

WAY, TRUTH AND LIFE

Order of Service (bulletin)

<https://www.spiritofhope.ca/news-and-events>

Video (recorded live stream)

<https://www.youtube.com/@spiritofhopeunitedchurch791>

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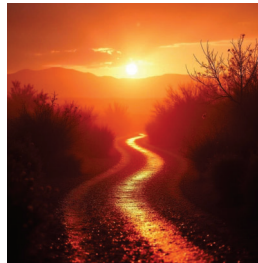
Easter 5

Acts 7:55-60

Stephen, meanwhile, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked to the sky and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right side of God. "Look!" he exclaimed. "I see the heavens opened, and the Chosen One standing at God's right hand!" The onlookers were standing there, shouting and holding their hands above their ears as they did so. They rushed at him at once, and dragged him out of the city. The witnesses then stoned him, having laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. As they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "O Jesus, receive my spirit." He fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, "Please, don't hold this sin against them!" and with that, he died.

John 14:1-4,6b

"Don't let your heart be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith in me as well. In God's house there are many dwelling places; otherwise, how could I have told you that I was going to prepare a place for you? I am indeed going to prepare a place for you, and then I will come back to take you with me, that where I am there, you may be as well. You know the way that leads to where I'm going. ... I myself am the Way - I am the Truth, and I am the Life. No one comes to Abba God but through me.



For the last four Wednesdays I was able to zoom with about 10 other people in an online Bible study group looking at the book of Amos. Now, there were fewer people on the first week because the advertised Zoom link was no longer in effect. And I sent out an email to as many people as I had in my phone with the new link that I just set up. But that's what you get when you plan an event for October, postpone it, but don't change the link. And Zoom thinks, well, that's long gone.

The book of Amos raised concerns over nations that commit war crimes during conflicts by attacking civilians. Amos was concerned how the poor were being treated in the northern kingdom of Israel. This is the time of the divided kingdom where Judah in the south was governed separately from Israel in the north. Amos is a southern prophet who had some things to say to his northern neighbors. Amos also raised concerns over the tendency of the wealthy and the powerful elites to be so arrogant and so self-absorbed that the vulnerable in their society are (at best) ignored and (at worst) oppressed. The Bible study consensus was that Amos was sharing valuable and needed messages. But we had concerns about how Amos proposed that these problems be dealt with. You see, Amos preached, *Because of your transgressions, your cities and towns are going to be*

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overrun by your enemies, and many are going to die. Because of your transgressions, your fancy houses and possessions will literally burn in fire and be destroyed. Amos preached that your crops are going to fail in drought and insect infestations and illnesses are going to kill many people. And Amos preached that all of this is going to happen as a result of God's desires. God wants to burn your houses, let you succumb to your enemies, die of illnesses, die of thirst, and die of hunger. God's going to let your strongholds be overrun. God's going to hold back the rain. God will send locusts and pestilence. This sounds like who we might sometimes identify as the vengeful, jealous, violent God of the Old Testament. The classic version that we still see in some modern preachers. Some of those who stand on street corners on soap boxes with their portable microphones and speakers and say, "Repent or suffer the wrath of God or stop your sinning or you will burn in hell." I think that deserves a slap on the pulpit. Now, I'm not sure how effective of an evangelical technique this can be to bring people into believing only based on threats of violent, painful consequences that would come if you don't believe. I mean, how honest is a faith if it's only based on fear?

Now, in the Bible study, I did my best to try and redeem Amos a bit by placing him in the context of living in the sixth century before Jesus' time, living into that cultural and religious assumptions, including the belief that God was continuously active in the world. The belief that everything that happens in the world, the good things and the bad things, the bumper crops, the empty silos, the victories, the defeats in war, had to be the result of the will of God because God is ultimately in control.

Even this theological context didn't fully redeem Amos in the eyes and ears of most of the Bible study group. The prophet's compelling message, the prophet's legitimate social critiques were overshadowed by his wrath of God, revenge theology... a theology that Jesus actually preached against. Turn the other cheek. Render to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar and to God that which belongs to God. Jesus countered the empire's efforts to maintain peace through might (through strength) to keep the peace or else experience war ideology. Jesus countered that effort of peace through the threat of violence with his own promotion of a peace through compassion, through love. A belief that Jesus shared by example. *Oh, you want to send the children away? Nah, bring them closer. In fact, sit on my knee. Oh, you want to judge this woman because of her reputation in town? I'll tell you what. I'm going to accept her fragrant and generous, comforting foot massage. Oh, you've been condemned for your crimes. That's not going to stop you being with me in paradise. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

Jesus had no qualms about highlighting social injustice, highlighting community concerns. Jesus openly objected to the questionable actions of those who were in power, those who held religious power, those who held political power, those who held economic power. But unlike Amos, for the most part, Jesus avoided taking violent action or calling for violent responses, calling for vengeful, wrathful punishment. Well, for the most part... there was that time that Jesus led a riot in the courtyard of the temple. And it was Jesus who one time said, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

The truth is simply that our scriptures are complicated. The best description is to say that the Bible is not a book. It's a library. It's got dozens of authors, mostly anonymous, who wrote in different places from different eras and with vastly varying theological perspectives. Our scriptures are full of competing and even contradicting narratives. And so many of us tend to focus on the parts that make sense for us now and give us life for today and just pretend that those other parts aren't there. Maybe we don't need to study Amos, we might say, because Amos is too wrath of Godish.

From a Bible study study perspective though, we have to understand that we have to start with context. We have to know where it comes from. We have to know (as best we can) who wrote it and when they wrote it,

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who they wrote it to, what was going on in the community, in the world at the time.

The fourth gospel in the New Testament, eventually titled the Gospel of John. That's the contextual reality right there. John is anonymous. There is nowhere in the book where it says *my name is John and I wrote this*. The name John got associated with the text based on a later tradition, not based on anything in the book. The closest it comes is to say a *disciple whom Jesus loved* is sharing their own experience here. All of the gospels in fact are anonymous. But they all got associated with a particular person with a place in the broader story which adds (I suppose at the time) a little bit of credibility even if it's not true as to who wrote the book.

The other gospels (John Matthew, Mark and Luke) are products of the mid70s in that first century. John didn't emerge for at least another 30 or more years, 90s or even close to the second century.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all came along in the very recent shadow of an unsuccessful Jerusalem revolt against Roman rule that resulted in the destruction of the temple that Jesus knew, the so-called Herod's temple. And as a result, these gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, helped emerge a theology that the worship of God and religious life would be increasingly non-site specific. Certainly not one place to go specifically.

It's reasonable to assume that the first three gospels, sometimes called the **synoptic gospels** because they share a lot of stories in common, were in relatively wide circulation by the time the gospel of John is written and that those works were familiar to the Gospel of John's writer. And John seems to have intentionally chosen to tell the story of Jesus in a very different way. It's almost like saying, "It's already out there the way they tell it. I'm going to tell the story in a different way. I'm going to share details of Jesus' life and impact, focusing more on the impact than the details of Jesus' life." And it's a little tricky because John still writes in narrative fact. But John is full of late first century editorial comments. You see,

The synoptics would show Jesus teaching through stories and metaphor. You know, *the realm of God is like a mustard seed*. But John just has Jesus talking about himself. *I am the bread of life*. In fact, there are seven major I Am statements in the book of John, which is a not too subtle expression that Jesus was in fact God. Because I Am is very closely related to the Hebrew verb "to be": Haya. When Jesus says I Am something, it's almost like saying God is something. The synoptics have kind of this messianic secret. Anytime someone started to talk to Jesus about Jesus being this chosen one of God, this Messiah, Jesus would say, *Don't tell anybody about this yet*. In John, you get overt messiahisms. *I and the father are one*, John quotes Jesus as saying. In the synoptics, the meaning is often implied behind the words. In John, it's like this is clearly what it means and this is what you should think. The synoptics have Jesus last last evening with his followers before his arrest and telling it as a narrative story and Jesus sharing supper with them in what becomes the institution for ritual meals within the church. John doesn't include a supper narrative at all in that night and simply has Jesus talking over and over and over again. In fact, if you have a Bible that uses red letters for the words of Jesus from chapter 14 to chapter 19, it's going to be almost all red. Five chapters worth of Jesus teaching. The one little narrative piece in there is the washing of the disciples feet.

As the century rolled on and as the early Christian movement became more inclusive of a gentile membership, traditional connections between the early followers of Jesus and the Jewish worshipping community began to become more and more stressed and waned over time. It appears that in some communities, you know, the gentile Christians were not welcome in the synagogues at all. But even Jewish followers of Jesus began to find themselves excluded from certain synagogues in some communities. Kind of this exclusion by association. If you're going to hang out with these Gentiles and we don't want you here.

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This is a late first century reality that can be seen read back into the book of John. John includes that in stories of Jesus' life from decades earlier. John is explicitly opposed to Jewish religious and political leaders, even extrapolating at times opposition to Jesus as coming from everyone from all of the Jews. The synoptic gospels speak of Jesus' opponents by their differing sects within Judaism. Jesus had run ins with Sadducees or other Pharisees or elders at the temple or lawyers: law experts, whereas in John it's just the Jews. Sadly, over the centuries, preachers who ignore this context have used the Gospel of John to justify anti-semitism.

And of course, as the first century advanced, there were increased tensions between the growing Christian communities and the Roman authorities. Emperor Nero famously blamed the Christians in Rome for the great fire that happened in the 60s.

It was already becoming an issue in the 50s (when the ministry of the Apostle Paul was active), the opposition to the early emerging Christian movement made some people within that movement nervous and raised serious concerns about whether they thought continuing involvement in this way of Jesus was wise. Paul would encourage them to stay within the church. This worry only grew as the decades wore on as new examples of persecution emerged. Some more in some communities and less in others.

The Gospel of John is forced to address this subtly seeking encouraging seeking to encourage people to remain within the church. Today's reading comes to us from that context. *You don't have to leave the Christian movement because it is the access to God.* John 14 is part of that five chapter final set of instructions that Jesus offers his disciples before his arrest.

On Thursday this past week, I officiated at a funeral here in the church. And I quoted verses from this part of John particularly the *in God's house there's many dwelling places. I go and prepare a place for you so that where I am you may be also.*

00:58:34

But the part that I want to talk about today is the next couple verses that follow. Verse four; *you know the way that leads to where I'm going.* Now, you may have noticed I skipped over verse five. That's because I didn't want to interrupt Jesus talking. Verse 5 is one of his disciples interrupting. After Jesus says, *You know the way that leads to where I'm going.* And Thomas goes, *We don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?* And then Jesus says, *Well, I am the way.* The last line of verse six is part John's *you don't want to leave the early church* encouragement. *No one comes to Abba God* (no one comes to the father in Greek) *but through me.* Nowhere else in the biblical record has any single passage (taken out of John's context) caused so much division led to so many acts of so-called holy violence and oppression that *no one comes to the father but through me.* In the millennia since John shared those words, far too many supposed followers of Jesus have made it their mission to debunk and devalue and demonize any other way of experiencing the divine other than through the lens of their version of Jesus.

They based this exclusivist theology on one prefix letter in the Greek text of the Gospel of John. The letter nu. It's the feminine singular version of "the" – the way, the truth, the life. In this way, they think the direct article carries more weight than the noun that follows it. It's not focused on *way, truth, and life.* It's focused on *the.*

Context matters. John is written to and for a church of Jesus followers. It was not an evangelical treatise that was designed for an audience of not-yet-church-members. It was written **to** the church, to people who were getting nervous about the history of persecution and wondering whether they should stick around or not. The

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context tells me maybe I probably should have actually included verse 5 because it's one of Jesus' disciples who says, "How can we know the way?" The **we** in *how can we know the way* is the followers of Jesus that exist. Jesus is the way for the followers of Jesus. It may be a bit of a cute biblical subtlety on my part, but the text is not necessarily claiming that Jesus is the way for people who aren't followers of Jesus. Even the phrase, "No one comes to God but through me," could be heard as, "none of you come to God but through me."

Context: John doesn't want the church to lose members out of fear, out of Roman oppression. The message in this part of John 14 is Jesus saying, is John saying, "Jesus is still our way. We're good."

The community of Jesus followers makes its connection to God through Jesus. Christians by definition are those who find their way to God through Jesus. It does not have to be exclusive of other ways to engage with the divine.

Now, if you're hoping to find me in in the church office this week, uh it's not going to be the best time because I'm going to be away for some study leave from Monday to Wednesday and I have day long Zoom meeting for most of Thursday and I usually stay in in my hometown of Leduc to write my sermon notes in the coffee shop on Friday. I will still be accessible by email and I'll get your voicemails.

Tuesday and Wednesday, I am very much looking forward to a retreat for active United Church clergy from the Prairie to Pine region, the Living Skies region, and from the Northern Spirit region. Basically, the the prairies excluding southern Alberta, which is more often paired with BC. It's going to be called the Great Exhale Clergy Retreat. And that's what I'm hoping to do. I'm looking to reconnect. I'm looking to rest and rejuvenate with colleagues who are also in active ministry.

But I expect tomorrow will be a bit different experience amongst a very different group of church leaders because I'm going to be heading to Red Deer for the inaugural Alberta Christian Leaders Summit organized by the Christian Impact Network. Now, I'm not sure when the event name changed, but as recently as five weeks ago when I first noticed it, it was called the Premier's Annual Christian summit. It did and still does list the Honorable Danielle Smith, the current Alberta premier, as the main speaker. Additionally, although he was never premier himself, the next main speaker is the son of an Alberta premier, Preston Manning: billed as a special guest speaker. Also expected to be present from the current Alberta legislature. Adriana LaGrange, the Minister of Primary Health Services, Demetrios Nicolaidis, the Education Minister, Nathan Neudorf the Affordability Minister. There are supposed to be three people present who were elected to federal parliament at the last election, all representing the Conservative Party of Canada, one of whom now is is a former MP because even though they'd just been elected to Parliament, resigned less than two months later to let another person who lost their seat run in what would be a safe CPC riding and get back into the House of Commons. I'm not naming any names. There's also going to be a former Alberta MLA who was also a former federal MP who was the one-time leader of the Canadian Alliance Party and was my MLA when I lived in Red Deer. You can put some *Stock* into that one if you like. And to round out the current and former politicians, I expect to see three current Alberta MLAs, two from the United Conservative Party, and one who is a former UCP but now an independent who got kicked out before they ever took their seat because they were heard comparing transgender children in schools to like adding feces to a batch of cookies. Great, great way to talk about your constituents.

Every single political person invited to the Christian leaders summit, formerly the Alberta Premier's annual Christian summit, is or has been connected to a conservative leaning or in some cases abvery conservative political party. But the event advertised itself as being billed to be for *Christian leaders, Christian organizations,*

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individuals interested in engaging in issues shaping our province. I said, "Well, that's me." Faith and politics, two of my favorite things. Now I'm not naive enough to think that they really were targeting someone like me. I think they want conservative Christians to talk to conservative politicians and give the impression that that is what Alberta Christianity is. And so, with open eyes I chose to take their coded invitation literally and so I applied to attend. Yes, I actually had to apply to register. I couldn't just register. So I had to apply and I assume they had some sort of vetting process. Maybe at least as simple as do you live in Alberta? But I did offer only the bare bones info they were asking about and I was granted the privilege to register which I did. I am not speaking here for or against any politician or any political party. This is just the context that I'm going to find myself in tomorrow. Okay, I might speak against that one person who talked about feces. But that's on policy, not on partisan politics.

Like the event name rebrand, the invitation also got a makeover at the same time. The website now says the invitation is for *all Christian leaders and organizations that serve in Alberta.* Well, that's still me. I'm a Christian leader serving in Alberta. Further down though, it gets a little more specific and it says this is going to be *an opportunity to have a direct dialogue between Christian leadership and Alberta's government.* Not Alberta's politicians, not political leaders, but the government. And it asks participants *to help shape policies affecting our families, churches, and communities saying, let's discuss responsibility, expectations, and cooperation* It's designed to tell the politicians what to do for Christians.

I know that when I looked into going to this that I would get some push back from my progressive Christian colleagues, and I did. No one liked the idea of giving this event some legitimacy. People didn't like the idea that the nearly \$400 cost to attend this one-day event must include a pretty huge profit margin for the Christian Impact Network. Although most of the people who I talked about it earlier hadn't seen anything yet about it. Eventually, the event did make the news when a group of faith leaders wrote and signed an open public letter highlighting the limited perspective of the speakers and the relatively high cost for this one-day event which would effectively price a lot of people out of attending. I have some privilege and I'm going to use it. The letter from the faith leader said, "A public life that only makes room for some voices is diminished for everyone." When the letter was released, it had 50 signatures attached to it. Now, it's pushing 200. I saw 180 the last time I checked, including a couple signatures from folk in this room.

My colleagues and my friends (who at first were chastising me for registering) are now encouraging me to represent the voice that the organizers did not expect or want in that room. Imagine if politicians are only presented with this one extreme view of Alberta Christianity. What will they take from that?

Now, I'm not going to be disruptive. I'm not going to be shouting or I'm not going to get into any arguments. But I hope to have lots of calm conversations. I'm not going to be carrying a protest sign. I'm not going to try and disrupt or get in the way of the event happening. I'm not going to call anybody down who's speaking. But visually, my appearance might hint at my perspective. I bought myself a new shirt. And I'm going to add my pronouns to my name tag because the registration didn't ask me for that. So, I'll just add them manually.

And as the invitation says, I am going to engage with the presenters and the other attendees on issues shaping our province from a Christian perspective. I'm going to participate as invited: as a Christian leader to directly dialogue with the Alberta government as best I can. I expect to be a minority. I expect to experience at least some subtle opposition. I don't expect to get kicked out. I'm not going to be doing anything worthy of being kicked out. I certainly don't expect to be like Stephen and get stoned for my beliefs. I have more privilege than Steven did. But I will respond hopefully with conviction, consistency, and compassion.

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I look to share my beliefs by example. So feel free to ask me next Sunday at coffee how things went or watch my social media.

Jesus led by example all the time. That's how Jesus taught and encouraged people to change the way they were living. The disciples were invited to follow that same way. Live out one's belief by example. *They will know we are Christians by our love*, the song says. And this is something that we all can do. This is our way, our truth, and our life. Amen.

#154MV Deep In Our Hearts

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