

## I. Advanced Organizer

- A. The room was simple and plain, with walls of cement brick, fluorescent lights overhead, cheap stained carpet, and the same 1970s style institutional furniture that adorned many of the dorm lounges around the college campus. The group was gathered sitting cross legged in a small circle on the floor; half a dozen or so college students in a basement common room of the dormitory. **One student, a Senior, tall and blonde, had a guitar in his lap** which he strummed with fervor, while singing heartfelt love songs, not to a male or a female crush, but to someone grander, more transcendent.
1. "Jesus, Jesus, holy and anointed one. Jesus" he sang.
    - a) The lyrics went on. "Your name is like honey on my lips. Your spirit like water to my soul. Your word is a lamp unto my feet. Jesus, I love you. I love you."
  2. As he sang, **a young woman sat in the circle and began to weep.** It was her first time there. She didn't know any of these students. She was new at this school, new in this part of the country, a California kid now living in Chicago, just starting to get her bearings in her theatre program when this tall, blonde theatre student had visited her freshman theatre history class. Before the lecture started, he addressed the class, and announced that he was starting a group for other theatre students who wanted to talk about God. The young woman sensed that most of the other freshman around her snickered or rolled their eyes at the invitation, but she couldn't dismiss it so cavalierly.
  3. The truth is, **the girl knew her presence in this midwestern college classroom wasn't just about her good high school GPA or her dreams of someday being cast in a Broadway musical.** She'd had numerous offers from schools across the country who promised her assistance on the path to her dreams, but in visiting them, there was only one school in which she had sensed **something bigger than herself and her aspirations calling her forward.** She had felt it touring this school's campus: a mysterious sense that she was stepping into her destiny, to a place she belonged, into a story that had yet to be written but in which she was to play a feature role. After months of seriously praying for the first time in her life to whatever might be out there in the universe, the young woman felt that the universe might be speaking back. **"I think maybe there's a God," she said to herself, "and that God wants me to go to school here."**
  4. So months later, when that blonde senior stepped to the front of her classroom and extended his invitation, the young woman paid attention. **She noticed the chills coming over her body,** a sensation she had had that strange day months before. She felt the prickling of the hair on the back of her neck; the stillness and gravity in her spirit that gave her a quiet confidence that, despite her nervousness and questions around people who identified themselves as Christians on campus, **this was an invitation she needed to accept.**
  5. So a few days later, there she was, seated on the dorm floor of the plain cement brick room weeping inexplicably and uncontrollably as the students around her sang their love songs to Jesus. **She couldn't really wrap her mind around what was happening.** She'd grown up attending formal churches that had none of this intimacy, none of this emotion, where the name "Jesus" was only invoked in concert with the last name of "Christ" and spoken of in terms so reverent that the Son of God seemed mythic and inapproachable, uninterested in the mundane daily realities of the people in the pews. Yet here, in this basement, as she nervously observed these students read together the stories from the gospels - stories of the life of Jesus, as she heard them speak of him somehow now mystically present with them in the here and now, as she listened to the simple love songs

they sang, **something deep in her was released.** She could feel an acceptance and love wash over her spirit that she had not felt before. A survivor of sexual trauma, a young woman who'd absorbed patriarchy's messages that she was unworthy and unlovable and that she could only be accepted by playing a role on the stage of life, **she felt seen and understood in a way she'd never been.** Places in her memory that had been cloaked in shame for years, parts of herself that she had worked hard not to look at or let anyone else see were exposed, **but rather than the exposure wounding her further, she could perceive a hope for healing.** For the first time in a deep way she understood the miracle of the words she'd been taught to sing as a child, "Yes, Jesus loves me." And that knowing brought a new kind of freedom and joy that would change her life.

B. Of course, as I'm sure you all know by now, **that young woman in the dormitory basement was me, more than 20 years ago.** That night and what came after played a significant roll in setting me on a path I had not predicted when I moved from San Diego to Chicago, with dreams of New York on the horizon. That path would eventually lead me to my life partner Jason, it would lead me to rethink my vocation, it would lead me to seminary, pastoral ministry, and eventually beginning the community that has come to be called Haven. Along the way, **the path of following Jesus at times would feel exciting and triumphant,** full of confidence that I now understood who God was, what God was doing in the universe, and how I was called to be a part of it. Yet at other times, **walking the path of Christian faith has felt immensely challenging,** as I've found myself hurt and heartbroken by some of my fellow travelers, or confused by detours that didn't match my understanding of how the journey was supposed to go. And then there have been the times when I've been forced to painfully confront the ways that it has seemed like **the very endeavor of traveling in Jesus' name seems to have harmed untold numbers of people for generations.** I've had my eyes opened to the harmful "idols", as I've come to call them, that were constructed throughout the particular version of the Jesus path I have walked, idols which at times made me wonder if there was anything in the path still worth walking on, or if the whole path was hopelessly corrupt.

1. But **despite my questions, despite my valid critiques of the infrastructure humans over the centuries have built on this path of Jesus-centered faith, I still remain.** I still find myself drawn decades later by that same mysterious and profound knowing I experienced long ago - a knowing that there is **something real and true and deep that I encounter though faith in Jesus and the Divine reality Christian faith upholds.** It still moves me in my core - **that God so loves the world that God draws near,** the Divine meets us in the particular and the personal, that God comes to the parts of us that have been told we're unworthy or unlovable with eyes of compassion and companionship, and from that place of intimate encounter, **the Divine wants to sustain us, remain close to us, confront the systems that harm and degrade our humanity, and redeem us and the rest of creation.**

C. Well, I share this story because today we are starting a new series of conversations we're calling **"The Stories That Sustain Us"**. In this series, **we're going to return to the gospels** - the set of stories in our sacred texts about the life and ministry of Jesus. We're gonna consider together afresh what some of these stories mean to us and for us. We're going to look to these stories with the hope that there's something in them that we need to keep is going, keep us grounded, keep us spiritually connected to something beyond ourselves and our challenging 2020 and 2021 realities.

1. For those of us who've found ourselves in recent years **deconstructing a good chunk of our Christian identity and faith practice**, I hope this will be an opportunity to examine what of this tradition and the stories at the center of it **still speak to us in sacred ways**. For those of us who are new to the spiritual endeavor and trying to discern what role, if any Jesus may play in it, I hope these conversations will be useful in helping you find a way forward.
- D. A few years ago our Haven leadership started to define the vision of Haven as a community that seeks to hold these values in tension: being **safe, diverse, and Jesus-centered**. In this series we'll take some time to consider together **what the third of those values means** to us. How do we continue to truly pursue Jesus-centered faith in ways that celebrate diversity, even a diversity of understanding and belief? How do we embody the diversity that I personally believe Jesus calls us to in ways that honor one another's sacredness and value one another's safety? I hope this series will help us grow deeper in wisdom and conviction as we try to **follow the Divine Spirit that sustained Jesus and that our tradition affirms is available to sustain all of us as we gather and grow in sacred community**.
  - E. This morning I'm not going to be giving a full teaching. This today is more of an introduction and opportunity for reflection and conversation as we begin this series that will take us through the first few months of the year, all the way to Easter. But I do want to briefly consider together **one gospel story as we begin**, that I hope might help our own reflection around where each of us is entering this conversation.
- II. The story comes from the Gospel of John at the end of Chapter 6.
    - A. **We won't go through the whole thing - I'll summarize what's been happening to give us some quick context**; you may want to go back and read more of the story yourself later.
    - B. Jesus has been **teaching in a synagogue in a place called Capernaum**, a detail that reminds us that just as each of us emerges from a particular tradition and spiritual background, Jesus himself was a part of a particular tradition. **Jesus of Nazareth was an observant Jewish rabbi**. And drawing from that tradition, it seems that the passage he was reflecting on in the synagogue that day was the same story we ourselves were looking at just last week: **the story from Exodus around the people of Israel being fed by God with manna, as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years**. Now before he preached in Capernaum, Jesus had just recently performed a miracle that resonated with that story in powerful ways. He had taken only five barley loaves and two fish and fed multitudes until they were satisfied. Now, as the crowds gather to see him with hope of more impressive miracles, Jesus challenges them with a stranger invitation. Rather than produce more food that people can consume with their mouths and stomachs, **Jesus seems like he wants to give them something else**.
      1. *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty,"* he told them. The people are confused by what he says, and they get even more puzzled as the dialogue continues and he elaborates, saying things like *"Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh"*. For many of Jesus' listeners, this was a bridge too far. They came wanting a miraculous loaf like they'd eaten before or heard about from their friends, but now Jesus seemed to them to be talking about cannibalism. That was just too weird. And this brings us to the part of the story I'm most interested in for us today. Picking up in John 6, verse 66.

C. *“Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:66-69, NRSV)*

1. **This moment resonates for me.** Perhaps it resonates for you. These disciples have had an experience that has been distressing. Jesus has said some confusing things, things that don't make sense. Many of their fellow followers have become discouraged and walked away altogether.
2. And Jesus understands that his closest followers may feel the same way. They may feel too confused, too bewildered, to persist. “Do you also wish to go away?”, he asks them.
  - a) And here is where Peter speaks with clarity of conviction: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”
    - (1) **It's not that Peter is just more pious than all these other folks.** One thing I love about Peter as you read the gospels is how clearly messy and human he is - he often speaks up first, saying the thing no doubt a lot of his friends are thinking. Sometimes we see that he's getting something, that it's clicked in a real way. And sometimes we see how much he's missing what Jesus is up to. But in his humanity, in the way he wears his heart on his sleeve and blurts out much of what he's thinking, we get the opportunity to **watch him evolve in his understanding.** We can also see Jesus' choice to keep investing in him as he does, even when he misses it. And this moment is an important one in his evolution from Simon the fisherman to Peter, a significant leader in Jesus' transformative spiritual community we'd come to call the church.
    - (2) “To whom can we go? You have the words of life.” I don't think Peter fully understands why he feels compelled to stay. **He just knows this: he's seen too much.** He's heard too much. Sure he's full of doubt, sure he has his questions, sure he's probably conflicted in different ways or misunderstands much of what project he's following Jesus into, but this he gets: something about what Jesus is speaking of, something of the message he is here to deliver - it is eternal. It brings life. **It is like manna from heaven - something that sustains.** Perhaps he has a sense that in calling himself the bread of heaven Jesus is talking about more than something you digest in your body - he's talking about **the nourishment that Jesus and his message bring to the soul.**
  - b) This week had it's own share of reasons for **many of us to feel perhaps conflicted with identifying as Christians or Jesus-followers, in the 21st century United States.** On Tuesday, we saw the electorate of Georgia elect two new democratic Senators to represent them in Washington DC - one a young Jewish filmmaker, who will be one of the youngest to take his place in the US Senate, and one the first Black Senator to be elected from the State of Georgia, Raphael Warnock a Christian Pastor who leads the same church that Dr. King once led. And then **within hours of celebrating the elevation of this Black Christian leader to serve in the US Capitol, we saw others, many who call themselves Christian and were decked in religious imagery to make the point - attack that same Capitol,** sure they were doing Jesus' bidding. How are we to reconcile these dueling realities? Might we, like Jesus' earlier followers, feel like this is a bridge too far to keep walking?
  - c) And yet for some of us, like for Peter, as confused as we are, as conflicted as we may feel, as confounded sometimes by what Jesus seems to say, **we've seen too much.**

We've heard too much. Something has captivated us and despite all we grieve or wonder about, it holds our hearts in deep ways. To whom could we go? We know we have tasted the words of life.

- D. I started this morning sharing one of my stories of why I, like Peter, can't walk away. This is far from the only story I have. Truthfully, there've been many encounters though the years on this winding path of faith that I've been on that have kept me in the journey. If you've been around awhile, you've heard a number of them. But ultimately this isn't just about me and my story. As we enter this conversation that we'll be engaging in the weeks to come, I want to give you all a chance to think about some of your own moments - dramatic or mundane. Where have you experienced something in the Jesus tradition that was compelling? What keeps you coming back? What of Jesus-centered faith has sustained you? Was it a story in the gospel you read? An experience in church? Or if you're new to this journey, and are still unsure about Jesus altogether, what brings you to a community like ours that calls itself Jesus-centered?

We're going to spend the rest of our time this morning reflecting and processing around those questions. And my hope is this will give us a chance to consider together as we prepare to spend some time looking anew at some of these stories from the life of Jesus that informs Jesus-centered faith, what is our personal connection to this tradition? How do we as a collective interact with it? What preconceptions are we coming in with? What history and experience are various ones of us bringing? What wounds are we attending to? How can we be mindful of those things as we navigate this conversation together?

Pray for us. Send us off for 5 minutes of reflection followed by breakout group discussion.

#### **Questions for Reflection & Conversation**

1. What about Jesus is compelling to you?
2. How do you identify with the Jesus tradition or Christian faith?
3. If Jesus-centered faith feels challenging to you, why do you think that is?
4. What might you hope to gain from looking at some of the gospel stories together in the coming months?