

# God's Radical Love For All

A Bible Study  
by  
Open Hearts. Open Church.  
The North/West Lower Michigan Synod  
Task Force on  
Sexual Orientation  
and  
Gender Identity

## Participant's Guide and Leader's Guide

March 10, 2018 Release



*Open Hearts. Open Church.*

The North/West Lower Michigan Synod Task Force on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

# Introduction

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Thank you for opening your hearts to hear what the Bible has to say about God's radical love for all.

This bible study was created by Open Hearts. Open Church. - the North/West Lower Michigan Synod Task Force on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity to help individuals, small groups, and congregations better understand what the Bible has to say regarding God's inclusive love, especially focusing on people of all gender identities and sexual orientations.

If you have any comments, questions, or would like more information please contact Open Hearts. Open Church. at [info@openheartsopenchurch.org](mailto:info@openheartsopenchurch.org)

Two documents from the ELCA's Book of Faith Initiative (<http://www.bookoffaith.org/>) form the basis of this bible study.

- What Lutherans Think About The Bible  
<http://www.bookoffaith.org/pdf/What%20Lutherans%20Think%20About%20the%20Bible-3.pdf>
- Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible  
<http://www.bookoffaith.org/pdf/Some%20Helpful%20Ways%20to%20Read%20the%20Bible-3.pdf>

Please read these so you can become familiar with them as they help you through this Bible study.

## Note to Leaders

Throughout this bible study you'll find notes in shaded boxes like this one. The Leader's Guide includes all that is included in the Participant's Guide as well as some prompts for your use in leading discussion.

Thank you for taking on the leadership of this Bible Study! We are praying for you and for your group's study. Here are a few notes which we hope will be helpful to you.

We ask that you consider spending one class session discussing the two documents mentioned above from the Book of Faith initiative to set a starting point for the study.

# Introduction

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Please be sure to get to the final questions of each section (Reflecting on the text and discussion: What resonates with you? What will you think more about? How has this understanding expanded your boundaries?) They are intended to be the capstone for each section.

We recommend that each text be given one session for discussion.

Included in this Study Guide are the texts, questions, and some supplemental pieces.

Be sure to invite the participation of each person as they feel comfortable.

# John 12:27-33

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## The Bible Passage

John 12:27-33

<sup>27</sup>“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup>Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” <sup>29</sup>The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” <sup>30</sup>Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. <sup>31</sup>Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup>And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” <sup>33</sup>He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what way(s) do you hear this text as law? In what way(s) do you hear this text as gospel?

Law and Gospel is often better expressed by verbs rather than nouns: So we read a passage (or our neighbor does), and we are convicted. We may even despair. We are struck by the needs of our neighbor. We hear who we are – sinners in need of forgiveness, lost souls in need of being found, lonely creatures in need of love. We hear God’s word as law. The passage “laws” us. The law drives us to the foot of the cross.

Or we read this same passage or another and we know the reality of God’s promise to us, to the world. We experience God’s forgiveness and grace. Christ is for us. We are surrounded by steadfast and committed love. We hear who God is. We hear God’s word as gospel. The passage “gospels” us. At the cross we experience the love and grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Examples:

Law: “Now is the judgment of this world.” Judgment means determining right and wrong.

Gospel: “all people” - there is no limit to Jesus’ declaration that he will draw all people to himself. According to Saint Augustine God is beyond space and time. So, when God

## John 12:27-33

takes on space and time (in becoming incarnate in Jesus) there is no place, no people, no race, no distinguishable group to which God does not make God's self available. (Augustine's Confessions, Book 11) "All people" in 12:32 is expansive, including Greeks at the supposed-to-be-all-Judean festival. God's judgment, according to this text, is that Jesus will draw all people to himself. That is good news.

"This is the reason I came to this hour / the voice is for you." In society we view death as an end; in this case it's a beginning. "The ruler of this world" is death, and Jesus is driving out death.

2. How does this passage show forth Christ? What does this text tell us about the person, the character of Jesus?

Example: "My soul is troubled." In the middle of his peril, his facing death, Jesus is still concerned about others. v. 30 Throughout all the turmoil, Jesus was always focused on giving, teaching, loving others.

Example: v. 32 Jesus is showing that there is something beyond death, Jesus is pointing to resurrection.

3. What other passages from the Bible help us to understand this passage? How does the context of this text inform your understanding of it? How does the reading and interpretation of the other passages inform your reading of this text?

Context: Mary the sister of Lazarus (whom Jesus raised from the dead John 11) anoints Jesus' feet with a costly perfume and wipes them with her hair (John 12:1-8), the chief priests plot to kill Lazarus because he is making Jesus popular (John 12:9-11), Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem (John 12:12-19), Greeks ask to see Jesus and he says, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor." (John 12:20-27).

Luke 4:1-13 The Temptation of Christ: "Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I

## John 12:27-33

please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” ’”

“[The Devil] reveals to Jesus the essence of these kingdoms, the inner dynamics that make them work. Their power and glory belong to the devil because they work by the devil’s power. This power is captured in his names. Satan, ‘Satanas,’ means the accuser. Devil, ‘diabolos,’ means the one who tears things apart, the divider. The kingdoms of the world work by the strategies of accusation and division. If Jesus wants political and social power, he must play the games of accusation and division...All Jesus has to do is commit himself to the strategies of accusing other people and dividing them from one another. But Jesus is already committed to another strategy. He adores the Lord whose way is forgiveness and reconciliation. Once again, Jesus will bring about the kingdom not by the reigning tactics of temporal power...Forgive one another and be reconciled is the way forward.” In other words, Jesus comes to bring people to himself. (The Relentless Widow: Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christians Preachers and Teachers. John Shea, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN ©1992.)

#### 4. What is the plain meaning of this text?

Historical context: The gospel of John was written at least 100 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus by a person who had never personally met Jesus. It was written for a group of Jewish Christians who had been exiled from their synagogue. Therefore, they were hurt by being exiled, missed their brothers and sisters who were left behind, and were dealing with persecution.

“All people” in 12:32 is expansive, including Greeks at the supposed-to-be-all-Judean festival.

Literary Context: just before the resurrection therefore Jesus conveys a sense of urgency. Just as in the Farewell Discourse and High Priestly Prayer (John 14-17). Jesus is attempting to impart all of his wisdom and religious knowledge to the disciples.

Theological reflection: This text reflects the duality of Jesus’ nature - human and divine. Saint Athanasius, “God became human so that we could become more divine.” See also the creeds.

#### 5. How is this text interpreted by my community? In my experience? How might others hear this passage, especially people from cultures different from my own?

# John 12:27-33

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Jesus came to do an expected thing: to redeem the world. But he did it in an unexpected way: He came in death and resurrection rather than as a military ruler.

Jesus' unexpected actions forced the people to read Scripture in a new way.

\*\*\*\*\*cite global, women's, Jewish, etc.

6. Reflecting on the text and discussion:
  - What resonates with you?
  - What will you think more about?
  - How has this understanding expanded your boundaries?

# Matthew 15:21-28

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## The Bible Passage

Matthew 15:21-28

<sup>21</sup>Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup>Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” <sup>23</sup>But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” <sup>24</sup>He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” <sup>25</sup>But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” <sup>26</sup>He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” <sup>27</sup>She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” <sup>28</sup>Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And daughter was healed instantly.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what way(s) do you hear this text as law? In what way(s) do you hear this text as gospel?

Law: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Gospel: “Let it be done for you as you wish.” This shows the effect of our prayers on God.

2. How does this passage show forth Christ? What does this text tell us about the person, the character of Jesus?

Example: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Jesus is influenced by his own culture – he is Jewish in every sense, including cultural prejudices.

“Then Jesus answered her, ‘woman great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’” Still Jesus is moved with compassion for the woman, and heals her daughter because of this compassion and love. It should also be noted that Jesus’ dialogue with her is important because it was against cultural norms for a man to talk to a woman alone. His willingness to answer her cries indicates that Jesus is breaking down the boundaries that divide us and keep us from God.



## Matthew 15:21-28

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3. What other passages from the Bible help us to understand this passage? How does the context of this text inform your understanding of it? How does the reading and interpretation of the other passages inform your reading of this text?

Context: Jesus has been preaching that it is not what we eat or how we wash that defiles, but what comes out of our mouths [10-20] which makes adherence to purity laws obsolete and sets faith and loving others as the most important way of honoring God.

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8: God declares that even foreigners who show faith in Him will be gathered to God's Holy Mountain.

Romans 11: 1-2a: Paul is affirming that God is still with those of the House of Israel.

4. What is the plain meaning of this text?

Historical context: The gospel of John was written at least 80 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus by a person who had never personally met Jesus. It was written for a group of Jewish Christians who had witnessed the total destruction of the Temple by the Romans. Therefore they were in a state of spiritual disarray, wondering what their relationship was to their Jewish brothers and sisters who were also displaced and who had rejected them, and what their relationship was to the gentiles who were beginning to believe in Jesus. The major theological debate of this time was what to whom the message of Christ was intended. One school of thought was that because God's original covenant was with Abraham then gentiles needed to become Jewish before they became Christian. Another school of thought saw God's covenant as being with Noah, which extended to all people and felt that belief in Jesus was all that was needed to be saved.

Literary Context: Just after a discourse on purity laws and faith. Jesus has just made the point to the religious elite that even if you follow the purity laws, but your heart is not oriented toward God and loving others then you are still not pure. Quoting Isaiah "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;" Immediately after the encounter with the Canaanite woman Jesus goes to the top of the mountain where he is met by crowds who we are told "praised the God of Israel" indicating that some of the crowd were gentiles.

Theological reflection: This text reflects the tension between Israel and the Gentiles, it also addresses the question "who are God's people"? Jesus' healing of the daughter reveals that all people are God's people. Furthermore this text explores the idea that our circumstances and prayers do affect God, and may even change God's mind.

# Matthew 15:21-28

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5. How is this text interpreted by my community? In my experience? How might others hear this passage, especially people from cultures different from my own?

Jesus was the Messiah and was therefore seen as the Savior only to the people of Israel, his acceptance of the Canaanite woman and healing of her daughter is an unexpected action that opens up Salvation to all people.

Jesus' unexpected actions forced the people to read Scripture in a new way.

How might this text be received by someone 'outside' of the dominant culture? Someone who has been excluded by the church? Examples: LGBTQ people, people of other religions particularly Islam?

6. Reflecting on the text and discussion:
- What resonates with you?
  - What will you think more about?
  - How has this understanding expanded your boundaries?

# Galatians 3:26-29

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## The Bible Passage

Galatians 3:26-29

<sup>26</sup>For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup>As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what way(s) do you hear this text as law? In what way(s) do you hear this text as gospel?

Chapter three of Galatians is a strong word of our unity in God's promise. The verses prior to our study point how we guarded under the law until faith would be revealed through Christ; the law was our disciplinarian (other translations say custodian, but a word study reveals that "tutor" may be even better choice) until Christ came. The strong grace in the text is that we are all equal before God, one before God, children of God, together in receiving God's promise.

2. How does this passage show forth Christ? What does this text tell us about the person, the character of Jesus?

"To put on someone" is an ancient idiom for assuming the standing or position of another person. Because Christ is the son of God, when we put on Christ, we become the children of God. We are baptized into Christ, have put on Christ, and we share his identity. This is not an imitation of Christ, but a new creation, God's gift to us through baptism.

This passage is radical in asserting that the categories of diversity created by the world have no relevance in Christ, and therefore have no relevance to us as new creations in God.

## Galatians 3:26-29

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3. What other passages from the Bible help us to understand this passage? How does the context of this text inform your understanding of it? How does the reading and interpretation of the other passages inform your reading of this text?

Background on text: Paul writes to the Galatians addressing their identity formation as Christians, bringing them a “message of radical grace, apart from works of the Law” (Richard Hays, New Interpreter’s Bible). Paul is concerned that the radical equality of Jews and Gentiles be implemented in the early church. Gentiles were being demoted to second class citizens because they were resisting circumcision; Paul asserts this physical mark is not necessary for full equality in the early church, as through baptism they are children of God.

Other passages:

John 8:31-36 - The Son makes us free; we abide in his household

Romans 6:3-4 - newness of life we claim in Jesus

John 17:21 - oneness with Christ and the Father

Genesis 12:2-3 - through you all the nations will be blessed

Colossians 3:12-15 - Clothe yourselves with compassion and love

4. What is the plain meaning of this text?

Through baptism we are children of God, and this relationship results in unity with one another. There are no longer barriers of race, economics, gender, or anything that reflects inequality. This equality and unity of all in Christ is the essence of the gospel.

Historical context: Galatia was settled by a tribe of Celtic origin that had migrated from Europe in the third century B.C.E. It was also a popular retirement area for Roman soldiers. The churches in Galatia were experiencing conflict between Jewish Christians and Pagan Christians.

Literary Context: This letter to churches in Galatia was thought to be written in the mid-50s C.E. Paul summarizes his proclamation of the gospel; he tells of his meeting with Jerusalem leaders; and reminds listeners that they are heirs of God’s promise.

Theological reflection: Following the Mosaic law is no longer a requirement because through Christ, we fully participate in the covenant, we are heirs according to the promise of God.

## Galatians 3:26-29

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5. How is this text interpreted by my community? In my experience? How might others hear this passage, especially people from cultures different from my own?

We note phrases of oneness in the passage, including frequent use of the word “all,” you are all; all of you. Phrases of union with Christ include v. 26, “faith in Christ,” v. 27, “baptized into Christ,” and “clothed with Christ,” and v. 28, “one in Christ”, and v. 29, “belong to Christ.”

This passage has been crucial in affirming women in leadership, and also celebrating the diversity of the kingdom, that truly all are welcome here.

Since gender is no longer an issue in Christ, this text may be particularly resonant for transgender persons.

We are aware of potential for anti-Semitism and wonder how a Jewish person would read this passage. It may be interesting to discuss why we need to continue to need the law.

6. Reflecting on the text and discussion:
- What resonates with you?
  - What will you think more about?
  - How has this understanding expanded your boundaries?

# Luke 10:25-37

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## The Bible Passage

Luke 10:25-37

<sup>25</sup>Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup>He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup>He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>28</sup>And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” <sup>29</sup>But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup>Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” <sup>37</sup>He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

## Discussion Questions

1. In what way(s) do you hear this text as law? In what way(s) do you hear this text as gospel?

Law: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Follow law exactly and you will have eternal life.

Bandits and robbers beat the traveler and left him to die. (sin active in the world)

Gospel: Samaritan’s empathy for the injured one  
Bandaging wounds, after cleaning them

## Luke 10:25-37

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Taking him to the inn for care  
Paying the innkeeper for that care  
The self sacrifice of placing the injured one on his own animal so that he had to walk  
Showing mercy to the stranger

2. How does this passage show forth Christ? What does this text tell us about the person, the character of Jesus?

Ignoring of boundaries as he makes a Samaritan to be the merciful one

Lack of respect for religious officials, first Priest, then Levite (priestly tribe of Israel, so more holy expectation) who were part of corrupt and ineffective religious system

Jesus shows how love is active, not passive. Not enough to see injured person, but must go more than the extra mile to take care of a person in need.

3. What other passages from the Bible help us to understand this passage? How does the context of this text inform your understanding of it? How does the reading and interpretation of the other passages inform your reading of this text?

Background on text: There is much going on in Luke's Gospel leading into this story. Luke tells us that Jesus has set his focus on Jerusalem. In chapter 9, he sends out the twelve Disciples to preach and heal. The feeding of the 5000 is reported. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain to witness the transfiguration. The Disciples are finally beginning to understand who Jesus is. Jesus warns them about what is ahead in Jerusalem. In chapter 10 Jesus sends out the seventy to preach and heal and they return with news of how well it went. It is at that point we encounter the attorney with the question that begins this passage.

Other passages:

What other scriptures remind us about inclusion of others, ignoring boundaries?

John 4: Samaritan woman at the well

Matthew 15: 21-28 Jesus has conversation with Canaanite woman

Luke 13: 10-17 Jesus heals woman in the Synagogue

Luke 7: 11-17 Jesus addresses woman in public

Matthew 9: 9-13 Jesus calls Matthew to be a disciple

Matthew 22: 1-14 Parable of the wedding feast

## Luke 10:25-37

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What other scriptures address seeing and responding to the needs of the marginalized or oppressed?

Luke 16: 19-31 Parable of Lazarus with Abraham

Matthew 8: 28-35 Healing of the man with demons

Luke 8: 12-16 Healing of the leper

Matthew 15: 21-28 Canaanite woman

4. What is the plain meaning of this text?

The question asked by the lawyer was a test for Jesus. He asked how do I get eternal life? Jesus' answer is about how the man lives his life. Knowing the law is important, but following the law requires so much more. How the law is lived out in our lives is the Gospel part of the text. Jesus tells us that our love of neighbor as ourselves is far from passive. We must do everything we can to make certain that we see the needs and respond to them, including self sacrifice to make it happen. Most importantly, there are no boundaries around who is our neighbor, it is an all inclusive term.

5. How is this text interpreted by my community? In my experience? How might others hear this passage, especially people from cultures different from my own?

What did this scripture teach you about the following:

- how we define "neighbor"
- how are traditional boundaries such as ethnicity or gender identity to be considered
- who has the authority to act?
- what is expected of us as we encounter people who are not like us?

6. Reflecting on the text and discussion:

- What resonates with you?
- What will you think more about?
- How has this understanding expanded your boundaries?



# Isaiah 43:1-7

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## The Bible Passage

Isaiah 43:1-7

<sup>1</sup>But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. <sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. <sup>3</sup>For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. <sup>4</sup>Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. <sup>5</sup>Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; <sup>6</sup>I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— <sup>7</sup>everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

## Discussion Questions

1. In what way(s) do you hear this text as law? In what way(s) do you hear this text as gospel?

Law is present in the covenant; God is God and we are not. The good news is the salvation, love, and protection that comes from the God who made us, who has claimed us and redeemed us.

2. How does this passage show forth Christ? What does this text tell us about the person, the character of Jesus?

Jesus is present in God's redeeming love. We don't need to write Jesus into Hebrew Scripture; this word can stand on its own. It is a good thing to know God's relationship with the people before Jesus' incarnation.

3. What other passages from the Bible help us to understand this passage? How does the context of this text inform your understanding of it? How does the reading and interpretation of the other passages inform your reading of this text?

# Isaiah 43:1-7

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Genesis 15 - God tells Abraham to fear not  
Psalm 139, Jeremiah 1:5 - God knit us together in our mother's womb  
Psalm 66:12 - Water and fire as dangers God brings us through  
Psalm 104:4 - the wind is God's servant

## 4. What is the plain meaning of this text?

Historical context: Deutero- or Second Isaiah, traditionally dated between fall of Jerusalem in 587 and fall of Babylonian empire in 539; Claus Westermann likes sometime after 550. Israel is in exile and needing a word of hope and promise. Prophet hides in anonymity: voice is God's, speaking a new word.

Literary Context: Preceded by calls to hear (listen to) the prophet; followed by a trial speech, you are my witness. The poetry can be seen as beautiful and filled with promise.

Theological reflection: Hope for the future in the midst of suffering; strong identity as God's beloved children.

## 5. How is this text interpreted by my community? In my experience? How might others hear this passage, especially people from cultures different from my own?

This text is appointed for Baptism of Our Lord (Year C in the RCL), affirming its statement of identity in God's family. However, there is violence in this text, the image of countries being given for ransom. Refugees will have a different reaction to this text. It can be heard as affirming and all-encompassing; people with different experiences may not hear that.

## 6. Reflecting on the text and discussion:

- What resonates with you?
- What will you think more about?
- How has this understanding expanded your boundaries?