

Remaining in Christ: Jesus' 'I AM' Statements in the Gospel of John

Introduction to the study

Hello.

Welcome to the Introductory Session of "Remaining in Christ: A Study of Christ's 'I am' Statements in the Gospel of John."

This eight-week study is produced by the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas, and created collaboratively by Marjorie George, John Lewis, and me, Jane Patterson. Filming is being done at the Jones Center in San Antonio, by Charles Sumners.

For each of the eight sessions, there will be a short introductory video like this one posted online on the diocesan adult formation site. The video can be watched either by individuals at home or by a small group or a whole class in a congregation. Each session will relate to a particular passage in the Gospel of John that focuses on some aspect of the identity of Jesus Christ, most of them conveyed through the familiar "I am" statements, such as "I am the Bread of Life," "I am the vine," "I am the Good Shepherd." You might think of these statements as basic building blocks in coming to know Jesus. Because they are so simple and basic, they really invite you to unpack them in your own experience and with your own imagination.

In addition to the video, there will be a handout for each week with some notes on the biblical passage and questions for reflection, to help guide you deeper in your participation with the passage. In a group or class setting, the questions are intended to guide a group discussion. A practice that we have found helpful in our own classes is to give everyone a little space of silence with each question before anyone speaks. We encourage people in the class to write down their thoughts before they share them. This practice helps more people to speak, and at more depth than if a few people simply start responding right away. Obviously, you're free to engage the material however you want. This is just an idea from our own experience. We have provided a page for you to write, draw, or scribble your thoughts as part of the weekly package.

The reflections will also include some ideas about how to take the passage into your own spiritual practice, whether in practices of prayer or practices in your own daily life. Our hope is that this study will not just teach you things, but empower you to live as Christ, by the power of the Spirit, in your own particular context.

The Gospel of John was the latest to be written of the Gospels in our New Testament. Scholars believe that it achieved the form in which we have it between 90 and 100, though it shows evidence of having gone through several stages in its construction. Just to give you some sense for how the Gospel of John fits into a timeline of the life of Jesus and the composition of the New Testament: The life of Jesus was roughly from 4BCE to around 30 CE, Common Era, or as you might know it, AD, the approximate date of

Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The earliest written material that we have is the letters of Paul, all written in the fifties. The first Gospel was probably that of Mark, which achieved the form we have it in around the year 70. Matthew and Luke probably had copies of Mark, together with their own sources when they were putting together their Gospels in the early eighties.

The Gospel of John has a very different character from Mark, Matthew, and Luke, and we are hoping that this study will help you appreciate the particular beauty and depth of John. What the Gospel of John really witnesses to most powerfully is the dynamism of the decades of reflection that John's community carried out during the years from 30 to 90 CE. This period of time included the disastrous destruction of Jerusalem and the flight of early Christians northward. For John's community, it also included a significant mission among the Samaritans, which shaped the community's understanding of Jesus.

This is the Gospel that refers to the Holy Spirit as the encourager, the Spirit of Truth that will guide the community into all truth. By the power of the Spirit, John's community came to deeper realizations about Jesus over the six decades between the resurrection and the completion of the Gospel. Christian tradition shows us that the deepest truths are not realized quickly. The people who knew Jesus personally in his lifetime are not necessarily the people who came to know him best in his full significance as Son of God. If you read all of the Gospel of John, you will notice that John includes a lot of the stories that you recognize from Mark or Matthew or Luke, but John will often follow a story by a lot of reflection on its meaning. If you want to check that out, look at John, chapter 6, where the feeding story is followed by a long reflection on Jesus as the Bread of Life. That long process of reflection is an invitation to you, also, to invite the Holy Spirit to guide you into deeper awareness of Christ. How do you encounter Jesus as bread, water, light in your own life?

Those of us who are creating this study are eager to set out on this journey of discovery with you. Thank you for joining us.