

## Study of the Gospel of John

March 17, 1996

March 21, 1996

In studying the Old Testament we have referred often to the fact that the Exodus was the defining event for the Hebrew people. For the first century Christians Jesus' resurrection was the defining event. The event in which they found their self-definition. With that in mind I would like to invite you to pre-read the story of the resurrection from John. (John 20: 1-18) and then as you read John see the story through the lens of the account of the resurrection.

The following background on this gospel, which is unique among the four gospels, is taken largely from **The Women's Bible Commentary**.

All four gospels set out to give portraits of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection. They share some of the same critical elements feeding the 5,000, walking on the water, and lengthy stories accounts of the passion and resurrection. Important differences mark them as well. In the synoptic gospels Jesus moves out of Galilee into Judea only once, when on his final journey to Jerusalem. In John, Jesus alternates between Judea and Galilee, traveling to Jerusalem three times. Jesus' public ministry lasts one year in the synoptics and three years in John. Jesus parables are spoken often in the synoptic gospels and rarely in John. There is a strong temptation to try to harmonize the four gospel accounts. Such a temptation must be resisted. Both we and the church as a whole need to hear the message in each account which is unique to that authors' understanding.

The gospel of John is formed around the question "*Who is Jesus?*" In its attempt to respond to this question John seems to seek to lead the reader away from complacency about Jesus identity, whether false certitude or over confident assumptions. Figurative language and lengthy dialogues are an invitation to the reader to shape a personal understanding of who Jesus. An understanding that will be more dynamic than titles or pronouncements could allow.

The author of John, like the authors of the other gospels, is anonymous. It is believed that the gospel was written at the end of the first century. Tensions had risen very high between early Christians and the rest of the Jewish community. The tension expressed itself in a break in the relationship between the synagogues and the Christian community. Understanding the break between the Jews who confessed Jesus as Messiah and the synagogues is crucial to understanding the social setting of John. The author refers to *Jews* very negatively. The split ruptured families as early Christians were faced with the impossible choice of claiming Jesus as Messiah and breaking from the community of home and nurture or remain in the synagogue and disclaim their belief of the fullness of God's gift to the world. *Jews* in John's gospel referred to the authorities and powers who rejected the gift of this fullness and forced the painful rupture.

John's use of *Jews* was insider language - one member of a religious family to another. When taken up centuries later it became outsider language and has been used to justify the act of one group passing judgment on another. Anti-Semitism is an ugly legacy of such judgments.

#### Reading Plan:

To read a whole book is a different approach than we have used. John is more reflective and meditative, less story-like than the other gospels and Jesus' discourses can run long. The gospel offers a play-like structure. Chapter 1 reads as the prologue, setting out important themes such as "light", "life", and "glory". Act I (Chapters 2-12) is the revelation of the 'Word of God to the world for those who have eyes to see. The glorification of God's Word is Act II (Chapters 13 - 20). The play closes with an epilogue, Chapter 21.

For the first week (March 17, 1996), please read the Prologue and Act I.

In John's portrayal of Jesus all the senses are stimulated, but especially hearing and seeing. The prologue, especially the first 18 verses, is more rightly a poem than a narrative. I would invite you to read it aloud to yourself, and then respond to it in some way - write a response of how you feel, a poem of your own or draw a picture.

In Act I the John chooses six signs or miracles by which Jesus makes himself known.

As you read Chapters 2-12 find and identify the six miracles by giving each sign the name of your choice. Following each miracle Jesus gives a discourse articulating the theme of "life through Christ" to be found in that miracle. Look for the theme and name it as you see it.