

SESSION

3

THE GOSPELS: MEMORY,
METAPHOR AND METHOD**INTEND**

(This is for your guidance: you can share aspects of it with the group at any time that seems right to you.)

Outcomes for this session include the following:

- deepening our awareness of the distinction between historical memory and metaphorical narrative;
- grounding our learning in group exploration of passages of scripture;
- wondering together about the significance of the birth stories in the gospels;
- becoming more aware of the challenges faced by biblical scholars in the search for the historical Jesus;
- experiencing the gospels as a part of the first-century developing Christian tradition;
- honouring the presence of Spirit and Wisdom in our lives in community;
- meeting Marcus Borg through another short DVD presentation and engaging with more of his ideas;
- practicing listening to one another with openness and compassion;
- exercising imagination as well as intellect and emotion.

PREPARE

- Place water and drinking glasses on a side table that is easily accessible to all.
- Place a candle on a central table; have matches ready.
- Place a Bible on the table with the candle.
- Ensure that participants have a copy of the *Participant Booklet*.
- Have the art image for this session ready to display.

- ❑ Have a DVD player and TV or data projector ready to play the Marcus Borg video clip, “The Birth Stories as Overtures to the Gospels and the Story of Jesus.”
- ❑ Look ahead to the preparations for Session 4, as it will require more time than has been required in the first three sessions.

GATHER

As people gather for this session, they will find a topic of conversation in the *Participant Booklet* to engage in while they are waiting for the session to begin. For this session the topic is *Reflect on a time when the story of Jesus’ birth has had meaning beyond our culture’s celebrations of Christmas.*

OPEN

At the beginning of each session we hear passages of scripture that draw attention to light, in either a real or metaphoric manner. As we hear the scripture passages, the candle of Jesus will be lit in our midst.

The candle is lit during the reading of these passages of scripture.

Luke 1:78–79

Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,
 God’s Sunrise will break in upon us,
 Shining on those in the darkness,
 those sitting in the shadow of death,
 Then showing us the way, one foot at a time,
 down the path of peace.

Isaiah 60:1–3

Get out of bed, Jerusalem! Wake up. Put your face in the sunlight.
 God’s bright glory has risen for you.
 The whole earth is wrapped in darkness,
 all people sunk in deep darkness,

But God rises on you,
God's sunrise glory breaks over you.
Nations will come to your light,
rulers to your sunburst brightness.

Matthew 2:9–10

Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in
the eastern skies.
It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child.
They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place!
They had arrived at the right time!

Isaiah 9:2

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.
For those who lived in a land of deep shadows –
light! sunbursts of light!

John 1:4–5

What came into existence was Life,
and the Life was Light to live by.
The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;
the darkness couldn't put it out.

John 1:9

The Life-Light was the real thing:
Every person entering Life
he brings into Light.

John 9:5

For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light.
I am the world's Light.

(FROM *THE MESSAGE* BY EUGENE H. PETERSON, 1995, NAVPRESS PUBLISHING GROUP)

Engage 1: Jesus Beyond Words

Display the poster-size image provided for this session for members of the group to see.

This image was chosen in relation to the scripture passages that we just read. It is a visual metaphor – a creative expression that invites interpretation by the viewer. As with all creative expression, what the artist intends may not be what the audience experiences. When you look at this painting you will see things that were intentionally incorporated into the painting by the artist, and you will see things that only you can see because you bring to the viewing of the painting your own life experience, your own very subjective perspective.

Think of your viewing of this painting as a kind of metaphoric “warm-up.” You are exercising your capacity to see meaning in literary and visual composition. Sit with one other person and speak to one another about the following:

- **what you see in the painting;**
- **the meanings that it conveys for you;**
- **its emotional impact on you.**

Engage 2: Memory Metaphorized

Borg writes on page 54: “As metaphorical narratives, the gospel stories about Jesus fall into two categories. The first is *memory metaphorized* – stories that contain the memory of something that happened, but that are told in such a way as to give them a more than historical-factual meaning.”

1. Read the following biblical passage in the group.
2. Move into groups of three and in conversation consider how this is an example of a passage that has a basis in memory and how it has also been given a metaphoric meaning. What events from this story might actually have a basis in memory? What are the more-than-factual meanings that you take from this story in the way that Mark tells it?

Mark 14:32–42

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

Engage 3: Purely Metaphorical Narratives

Referring again to page 54, Borg writes: “As metaphorical narratives, the gospel stories about Jesus fall into two categories...The second is purely metaphorical narratives. These are not based on memory of a particular event and thus are not history remembered, but are stories created for the sake of their metaphorical meaning.”

1. Read the following biblical passage in the group.
2. In the same groups of three consider how this is an example of a symbolic narrative created for its metaphorical meaning. What are the more-than-factual meanings that you take from this story in the way that Mark tells it?

Mark 6:34–44

As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand.

Engage 4: The Stories of Jesus’ Birth

Borg writes on pages 60–61: “The stories of Jesus’ birth in Matthew and Luke are among the best-known stories in the gospels. For many Christians, our earliest memories of Jesus, the Bible, and God are associated with these stories. And when we were children, most of us took it for granted that ‘it happened this way.’ But the vast majority of mainstream biblical scholars see these stories as metaphorical narratives rather than as history remembered.”

Borg notes three main reasons why scholars see them as metaphorical narratives:

- They are accounts, late in the first century, found only in Matthew and Luke;
- The plot line in Matthew is quite different from Luke;
- These stories look like they belong to the literary genre of symbolic narrative with features such as angels, messages in dreams, a special star, and divine conception.

What is the significance of these birth stories in the gospels of Matthew and Luke? Let's hear Marcus Borg respond to that question on the DVD:

1. Play the DVD clip of Marcus Borg on the topic, "The Birth Stories as Overtures to the Gospels and the Story of Jesus."
2. Share your responses to Borg's presentation on the birth stories in small groups of five or six, or as a whole group.
3. In the same groups go around and share insights about the difference this understanding of the birth stories might make to your Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany celebrations.

Engage 5: History or Metaphor? That is the Question.

"How does one make discerning historical decisions about how much is memory and how much is post-Easter testimony, about how much is history remembered and how much is metaphorical narrative?" (p. 69)

Why answer this question? We could just leave it to the biblical scholars to do their research, consulting with one another and publishing the results. However, Marcus Borg provides us with a window into the exciting world of the biblical scholar and historian: "The study of the historical Jesus is one of the most exciting intellectual and religious adventures of the last few centuries" (p. 76).

Borg also makes the following observation about history as a craft:

The writing of history is neither a science nor an art. Direct observation of the past is not possible, just as verification through experimentation is impossible. The verifiable results of science are beyond what a historian can provide. Neither is it an art, for it is not sheer imagination and creativity. It is perhaps more like a craft in which a construction is made out of existing material. It involves both data and creativity. And as with a craft, one learns how to do it by doing it. It is not a process in which one simply learns the rules and then mechanically applies them (p. 75).

What follows is a brief summary of the “criteria and considerations” (pp. 69–75) that scholars like Borg bring to their examination of the biblical text in distinguishing between memory, testimony, history, and metaphor. Review this summary together and then discuss in the group the question that follows the summary.

1. Multiple Attestation

“If an element of the gospel tradition – story or teaching or theme – is found in *two or more independent gospel sources*, at least one of which is early, it has a good claim to be memory” (p. 70).

2. Consistency

If an element of the tradition is consistent with the image of Jesus that emerges from the use of multiple attestation, “then it may be regarded as memory, even if it is found in only one source” (p. 70).

Example:

- a number of Jesus’ parables found only in one source that are consistent in their form and perspective with what else we think we know about Jesus

3. Tendencies of the Developing Tradition

“If a text contains a *demonstrable tendency of the developing tradition*, then there is a good possibility that it is a post-Easter product rather than memory” (p. 71).

Examples:

- the tendency to add Christological language to texts that do not have it
- the tendency to place a short statement that seeks to crystallize meaning at the end of one of Jesus’ parables

4. Environment

If a story or teaching is to be seen as memory, it must fit into the environment of Jesus; that is, into the time and place of the Jewish homeland in the first third of the first century (pp. 72–73).

Example:

- Jesus making a statement that abolishes the distinction between kosher food and forbidden food, a distinction central to the dietary laws of the Jewish Bible.

5. Spectacular Events (pp. 73–75)

If a story is reporting on a spectacular event such as stilling a storm, there are four key questions to be considered:

- Does the language of the story have obvious symbolic meaning?
- What are my own limits of “the spectacular,” of what is possible?
- Do I want to affirm that Jesus, as a figure of history, was fully human?
- What’s the line between “spectacular events” and acts of healing and exorcism?

Question for group discussion: What new insights do you have into the gospels as a result of doing this exercise?

ANTICIPATE

In the next session we will enter both descriptively and imaginatively into the social world of Jesus so that we can have some sense, no matter how vague and distant, of the context in which he lived. Of the ten sessions in this program, this is the one that requires the most preparation! Here are three things you can do:

1. **Read Chapter 4: “The Shaping of Jesus: Jewish Tradition in an Imperial World.”**
2. **Make reference to the “Chapter 4 Summary Notes” on page 17 in the *Participant Booklet* as you review the information that Borg presents in this chapter.**
3. **Choose a character from the list presented on page 15 of the *Participant Booklet* under the title, “Hearing the Voices of Jesus’ World.” Follow the instructions given on that page in preparation for the next session.**

CLOSE

ONE: Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,

ALL: God's Sunrise will break in upon us.

ONE: Get out of bed, Jerusalem! Wake up. Put your face in the sunlight.

ALL: God's bright glory has risen for you.

ONE: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

**ALL: For those who lived in a land of deep shadow – sunbursts
of light!**

ONE: What came into existence was Life. Light to live by!

**ALL: The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't
put it out.**

ONE: Jesus is life-light for our world. A light for all time!

ALL: Jesus is life-light for our world. A light for all time!

REFLECT (for the program facilitator after the session)

1. Leadership: As you reflect on your leadership, notice what you did that made a difference in the way that participants got involved in this third session.
2. Participants: As you think about the participants, reflect on the journey of learning that each one is taking.
3. Outcomes: As you think about what you set out to do in the session, notice what was achieved, both planned and unexpected.
4. God-Aware: Notice where the Spirit was visibly active in the process of the session, in the life of the learning community...and give thanks.