
Come and see
Chapel in the Park United Church
January 18, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, and John 1:29-42

If you have ever wondered why we read the bible passages we read ... it's very simple actually. There is a thing called the "lectionary" which is a list of suggested Bible readings for each Sunday. By using this list - over time - we cover most of the important Bible stories. In this church we usually follow with the readings suggested in the lectionary. We deviate from the lectionary on special occasions that the lectionary does not include (like Canadian Thanksgiving) or when I just feel the need to discuss something else.

The lectionary cycles - or I could say, re-cycles - every 3 years. And each year focuses on one of the gospels.

But - I hear you say - wait a minute. There are 4 gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Why does the lectionary only cover 3 of the gospels? And that's a great question. The short answer is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke each dominate 1 year in the 3 year cycle. John does not get its own year in the lectionary. Instead, texts from John are sprinkled around the calendar in strategic ways. But John does not get a full year. The main reason that John does not get its own year is that of all the gospels, John is not really laid out as a story in the way that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written quite a bit earlier than John. Most scholars believe that John was written about 120 AD. And John, being written last, is different in part because the later-stage of the early church needed a different type of message. By the time that the gospel of John was written down, Matthew, Mark, and Luke were likely already well known. So the gospel of John is written for a different purpose. The gospel of John is more of a theological presentation. The basic story of Jesus was already recorded. The author of John was trying to do something else.

Here is one way to summarize the differences between the gospels.

Mark was the first gospel to be written down. And Mark reads like ... Jesus went

over here and did this. With no explanation. Then Jesus went over there and did that. Again with no explanation. I love the gospel of Mark. Matthew and Luke were written down a bit later. In Matthew and Luke it's more like ... Jesus went over there and did this ... and here's why. Then Jesus went over there and did that ... and here's why.

In contrast, the gospel of John is more a collection of anecdotes and preaching points. The narrative elements are not even in the order that the stories happened. Because the point of the gospel of John is not a chronological history of Jesus. It's a theological introduction to Jesus from what would later be called a "Christian perspective".

The gospel of John is more theological. The gospel of John is more thoughtful. The gospel of John is also more controlled. And please do not hear this as a bad thing. I think it is wonderful that we have 4 gospels (as well as other gospels that were not included in the Bible). I value different perspectives on the life of Jesus. We just need to remember that each of the gospels was written for a reason. And they were not all written for the same reason.

As one example - consider the story of Jesus clearing out the money changers in the temple. When did Jesus do that? In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus did that near the end of his ministry. In fact, the act of kicking the money changers out of the temple was part of the confrontation with the religious authorities that led to Jesus's arrest and crucifixion. But in John, Jesus cleanses the temple at the very beginning of his ministry. Right after Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding.

Another example of this is today's reading. John sees Jesus walking past him and John names Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." That naming of Jesus requires all sorts of theological underpinnings that would not have been available in the early years of Jesus's ministry. That is definitely the gospel of John!

But the text is there. Jesus is a lamb. A lamb that takes away the sins of the world. Does that image suggest anything to you? Scholars debate this of course, but the most obvious conclusion is that John was casting Jesus into the role of a sacrificial lamb. Many traditions - including Jewish traditions - at that time used animal sacrifice as a way of dealing with sin. John is making the leap to what would become the traditional Christian

idea that Jesus was the sacrifice for our sins.

The idea of sacrifice is a very old one. But essentially - there are 2 types of sacrifice. Two completely different types of sacrifice that require different sorts of actions. And yield completely different results. And unfortunately, the authors of the Bible used the single word “sacrifice” for both types. Fortunately, it’s not that hard to figure out.

One form of sacrifice is the form that John refers too. This is a type of sacrifice where one group - or one person - sacrifices someone or something else. Think about the stories in the Old Testament where people sacrifice animals. People perform the actions, but it is an animals who makes the actual sacrifice. The animal dies and the humans gets to keep living. In this type of sacrifice, we claim that we are making a sacrifice, but then we expect someone else to suffer for our decision. We don’t think that we ourselves have to suffer or change in any way. I always think of that as an external sacrifice. Meaning that the actually sacrifice is external to us. External sacrifice is external in one more way - other people can see that we have made a sacrifice.

The other form of sacrifice is self-sacrifice. This is based on the simple idea that if sacrifice is such a great idea, then we ourselves should make an actual sacrifice. We intentionally choose to suffer in some way to support a greater objective. I always think of that as in internal sacrifice. Meaning that we ourselves actually sacrifice a part of ourselves in some way. Internal sacrifice is usually internal in one more way - other people usually do not see that we have made a sacrifice.

Sacrifice says that I can purchase an animal and give it to a religious leader to kill it, burn it, and eat the tasty bits. I lose nothing except the price of the animal.

But self-sacrifice says that I should be making the sacrifice - personally. Self-sacrifice is an opportunity for us to change ourselves. That is so much harder than just paying for the cost of an animal. Self-sacrifice means I need to reflect on my life and make some changes. But the good news is that self-sacrifice will help us in amazing ways.

This idea is in the Bible actually. For example, from Hosea 6, “God desires mercy,

not animal sacrifice. God desires the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”¹ The Bible actually encourages self-sacrifice over animal sacrifice. But sacrificing an animal is always much much easier, so it was popular.

But instead of sacrificing animals, we are asked to sacrifice something more important to us. Like what? Perhaps our time? Perhaps our plans? Perhaps our need to control things? Perhaps our need to be “right” in every situation. Perhaps our decision to hold resentment or anger. That sort of thing. We are invited to sacrifice something that actually matters to us. And we do that - not because it is painful - but because it takes us where we need to go. Sometimes what we need to sacrifice is our own sense of self.

Which reminds me of the story about Pope Leo XIV.

[image: real Pope Leo XIV]

No ... not that one. I mean the other Pope Leo XIV. You do know that there are 2 of them, right?

[image: 2 Pope Leos]

I mean the fictional Pope Leo XIV who was featured in the 1986 movie “Saving Grace”. “Saving Grace” is a fictional story that describes the spiritual journey of Pope Leo XIV, during the early days of his time as Pope. Here is a summary of the movie.

One year into his ministry as Pope, Leo realizes that he is disillusioned. When he was a priest, he spent much of his time helping people one-on-one. But as Pope, Leo is herded around by handlers and is continually rushed off to different functions. He sees lots of people, but feels that he never has time to really help anybody properly. This is brought to a head when a young deaf girl from a local village visits Leo at the Vatican. She visits because her village needs a priest. A short while later Leo somehow manages to get himself locked out of the Vatican. In his gardening clothes!

Without his liturgical clothing, people do not recognize him. He is thrown out of a pizza store when he can't pay for his lunch. As Pope, he had no need to ever carry money. But now that he is on the streets nobody is going to give him his lunch for free. He is thrown into a public fountain. His opinions are ignored. But Leo seems to enjoy these interactions. He is getting in touch with real people again. He is interacting. He is

¹ Hosea 6:6

engaging.

Leo decides he needs to interact with normal people for awhile, so he travels to the little girl's village - the village that needed the priest. But he doesn't go there as a priest. He goes there as a drifter, someone looking for work.

Leo joins with the villagers and he sorts rags, which is the only job he can find. The town has no real employment or food, because their irrigation system was destroyed in an earthquake. Leo soon realizes that the broken irrigation system is the problem that is preventing all progress in the village. So Leo decides to fix the irrigation system. He can't do it alone, but he begins the work alone - with the villagers laughing at him. Over time, the villagers join in and help Leo. They work with Leo and they work with each other. And over time, Leo realizes that his role in the village is to re-build the irrigation system by re-building the community. He succeeds. The villagers do work together. And they get their irrigation system working again.

But when Leo calls back to the Vatican while the irrigation system is being re-built, the Cardinals are very confused. Leo says, "I'm helping the village to rebuild the irrigation system." And the Cardinals respond, "We can send everything they need, engineers, materials, we can build it for them." But Leo, with a very clear mind says, "These are defeated people, if we do the work for them it would fall into disuse in a couple of weeks. They have to do it themselves."

And so, over the course of a few weeks, Leo gets the townsfolk working together, gets the irrigation system working. But Leo also fixes his understanding of his ministry as Pope - by reconnected with community himself. Leo then returns to the Vatican, and goes back to his duties as Pope a transformed as well as a transforming person.

And how exactly did Leo achieve this miraculous transformation? He stopped doing what everyone expected him to do. Leo realized that the life he was living was not in fact the life he needed to live. There was a better life waiting for him. But he needed to give up being a "boring" Pope to discover his own way of being the Pope. He had to give up the ministry that other people planned for him in order to find the ministry that was waiting for him. In his case, in an small irrelevant little village. In a sense, only then did he really become the Pope.

Leo lived into the wisdom offered by Socrates ...

[image: “To find yourself, think for yourself” ... socrates]

In fact, Leo did nothing more or less than accept the call from Jesus we read from John earlier. The call from Jesus that does not require big words or complex theologies. When the disciples asked Jesus about his ministry, Jesus simply responded, “Come and see.” Just that. Open your mind. Open your heart. Come and see.

Is life really that simple? Remember what St. Paul told the congregation in Corinth today. St. Paul told the congregation that they already had all the spiritual gifts that they needed. That they did not need to be perfect - they just had to engage. And Rev Paul says we already have all the spiritual gifts that we need too. We have God’s spirit and we have each other. What more could we possibly need?

[image: grasslands path]

Which finally brings me to the image for this week.

It’s a lightly trodden path through open grassland.

- There’s no fence.
- No sign telling you where it leads.
- No guarantee of what comes next.
- Just a path. And an open horizon. You could turn back. But you don’t have to.

(pause)

- External sacrifices happen in public, in a moment, where everyone can see.
- Internal sacrifices begin quietly. Often unnoticed. Usually unfinished.
- They begin when we loosen our grip.
- When we stop clinging to what feels safe or familiar.
- When we take one small step toward something we do not yet fully understand.

(pause)

- Jesus never said, “Figure it all out.”
- He never said, “Be perfect first.”
- Jesus said, “Come and see.”

(pause)

- Paul tells the Corinthians that they already have what they need. And so do we.

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- We have God's Spirit. We have one another.
 - The question is not whether we are ready. The question is whether we are willing.

(pause)

- Faith is not something to complete. It is something to step into.
- So if you find yourself standing at the edge of that path, unsure, curious, maybe a little hesitant - you are exactly where the story begins.

Come and see.

Amen.