An abstract painting of a landscape. In the upper left, a small house with a dark roof is visible. Below it, there are rolling hills and fields in shades of green, yellow, and blue. The sky is a mix of yellow, orange, and blue. The overall style is impressionistic with visible brushstrokes.

Part III—Finding Our Identity

LESSON EIGHT

Remembering Jesus' Baptism



SCRIPTURE

Luke 3:1–22, Matthew 3:1–17, Mark 1:1–11, John 1:19–34

MAIN IDEA

In baptism we are identified as God's own children charged to serve faithfully, justly, and lovingly.

Opening Prayer

Redeeming Christ, as we remember your baptism today, help us to connect our story to your divine story. Open up your word to us and help us to see it anew. Draw us even closer to you, O Beloved Christ, that we may follow you devotedly. Amen.

SUMMARY

For some of you, your baptism happened so long ago that the only way to remember it is through photos, family stories, or the little record books that churches once gave to parents after their child was baptized. As we remember Jesus' baptism today, we are drawn to the majesty of the heavens opening up, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and the voice from heaven claiming Jesus as the Beloved. If your baptism day was just as dramatic, I doubt that you would question, even for a moment, your identity in Christ. We sometimes forget that we professed our trust in Christ and that we vowed to live our lives as Christ's faithful disciples. Being clear regarding who we are as children of God may require us to commit ourselves to Christian discipleship, once again, with the help of the Spirit of God.

LESSON

At times in our lives, we are unsure of who we are and are seeking to find our identity. One of the times when there is clarity and focus about our identity is at our baptism. Through baptism, Christ claims us, and we are identified as children of God. In our own baptism, we profess (or our parents or guardians profess for us) that we trust in Jesus and desire to be part of the family of God. Through baptism, we take on a new identity—and that identity is in Christ.

In this lesson, we remember Jesus' baptism, and in doing so, we also with joy remember our own. You have certainly noticed in the Bible that we do not get every year and every minute of Jesus' life. Jesus is a baby; he is presented in the temple as an infant; then, all of a sudden, he is twelve years old and traveling with his parents to Jerusalem, where he stays behind in the temple (in "his father's house"). Then suddenly, he is thirty years old and is being baptized by John the Baptist.

You remember that John was out baptizing folks in the region around the Jordan. He was a prophet who proclaimed that "one who is more powerful than I is coming" (Luke 3:16). The prophet Isaiah proclaimed: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD'" (Is. 40:3). Isaiah is cited in Luke to show that John the Baptist was the one who was preparing the way for the Messiah (Luke 3:4–6).

The message of John the Baptist is still part of our baptismal ritual. John's message was to repent and be baptized. In baptism, we renounce evil, just as John encouraged those in the wilderness with him to do thousands of years ago. We promise to live the Christian faith, to teach that faith to our children and to turn from the ways of sin and its power in the world. And we vow to be Christ's faithful disciples, obeying Christ's word and showing his love.

The Greek word used to describe John's message of repentance in Luke 3:3 and 3:8 is *μετανοίας* ["metanoias"], which means to turn or to repent. We not only turn away from sin, we turn away from an identity that was not who we really are. Through baptism we enter the covenant God has established. Within this covenant God gives us new life, guards us from evil, and nurtures us in love.

Jesus' Beloved Identity

John's preaching and baptizing is a precursor to "the One who is to come." John said, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16).

You would think that Jesus would be the one baptizing, but John was the one out baptizing people. If it were up to me, I would have thanked John for handling things and said to him: "I'm here now. It was great of you to prepare the way, John, but I'll take over now. I'll do the baptizing."

Thank God it is not up to me. We are not Christ. We are the ones who point people to Christ. Even John tried to prevent Jesus from being baptized by him when he said: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt. 3:14). Jesus knew he was to be baptized by John, and John consented. So, John baptized Jesus.

If we take on a new identity when we are baptized, what is the identity that Jesus took on? It is hard to miss. A voice came from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (cf. Luke 3:22 and Mark 1:11).

Just as baptism is a sign and seal of our incorporation with Christ, the baptism of Jesus was a sign to all who were there and a seal to Jesus himself that he was the beloved child of God.

Baptism takes initiative on our part (by way of our parents in infant baptism) to turn to God. There is also initiative on God's part to reverse our circumstances from death to life. In many ways, baptism is an acknowledgment that God has been with us from the beginning of our lives and is with us now. God claimed Jesus, and we are claimed as unique, beautiful, and the beloved of God.

Remembering Who We Are

As we grow up and develop, though, sometimes we become confused about who we are. We may even have different identities for different places and groups of people. We may hear ourselves talking or see ourselves in a mirror and not recognize who we are.

Author Paul Mallard suggests, "We allow a cacophony of voices to shape our identity. The problem is that these voices vary so much in their assessments. We can easily end up becoming people pleasers, constantly changing our image, chameleon-like, depending on our environment. But, do we really want to go through our whole life wearing a series of uncomfortable and ill-fitting masks?"³⁷

Psychologist Erik Erikson coined the term "identity crisis" in 1968.³⁸ In his work, he focused on adolescents who are faced with changes in their bodies and perspectives. Once they get through this stage of development and forge their self-image, they become adults.

One would think that becoming adults would be the end of the process of reaching an understanding of who we are. We have also heard a lot about "mid-life crisis." Coined by Dr. Elliott Jaques in 1965 in a paper on the working patterns of creative geniuses³⁹ and later popularized by

author Gail Sheehy in her book *Passages*,⁴⁰ this occurs when one's identity and self-confidence is shaken, often initiated by incidents that call attention to a person's aging or mortality, and sometimes accompanied by feelings of a lack of accomplishment. Curiously, a person with significant accomplishments may go through a midlife crisis. This manifests itself in a desire to reclaim one's youth by making drastic changes to one's current lifestyle. Interestingly, most people do not have this experience in life or if they do, it is mild and fleeting. This may be what we mean when we suggest that others are aging gracefully or aging beautifully.

A new sports car or a new lifestyle may feel good—and in some cases, as with a commitment to exercise and healthy eating, a change may be good for you—however, drastic changes are not always good.

A Christian's answer to a crisis of identity is to remember who we are. Our core identity is as children of God. The next step is to reclaim whose we are. We belong to God. When we are lost, we can find and claim our identity in Christ. After introducing the child to the congregation at a baptism, some ministers use the scripture, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are" (1 John 3:1).

Remembering Our Call to Discipleship

At the time of baptism, we are also charged to be participants in Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice. After our renunciation of evil and profession of Jesus as Christ, we then pledge to be Christ's disciples, showing Christ's love to the world. So, our mission begins.

37 Paul Mallard, *An Identity to Die For: Know Who You Are* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2020), 4.

38 Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968).

39 Elliot Jaques, "Death and the Mid-Life Crisis," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 46, October 1965, 502–514.

40 Gail Sheehy, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (New York: Dutton, 1976).

The crowds wanting to be baptized asked John the Baptist what they should do. In Luke 3:10–14, John responded, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” John said to tax collectors wanting to be baptized, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Finally, John directed soldiers, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

John’s main message was, repent of your sins, admit what you have done and ask God for forgiveness. Be baptized and be made clean. Come and turn your life around. Come and get new life. Live a life worthy of repentance. Bear good fruit. Give. Love. Share. Show Compassion.

So, another part of our identity is participating in Christian service. Ministry, volunteering, being a witness, and serving others are part of who we are as Christ’s children. If we have neglected to engage in ministry, here is our wakeup call, as being Christ’s disciples includes spreading the good news of the gospel, speaking up for justice, being merciful, and participating in Christ’s reign in the world. Being Christ’s disciples is part of our identity, vocation, and calling.

Activity

Your call from God can change over time, as well as the focus of your service or ministry. Take a look at the ordination vows (or constitutional questions) for ruling elder, deacon, and minister. See the latest edition of the *Book of Order*, W-4.0404 or ask your pastor to share these vows/constitutional questions with you. After reading them, make a list of the vow that seems to speak to you the most at this time in your life and history. How is Christ calling you to participate in ministry today?

Remembering the People Who Were Baptized with Jesus

It is only fitting that we would remember the baptism of members of Christ’s church when reading about Christ’s baptism; look closely at this scripture in Luke 3, “Now, when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized” (Luke 3:21). It was Jesus’ baptism day, but that same day, other people were baptized too.

How glorious it must have been for those baptized that day to be baptized with Jesus. How would you like to share an anniversary date with Jesus—the anniversary of your baptism?

The baptism of Jesus is found in all four gospels, Matthew 3, Mark 1, Luke 3 and John 1, as well as in Acts 1. As Jesus came up out of the waters of baptism, the people saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And God was pleased. God knew that this was good. And God claimed him, just as God claims us.

Prior to this, circumcision was the sign of the covenant. But with the coming of Christ, baptism and Holy Communion became sacraments in the early church and are the two sacraments observed in most Protestant traditions today.

People of all genders and different walks of life, those who live on the margins and those who are part of church leadership, join in Christ’s death and resurrection through the waters of baptism and all share together in Holy Communion and the feast that is to come. The sacraments link us to Christ, and the people who join with us contribute to our identity, as we are a people of relationships who come out of God’s covenantal community. All of the baptized faithful are one in Christ, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, or economic status.

Activity

Reflect on a time when you were at one with yourself and with God, when you had certain clarity about who you were and your place in the world. Where did your sense of identity and your sureness in it come from?

Finding Our Identity in Jesus Christ

Participating in Christ's mission in the world means that we may need to ask ourselves, "What does it mean to follow Jesus? If Jesus were here today, what would Jesus lead us to say and do?" In answering this question, we consider the mind and will of Christ as we encounter life's challenges and joys.

As followers of Christ, and as members of Christ's Church, we have a moral imperative to "work for justice in the world: exercising [the Church's] power for the common good; dealing honestly in personal and public spheres; seeking dignity and freedom for all people; welcoming strangers in the land; promoting justice and fairness in the law; overcoming disparities between rich and poor; bearing witness against systems of violence and oppression; and redressing wrongs against individuals, groups, and peoples" (W-5.0304, *Book of Order*).⁴¹

We can find our identity in Christ in the community of believers, as Christian identity is shared with others in the church community. We are not alone. We are made in the image of our Creator. This is who we really are, and this identity is unchangeable, whether we are youth or seniors, married or widowed, retired or entering new professions, nondisabled or differently-abled. In this identity we devote

ourselves to the church's teaching, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

In this identity found in Christ, we are bold enough to show others who we are. I can imagine that even John the Baptist had a moment of clarity about his own ministry, God's purpose in the world, his own commitment and his faithfulness to God, initiated by baptizing Jesus in the wilderness that day.

Is it possible that part of how we reclaim our identity in Christ occurs when we participate in practices of spiritual renewal? For ages, people have studied scripture, read devotionals, engaged in daily prayer, gone on silent retreats, held worship outside at campsites, engaged in Lenten and Advent practices, practiced meditation and mindfulness, and joined with others at retreats and gatherings of the church. All of these practices help us reclaim our baptismal identity. Jesus' mission had to do not only with water but also with Spirit. Could reclaiming our Christian identity have to do with renewal and being filled with God's Spirit?

Just as the dove was a sign to Noah that the waters of the flood were receding and that a completely new covenant by God with all humankind was being struck (Gen. 8–9), so, perhaps, the Spirit-dove signaled that God in Jesus was doing something new in relationship to all humankind. Wouldn't it be amazing if God is doing something new with us even today, blessing us and the people of the earth?

A hymn I love by John Ylvisaker highlights how God has been with us from the beginning of our lives and is with us now. Found in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, the lyrics are:

41 *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II: Book of Order, 2023–2025* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2023), W-5.0304.

*I was there to hear your borning cry;
I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized to see
your life unfold.*

*I was there when you were but a child
with a faith to suit you well;
in a blaze of light you wandered off
to find where demons dwell.*

*When you heard the wonder of the Word,
I was there to cheer you on.
You were raised to praise the living Lord
to whom you now belong.*

*If you find someone to share your time
and you join your hearts as one,
I'll be there to make your verses rhyme
from dusk till rising sun.*

*In the middle ages of your life, not too old,
no longer young,
I'll be there to guide you through the night,
complete what I've begun.*

*When the evening gently closes in and
you shut your weary eyes,
I'll be there as I have always been with
just one more surprise.*

*I was there to hear your borning cry;
I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized to see
your life unfold.⁴²*

As God remembers us, let us remember God,
and let us celebrate with great joy Jesus' baptism
and our own. Let us celebrate the renewal of our
lives in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Closing Prayer

*O Christ, thank you for welcoming us into your
family and for claiming us in the waters of
baptism. We are grateful for your love and grace,
even when we lack clarity of call, purpose, and
identity. Light a fire in us, O Holy Spirit, and
renew us for your service in the world. Amen.*

42 John C. Ylvisaker, "I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry" in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 488. Text © John Ylvisaker. Used by permission. Ylvisaker / Kruger contract number 13600.

Reflection Questions

1. Why did Jesus ask John the Baptist to baptize him?
2. What kind of relationship do you suppose John the Baptist had with Jesus?
3. How do you believe your identity in Christ is related to your baptism?
4. How is our Christian identity related to Jesus' baptism?
5. At certain times of life (adolescence, adulthood, at marriage, when having children, or during midlife) we reexamine who we are. What are other significant times in your life when you began to question your identity?
6. What would you need to do to know unequivocally that you are a child of God? What do you think causes a person to waver from this identity or to question it?

LESSON EIGHT NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has some minor discoloration and faint smudges, suggesting it might be old or handled. There is no handwriting or printed text on the page.

*Suggestions for Leaders***LESSON EIGHT: Remembering Jesus' Baptism****Central Concept**

"In baptism, God claims us, and seals us to show that we belong to God. God frees us from sin and death, uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. By water and the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the church, the body of Christ, and joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice."¹

Connect

(10 minutes) Invite participants to complete these statements as a whole group in a circle. If the group is larger than eight, use pairs that change after each statement.

- One thing I love about my congregation is . . .
- A person who made me feel welcome when I first came to my church was . . .
- A person I have connected with in my congregation is . . .
- One program or group where I have found community and connection is . . .
- One way I have found to serve others in my congregation is . . .
- One local or international mission activity of my congregation I eagerly support is . . .
- When I hear, "Remember your baptism," in worship, I feel . . .
- End with this one in the whole group: Being a member (or a part) of a congregation is important to me because . . .

Consider

(10 minutes) Divide into small groups and assign each a baptism story from one of the four gospels. Offer these instructions: Read your version aloud. Listen for what baptism means, both according to the words spoken in

the story, and as indicated by the actions taken. Share your impressions with one another, then, based on your version only, write one sentence expressing the meaning of baptism, to be read to the whole group.

Hear the sentences and invite the group to ponder the meanings of baptism they have heard as they further explore what baptism sets in motion for God's people of faith.

(30 minutes) Set the scene for thinking of the life of a Christian in four "phases," directing them to the list below. Before you read each one aloud, or engage participants to do so, tell them they will have an opportunity to explore one of these four phases in more depth in a small group, and they can choose which one they want to examine. Invite them to listen for the one that most matches a role they have in their own congregation, or their own time of life, or that of someone in their family.

1. One is baptized, claimed as God's own, and set upon a journey within the context of a community of faith.
2. Together with baptism or as a step of one's own choosing, *one promises to be Christ's faithful disciple*, renouncing evil and professing that Jesus Christ is Lord.
3. Throughout life, one is repeatedly called to remember one's *identity as "child of God"* and reclaim it in the midst of years of fortune and misfortune, calm and crisis.
4. Throughout life, *one is invited repeatedly to fulfill the promises made when joining Christ's church*, to participate in worship, prayer, service, and study.

Assure participants it doesn't matter if the groups are the same size, or even that all are chosen. Ask for a show of hands for each of the four phases, then make small

¹ *Book of Common Worship, Pastoral Edition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 50.

groups based on their choices. Ask the participants to use the directions below.

Group 1: (*Relating to the time after baptism and before becoming a member of a congregation*) In hindsight, what experiences and teaching do you believe most important to provide the church's children and youth of today as affirmation of their identity as a child of God, and as nurture for their life in Christ? Discuss, list as many ideas as are expressed, then choose between five to ten priorities to report back to the whole group.

Group 2: (*Relating to becoming a member of a congregation*) What do you believe it means for the church to profess "Jesus Christ is Lord" today? For example, Lord of what? Lord over whom? Lord to whom? Does renouncing evil mean rejecting it for oneself or repudiating it in society, or both? Name some things present in our world you believe are "evil." What about your Christian faith causes you to believe this? In addition to words, what actions might make renouncing evil effective? Be prepared to offer the whole group ideas about professing Jesus as Lord and how the church might address a particular societal evil.

Group 3: (*Relating to repeatedly being called to remember one's identity as "child of God"*) What are some of the things that have happened in your life that challenge your self-perception as a child of God? How have misfortunes, crises, and unwanted changes drawn your attention away from centering your energy on living as God's beloved child? What kind of support have you received, or do you long for, from the church for remembering you are a child of God during this time of life? Be prepared to name in the whole group one support a person has received from the church, and one kind of support from the church one might find valuable and therefore long for.

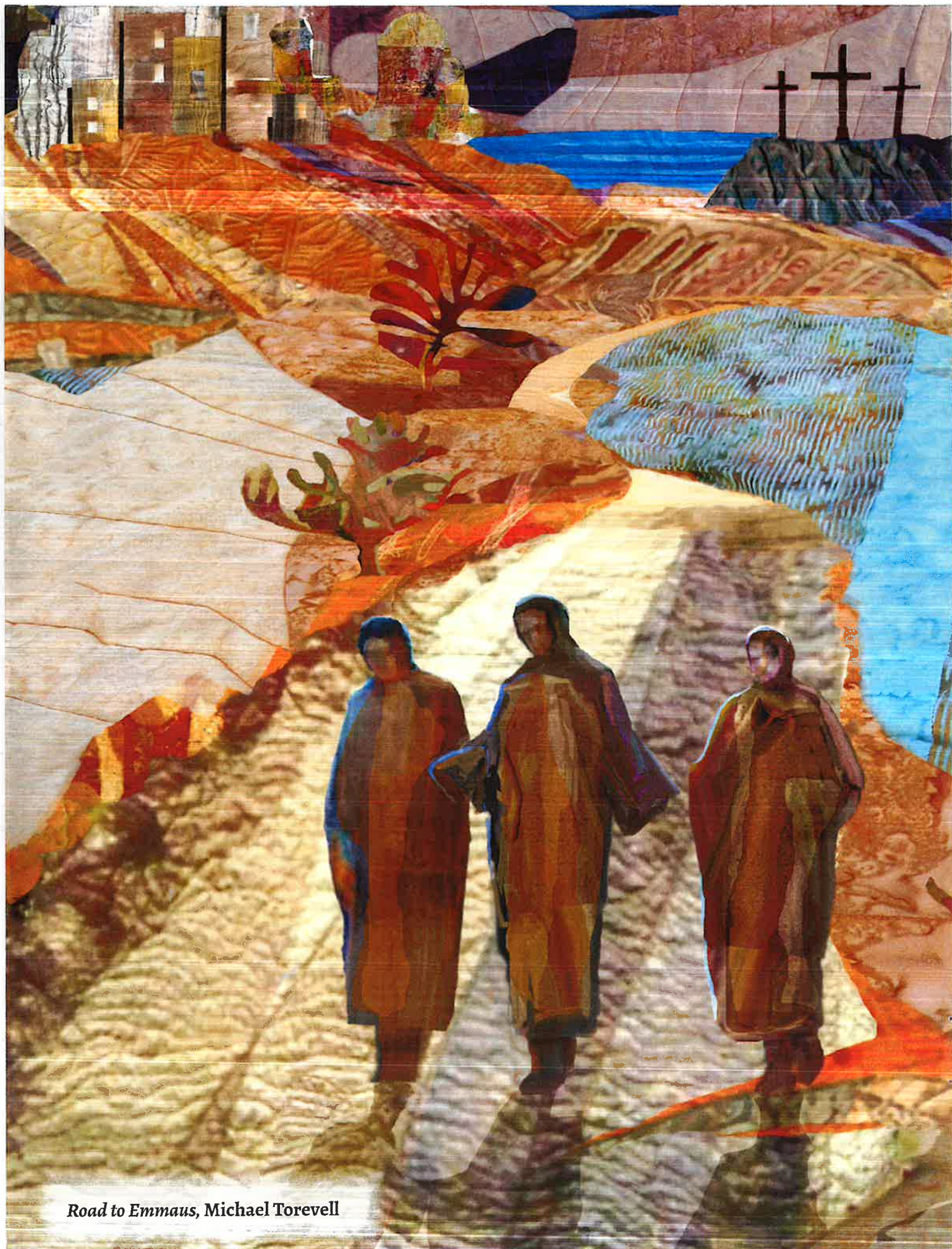
Group 4: (*Relating to being invited repeatedly to fulfill the promises made when joining Christ's church*) What competes for your attention over regular participation in worship, and practicing spiritual disciplines such as daily scripture reading and prayer? What guides your understanding of stewardship of financial gifts? What might you like to explore in group study in this season of life? The Lord's requirement that followers of Christ "do justice" is mentioned more often than many other calls to serve others. What justice issues are you most enthusiastic about, and are you satisfied with your commitment in time and energy? Why or why not? Be prepared to bring back to the whole group two or three promises that continue to shape your life of discipleship and bring you joy.

Convene as a whole group and hear the offerings from each of the small groups.

Commune and Commit

(5 minutes) Invite endings to this statement: "My identity is in Jesus Christ because . . ."

Close with this lesson's Closing Prayer.



Road to Emmaus, Michael Torevell