start feeling overwhelmed knowing that a pre-emptive attack of negative thoughts is forthcoming.

But then, I utilize this God-Given strategy. I simply pause, take a big breath and look up while praying. I recall loving, scriptural words of God made flesh through my Savior Jesus Christ as well as words deposited directly into my heart:

My precious child, the Creative Author of the entire universe and the entire Heavenly host, are on your side. Can you not imagine your departed loved ones cheering you onward? If your Mighty God is for you, who can possibly stand against you?

On this earthly journey, I must regularly remind myself that I need only to heed God's life-giving words of hope and walk every step with Him. Indeed, the stars are only a faint reflection of the glory of the Creator of all things everywhere.

Prayer:

Precious Lord, please show us your illuminating Light wherever we find ourselves. Amen.

Eric M. Walker

The Faithful Light

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

John 8:12 NIV

To suggest we are living in turbulent times could be the understatement of the ages. Still, the sun manages to rise every day without fail. In fact, through every major world event and countless wars, the sun has always risen, shining its warm life-giving light every morning. By claiming Jesus to be the Light of the world, we celebrate His love, light, and faithfulness, as in “Great is thy faithfulness; morning by morning new mercies I see.”

Like the sun, the Light of Jesus would not discriminate. Although we Gentiles were not officially “included” among Jesus’ following until later (Acts 10), the faithful light of Jesus would often transcend the walls of His place and time. Much to the dismay of many critics, including the Pharisees (meaning Separatists), the un failing light of Jesus would shine on All, from the Adulteress to Zacchaeus—even on Samaritan women.

Fast-forward to today, after the Light of Jesus has been shining on the world since the beginning of time, really (John 8:58). No doubt we have come a long way in our global church and local congregations. But, do we continue to build walls that limit the light, love and grace of Jesus from shining through to all—regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, even political affiliation?

Perhaps in this time of Lenten reflection, we may All slow down and reflect on allowing that faithful, un failing Light of Jesus to truly shine on All of God’s Beloved. In that bold, progressive spirit of Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Amen.

Chris Hong

Seeing the Other

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

John 8:12 NRSV

God’s light enables us to engage a new way of seeing.

On my way into church on a recent Sunday I saw several homeless persons and thought how easily we can pass by as if we can’t see them. At the table in the Commons after the service I encountered persons whose clothing was worn and who were eating food by the plate-full. I wondered. Are these the people who Jesus came for, died for, and is living among us for? Liberation theology believes God has a “priority option for the poor.” God’s light enables us to see human suffering and tells us we need to do things that will make a difference.

When we are least expecting it, God’s Light shows us more than we wish to see—children in cages, people fleeing for their lives in front of raging fires, people of color who fill our prisons, gaps in school achievement, immigrants who flee to our borders, victims of disease, racism, war, gun violence, sex trafficking. I pray every day for help setting priorities and for energy to follow-through. (At 84, the energy part is critical.)

When helping resolve conflict, I often wonder how each side sees the other. God’s Light helps us to see through the eyes of the other. This enables us to move through the darkness of the moment toward the Light of life. How does the world appear to our “enemies” and how do they see us? Who is going to reach out?

Prayer:

God of Light, help us to see what we would rather not see. Empower us to walk in your Light and to make a difference.

Hal Garman

Light in the Darkness

*Again Jesus spoke to them, saying “I am the light of the world.
Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but
will have the light of life.”*

John 8:12 NRSV

John’s themes of light have always resonated with me. In today’s world we have electric lights and rarely have to contend with darkness, but I am a hiker and camper and have some sense of the pre-electric world. If you have ever had to go out to an outhouse in the night at some remote location, you know the light of the flashlight is so critical to feeling safe. The light of the camp fire brings warmth and comfort. My personal image of God is of the sunlight (or moonlight!) shining through the trees and brightening the path in front of me as I hike in the woods.

But right before this verse in John’s Gospel is the story of the woman caught in adultery. It makes me think that light is also exposing what Pharisees were really doing underneath their public regard for rule following. When I pray, I feel God sometimes pulling away the layers of the story I tell myself about why I do what I do—illuminating the motives I hide from even myself. The light of life can be glaring when it reveals I need to change my ways.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, hold me in your light, leading me on and keeping me warm and safe but also challenging me to truly know myself and You.

Joanne Garlow

22 Life-changing Words

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

John 8:12 NIV

The Pharisees’ failed attempt at entrapment was a triggering event that provided Jesus an opportunity to proclaim twenty-two life-changing words of empowerment, assurance, and hope. These words have reverberated from that very moment in the temple court thousands of years ago to the present.

John’s account of the event about an unnamed woman, Jesus’ disarming body language and discourse, and “blind” Pharisees, is illuminating. The unnamed woman embodied all of the potential named circumstances of life—sickness, grief, insecurity, guilt, to name a few--that can make us vulnerable to being cast into places of fear, despair and darkness.

Two years ago, when I walked alongside my sister who was undergoing chemo and radiation therapy for breast cancer, I witnessed the fear and despair that overwhelmed her. Because I loved her and loved Jesus even more, I was able to stand steadfastly in the gap on her behalf. The darkness of the diagnosis and treatment would not have a nanosecond of a chance to eclipse the hope and healing that I had claimed for her through God’s grace and mercy.

The twenty-two words in John 8:12 beautifully encapsulate the scope and effect of Jesus’s proclamation: that God’s divine light sustains life and is life. Those who follow the Divine Leader will never experience spiritual darkness because spiritual darkness cannot coexist with divine light.

Prayer:

Thank you, God, for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ who is my light and my salvation.

Cheryl Gibbs

True Followers

I am the light that has come into the world. No one who has faith in me will stay in the dark.

John 12:46 CEV

Christianity? Being, acting and living as Christians? Being “Christ-like” in accordance with what we understand Christ had prescribed? How far have so-called Christians strayed from Christ’s precepts? Think of what has been done in the name of Christianity – the Crusades, Inquisitions, persecutions, slavery, discriminating against those of another skin color, lower status or class.

Such happenings come as a wake-up call as we realize Christ calls on us to be one in Him, as stated in John 15:4, “Dwell in me as I in you.” Christ even portrays Himself as actual nourishment for us when He says in John 6: 56, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I in him.” In fact, this concept is embodied in our participation in the communion service ceremony when we “do this in remembrance of” Him, hearing the words spoken in Mark 14: 22 – 24 “... he took bread... broke it and gave it to them with the words ‘Take this; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup... And he said to them, ‘This is my blood...’”

Looking again at these passages causes me to reconsider what it requires to be a true follower of Christ. Am I worthy of bearing the name of Christ, a Christian?

Laetitia Combrinck

Fruitfulness

“There is an orchard in an apple.” The speaker was referring to the potential of the seeds hidden at the core of the apple. Each seed produces a tree and, potentially, multiple trees.

I have been painfully slow in coming to understand that I am much more than my history, beliefs, or circumstances. I have tended to identify with externals—jobs I have held, books I like to read, or preferences for living my life. But, at my core—difficult for me to embrace—I am a glorious child of my Creator. What does that mean? It means that I am endowed with the potential for modeling the qualities that we associate with God: creativity, compassion, justice, forgiveness, pure love. So, I am a divine seed planted on Earth to fulfill the purposes of the Kingdom of God. In Jesus I have a model who, at the same time, shows me the nature of our Creator, and shows how I might relate to others if I lived up to my God-given potential.

Jesus’ statement, “I am the true vine,” is powerful for me. The imagery of dead branches attached to a vital plant speaks loud and clear. Can I call myself a Christian and not be fruitful? Absolutely. But, just as a seed needs soil and watering, so do I need to be spiritually nourished through daily intentional time in reflection, meditation, or prayer.

But there is more: “Remain in me,” insists Jesus. My fruitfulness (the quality and richness of my interactions with the world) depends on my choosing daily to remain rooted in my Source.

Prayer:

*Oh give him all your tears and sadness, give him all your years of pain,
And you’ll enter into life in Jesus’ name.*

(from Spirit Song in the United Methodist Hymnal)

Josiane Blackman

Finding and Pruning True Vines

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

John 15:1-2 NIV

For quite some time, I have been looking for meaningful work. Over this past autumn, I relied on online searches to land a position. The results were a few interviews but no offers. This long, tedious process had run its course; I hid from everyone my true feelings of fearfulness, anger, frustration, and isolation. Employment searches can be challenging but do they have to be so overwhelming?

In John 15:1-2, Jesus is inviting me to remove the branches that are not serving the Gardener or myself. The branches of isolation, self-centered fear, and pride are withering and dying.

Recently, I gave a speech practicing my skills and am now working with a professional development group. Two realizations have come out of this:

1. I have a God-given talent to train people. Even when I feel crappy, I am quite competent with this gift.
2. The tools (branches) of networking, connecting with support groups, and going to professional events are important options I am invited to explore.

What an awakening it has been to see how much I need fellowship and these branches! These are the branches that are life-giving and energizing. Yes, the Gardener will bear fruit.

My story is not over yet but I am building a new garden on this challenging journey.

Prayer:

Lord, help me to be humble as you remove the branches of my old ways and bring fruit to the branches of fellowship and service.

Wil Rumble

Pruning

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes.

John 15 1-2 NIV

Jesus spoke these words at the Last Supper to comfort and set expectations for his Disciples in the days ahead when he would not be with them physically. As a modern disciple, the words should be comforting to me, but “cutting” and “pruning” are not words that I associate immediately with comfort. Eventually, our garden provided me with some insight.

Wonderfully, as the weather warms in early spring, volunteer plants sprout in our compost pile. Most are squash vines, sprouting from seeds in the kitchen waste that I composted earlier. By cutting the weaker sprouts, I leave the most viable vines to spread from the compost pile over the adjacent lawn.

One year promised to be particularly bountiful given all of the squash blossoms that the vines were producing. Then I noticed chipmunks feasting on the tender blooms as fast as they appeared. Several weeks later, to my surprise, I discovered the squash plants produced even more blossoms with the “pruning” that the chipmunks had done. The pesky animals had tired of the blossoms and left the vine to produce an abundant harvest for our table.

Jesus was conveying what this garden experience taught me. He was assuring the Twelve Disciples (and us) one last time to always abide in God’s Love.

Prayer:

O Master Gardener, help me accept the pruning that life brings. May I remain rooted to Your Love through Christ so that I will continue to bear fruits of Your Love abundantly in all circumstances. Amen.

Joe Steller

Evergreen

I love the Biblical parables that invoke nature. And while neither Jesus nor any of the prophets, disciples, or ancient kings seemed concerned with what we might term environmental issues, there are plenty of stories and incidents that testify to the glory of God's creation and our need to protect it. What's more, the fact that the economy of Palestine was primarily agricultural meant that Jesus used plants and animals in his allegories.

Late in January, I was re-reading a book entitled *God in the Garden*, which points out that in old Europe, "it was believed that decorations and greens hung for Christmas should not be taken down until Epiphany. The greens were thought to be imbued with spiritual qualities, and due to their connection with Christ's birthday, they should never be handled irreverently." In fact, it was considered very bad luck to just toss the decorations as we do today. Holly could be burned or given to cattle to eat. Mistletoe was carefully preserved to carry the blessings of the season. Rosemary was often used to create scented water for bathing. The author suggested we carry on this tradition by using the needles of holiday pines as mulch.

Good idea, I thought. But all the dumped trees had been collected in our neighborhood. Yet, as I arrived at my yoga class later in the morning, I saw the pickup hadn't occurred on that block. And during the meditation phase of the practice, the words "holy home" suddenly appeared in my mind. I took it as a commandment. After the class, I picked up a few of the discarded wreaths on the street and took them with me—to be chopped up and sprinkled under my azaleas and rhododendrons.

Steve Dryden

Stay Connected to the Vine

I am an urban gardener. The plants on my balcony give me great joy, especially when they are in bloom. Picture red geraniums, yellow and orange marigolds, white and purple impatiens, all thriving in DC's hot, humid summer weather. They remind me of the plant and garden images that abound in the Bible.

Among my favorites is Isaiah's comforting and assuring prophecy: "You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail" (Isaiah 58: 11). And, St. Paul writing to the Corinthians makes it clear that we must do our part but God is in charge and responsible for all growth. He says, "I planted the seed. Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow." (I Corinthians 3: 6)

Jesus takes the imagery one step further in the gospel of John: "I AM the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

"Apart from me you can do nothing." That is strong language! Can you embrace and believe that: God rules the world and everything in it? God is in charge. He is in control?

These are difficult concepts for Type A control freaks like me (and perhaps, you). The Good News is that Jesus is here to help us. We should be connected to Him, as the branch is connected to the vine. Without Him we are truly nothing, just dried-up branches. With His love flowing through us, we can love and serve, even work miracles. With Him, we can work to bring in God's kingdom here on earth.

Prayer:

Jesus, please help us stay connected to you through worship, praise, prayer, loving others, and service. Rid us of all anxiety and care and help us put our trust in You.

Ella Cleveland

Blessed Be the Tie That Binds

“I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

John 10:10 KJV

The letter arrived years after I retired from the Foreign Service. It was from Gregory, my Nigerian librarian, who decades earlier had worked in our cultural center in Kaduna. He wrote to say he and his wife were meeting their daughter in Washington and could we join them. In a phrase that awakened a rush of nearly forgotten memory, he reminded me when, in our time together, his pregnant wife survived an illness that threatened the loss of their expected baby. He said it was because I'd donated blood so a needed transfusion could be performed.

Details flooded back. I hadn't hesitated in responding to this need. Gregory's wife recovered and gave birth to a healthy daughter. Not long afterward, our assignment ended and Pat and I said many farewells in preparation to leave. With our young son and our own infant daughter—also born in Kaduna—we departed for the U.S. The years passed. We lost touch. We moved on to assignments in five other countries.

Our visit in DC with Gregory, his wife and daughter was filled with joy. They related details of their ensuing years. A good student growing up in Nigeria, their daughter completed schooling, then medical studies, qualified as a physician, married an American doctor and moved to Atlanta. We learned this fine grown woman not only practices medicine but leads physicians of color in advancing their profession nationally.

Years have passed. Gregory retired. We later learned he had died. His family related something to us Gregory never did: he was an honored chief among his Nigerian people, who celebrated his passing fully.

Steve Telkins

Roots of Our Faith, Vines of Our Lives

My mother, Mrs. Hallie M. Thomas, was born in 1938 in Paint Rock, Alabama. When she was a young girl, my grandmother divorced my grandfather, and married another man. Additional children were born, and the relationship between all became contentious. My mother felt as if she was an outsider and stranger growing up, and it contributed to a difficult relationship between her and her mother. This tension never fully went away until my mother's passing in 1998. My mother was a self-sufficient, resilient, woman, but she carried anger and pain over her childhood for a long time. She felt as if the roots and vines of her identity were cut instead of pruned.

In John 15:2, Jesus says that he takes away every branch that doesn't bear fruit and prunes the fruit-bearing branches so they can bear even more. My mother was not a woman who was religious, and much of this was due to how she saw the church and my very religious grandmother. It was well into my childhood and early adulthood that I saw her embrace Christ, in her own way. Vines, roots, and branches are all from the same tree. Life can twist, mold, and shape these vines and branches in different ways, and sometimes the Chief Gardener who is Jesus works on pruning us so we can one day bear fruit.

Prayer:

Lord, we often can carry burdens, resentments, and contentious legacies which can keep us from being free to bear good fruit. May your pruning shears of Grace, Peace, and Balance in the Holy Spirit cut away the bad parts of ourselves and help us bear good fruit for Your Glory. Amen.

Serge Thomas

Connection

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit...If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

John 15:5-9 ESV

“All who live in love are thine.” – from *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee*

“Only connect” – *Howard’s End* by E.M. Forster

Over the past couple of years going through and coming out of a period of grief, I have been incredibly blessed with loving, supportive people in my life. People who bring hilarious laughter, thoughtful perspective, and deep joy. Whether through a weekend vacation, dinner at a local restaurant, or a friendly greeting on Sunday morning, I see the life of God flowing through each person’s own unique and special personality.

I find myself wanting everyone to have such a network of support, in times of difficulty and in times of peace. While experience teaches us that life is fragile, that knowledge can inspire us to make moments of light in the lives of others in our reach—constricted as we are by time and space.

Connecting can be hard work at times. Struggling to find the right words, making time to be there, giving up some of our independence and self-reliance, being quiet instead of trying to fix the other person—in time these sacrifices bear fruit.

Other times, connecting is just the joyful, freeing act of being our best selves with each other. Unguarded moments of sharing both laughter, and our innermost feelings in a tapestry of words and spirit, a kind of “good infection,” as C.S. Lewis described.

As we travel our roads together, let us make it a priority to connect to God and to each other. Go where you find life. Live where you can bear fruit.

Paul Keefer

The One Coming Into the World

She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

John 11:27 NRS

Bursting out of the dark and humid *comedor* into the brisk air of the Sonoran desert, I called after my friends, "Wait! I haven't said goodbye!"

I squinted to find Ruth's face. Ruth is six years old and spent the last few weeks traveling from Central America to a small town on Mexico's border with Arizona. She and her family are seeking asylum in the U.S.

Mornings and evenings, they wait alongside dozens of others to receive meals and assistance at the *comedor*. Mornings and evenings, my U.S. passport lets me cross into Mexico to serve those meals and then move back into the U.S. to sleep at night. The Catholic sisters and fathers who run the *comedor* speak of these families as contemporary saints: radical incarnations of faith, hope, and love. I had so much to say to Ruth, but knew so little Spanish.

"¡Dios te bendiga!" --God bless you! --I stammered in a heavy accent. We hugged and as they turned to leave, Ruth stopped and reached toward me. She traced a line through the air near my forehead straight down toward my heart, then from my right shoulder and left, saying "en el nombre del Padre, Hijo, y Espíritu Santo." I realized she was blessing me with the sign of the cross.

It was just 15 seconds, but in those 15 seconds, six-year-old Saint Ruth brought me into an eternal dimension, outside of time. Through Saint Ruth, Eternal Life broke into the world.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, help us to believe and receive you when you come into our world.

Amanda Munroe

‘I Am’ Questions

It is spiritually enriching to think about the ways Jesus describes himself as I AM. It’s amusing how Jesus must have struggled to explain this within the limitations of human language. Jesus says He is the bread of life, the living water, the gate to eternal salvation. “I am the way, the truth and the life.” He just about covers it all.

And this leaves me with some unsettling questions. Who are we? If he is all that, then who am I?

Is our being and core identity to be found in our public and professional face? Our reputation? Is it in our pride for our children? In our wealth and material acquisitions? In the things we have done for the church and for others?

None of these things are intrinsically wrong and perhaps even good. Yet there are other things that we often let define us. What about that habit we can’t shake? Our abrupt reaction when someone annoys us? What about those things we have sought, even prayerfully, that elude us? (Ask NFL quarterbacks Kurt Cousins or Carson Wentz, strong believers both, when they get injured or lose the big game? Cousins said, “It feels raw.”) What about when, despite our best efforts, we fail to get ahead? What about a friendship or relationship, even between two believers, that breaks up with abundant acrimony?

Are we defined by these things?

I’m indebted here to Julian of Norwich for her 1330s insight. Setbacks and disappointments are merely things that God uses in our despair to cause us “to fall into our Lord’s breast” and seek God’s mercy and, upon receiving it, to receive joy and the capacity to assimilate into our own lives all those things that Jesus says “I AM.”

Our only true identity is in Christ—the one who fulfills the I Am.

Wesley G. Pippert

Practicing Resurrection

In one of the best-loved and certainly most important “I am” statements in the gospel of John, Jesus tells Martha, sister of the recently deceased Lazarus:

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 11:25-27 NRSV

This powerful assurance has captured the imagination of writers across the centuries, including English novelist Charles Dickens and the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky.

In Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, set during the French Revolution, the dissolute Sidney Carton repeats Jesus’ words to himself as he determines to take another man’s place at the guillotine. In Dostoevsky’s great novel *Crime and Punishment*, the murderer Raskolnikov asks the faithful Sonya to read the story of Lazarus to him, including Jesus’ assurance of resurrection and everlasting life. Raskolnikov eventually experiences a kind of spiritual resurrection by voluntarily confessing his crimes near the novel’s end.

Carton and Raskolnikov are among the greatest characters in nineteenth-century fiction. They are also, at times, among the most despicable. But Dickens and Dostoevsky understood that, through Christ, resurrection was possible for everyone, even the so-called “worst” among us. Forgiveness and new life were assured. These writers gave us characters whose lives were not, ultimately, bound by or to the past. Redemption was possible if only one accepted it.

As contemporary American poet Wendell Berry reminds us—echoing John 11—we all need to “practice resurrection.” Christ showed us the way. He was the way.

Deryl Davis

Fully Alive

I am the way and the truth and the life.

John 14:6 NIV

A few Sundays ago, the Foundry choir sang a beautiful African hymn, and persuaded a few in the congregation to join in with clapping and some light pew-swaying. I smiled to myself thinking of the church services I attended while living in Burundi.

Burundians throw down at church. Songs become medleys that weave in and out of one another, forgetting where they started or where they're going. Chairs and benches get pushed aside for dancing—not polite afternoon wedding moves but sweat-through-your-clothes dancing. Regardless of what life was like outside of the service, Sunday mornings were undoubtedly a time to be alive.

Of all the “I Am” statements from Jesus, life has always resonated with me most. Not the promise of life ever after but meaningful, undulating life here and now. Growing up in a home that wasn't particularly joyful, the vibrancy of Christian community captured me: passion, purpose, risk, deep relationships, the unexpected path, the political imagination. This is where I sense God and when I feel closest to Him.

I truly believe in the maxim of St. Irenaeus that “The glory of God is man fully alive.” God desires us to be free from inhibitions—be they physical, mental, emotional—to fulfil our unique potential and be our most technicolor selves. Structural inequality and injustice keep so many from the fullness of life. It's the work of God's people to transform these ills so we may all experience God's bursting vision for our lives that extends well beyond a good church dance session.

In Jesus' name, we have a lot of work ahead and a lot of living to do.

Meg Lavery

Please Don't Go Away

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 14:5-6 NIV

Imagine the heartbreak and confusion Jesus' disciples must have felt at the Last Supper when Jesus told them that He would soon be going away and that they couldn't come with Him. The disciples had been in an all-time, epic and almost tribal relationship with a miraculous Rock Star Rabbi for three years. Then suddenly, this news hits them. They could not grasp why or where Jesus was going. At least Thomas spoke up through the immediateness of his shock with heartfelt words that authentically conveyed: "Please don't go away without us."

I can relate. When I recently felt yet another significant person and I were about to part ways, my mind easily went into a destructive state of disbelief. Less than subtle hints started getting louder. Tears, shed the many times I spent alone, became deafening.

Thomas and the disciples could not have known that Jesus would return, not just for them, but for all of us. During seasons of loss, I am profoundly comforted by the book of John and this story. I finally woke up from this latest unrealized dream of finding true love and tearfully ran back into the arms of God. My loving Creator had been patiently waiting for me to come home.

Prayer:

Precious Jesus, thank you for honoring your eternal Words and for coming back for us. Thank you for also giving us the Holy Spirit as our divine guide while on earth, until we see you face-to-face. Amen.

Eric M. Walker

“I Am The Resurrection and The Life”

To have stood where Mary and Martha stood, both before the one they called “Messiah” and the immensity of their grief, must have been exhausting. The days of watching and waiting as Lazarus’ life slipped away. The pain of preparing for his burial. The anticipation of the arrival—and confrontation with—the one who could have prevented it all in the first place.

Jesus’ response might sound dismissive. Perhaps, it’s simply foreshadowing of Lazarus’ resurrection a few verses later. But I see resurrection happening first not when Lazarus wanders out of the tomb, but when Martha is able to proclaim in the midst of her grief, sorrow, and rage: “I believe.” Something miraculous happens in the humanity of this encounter, when love embodied creates the space for hope and connection when everything else points to its impossibility.

Anyone who has borne the weight of grief knows how desolate those spaces can be. And like Martha, it’s likely we’ve experienced the way that love embodied can create space for life, even if only for a moment, to break through.

Those who are called to journey in the way of Christ can read this “I am” statement as a reminder to be love embodied—resurrection and life—where ever grief and sorrow exist in our world.

Our work is to bear life into the lives of all those we meet, and to be agents of resurrection in our workplaces, relationships, and communities. It is to remind people that they aren’t alone, speaking up when no else will, showing up for people when everyone else has forgotten they’re there at all. Whether that’s at a bedside, a General Conference, or on the corner of 16th and P Streets in Washington, D.C., when we do, I guarantee we too will become for the world the resurrection and the life.

Rev. Will Green
Associate Pastor / Director of Discipleship

The Resurrection and the Life

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

John 11:25-26 NIV



According to John 20:11-18, Mary Magdalene, alone in the garden outside the tomb, saw two angels sitting where Jesus' body had been. The risen Jesus approached her. At first, she mistook him for the gardener, but after she heard him say her name, she recognized him and cried out “Rabbouni,” the Aramaic word for teacher. She tried to touch him, but he told her, “Don't touch me, for I have not yet ascended to my father.” Jesus then sent her to tell the other apostles the good news of his resurrection. The Gospel of John, therefore, portrays Mary Magdalene as the first apostle, the apostle sent to the apostles.

The painting “Christ Appearing to Mary” (ca 1885) is on view in the Luce Foundation Center in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The artist, Albert Pinkham Ryder, said, “I cannot but feel in some way that in . . . the religious picture I have gone a little higher up on the mountain and see other peaks showing along the horizon.”

What inspires us to go “a little higher up on the mountain”? If we believe that we “shall never die,” there are no limits. Onward and upward!

Prayer:

Thank you, God, for the promise of everlasting life. Amen.

Stephen Roberts

I AM

Somewhere along the dusty road
He turned and said to them:
“I am the Way.”
They were looking at the ground, at their sandals.
All of them.

“I am the Truth,” he said. “Do you understand?”
After a short pause, he tried again:
“I am the Life.”

Something began to resonate in at least one of them.
Looking up, he could see a bird, like a tiny dot, in the sky.
“We’ll go with you,” he said,

Shielding his eyes from the sun
As if he were uncertain or scared or devoted
Beyond his comprehension.

Many miles later
They finally understood.

Deryl Davis

What's After I Am?

“I am” is a declaration of one’s self to the world. Music and poetry come to mind.

I am superman

I am iron man

You can shoot shots or cheer ‘cause I... am I am whatever you say I am

I am the one who knocks

I am the dream and the hope of the slave

I am woman, hear me roar

Yet Jesus’s seven “I am” statements aren’t self-declarations. *They are offers to others; they are gifts to us.*

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

I am grateful for this gift.

Beth Scott