

2022: Year of Vision
The Book of Revelation



ALL THINGS NEW

STUDENT GUIDE

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Dear Friends in Christ,

Welcome to **2022: The Year of Vision**. Our focus this year will be on God's vision and promise to make "all things new". At the end of the Book of Revelation, God paints a picture of a new heaven, a new earth, a new Jerusalem, and a new Eden. God is in the business of making all things new and invites us to be a partner in the renewal of all things. The mission of the Northwestern Ohio Synod culminates in the renewal that God promises to bring. "Sent by the Crucified and Risen Jesus to Make Disciples, Equip Leaders, Strengthen Parishes, and Nurture New Communities **for the Renewal of Northwestern Ohio and the World**".

One of my favorite Bible verses related to the promise of God's vision is recorded at the end of the Book of Revelation. The Bible verse is Revelation 21:5a, which will serve as our 2022 Year of Vision Memory Verse. **"And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5a)**. I encourage you to memorize Revelation 21:5a and open your eyes to notice the places in your community where God is doing a new thing. And then allow the Holy Spirit to open your heart to love the new thing that God is doing. And finally, open your hands to fully engage and partner with God to bring what is new in the community to life. In partnering with God to renew the community and the world, you will discover your own transformation. For it is in the renewing, that we are renewed.

What follows is a seven-session study on the Book of Revelation, chapters 1-3, and 21-22. Open (or turn on) your Bible, gather with a group of friends, get outside the four walls of the congregation, and learn what God desires to teach you. But be careful. Be very, very careful, because God's Word has the power to renew people and communities from who we are, into the people and communities that God longs for us to be.

Let us pray, **Almighty God, by our baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, you turn us from the old life of sin. Grant that we who are reborn to new life in him may live in righteousness and holiness all our days, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship pg. 86)

Blessings,

Bishop Daniel G. Beaudoin

Tips for Group Members

“And the one who was seated on the throne said ‘See, I am making all things new’”

(Revelation 21:5a)

Our focus this year will be on God’s vision and promise to make “all things new”. At the end of the Book of Revelation, God paints a picture of a new heaven, a new earth, a new Jerusalem, and a new Eden. God is in the business of making all things new and invites us to be a partner in the renewal of all things.

One of the ways that we partner with God is by engaging in God’s word through study, reflection, and conversation. Thank you for your willingness to attend this sacred endeavor. Now, you don’t need to be a Bible scholar to attend a Bible study. You simply need to be open. Open to experiencing new thoughts, great discussion, and the potential for real growth. Think of a coffee shop conversation rather than a classroom lecture. These studies can be experienced in a variety of settings, though I would encourage you to follow the pattern of the original apostles and share these studies out in the “marketplace” (outside the four walls of the church building). You never know who might be watching, listening, and wondering. These studies are intended to last around 60 minutes. Below are some suggestions to assist you.*

Before the Gathering

1. Pray. Pray that God would guide you to learn and participate faithfully. Pray for your Bible study leader and the participants who will gather for conversation. Ask God to open your hearts and minds to hear God’s Word that it may motivate you to a new way of thinking and being.
2. Come to the study prepared. Read and then slowly re-read the assigned Bible passage. Write down particular and peculiar words and phrases you have questions about. Bring those questions to the group gathering.
3. Carefully work through the lesson. Take time to meditate and reflect on each question. Write your responses in the space provided. Please set aside 60-90 minutes for prep time each week.
4. Consider ways to apply the assigned Bible passage to your life.

Tips for Leaders

During the Gathering

1. Bring the necessary materials: Bible, student guide, pen, or pencil.
2. Some tips for participating in discussion:
 - Be willing to participate. The leader will not be lecturing, but leading a conversation. Join the conversation.
 - Stick to the topic being discussed. Try to avoid drifting off on tangents.
 - Be attentive to other participants. Listen to what they are sharing. You may be surprised by their insights. Also, be affirming. This will encourage some of the more hesitant participants to share.
 - Be careful not to dominate the discussion. Do participate, but allow others to also participate.
 - Fully expect that God will teach you something through this lesson and through the other members in your group. Pray that you may apply God's teaching to your daily life.
3. Some general guidelines
 - We will consider all conversation within our group to be confidential.
 - We will not share confidential conversation without specific permission.
 - We will make space for each participant to share / speak as they are comfortable doing so.
 - We will listen attentively to one another.
 - We will be very cautious about fixing people and giving advice.
 - We will practice Martin Luther's explanation of the 8th Commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor". "We are to fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light".

*adapted from *Bible Studies for Everyone* by N.T. Wright

Resources

Study Bibles

Lutheran Study Bible - NRSV (2009) Published by Augsburg Fortress

Harper Collins Study Bible – NRSV (2006) Published by Harper One

Bible Dictionary

Harper Collins Bible Dictionary (2011) Published by Harper One

Bible Atlas

Zondervan Atlas of the Bible (2010) Published by Zondervan

Commentaries

Revelation by M. Eugene Boring (1989) Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching. Published by John Knox Press

Revelation by Wilfrid J. Harrington (1993) Sacra Pagina Series Volume 16. Published by Liturgical Press

Revelation and the End of All Things by Craig R. Koester (2001) Published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

Revelation for Everyone by N.T. Wright (2011) Published by Westminster John Knox Press

Other

Revelation (N.T. Wright for Everyone Bible Study Guides) by N.T. Wright with Kristie Berglund (2012) Published by Intervarsity Press.

The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation by Barbara R. Rossing (2004) Published by Basic Books

The Book of Revelation: A Graphic Novel (2012) Published by every i publishing

All Things New

An Outline

Introduction (1:1-8)

I. Prologue (1:1-3)

II. Greetings and Doxology (1:4-8)

Body (1:9-22:5)

I. A Vision of the Exalted Jesus (1:9-20)

II. Messages to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)

A. To the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

B. To the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

C. To the Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

D. To the Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

E. To the Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

F. To the Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

G. To the Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

III. All Things New (21:1-22:5)

A. A New Heaven and A New Earth (21:1-8)

B. The New Jerusalem (21:9-27)

C. A New Eden: River of Life and Tree of Life (22:1-5)

All Things New

An Introduction to Revelation

The last book of the Bible is the *Book of Revelation*. The title Revelation comes from the opening words of the book, “*The revelation of Jesus Christ...*” (Revelation 1:1a). The Greek word for Revelation is *apocalypse*, which means to uncover or unveil. Another title for the *Book of Revelation* is the *Apocalypse of John*. Sometimes folks refer to the Book of Revelations, as if it were plural. It is not. The *Book of Revelation* is a single revelation that John receives from God.

The *Book of Revelation* is apocalyptic literature, which is unique among the sixty-six books of Scripture. There are glimpses of apocalyptic literature in the *Book of Daniel*, the *Book of Ezekiel*, and the *Gospel of Mark*. Only the *Book of Revelation* is marked by the genre of apocalyptic literature throughout. Apocalyptic literature was often written during times of persecution. *Daniel* was written during the difficult reign of the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV. The *Gospel of Mark* was written during the Jewish – Roman War (66-70 A.D.). The *Book of Revelation* was written during the reign of Roman Emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.). Some scholars argue that apocalyptic literature was written during times of distress to encourage those being persecuted to keep the faith and to remain hopeful for a better future; a future where God makes “all things new”.

Apocalyptic literature is marked by a “code language” that is full of unusual images, symbols, and words. It is important for us to remember that we are not the primary audience for the *Book of Revelation*. *Revelation* was originally written for the house churches in the ancient cities of Ephesus, Sardis, and Philadelphia. It was written for the followers of Jesus living in the Roman province of Asia during the first century. Those early Christians certainly had a better understanding of the “code language” that marks Revelation. The imagery and language that John uses seeks to both unveil and veil. It unveils the truth to those who are a part of John’s community and veils the truth from outsiders. Much of the original imagery and language of Revelation has been lost to us, but through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can still find sacred truths that both challenge and comfort.

One of the most helpful ways to view the *Book of Revelation* is through the previous sixty-five books of scripture. Revelation relies on the rest of the Bible to tell its story. In the 404 verses of the *Book of Revelation*, there are more than 500 allusions to the Old Testament. Notice, I said “allusions”, for there are very few direct quotes from Scripture. Hence, the *Book of Revelation* is a mosaic, a colorful collection of Old Testament symbols and images that stack on top of each other. For the original readers, who were steeped in the Hebrew scriptures, these allusions would sing aloud. But having not been raised in that culture, we don’t “catch” all the symbols and images, so we need the help of study aids in order to understand how all the allusions work together. We need help hearing

All Things New

An Introduction to Revelation

the symphony that is Revelation. So much of the *Book of Revelation* remains a mystery to us, that we enter its story, symbols, and images through faith.

This Bible study will explore *Revelation* chapters 1-3, and 21-22. In *Revelation* chapter one, we meet the main characters in the narrative. We meet God who is described as “him who is, and who was, and who is to come (1:4). We meet the Holy Spirit, described as “the seven spirits” (1:4). We meet the Exalted Jesus, who is the faithful witness and the firstborn of the dead (1:5-6). He is also described in images that are surreal and packed with Old Testament allusions (1:12-16). And finally, we meet John (1:1, 4, 9), an exiled leader in the Early Church, who receives the vision of Revelation, and is commanded by Jesus to record it, “*Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this*” (1:19).

John begins the *Book of Revelation* by writing what he has seen, which is the vision of the Exalted Jesus (1:9-20). The Crucified, Risen, and Exalted Jesus plays a key role in this narrative and will appear throughout *Revelation* to offer challenge, encouragement, hope, and eventually the promise to make “all things new”.

John then shifts to *what is*, and records in Revelation 2-3 *what is* occurring in the seven churches of Asia Minor. Each of these churches has a geographic context, but its identity is defined by its relationship with Jesus, who knows what is occurring in each locale. Each church is marked by a brief description of the Exalted Jesus. In Ephesus, the Exalted Jesus is described as “*him who holds the seven stars in his right hand...*” (2:1). In Pergamum, the Exalted Jesus is described as “*him who has the sharp two-edged sword*” (2:12).

These vivid descriptions of Jesus are followed by the emphatic words, “*I know...*” The Exalted Jesus knows what is happening in each church, and depending on the situation, Jesus provides words of commendation or words of condemnation. Jesus knows his churches, so he affirms, corrects, and promises. Jesus knows their strengths, their sorrows, and their shortcomings, but they are never forsaken, which leads the reader of Revelation to the promise of *what is to take place after this*.

The Exalted Jesus ends each letter to the seven churches by offering a promise of new and abundant life, which is expressed in a variety of images. These images are directly connected to the end of Revelation (chapters 21-22), where we will read about the promise of “all things new”.

A New Heaven. A New Earth. A New Jerusalem. A New Eden. The *Book of Revelation* ends with the promise of a new future for all of Creation. “**And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new”**” (Revelation 21:5a).

All Things New: Memory Verses

Lesson 1

Revelation 1:8 **“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.**

Lesson 2

Revelation 1:19 **Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this.**

Lesson 3

Revelation 2:4 **But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.**

Lesson 4

Revelation 21:1 **Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.**

Lesson 5

Revelation 21:22 **I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.**

Lesson 6

Revelation 22:1 **Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb**

Lesson #1: All Things New: An Introduction

Bishop Daniel Beaudoin

1. **Read** the Opening Scripture Verse: Revelation 1:8
2. Opening **Prayer**
3. **Welcome** and Introductions
4. **Announcements** that Are Pertinent to the Group
5. A **Story** (read aloud with the group)

Four-year-old Veronica loved coming to worship with her grandparents. She loved listening to the organ music and grandpa's deep voice as he sang the hymns. She loved going up for the children's message and hearing grandma read the Scripture lessons. But what Veronica especially loved about worship were the beautiful stain glass windows. Windows full of colors, images, and symbols. Windows that transformed ordinary light into sacred stories from Scripture; stories that Veronica was just beginning to learn about in Sunday School. There was an image of Noah's ark, and the image of Ruth gathering grain from a field. There was Moses holding the 10 Commandments and Jesus on a cross between two thieves. There was the woman at the well, and there was Jesus praying in a garden. Even though she was just learning to read, the images in these windows helped little Veronica experience the great stories of God. It is good for us to remember that God appears to us in Sacred Scripture and God also appears to us in symbols and images.

Why did I choose to name the little girl in this story Veronica? What is the significance? Do a little digging. Google it if you must. _____

6. Opening Reflection Questions

A. When you think about the Book of Revelation, what images quickly come to mind? See if your group can come up with seven unique images? Why the number seven?

B. In Revelation 1:3, John encourages his readers to "keep what is written". What do you think he means? What are some things that you keep, either literally or figuratively? Why do you keep these things?

7. Introduction to the Study

As we begin our reflection on the *Book of Revelation*, we will start with some key questions. Who is the author? Where was *Revelation* written? When was it written? And finally, why was it written?

Lesson #1: All Things New: An Introduction

Who: Four times the author of *Revelation* identifies himself as John (1:1; 1:4, 1:9, and 22:8). Early Christian tradition attributed this work, along with the *Gospel of John*, and 1, 2, and 3 John, to the Apostle John, son of Zebedee. Another strand of ancient Christian tradition argues that *Revelation* was written by a different John, whom they identify as “John the Elder”. In the opening chapter of *Revelation*, we learn that John is a church leader who is exiled from his home and community because of his Christian faith. While on the Island of Patmos, John receives a vision, and is commanded by the Exalted Jesus to write down what he sees (1:19). The Book of *Revelation* is the written narrative of the vision that John experiences while on the Island of Patmos.

Where: Patmos is a small island in the Aegean Sea. It is located off the Turkish coast and was used by the Romans as a penal colony. John shares with the reader that he is living in exile, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (1:9). John was on the Island of Patmos, separated from his faith community, because of his teaching of Scripture (word of God) and his testimony about the Crucified and Risen Jesus.

When: Most Bible scholars date the composition of the *Book of Revelation* to around 95 A.D. Bishop Irenaeus records that *Revelation* was written during the end of Roman Emperor Domitian’s reign (81-96 A.D.). During Domitian’s reign, there was pressure on the early church to participate in Roman religious practices. Those Christian who refused to participate could be martyred like Antipas (2:13) or exiled like John (1:9). For the original reader of *Revelation*, social ostracism, economic oppression, and early state persecution were becoming a reality, and threatening to become much worse.

Why: *The Book of Revelation* was written to offer hope during a difficult time. John writes to encourage Christians who are suffering to stay the course, to keep the faith, and to endure through to the promise that God will make all things new.

8. Reflection and Conversation

A. Read *Revelation* 1:1-3. Notice the 5-stage process. Revelation was given by:
God to Jesus > Jesus to an angel > Angel to John > John to the reader > Reader to the hearer

B. What is the difference between the word of God and the testimony of Jesus? See 1:2.

C. What three groups of folks are blessed according to 1:3?

Lesson #1: All Things New: An Introduction

D. Read *Revelation* 1:4-8. Beginning in verse 5, Jesus is described in three unique ways. Look through the list. Is there a particular description / image of Jesus that may be new to you? What is it about that new image that strikes you?

E. As you think about your own faith community/parish what image comes to mind for you? Talk with your group about this image. What might God be trying to tell you and your community/parish? _____

F. Read *Revelation* 1:11. List the seven churches who will receive John's Apocalypse:

9. All Things New... To Do:

Images and symbols play an important role in the Book of Revelation. Take a slow and intentional walk through your community (block, neighborhood, village, town, country road), make note (snap a photo) of seven images and symbols you notice. Share your findings with your group. What is the message these images and symbols are trying to convey?

10. Homework:

- Read Revelation chapter 1
- Memory Verse (*Revelation* 1:8)
- Work through Lesson #2
- Check out this Bible Project Video on Apocalyptic Literature (6:58 minutes)
 - <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/apocalyptic-literature/>

11. Closing Prayer:

We worship Your pure image, O Good One, asking forgiveness of our sins, O Christ our God; for of Your own will You were well-pleased to ascend the Cross in the flesh, that You might deliver from slavery to the enemy those whom You had fashioned. Wherefore, we cry to You thankfully: You filled all things with joy, O our Savior, when You came to save the world. Amen.

(Greek Orthodox Prayer for the Commemoration of the Holy Icons)

Lesson #2: A Vision of the Exalted Jesus

Bishop Daniel Beaudoin

1. **Read** the Opening Scripture Verse: Revelation 1:19
2. Opening **Prayer**
3. **Welcome** and Introductions
4. **Announcements** that Are Pertinent to the Group
5. **Share** your stories of your "All Things New... To Do" from the past week
6. A **Story** (read aloud with the group)

An old Rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended, and the day had begun. "Could it be," asked one of the students, "when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?" "No," answered the rabbi.

Another asked, "Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a date tree?" "No," answered the rabbi.

"Then when is it?" the pupils demanded. "It is when you look into the face of another human being and see your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night."

So, what do you think? We are all created in the image of God. How would you describe the sacred connection between love of God and love of others?

7. Opening Reflection Questions

A. What are some things you find yourself dreaming about? Take a moment and share with your group one of your dreams. _____

B. Paint an image of Jesus. How would you describe Jesus to someone? What words, images, and symbols come to mind? Share with your group. _____

8. Introduction to the Study

While on the Island of Patmos, John has a vision. Not a dream, but a vision of the Exalted Jesus.

John's vision is not a vision of Jesus of Nazareth who walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Nor the vision of the Crucified Jesus, who was laid lifeless in a borrowed tomb. Nor the vision of the Resurrected Jesus who appeared to His disciples from beyond a locked door. Here is a vision of the Exalted Jesus, who is resurrected from the dead and ascended into heaven. Here is the Christus Victor, who stands within and above all space and time.

Lesson #2: A Vision of the Exalted Jesus

John's vision of the Exalted Jesus is a mosaic full of Old Testament symbols, metaphors, and allusions. First, John sees Jesus standing among the seven lampstands. In the Old Testament the golden lampstands are called menorahs, and these are lights that burn continually before God in the Sanctuary. We learn in Revelation 1:20 that these lampstands are the seven churches to whom John is writing. So, where will the Exalted Jesus be found? In and among the churches.

John also uses an allusion from the Book of Daniel 7:13 to describe the Exalted Jesus as one like a Son of Man. In Daniel, Son of Man refers to a human figure to whom God will grant an everlasting kingdom. Jesus often described himself as the Son of Man, one who is truly human, but also more. John's vision points us to that "more".

John goes on to describe the Exalted Jesus in terms that are surreal. White head and hair. Eyes like a flame of fire. Burnished bronze feet. Voice like the sound of many waters. Seven stars in his right hand. A sharp, two-edged sword from his mouth. A face that shines like the sun. All these descriptors of the Exalted Jesus are grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures and offer the people of God a vision of hope during a difficult time. The vision of the Exalted Jesus encourages those who are suffering to stay the course, to keep the faith, and to endure through to the promise that God will make all things new.

9. Reflection and Conversation

A. Read Revelation 1:9-11

B. Why is John on the Island of Patmos? _____

C. John is "in the spirit". What does this mean?

- This is a **vision** that comes to John while he remains on Patmos (see also 4:2, 17:3, and 21:10)
- Three Bible stories that contain visions
 - Isaiah in the Temple (read Isaiah 6:1-8)
 - Ezekiel's Call to Be a Prophet (read Ezekiel 2:1-10)
 - Peter on the Rooftop (read Acts 10:9-16)
- This is **not a dream** that John experiences
- Three Bible stories that contain dreams
 - Jacob's Ladder (read Genesis 28:10-16)
 - The Holy Family Escapes to Egypt (read Matthew 2:13-15)
 - Pilate's Wife Dreams of Innocence (read Matthew 27:11-19)
- In what ways might a Biblical dream differ from a Biblical vision?

D. Read Revelation 1:12-20

Lesson #2: A Vision of the Exalted Jesus

E. John uses seven unique images to describe the Exalted Jesus. Take a moment to record each image.

- Head / Hair: _____
- Eyes: _____
- Feet: _____
- Voice: _____
- Right Hand: _____
- Mouth: _____
- Face: _____

Is there a particular image of the Exalted Jesus that causes you concern?

Confuses you? Brings you hope? _____

F. The Exalted Jesus holds the keys to Death and Hades (1:18). Does this image suggest an image of doom or hope? Why do you think so?

10. All Things New... To Do:

Try your hand at a little art. Re-read Revelation 1:12-16, and then draw (pencil and paper) or sculpt (clay) your vision of the Exalted Jesus. Be diligent. Be courageous. And be of good cheer. When your masterpiece is finished, be sure to take a photo when done and share it with your group.

11. Homework:

- Read Revelation chapters 2 and 3
- Memory Verse (Revelation 1:19)
- Work through Lesson #3
- Please watch this brief analysis of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "*I Have a Dream*" speech (4:12 min).
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxIOlynG6FY>
 - When did Dr. King's speech move from an earthly dream to a heavenly vision?

12. Closing Prayer:

God, as the prophet has said, we are at great risk of perishing for lack of vision. We cannot locate ourselves in your larger plans. We cannot see where the church is going. Or even where we are going in the next few years (or days). Give us eyes to see Your great plans for all of humanity.

Give us ears to hear the cries of people who yearn -- even faint -- for a glimpse of you.

Plant your vision in our hearts, O God, lest we perish. Amen.

(A Prayer for Vision from the United Methodist Church)

Lesson #3: Send It to the Seven Churches

Deacon Sherry Krieger

1. **Read** the Opening Scripture Verse: Revelation 2:4
2. **Review** Memory Verse: Revelation 1:19
3. Opening **Prayer**
4. **Welcome** and Introductions
5. **Announcements** that Are Pertinent to the Group
6. **Share** your stories of your “All Things New... To Do” from the past week
7. A **Story** (read aloud with the group)

In August of 2019 I noticed a strange feeling like a little tug on my toes, like someone was pulling the fine hairs on each toe. It went away, I didn't think much of it. A month later I noticed a slight tingling on my calf when I ran my finger over the skin, but it went away, and I didn't think much of it. A month after that, the “slight calf tingling” now occasionally traveled up and down my leg with much more defined feeling; painful, but it was certainly manageable. By early November, I had lulled myself into some mild life-altering habits – I couldn't sleep in certain positions, I walked with a very slight limp, but in general, my leg was ok when stretched a bit. I kept moving, living, working, powering through. Over Thanksgiving break, however, the pain increased significantly and within 2 weeks, I was walking with a severe limp with pain and tingling constantly running up and down my leg. By the time I was on my way to the doctor's office, I wept the whole way there because of the intense pain. And, it was so bad that I could not even get up on the patient table by myself. The doctor had to help me up so that I could sit in such a way he could check my reflexes; of course, they were severely inhibited.

Off to X-ray and MRI went I. Final diagnosis, a cyst sitting right on my sciatic nerve, surgery was imminent. Thankfully, I had back surgery on January 29, 2020 to remove the cyst and fuse my S1L5 vertebrae together.

Through the development of all these symptoms, my back never hurt, not once. After the surgery, the leg pain was completely gone, but in its place was and still is, back pain; a pain I will live with the rest of my life. It is very manageable since I learned how to take care of it in physical therapy, and I know when I have not been attentive to my legs and back because the pain comes back with a vengeance.

Why do I tell you this story? Because it is a poignant and personal example of what I think we do in the church as well. We ignore symptoms, endure life-altering experiences stoically or without thought for how it effects the future, we sometimes diagnose ourselves incorrectly and choose denial, comfort or group interests that lay outside of the truth of God's mission and will for the community. And we ignore the wider community in the process, forgetting that the church is not created for ourselves alone.

Lesson #3: Send It to the Seven Churches

Don't believe me? Ask the folks at St. John's in Oak Harbor. Through a very painful, emotional yet moving experience, the worshipping community of St. John's identified, grieved, and healed patterns of behavior that over the course of 100+ years had moved them away from God's will.

Through a deep review of their past, storytelling, and sharing experiences, they realized how significantly they had developed the idols of music, building, and a misguided sense of ownership in the parish, and had come to a place of sickness, unhappiness, and certain death. Just like the churches in our reading this week, they realized the criticism Jesus might have for them. They repented, asked for forgiveness from God and each other, and now, having experienced deep forgiveness and healing, are flourishing with each other in God's joy, peace, and light. They are excited for the future and are making vastly different choices with their resources, mission and leadership as they begin to join God's mission and understand their purpose in the community in which God planted them. But just like my back, health, wellness and staying aligned with God's will requires consistent tending, constant prayer, and intentional spiritual growth.

8. Opening Reflection Questions

A. Think about a time when you were surprised by something that you thought you knew exactly what was going on, or you thought you had read a situation well and had all the facts, but then found out you were mistaken. How did you feel? How did you handle this kind of surprise? _____

B. Think about and share about a time in your life when you let your guard down, you let things go, you didn't pay attention or stay vigilant about something, or you began to slip a bit in your faith, behaviors, or values. What happened? What did you learn?

9. Introduction to the Study

In Revelation chapters 2 and 3, the writer has an intense vision that sends a distinct and specific message from Jesus himself, to seven Christian churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The messages are interesting in that they are not written in a traditionally Jewish, Christian or religious format, but are clearly reminiscent of how Persian or Greek kings and Roman emperors would address their subjects. This simply speaks to the significance of governmental and non-Christian influences of the time on both the writer and Christian followers. This type of decree would deliver a significant and powerful message to the listener.

Lesson #3: Send It to the Seven Churches

The decrees tend towards a formulated pattern, although each is very distinctive to its context:

1. Church location
2. Writing command
3. Directive ('these are the words of...')
4. A Title or description of Jesus Christ
5. A discerning word about the church, 'I know'
6. Compliment, Admonition and/or Warning
7. Proclamation to listen
8. A strong suggestion for restoration, repentance and/or faith statement.

As you read the decrees, see what parts of the formula you identify.

In each of the messages, Jesus offers some discernment and reflection about the state of the church, things that it has experienced, and some warning or advice on what it should do differently moving forward. Also distinctive in these messages, Jesus is talking directly to the churches through their "heavenly angel." Ponder that thought for a moment. A heavenly angel corresponds to each of the earthly churches. Imagine your church, your parish's heavenly angel. What do you think your angel would be like??

As you read, think about your own parish and how it might relate or reflect any or all of the seven messages given in these chapters. What resonates with your experience? What can you accept as a compliment from Jesus? For what do you and your worshipping community need to repent?

Where might your behaviors, values, and faith have begun to slip out of God's favor or will? We Lutheran Christians always rely upon and are thankful for God's grace, because it is the ONLY thing that saves us... but feel free to use this exercise to examine your own and your worshipping community's life in relation to God, in relation to others and in relationship the wider community. Are you living into the mission God has called you?

10. Reflection and Conversation on Revelation 2:1 – 3:22

A. The seven churches were located in Asia Minor. Where is Asia Minor? (feel free to Google 😊)

B. What might be the benefit of giving these messages to these 7 particular churches when there were other churches throughout the Middle East, Asia Minor and beyond?

Lesson #3: Send It to the Seven Churches

C. Let's Dissect the Messages to the Seven Churches

If you have a large group, break into pairs or triads and have each group read one of the seven messages. If you are a small group, focus on one or two of the messages. Complete the following chart for the messages that you study. Remember, although they are similar, each message is different in content (answers are in the addendum):

1. Message Outline

- a. Name/Location:
- b. Name/description of Jesus:
- c. Compliments or Accomplishments:
- d. Jesus' Critique:
- e. What should they do in the future?

Each church has a distinctive character flaw. Match the character flaw with the church:

(1) The church that patiently endured despite stress, weakness, and struggle	(a) Ephesus
(2) The church that is spiritually dead	(b) Smyrna
(3) The church with a lukewarm faith	(c) Pergamum
(4) The church that follows false prophets	(d) Thyatira
(5) The church that remains faithful even under persecution	(e) Sardis
(6) The church that has abandoned its love for Christ and his teaching	(f) Philadelphia
(7) The church that compromises its beliefs	(g) Laodicea

Lesson #3: Send It to the Seven Churches

D. **Some Questions for us in 2022.** Pick and choose the questions to answer below given the time you have for discussion:

One of the churches had abandoned their love of Christ for other things

- Have you ever turned the other way when someone was being hurt, left out or excluded or spoken angrily with someone rather than share the love of Christ and/or choose to be kind to a person who thought differently? How did you feel? What did you learn? How does it feel now telling the story?

One of the churches endured persecution

- Have you ever been persecuted for your faith? If so, please share.
- If not, take some time to learn about the church in other countries which is under persecution for the faith (Check out <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29Rt7P7Mr5k> on the persecution of the Chinese Christian Church [26:48])

One of the churches is accused of compromising its beliefs

- How do we normalize society's and/or cultural beliefs and behaviors into our daily life?

One of the churches seems to be following false prophets

- Identify and share any false teachings that might be threatening the church today?

One of the churches seems to be spiritually dead

- What might be some characteristics of a church, people, or person who is spiritually dead?
- Is there anything from which you or your church needs to wake up?

One of the churches is patiently enduring very difficult situations

- What does "patient endurance" mean to you?
- How have you seen your worshipping community patiently endure?
- How have you seen your community patiently endure?

One of the churches has a lukewarm faith

- Reflect on your parish's mission statement. How does it motivate the parish to exciting and faithful living?
- Can you identify any "symptoms" that you've grown to accept in your parish or in your life, that might benefit from the expert Jesus, taking a deep, long look at and offering his critique and warning for repentance?

Lesson #3: Send It to the Seven Churches

11. All Things New... To Do:

Knowing our story is important. Seeing it with fresh eyes and reflecting on that story is important, and then sharing our story takes it to a new level. Spend the next 7 days journaling a snippet of your church story. Each day, reflect back on your last visit at church. Answer one of the following questions each day: What did you see? What did you hear, taste and/or smell? What did you experience? Was there anything missing?...If so, what? What did you see as you drove through the neighborhood, streets, houses, fields, or community(ies) along your way to church? How have you seen your church relate to the people who live along this path to church? Pray on your reflections and ask God to reveal one new thing about your church that you can focus on, do, pray over, develop, volunteer to do, or offer support towards this year. Share your reflections next week with your group

12. Homework:

- Read Revelation 21:1-8
- Memory Verse (Revelation 2:4)
- Work through Lesson 4
- Listen to "How Can It Be" by Lauren Daigle (4:10)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wt5X91ciE6Y>

13. Closing Prayer:

Almighty God, draw our hearts to you, guide our minds, fill our imaginations, control our wills, so that we may be wholly yours. Use us as you will, always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

(LBW, prayer for Self-dedication, p. 47)

Lesson #3: Send It to the Seven Churches

Addendum A: Lesson 3's Seven Messages

Message 1

- a. Name/Location: *Ephesus*
- b. Name/description of Jesus: *He who holds "seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands." (vs. 1)*
- c. Compliments or Accomplishments: *Patient endurance, dislike of false prophets*
- d. Critique: *vs 2:4 "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." Meaning they have and serve other gods besides the one true God.*
- e. What should they do? *Repent, go back to doing what they did before, worshipping only God, live faithful to Jesus*
- f. Summarize and describe this church as Jesus sees it: *The church that has abandoned its love for Christ and his teachings*

Message 2

- a. Name/Location: *Smyrna*
- b. Name/description of Jesus: *He is "the first and the last"(vs.8)*
- c. Compliments or Accomplishments: *God knows and sees the affliction/persecution of this group of people, while acknowledging their spiritual wealth and material poverty*
- d. Critique: *There is NO critique here*
- e. What should they do? *Stay strong, stay faithful, vs 2:10 "Do not fear what you are about to suffer"*
- f. Summarize and describe this church as Jesus sees it: *The church that remains faithful even under persecution*

Message 3

- a. Name/Location: *Pergamum*
- b. Name/description of Jesus: *He who "has the sharp two-edged sword" (vs.12)*
- c. Compliments or Accomplishments: *There are faithful believers in the church who do not deny the name of Christ (vs.13)*
- d. Critique: *vs 2:14-15 "But I have a few things against you...there are some who follow false prophets, and bring false teachings into the church and are leading believers astray*
- e. What should they do? *Repent, refrain from compromising your beliefs, stand strong in the faith*
- f. Summarize and describe this church as Jesus sees it: *The church that compromises its beliefs*

Message 4

- a. Name/Location: *Thyatira*
- b. Name/description of Jesus: *"Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze" (vs.18)*
- c. Compliments or Accomplishments: *Believers are faithful and work hard, they express love, faith, service and patient endurance.: (vs 19)*
- d. Critique: *vs 2:20 "But I hold this against you..." believers are tolerant of false prophets and teachings, and some lead others into adultery and following idols*
- e. What should they do? *Repent and know that God deeply searches their hearts; do not lead others into bad behaviors*
- f. Summarize and describe this church as Jesus sees it: *The church that follows false prophets*

Lesson #3: Send It to the Seven Churches

Addendum A: Lesson 3's Seven Messages

Message 5

- a. Name/Location: *Sardis*
- b. Name/description of Jesus: *He “who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars” (vs 3:1)*
- c. Compliments or Accomplishments: *This is pretty slim for Sardis. There are a few faithful followers and a name that reflects being alive in Christ, but Christ’s critique is very strong against this church*
- d. Critique: *vs 3:1 “You are dead”, this church was found to be lacking in works, service, and spirituality*
- e. What should they do? *Repent and remember where they started and the faith that formed them. Christ’s warning is very severe here about “waking up” and becoming faithful again, so salvation will be theirs*
- f. Summarize and describe this church as Jesus sees it: *The church that is spiritually dead*

Message 6

- a. Name/Location: *Philadelphia*
- b. Name/description of Jesus: *“the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David...” (vs 3:7)*
- c. Compliments or Accomplishments: *These believers are strong and have not denied their faith or the name of God, and have exhibited patient endurance (vs 8-10)*
- d. Critique: *There’s no criticism or reproach for Philadelphia’s believers, only for their persecutors. Instead, Christ promises that if they stay faithful, he will protect them*
- e. What should they do? *Stay faithful and strong, “if you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it.” (vs.3:12)*
- f. Summarize and describe this church as Jesus sees it: *The church that patiently endured despite stress, weakness and struggle*

Message 7

- a. Name/Location: *Laodicea*
- b. Name/description of Jesus: *The “Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation” (vs 3:14)*
- c. Compliments or Accomplishments: *There is very little complimentary language for Laodicea*
- d. Critique: *Christ strongly scolds this church for having a very unenthusiastic, “lukewarm,” tepid kind of faith (vs. 3:15 – 17); they are spiritually bankrupt*
- e. What should they do? *They need to repent, and Jesus teaches them that even though they live in a very wealthy city, he is the only one who can heal them and provide spiritual wealth (3:17-18); and if they do Christ will share his heavenly banquet with them; salvation will be theirs.*
- f. Summarize and describe this church as Jesus sees it: *The church with a lukewarm faith*

Lesson #4: A New Heaven and A New Earth

Pastor Sarah Schaaf

1. **Read** the Opening Scripture Verse: Revelation 21:1
2. Opening **Prayer**
3. **Welcome** and Introductions
4. **Announcements** that Are Pertinent to the Group
5. **Share** your stories of your “All Things New... To Do” from the past week
6. A **Story** (read aloud with the group)

People tell you that having a child will change your life. I understood that I would be different. What I didn't anticipate, is how much having a child would transform my community. That is a gift I will forever be thankful for. When my son Isaac arrived on the scene, he brought all kinds of changes to my life, but he also changed our church. Suddenly, the trustees were very concerned about regularity with which the air vents were cleaned. Suddenly, I found people waiting for me in the parking lot. “What can I carry in?” they would say before I could even turn off the car's ignition. Suddenly, new people, who I hadn't really known before, emerged dedicated to the task of loving this kid well. We tend to praise the church for being steadfast, unchangeable throughout all of history, but having the capacity to be changeable is also faithful. One of the church's most beautiful qualities is its ability to be transformed by the ones who God sends to dwell in it.

7. Opening Reflection Questions

A. Share a story of a time when you have been changed by the presence of someone.

What new things did you find yourself doing in this season?

B. When have you celebrated change?

8. Introduction to the Study

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.” (21:1) Revelation envisions not just the redemption of humanity, but of all creation. God is making all things new, joining heaven and earth! This hope-filled transformation is initiated by the presence of the one who enters in.

It is a “rapture in reverse.” It has downward motion. People are not snatched up from earth, instead God comes down to earth to dwell with humanity. The home of God is among people! The Gospel of John tells us, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

For more about the “rapture in reverse”: *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, by: Barbara Rossing

Lesson #4: A New Heaven and A New Earth

The Gospel of Matthew calls Jesus, “Emmanuel,” meaning “God is with us” (Matthew 1:23). Revelation envisions “He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples”. The message is clear, God loves the world so much that God comes down to be with us. Through God all of heaven and earth become new.

This new reality is also marked by what is absent. In God’s new creation there is no room for anything that diminishes life. Tears are wiped away. Death, mourning, and pain are no more. God is making all things new. The passage ends with a warning to all that oppose the ways of life. John doesn’t say that anyone who has been guilty of sin will be prohibited from entering into God’s new creation, only that we cannot bring our sinful ways with us into this new reality. When God says, “See I am making all things new,” God means I am making ALL things new!

9. Reflection and Conversation

Read aloud Revelation 21:1-5

A. What does John see in verses 1-2?

B. What is now missing?

C. What chaos threatens God’s plans in our own lives?

D. In Revelation God is invested in the salvation of not just individuals, but of the whole world. Why do you think God cares about the whole created order?

E. “Dwell” (or tabernacle) in Revelation is the same word used to describe Jesus’ coming in John. What difference does it make that God comes down to dwell with God’s people?

F. What does the loud voice from the throne say? (vs 3-4)

Lesson #4: A New Heaven and A New Earth

G. Read vs 3-4 aloud again. Which promise do you most need to hear right now, and why? Which promise does your community need to hear right now, and why?

Read aloud Revelation 21:5-8.

H. What does it mean that God is making all things new?

I. If God is making all things new, what is one new thing you or your parish can do?

J. The vices list in verse 8 are intended to characterize the distinctive life of people in the city of God, not limit those who will finally be there. What are some of the characteristics or values of your faith community? What value might you aspire to if God is making all things new?

10. All Things New... To Do:

God said "See, I am making all things new." We see glimpses of God's new creation in our world all the time. This week do a "newness" scavenger hunt. Take pictures of where you see glimpses of God's newness in your day. Share your discoveries with your family and/or others in your group.

11. Homework:

- Read Revelation chapter 21
- Memory Verse (Revelation 21:1)
- Work through Lesson 5
- Check out this Bible Project Video on Heaven & Earth (6:43 minutes) - https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/heaven-and-earth/?utm_source=web_social_share&medium=shared_video

12. Closing Prayer:

For our closing prayer listen to Canticle of the Turning, Roy Cooney by A New Community Church

https://youtu.be/A7fTuH_0agE

(3:45 minutes)

Lesson #5: The New Jerusalem

Caroline Guy

1. **Read** the Opening Scripture Verse: Revelation 21:22
2. Opening **Prayer**
3. **Welcome** and Introductions
4. **Announcements** that Are Pertinent to the Group
5. **Share** your stories of your “All Things New... To Do” from the past week
6. A **Story** (read aloud with the group)

Have you ever watched someone improvise an artform? Whether it's theater, dance, comedy, or even physical pieces of art, I love watching people create with no plan. The moments when things get clunky and don't seem to work are made wonderful in the moments when everything comes together. There's something exciting about knowing that there's no end result and just watching the process run its course. But watching people improvise is an entirely different experience than doing it yourself.

In May 2017, I was a part of a month-long dance intensive (a short, rigorous program where you take classes, learn the business side of the industry, and choreograph new works). One of the classes we took was about improvising... as a group. I was terrified. It's one thing to improvise by yourself, but to have five other people dancing without a plan around you? No way, absolutely not.

We started the class very slowly and with limited movements, just to make sure no one got hurt. It was a mess. We looked like six people all doing their own thing. As the class went on we worked through exercises that taught us how to be aware of our surroundings, how to show up for one another, how to know when to take risks and when to be a support. These lessons were game-changing. We began to move as one unit and taking bigger risks.

This was one class but we took these skills into the rest of our month together and our entire creative process changed. We were no longer afraid to try new things. Instead of spending time thoroughly explaining ideas, we were able to work through them and play with different outcomes. Rehearsals became a time of problem-solving and playing. In the end, the works we created were some of the most creative works I've ever performed.

What was the difference? Why did that one class change everything?

We learned to be confident in our own and each other's abilities.

We learned how to know when to take risks and when to be supportive.

We learned the balance of risk-taking and reliability.

And through these lessons, we learned to trust each other, knowing that no one was going to get hurt. We had each other's backs and because of that, we felt comfortable and confident in pushing ourselves further than we'd gone before.

Lesson #5: The New Jerusalem

7. Opening Reflection Questions

A. Think about a time where you felt like you could take risks. What about that situation made you feel like you were able to take those risks?

B. Have you been with a group of people that you trusted completely to have your back? Describe that group and what made it special.

8. Introduction to the Study

In Revelation 21:9-27 we are taken on a tour of the New Jerusalem. Guided by an angel, the author describes a vision of a Holy City, with specific measurements and descriptive details. One of the most notable details of this section is the in-depth description of the numerous gemstones that comprise and adorn the city. Walls made of jasper, gates made of pearl, along with eleven others that adorn the foundations of the wall. The city itself is made of pure gold, including the great street. The New Jerusalem is luxurious and opulent. It shines “with the glory of God”.

Taking a closer look at these descriptors we read that the walls of the New Jerusalem are about 1500 miles high and made of jasper. Jasper is a gemstone that is opaque and ranks at a 6.5-7 out of 10 on the Mohs Hardness Scale (a scale that ranks the “scratchability” of a gem). This wall is massive, it is sturdy, and it will not easily be destroyed.

We also read about the gates of the city. There were twelve gates with twelve angels at the gates. Each gate was made out of a single pearl. Pearl is also a gemstone, but it ranks at a 2.5-3 out of 10 on the Mohs Hardness Scale. But the more fragile material is not the only other notable detail about the city gates. Towards the end of this passage we read, “its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there.” (v.25) The New Jerusalem has twelve points of entry, all of them accessible all of the time, because the gates never close. But readers are assured that “nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood” (v. 27)

There is a great deal of detail laid before us in this passage. But why are the details important? As we read in the introduction to Lesson 1, the Book of Revelation was written to offer hope to a suffering people. The original audience was oppressed and persecuted, and this vision from God through John offers images of hope. The New Jerusalem is beautiful, safe, and free of wrongdoing.

Lesson #5: The New Jerusalem

9. Reflection and Conversation

A. Read Revelation 21:12-14. What is inscribed onto the wall and the gates?

B. John tells us that this new city of Jerusalem is not only fashioned after the old city, but has “the old” inscribed into its foundations.

- Why do you think this is important? _____

- If you were rebuilding your community from the ground up, what are the “old” things you would keep? _____

C. Read Revelation 21:25-27.

- When or where do you feel the safest? _____

- When or where do you feel the most free to be your authentic self?

- How would your life be different if you had total safety and total freedom? What could you do? What risks could you take? _____

- How would your community be different if it resembled the New Jerusalem? What would have to change to start working towards that vision?

D. Read Revelation 21:22-24.

- What is the one thing lacking in the New Jerusalem

- Why is there no temple in the New Jerusalem?

Lesson #5: The New Jerusalem

- Where have you experienced God outside of a church building or activity?

- How can you help someone see that God dwells in them?

E. The audience of this vision needed to hear a message of hope. What is the message of hope that your community needs? How can you share and live out that message with and for your community? _____

10. All things new... to do:

Take some time this week to create something with no plan. Give yourself permission to have fun, take risks, and not worry about the final product of what you create. Need some ideas?

Put on your favorite song and dance!

Grab some paper and crayons and draw

Pick up some playdough or modeling clay and make different shapes and objects

Grab some chalk and doodle on the sidewalk

Grab a camera or your phone and take some pictures around your house or neighborhood.

Choose a meal to make something from scratch with no recipe (try a soup or a stir-fry!)

Remember: it's about the experience of creating something new, it's not about the end product!

Let yourself be silly and just go for it!

Lesson #5: The New Jerusalem

11. Homework:

- Read Revelation 22
- Memory Verse (Revelation 22:1)
- Work through Lesson 6
- Check out this video of a Jack and Jill Competition (4:14)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTG2LDCmbvM>

(Jack and Jill competitions are where randomly assigned partners dance to randomly assigned music. Talk about a balance of risk-taking and reliability!)

12. Closing Prayer:

Holy One who has given us the breath of life,
Today we remember
To breathe deeply
To rest
To take in
To pause before we act...
And then to take in another deep breath poised on the edge
And risk jumping in
Risk taking action
Risk speaking up
Risk using the gifts we have been given
So that at the end of our life we can say with absolute clarity
That no part of our existence was wasted in fear of failure or fear of success.
Hold us;
Prepare us the way to begin to offer the gift of our awakened presence,
Full of love and light today.
These and the prayers of our hearts we lift up now in the silence...
Amen

A Prayer of Risk by Tamara Lebak

Lesson #6: A New Eden

River of Life and Tree of Life

Calla Gilson

1. **Read** the Opening Scripture Verse: Revelation 22:1
2. Opening **Prayer**
3. **Welcome** and Introductions
4. **Announcements** that Are Pertinent to the Group
5. **Share** your stories of your “All Things New... To Do” from the past week
6. A **Story** (read aloud with the group)

Salameh Bishara, a Lutheran Palestinian, grew up under the strong branches of his family’s olive trees near Bethlehem, where 9 strong trees have been rooted for 2,000 years. Olive trees, he says, are the holiest of the holy, the mother of all trees. Olive wood is resilient and strong, its branches bearing the silvery green leaves that refuse to fade under the sun, and diligently protect in the chill of winter. Olive trees never drop their leaves. Every fall as a child Salameh joined his family for the olive harvest, adding his voice to the chorus of olive tree songs, chanting traditional Palestinian folk music, and learning a deep care for creation while balancing on the ladders and bent over the burlap tarp collecting olives. Every year, the harvest fills the oil jars of the family. Providing flavor and nutrients to every meal on the table, being lathered on skin and hair to soothe and heal, the tree provides the salve of life in this community.

Salameh’s trees are rooted in Palestinian land that is now under Israeli occupation. Though this valley where the olive grove is located is nestled far into the West Bank behind the 1949 Green Line, it has since been claimed by Israel as property of Jerusalem. Part of Salameh’s family land was confiscated by Israeli soldiers without negotiation or compensation. More land has since been cleared by the occupation to make way for a road through the valley that Salameh and his family will never be able to drive on.

For five seasons, the 9 olive trees despaired this disruption of the land, the chaos of construction and increasing difficulty and legality around access. For five seasons, the Bisharas found that the trees themselves protested the invasion of land, withholding olives. Five seasons without the joy of harvest, five seasons without oil.

Yet the olive trees stand firm as more land is cleared, ever closer to the nine olive trees, this time for a wall. A wall that Israel builds for security – but rather than being built on Israeli land, the wall is built deep into Palestinian land. It separates Palestinians from each other, from their land and their trees. Priests come and pray with the Christians among the uprooted trees as bulldozers stand nearby. Twenty-eight feet high, the cement wall towers over the nine large olive trees today.

Lesson #6: A New Eden

River of Life and Tree of Life

They continue to bring forth good things, even in the daunting shade of the separation wall that casts much uncertainty over their future. And in that shadow families still celebrate the trees. They give thanks for generational dedication to the land and for trees with roots as deep as their own that continue to bring forth blessings from the rockiest ground. “These trees have survived 2,000 years” says Salameh, inshallah [God willing] “they will survive 2,000 more”.

7. Opening Reflection Question

Preternatural [adjective] pre-ter-nat-u-ral

Definition of preternatural from Merriam Webster Dictionary

1. existing outside of nature
2. exceeding what is natural or regular: EXTRAORDINARY
3. inexplicable by ordinary means

Salameh’s trees don’t produce olives when the community is in turmoil. In our verses from Revelation today, the tree of life grows twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month! That’s beyond what we naturally know to be possible! It’s preternatural! Extraordinary!

A. What extraordinary things have you experienced God do in your life? In the life of your community? _____

8. Introduction to the Study

For nature and humanity alike, empire is chaos. Whether it is walls, barbed-wire, checkpoints, watch towers, or land demolition and pollution of water and soil, empire changes more than the landscape of a place. As a people living in occupation, the readers of John’s letter would know a thing or two about this reality. Throughout the book of Revelation, we see nature respond to abuse of powers and principalities played out colorfully. Acts of nature are used as destructive forces in the beginning chapters as floods, fires and earthquakes literally turn the world upside-down.

But our first glimpse of life in the new city is a river of crystal-clear flowing water. We can follow this flow of liquid life back to Ezekiel 47:1-12, when water flows out from the temple, deeper and deeper until Ezekiel can no longer cross it. He is told that the water will flow throughout the world and that wherever the river goes “everything will live”. It’s a beautiful image we see come to fruition in this New Jerusalem, as the river of life flows directly from the throne of God and the Lamb—no longer confined to a temple, but active in the life of the city and all creation. This sign of victory for God connects back to the Hebrew scriptures (Zechariah 14-8 and Habakkuk 2:14) with which the original listeners would be familiar.

Lesson #6: A New Eden

River of Life and Tree of Life

In his vision, Ezekiel also saw the next image, fruit trees on either bank of the river (47:12) “with their fruit for food and their leaves for healing”. Called the “tree of life” we are moved to recall the tree from Eden that played a role in the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden. But this tree of life in Ezekiel and now in Revelation is not just there to provide redemption for Adam and Eve, or even just for those who reside in the new Eden. But the tree is for the healing of the nations! With this peace, there is heaven on Earth! It’s not just a garden, either. The city is alive and thriving, attracting the nations for worship and healing. It is a bustling urban area filled with thriving life—both human life and plant life! God rejoices in (and transforms) both as all come to see God’s face, an impossible dream in the Hebrew Scriptures (Exodus 33:20, Deuteronomy 4:12, John 1: 18, 1 John 4:12). The tree and the river are expansive, an ever-widening welcome to all.

And so we actually end at the beginning, cycled back into the dance of a story that eternally leads us back to the victory of the crucified and risen Jesus. We see how even in Genesis 1, God pointed us towards what God’s ultimate intention always was for creation. Now, rather than God ordering the world through day and night, God provides the light in which humans live in community and steward the earth, the trees and all living things. This is central to the world-view of us as Christians. N.T. Wright reminds us that “the whole of Christian theology is based on the goodness of creation, yet the goodness of creation consists partly in this, that it points beyond itself to the new creation.” This isn’t a mistake! Creation by design is never abolished or replaced but renewed continually!! This is something we can replicate in the present with the way we care for creation.

The book of Revelation invites us to witness a glimpse of God’s ultimate purpose for the whole of creation. In the victory of Jesus over tyrannous systems of death and division, creation rejoices and flourishes. This liberation story is especially poignant to both people living in occupation, and a withering creation—clinging to hope for a day when a just peace will allow both to thrive. Folks all over the world are bearing witness, sharing their testimony in lives of faithful care for God’s creation within systems that seek destruction. We can learn a great deal from faithful witnesses to God’s love in a world of violence, today. The diligent commitment of these folks lends contextual perspective to what John’s glorious vision for Christ’s return and redemption of creation look like here and now.

Lesson #6: A New Eden

River of Life and Tree of Life

9. Reflection and Conversation

Read Revelation 22:1-5

A. What is the purpose of the leaves of the Tree of Life?

- What might need to be healed in your community? Where might God be at work right now partnering with people towards that healing? How might we participate in this redeeming work today? _____

B. What is similar about this New Jerusalem to Eden? What is different?

- What does it mean for our communities today that God dwells with God's people in the city and the New Eden? What does it mean for us as people of faith that there are no walls that keep people out, and no designated holy space [temple] in the renewed creation?

C. What will not be found in the New Jerusalem?

- What "accursed things" are found within your community? What do you imagine being rooted out in the New [insert name of your town]?

D. What does it mean that God's name is on their foreheads?

- Do you recall a time when you may have been "marked and sealed"?

Lesson #6: A New Eden

River of Life and Tree of Life

10. All Things New: To Do

In John's letter, the liberation of all people, nations and creation are intertwined. Adopt a new, small practice that cares for creation. Could you start composting your food scraps? Is it possible for you to make small swaps to minimize your use of single-use plastics? What may water conservation in your home or church community look like? Is it possible to resist mowing down native plants that bees rely on?

11. Homework + Resources:

- Read through Revelation 22
- Work through Lesson #7
- Learn more about the people of Palestine and Israel: *Book: The Lemon Tree by Sandy Tolan*
- *Presbyterians for Earth Care 2021 Lenten Devotional*
- Join with other Lutherans imagining a new creation: *Lutherans Restoring Creation*
- *The Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations Prayer Liturgy*
- Learn about Climate Refugees:
 - *Article for children: What are Climate Refugees?*
 - *Documentary: Lowland Kids*

12. Closing Prayer:

“Holding to a hopeful vision in the context of war gives hope a new meaning. It is no longer something we see but rather something we practice, something we live, something we advocate, something we plant. At times when we feel as if the world must be coming to an end tomorrow, our call is not to wait, not to cry, nor to surrender. Rather, our only hopeful vision is to go out today into our garden, into our society, and plant olive trees. If we don't plant any trees today, there will be nothing tomorrow. But if we plant a tree today, there will be shade for the children to play in, there will be oil to heal the wounds, and there will be olive branches to wave when peace arrives.”

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, *Bethlehem Besieged: Stories of Hope in Times of Trouble*, pg 157

Discuss together what “olive trees” you would like to plant in your life, in your community and in our world, here and now. Lift each other's intentions to God in prayer.

Lesson #7: Now What?

Calla Gilson

1. Opening **Prayer**
2. **Welcome** and Introductions
3. **Announcements** that Are Pertinent to the Group
4. **Share** your stories of your “All Things New... To Do” from the past week
5. A **Story** (read aloud with the group)

Isabel Lind is a saint in the collective memory of my family. Though she passed away a few months before I was born, stories of her wit, resourcefulness and abundant love can be heard whenever the family gathers, almost convincing me that I intimately know her. When the 40 or so cousins come together for a meal, someone always ends table grace with an invitation to “pray the prayer that Jesus and Grandma Lind taught us”. I always thought they meant that she taught them the words to the Lord’s Prayer, but the stories indicate that she did most of her teaching by remarkable example.

As a child, my grandmother remembers her mother meticulously grafting fruit trees. One tree had been the particular subject of Isabel’s affection and over the years she grafted the tree to grow eight distinct varieties of peaches. She tried to impart to her young daughter the techniques of grafting that resulted in such a remarkable tree, but eventually the family moved off the Henry County land and relocated to another farm.

The extraordinary peach tree, which continued producing its eight varieties of fruit is now, much like Grandma Lind, the stuff of legends. But this story drips with what I’ve heard to be true about her sweet faithfulness to God, her good stewardship of creation and her deep care for her community. In every tree she grafted, she was partnering with God to create something new that would feed the community and make life for many a little more like, “Thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven”. She had great respect for the original tree—not destroying it, but rather using its wisdom and strength to bring forth something new that met a need and grew right alongside, becoming incorporated into the tree itself.

6. Introduction to the Study

Try to imagine the response of the early Christians as they too reached the end of the Book of Revelation. If they’re anything like us, their response was likely a series of questions for today that the letter doesn’t fully answer:

- Where was this all going?
- What is our role in the vision?
- What is God doing now?

Lesson #7: Now What?

That's the beauty of catching a glimpse of the vision—of knowing how the story ends. The victory of Jesus, the renewal of creation—it's not something we have to wait for, it's something we have the pleasure of partnering with God to work towards now!

It's not an easy task. Just ask John's readers: in their time of conflict and confusion, they too may have found it hard to see their hostile neighbors as future inhabitants of a city flowing with living water despite God's repeated and generous invitation to partner in the redemption of creation and our communities.

But it's God's vision—not ours. And we have the privilege of partnering to create new things from the strength and wisdom of scripture at play in this beautiful story. As you reflect together today, dream about what it may look like for your community to partner with God to make all things new. What are small, faithful steps you can take together to use the gifts of your place to meet its deepest needs and share Jesus in the process?

7. Reflection and Conversation

A. What does it look like to live in joyful expectation of the day when Jesus comes?

B. What one new learning from these last six weeks has been the most inspiring or challenging for you? _____

C. How does the remarkable vision we've been invited to see, shape a way of life for us and our communities now? _____

D. How could you put some of your dreams for your community into action?

8. All Things New: To Do

Together throughout your week, conduct a listening audit within your community. Come back together to share your findings. Determine places where you see God doing a new thing outside the walls of your church and go visit!

Lesson #7: Now What?

9. Resources

- Dig a little deeper and invite a few more folks to try out this [People Mapping exercise](#) to explore what God may be up to in your community.
- Gather a group of folks really interested in what it means to nurture new Christian communities beyond the walls of your church. Consider reading and dreaming further together with [21st Century Christian: Following Jesus Where Life Happens](#) by Rev. Dr. Michael Adam Beck. Purchasing the book includes access to a video series, sermon guides and discussion guides.
- Learn more about Blended Ecology of nurturing new communities while caring for the inherited church.
 - Book: [Deep Roots, Wild Branches by Rev. Dr. Michael Adam Beck](#)
 - Podcast: [003 Blended Ecology \(Both/And Church\)](#)

(All resources can be found at nwos-elca.church. Click "Learn More" on our homepage to learn more!)

10. Closing Prayer:

Day by day, dear Christ:
teach us from your word and your world;
lead us on our pilgrimage of life;
help us to live in your rhythms;
spur us to overcoming prayer;
strip from us all that clutters;
cherish through us your creation;
heal through us what is broken;
blow us to places beyond our comfort zones;
inspire us to foster unity;
reach out through us with your justice, truth, and love,
that we may be aflame
and struggle for you forever.
O Christ,
like the seed that falls into the ground,
and yet bears fruit,
may we yet see the fruit
of eternal life on earth.
Amen.

***Tree of Life: Celtic Prayers to the Universal Christ by Ray Simpson, pages 37 and 195.
Original prayers inspired by ancient prayers including those found in the Carmina Gadelica.

