Invitation to the Table

This week I was inspired by our General Minister and President's address on Martin Luther King Jr's Birthday. Speaking from Isaiah 11, Dr. Owens said, "The role of the prophet is not just to critique the empire, but also to provide a vision for what the alternative society will look like."

Listen as Isaiah describes what society will look like when Messiah comes: it's not a conservative or liberal agenda enforced by political or military power. Listen:

He shall not judge by what his eyes see
or decide by what his ears hear,
4 but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth; …
5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
6 The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them. (11:3-6)

Dr. Owens said, "All these natural enemies who don't agree on anything, somehow come together and figure out how to make a society in which everybody has enough." For Isaiah, Messiah is not about empire. Righteousness—and the same word, in both Old Testament and New Testament languages, depending on the context, is translated "justice." They're virtually interchangeable—*righteousness will be the belt around his waist*. Finally, *"They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."*

There's an insert in your bulletin. On the back is a link where you can find the video of Dr. Owens' address (8 minutes long). Below the link is a Disciple Affirmation; sort of our denomination's identity statement.

Read it with me: "We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one Body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us." That statement fits within Isaiah's vision of the Messianic community.

We disciples have beautiful words about so many things; but we must decide to be the church we say we are. The reason is represented on this table.

Our Communion Hymn is "*Draw Us in the Spirit's Tether*," #392.

Pastoral Prayer

• **Barry Fowler**	•

• **Evangelism Task Force**
  • Jessica Henry Spayde
  • Rick Crawford
  • Amy Ferdowsian
  • Marcus Hutto
  • Bill Patterson
  • Jo Lynn Robinson
  • Any who have interest. The meetings will be open.
	• **Projects:**
	  • Piano
	  • Speakers
	  • Carpet to Match Chairs
	  • Strip & Wax Floors
	  • Hard Surface Ceiling Tiles

These are difficult days for followers of Jesus. All around us are people whose words claim Jesus but whose actions do not. In the ideological chaos of social media, the frightening realism of AI, and in face of blatant misrepresentations by people in power, when we never know whose words we can trust, listen to these words from the 1st epistle of John:

> *1 John 4:1-3: Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test (discern) the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.* [2]*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,* [3]*and every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.*

I ordered this year's Lenten Devotional book this week. It's written by Teri Hord Owens, who I quoted at the table. It's based on the section of Luke's Gospel called "The Travel Narratives." Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem for his own showdown with those who distort and misrepresent the truth. Here is a quote from her introduction:

> "At every turn, the foundation of prayer and scripture in Jesus' life is evident. From responding to "test" questions from scribes and priests to his teaching, Jesus' practices of prayer and scripture guide him and give him wisdom to share, testimonies to make.
>
> "There are moments when we, too, can feel all is lost, that God is nowhere to be found. Only when we have committed ourselves to deep spirituality and Biblical literacy can we be fully strengthened by God's presence in those moments. Without those two powerful foundations, we are unfamiliar with how God moves, acts, and speaks."

My prayer for you this morning is that you will commit to a deeper spirituality and to a deeper relationship with Scripture, and that God will grant us all discernment when integrity is in question, repentance when we are party to confusion, either by our lack of awareness or by our silence, and protection from deception. And I pray that God will grant us all clarity and strength to speak the truth in love.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Gate for the Sheep

JOHN 10:1-10 (NRSVUE) *"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.* [2]*The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.* [3]*The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.* [4]*When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.* [5]*They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."* [6]*Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.* [7]*So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.* [8]*All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them.* [9]*I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.* [10]*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*
The Word of God for the people of God!

Today I'll begin with my teacher's hat on, and explain a phrase—a word, really—that establishes context not only for the Gospel of John, but for most biblical writings. The specific word is an adjective: Johannine. It means things related to John. The full phrase is the Johannine Community.

The Hebrew prophets attracted followers—disciples—who learned from them and continued their teachings after their deaths. The most prominent example probably the Isaiah community.

Isaiah lived in the middle and late 8th century BCE, but long after his death the "Isaiah Community" continued his work. Most scholars agree that Isaiah is responsible for the first 39 chapters of the book that bears his name, chapters 40-55, called Deutero- (2nd) Isaiah, came together during Babylonian exile in the 6th century, and chapters 56-66, called Trito-(3rd) Isaiah emerged after the exile, a half-century later. It all is rooted in the preaching and teaching of Isaiah.

After the Maccabean revolt in 167 BCE, Jerusalem enjoyed home rule for almost a century, and the Isaiah Community established a monastic presence at Qumran, near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. They were known as Essenes. The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in nearby caves where the Essenes had hidden them when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Qumran complex in 70 CE, and most Jewish groups were scattered.

Almost all the 981 scrolls are variations of portions of what we know as the book of Isaiah. Some scholars—and I concur—see evidence that Jesus spent time in Qumran prior to his baptism. It was there, I believe, that his own self-understanding emerged as he studied the Servant Songs of Isaiah.

Jesus also gathered disciples, and, of course, that community became known as "church." After his death, his disciples gathered disciple groups that collected letters and sermons and songs and compiled them, adding their own commentary. Portions of some of those collections are in our Bible, including the collections of

the Johannine community: the gospel, three epistles, and Revelation.

Some churches would scream, "Heresy!" and throw rotten tomatoes at me. "The Bible is the inspired 'wurdagod!'" (That's one word: "wurdagod.") And yes, it is inspired. Our difference would not be over *whether* God inspired Scripture, but *how* God inspired Scripture and how that inspiration continues today in the reading and understanding of Scripture in its original contexts. God's inspiration was involved, and continues to be involved in every step of the process.

Whoever John was (some believe he was the apostle, John), all of the writings that bear his name are the work of a couple of generations of the Johannine community. The Gospel comes to us as a distinctive, inspired interpretation of Christ and the church, and is acknowledged as one of the church's most profound statements of the meaning of Christian faith.[1]

Having said all that, I'll switch hats here and preach a while. The "I am" statements are unique to John. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus talks about the kingdom of God. In John, he talks about himself. This isn't egotism on the part of Jesus; it's the theology of the Johannine community as it addresses the question, "Who is Jesus?" or more to the point in their context, "Is Jesus the Messiah?"

The cumulative effect of the "I am" sayings aligns with the other three gospels, especially Mark, to portray Jesus in a role that is distinct from—almost opposite of—Messiah, and is much more akin to Isaiah's "Servant of YHWH." (And since I've referred several times recently to Isaiah's "Servant Songs" that describe the "Servant of YHWH," I've listed the related passages on the insert in your bulletin.)

We don't know when Jesus first became aware of the depth of God's claim on his life. The Gospels first introduce that awareness at his baptism. In the temptation narratives that follow, Matthew and Luke report that Jesus rejected military and political ways of fulfilling his mission. In John, there is no temptation; instead, that same rejection is presented in the "I am" statements: "I am Bread…" "I am light…" And today, "I am the gate for the sheep."

A common biblical imagery represents God's people as sheep who need a shepherd but sometimes have false leadership. In John two related images become entangled: "I am the gate for the sheep" and next week's statement that summarizes today's description of "the good shepherd."

Shepherd, we expect. David was a shepherd. Jacob, Moses, the prophet Amos… But first we encounter, "I am the gate for the sheep." It is crucial that we keep the two metaphors separate; although, obviously they are related.

Today's "gate" imagery reflects the practice of shepherds to sleep at night

[1] Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 286). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

lying across the entrance to their sheepfolds to block the entrance from intruders and to keep the sheep from straying outside the fold. The shepherds' own bodies become, literally, "the gate for the sheep."

The idea of the temple as the "gate of heaven" hovers in the background. When Jacob had his vision of a ladder reaching up to heaven, he woke up and said, ***"Surely the Lord was in this place, and I didn't know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."*** In Jewish tradition the House of God—the Temple—was the gate of heaven.

In the theology of the Johannine community, Jesus is the access to God—the gate of heaven;[2] and in today's and next week's readings we're presented with this wonderful pastoral image of a shepherd and his sheep.

We were in Amman, Jordan in 1981, and our 3rd floor hotel room had French doors opening out onto a small balcony. The weather was beautiful, and we were on the 3rd floor, so we slept with the doors open. Early the next morning I was awakened by the faint sound of tinkling bells. I got up and stepped out onto the balcony, and there on this beautiful, grass-covered hillside just below was a young shepherdess and about a dozen sheep—a beautiful, peaceful way to start the day.

But John interrupts this tranquil scene by introducing the dangers the shepherd risks on behalf of the sheep. He opens with a contrast between who comes through the gate and who crawls over the back fence.

Remember: the church began as a movement within Judaism. Late in the first generation, Paul shared with Gentiles and dealt with false teachers—Jews who had accepted Jesus but insisted only Jews or those Gentile converts who submitted to circumcision could be true Christians.

During Jesus' life, Judaism had had several parties: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, priests, Scribes, Levites, sectarian reform movements, baptizing groups like John the Baptist's... When Rome destroyed Jerusalem, those groups were scattered. That scattering is called "the Diaspora". Only the Pharisees survived.

They gathered a group of rabbis and scholars to restructure the shattered Jewish community. They pulled together the Hebrew Scriptures, pretty much we have them today. They set standards for ordaining rabbis and purged the Jewish community of fringe groups they considered dangerous to their community[3]—including those who proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah.

Fred Craddock once said, "There is nothing so authentic that it does not have its pornographers." Every religious faith deals with false prophets, including those who would demonize an Episcopal Priest who, in the spirit of the same "Servant

[2] Ibid., page 321.
[3] Ibid., page 286.

Songs" of Isaiah Jesus chose as his standard, pled with the most powerful man in our nation to show mercy to those who are relatively powerless.

John already has pretty much said that Jesus was not the Messiah Jewish tradition had expected for 600 years; and today's text closes, ***The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."*** The gate that leads to abundant life does not wield political or military power. It looks like Jesus.

We are disciples of Christ—that Christ—a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one Body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us." That statement fits within Isaiah's vision of the Messianic community, the vision that molded Jesus life and ministry. Let us continue striving to be the church we say we are.

The Servant Songs of Isaiah

- **Isaiah 42:1–4**: The servant establishes justice and sets captives free.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
2 He will not cry out or lift up his voice
or make it heard in the street;
3 a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
4 He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth,
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

- **Isaiah 49:1–6**: The servant leads the people of Israel back to God

Listen to me, O coastlands;
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The LORD called me before I was born;
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
in his quiver he hid me away.
3 And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."*
4 But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the LORD
and my reward with my God."
5 And now the LORD says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,*
and that Israel might be gathered to him,*
for I am honored in the sight of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—
6 he says,
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant*
*to raise up the tribes of Jacob**
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,*
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

*This song specifically implies that the Servant is Israel.

- **Isaiah 50:4–9**: The servant demonstrates faithfulness to the Lord, but this faithfulness results in suffering, because he speaks truth to power.

The Lord GOD has given me
a trained tongue,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens,
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
5 The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I did not turn backward.
6 I gave my back to those who struck me

and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
7 The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
8 he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand in court together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
9 It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

- **Isaiah 52:13–53:12**: The servant will suffer because the accomplishment of the work he is called to do challenges the powers that be.

See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up
and shall be very high.
14 Just as there were many who were astonished at him[a]
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
15 so he shall startle[b] many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him,
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.
53:1 Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
2 For he grew up before him like a young plant
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering[c] and acquainted with infirmity,
and as one from whom others hide their faces[d]
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

4 Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases,
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
5 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,

stricken for the transgression of my people.
9 They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb[e] with the rich,[f]
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
10 Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with affliction.
When you make his life an offering for sin,[g]
he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.
11 Out of his anguish he shall see;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one,[h] my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out himself to death
and was numbered with the transgressors,
yet he bore the sin of many
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Here is the link to Teresa Hord Owens' address to the January 20th Interfaith Gathering and Moral Mass Meeting in Memphis on Martin Luther King Jr's birthday:

Rev. Terri Hord Owen's speech from the January 20th Interfaith Gathering and Moral Mass Meeting.

The text Rev. Hord uses is Isaiah 11:1-9. Some include this passage as a "Servant Song."

* * *

A Disciple Affirmation

We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one Body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.