

TELLING GOD'S STORY
**YEAR FOUR:
THE STORY OF GOD'S
PEOPLE CONTINUES**
INSTRUCTOR TEXT AND TEACHING GUIDE

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Olive Branch Books
Charles City, Virginia

*For my children—
and for all of God's children.*

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Introduction

My first class in graduate school was Medieval English Drama. We studied the mystery plays—mostly those known to us today as the York Mystery Plays, which you can still see performed in some places throughout the world. For ordinary medieval people, many if not most of whom were largely illiterate, the mystery plays depicted the drama of humanity's life with God from Creation to the Last Judgment, and they depicted it with humor, reverence, and, sometimes, with astonishing insight. I was surprised by the unusual emphases and interpretations the plays offered.

It was astonishing, for example, to see that when God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, he sent them to “middle-earth.” What could that mean? Perhaps, some suggested, middle-earth is simply where medieval English people imagined themselves living: not below in hell, nor above in heaven, but in the middle, on the earth—middle-earth.

But perhaps, as well, Adam and Eve's expulsion to middle-earth signified something else in the imaginations of these medieval theater folk. For Adam and Eve, like us, live between the times—between the paradise of Eden and the joy of the New Jerusalem. Perhaps even the play depicting the banishment from the garden suggested a kind of mercy: the mercy of the creation of time where there had once been eternity. Rather than being eternally damned, Adam and Eve were given the mercy of time, in which God's redemption would be revealed.

This volume of *Telling God's Story* takes place in a similar sort of middle-earth. Jesus departs, but rather than signifying tragedy and the end of the story of God's life with God's people, it opens up another merciful window of time—time for the Gospel to spread throughout the earth, time for more people to be gathered into the family of God. And in this middle-earth setting, Jesus' followers are given the job of

extending Jesus' work—his teaching, his healing, the hope of his resurrection—throughout the earth, in anticipation of the time that is to come, when every tear is wiped away, and sorrow, tears, and death itself will be no more. The lessons in this book explore the mystery of living as Christians in the meantime—the in-between times.

A fuller explanation of the methods behind this program is found in the core text for this series, *Telling God's Story: A Parents' Guide to Teaching the Bible*.

Organization

The lessons for *Year Four* are centered on understanding the in-between times—what happens when Jesus leaves? How is his story continued? What does it mean to live in the way of Jesus? The lessons are organized into ten units, each covering an important aspect of the New Testament:

UNIT 1: Jesus Departs—and God is Faithful

UNIT 2: The Holy Spirit

UNIT 3: The Cost of Following Jesus

UNIT 4: Being a New Creation in Christ

UNIT 5: Who is Paul?

UNIT 6: The Good News is For Everyone!

UNIT 7: The Life of the Church

UNIT 8: After Death

UNIT 9: Last Things

UNIT 10: These Three Remain: Faith, Hope, and Love

Aim to complete one lesson per week. This book is designed to be used along with *Telling God's Story, Year Four Activity Book: Student Guide and Activity Pages*, (available for download at welltrainedmind.com) which contains pictures, projects, and other activities. You may wish to read the scripted lesson to the child on the first day as he or she colors the picture, and then complete projects on the second and third days. Alternately, you may read the scripted lesson on the first day, complete the coloring picture on the second, and complete a chosen project on the third. In a group setting that meets once a week, plan to read the scripted lesson as the students color and then to conclude the day's study with one of the projects or games especially designed for group use. You may find it helpful to both open *and* close your work with the scripted lessons, or to invite children to retell the story after they've heard it, perhaps using small figures or other manipulatives.

Each of these units comprises several lessons, which means that you will spend several weeks on each unit. The order is not unalterable, but neither is it random. We start with the story of Jesus' departure and end with his Second Coming; and the middle is all about how Jesus' followers did (and should) live in light of these two great events.

The first three units ("Jesus Departs—and God is Faithful," "The Holy Spirit," and "The Cost of Following Jesus") seek to form a link with *Telling God's Story, Year Three: The Unexpected Way*, even as the book of Acts is really part of a two-volume set—Luke-Acts. As Jesus departs, God's presence abides in the coming of the Holy Spirit, who begins to dwell in Jesus' followers, who continue his work—and face persecution because of their faithfulness.

The fourth unit, "Being a New Creation in Christ," along with the fifth and sixth, ("Who is Paul?" and "The Good News is for Everyone!") delve into the question of what it means to "be born again." Because Paul is the theologian of the early church who wrote extensively on this question, several lessons focus on the range of his teachings, including the important questions of "For whom is the Gospel?" and "What must one do to be saved?" The seventh unit addresses the related issues of the common life of the church: how Jesus' followers learned to share responsibilities and resources, and how to deal with conflict.

The next two units, "After Death" and "Last Things," explore, first, the centrality of Jesus' resurrection to the Christian faith and its relationship to Christian hope: What has the Christian to fear if Jesus has conquered death? "Last Things" introduces children to the often confounding book of Revelation, but instead of the Hollywood-inflected sci-fi version found in some interpretations, these lessons interpret Revelation as a return to the Garden of Eden, which is transformed into the City of God that fills the whole Earth, where, at last, God dwells among people and death and sin are conquered once and for all.

The final unit, "These Three Remain," concludes the course by helping students understand and cultivate the three essential virtues praised by Paul in I Corinthians 13 as "the things that remain forever": Faith, Hope, and Love. The three lessons in this unit explore these often-misunderstood virtues and encourage children toward a lifelong journey of practicing them.

Even though the order of the lessons is intentional, you should feel free to alter the order to suit your own purposes, particularly if you are seeking to link your lessons with the lectionary readings or the Church

Year more generally. “Lesson 5: Tongues of Flame—Babel Undone,” for example, could stand alone on Pentecost.

Each lesson opens with a brief word of explanation to the parent or teaching adult. These are more detailed and complex than the scripted lessons to be read aloud; think of them as mini-commentaries. I’ve tried to include the major theological and critical questions that arise in each passage—not that these will necessarily be questions that the children will ask, but because they are things that I’ve found good to know; things that have deepened my reading of Scripture and my understanding of Jesus.

All scriptural excerpts are drawn from the New International Version.

Unit 1

Jesus Departs—and God is Faithful

Jesus' followers were devastated when he died: it seemed impossible to them that he could actually have been the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, and yet suffer a shameful, criminal's death.

But he rose from the dead, and he is alive. And that God's Messiah would suffer was not, from the point of view of the Hebrew Bible, at all unexpected.

Still, his followers were surprised, and then even more astonished when, just as they were hoping and expecting that Jesus would restore the kingdom to Israel and end their exile, Jesus didn't quite answer the question, instead charging them with being his witnesses in all the region—and all the world.

And then Jesus departed, leaving his very surprised followers to continue his work.

The lessons in this unit are a bridge from the work of Jesus in the Gospels to the continuation of his work by his apostles, through the help of the Holy Spirit.

Continuing Jesus' Story

What the Parent Should Know: In our Bible, the Gospel of John separates the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, but in fact, Luke and Acts form a literary unity; a single book traditionally understood to have been penned by a single author. Scholars often speak of them as such: "Luke-Acts." That they are two halves of one whole—"Volume One" and "Volume Two"—is clear from Acts' prologue:

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. (1:1-2)

Why, then, are Luke and Acts separate? Perhaps they are separate because in the present canonical order, Acts forms a good introduction to Paul's letters, or perhaps because Acts is simply unique among New Testament books. Either way, it is clear from the superscription and from the character of the books themselves that Acts continues the story of Luke.

In the book of Acts, Luke is concerned to show how Jesus' story is rooted in Israel's story, and to show that God was not only faithful to his promises to Israel, but has also extended those promises and blessings to all people, including Gentiles (non-Jews). The apostolic teaching within the book draws deeply on the Old Testament, stressing that God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3,

I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you . . .

is now being fulfilled as the good news of Jesus is offered not only to Israel but also to all nations.

Commentators often note that the book of Acts follows a structure based on geography. As New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson notes, Jesus' final appearance in Luke (24:47-49) sketches the outline of Acts: "Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Many readers observe that Jesus' words to his disciples at the beginning of Acts outline the book as well: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (1:8)

Indeed, Acts follows this very structure. The first part of the book takes place in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7), followed by Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-12), and then Asia Minor and Europe (Acts 13-28). However, Jerusalem remains central in the story, with events in Jerusalem narrated all throughout the book. This is because Jerusalem is central to God's promises to Israel and, as the place of Jesus' crucifixion, to the birth of the church.

The book of Acts is often labeled "The Acts of The Apostles" and has also been called the Book of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is active within the book of Acts, guiding and driving the apostles' ministries; there are five separate accounts of the "outpouring" of the Holy Spirit within the book (2:1-4; 4:28-31; 8:15-17; 10:44; and 19:6), including the famous "tongues of fire" at Pentecost. The ministers of the Gospel in Acts are described as being "filled with the Holy Spirit" (4:8; 5:32; 6:3; 7:55; 11:24; and 13:9), and, as scholars such as Luke Timothy Johnson note, are portrayed as prophets among the people of Israel. They perform miraculous signs and wonders, as prophets do, and they preach and reveal a message from God that is met with significant opposition, as prophets do—Jesus and John the Baptist included.

Acts is also significant in that it narrates the continuing story of Jesus' work as carried on by the Holy Spirit in the church that is forming. The term "Christian" is coined in Acts, and it is in this book that Christians are first called "Christians" (11:26), and, emerging as a distinct group, become the targets of persecution. But, paradoxically, that persecution only seems to strengthen the movement, as if to affirm, as Jesus' death and resurrection affirmed, that suffering, even suffering unto death, can be redeemed for God's good purposes.

Begin by reading aloud:

Have you ever read a story or seen a movie that had more than one part? Many popular books, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, are broken into several parts. *The Lord of the Rings* has three parts, and is sometimes sold as three separate books, or *volumes*. But *The Lord of the Rings* is also sold as a single, very thick book, because it is really one single story. If you were to read them out of order, or to read one of them without the others, you would not be getting the whole story, but only part of it.

The book of Acts—which probably has the title *The Acts of the Apostles* in your Bible—is something like that. We can think of Acts as “Volume Two” of a single book called “Luke-Acts,” because it continues the story begun in the Gospel according to Luke. (Acts doesn’t actually come after Luke in your Bible for all sorts of reasons we won’t get into here.) But the same person wrote both volumes, and Acts continues the same story that Luke’s first book began. Here is how Luke introduces the book of Acts:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. (1:1-2)

So the book of Acts is “Volume Two” of the story about Jesus begun in the Gospel according to Luke. But what is interesting and even a little strange about Acts is that Jesus himself is only there for the very first part of the very first chapter, and then leaves. How can Acts be a continuation of the story about Jesus if Jesus isn’t even there for most of it?

At the end of Luke’s Gospel (which, you’ll remember, is “Volume One” of a single book, Luke-Acts), Jesus tells his disciples to take his teaching “to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Jesus’ story is “to be continued . . .” by *Jesus’ followers*. As Jesus is leaving, at the very beginning of Acts “Volume Two,” he says:

. . . you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (1:8)

Do you know what a “witness” is? A witness is a person who sees something take place, and can testify—that is, tell other people—that it really happened. Jesus is asking his disciples to continue his work by *witnessing* what they have seen and what they have learned from Jesus.

And what have they seen? What have they learned? They have seen that Jesus is God’s son, and that in Jesus God has kept all of his promises

to his people. They have seen him teach that following God is not about keeping a set of rules but about loving God and God's people, especially people who are poor or excluded. And they have seen Jesus get into big trouble for this teaching. They have seen him be killed for it. But they also have seen God's power in raising Jesus from the dead—what we call the *Resurrection*. They are *witnesses* to all of this.

They are also witnesses to something else, a teaching that really angered and upset people—the idea that to be one of God's people, you don't have to be born into a certain family or nation. You just have to believe in Jesus, and follow him. This was God's plan all along, and now the disciples are going to be witnesses to it. They are going to take God's message—of Jesus' resurrection—to *all* people, first in Jerusalem, then in the surrounding area, and, finally, to the whole world. They are continuing the story Jesus began. Like Jesus, the disciples will have enemies—people who do not want their message to spread, people who will even try to kill them for it.

But they are not alone as they continue Jesus' story. Jesus promises them that his Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, will be with them. And Jesus' resurrection promises that even their suffering—even their *death*—will be redeemed, undone, and made new.

Lesson

2

Acts 1:9-14

Gone But Not Gone

What the Parent Should Know: When we read certain passages of the Bible—for example, texts dealing with the Crucifixion, or this text, which deals with what has been called the Ascension—it is essential to remember that the disciples did not have access to what we already know. At the Crucifixion, they had no thought of the Resurrection; even though Jesus had hinted at it strongly, they didn't quite understand. Likewise, in Acts 1, the disciples didn't seem to know that Jesus' presence among them was on the verge of a drastic change.

As anyone familiar with the Old Testament and the Gospels knows, the belief that God would eventually restore his people, that is, "restore the kingdom to Israel," was central and long-held. The faithful believers expected

God to oust the Gentile overlords and establish a lasting, peaceful, and prosperous kingdom centered in Jerusalem. The disciples are there in Jerusalem, waiting and wanting to know: Is this going to happen now? Jesus tells them that it's not for them to know the "times or dates," but that they have work to do, and they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

And then he disappears from their sight, enveloped in a cloud.

It is important, first, to point out that the disciples emphatically did not imagine that Jesus was a space traveler, moving up through the sky, into the atmosphere and stratosphere, and out into space. When contemporary people think of "heaven," we often think of a place that's somewhere up in the sky, where people are floating on clouds, and possibly flying. But despite this persistent misconception, in the Bible "heaven" means God's kingdom, the "place" where God's reign is perfect and all is as it should be. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for God's will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven." Following Jesus means somehow participating in the life of God's kingdom—the kingdom of heaven—while still occupying this space, where we only see glimpses of what God's kingdom is like.

So why would Jesus leave his disciples and go to that place without them?

In fact, the Ascension does not mean that Jesus is gone. The scholar N.T. Wright points out that the disciples—and early readers of Luke-Acts who were familiar with the Old Testament—would have, on witnessing the Ascension, thought immediately of the vision in Daniel 7. This vision is of a person "like a son of man" who comes "with the clouds of heaven" unto "the Ancient of Days," and is given "authority, glory, and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." (Daniel 7:13-14) Jesus is not leaving; he is being crowned the eternal king of the universe, and his disciples will now become apostles—messengers sent out to the uttermost parts of the kingdom—all the earth, in this case—to proclaim his kingship.

Jesus is leaving, and yet not really leaving. Scholar Luke Timothy Johnson points out that in 2 Kings 2, when the prophet Elijah ascends to heaven "in a whirlwind," his disciple, Elisha, asks for and is granted a "double portion" of Elijah's prophetic spirit, and then takes up Elijah's mantle (robe) and continues his prophetic ministry. (We still sometimes use the phrase "take up the mantle" to indicate the continuance of a particular kind of work in the tradition of the one who began, or last carried out, that work.)

The coming of the Holy Spirit is akin to this, and so we are to understand that the disciples are in fact carrying on Jesus' ministry filled with his Spirit. His promise in what Christians have come to call "the great commission"

(Matthew 28:20) to be “with you always, to the very end of the age” is not voided by the Ascension. He is not gone, but present in a new way.

The disciples—now apostles—meanwhile, carry on his ministry filled with his Spirit and in prayerful obedience, with the hope that “this same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven,” as they saw him go (Acts 1:11). And when he does, heaven—where God is—and earth—where we are—we be united as one forever. For now, Christians pray “Your kingdom come, your will be done . . .” proclaiming Christ’s kingship and doing the work of the kingdom.

Begin by reading aloud:

Even if you are a child, you know that this world you live in has problems in it. Things go wrong. People get hurt and sick; people feel sad; people hurt one another; people are greedy and selfish. Things aren’t all as they should be—things are neither as we would like them to be nor as God would like them to be.

But Jesus’ disciples, along with God’s people throughout many long years, were waiting for God to establish his kingdom. They were waiting for someone—whom they often called the *Messiah*—who would be their king, rescuing them from the sometimes-brutal foreign rule they’d been living under for hundreds of years. The kingdom that God would establish for them would have its center in the city of Jerusalem, and it would be a place of peace and prosperity where there is no more hurting, no more sickness, no more sadness, and no more greed, nor selfishness, nor people hurting other people. When Jesus came, and people began to realize that he was the Messiah, they were constantly surprised by what he meant by the “kingdom.” He was not going to start a war and take over the land that had been promised to God’s people. Instead, God’s kingdom was going to be something else altogether.

And of course, people’s hopes that Jesus would establish this kingdom were crushed when Jesus died. But here, in this story, Jesus is alive again, and he has been with the disciples for forty days, showing that he was really and truly alive again, and teaching them more about God’s kingdom.

But they are still waiting—in Jerusalem, no less, the very place where they expected God’s good kingdom to begin—and they want to know: *Is this really going to happen? Is it going to happen now?*

Jesus’ answer is surprising and probably not very satisfying to them. He tells them they can’t know the answer to that question, but they will get power from the Holy Spirit of God, and they will “be his witnesses” throughout all the earth.

And then he disappears from their sight, enveloped in a cloud!

What is happening here? Has Jesus turned into some kind of space traveler, traveling up through the layers of the atmosphere and into outer space? No, he has not. While we sometimes think of “heaven” as a place “up there in the sky,” the writers of the Bible did not think of it that way. In the Bible, heaven means God’s kingdom, the place where everything is as it should be. You may have heard the Lord’s Prayer, which asks God to make things on earth as they are in heaven. And that is what the disciples were waiting for: God’s peaceful and prosperous kingdom to be on earth. But then, instead of saying, “Yes, that kingdom is starting now,” Jesus leaves—in a cloud—and goes to where God is! He seems to be gone!

But Jesus is not *really* gone. Before this, he had promised his disciples that he would be with them always, and he is not breaking his promise.

In a book of the Old Testament (the only part of the Bible that Jesus’ disciples had and knew) called Daniel, there is the story of a person who comes to heaven in a cloud and is made king of all the earth, of “all peoples, nations, and languages” for always and always. The disciples now see that Jesus is not leaving them, not really. He is being crowned king of the universe, and they are being sent as his messengers to take the news that Jesus is King to everyone in the world.

Another story in the Old Testament—this time, one that comes from 2 Kings 2—helps us to understand the meaning of Jesus’ *ascension*—which is the word that Christians have used to talk about the moment at which Jesus went up to heaven in the cloud. In 2 Kings, a prophet—a special messenger of God who had been given the ability to speak to God’s people with God’s strength and power—named Elijah is taken up to heaven in much the same way that Jesus is taken up to heaven. Elijah has a disciple, too, called Elisha. As Elijah is leaving, Elisha asks that he be given some of Elijah’s power as a prophet of God. Elisha gets this, and then he picks up Elijah’s mantle (a sort of coat or robe) and goes on with the work Elijah had already been doing. Even today, you may sometimes hear people speak of “taking up the mantle” of someone else. It means that the person will continue the work started by another person.

And in fact this is what the disciples have to do. They must take up Jesus’ mantle and continue Jesus’ work—announcing that Jesus *is* King and that, one day, when Jesus returns in the same way that he left, God’s kingdom (heaven) and this earth (where we are now, where there are problems of all kinds) will be made into one kingdom, forever and ever.

Meanwhile, the disciples, who we will soon learn to call “apostles” (more on that in the next lesson) are, like Elisha carrying on Elijah’s

ministry, continuing Jesus' work. The Holy Spirit comes upon them, and they travel and pray and work as they wait for the day when Jesus will return to be king of a new heaven and earth, which will no longer be separate, where all things will be as they ought to be, with no one going hungry, no one hurting anyone else, and people living peacefully with one another.

And that is why Christians, even today, pray for God's will to be done, and for God's kingdom to come. That is why Christians try to do what is kind and right and what pleases God: because we are trying to take up Jesus' mantle.

And we are not doing it all on our own: Jesus is gone, but he is not *really* gone. His Spirit is with us still, as it always will be. And one day, he will be back; God's space and ours will be one space, and all will be as it should be.

Lesson

3

Acts 1

What is an Apostle?

What the Parent Should Know: In Greek, "apostle" simply means "one who is sent on a mission."

It is sometimes easy to forget that what we now consider rudimentary communication devices—the telegraph, for example—are astonishingly new: in the ancient world, news was limited to what a person, or group of people, could pass on either by word of mouth or by carrying messages written on papyrus or pieces of broken pottery. These messengers carried important news, such as news of wars won or lost, or news of a new king. And these messengers might have been called apostles.

In the New Testament, "apostle" is sometimes used to refer only to the twelve disciples (minus Judas, plus Matthias—more on that in a moment) who testified to Jesus' resurrection. But other times—especially in Paul's letters (or "epistles"), apostle means any person who has seen the risen Christ. Paul himself qualifies as an apostle because he saw a vision of the risen Christ. But perhaps the most important point to make about an apostle is the apostle's message. What are the New Testament apostles sent to proclaim? They are sent to proclaim the news that the risen Christ is King.

Scholars such as N.T. Wright have observed that the number of the disciples (twelve) matches that of the tribes of Israel. After the defection of Judas Iscariot, whom, we are told in this chapter, dies rather gruesomely as a “reward for his wickedness,” the number had to be brought back up to twelve in order to preserve that symbolic integrity. This was accomplished by choosing from among the group of people who had accompanied Jesus and his disciples from the time of John’s baptism, and, importantly, who had been witnesses to the Resurrection. Two were nominated: Joseph (called Barsabbas or Justus) and Matthias. With prayer, the disciples asked God to make his will clear through the drawing of lots. This may seem to contemporary readers a rather unspiritual way of deciding a matter (akin to rolling dice), but in the ancient world, drawing lots was considered a way for God to make his will known. (See, for example, Proverbs 16:33, which reads, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”)

There is no good reason to think that the twelve apostles are meant to replace the twelve tribes of Israel—it’s probably better to think that they’re renewing it. The renewing of Israel has preoccupied the devout all throughout the Gospels, and this preoccupation continues here, when the disciples ask whether Jesus is now going to restore the kingdom to Israel. But Jesus’ answer is confusing, as anyone familiar with the Gospels might expect. It’s not for them to know the “when” of it all, Jesus says, but rather, they are to be his witnesses in the world through the power given to them by the Holy Spirit. This is why they are called apostles—like other ancient apostles, they were officially charged with spreading the news of the newly crowned king: the king of all the earth, who has conquered even death itself.

But this is not the kind of king—or kingdom—the apostles were expecting. It is rather a disappointment to them to realize that Jesus does not intend to overthrow Caesar’s government and set up his own. Jesus is King, but all is not as God wishes it to be on earth (as it is in heaven). The disciples/apostles, like us, are still waiting for God’s kingdom to come completely; for God to bind up all wounds and wipe every tear. Yet by proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection, the apostles are making it known that Jesus is King: that God’s kingdom has broken into the kingdom of this world, vanquishing that power no earthly king or emperor, however mighty, could control: death.

We should note, finally, that the apostles are a ragtag group. They are ordinary people, and their message is accepted earliest and most eagerly by the people then considered lowliest: women, slaves, and the very poor. Yet the apostles have something remarkable: the presence of God’s Holy Spirit as well as God’s power. And, perhaps most remarkably, they are eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus, whom they have seen and touched; with whom they

have broken bread. While Christians today often fixate on Jesus' death as the center of the story, the apostles regarded the Resurrection as the center. It declared definitively that Jesus was King of the only Kingdom with any real power.

This is the truth that the sent-out ones, the apostles, are bringing to the world: Jesus has risen from the dead. Jesus is King.

Begin by reading aloud:

Have you ever talked on the telephone to someone who lived very far away? Maybe you have used a computer or another kind of device that allowed you actually to see and hear the person to whom you were talking. Some children live very far away from their grandparents or other relatives, and they are thankful for these kinds of things, which allow them to share all their news.

These same machines—telephones, computers, and other devices—also make it possible for news to travel very quickly from one part of the world to the other. When a war begins (or ends) on one side of the world, we can know about it almost instantly, even if we are thousands and thousands of miles away. But in the ancient world, the world in which Jesus lived, none of these things existed.

Instead, in the ancient world, news was mostly limited to what a person, or group of people, could pass on by what we call “word of mouth;” that is, one person telling another person and that person telling another person, and so on. (Sometimes people also carried messages written on papyrus or pieces of broken pottery, but even so, the pottery had to be carried by messengers.) In the language spoken by the people who wrote the New Testament—the part of the Bible where we find the book of Acts—these messengers were known as *apostles*.

Imagine for a moment that a teacher came to your town to teach you and a group of your friends how to play a new kind of game or how to make a new kind of craft. And then, after the teacher left, she instructed you to travel around your own town and even beyond your town, teaching other children everything that she had taught you. You would then be a sort of apostle: a person sent out to share a kind of message or lesson with other people. If you can imagine that, you can easily understand what Luke and the other New Testament writers mean when they say *apostle*.

In the New Testament, the word apostle can mean any of the people who saw Jesus after his resurrection. It can also mean the special group of twelve people that were with Jesus for all of his time on earth, until the time he was taken up into heaven. Going back to the imaginary

teacher who came to your town to teach you a game or craft, you might imagine that she had twelve *official* students—students whom she had specially chosen—but that many more students actually tagged along to learn from her. If you can imagine that, you will understand what it was like when Jesus was traveling and teaching. He had twelve *special* students, but many other people followed along to learn from him.

Perhaps you remember the story about Judas, who was the one of Jesus' disciples who chose to betray him—that is, to help Jesus' enemies capture Jesus. The beginning of Acts tells us what happens to Judas, and I'm afraid it isn't very pleasant at all. With the money he got from betraying Jesus, Judas bought a field, and in the field he died in a messy and bloody way. This meant that there were, in fact, only eleven disciples left. But that's not good—there needed to be twelve special apostles to carry the message about Jesus. But why? Why *twelve*?

Luke, the writer of Acts, is trying to show us something important with this number twelve. In the long-ago days of God's people Israel, there were twelve tribes. Through a number of terrible events, the twelve tribes were scattered, and God's people were waiting for God to restore—rebuild, remake, regather—the kingdom of Israel. By making sure that there are *twelve* apostles, Luke is trying to point out that God is using these people to rebuild God's kingdom, although not in the way they expect. So, praying and asking God to show them whom they should choose as the twelfth apostle, they choose a man called Matthias, who was among the group of people (in addition to the original twelve) who'd followed Jesus around, learning from him, and who had seen him after his resurrection.

So when Bible writers use the word apostle, they mean a person who was sent out to share the message—the news that they had seen happen right before their eyes—that Jesus had risen from the dead. And in saying that, they were saying something very important—that *Jesus is King*. That is why there must be twelve apostles: to show that God's people and God's kingdom *is* being rebuilt, but in a new way. By rising from the dead, Jesus has shown that God's kingdom is more powerful than any earthly king or emperor. No earthly king or emperor can overcome the power of death—but Jesus did.

The apostles were ordinary people, but Luke tells us that they have God's Holy Spirit upon them as well as God's power within them. And they have seen something remarkable: Jesus crucified, dead, buried, and then *alive again*. He had been dead, but he had returned, and they had touched him, talked with him, eaten with him. Now, before returning

to heaven—the place where everything is already as God wants things to be everywhere, with no death, no pain, and no sadness—Jesus sends his friends out to be *apostles*: messengers with an astonishing message: Jesus has risen from the dead, and Jesus is King—Jesus is *the* King.

Lesson

4

Acts 2:22-41 God's Deliverance: The Exodus, Jesus, and Evil

What the Parent Should Know: This section of Peter's sermon in Acts 2 is as theologically dense as it is rhetorically powerful. Not only does it offer a robust exposition on the meaning of Jesus' death in relation to both divine and human intentions, but it also defends Christ's kingship from the Old Testament and offers an invitation to his hearers—mainly “Israelites” to “repent and be baptized”—while emphasizing that this invitation is not only for them, but for whomever God may call.

Peter argues that Jesus' “miracles, wonders, and signs” clearly marked him as sent by God; but that, nonetheless, even the very people who witnessed those affirmations handed him over to be crucified. It is important to acknowledge here that some Christians throughout history have used this (and similar New Testament pronouncements) as justification for anti-Semitism. But that is a gross misrepresentation of what Peter actually says in this text (and let us not forget that Peter himself denied Jesus three times and thus had a measure of complicity in his death as well). Peter does not mince words, but he does address the situation with far greater nuance than later anti-Semitic slurs accusing Jewish people of being “Christ-killers.” Israelites were certainly the ones to reject Jesus, one of their own, and hand him over to the Roman authorities for crucifixion—but Gentiles also cooperated and were just as culpable.

But here is perhaps the most perplexing part: all of this was somehow part of “God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge,” a fact that does not mitigate the culpability of the human beings. This endlessly mysterious theological dynamic—which is summed up nicely in Genesis 50:20 (“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives”)—appears throughout the Bible. It appears, for example, in Isaiah 10:5, which paradoxically and confusingly

Unit 4

Being a New Creation in Christ

Most stories of conversion to Christianity come nowhere close to the drama and intensity of Paul’s Damascus Road experience. Sometimes, a person’s experience of being saved is less a “conversion” and more of a gradual recognition, as in this unit’s story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Nonetheless, the New Testament consistently speaks of salvation in Jesus as conversion, “new creation,” or being “born again.” This does not mean that a person’s substance—who he or she is—changes when he or she comes to believe in Jesus. Instead it indicates that the believer’s priorities, preoccupations, and attitudes toward God and other people have been significantly altered; reoriented to center on Jesus Christ, often with surprising results.

Lesson

13

Acts 8:26-40

An Outsider is Welcomed In

What the Parent Should Know: In this passage, Philip—one of the seven chosen and blessed by the apostles to serve in Acts 6:1-8—shares the good news of Jesus Christ with a man who is an outsider three times—not only is he not Jewish, he is an Ethiopian man from the queen’s court, and he is a

eunuch. Nevertheless, Luke tells us, he had come to Jerusalem to worship. Though Philip is a helper and not an apostle, the Holy Spirit as well as “an angel of the Lord” minister to the man through Philip, offering something of a foretaste of the more general welcome to be made to Gentiles later on. Tradition (including the church father, Irenaeus) tells us that this apparently influential Ethiopian man, who, we are told, had charge of the entire treasury of the queen, was responsible for evangelizing his home country, which, commentators say, was not exactly where modern-day Ethiopia is, but, more likely, the ancient kingdom of Nubia which was located near modern-day Sudan.

When the angel of the Lord tells Philip to go down from Jerusalem, we should notice that the Gospel appears to be spreading just as Jesus declared that it should—in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria (8:1-25), and now to the uttermost parts of the world, as in Acts 1:8. As a number of commentators (including Ben Witherington and Robert Tannehill) have noted, ancient Near Eastern literature makes clear that Ethiopia was considered to be part of the remotest regions of the known world. Philip, at the prompting of the angel and the Spirit (8:29) goes to him on his way and joins him in his chariot, where he finds the man reading the prophet Isaiah (likely, aloud, as reading silently was rare in the ancient world). “Do you understand what you are reading?” he asks. “How can I, unless someone guides me?” the eunuch says, inviting Philip to sit beside him.

The eunuch is reading from Isaiah 53:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before his shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright reminds us that the early church read the Old Testament as a great narrative; there was no question of simply linking Old Testament passages up with Jesus. Rather, Isaiah’s “suffering servant” passage envisions a man who will take up the work that Israel was meant to do, who will die, bearing all the evil of the world. The subsequent passages in Isaiah envision a new covenant (ch. 53), a new creation (ch. 55), and, significantly for our purposes here, a hospitable welcome to those outside of Israel (ch. 56), which is especially relevant to the Acts passage because eunuchs are specifically included in God’s welcome. Castrated men had been specifically forbidden (in Deuteronomy 23:1) from participation in the assembly of the Lord. Here, as throughout the Gospels, Jesus’ welcome is

unexpectedly inclusive indeed. Surely this is a major part of the “good news about Jesus” that Philip speaks to the Ethiopian man.

The Ethiopian man is deeply receptive to Philip's teaching; indeed, he seems to be waiting to hear what Philip has to say, and it is he who points out the water and asks to be baptized. Meanwhile, Luke subtly sketches Philip's ministry as parallel to Jesus'; the lamb before its shearer does not open its mouth; Philip opens his mouth to speak about the scripture. Jesus' life is taken away from the earth; in this passage, the Holy Spirit snatches Philip away and moves him onward, away from Jerusalem.

The Holy Spirit does a mighty work through Philip, and it looks like outsiders being welcomed in and the Gospel of Jesus Christ going to the edges of the world.

Begin by reading aloud:

Have you ever felt like an outsider? Maybe you have been at gatherings where you were the only boy among crowds of girls, or the only girl among crowds of boys. Maybe you have been in places where you were the only child in a roomful of adults. Or maybe you have had other, different experiences of feeling like you didn't quite belong.

By now you probably understand that Jesus' teaching is that whoever will come to him, belongs. Although at certain times and in certain places, people believed that God loved them best of all, because they were the best at keeping the rules or because of who their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents were, the truth is that God welcomes whoever will come to him—whoever will come to Jesus.

Do you remember that Jesus told his disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the “uttermost” parts of the world? Well, that is exactly what is starting to happen in this story: a man who would have seemed to Jesus' friends like the most extreme kind of outsider is welcomed into the family of believers.

The man was from Ethiopia, an African kingdom that historians think was probably closer to where Sudan is on our maps of Africa today. This was about as far away from Jerusalem as most people in Jerusalem could even imagine. He was a man from the queen's court—the person in charge of handling all of the royal wealth. He was also a eunuch, meaning that he was not like most other men and would never get married or have children.

So he was an outsider in more ways than one.

He wasn't Jewish. He was from as far away as anyone had ever heard. He would never get married or have children the way that most other men would.

But he loved God's word and cared enough about God that he traveled all that very, very long way to Jerusalem—the special city of God; the center of where God was doing his most important work in Jesus—in order to worship. Now he was on his way home, but he was still not quite sure he understood about God.

And so, an angel of the Lord tells Philip—one of the apostles' helpers—to go down from Jerusalem so that the good news about Jesus can continue making its way out from the center. As Philip goes on his way, he finds the Ethiopian man riding in his chariot, reading from Isaiah 53; from the part of the Bible we usually call the Old Testament (but which, at the time, was the only part of the Bible anyone had).

“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asks the man.

“How can I, unless someone guides me?” the man replies, inviting Philip to sit beside him.

Here is what the man is reading, from Isaiah 53:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before his shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.

Who was Isaiah the prophet talking about? He was talking about Jesus, of course. Jesus, who would suffer and die to bear all the evil of the world. As Isaiah's book goes on, he speaks about a “new covenant” and a “new creation” in which God will make all the wrongs and hurts of the world right, and will welcome with generous hospitality all the people of the world who will answer his invitation—including those whom people might regard as “outsiders,” like the Ethiopian man.

And this is probably a big part of the “good news about Jesus” that Philip speaks to the Ethiopian man: God's welcome is for everyone.

The Ethiopian man seems to be waiting to hear what Philip has to say, and it is he who points out the water and asks to be baptized. Meanwhile, Luke, the storyteller, gives us some hints in the way he tells the story to suggest that Philip's ministry is in some ways like Jesus'; the lamb before its shearer does not open its mouth; Philip opens his mouth to speak about the scripture. Jesus' life is taken away from the earth; in this passage, the Holy Spirit snatches Philip away and moves him onward, away from Jerusalem.

The Holy Spirit does a mighty work through Philip, and it looks like outsiders being welcomed in, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ going to the very edges of the world.

get all of the work done that they need to do. One group is frustrated, it seems, because the poor people among them aren't getting enough food, even though the poor people in another group are getting enough food. So the apostles choose more helpers to do the job of food sharing, which seems to be as important as the other kinds of work that the church does, like teaching and worshiping.

Just as is the case in families, in the family of believers, there are sometimes problems and hardships. Sometimes we are selfish. Sometimes we don't want to share. Sometimes some people work too hard. But, these stories tell us, God is with us, and God's grace helps us to do better: to be generous, to be joyful, to share what we have, to help one another, to eat together, and to welcome others to join us.

Lesson
23

1 Corinthians 12; and Romans 12
Sharing Different Gifts
within the Community

What the Parent Should Know: The New Testament envisions the church as a single body. One person's body is made up of many diverse parts that, having vastly different functions, nonetheless work together. In a similar way, Paul describes the church as a single body—the Body of Christ—comprising many members, each of whom has particular gifts and therefore distinct contributions to make to the functioning of the body as a whole.

One of the passages that explores this idea in detail is 1 Corinthians 12. Paul begins by distinguishing between the influence of the Spirit of God and those of false gods or spirits. It is a simple distinction: If a person declares that "Jesus is Lord," he or she is speaking by the Spirit of God. If a person says something like "Jesus be cursed," he or she is definitely NOT speaking by the Spirit of God.

Paul goes on to establish the unity and diversity of the body of Christ.

There are different kind of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.

There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

There are different kinds of working,

But in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. (verses

4-6)

These gifts, Paul goes on to say, are given “for the common good,” and include all kinds of things: wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, discernment, and more. But even if different people have different gifts, Paul emphasizes, all “are the work of one and the same Spirit,” refuting the false notion that different gifts mean that different people are being influenced by different spirits, as in some pagan philosophies.

From there Paul introduces the metaphor of the body, which powerfully evokes both the wonderful diversity and significant unity of the church—no matter our cultural background (“whether Jews or Gentiles”) or our socio-economic status (“slave or free”), we were “all given the one Spirit to drink.” Here Paul evokes early Christian table fellowship, which was radical in its equality and openness, as well as the Lord’s Supper.

Yet, for all this unity, the body of Christ is no monoculture, but more of an ecosystem, or a complex organism comprising many different parts—“just as a body, though one, has many parts, so it is with Christ,” Paul writes. And Christians are Christ’s body.

Because Christians are meant to understand themselves as parts of a single body, there is no room for disunity, division, pride, isolation, envy, or disparagement of weaker or seemingly less honorable parts of the body: each has its part to play, without which wholeness is impossible. As Paul writes in the related passage, Romans 12:3-5,

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

And back to 1 Corinthians 12:

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you.’” Paul is speaking very euphemistically, but it doesn’t take much imagination to figure out that the humblest and least glamorous parts of the body are indispensable to the functioning of the whole; indeed, as Paul says, it’s the most “unpresentable” parts of the body that need “special modesty.” (“Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position,” Paul writes in Romans 12.)

In any case, the body is a whole—if one part suffers, the whole suffers; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone,” Paul writes in Romans 12.

Paul offers the unity of the physical human body as a metaphor for the “body of Christ” (v. 27). Not everyone will have the same gift, and that is as it should be—as indeed it must be. And if the church forms a single body, then the glue that holds it together is cooperation and love. Significantly, the chapter that follows the Corinthians passage is the famous “love chapter.”

He also explains that any of these gifts, even the most spectacular and impressive of gifts, are worse than meaningless if lacking in love, because love is cooperative, inclusive, patient, and humble: the very things that make for unity within diversity.

Begin by reading aloud:

An old story I was told when I was a child went something like this:

The different parts of the body began arguing one day about which of them was the most important.

“I am the most important,” said the brain. “I do all of the thinking and keep the rest of you organized.”

“No, I am the most important,” said the stomach. “I mash up all food and keep the rest of you all going with the energy you need.”

“No, we are the most important,” said the feet. “We help the rest of you move around.”

And then the eyes, the ears, and many other parts of the body joined in, each arguing that their particular job was the most important thing.

The parts of the body in charge of going to the bathroom were too embarrassed to boast about their importance. After all, nobody really likes to talk about going to the bathroom. But to teach the rest of the body a lesson, they quietly decided to stop doing their job for a while.

It wasn’t long before the feet began to move more slowly. The stomach began to hurt terribly. The brain felt foggy and confused. And even the eyes, the ears, and all the other parts of the body started to feel awful.

So the brain, who had started the argument in the first place, called a meeting. “We were all wrong to argue about who here is most important. We have learned that for the whole body to work well, we must all work together. Even the parts that we are embarrassed to talk about are important and necessary to us all. We couldn’t do it without each other.”

When he writes about the church, and the way that the people in the church should work and live together, the Apostle Paul speaks about the church in much the way this story speaks about the body. He even calls the church itself a body—the Body of Christ—which is made up of all the different people who love and follow Jesus. Each person in the Body

of Christ has a different job to do, but it is a mistake to think that one job is much more important than another job.

Paul speaks about these different jobs as “gifts.” You may be gifted at drawing, or making music on an instrument, or playing a sport. You can do these things well, perhaps, and not only because you have worked hard at them, but because you have a special “knack,” or an inborn ability to do these things well. Similarly, Paul says that each person that is part of Christ’s body has been given different gifts that he or she is meant to use for the benefit of everyone else in the body. These gifts include wisdom, knowledge, faith, understanding, hospitality, and other things.

But even if people have different gifts, Paul says, they are all meant to work together, because all of these gifts are from the same God. He writes:

There are different kind of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.
There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.
There are different kinds of working,
But in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

Because God is the one who gives the gifts, and because people who are part of the Body of Christ belong together, and are meant to work together, there shouldn’t be any arguments about which part is more important.

Paul writes this:

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you.”

If one part of the body suffers, the whole suffers; if one part is feeling and doing well, every part other part is glad, too. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone,” Paul writes in Romans 12.

Among the people who make up Christ’s body, there shouldn’t be any of the kinds of arguments that happen in the story at the beginning of this lesson.

Instead of arguing and acting competitively, members of Christ’s body should try hard to work together peacefully, and with love. Paul says that all of the gifts he talks about are meaningless without love, because love is the very thing that allows different people to work together on the same task without arguing about who is the best or the most important.

James 2 Faith Must Express Itself in Works, Not Just Words

What the Parent Should Know: This chapter of the epistle of James is full of themes popular with Old Testament prophets such as Amos: namely, that God demands justice and equality; that, in a reversal of the world's values, God favors people who are poor; and that faith that doesn't bear fruit in the form of good works (including relieving the suffering of people who are poor and working for justice) is dead. And these themes are interrelated.

While the New International Version (NIV) renders the first verse as saying "Brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism," other translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), give a stronger sense of the absolute conflict between believing in Jesus Christ and showing favoritism and also convey an urgency and immediacy, suggesting that the letter is in response to specific acts of favoritism: "Do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"

The implication is clear: if you are showing favoritism, you are acting as if you don't believe in Jesus, because if you know anything about Jesus at all, you know that he follows an unexpected way, explicitly not showing favoritism. Or, if he does show favoritism, he does so in an upside-down way: specifically favoring those that most of the world has rejected and cast out.

James gives an example of the kind of favoritism that he is speaking against: A person comes into a gathering (presumably a gathering for worship) and, if he is dressed nicely, is given a good seat. On the other hand, a poor-looking person is made to stand, or to sit on the floor. In the Greco-Roman world, one's sitting position at the table (and remember, early church worship included a meal) indicated social rank. But Jesus' way taught a radically open and equal table fellowship—we see this in Acts, too—and so this kind of favoritism is completely out of place.

In verse 5, James hints at what some theologians have called God's "preferential option for the poor"—"Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (v. 6) Yet James' audience has, apparently, "dishonored the poor," an affront to God. "If you show favoritism," James writes in verse 9, "you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers."

James continues, urging his readers to keep the law—specifically, that which urges “Love your neighbor as yourself”—and also, in light of that law, to be merciful to others. He then moves into what may be a rationale for these instructions: namely, that if you claim to have faith in Jesus, you must do good works in keeping with that faith (v. 14).

This idea—that “Faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead” is related to the idea in verse 1 that if you really believe in Jesus, you will not show favoritism. One can say that one believes in Jesus, but if one then acts disdainfully toward those that Jesus loves—specifically, people who are poor—while favoring wealthy people, one’s “belief” in Jesus is suspect at best. To demonstrate that words without action are empty, useless things, James uses the following example:

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (2:15-17)

James closes the chapter with examples from the Old Testament, Abraham and Rahab, who were considered righteous because of their good works.

Scholars and others debate whether or not James is teaching that people are saved by what they do, but for the purposes of teaching children, it is not necessary to wade into these waters. The idea that true faith will in fact bear fruit is uncontroversial. If we truly believe what we say we believe, we will live and act in accordance with that belief—and rely on God’s mercy when we do not.

Begin by reading aloud:

“We love our dog so much!” the children say.

But they never remember to keep his water bowl full. When their mother asks them to take the dog for a walk, or throw the ball for him, they groan and roll their eyes.

They say they love the dog. But do their words mean anything to the dog?

Well, but dogs don’t understand human speech in that way. Let’s think of a different example.

“I am so sorry that you are sick, Mom! I wish I could help you feel better,” a girl says to her mother.

Then her mother asks the girl to bring her a glass of cold water. But the girl is busy with something and doesn’t want to get the water. “Can’t my brother do it?” she asks.

She said that she was sorry her mother was sick and that she wished she could help. But did her words mean anything to her mother, when the girl wouldn't even help in a simple way?

The epistle (or letter) of James is full of teaching about words. In one chapter, James says that words are powerful, that they can be dangerous and hurtful, and that it is important to try and control the words we say.

James also tells us that words don't mean much if we don't live and behave in a way that goes along with the words we say. The children's "love" for the dog doesn't mean much if they don't take actually help to take care of the dog.

James is concerned because the people to whom he is writing *say* they love and believe in Jesus, but aren't actually *acting* as if that is true. The way they are acting, James writes, makes it look like they don't believe in Jesus at all.

What are they doing to make their words seem false—like a lie?

They are showing favoritism. This means that they are treating some people much better than they are treating other people.

In James' world, everyone had a place in the social order. Some people—rich people, powerful and influential people—were treated as more important than other people. Other people—people who didn't have much money, people who worked as servants—were treated as less important. If you were to go into a gathering of people, you would be able to tell who the rich people were: they would have the best seats. The poor people would be standing or sitting on the floor.

But one of the things that makes Jesus' way so unexpected and upside-down is that he arranged things so that no one was to be treated as more important than anyone else. Jesus went straight for the people that no one else wanted, and invited them to share meals with him.

And we know from Acts that Jesus' followers shared everything and ate together and lived in such a way that no one was treated better because they were rich or worse because they were poor. This is how Jesus' followers are supposed to live!

But that is not what they were doing.

So James asks his readers to stop showing favoritism. And then he explains why it is so important to live and act in ways that go along with the words that they say: "Faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead."

This is not so different from what James wrote earlier, about *saying* that you believe in Jesus and then showing favoritism—*doing* something that's exactly the opposite of what Jesus teaches. You can *say* all kinds

of things and not mean them. It is what we *do* that shows what we really believe—what we really have faith in.

James uses this example to explain why *saying* that you believe is not enough unless you also *do* things to show that you really do believe:

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (2:15-17)

If we *say* we believe in Jesus, James says, we will *do* things that show that our belief is true and sincere. If we don’t do those things, it simply reveals that we didn’t truly believe in the first place.

Unit 9

Last Things

The book of Revelation confounds many people, even those who have been raised in the Christian faith. Some of its apocalyptic imagery is perplexing and bizarre, even frightening, particularly when it is envisioned—as it has been by Hollywood—as something along the lines of science fiction.

Looked at a bit differently, the book of Revelation offers an important vision of the end of time: of the risen and exalted Christ in his glory, of the Garden of Eden transported into the City of God that fills the whole Earth, and of the intimate relationship between God and people when, at last, death has been conquered once and for all and every tear has been wiped away.

Lesson

31

Revelation 1, especially verses 12-20 Christ, the Mighty Conquering One

What the Parent Should Know: Often enough, we have a mental picture of Jesus as entirely meek and mild, even a bit puny. While we seem to have little trouble envisioning the baby in the manger, or the crucified Christ, imagining the risen Christ is somewhat more difficult. What does it mean that Jesus

has died, but has been raised, incorruptible, so that he will never die, and is, in fact, alive even now?

The book of Revelation, though written in highly figural language, is, in fact, the revelation of Jesus Christ. This is one reason why the book is not called RevelationS, plural, but rather the revelation, singular, of the one Lord Jesus Christ, given to the churches through John, who, as a result of persecution, is in exile on the island of Patmos. Jesus appears to him and charges him with writing his vision and sharing it with the “seven churches,” which are representative of ALL the churches (seven being a biblical number expressing completeness or wholeness).

John’s vision begins with hearing, from behind him, a loud voice like a trumpet. Turning to look, he sees a truly remarkable sight:

[W]hen I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. (verses 13-16)

This image is kingly and fierce: eyes of fire; a mouth from which emerges a sharp sword (presumably, because it is a mouth that cannot but divide truth from lies—a sharp sword being a metaphor for truth-telling). In this vision, Christ looks a lot like the God of the Old Testament: strong and victorious. This is the vision that sets up everything else in the book of Revelation, as everything in heaven and earth is put into order by this mighty, triumphant King.

John is, quite understandably, afraid at this vision (“I fell at his feet as though dead,” he writes). Yet as he does in the Gospels, when appearing to his disciples after the Resurrection, Jesus urges John not to fear. Jesus’ presence is, in fact, the basis for leaving aside fearfulness entirely:

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus says. “I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.” (verses 17-18)

Jesus is completely triumphant, and he is standing there, among the lampstands, which are the churches. What does the church have to fear, if

THIS is the one who walks among them, utterly powerful and mighty, yet gentle and loving?

Again, we often forget that Jesus is mighty in his resurrection. He is not an endlessly patient, avuncular fellow. Here the revelation of the risen Lord is that of a powerful, triumphant warrior king who has conquered the last, worst enemy—death—and who now dwells among the churches. What can anyone do to the one to whom Jesus stands with? He holds the keys to death and hell!

So, in the face of the difficulties and persecutions to come, the church need not fear. This warrior king triumphant stands among us, and he is for us.

Begin by Reading Aloud:

There are two ways that people have of speaking about Jesus that make it difficult to understand who Jesus really is: speaking of Jesus in the past tense, as if he were no longer alive, and speaking of Jesus and what Jesus would do as if Jesus is just a generally nice man who mostly wants people to have good manners, but who is not particularly strong or bold.

At Christmastime we think about Jesus as a baby in a manger. At Easter we think about Jesus on the cross, and then in the garden, greeting his friends. At Pentecost we think of him disappearing into the clouds and going up into heaven. But then what? What happens next?

In this part of the Bible, the Apostle John has a vision of Jesus as he is in heaven. And he is not a baby in a manger. He is not a generally nice man who mostly wants people to have good manners. And he is definitely not a person to be spoken of in the past tense. The Jesus that John sees in a vision and then writes about is a powerful, even frightening figure.

John's vision begins with hearing, from behind him, a loud voice like a trumpet. Turning to look, he sees Jesus—who appears truly remarkable:

[W]hen I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. (verses 13-16)

This word-picture paints Jesus as kingly and fierce—something like a very strong superhero. He has fiery eyes, a mouth that is like a sharp sword (which probably means it is a mouth that can only speak the truth), and a face as bright as the sun. He glows, and he stands among the lampstands and stars, which John tells us represent the churches and the angels that watch over the churches. This is Jesus after his resurrection, in a body that will never die, powerful and strong, ready to put everything in heaven and on earth into order.

John tells us he was pretty afraid of Jesus at this point—“I fell at his feet as though dead,” John writes—and that makes sense: Jesus looks powerful and a bit scary. But just as he did when he appeared to his friends and disciples after he rose from the dead, Jesus tells John not to be afraid. Jesus is powerful beyond measure, strong beyond imagining, but he is gentle. He brings peace. And his presence is the very thing that can allow us to leave aside our fears, because Jesus has already taken care of the worst thing that there is in this world: death.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus says to John. “I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.” (verses 17-18)

Jesus is completely triumphant, and he is standing there, among the lampstands, which are the churches. What does the church—what do Christians—have to fear, if THIS JESUS is the one who walks among them (and among us), utterly powerful and mighty, yet gentle and loving?

We should not forget that Jesus is mighty in his resurrection. He appears to John, and, through John’s writings, to us, as a powerful, triumphant warrior king who has conquered the last, worst enemy—death—and who now dwells among the churches; among us. What can anyone do to us if Jesus stands with us? He holds the keys to death and hell!

So, in the face of the difficulties, we do not need to be afraid. Jesus, a warrior king triumphant, stands among us, and he is for us.