

Week 1 – Knowing the Great “I Am”

Key text: Exodus 3:1-14

Opening

Consider introducing the series with the subject of the vastness of God. Research and provide data on the universe, such as the size of our solar system and our galaxy, and then compare those figures to the total number of galaxies scientists believe there may be in the universe. It challenges the imagination!

Consider it another way. Talk about and provide data on how detailed and intricate the universe is. What is the number of cells in the human body? How small is an atom? This is infinity.

Such thoughts help us consider the vastness of God, who is Creator of all. Yet, that vast, infinite God is also personal and desires to be personally known by us. This is why God came to us in the person of Jesus.

Such an introduction will provide a way to talk about why you are doing a series on the “I am” sayings of Jesus. This series will explore self-identifying claims Jesus used that help us to experience and to know God.

The first I am spoken by God in the Bible reveals God’s desire to be known.

Into the Word

Explore the Exodus story and the context of the name God gave to Moses. Research cultic beliefs from that time about the power of names have. How was the name *Yahweh* treated? What other understandings of this name are important? Relate those thoughts to modern relationships and to the importance of knowing someone’s name or someone’s calling us by name. (Perhaps you have a good story of someone very important calling you by name when you didn’t even realize this person knew you. Relate the importance of that experience.)

What messages are being communicated in Moses’ desire to know God’s name and in God’s willingness to be known?

Now move to the New Testament. Give the meaning of Jesus’ name. How do the images of the “I Am’s” express further understanding of Jesus’ name? Consider how the “I Am’s” were important spiritual symbols coming out of Jesus’ Jewish faith, yet how they also are earthy and experiential. What is the message there? What does it say that these spiritual images were practical parts of everyday life at that time?

Making Application

If the symbols of the “I am” mean God can be experienced in the ordinary world, what does this mean for us? Sometimes we talk about experiencing God as an intentional decision—a choice we make—in that God won’t draw near unless we seek God. But what if it works the other way around? What if God is already a part of our world, and we are simply invited to see and experience God’s presence? How are the “I Am’s” an invitation to enter into the “is-ness” of God, the God already here, the God who is I am?

You might want to use Brother Lawrence’s *Practicing the Presence of God* as an illustration (an uneducated monk who simply practiced being aware of God in course of an ordinary life of working in a monastery kitchen).

Invite participants into a six-week journey of being open to God. The symbols of the “I am” sayings teach us not only about God, but also about us. We get more in touch with our longings and needs and what ultimately fills these. Close the message by inviting participants to do the exercise in the book (p. 23) and to finish their own “I am...” sentence. Then invite them to make a list of what they imagine God might say. The comparison of these two lists is a good place to begin this journey. This will also prepare the participants for their small-group gathering.

Worship Helps

Litany

One: Just as God spoke to Moses, God wants to speak to us. Let us open our hearts to God who wants to be known and who says,

All: “I Am Who I Am.”

One: When life pressures us to care more for things than for God, remember that Jesus said,

All: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”

One: When we feel puzzled about which choices are right, we can ask for guidance from the one who said,

All: “I am the Light of the World.”

One: When we feel vulnerable and lost, we can find comfort in knowing that we are continuously being sought by the one who said,

All: “I am the Good Shepherd. Come to me.”

One: When we feel powerless and weary, we can find power offered to us by the one who said,

All: “I am the True Vine. Abide in me.”

One: When we wonder who's in and who's out with God, we can find reassurance in the grace embodied in Jesus who welcomed all, saying,

All: "I am the Way. Follow me."

One: When we face loss and pain, we can find hope in the one who promised us renewed and abundant life, saying,

All: "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Live in me."

Prayer

Dear God,
Help us to open our eyes,
our ears,
our minds, and
our spirits
to understand who you are
and to know you.
Be with us as we draw near to you
and closer to each other.
In your son's holy name, we pray.
Amen.

Hymn and Song Suggestions

O God, Our Help in Ages Past
Great Is Thy Faithfulness
Just as I Am, Without One Plea

How Majestic Is Your Name (TFWS The Faith We Sing 2023)
Be Still and Know I am God (TFWS 2057)
Lord I Lift Your Name on High (TFWS 2088)
Take, O Take Me As I Am (Worship & Song 319)

Here I Am to Worship by Tim Hughes
10,000 Reasons by Jonas Myrin and Matt Redman
Blessed Be Your Name by Matt and Beth Redman
How Great Is Our God by Chris Tomlin, Jesse Reeves, and Ed Cash

Scripture Text

Exodus 3: 1-14

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%203:%201-14&version=NRSV;NIV;CEB;ESV>

Week 2 –“I Am the Bread of Life” –Knowing God’s Satisfaction

Key Text: John 6:27-59

Opening

Begin the message considering how hard it is to stay satisfied in our world. Collect information on products that were advertised as “never needs replacing” or “guaranteed to satisfy.” How many of those same products later were made with upgrades or in “new and improved” versions?

Or look at some of the many advertisements aimed at making us dissatisfied. For example, “Are you tired of that old, worn out [fill in the blank]?” Consider putting together a short video of commercials or print advertisements that use phrases such as this.

Then explore the implications of such messages. What do they do to our sense of satisfaction? Research articles dealing with the impact of a disposable society on our self-image. What does the constant message of “something better is out there” do to our relationships, our feelings about our careers, enjoyment of our possessions? This will provide a great lead-in to this week’s theme.

Into the Word

“I am the bread of life” is Jesus’ response to a miracle-chasing crowd. Explain the context of that remark. Consider what impact it would have had upon the people’s faith if Jesus had just given them what they wanted. What could be the possible downsides of that? (A good example is the movie *Bruce Almighty* and what happens when the character played by Jim Carrey, who has been given God’s powers, ends up answering everyone’s prayer with a “yes.”)

Jesus comes into a world prone to making us chase after endless wants, and he offers to be a source of satisfaction.

Making Application

What does this focus upon eating and being fed say about the power of hunger? How powerful a force is hunger? Can you think of other hungers that can become so great they make people do things they otherwise never would have considered?)

How can we experience Jesus as a source of satisfaction? How do we keep from being consumed by our appetites? This is a good time to teach about fasting. Research quotes about fasting from various saints: the desert fathers, other ancient / modern mystics, Luther, Wesley, and more-recent theologians. What are varieties of fasting that people might be invited to practice during Lent that will build authority over our appetites and urges? Perhaps list several, such as those mentioned in the book; you may know of others. Give some instruction on how participants might follow this for the remainder of Lent. (p. 32)

Worship Helps

Call to Worship

One: Come, let us worship Jesus, the Bread of Life!

All: Christ has come from heaven to feed us with divine vitality.

One: We worship the One who offers the world everlasting life.

All: Bread of heaven, feed us till we want no more.

Litany

One: When we feel hungry for more of something—even when we're not sure what that something is, we can remember that Jesus said,

All: "I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry."

One: When we feel distracted by other means of fulfillment in the world, help us to remember that Jesus said,

All: "I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry."

One: When we find ourselves feeling inadequate or incomplete in our daily lives, remind us that we fill ourselves up on Jesus' sustaining words,

All: "I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry."

One: When we look around at friends and strangers, assessing how we measure up to others, help us to remember that we are enough and are satisfied by God's grace when we hear Jesus say,

All: "I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry."

One: When we worry that the satisfaction we have now may one day run out, let us rest in the truth and fullness of Jesus' promise,

All: "I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry." Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from the evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Prayer

Dear God, help us to remember that even when we feel like we don't do enough to honor you, you accept us just as we are because you made us and love us.

Let us be constant reminders to each other that we are enough. We invite you to join us in this place, making your presence evident in our community. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Benediction

May the love of God
and the peace of Christ be with you.
You are filled with the bread of Life,
go and share the abundance of Christ with a hungry world.

Hymn and Song Suggestions

My Hope Is Built
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling
All Who Hunger (TFWS The Faith We Sing 2126)
Christ Is Enough by Rueben Morgan and Jonas Myrin
Bread of Life by David Glenn

Songs for Communion

Let Us Break Bread Together
Fill My Cup, Lord
One Bread, One Body
Eat This Bread
Breathe by Michael W. Smith

Scripture Text

John 6: 25-35

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+6:+25-35&version=NRSV;NIV;CEB;ESV>

Week 3—“I Am the Light of the World.” – Knowing God’s Guidance

Key texts: John 7:2, 14; 8:12

Opening

Begin this message by reflecting upon ways our society has evolved when it comes to geographical guidance aids. Remember when we had foldout maps that could stretch across the width of a car interior? Then we had more-manageable, comprehensive atlas books, but they had to be repurchased every few years to keep up with new roads. Finally, with the Internet, things really improved—we could use sites such as *mapquest.com*. Then came GPS devices. Now we don’t even need to buy separate devices; everything we need comes on our phones! (There’s obviously a fun jab at men just waiting to be taken here, thinking about how these technological advances helped those who don’t like asking others for directions. In fact, Google “Who discovered GPS?” and you’ll find three men!)

You could then make a turn recognizing another popular acronym for GPS—God’s Positioning System. God’s desire to give direction to us is central in Jesus’ words, “I am the light of the world.”

Into the Word

This week’s sermon presents a great opportunity to experience the context of today’s saying beyond what the book and DVD provide, as well as to build anticipation for the small-group gathering. Teach about the setting of this “I am” saying—the Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths. The Hebrew word for booth is *sukkot* (plural) or *sukkah* (singular). Have a replica of a *sukkah* built on the chancel as a visual illustration. (This is a great project for a Scout troop if you have one affiliated with your church.) If the *sukkah* you’ve built is big enough, you might preach this part of the message sitting under it. Invite participants to consider why this is an important remembrance in the Jewish faith. How is life like a pilgrimage? What lessons did ancient Israel’s experience in the wilderness provide for future generations? Also, point out that this is one of the biggest celebrations of the year in modern Israel, and that small groups this week will get to see a present-day festival in Jerusalem.

Then point out the other context—the Sanhedrin meeting (in violation of their own code) in the Hall of Hewn Stones. If you have visual capability in your sanctuary, you could search for images to display on the screen showing what this place looked like, and the proximity of that gathering to where Jesus might have been standing in the courtyard of the Temple. Consider highlighting the teaching about the “Grand Illumination” that was part of this festival. What is the meaning of Jesus’ words “I am the light of the world” in this context?

Making Application

We all need guidance; sometimes we realize this, and sometimes we don't. In the context of the Old Testament *sukkot* festival, this was a reminder of how we need to seek God's direction. What is the power of a person who recognizes this? Who are people you have known, or from history, who were better leaders or public servants because they realized their need for God's direction? (Think of Martin Luther King collapsing in prayer at his kitchen table during a turbulent time in his life.)

At the same time, what does it look like when, like the Sanhedrin, we refuse to recognize our need for God's guidance? How can failure to seek God's wisdom blind us to the truth, especially when we think we have the truth? Religious persons can be the worst offenders. Look up instances in the Bible where it mentions people marching ahead with their plans but not seeking or consulting the Lord.

What does it mean to seek God's guidance willingly? What does it mean to be open to God's direction when we don't think we need to change direction?

Worship Helps

Prayer

Loving God, we come together today, rejoicing and dancing in the light that you shine on us, allowing us to see you, know you, and find our way to you through your son Jesus. We know that you are with us in this place. Help us open our eyes to see you, our ears to hear your Word, and our hearts to know your love. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Litany

One: When we look around us and feel that only darkness and emptiness surround us, illuminate our hearts with Jesus' words,

All: "I am the Light of the World."

One: When we look for God in the places of pain and suffering, pleading for that holy presence to be made evident even in the gloomiest of places, help us to see God at work through Jesus' promise,

All: "I am the Light of the World."

One: When we feel far away from God, even when we try to create that distance ourselves, remind us that the love of God is always touching us through Jesus' words,

All: "I am the Light of the World."

One: When we can't figure out where to go next, what to do, or who to be, help us to hear God's call and see the path illuminated for us by the one who says,

All: "I am the Light of the World."

One: When we wonder how we will go out into the world and shine God's light, sharing God's love with all the earth, let us follow Jesus' lead as he reveals himself to us, saying,

All: "I am the Light of the World." Amen.

Prayer

Loving God, Creator of Light.
We thank you for coming to us in Jesus Christ,
 showing us who you are
 and who we are created to be in you.
Light the dark corners of our minds.
Warm the cold places in our hearts.
Fill the empty chambers of our spirits.
Heal the brokenness in our lives. Amen.

Hymns and Song Suggestions

I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light
Be Thou My Vision
This Little Light of Mine
Come, We That Love the Lord

Guide My Feet (TFWS The Faith We Sing 2208)
We Are Marching (TFWS 2235-b)

As Pilgrims on Our Way (Upper Room Worshipbook 210)
Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness (Upper Room Worshipbook 90)

Open the Eyes of My Heart by Paul Baloche
Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone) by John Newton, Chris Tomlin, and Louie Giglio

Scripture

John 8:12

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+8:12&version=NRSV;NIV;CEB;ESV>

Week 4—"I am the Good Shepherd." –Knowing God's Care

Key text: John 10:1-15

Opening

Once again, this is a message that lends itself to being experiential for the congregation. If you begin by launching into the shepherding images, consider having a typical sheep pen built that would look like a rock wall with an opening. Or once again, use images that could be shown on a screen. If you have a sheep pen built, foam rocks work well and are not very expensive. By standing in the entrance of the pen as you preach, you will provide a great way for people to understand the "going out and coming in" verses in the Old Testament.

And/or, begin with a focus on our modern craving for security and excitement. You could have fun asking the congregation to think about how much we are creatures of habit. Ask, "How many of you sit in or near the same place during the worship service each week? Why do we do that?" You could also research how much we spend today on security, such as home-alarm systems. Providing security has become big business.

At the same time, how much do we invest in recreation and vacations? We need breaks in our routines, as well as activities that bring energy. We are always in movement through that portal—going out and coming in.

Into the Word

Make reference to the context of last week's saying, and how this marks the beginning of a mounting tension between Jesus and the religious leaders. That tension leads up to Jesus' words, "I am the good shepherd." Jesus debated with religious leaders about what it means to be descendants of Abraham. In fact, this was the context of another "I am" saying: "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58).

This leads into the story of Jesus' healing the man born blind and the interrogation by the Pharisees. It ends with Jesus accusing the Pharisees of spiritual blindness.

Immediately after that, Jesus compares himself to a good shepherd, in contrast to thieves. This is important framing. Jesus is both a door / gate for the sheep *and* the good shepherd, because he lays himself down for the sheep. Jesus pits himself against many in religious leadership who profess a care for the people but who do not have the investment they claim to have.

Making Application

How does this apply to our lives? Is there a message here for the modern church? There is much emphasis today on growth and numbers, but do we at times lose sight of the individual worth of people because of the drive to be successful? Or perhaps look at the sports world and the attention a team or an

owner gives a player until that player's performance is no longer up to expectations.

Make it even more personal: Have we experienced from an employer, a friend, or someone else we trusted an expressed concern for our well-being, only to find out this concern was based solely upon what we could do for that person?

The important point to make here is that none of us loves totally free of impure motives. We too can be guilty of the same—helping someone because of what he or she can do for us; showing special treatment toward others because of the way in which they make us feel important. Jesus' saying "I am the good shepherd" is radical because he doesn't seek to get anything out of the sheep—he simply lays down his life for them. This is the basis of our value and worth—understanding and accepting the sacrifice God is willing to make on our behalf. Our importance is based either upon what we do or upon what God has done for us.

The conversion story of Liz Curtis Higgs is applicable. Living a very wild life, she accepted an invitation to attend church with a friend. The pastor talked about men laying down their lives for their wives. Higgs said to her friend, "If I met a man willing to die for me, I'd marry him in a heartbeat." Her friend said to her, "Liz, a man has already died for you." Somehow the idea that God loved her that much despite her life and deeds broke through.

<http://www.lizcurtishiggs.com/about-liz/lizs-journey-of-faith/>

Worship Helps

Litany

One: When we find ourselves wondering how we are expected to navigate this confusing, intimidating world, help us to remember that we are not alone because Jesus says,

All: "I am the Good Shepherd."

One: When we feel tempted to stray from our communities, to try to make it on our own without the help of those who care about us, remind us that we are never out of your care when Jesus tells us,

All: "I am the Good Shepherd."

One: When we take a risk and venture out alone anyway, remind us that there is no distance we can wander that God is not still guarding and holding us close when Jesus says,

All: "I am the Good Shepherd."

One: When we're too tired to do or to think anymore, help us to remember to rest and feel safe under the keep of Jesus, who says,

All: "I am the Good Shepherd." Amen.

Prayer

Holy God, we come to you today in gratitude for your love and care. We can become so busy and consumed with stress and deadlines that we need a reminder of who we are, whose we are, and why we are here. Thank you for loving us through all of it. We need your guidance and care to do the work you call us to do and to be the people you call us to be. Help us, Lord, as we seek to do your will as your beloved children. Amen.

Psalm 23

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+23&version=NRSV;NIV;CEB;ESV>

Prayer

Saint Patrick's Breastplate

Christ be with us, Christ before us, Christ behind us,
Christ in us, Christ beneath us, Christ above us,
Christ on our right, Christ on our left
Christ where we lie, Christ where we sit, Christ where we arise,
Christ in every heart of everyone who thinks of us,
Christ in every eye that sees us.
Christ in every ear that hears us.
Salvation is of the Lord,
Salvation is of the Christ,
May your salvation, O Lord, be ever with us. Amen.

Hymn and Song Suggestions

Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us

Spirit Song

He Leadth Me

The King of Love My Shepherd Is

In Christ Alone by Keith Getty and Stuart Townsend

Scripture

John 10:1-15

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2010:1-15&version=NRSV;NIV;CEB;ESV>

Week 5—“I am the true vine.” –Knowing God’s Power

Key text: John 15:1-8

Opening

A friend rode with a farmer upon his horse-drawn wagon. There were blinders on the horse, and as they rode along, the friend noticed the farmer frequently saying, “Now, keep pulling, Cinnamon... That’s the way, Gertrude... A little harder, Dakota...” Finally, the friend asked, “Why do you keep calling all these different names when there’s just one horse?” The farmer replied, “So my horse will think there are others pulling too. If he thinks he’s alone, he’ll quit!”

You may think of other stories that relate to the feeling that *It’s easy to give up when we think we’re running alone.*

Into the Word

That sets up this week’s saying. Jesus was preparing the disciples for his departure. Offer some background on how this saying and next week’s saying come in what is known as the Farewell Discourse in John. These chapters (14–17) are about preparation for the disciples after Jesus’ death. Jesus knows that the disciples will feel alone and that it will be easy for them to give up.

Obviously the central image for staying connected to Christ as our source of spiritual power is the vine. Make reference to the book or do your own research on the vine as an important symbol in Israel’s faith. Do a word study on *abide*, and consider how this keeps us connected. Jesus talks about “cutting away” as the key to abiding—a seemingly contradictory idea. How can this be? How is removing something a way to stay strong and healthy?

Making Application

The book deals with the two-fold aspect of cutting away: pruning growth and removing dead branches. Are there agricultural examples in your area that fit well, such as apple trees? Vineyards? Other citrus produce?

What does this look like in our personal lives? In other words, what are some ways in which we sometimes need to prune or cut away? In making spiritual application, ask, “Why this is hard? What makes us resist cutting away too much activity or finally letting go of something that has no promise of producing? How much of our self-identity or feelings of importance get in the way? How much does insecurity play a part?” At the root of all of this is our trust in God to give us what we need.

Consider using a sample vine during the message. Close by illustrating what it means for us to be the branches, as Jesus said, and letting him be the vine. On one end is the fruit—whatever it is that makes us feel productive or successful or

secure. On the other is the vine—our source of life. Which way do we look for strength?

Worship Helps

Litany

One: When we feel isolated, we can remember that Jesus said,

All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.”

One: When we feel powerless, we can find strength in remembering that Jesus said,

All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.”

One: When we are tempted to try to go it alone, we can reach out to other believers, remembering that Jesus said,

All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.”

One: When life becomes so busy that time with God seems impossible to find, we can regain our focus by remembering that Jesus said,

All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.”

One: When we stress about the quality of the fruit we are or are not producing, we can relax and trust the source of our life and growth, the One who said,

All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.” Amen.

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for bringing us all here together again. We have learned so much about you through the words of your son, Jesus Christ, and we hunger for a deeper sense of you and your love for us. Be with us as we continue on this journey; help us to love one another and to use the gifts you gave us for the building up of your kingdom. In your name we pray. Amen.

Hymn and Song Suggestions

Bless Be the Ties that Binds

One Bread, One Body

We are One in the Spirit (TFWS The Faith We Sing 2223)

O Blessed Spring (TFWS 2076)

Vine and Branches (Upper Room Worshipbook 107)

One Thing Remains by Brian Johnson, Christa Black Gifford, and Jeremy Riddle

Scripture

John 15:1-8

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2015:1-8&version=NRSV;NIV;CEB;ESV>

Week 6– “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”–Knowing God’s Way

Key text: John 14:1-7

Opening

Use a story from your own experience of needing assistance to find your way and someone giving you complicated directions, as opposed to someone simply saying, “Just follow me. I’ll take you there.” It’s always better when someone shows us the way!

Examine how the Bible is a story of God’s bringing us back to the garden of Eden—not the literal place, but the state of being where we had perfect communion with God. The Bible is about God’s desire to direct us back. The Law was meant to be a set of directions for us. Then prophets made it more personal, but it was still like the clerk in the store just pointing us in the right direction. Finally, God sent his son, who said, “Follow me.”

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” His life is the way to the Father. Today’s message focuses on what this means.

Into the Word

This week’s chapter in the book deals with the controversy of Jesus’ words, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” You may wish to avoid this altogether in the sermon, or you may choose to prepare and set the stage for that discussion. If you do the latter, regardless of your interpretation, be wary of getting into the debate on Christianity versus other religions. The focus should be upon how Jesus is the way.

Refer to last week’s message, in which you described the setting of Jesus preparing his followers for his departure. Also, consider the setting in which this Gospel was written: It was a time of great persecution against Christians who were easily tempted to believe others questioning the validity of their faith. Both settings put people in contexts of facing adversity.

This is also the same passage where Jesus talks about taking us to the “mansions” prepared for us. Point out the book’s reference that *mansion* is the noun form of the verb *abide*, from chapter 15. Jesus will take us there. This passage is written with a very relational understanding. This has to be about more than just something to believe.

Making Application

What’s the message for us? How does knowing *about* God versus really knowing God make a difference in our lives, particularly in times of adversity? Are there times when we need more than simply “right belief”? How important is a relationship with a living Savior?

This is a good focus for the rest of the message: How do we make Jesus *our* way? How can we know Christ in such a way that it gets us through our challenges? What practices help us to know Christ in a real and vital way?

Worship Helps

Litany

One: When we face a complicated situation that challenges us to see what God wants us to do, we can remember Jesus saying to his friends,

All: "I am the Way."

One: When we find ourselves wondering if we're really accepted by God, we can take comfort in remembering the grace embodied in Jesus who said,

All: "I am the Way."

One: When we are tempted to believe that we know who's in and who's out, we can remember that Jesus welcomed outsiders and outcasts and said,

All: "I am the Way."

One: When we fall into the trap of thinking that faith is about rules, we can remember the call to relationship found in Jesus' words,

All: "I am the Way."

One: When we wake in the morning and wonder what God asks of us in that day's encounters, we can find our model and our answer in the one who said,

All: "I am the Way."

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for working in our lives every day and allowing us to gather together to learn more about you through your son Jesus Christ. We thank you for the work you have already done in our lives and in the life of our church and we know you are not finished with us. Please be with us as we draw near to you and closer to each other. In your son's holy name, we pray. Amen.

Hymn and Song Suggestions

The Summons (TFWS The Faith We Sing 2130)

I Have Decided to Follow Jesus (TFWS 2129)

Christ is the Truth, the Way (Upper Room Worshipbook 93)

Give Me Jesus (Upper Room Worshipbook 111)

Jesus Paid it All by Elvina Hall

Scripture

John 14:1-7

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+14:1-7&version=NRSV;NIV;CEB;ESV>

Week 7—“I am the Resurrection and the Life.” – Knowing God’s Possibilities

Key text: John 11:17-26

Opening

Research everything you can find about Lazarus. Begin the message by helping people to see things through his experience. You might tell it from a third-person perspective: “Lazarus was just ___ years old. He lived in a small village with his sisters, probably never venturing more than a day’s walk from home. He became ill one day. Unfortunately for him, he lived in a time and place where no medical treatments were available. Worried loved ones could do nothing but watch him rapidly decline...”

Lead up to the dramatic moment of Lazarus coming out of the tomb, squinting at the light, wondering what had happened. And then he faced suspicious people who wanted to put him to death for being the recipient of one of the greatest miracles in history!

The turn you could make here is to point out that for all the drama surrounding his life, Lazarus never speaks. We don’t have even a single quote from him in the Bible. As significant a role as he played, he actually is not the main character of the story. He is not even a supporting actor. The real emphasis is on his sisters—those who have to face the death of someone they loved.

That’s what makes this story relevant for every one of us: If we live long enough, we have to face the deaths of people we love. This story is about facing death.

Into the Word

This chapter in the book uses Barbara Brown Taylor’s distinction between belief and trust. Consider exploring what this looks like as a key to understanding Jesus’ words, “I am the resurrection and the life.” What is the difference to you?

Someone once described it this way: “I went to a new dentist. I saw the many diplomas from reputable universities hanging upon the wall and believed this doctor was competent. I watched as he treated people with compassion, and I believed he was caring. I saw an expensive foreign car in the parking lot with a license plate that said ‘Tooth Doc,’ and I believed he was successful. But when I got into the chair and he walked over to me with a pointed instrument in his hand and said, ‘Open up!’ I needed more than belief, and I had to trust!”

Making Application

Is it ever this way with faith? Can we believe all the right things about God but find it hard to trust? Why is this the case? What does trusting require? Is it possible to go through life believing but never really trusting God?

Make reference to the book’s distinction between resuscitation and resurrection. Point out the obvious tension in this story. It is clearly a story of resuscitation—

Lazarus would one day die again. But the story is also about resurrection—trusting God to do more than what we see as possible. How we read the story makes all the difference. If we read this story as being about resuscitation, we will only trust God *for* our wants. If we read it as being about resurrection, we will trust God *with* our wants. What are some ways to illustrate or tease out that idea?

You might have a story from your own life or from the life of someone in your congregation who trusted God in a time of loss, the way Martha was invited to trust Jesus, and who came to discover God's power to bring new joy for living. What were some of the difficult steps of trust that you or that person had to take in order to come to that new place?

You may want to close out the series by thinking about the words "I am." Emphasize that the phrase "I am" doesn't mean the same as "I have been." God is no has-been. Perhaps today is an opportunity and a challenge for new trust among people for whom God is a has-been. Perhaps they have felt let down by God in the past. Perhaps God didn't come through for them in a way they wanted, but that doesn't mean God isn't coming through! (One good illustration here is from the movie *Forrest Gump*, when Lieutenant Dan finally comes to a place of new discovery in God's goodness despite the trials he has been through.)

Also, note that God doesn't say, "I will be." Maybe today is a good opportunity for some to trust that we don't have to be in a better position of faithfulness or living before we can know God's faithfulness. It is easy to believe that we have to get things right before God will enter into our lives to give direction or offer care or provide satisfaction and power.

Instead, God says "I am!" That means God is present *now*. This moment in our lives is the best one for opening ourselves to the full presence of Christ and inviting him into our lives.

Worship Helps

Litany

One: When we find ourselves wondering why loss has come, we can remember Jesus' words as he faced death:

All: "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

One: When we are tempted to give in to the lie that life will never change for us, Jesus says,

All: "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

One: When life's disappointments cause us to stumble, Jesus reminds us,

All: “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

One: When we ask God to give us back something we’ve lost, Jesus reminds us to look forward, saying,

All: “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

One: God works on both sides of the grave, giving us life now and life yet to come, through Christ who said,

All: “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” Amen.

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for your ever-present grace and love. Thank you for the beauty of new life that we see every morning. Even when we are unsure of what will happen next, help us to remember that you are with us, holding us in your hand and loving us no matter what happens. In your son’s name we pray. Amen.

Litany

One: We live; God gives!

All: Hallelujah!

One: We cry; God supplies!

All: Hallelujah!

One: We need; God speeds!

All: Hallelujah!

One: So let us with joy, joy, joy

All: Return what God has given.

(Africana Worship Book, Year A. ©Discipleship Resources.)

Hymn and Song Suggestions

Tell Me the Stories of Jesus

Christ the Lord Is Risen Today

He Lives

Up from the Grave He Arose

Crown Him with Many Crowns

Because He Lives

Christ Is God’s Never Changing “Yes” (Upper Room Worshipbook 95)

Christ Is Risen by Matt Maher and Mia Fields

Mighty to Save by Ben Fielding and Reuben Morgan

How Great Is Our God by Chris Tomlin, Jesse Reeves, and Ed Cash

Scripture

John 11:17-26

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2011:17-26&version=NRSV;NIV;CEB;ESV>