

**Presence in Absence:  
The Departed Jesus Who Remains**



**Small Group Study Guide  
Lent 2021**

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## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Everyone, leader and participants, should begin by reading the introduction (page 4) for its important orientation to the Gospel of John. Guidelines for participating in a small group can be found in the group covenant (page 19). Leaders will review this during your first meeting.

**Participants** can best prepare for each meeting by reading the assigned text in advance, at least once. They can also read the material that will guide the discussion, although this is not necessary to enter into the discussion.

If you are unable to attend a small group or the adult education class, you can use this guide each week to prepare to hear the sermon in worship on Sunday or during the week on the Nassau Church website. This guide can also help in your preparation for the adult education presentations by Dr. Berg. Or read the text and discuss the questions together as a family or couple. Perhaps you didn't sign up for a small group because the times were not convenient. At any time during Lent you can gather three or four friends on Zoom to talk about the Gospel of John using this guide.

**Leaders** of small groups, you will prepare by reading the text in advance as well as looking over the discussion plan to see how it will fit your group and the events of the day. For suggestions and reminders about leading small groups in general and this series in particular, turn to the end of this guide.

However and whenever you enter into this study, bring your own questions as you grapple with this material and the Christian discipleship today. May your faith increase even as you find new questions in the Gospel of John.

# INTRODUCTION

A striking feature of the Gospel of John is how frequently Jesus announces his impending departure from “this world.” These statements bewilder the crowds and worry his disciples. In his lengthy conversation with his disciples on the eve of his arrest, however, Jesus makes the seemingly contradictory claim that his departure ensures his ongoing presence among them. Our Lenten study will focus on this provocative, fascinating, and ultimately encouraging message Jesus delivers to his disciples in John 13–17.

John 13–17 is a lengthy and sophisticated dialogue between Jesus and his disciples that takes place during their celebration of the Passover meal on the evening of Jesus’ arrest by the Jewish authorities. The Fourth Evangelist has skillfully drawn on a number of literary genres in crafting these chapters: the Jewish testament that captures the final words of a patriarch like Abraham or Jacob; the dinner table discourse, or symposium, well known to us from ancient Greek philosophical writers; and even conventions from Greek and Roman dramas. The so-called “Last Supper Discourse” is a masterful literary and theological achievement.

Woven throughout the Last Supper Discourse are the recurring themes of Jesus’ imminent departure from “this world” and his promise to the disciples to remain with them. In this study we’ll examine the interplay between these two themes of presence and absence and explore the creative theological tension that results from their juxtaposition. The result is a confident assertion that the soon-to-be absent Jesus will nevertheless always be present among his disciples.

We enter this Lenten season in the throes of a global pandemic that has frequently rendered us isolated from our friends, families, and communities. The absence of fellowship and human connection has taken a toll on us all, and perhaps has even made us question God’s presence in our world and in our lives. May our Lenten study of the abiding presence of Jesus despite anxieties about his absence bring us all encouragement and hope.

# WEEK 1

*“Where I am going, you cannot follow me now;  
but you will follow afterward” (John 13:36b NRSV).*

The central act of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John is Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples, an intimate and tender scene that establishes humility, service, and love as hallmarks of Christian community. After this object lesson, Jesus begins a long farewell speech to his disciples that will carry all the way through the end of chapter 17.

Read John 13:1–38 to understand the larger context of our passage for today.

## Orienting Ourselves to John 13:31–38

Note the multiple occurrences to the verb “glorify” in 13:31–32. Jesus in John frequently uses this verb as well as its corresponding noun “glory.” Take a look at the following occurrences of the terms to get a sense for how Jesus uses them: 1:14; 2:11; 5:44; 7:18; 8:54; 12:16; 12:23, 28.

- What does it mean for Jesus to be “glorified”?

A major shift in the narrative occurs at 13:31

- What happens to trigger this shift?

## Exploring Presence in Absence in John 13:31–38

Jesus asserts in 13:33 and 13:36 that he will depart soon, and the disciples will not be able to follow him. Compare and contrast this scene to 7:32–36, where Jesus makes a similar statement.

- How do the two scenes compare? Do the circumstances of each scene make a difference in how we understand Jesus' words about his imminent departure?

In 13:34–35, Jesus issues the famous command for the disciples to love one another.

- What is the relationship between the love commandment and Jesus' impending absence from the disciples? How is love related to the “presence in absence” of Jesus?

## Questions for Reflection

- How does combining the stories of the Passover meal in the Synoptic Gospels and the footwashing in John on the day we call Maundy Thursday inform your discipleship?
- As you recall the group discussion about John 13, what stretches your trust in God? What supports it?

## WEEK 2

*“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you”  
(John 14:18 NRSV).*

Jesus explains the relationship of his work and identity to the Father who sent him and continues to speak of his imminent return to the Father. His words of assurance to the disciples include a reference to the coming “Advocate” and “Spirit of Truth,” which are names for the Holy Spirit found only in the Gospel of John in the New Testament.

Read **John 14:1–31** to understand the larger context of our passage for today.

### Orienting Ourselves to John 14:15–31

A prominent theme of the Gospel of John is the relationship of Jesus to the Father who sent him into the world, and here in chapter 14 it takes center stage. To get a grasp on Jesus’ teaching about the Father in chapter 14, take a look at some representative passages from earlier in the Gospel : 5:19–30; 6:35–40; and 10:22–39.

- What is at stake for Jesus’ in his insistent teachings about the Father? What truths does he want his hearers to comprehend?

In 14:16, Jesus promises to ask the Father to send an “advocate.” The Greek term used here typically refers to a defense attorney but can also refer more generally to one who comforts or consoles. It is clear from 14:17 and 14:26 that Jesus is referring to the Holy Spirit.

- What is the function and role of the “Advocate,” and how does its arrival relate to Jesus’ impending departure?

## Exploring Presence in Absence in John 14:15–31

This passage is filled with references to Jesus' presence and absence; he is going away but coming back; he will return to his Father but the Advocate will remain forever; and the world will not be able to see him but the disciples will be able to see him.

- Is it possible to make sense of all this language about coming and going, being absent but also present? As Jesus looks forward in the narrative, what event or events might he be describing?

Last week we explored love in relation to the presence in absence of Jesus. In today's passage, Jesus tells the disciples he is leaving "peace" with them (14:27).

- How does Jesus characterize the peace he will grant them? What do you think this kind of peace entails?

## Questions for Reflection

- During this time of pandemic and political and racial turmoil, what from John 14 and the group discussion gives you hope today?
- Where do you see the Advocate, Companion, Holy Spirit present in the world around you?

## WEEK 3

*“It is to your advantage that I go away” (John 16:7b NRSV).*

Jesus calls the disciples his “friends” rather than his “servants” and urges them to love one another sacrificially. He warns that the “world” will be hostile to them but that they will persevere in their discipleship and testimony with the aid of the Advocate.

Read **John 15:1–16:15** to understand the larger context of our passage for today.

### Orienting Ourselves to John 15:26–16:15

In 14:31, Jesus tells the disciples to rise and depart with him. Jesus then proceeds, however, to speak for three more chapters (15–17)! Note that 14:31 would seem to dovetail nicely with 18:1, an observation that leads many scholars to assert that chapters 15–17 were inserted here after the Gospel was written; it is certainly a plausible hypothesis. It is worth considering, however, that the contents of chapters 15–17 are clearly thematically related to the rest of the Gospel, and that the Fourth Evangelist is a sophisticated author.

- If we assume that the delay in the departure of Jesus and the disciples is not the result of clumsy editing but rather reflects literary intention, what is the effect of this delayed exit for readers of the Gospel? How does it enhance the narrative?

## Exploring Presence in Absence in John 15:26–16:15

In this passage, we learn more about the Advocate introduced in 14:16, 26. Look at the references in this passage to the Advocate and its equivalent term, “Spirit of Truth”: 15:26; 16:7; 16:13.

- What do we learn in this passage about the relationship between the Advocate, Jesus, and the Father? How does it help us further understand Jesus’ “presence in absence”?

Jesus explains in 16:4 that he is saying things to the disciples now that he did not say earlier because he was with them.

- How will Jesus’ explanations to the disciples help them when he is no longer present with them?

## Questions for Reflection

- As we continue to live under the rule of COVID–19, many of us have lost family members and friends as a result of the illness or we have lost face-to-face contact. How do Jesus’ words to the disciples about leaving connect with your life and faith today?
- How do the suggested Bible passages and the group discussion about the Advocate add to your understanding of the role of the Advocate in your life?

## WEEK 4

*“A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me” (John 16:16 NRSV).*

Jesus acknowledges that the disciples will grieve when he departs from them but assures them their grief will turn to joy when they see him again.

Read John 16:16–33 to understand the larger context of our passage for today.

### Orienting Ourselves to John 16:16–24

In 16:17–18 the disciples are struggling to understand Jesus’ words. Puzzled and confused reactions to Jesus’ teaching are common in John. Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is an often enigmatic speaker who employs irony, double-meanings, and provocative metaphors to communicate his message, and the result is often head-scratching and consternation on the part of his hearers. Read the following passages to get a better handle on this theme: 2:19–21; 3:1–9; 4:4–15; 6:48–60; 10:1–6.

- How are we as readers of the Gospel positioned with respect to Jesus’ enigmatic utterances? Does the Fourth Evangelist want to confound us as well?

## Exploring Presence in Absence in John 16:16–24

After a lengthy stretch of exposition by Jesus, the voice of the disciples returns in this passage (we last heard from them in 14:8).

- What do you think lies behind their questions about Jesus' absence and presence in 16:16–24? How does Jesus respond?

We've explored in previous weeks the themes of love and peace in relation to Jesus' "presence in absence." Now in 16:20–22 we encounter a new theme: joy.

- How does the joy of the disciples differ from the joy of the "world" in relationship to what happens to Jesus? What do you think Jesus means here by "world"?

## Questions for Reflection

- The passage for this week opens with questions from the disciples about what Jesus is saying, but they talk among themselves. What questions do you have for Jesus? How does his answer to the disciples work for your questions?
- Jesus told the disciples that while they find distress in the world, he speaks so they will have peace (v. 33). How do these words provide encouragement or peace for you?

## WEEK 5

*“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world”  
(John 17:11a NRSV).*

The Last Supper Discourse ends with a magisterial prayer offered by Jesus to the Father on behalf of the disciples. It weaves together the themes and main ideas of chapter 13–16 in a grand and poetic fashion and marks a major turning point in the arc of the narrative. At the conclusion of the prayer, Jesus and the disciples depart for the garden, where Jesus is betrayed and arrested.

Read **John 17:1–26** to understand the larger context of our passage for today.

### Orienting Ourselves to John 17:11–26

The “world” is a prominent concept in this passage and occurs frequently in the Gospel. Take a look at some representative uses: 1:9–10; 3:16–17; 7:7; 14:17–19; 15:19.

- What is “the world,” as Jesus uses this term in the Gospel of John?
- What is the relationship between the disciples and the world, according to 17:11–26?

In 17:20–23, Jesus prays for the disciples to be “one.”

- What seems to be primarily at stake for Jesus in the unity of the disciples? What will it accomplish or make possible?

## Exploring Presence in Absence in John 17:11–26

Jesus has previously enjoined the disciples to love one another and has promised them peace and joy. Here in 17:17–19 he asks his Father to “sanctify them with truth” as they are sent out into the world.

- What role do you imagine truth plays in the lives of the disciples in their mission to the world?

Woven throughout this passage are references to the relationship between Jesus and his Father and the implications of that relationship for the disciples.

- How does Jesus’ relationship with his Father relate to the question of his presence with the disciples?

## Questions for Reflection

- In this long prayer, Jesus seems to be going round and round in connecting his disciples to him. What from his prayer makes a connection with Jesus stronger for you? Or your connection with God?
- What from this prayer might strengthen you to enter Holy Week?

## WEEK 6

*“The light is with you for a little longer” (John 12:35a NRSV).*

In the final week of our Lenten study, we jump back in the narrative to John 12, the story of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. We will find that it contains many of the themes we have studied in the Last Supper Discourse in John 13–17 and thus is a fitting way to conclude our engagement with the Fourth Gospel.

Read John 12:12–50 to understand the larger context of our passage for today.

### Orienting Ourselves to John 12:12–36

The triumphal entry scene here in John 12:12–19 has the same basic narrative contours as the accounts found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Note, however, the parenthetical aside in 12:16 about the disciples not understanding the significance of the triumphal entry as it occurred but only understood it after Jesus was “glorified.” See similar statements of deferred understanding in 2:22 and 8:25–28.

- What do these statements suggest is the role of Jesus’ “lifting up” or “glorification” in relation to the ability to understand who Jesus is?

In 12:23 and 12:27, Jesus remarks that his “hour” had come.

- How does the characterization of the “hour” in 13:1 compare to Jesus’ earlier statements regarding “the hour” or “his hour” in 2:4; 4:21; 5:25; 7:30; and 8:20?
- To what does Jesus refer when he speaks of “his hour”?

## Exploring Presence in Absence in John 12:27–36

Light and darkness is a running motif in John; some important passages are: 1:1–10; 3:14–21; 8:12; 9:4–5. In 12:35–36 Jesus encourages the crowd to believe in the light (himself) while he is with them so they might become children of light.

- What does the imagery here suggest about Jesus’ “presence in absence” (cf. also 12:46)? If Jesus is the light that has come into the world, is the light absent from the world once Jesus departs to his Father?

## Questions for Reflection

- In John 8:12 and 12:35–36, Jesus speaks of himself as light and in 15:1–8, he calls himself the vine. What metaphor for Jesus would you suggest for the 21st century?
- As we approach Holy Week and the joyous celebration of Easter, what from Jesus’ words about presence in absence do you want to take with you?

## NOTES FOR LEADERS

Leading a small group is not quite the same as leading a Bible study. While the goal of a Bible study would be to increase biblical knowledge, the primary goal for a small group is to deepen relationships among the participants as each one grows in relationship with God and Jesus and as Christ's disciple. For these Lenten small groups, the content to assist in meeting this goal is from the Gospel of John, specifically chapters 12–17.

At the first gathering, take time to review the Group Covenant on the following page. It is important that each member of a small group is clear about the guidelines that make for a successful time together. Invite the group to add to the covenant.

A simple process for each week could be:

- Ask the opening question (see below).
- Prayer
- Read or invite a group member to read the Bible passage or selections from it aloud.
- Read and discuss the questions in “Orienting Ourselves.”
- Read and discuss the questions in “Exploring Absence in Presence.”
- Present one or more questions for reflection.
- Invite prayer requests and close with prayer.

### Opening Questions

To help the participants become better acquainted, and especially if anyone in your group doesn't know the other participants, invite everyone to answer a question at the beginning of each gathering. This time also helps the group make the transition of what has been occupying their minds to enter into the small group discussion space. Suggested questions are below, but feel free to come up with your own.

- Week 1: Recall a communion service that stands out in your memory. Name the feature (setting, participants, or time in your life) that brings it to mind.

- Week 2: Recall a person older than you who has figured significantly in your faith journey. Name something about the person that prompted this relationship.
- Week 3: Recall the departure (moving away, death, whatever) of someone close to you. What was a strong emotion for you during the departure?
- Week 4: Recall a happy occasion when someone whom you had not seen for a long time returned. What word or two describes the occasion?
- Week 5: Recall a time when you had to do something new by yourself (new school, job, newborn baby). What or who helped you?
- Week 6: Think back over the past year. What about your faith has stayed with you the whole time?

Give the group a moment to think about their response. You can model the amount of time for each person by answering the question first. You may need to remind them to keep their answers short from time to time; there is much more to discuss.

## Questions for Reflection

These questions at the end of each session can be discussed in the group. However, if time is short, invite two or three responses and encourage the participants to think about them on their own during the coming week. At the opening of the next meeting, invite comments on the reflection questions.

## Questions from the Group about the Gospel of John

If your small group has a question and would like to offer it to Shane to include in a future presentation, email it to Corrie Berg ([corrie@nassauchurch.org](mailto:corrie@nassauchurch.org)). No promises, though.

*May leading your small group during Lent be a joy and a spiritual discipline that forms and strengthens your faith.*

# GROUP COVENANT

- ❖ **What happens in the group stays in the group.** To build and maintain an atmosphere of trust, confidentiality is essential.
- ❖ **Speak and make space for others to speak.** Each voice is important. If you are usually quiet, make an effort to offer your thoughts. If you speak out easily, hold back for others to speak or invite someone who hasn't spoken to speak.
- ❖ **Stay with the group.** Physically, be present at each gathering rather than treat attendance as just another option. Mentally, listen to others and participate. Being present can be more difficult in a virtual setting. Try to put yourself in a place where you won't be distracted by others.
- ❖ **Focus on ideas, not the person.** If you disagree, disagree with the idea, but don't belittle the person.
- ❖ **Speak from your own awareness.** When offering an opinion, claim it as your opinion rather than make generalizations.
- ❖ **Everyone in the group is a learner.** In a small group, there are no experts. Learning is a lifelong process.

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