

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open the bible and light a candle beside it. Set a pitcher of water and bowl nearby.

LEADER: Let us dedicate—

ALL: Our eyes to see where justice must bloom.

LEADER: Our ears to hear God's word and the voices of our times.

ALL: Our minds to wrestle with all God asks of us.

LEADER: Our mouths to dialog with friends and foes.

ALL: Our hearts to welcome neighbors and newcomers.

LEADER: Our shoulders to continue the work of the gospel.

ALL: Our whole selves to God who is three in one love—
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

On the strength of a Samaritan woman's witness, her townspeople come to meet Jesus and believe in him. The Eastern Church gives her the name Photina (light bearer). In her conversation with Jesus, the woman recognizes he has come in spirit and truth to include her people in his community.

Like the fishermen who leave their nets to follow Jesus, she leaves the water jar that symbolizes her work and goes to tell her townspeople she has found the messiah. The strength of the Samaritan woman's word and witness

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3rd Sunday of Lent

brings her people to hear Jesus for themselves. Her witness can inspire our own.

Her story provides the title for a collection of writings about who Jesus is in women's lives today. The book is *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women* (Orbis 2016). Theologian Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, is the editor.

The Christology class that Sister Elizabeth teaches at Fordham University frequently takes her to the library. Christology is the study of who Jesus is, our faith seeking theological understanding. In the library Sister Elizabeth looks for articles to add women's voices to the many men's voices already wrestling with who Jesus is for us today.

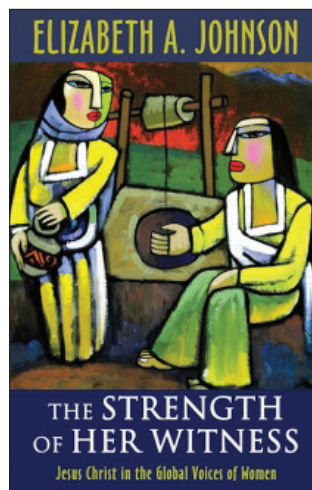
The articles she has collected explore women's experience of Jesus. Twenty-five women theologians speak out of cultures rooted in six continents, out of women's struggles for liberation, out of experiences of mothering.

Hispanic theologian Maria Pilar Aquino understands Jesus as liberator of the oppressed. One meets him through participating in *la lucha*, the struggle of the oppressed for dignity and life. "Something is wrong with living in the terrible deprivation so many do," she says. "Faith motivates me to seek justice. Theology is knowledge for liberation and service of the people."

Jeanine Hill Fletcher, a young mother and professor at Fordham, offers breast feeding as an example of self-giving love. "It requires commitment all night and all day to giving of the self to the needs of the other. Humanity suckles at the breasts of Christ as Christ gives himself for the lives of many, and Christians are called to

carry on that mother role for a world in need."

● Where does your Christology come from? What do you say to others about Jesus and our relationship with him?



GOSPEL

Samaritans take a woman's word.

NARRATOR: On his way through Samaria Jesus came to a town called Sychar near the land Jacob gave his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down at the well. It was about noon. His disciples had gone into town to buy food. A Samaritan woman came to draw some water.

JESUS: Give me a drink.

WOMAN: You are a Jew. How can you ask me, a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink?

NARRATOR: Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.

JESUS: If only you knew God's gift and who is asking you for a drink, you would ask him and he would give you living water.

WOMAN: Sir, you don't have a bucket and this well is deep. Where do you expect to get living water? You don't pretend to be greater than our ancestors Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, who gave us this well and whose family and flocks all drank from it?

JESUS: Everyone who drinks this water will keep getting thirsty, but whoever drinks the water that I give will never be thirsty again. The water I give will become a spring within that wells up into eternal life.

WOMAN: Sir, give me this water! Then I will never be thirsty again, and I won't have to keep coming here for water.

JESUS: Go, call your husband.

WOMAN: I have no husband.

JESUS: You are right. You have had five husbands, but the man you are living with now is not your husband. What you have said is true.

WOMAN: I see you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship God.

JESUS: Believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not understand, while we Jews understand. Salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and is already here, when real worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth. These are the worshipers God wants. God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth.

WOMAN: I know the messiah is coming, the one called the Christ, who will announce all things to us.

JESUS: I am the one, who is speaking to you.

NARRATOR: Jesus' disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. The woman left her water jar at the well and went off into the town.



What do you see in the art?

WOMAN: Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did. Couldn't this be the messiah?

NARRATOR: The people set out to meet Jesus. Many Samaritans from that village believed in Jesus on the strength of the woman's word, "He proclaims all the things I ever did." When the Samaritans came to Jesus, they begged him to stay, so he stayed for two days. Many more believed in Jesus after listening to his teachings. They spoke to the woman.

SAMARITAN 1: Now we believe in Jesus not because of your story but because we ourselves have heard him.

SAMARITAN 2: We know this is the Savior of the world.

John 4:5-30, 39-42

Jesus woos a Samaritan woman and her people to faith.

The Samaritan woman has no personal name. The gospel identifies her as a representative of her people. She knows their history and speaks their alienation in her dialog with Jesus.

Jews and Samaritans trace their common ancestry back to the patriarch Jacob, later named Israel, and his wives Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah. Twelve tribes descend from this family. With Moses the tribes make a covenant to be God's people and keep the ten commandments. Under David the twelve tribes become one kingdom. After David's son King Solomon, the united kingdom splits in two. Samaria becomes the capital of the northern kingdom; Jerusalem, the capital of the south.

This split deepens after Assyria destroys Samaria, deports many of its people, and resettles the land. These new settlers from Babylon, Cuth, Hamath, Avva, and Sepharim worship their own gods. Because the Samaritans intermarry with them, Samaria becomes the home of heretics, according to the Jews of the south. It is not the woman but Samaria that has had five husbands in its past—the false gods of the new settlers. The story is in 2 Kings 17.

The woman recognizes Jesus is a prophet because he speaks like prophets such as Hosea when he compares people's relationship with God to a marriage. Jesus

is calling the woman and her people out of their past relationships with other gods and offering himself as the real husband of Samaria.

● **What difference does it make to recognize Jesus is talking to this woman as a representative Samaritan rather than a sinner?**

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman is more than a conversation. It's a wooing. The signs Jesus works in John's gospel begin with the lavish six jars of wine he provides for a wedding feast that has run out of spirits (2.1-12). Jesus is the bridegroom who pours out the Spirit in a new community.

The setting of Sunday's gospel at a well brings the marriage theme back into the story. The well is a common courting place in ancient times, just as restaurants and other watering holes are today. Jacob, for whom this well is named, met his wife Rachel at a well. A servant looking for a wife for Jacob's father, Isaac, found Rebecca at a well.

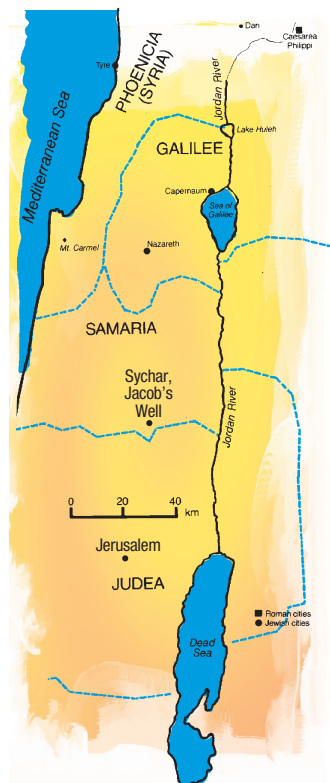
Moses rescued seven sisters at a well and married one of them. At Jacob's well the bridegroom Jesus woos the Samaritan woman and Samaria into union with him in the community of the new Israel.

John's gospel contrasts the noontime when Jesus woos the Samaritan woman, a supposed heretic, and the nighttime in the chapter preceeding when Nicodemus, a Jew and strictly observant Pharisee, comes to visit Jesus. Jesus leads both of them on through deliberate double meanings.

Jesus winds up in a monologue with an uncomprehending Nicodemus. The woman, however, questions, objects, and challenges Jesus until in the end she recognizes—aha! he is the messiah. She models bringing one's life story into dialog with Jesus and struggling to break open the word he speaks.

● **What do you appreciate about the woman's faith journey as a wooing?**

“**A**re you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well?” the Samaritan woman asks, when Jesus offers her living water. This is a Samaritan question. The well has been an abiding gift to the people of central Israel. But Jesus' gift goes beyond Jacob's. In the water Jesus



gives, the Spirit wells up within the person into eternal life. Jesus' gift quenches all thirst.

The wooing moves toward the woman's recognition of Jesus as bridegroom to both Israel and Samaria. Boundaries begin to give way. The woman acknowledges her people expect a messiah who will tell them the things of God. "*I am* he," Jesus says, the first of many times in John's gospel when Jesus uses the divine name God first confided to Moses—I Am.

No wonder the woman leaves her water jar behind and goes to her townspeople. Jesus calls her out of her alienation into his new community of spirit and truth. The messiah has courted and proposed. She challenges the villagers to see in Jesus what she has seen, "Could this be the messiah?" They come and see Jesus and ask him to stay, which in John's gospel means *to dwell with*. On the strength of the woman's word of testimony, these Samaritans join the community in which Jesus abides.

In John's gospel only the Samaritan woman brings a whole group to Jesus. Andrew brings Peter. Philip brings Nathanael. She brings a whole town. She is transparent. Her people see through her to Jesus.

● How does your parish bring people—youth, immigrants, the elderly—to Jesus?

● When have you experienced the Spirit well up within you? Where has trusting the Spirit's stirrings led you?

FIRST READING

Is God in our midst?

On their journey to the promised land, the Israelites' thirst makes them testy and quarrelsome, nervous about the present and future. They cry out against Moses and God and begin to remember Egypt longingly despite their position there as slaves.

The people forget how recently God brought them safely through the waters of the sea and fed them with manna and quail. They need water and they want it now. They question God's continuing presence with them. The names Massah and Meribah mean the *quarrel* or *test*, the place where the people asked, "Is God in our midst or not?"

Israelites quarrel.

In their thirst for water, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?" So Moses cried out to God, "What shall I do with these people? A little more and they will stone me!"

God answered Moses, "Go over there in front of the people, along with some of the elders of Israel, holding in your hand as you go, the staff with which you struck the river. I will be standing in front of you on the rock in Horeb. Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink."

This Moses did, in the presence of the elders of Israel. The place

was called Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested God, saying, "Is God in our midst or not?"

Exodus 17:3-7

● How do you answer this ancient question? Is God in our midst?

PRAY

Take a brief quiet time to surface alienations and estrangements the gospel brings to mind.

LEADER: Now is the time to build Jesus' new community.

ALL: Let us worship God in spirit and truth.

EACH: Now is the time to... (*Each can finish the statement above.*)

ALL: Let us worship God in spirit and truth.

LEADER: Let all who seek God, come to the waters.

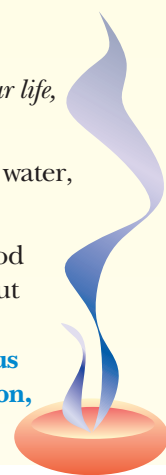
SING: *Come to the Water*, by John Foley, S.J., (*Gather* #502)

*O let all who seek,
let them come to the water;
and let all who have nothing,
let them come to the Lord:
without money,
without strife.
Why should you spend your life,
except for the Lord?*

Sprinkle each other with water, saying:

EACH: May the love of God continue to be poured out in you.

ALL: May our God bless us always, Source of Life, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.



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by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible, light a candle, and place a plant beside them at the center of your group.

LEADER: Revive us again this spring, life-giving God.

ALL: Let us live the words that come from the mouth of God.

LEADER: Help us see ourselves as those we anger and frustrate see us and change according to your call.

ALL: Create in us whole hearts, O God. Sustain our love in your love.

Where do we find God? One common answer is deep within. How do we find God deep within? Common answers include time for solitude and silence, time to listen to one's own aspirations and desperations apart from those of others in our lives. A retreat can help us sort what and who we really value or maybe we need a little time with a hook in the water.

The man born blind in Sunday's gospel finds God in a different place, in encounters with others outside himself. Explaining his new eyes to neighbors, teachers,

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and parents helps him find words for who the man must be that gave him sight. He finds God in dialogue, in the space between us, where grace and amazement attend our efforts to bridge our separate selves and glimpse the mystery we each are.

Traditionally Lent is about fasting, eating less or maybe better. It's about recognizing what drives us—to eat, spend, drink, gamble, veg, work too much. Fasting can help us break patterns and free our spirits to build healthier, holier lives and use neglected gifts.

Some of us may need to fast from friends or family who dump on us rather than deal with their problems or perhaps overestimate their closeness. Lent is the time for a spring cleanup that makes room for new life.

St. Ignatius, the founder of the Society of Jesus, encouraged his priests to use a simple, daily form of prayer called the Examen. It is an examination of the events and feelings we experience each day, an examination of consciousness, not conscience. It involves taking 10-15 minutes of contemplative time each day, morning or evening, or a time that works. Sit quietly, comfortably. Let your senses help to remember the day or the day before.

What or who did I see? What did I hear, taste, smell, touch? What energized me? What feelings did I experience? Express gratitude to God. Then remember and feel any regrets in an event or relationship. Ask for God's help. Over time pay attention to recurring feelings and insights and follow tugs

toward all God asks. It's a way to see with new eyes like the man in Sunday's gospel.

● What encounters or events keep surfacing in your contemplative moments this Lent? Where do they point?



GOSPEL

Jesus gives sight to a man born blind.

SCENE 1

NARRATOR: As Jesus walked along with his disciples, they saw a man who had been born blind. Jesus spat on the ground and made some mud. He rubbed the mud on the man's eyes.

JESUS: Go wash in the Pool of Siloam.

NARRATOR: *Siloam* means *sent*. The man went, washed, and came back seeing.

SCENE 2

NEIGHBOR 1: Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?

NEIGHBOR 2: No, he just looks like him.

MAN BORN BLIND: I am the man.

NEIGHBOR 1: How were your eyes opened?

MAN: The man named Jesus made some mud, rubbed it on my eyes, and told me, "Go to Siloam and wash." So I went, and as soon as I washed, I could see.

NEIGHBOR 2: Where is he?

MAN: I do not know.

SCENE 3

NARRATOR: Then they took the man who had been blind to the Pharisees. The day that Jesus opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath.

PHARISEE 1: How did you receive your sight?

MAN: Jesus put mud on my eyes, I washed it off, and now I can see.

PHARISEE 2: The one who did this cannot be from God. He does not obey the Sabbath law.

PHARISEE 1: But how could a sinner do such mighty works as these?

NARRATOR: They were sharply divided about Jesus. They spoke again to the blind man.

PHARISEE 3: You say Jesus opened your eyes. What do you say about him?

MAN: He is a prophet.

SCENE 4

NARRATOR: These teachers were not willing to believe that the man had been born blind and begun to see, so they called his parents.

PHARISEE 1: Is this your son? If he was born blind, how is it that he can now see?

FATHER: This is our son. We know he was born blind. We do not know how he can see now, or who opened his eyes.

MOTHER: Ask him. He can speak for himself.

NARRATOR: His parents feared the Jews who had agreed among themselves that anyone who believed Jesus was the messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

SCENE 5

NARRATOR: A second time the teachers called in the man born blind.

PHARISEE 2: Promise before God that you will tell the truth! We know the man who healed you is a sinner.

MAN: I do not know if he is a sinner or not. I do know one thing; I was blind, and now I can see.

PHARISEE 3: What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?

MAN: I already told you that, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples?

What do you see in the art?



PHARISEE 1: You are his disciple; we are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses. We don't have any idea where Jesus comes from!

MAN: How strange! You don't know where he comes from, but he opened my eyes. We know that God doesn't listen to sinners; God listens to those who respect God and do what God wants them to do. Since the beginning of the world, no one has heard of someone opening the eyes of a man born blind. Unless this man came from God, he could not have done such a thing.

PHARISEE 2: You were born and raised in sin—and you are trying to teach us? Get out of the synagogue!

SCENE 6

NARRATOR: Jesus heard that the teachers had expelled the man born blind and went to talk to him.

JESUS: Do you believe in the Son of Man?

MAN: Tell me who he is, sir, so I can believe in him.

JESUS: You have already seen him. He is speaking to you now.

MAN: I believe, Jesus.

The man born blind speaks his truth.

Sunday's gospel begins as a miracle (scene 1) but continues as a faith drama, a series of scenes in which a man born blind explains to neighbors and teachers how he got his sight and who this person is who gave him sight. As the man tells his story, he sees with increasing clarity who Jesus is. Reread and explore the story of his journey for yourself, using the directions below.

● Give titles to the six scenes as a way of identifying what happens in each and how the conflict grows.

● In which scenes is Jesus central? In which, the man born blind? Note all the places the man born blind repeats the story of his healing.

● Underline the statements the man makes about who Jesus is. What steps do you see in the faith journey of the man born blind?

Scene 1 tells a simple story of a physical healing; however, miracle stories in John's gospel are never simple and never called miracles. They are *signs* that reveal Jesus. In Sunday's gospel the gift of sight, which the man receives from Jesus in scene 1, sets him off on a journey of insight into who his healer is (scenes 2-6).

The man with new eyes becomes the central character in scenes 2-5. In your bible study you may have noticed that the man says less in each scene about the miracle and more about who Jesus is. When his neighbors first question how he came to see, the man simply recounts all Jesus' actions.

When neighbors take the man to the Pharisees in scene 3, the man born blind first repeats some of what happened to him and then reflects—Jesus must be a prophet. His controversy with these strict teachers of the law helps the man see Jesus in a new way.

In scene 5 after his parents insist the man must speak for himself, he tells his story in eight words, "I was blind, and now I can see," but he reflects at length on who his healer must be and makes an argument that anyone who heals a man blind from birth must be from God. His healing is a sign that reveals Jesus for the man but remains a sin in the eyes of the Pharisees. The blind man

sees; the seeing teachers remain blind.

Ask yourself the questions the man born blind answers:

- How were my eyes opened?
- How did I receive my sight?
- Where is Jesus?
- Do I believe in the Son of Man?

Sunday's gospel tells in one story two layers of history—a mud layer and a water layer. The mud layer is Jesus' historical ministry (A.D. 30), in which Jesus in person smears mud on a man's eyes. However, Jesus sends the man to the pool of Siloam to wash. Only in washing does he receive his sight.

This detail suggests this story also tells a later history about Christians, who become Jesus' followers through baptismal washing. The man born blind represents both a man who encounters Jesus and a character in the gospel with whom the Christian community identifies and through whom they tell their story.

Bible scholar

J. Louis Martyn suggests we glimpse in the parents' fear the conflicts which the whole Christian community faced in the A.D. 90s. The parents fear those in their synagogue who have agreed to put out anyone who confesses Jesus is the messiah.



No one is certain when or in what synagogues divisions arose between disciples of Jesus and disciples of Moses. However, after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, a number of rabbis formed an academy in the town of Jamnia. From this school modern Judaism grew. Scenes 4 and 5 picture the man born blind and his community experiencing tensions that ultimately force Jews to take sides and become separate groups.

The gospel tradition equates a healing encounter with Jesus and a baptismal encounter. In Jesus' absence—the middle of Sunday's gospel—the man with new eyes speaks the truth of his experience. In his witness, he progressively finds words and gains insight into who Jesus must be. His witness models the value of articulating and sharing our own experience of God and of persisting in dialogue with those who challenge us. He calls us to continue his story as our own.

- What conflicts call you to speak your experience of God's Spirit stirring in you?
- What insight does this gospel give you about the value of faith sharing?



Samuel anoints David.

The anointing of David is another great moment in the history of Israel which the Lenten first readings recall. David is the youngest of eight sons, a youth who is God's choice to be king, but

not the prophet Samuel's first pick. The outpouring of the Spirit upon David manifests God's blessings on him.

God chooses a king.

God said to Samuel: "I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem, for I have chosen my king from among his sons." As Jesse and his sons came to the sacrifice, Samuel looked at Eliab and thought, "Surely this is God's anointed." But God said to Samuel: "Do not judge from his appearance or from his lofty stature, because I have rejected him. Not as humans see does God see, because humans see the appearance but God looks into the heart." Jesse presented seven sons before Samuel, but Samuel said, "God has not chosen any of these."

Then Samuel asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" Jesse replied, "There is still the youngest, who is tending the sheep." Samuel said to Jesse, "Send for him; we will not begin the banquet until he arrives." Jesse sent and had him come. The young man was ruddy and handsome with beautiful eyes. God said, "Arise and anoint him, for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed David in the presence of his brothers. The Spirit of God grew strong in David from that day on.

1 Samuel 16.1,6-7,10-13

- Whose appearances have fooled you into misreading their capabilities?
- In what young people do you see promise? What does the Spirit speak in them?
- Whom in your community of faith or service do you want to anoint for leadership?

PRAY

Pray together to conclude your reflection on the journey of the man born blind into seeing, believing, and professing his faith.

LEADER: Once we were in darkness but now we live in the light of God.

ALL: Light produces every kind of goodness, justice, and truth.

LEADER: Once we were blind but now we see.

EACH: (*Make a personal statement of faith.*) I once was blind but now I see...

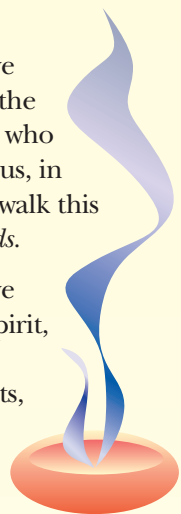
LEADER: We believe in God, who is three persons in one love. What do we believe about the Creator of all that is?

Group responds.

LEADER: What do we believe about Jesus the messiah, God's Son who has become one of us, in whose footsteps we walk this Lent? *Group responds.*

LEADER: What do we believe about the Spirit, who animates the communion of saints, living and dead? *Group responds.*

ALL: Loving God, you bless us with the light of life. Your goodness and kindness follow us all the days of our lives.



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The Our Father online retreat has just seven parts.
Begin today and be ready for Easter.

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open the bible at the center of your group and light a candle beside it. Recall the names of people you love who have died. Pray Romans 8.11:

LEADER: The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us.

ALL: The one who raised Christ from the dead will bring our mortal bodies to life through the dwelling of the Spirit in us.

Inevitably in our lives we stand at the graves of those we love. Perhaps it is misting as it was when we stood at my mother's grave and each shoveled dirt into the place of her resting. It was October. This final family act of love seemed like a fall planting for an as yet uncertain spring.

When we bury those we love, we lose all they learned in their lives—the quickness of their fingers on a violin, their mastery of physics, their wisdom in relationships, the way the holy showed through in their kindness. What lives on? Every death raises questions about its meaning and makes of our graves places where faith must begin.

Our graves call the question—what do I believe

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about God? Sometimes the veil between worlds seems thin. We experience our loved ones intensely present with us.

None of us knows what lies beyond death. We have only our experience of God in our world and in our holy history. Henry Nouwen compares dying to the trust between trapeze artists. One lets go, trusting the other will catch her or him.

Christians are companions in hope that the God who creates and sustains the world will raise us up. We are companions in hope that the new life Jesus promises will be our own.

We live in promise, not certainty. We walk with Jesus,

who did not sidestep death but trusted the God he experienced beloving and inspiring him; he gave himself in human unknowing.

Jesus grieves in Sunday's gospel with three people he loves. His friends Martha and Mary believe Jesus could have saved their brother Lazarus, but he didn't come in time. The gospel sets a scene familiar: two sisters stand at their brother's grave with a friend.

● Who have you accompanied in sickness and death?

● What funerals do you remember especially? For what reasons?



GOSPEL

Jesus is resurrection and life.

NARRATOR: There was a man named Lazarus, who was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. The sisters sent word to Jesus to inform him, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

JESUS: This sickness will not end in death; rather it is for God’s glory, that through it the Son of God may be glorified.

NARRATOR: Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus very much. Yet, after hearing that Lazarus was sick, Jesus stayed on where he was for two days more. Finally he said to his disciples:

JESUS: Let us go back to Judea.

NARRATOR: When Jesus arrived in Bethany, he found Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. The village was not far from Jerusalem—just under two miles—and many Jewish people had come out to console Martha and Mary over their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary sat at home.

MARTHA: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died. Even now I am sure that God will give you whatever you ask.

JESUS: Your brother will rise again.

MARTHA: I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

JESUS: I am the resurrection and the life: whoever believes in me, though they die, will come to life; and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?

MARTHA: Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the messiah, the Son of God: he who is to come into the world.

NARRATOR: When she had said this, Martha went back and called her sister Mary.

MARTHA: The Teacher is here, asking for you.

NARRATOR: As soon as Mary heard this, she got up and started out in his direction. Actually Jesus had not yet come into the village but was still at the spot where Martha had met him. The Jews who were in the house with Mary saw her get up quickly and go out, so they followed her, thinking she was going to the tomb to weep. When Mary came to the place where Jesus was, she fell at his feet.

MARY: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died.

NARRATOR: When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had accompanied her also weeping, he was troubled in spirit, moved by the deepest emotions.

JESUS: Where have you lain him?

ALL: Lord, come and see.

NARRATOR: Jesus began to weep.

MOURNERS 1: See how much he loved Lazarus.

MOURNERS 2: He opened the eyes of the blind man. Why could he not have done something to stop this man from dying?

NARRATOR: Troubled in spirit, Jesus approached the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across it.



What do you see in the art?

JESUS: Take away the stone.

MARTHA: Lord, it has been four days now; surely there will be a stench.

JESUS: Did I not assure you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God displayed?

NARRATOR: They took away the stone, and Jesus looked upward.

JESUS: Father, I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd, that they may believe that you sent me. Lazarus, come out.

NARRATOR: The dead man came out, bound hand and foot with linen strips, and his face wrapped in a cloth.

JESUS: Untie him and let him go free.

NARRATOR: Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and saw what Jesus did put their faith in him.

Martha believes Jesus is the messiah.

Like the Samaritan woman and the man born blind, Martha and Mary speak as individuals but also as representatives of the Christian community that gives us John's gospel. Between Jesus' death and resurrection (A.D.30) and the writing of John's gospel (A.D.80-100), this community told and lived Jesus' story. The cycle-A Lenten gospels show us that this early community faced its own later conflicts by reflecting on events in Jesus' life.

On one level the miracle is an event in Jesus' lifetime, the raising of Lazarus its focus. On a second level the raising of Lazarus is a sign on which the Johannine community reflects about who Jesus is to them and to their loved ones who are dying. The dialog Martha and Mary have with Jesus explores the relationship between the crucified and risen Jesus and disciples like their brother who face death in the late first century.

When Martha and Mary meet Jesus, they each say, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died." The repetition tells us this statement is important. Martha and Mary raise a question in the life of the early Christian community in which many expected Jesus to return in glory within their lifetimes.

● What questions do you have about death?

● Before what graves have you stood and asked as Martha and Mary do, "Why didn't you save the one we love?" What answer did you get?

In reflecting on Lazarus's death, the death of someone Jesus loves, the community remembers Jesus himself suffered death and transformed its meaning. The gospel inextricably links Lazarus's death with Jesus' death, and Lazarus's new life with the promise of Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus' journey to Bethany takes him just two miles from Jerusalem, where mourners quickly carry the news Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead to the high priests. These officials immediately convoke the Sanhedrin and decide to kill Jesus (John 11.46-53).

This chapter that tells the story of Jesus' raising of Lazarus ends with the officials deciding Jesus must die. When he weeps with Martha and Mary over the death of their brother and his friend, Jesus stands at the door of his own grave. Raising Lazarus sets his passion in motion. Lazarus lives to face death again. Jesus leads Lazarus and all his disciples through death to life. We can see Martha and Mary in the gospel art unwrapping not only Lazarus but every Christian in the promise of the resurrection.

● What do you appreciate about Jesus, truly human in this scene as well as truly divine?

As her conversation with Jesus begins, Martha believes Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had been there. To her, Jesus is someone who cures illness and has a special closeness to God that will get him whatever he asks. She believes in a wonderworker.

When Jesus says, "Your brother will rise again," Martha thinks he is talking about resurrection on the last day. This is faith that Jesus is the apocalyptic figure who will bring good to triumph on the last day. Early Christians expected this day in their lifetimes.

The community that gives us John's gospel believes Jesus is more than a wonderworker or an apocalyptic figure. In Sunday's gospel Jesus calls Martha to this deeper faith. "*I am* the resurrection and the life," he says. Jesus' words say that he is *I Am*. This is the name of God in the Old Testament. Martha affirms one of the ten *I Am* statements in John's gospel, identifying Jesus as the pre-existent Word who was with God from the beginning and was God.

John's community also sees Jesus as the messiah, the king greater than David that the prophets expected. Martha affirms in her confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the messiah. "Yes, Lord," she says, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world."



Martha confesses the faith of later disciples who have reflected on all the scriptures say about Jesus and who have faced the death of their loved ones. The raising of Lazarus manifests God's same life-giving power that raises Jesus himself from the dead and makes the grave a threshold of divine promise for every Christian.

The time above all to make Martha's confession is at the graves of our loved ones. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. The gospel calls us to find the ultimate meaning of our lives in the mystery of Jesus' story, in the light he gives to life, in the hope he gives in death.

● **What helps you believe God can and will raise us up when we are in pain? When we face death?**

● **What do you say to someone suffering the pain of a child, parent, or spouse dying?**



Ezekiel imagines his people restored to life.

Ezekiel gives us images of God's transcendent power which we know well from spirituals—dry bones that rise again, the wheels that move by the grace of God. Ezekiel speaks for the God of Israel but he lives in exile in Babylon—modern-day Iraq. He is among those the Babylonians



take captive in 598 B.C., ten years before they finally level the city of Jerusalem and its temple. The temple vanishes with its priests and festivals that once assured the people of God's presence with them.

What God gives Ezekiel in exile are visions, dreams of new birth in the midst of the dry and scattered bones of his people. Israel doesn't become an independent nation again until modern times. But out of Israel's relationship with God come two world religions—Judaism and Christianity. Ezekiel's vision is without earthly foundations; it is sheer faith in God's life-giving power.

These bones will rise.

Thus says the Holy One: O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am God, when I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people! I will put my spirit in

you that you may live, and I will settle you upon your land; thus you shall know that I am God. I have promised, and I will do it, says God.

Ezekiel 37.12-14

● **What speaks to you in Ezekiel's vision?**

● **What speaks to you in the artist's portrait of Ezekiel?**

PRAY

Name a sign of spring that makes you personally aware new life is waking from winter death or dormancy.

LEADER: God who creates and sustains all life.

ALL: We are made in your image and likeness.

LEADER: God of spirit and truth.

ALL: You call us into communion beyond our borders.

LEADER: Jesus, light of the world.

ALL: We walk in the light of your life.

LEADER: Jesus, resurrection and life.

ALL: You promise life with you forever.

Sing: "We Remember," Gather #593. Exchange a greeting of peace.



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