



LEADER GUIDE

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

The GOSPEL of JOHN



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LEVINE



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SESSION 1

The Wedding at Cana

(John 2)

Session Goals

This session includes the introduction's consideration of the Prologue to the Gospel of John. The reading, reflection, discussion, and prayer will help participants:

- understand and articulate ways in which the Prologue to John's Gospel (1:1-18) expresses Jesus's significance through older, scriptural images of creation and light,
- closely read and reflect on the story of Jesus's first sign, turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana (2:1-11), and
- consider and commit to specific ways in which they can together shine as light by "changing what is to something that is better."

Biblical Foundations

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it. . . .

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:1-5, 14

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to me and to you? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the person in charge of the banquet." So they took it. When the person in charge tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), that person called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

John 2:1-11

Before Your Session

- Carefully and prayerfully read this session's Biblical Foundations more than once. Note words and phrases that attract your attention and meditate on them. Write down questions you have, and try to answer them, consulting trusted Bible commentaries. Become as familiar with these Scriptures as possible.
- Carefully read the introduction and chapter 1 of AJ's book more than once.
- You will need: either Bibles for in-person participants or screen slides prepared with Scripture texts for sharing (identify the translation used), or both; newsprint or a markerboard and markers (for in-person sessions).

- If using the DVD or streaming video, preview the session 1 video segment. Choose the best time in your session plan for viewing it.

Starting Your Session

Welcome participants. Tell them why you are excited to study AJ's book with them. Invite them to speak briefly about why they are interested in this study and what they hope to gain from it.

Invite volunteers to share anything they know about the Gospel of John. Write their responses on the newsprint or markerboard. Alternatively, invite participants to spend five minutes skimming the Gospel, then ask them to share brief impressions and reactions.

Tell participants AJ suggests John supplements and “provides his own take” on the Synoptic tradition. John's Gospel is rich in content, and your group will not have time to read and study it all. AJ's book, and your group's study, focus on stories unique to John that can help us appreciate in new ways John's conviction that Jesus of Nazareth embodies the divine.

Opening Prayer

Creator God, who spoke light into darkness and order out of disorder: may your Spirit hover over us as we study the Gospel of John. Illuminate our reading, our hearing, our reflection, and our conversation, that your servant John's ancient words may become for us, by grace, fresh, surprising, challenging, and sustaining words that make us always more ready to receive your Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Watch Session Video

Watch the session 1 video segment together. Discuss:

- Which of AJ's statements most interested, intrigued, surprised, or confused you? Why?
- What questions does this video segment raise for you?

Book Discussion Questions

The Fourth Gospel's "Big Bang"

Invite participants to read John 1:1-5, 14 aloud in unison, from the same translation. (If time allows, read John's entire Prologue, 1:1-18.) Ask participants to speak briefly about the word or phrase from these verses that most catches their attention, and why.

Discuss:

- AJ says the Prologue is John's "version of the big bang." What does she mean, and do you agree? Why or why not?
- "Ancient Israel was an aural rather than visual culture," hearing rather than picturing its stories. To what extent do speaking and hearing create and re-create communal life in your culture? In your family? In your congregation? How, if at all, do you encounter God in what you hear or have heard?
- What claims does John make about "the Word" (*Logos* in Greek) in his Prologue? How do these claims connect to or evoke claims about God's creative activity in Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8:22-36?
- As AJ explains, first-century Stoic philosophy referred to the world's order as *logos*. Do you tend to see more order or disorder in the created world? Why? What examples of order in nature do or might draw your attention to "the Word" John describes?
- "The Word" is, for John, also "the light" (vv. 4-5; see also 1:7-9; 8:12). "The Bible," AJ remarks, "is replete with images of light and dark." Which ones flash most quickly to mind for you? Which have you found most meaningful, and why? What does John mean by identifying "the Word" with "the light"?
- AJ calls readers' attention to one of the four "Servant Songs" in Isaiah. Read Isaiah 42:1-9. How does this passage

connect God's commissioning of the servant to God's creative work? How, specifically, is the servant to be "a light to the nations" (v. 6)? Who else, if anyone, might we identify as the servant?

The Wedding at Cana

Invite participants to speak briefly about the most memorable wedding reception they've ever attended. What made it so memorable?

Recruit volunteers to read aloud John 2:1-11, taking the roles of the narrator, Jesus, his mother, and "the person in charge" ("the catering manager," AJ).

Discuss:

- AJ suggests seven reasons John could have included the story of Jesus's miracle at Cana as "the first of his signs" (v. 11)—eight, including the suggestion John did so to indicate Jesus's approval of marriage. Which do you find most convincing or compelling, and why? What others, if any, would you suggest?
- AJ says "the third day is the day when miracles occur," citing Genesis 22:4; Exodus 19:11; Hosea 6:2; and the tradition of Jesus's resurrection (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:4). Is there a day in your life you could point to as a "third day"? What happened to make it so?
- Israel's Scriptures often present God as Israel's bridegroom and husband. Using a print or online concordance, locate and read some of these Old Testament passages. How do they inform your understanding of similar imagery for God and the church in such New Testament passages as 2 Corinthians 11:1-2, or God and the new creation in Revelation 21:2? How does this tradition inform Christian identification of Jesus as a bridegroom, as in John 3:25-30?
- The wedding feast also evokes Israel's understanding of the messianic age as a banquet, as in Isaiah 25:6-9. How does

such imagery increase your understanding and appreciation of the story about wine at a feast in John 2?

- As AJ notes, weddings create new families. How does the wedding at Cana signal the beginning of Jesus's new family? How does John's interest in Jesus's new family shape the way he presents Jesus's mother, in both this story and John 19:25-27?
- Why does Jesus initially respond to his mother's "indirect request" as he does? Is he being rude, as AJ states (and illustrates from Scripture)? Why do you think his mother nevertheless instructs the servants to do what Jesus tells them?
- AJ suggests Jesus's addressing his mother as "woman" underscores "the role that women play in [John's] Gospel." Compare John 2:4 with 4:21 and 20:13. How does each of the women Jesus addresses as "Woman" play an important role in the Gospel?
- What is Jesus's "hour" in John's Gospel (see also 4:21-23; 5:25-29; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23-27; 13:1; 16:21-22, 31-32; 17:1)? How is Jesus's "hour" an example of *kairos* time—opportune and momentous time?
- What times in your life have proven to be *kairos* times? Did you recognize them as such in the moment? What, if anything, can we do to make ourselves more attuned to *kairos* times when they arrive? How can we recognize potential *kairos* time in the midst of everyday, mundane *chronos* time?
- AJ points out John calls the servants at Cana *diakonoï*, deacons, and "would have known of the church office" by that name. See also 12:26, the term's only other occurrence in John. Taken together, what does the Fourth Gospel suggest about deacons? If your tradition or congregation includes the office of deacons, how does your understanding of it align with John's use of the word?

- Of the servants, AJ wonders, “Are they merely following orders, or do they have ‘faith’? Do they realize the import of what is about to happen, and of their role in it?” What do you imagine, and why? To what extent is the servants’ faith or absence of faith important in understanding this story? What significance, if any, do you find in the fact that the servants know the source of the wine while their manager does not (v. 9)?
- John says Jesus’s disciples “believed in” Jesus as a result of this miracle. AJ asks what, exactly, they believed. What do you think?
- AJ stresses that Jesus’s transformation of water to wine is not simply a miracle, but a *sign*—one of seven in John’s Gospel, each with a symbolic meaning larger than itself. How would you summarize the larger symbolic meaning of this first of Jesus’s signs?

Closing Your Session

Jesus “revealed his glory” at Cana (2:11) by changing water into wine—arguably, “changing what is to something that is better,” which is how AJ describes what it means “to shine as light. . . [to be] like God in the act of creation.” Read aloud from AJ’s book her retelling of the story of Rabbi Israel Salanter and the shoemaker: “As long as the candle is burning, it is still possible to mend.”

Lead participants in brainstorming specific, concrete ways your congregation is or could be “changing what is to something that is better.” Whom could you be or are helping in these ways? What resources do you have, or what resources could you obtain, to “mend” even more? Write their responses on the newsprint or markerboard. Don’t close your session until your group has agreed on at least one practical next step to “shine as light” in your community and the world.

Closing Prayer

Jesus our teacher, at Cana you revealed your glory, the glory of the Father's only Son, by increasing joy and providing blessing in abundance. Send us out in your Spirit's strength to reflect your light, doing the works of the One who sent you while it is still day, every day and every hour, until the last. Amen.

Optional Extensions

- Discuss how the claims in John's Prologue about creation and the Word's incarnation shape you and your congregation's attitudes toward and involvement in the natural, physical world. How does or how could your congregation work to affirm the created world's goodness and work for its healing?
- Read Wisdom of Solomon 9 (found in Bibles containing the Apocrypha or "deuterocanonical" books). How do John's claims for "the Word" echo this chapter's claims for Wisdom?
- Begin talking with your congregation's leadership about making weddings during the main worship service an option available to couples wanting to get married in your building, or making the practice a congregational norm. How would the congregation be educated about and discuss together reasons for this approach? What liturgical, musical, physical, and scheduling changes might be needed to facilitate it?

UNLOCK THE HIDDEN DEPTHS OF JOHN'S GOSPEL.

John's Gospel offers readers a new language—of being born anew, of living water, of wind and spirit, of the “I am”—that enhances how we understand the divine, how we experience the world, and how we participate in the mystery of faith. With her characteristic wit and charm, Amy-Jill Levine introduces readers to the world of the Gospel of John by unpacking the stories in their original context, along with examining how the text is read today.

This Leader Guide contains everything needed to guide a group through a six-week study. Includes session plans, discussion questions, and activities based on the book and DVD, as well as multiple format options.

1. The Wedding at Cana (John 2)
2. Nicodemus (John 3) and the Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4)
3. The Healing of the Man at the Pool (John 5)
4. The Man Born Blind (John 9)
5. Foot Washing (John 12 and John 13)
6. Mary Magdalene and Doubting Thomas (John 20)

Amy-Jill Levine's commentary on the Gospel of John is a scholarly book that reads like a good sermon. It is learned without being pedantic, and it reveals the author without being about her. Above all, like any good sermon, Dr. Levine's commentary never forgets the audience. Always she asks how John's audience would have heard his Gospel, and that forces the reader to ask how a modern audience might hear it. Not just Dr. Levine's content but also her wonderfully conversational tone make this the ideal commentary, not only for scholars, but for lovers of good writing whether they are Christians or people like her: fascinated by followers of "the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

The Very Reverend Patrick Malloy, Dean, The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine



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