Making Sense of the Bible:

Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today

Chapters for Next Week: 12 & 13

Scriptures: John 1:1–18 | John 20:30–31 | 2 Peter 3:14–16

Christ the Servant Lutheran Church ELCA

Who Wrote This, and When:

Session overview: John reads nothing like the other three. Slower, stranger, more like poetry than reporting. Hamilton treats that difference as a gift rather than a problem to solve. Then he shows how the church sorted out which books belonged, a long argument that took centuries and did not happen in one smoky room.



Opening Prayer Holy God, you spoke and the world began.
Then you spoke again in Jesus, and your Word put on skin and moved into the world.
Thank you for everyone who carried that story to us. The ones who preached it, copied it by hand, argued over it, and passed it down so it could land in our laps tonight.
Quiet the noise of this world that keeps us from treating your Word like a museum piece.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



Starter Discussion Question:

If a friend who'd never opened a Bible asked what the Gospel of John is like, what would you tell them?

Which New Testament book are you least likely to open? Why?

Notes:

Chapters for Next Week: 14 - 16

Scriptures: 2 Timothy 3:14–17 | Hebrews 4:12 | 1 Kings 19:9–13

Chapter 12:
The Perplexing, Puzzling, & Profound John

Read aloud together (three voices for the first passage):

John 1:1–5
John 1:6–14
John 1:15–18
John 20:30–31 - where John tells us plainly why he wrote the book

What jumps out at you? Notice that John doesn't start in a manger or at a river. He starts before the world even existed. Before we see Jesus do one thing, we already know who he is.

What Makes John Different

About 92% of John isn't found in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Same Jesus, same cross, same empty tomb. But a very different way of telling it. Think of the first three Gospels as the news report & John as the sermon preached years later by someone who has thought about it his whole life.

	Matthew, Mark, and Luke	John
How Jesus teaches	Short parables about the kingdom of God	Long speeches and "I am" sayings about himself
Where it happens	Mostly Galilee, one trip to Jerusalem	Mostly in and around Jerusalem, several trips
How long	Feels like about a year	About three years
Clearing the temple	The last week, and it leads to the cross	The very beginning of his ministry
What pushes the leaders over the edge	The temple scene	Raising Lazarus
The Last Supper	Bread and cup	Jesus washes feet
Timing of the cross	After the Passover meal	While the Passover lambs are being killed
What healings are called	Miracles, mighty works	Signs, pointing past themselves

How John is laid out: Jesus' public ministry (chapters 1–12), his long talk with his closest friends on the last night (13–17), and his death and resurrection (18–20). Chapter 21 reads like an add-on, where Jesus restores Peter after his denial.

Who wrote it? The church has long tied this Gospel to John and to "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Many scholars think it took shape in a community built around that disciple's memories, maybe written down by more than one hand. Most agree it was the last Gospel written, sometime after AD 90.

Let's Talk

1. John tells us straight out why he wrote this book (20:30–31). He wants us to believe, and in believing, to have life. How does knowing an author's purpose change the way you read?
2. John calls Jesus' healings "signs." A sign isn't the destination. It points you somewhere. Does that word change how you think about miracles, then or now?
3. Why do you think John left out so much of what the other Gospels tell, and added so much they don't?
4. Hamilton says the first three Gospels give us a human Jesus with hints of the divine, and John gives us a divine Jesus with hints of the human. When you picture Jesus, which one shows up first? What happens to our faith when we only hold onto one?
5. Hamilton turns to Matthew, Mark, and Luke for the *what*, *when*, and *how*. He turns to John for the *who* and *why*. Which questions are you asking of Jesus these days?
6. Is the Jesus who tells short stories about seeds and lost sheep more "real" than the Jesus who gives long speeches about bread and light? Or do we need both?
7. Hamilton suggests the split between mainline and evangelical churches in the last century runs along the same line. Mainline folks lean on the kingdom of God and loving your neighbor. Evangelicals lean on being born again and a personal relationship with Jesus. Do you buy that? What else drives churches apart?
8. Be honest. Which side does your own faith lean toward? What would it look like this week to live a little more of the other side?

Take It Home

Sometime this week, read John 1:1–18 out loud. Alone, in a quiet room. It was written to be heard, not skimmed. Notice which line sticks with you, and carry it into your day.
Close tonight with prayer, taking turns around the table.

Chapter 13:
Which Books Made It into the New Testament and Why

A quick tour of the New Testament: Hand these out and read them around the room:

Matthew 5:1–3

John 3:16–17

Acts 9:3–6

Romans 8:38–39

1 Corinthians 12:27–28

Galatians 2:16

1 Timothy 4:11–12

Philemon 1:8–10

James 2:14–17

1 Peter 2:11–12

1 John 5:18–19

Jude 1:4

Revelation 22:1–2

Step back and look at all of these it together:

What threads do you hear running through?

Could any one book carry all of that by itself?

Now read 2 Peter 3:14–16. Here's a writer who already treats Paul's letters as scripture, admits they're hard to understand, and warns that some folks are twisting them. Sound familiar?

How the New Testament Came Together:

For the first few decades, the New Testament wasn't a book. It was a person, Jesus, and a bunch of witnesses telling his story. Nobody sat down and voted the whole thing in one afternoon. It grew slowly, kind of like a path through a field. People kept walking the same way because it kept getting them home.

When	What happened
AD 50s–60s	Paul writes letters to the churches he started. He never imagines they'll be called scripture.
About AD 96	Clement, bishop of Rome, quotes Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Paul's letters are already getting around.
Late 1st or early 2nd century	The *Didache*, a sort of early church handbook, borrows from Matthew and tells believers to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day.
About 130	Papias connects the Gospel of Mark to Peter's memories, and a Gospel to Matthew.
About 140	Marcion throws out the Old Testament and keeps only an edited Luke and ten of Paul's letters. The church realizes it needs to get clear on which books count.
Mid-2nd century	Justin Martyr describes Sunday worship. The Gospels are read right alongside the prophets.
About 170	Tatian blends the four Gospels into one story. Irenaeus insists there are four, and only four.
Third century	Origen sorts books into "accepted" and "disputed." Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude are still in question.
367	Bishop Athanasius lists the 27 books we have today in his Easter letter.
397	A council in Carthage names those same 27 as the scriptures to be read in church.

That's more than 300 years of reading, praying, and arguing.
Even later, Martin Luther had real doubts about James, Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation.

What Got a Book In?

Scholars usually name three tests: apostolicity, catholicity, and orthodoxy.
Hamilton puts the same ideas in plainer words.

1. **Usefulness.** Churches kept reading it because it helped them. Paul's letters got copied and passed along because they actually spoke to people's lives.
2. **Consistency.** It matched the faith the apostles preached. Something like the Gospel of Thomas sounds strange and secretive next to Acts, Paul, and the four Gospels.
3. **Association.** It was tied to the apostles or the people who knew them. That's why some folks also valued books like 1 Clement and the *Didache* for a while.
4. **Acceptance.** The vast majority of churches, east and west, had been using it for a long time. A book a few churches suddenly discovered in the 300s didn't make the cut.

What about inspiration? The early church believed the Spirit was at work in these writings. But you can't measure inspiration with a ruler. It's something the church came to recognize in books that were useful, faithful, and widely loved.

Let's Talk

1. Do you think Paul ever pictured his letters being read in church 2,000 years later? Does it matter if a writer knows they're writing scripture?
2. The *Didache* told Christians to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day. Good idea? What would change in your life if you did that this week?
3. Marcion couldn't square the God of the Old Testament with the Father of Jesus, so he cut the Old Testament loose. Have you ever felt that tension? How do you hold the two together?
4. Marcion also borrowed from early Gnostic ideas that split the world in two: the physical stuff is bad, the spiritual stuff is good. Where do you see that split showing up in how people live their faith today?
5. The canon settled slowly, with disagreement along the way. Does a long, human, argued-over process make you trust the result more or less?
6. If you had to pick the criteria for what belongs in scripture, what would yours be?
7. Luther and Calvin both had doubts about some books. Is it okay for Christians, or pastors, to wrestle with parts of the Bible?
8. Every one of us has a canon inside the canon, the parts we actually read. What's in yours? What have you quietly left out, and what might God be trying to say through it?

Take It Home

Pick the New Testament book you named in the warm-up, the one you usually skip.
Read one chapter of it this week. Before you start, ask God to show you why the church held onto it all these years.