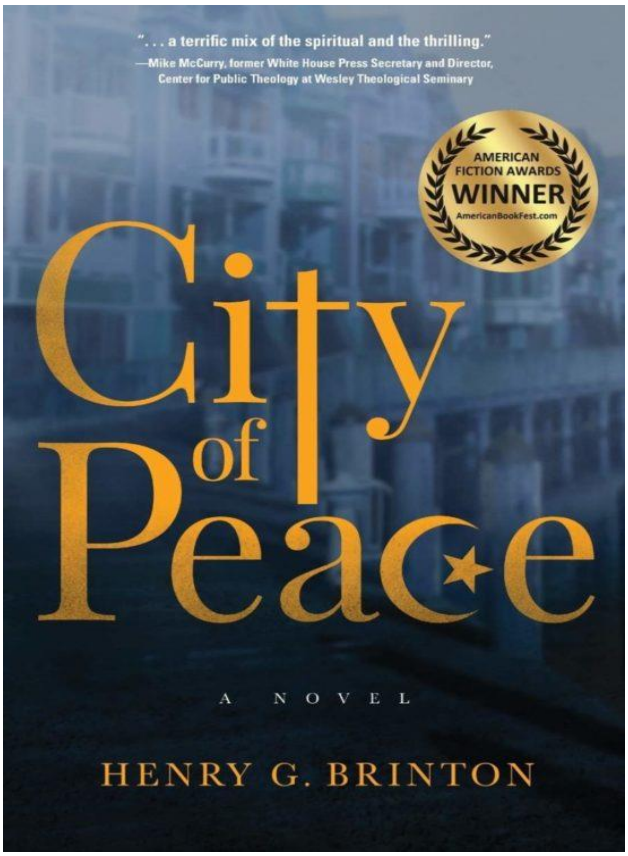
Exploring the Bible through *City of Peace*



A 12-week Bible Study

By Henry G. Brinton

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Available from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and independent bookstores through indiebound.org

Introduction

As a Presbyterian pastor in Fairfax, Virginia, I deliver Sunday sermons based on biblical passages, and try to bring these ancient texts to life through illustrations, interpretations and applications. I also teach Bible study classes that explore the original and modern meanings of passages from the Old and New Testaments.

But I find that sermons and classes have their limits. People naturally push back against sermons—in fact, a common expression is, "Don't preach at me." And Bible studies can leave people wondering about how ancient passages can be connected in a meaningful way to 21st-century living.

Now I've written a novel called *City of Peace*, and I'm finding that a story can be better than a sermon. Not that this approach is original to me. Jesus didn't lecture people, but instead taught through parables such as, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground" (Mark 4:26). When people heard the beginning of a story like that, they leaned in and wanted to hear more.

In the years that followed, Jewish rabbis continued this approach through two types of biblical interpretation: *midrash halakhah,* which focused on Jewish law and practices, and *midrash aggadah,* which centered on the story or characters of the biblical law. There's nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Jesus knew this, as did generations of rabbis.

So, I invite you to join me now in exploring the Bible through a novel about a Methodist pastor named Harley Camden, who spirals downward into grief and anger after losing his wife and daughter in a European terrorist attack. The bishop forces him to move to a tiny church in small-town Occoquan, Virginia, to heal and recover. But all hope for serenity is quickly shattered by the mysterious murder of the daughter of the local Iraqi baker, followed by the threat of an attack by Islamic extremists.

Harley tries to build bridges to his neighbors, including Muslims and Coptic Christians, and digs into the history of the ancient Galilean city of Sepphoris to find the secret to survival in a fractured and violent world. Past and present come together in surprising ways as Harley sets out to stop the violence and save his new flock.

City of Peace is a mystery novel, but it is full of biblical insights. I offer you this 12-week Bible study as a way to unlock the truths of the Bible through a page-turning work of fiction, one that can engage you as a reader and also as a person of faith. Each lesson asks you to read two short chapters from the book, and then discuss the questions and issues raised by the story (an alternative would be to read four chapters each week, and turn this into a 6-week Bible study). As Jesus himself knew so well, there is nothing in the world more powerful than a good story.

As you enter into this Bible study, remember that that both God's Word and human words can create a new world for yourself and for your community. As Harley Camden says in *City of Peace,* "I'm convinced that words create reality. It's a very biblical idea. Think of God creating the world in Genesis, saying 'Let there be light,' and there is light. Jesus is described in the New Testament as 'the Word.' When Martin Luther King, Jr., said, 'I have a dream,' people began to see a vision of a new world of equality. Words create reality. Whether we say 'I love you' or 'I hate you' makes a huge difference."

Yes, the words we read and the words we speak can create a new reality, one that can change our lives for the better. I hope that your reading of *City of Peace,* combined with your study of Holy Scripture, will lead you to stronger and more loving relationships with God and with the people around you.

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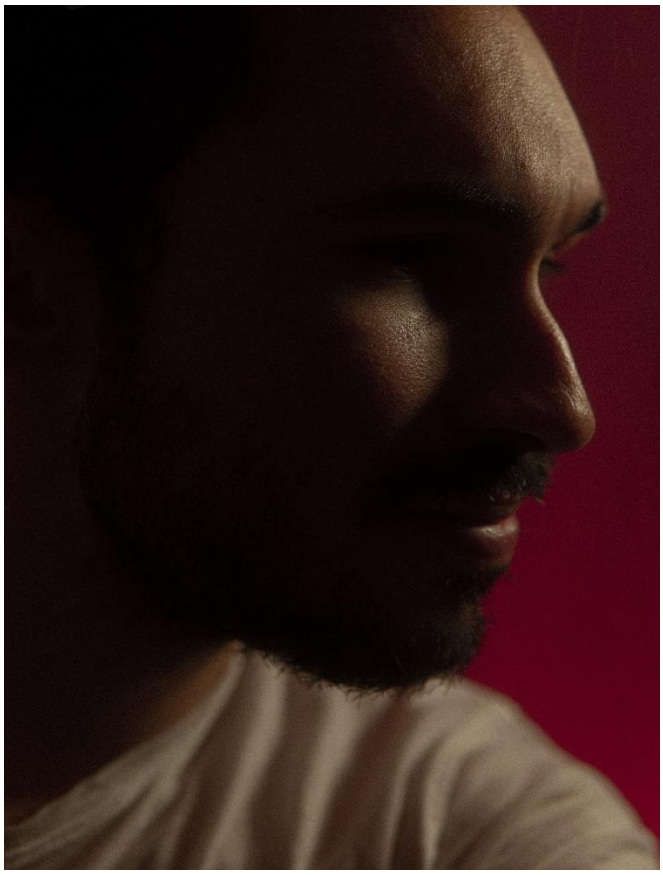
Week 1: Black Jesus



Riverside Methodist Church in Occoquan had a black Jesus. Pastor Harley Camden noticed it the first time he walked into the small sanctuary and looked up at the stained-glass window at the front of the church.

At first, he thought that the glass was simply dirty, but as he moved closer he realized Jesus was designed to look more like a Palestinian Jew than an English Methodist. *That's probably historically accurate*, he thought, *and politically correct*. But then he looked closer and saw the date on the lower right corner of the window — 1885.

The dark-skinned Jesus had been installed in an era when most stained-glass images of him were decidedly Northern European white. This Jesus had a determined look as he calmed the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Harley quickly realized why. Riverside

Methodist had been founded by a pastor named Bailey, a former slave, and for over a century it had been an African-American congregation called Emanuel Baptist Church.

Entering another world

Harley visited the church on his first trip to Occoquan, a small town perched on the southern shore of the Occoquan River. Driving south from Sterling, he took Route 123 through southern Fairfax County and passed the old Lorton prison, now repurposed as an arts center called the Workhouse. *The bishop said she wasn't sending me to prison*, he mused as he drove past, *but look — there it is*.

A steep hill, heavily forested on both sides, dropped from the arts center to the Occoquan River. Harley was surprised by the simple beauty of the concrete bridge sweeping across the water into Prince William County, presenting drivers with a panoramic view of the Town of Occoquan to the west. He slowed his car as he approached the southern end of the bridge, and then turned on Commerce Street. Welcome to Historic Occoquan, Founded 1734.

Having just left the suburban sprawl of twenty-first-century Sterling, Harley felt like he was entering another world. Creeping west along Commerce Street, he saw Auntie's Pie Shop and Riverside Methodist Church across the street. He turned on Washington Street and eased his car into the parking lot of the church. Looking around, he saw the river, bridge, townhouses, and several blocks of shops and restaurants. He could explore the entire town by foot in less than an hour. The bishop had told him that Occoquan was an Indian word meaning "at the end of the water." *More like "at the end of my career,"* he thought.

Finding strength to live with dignity

The church was renamed Riverside Methodist Church in the late 1990s when the congregation of Emanuel Baptist had moved to a larger and more modern structure in Woodbridge. Harley put a key in the front door of the church and was immediately assaulted by a wave of warm, musty air. He walked through the small narthex and turned on the lights in the sanctuary.

Rows of oak pews stood on either side of a center aisle covered with worn red carpet. The front of the church had a pulpit on the left and a lectern on the right, with a Communion table in the center, under the stained glass of the black Jesus. Harley walked down the aisle, trying to imagine himself leading worship in these dank quarters after years of presiding over services in a sleek modern building in Sterling. He spent a few minutes studying the stained-glass window, which the bishop had told him about, focusing on the stained-glass image of Jesus and the frightened disciples around him.

Running his fingers along the backs of the wooden pews, he imagined that the space had been the site of countless milestones over the course of a century and a quarter—dedications, baptisms, weddings, funerals. Anguished prayers had been said here, rousing sermons had been preached, lives had been changed. Generations of African Americans, in particular, had looked up at the Jesus in the stained glass and found strength to live with faith and dignity in a segregated society. A trickle of tenderness began to flow into the dry canyon that was Harley's heart. And yet, he didn't want to get sentimental. What had sentimentality ever done for him?

Read chapters 1 and 2 of ***City of Peace*** along with Revelation 1:15: "his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters." This is the only biblical verse that makes reference to the skin color of Jesus.

Questions:

1. Although Jesus is depicted in many pieces of art as a white man, scholars believe that Jesus looked like any other Jewish Galilean of the first century: A man with short, curly hair and darker skin and darker eyes. What difference, if any, does the skin color of Jesus make to you?
2. What comfort would a black Jesus offer to African American Christians or to other people of color? What comfort or challenge does such a depiction offer you?
3. How are your thoughts about racial justice impacted by a non-white Galilean Jesus, if at all?

Week 2: A Christian and a Fighter

One of the first people that Harley Camden met in Occoquan was Dirk Carter, a member of Riverside Methodist Church and a military veteran who served in Viet Nam. After Harley's first sermon, Dirk invited him to lunch at the American Legion Hall.

“I’m a lifelong Methodist," said Dirk to Harley, after they sat down. "There are times when I think that the denomination is getting too liberal for me, but then I remember all the great people that I’ve known in the church. Mrs. Peterson, my Sunday School teacher, she was so nice to me. Reverend Smith got me through some tough times with my parents when I was a teenager. Chaplain Gerde, who kept me from losing my mind in Nam. All Methodists. So I’ll never leave.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Harley. “The church has been good to me as well. I was an Army brat and we were always moving around. But just about everywhere we went, there was a Methodist church. It gave me a sense of stability.”

Not peace, but a sword

The waitress brought Dirk a beer and an iced tea for Harley. Dirk said that he had been a fighter as a kid. “Always getting into scraps over stupid stuff,” he admitted. “Always had a chip on my shoulder. I was probably on my way to reform school, but then one Sunday I was sitting in church. Didn’t want to be there, but my parents made me. Reverend Smith read a verse I had never heard before: ‘I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.’ That got my attention. Words of Jesus, no less.”

“What did that mean to you?”

“It let me know that Jesus was not a wimp. Willing to fight for what mattered to him.”

No greater love

“Of course," said Harley, "Jesus did not literally use a sword.”

“Sure." said Dirk. "But it got me thinking more about what it would mean to be a Christian and a fighter. I came to see that the two were not mutually exclusive, and when I turned eighteen I joined the Marines. Eventually, I heard another verse that really became a key one for me. I think the chaplain said it in Nam. Again, some words of Jesus, ‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’ I really saw that verse come to life on the battlefield. I swore to myself that I would show that kind of love.”

Harley was impressed. “Dirk, I like the way you bring your work and your faith together.”

“Well, I’m no saint,” he admitted. “Far from it. I need forgiveness, and I ask for it every Sunday."

Read chapters 3 and 4 of ***City of Peace*** as well as the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:34, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," and John 15:13, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Questions:

1. How do you visualize the "sword" that Jesus brought into the world, and what divisions did it create? What role did it play in the ministry and mission of Jesus?
2. Jesus gave his life for his friends, in his ministry and on the cross. Where do you see Christians doing this today? How can you lay down your life in a similar way?
3. What does it mean to you to be a Christian who fights for his or her beliefs? When, if ever, does a fighting spirit go too far?

Week 3: A Mighty Wind

Soon after moving into his home in Occoquan, Harley Camden was treated to a ride in a powerboat by his friend and parishioner Dirk Carter.

Harley was surprised by how good it felt to be on the river. The sunlight shimmered on the water, and the deep green leaves of the trees along the banks made the river itself look green. A family of ducks swam beside them for a minute, and a fish jumped out of the water just a few feet from the bow. They moved slowly at first, passing under the Route 123 bridge as they headed east. Harley soaked up everything around him, letting the river work its calming magic on him.

"This part of the river is 'no-wake,'" said Dirk, "meaning you have to move slowly, running the engine about 1000 RPM. There are a number of houses with docks, and a couple of marinas up ahead. If we revved her up, our wake would cause all kinds of

damage to the boats that are tied up. In about twenty minutes, we'll be able to let 'er rip."

"No problem at all," Harley replied. "I'm enjoying the sights."

Skipping across the water

After a few minutes, they were moving at thirty miles per hour, shooting across Occoquan Bay and out into the Potomac. A strong breeze whipped across the water, creating little whitecaps, but the boat handled the waves well.

"Should have warned you that there was a small craft advisory today," shouted Dirk, smiling. "But don't worry. Weather Service guys are always cautious."

As they skipped across the water, Harley began to feel a strong connection with his boating companion. Dirk pointed to Mason Neck, the large peninsula that formed the western bank of the Potomac River, and shouted that it was the location of Gunston Hall, the home of one of the founding fathers, George Mason.

He said that Harley could pull some enormous catfish out of the deep sections of the river around there. Stretching his hands out to four feet, he signaled the size of the biggest one he had ever caught. As the boat sped northwest, Dirk said that they were entering Gunston Cove, which bordered Mason Neck on the north and spilled into the Potomac.

Wind power

Conversation was difficult with the noise of the engine and waves against the hull, so Harley sat back and enjoyed the ride. He felt so free on the water, disconnected from the endless conflicts and concerns of life on land. As the wind whipped around him, Harley suddenly realized, *Yes, this is why the Holy Spirit is described as a mighty wind. Feeling the spray of the water, this is the cleansing water of baptism washing away my sins.* Wind and water were spiritual, no doubt about it.

Read chapters 5 and 6 of ***City of Peace*** as well as Acts 2:1-2, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven

there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were staying."

Questions:

1. What does water mean to you, and what feelings do you associate with it? Where do you most enjoy the water, and why?
2. Why do you think wind is associated with the Holy Spirit? What characteristics do they share?
3. Where do you go for spiritual renewal? How have you experienced God in nature, if at all?

Week 4: God is Love

A short, slender man entered the visitation room of the county jail with his hands behind his back. He was followed by two guards, one of whom stopped him and unlocked his handcuffs. The man glanced at Harley Camden before entering, then turned his eyes forward and walked to a chair on the far side of a table in the middle of the room. He sat and rubbed his wrists to soothe them after being released from the cuffs. The guard turned to Harley.

"Pastor Camden, this is Muhammad Bayati. You have twenty minutes. Good luck." Harley walked cautiously into the room, jumping slightly when the guard closed the heavy steel door behind him.

"Mr. Bayati?" he asked, putting out his hand for a shake. "I'm Harley Camden, the pastor of Riverside Methodist Church in Occoquan." The inmate looked him in the eye and offered his hand but didn't say anything. "May I sit down?" Harley asked. Muhammad nodded.

"You probably wonder why I am here," Harley continued. "I was called by a corrections officer since I am the only clergyman in Occoquan."

"I've heard about you," said Muhammad. The man had a brown face with deep lines, bushy eyebrows and large brown eyes that were as dark and deep as the inky water of the Occoquan River at night. Muhammad was balding, with a fringe of gray hair around the back of his head. His orange jail jumpsuit hung on his slender frame, and his long fingers continued to massage his wrists.

After some brief introductions, the two men talked about prayer and loss and the justice of God. Harley knew that Muhammad had been charged with killing his daughter Norah, and told him that people were calling it an "honor killing."

Muhammad's eyes flashed with anger. "Absurd. Such killings are barbaric. I am an American. I left Iraq to escape such brutality. I came to America because it is a land of justice, and now I am getting no justice."

"I'm not being accusatory;" said Harley. "it's what people are saying."

Muhammad's expression changed from anger to sadness. "I know."

What would Jesus do?

"So why have you started a hunger strike?" Harley asked.

Muhammad ran a hand across his bald head. "To bring attention to my case, and move it more quickly to trial. I think Norah's death was a priority for the police until I was arrested. Now, no one cares. The prosecutor is going to take his time and build a case around the idea of an honor killing. But nothing could be further from the truth. I need to get to trial, prove my innocence, and return to my work at the bakery."

"But you are going to destroy your health by starving yourself."

“God will take care of me,” Muhammad said. “My incarceration is unjust, and God is a God of justice. He will help me get through this.”

Harley thought for a moment about what his next move should be. “What do you think Jesus would want me to do? After all, we both honor Jesus, right?”

“In my faith, he is a great prophet,” said Muhammad. “And as an Iraqi, I cannot forget that the Wise Men came from the east, maybe even from my homeland, to visit the baby Jesus.”

“Exactly,” Harley said, a little surprised that Muhammad knew that Bible story. “Jesus is a prophet for you and the messiah for me. He teaches that we should help the hungry and the thirsty, and visit people in prison.”

“Indeed he does,” Muhammad agreed.

“So perhaps you are the hungry one in prison that I am supposed to help.”

“Maybe,” said Muhammad, “but I don’t know what you intend to do.”

“The Bible says that when I help a person like you, I am really helping Jesus.”

Muhammad looked at him quizzically. “So I am Jesus for you? I do not see how that can be. I am not a prophet.”

“We don’t have to get too spiritual about it,” said Harley, backing off a bit. “But I think I should help. What can I do for you?”

Turning the wheels of justice

“Anything to get my case some attention,” suggested Muhammad, “and move it more quickly to trial. I am angry that I am locked up and forgotten, falsely accused of a crime that I did not commit. I came to this country because of its rule of law, and now look at what is happening to me.”

Harley pondered for a moment, and then thought of Henry Kim, the husband of his colleague Emily. He wrote for the Metro section of *The Washington Post*. Maybe Henry could do a story on Muhammad.

"If I could get a journalist to write a story on your case, would you be willing to stop your hunger strike? It won't get you out of jail, but a big story might get the wheels turning a little faster."

Muhammad thought for a moment and nodded. "I would agree to that."

"I'm sure your family would appreciate it," said Harley. "They must be worried."

"They trust God, as I do. God is merciful and just."

A new view of God

"God is also love," added Harley. "Our Bible says that God is love."

Muhammad cocked his head slightly. "That is different from our understanding. We have many names for God, but love is not among them."

"For Christians, love is at the core of who God is," explained Harley, offering an insight that had been at the center of many of his sermons. "God reveals his love by sending Jesus to bring us forgiveness and new life. And the response we are supposed to make is to love one another—a love that should be extended to friends, enemies, blacks, whites, Muslims, Jews, fellow Christians. It is all supposed to come down to love. In fact, the Bible insists that those who say, 'I love God' but hate their brothers and sisters, are liars."

"I would agree with that," said Muhammad. "Loving God does require that we love the people around us."

"Of course, it's easier said than done," observed Harley. At that moment, the heavy metal door opened behind him, and the guard said, "Time's up."

Read chapters 7 and 8 of ***City of Peace*** as well as 1 John 4:7-8: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

Questions:

1. Where do you see problems with the justice system in the United States today?
2. What do you think Jesus would do for incarcerated people, if he were to visit them in an American jail?
3. The Bible says that "God is love," which leads to the conclusion that "love is God." What does this mean to you, and what difference does it make in your life?

Week 5: Finding Calm in Creation

Harley Camden fired up his boat and pulled away from the dock, enjoying the slight breeze rippling the surface of the Occoquan River. The boat cut effortlessly through the water, and Harley loved the feeling of moving forward with no friction, no resistance, no tension, no struggle. He was finding calm in creation.

Harley headed for the channel under the Route 123 bridge, not wanting to run into the rocks lurking beneath the water near the Occoquan shoreline, and then watched as the boat's small wake sent ripples toward the shore and caused the sunlight to dance.

He looked toward Maxine's Restaurant and saw children running along the public dock, chased by parents who didn't want them to fall into the water. Ducks paddled out of his way, and a heron swooped down in front of him. As he passed under the bridge, Harley felt his blood pressure dropping.

Boating had become meditation for Harley, an activity that enabled him to practice what his contemplative friends called mindfulness—focusing awareness on the present moment. On the boat, he had to pay attention to where he was going, with eyes open for kayakers and floating logs, but none of this activity required much mental energy. He simply looked and listened and experienced the river, occasionally adjusting the throttle and turning the steering wheel.

Rootedness is a virtue

After passing under the I-95 bridge, Harley looked to the shore and saw the huge rocks that had been put in place 300 million years ago. They were covered with large trees whose roots reached around the rocks, hugging them tightly and finally plunging into whatever soil they could find. He couldn't tell if the rocks were supporting the trees or the trees were supporting the rocks. Harley envied that. He thought that such rootedness was a virtue. He wondered what it would feel like to hold on to something so solid, and to be able to grow and thrive with such a firm foundation. An old hymn began to play in his head: "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

Harley believed in Christ, but he had no roots. He had grown up an Army brat, moving around the country and then ending up in Germany for his high school years. He came back to the US for college and divinity school but didn't feel a connection to any one place until he became involved with Karen and moved to Alexandria.

His dad was a no-nonsense Army officer, a veteran of Vietnam with a three-pack-a-day habit, and he died of lung cancer a month after Harley graduated from college. His mother was softer and more spiritual, but she retired to Florida and remarried. Harley enjoyed visiting her in her new home and liked her new husband, but she developed ovarian cancer and was dead by the time Harley turned forty. He had grown up as an only child and often longed for a larger family. That was one of the reasons that his wife Karen and daughter Jessica were so precious to him, and why he became so close to Karen's parents in Alexandria.

Throughout his ministry in the Washington area, the five of them gathered frequently for birthdays and holiday celebrations. Sometimes Karen's brother from Spokane

would join them, along with his family, but usually it was just Jessica, Harley, Karen and her parents. They loved to eat and drink together, whether they were having a Fourth of July picnic or Christmas dinner. But after the Brussels bombing that killed Karen and Jessica, Karen's parents moved to a retirement facility in Annapolis, and he rarely saw them. He came to realize that Karen and Jessica were his roots, and without them he had nothing holding him in place.

The view from the water

Harley found himself thinking of Karen's parents as he steered the boat into the Potomac River and headed north. They had lived in the Mount Vernon area of Alexandria, and on their many visits Harley and Karen enjoyed walking along the trail bordering the river, which offered stunning views of the river and the Maryland shoreline.

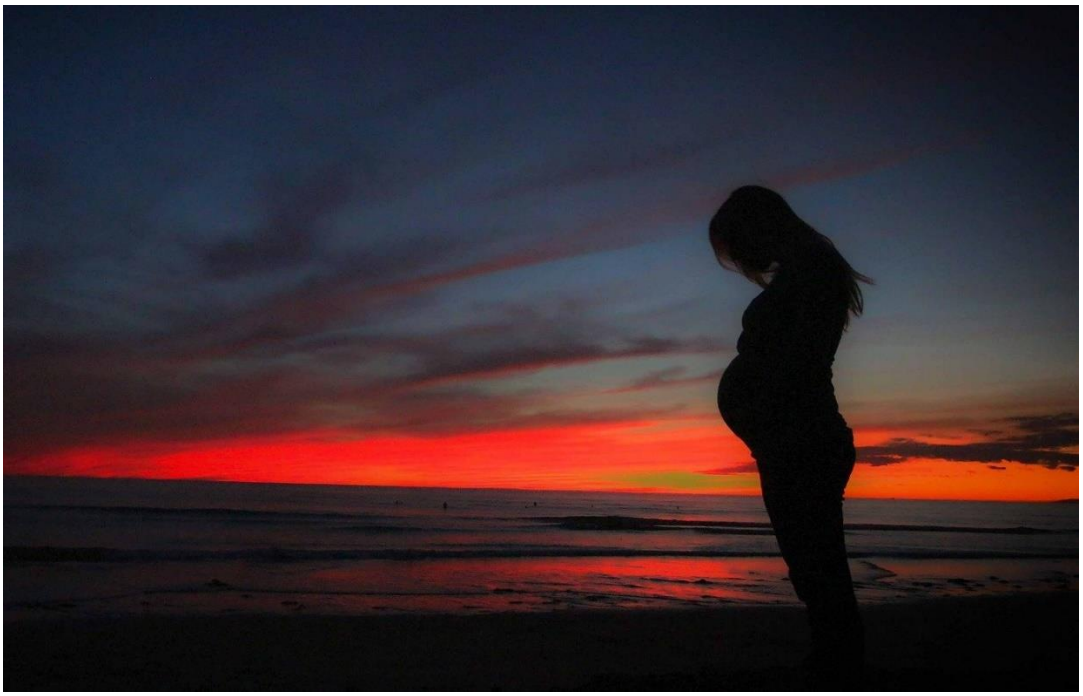
Now Harley was able to see their neighborhood from the water, which gave him a new perspective. It struck him that travel in colonial Virginia had been largely water-based, but now it was primarily land-based, with people moving around by cars and trucks and busses and trains. He enjoyed seeing the area from the water and feeling a connection with years gone by. One of his favorite destinations had become George Washington's Mount Vernon home, which was hard to see from the land but spectacular from the water. Once again, he was finding calm in creation.

Read chapters 9 and 10 of ***City of Peace*** as well as Psalm 104:25: "Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both great and small."

Questions:

1. Where do you find calm in creation? In what ways does it focus your awareness on the present moment? How can you make it a bigger part of your life?
2. What are your religious or familial roots, and how do they anchor you?
3. When have you seen a place from a new perspective (for example, from the water or the air), and how did this view affect your understanding of it?

Week 6: Justice and Love



Harley Camden dreamed he was in his twenties, on his summer semester in Israel, digging in the Galilee. A warm breeze caused a grove of pine trees to sway gently, and a pair of birds flew in gentle circles above him in a cloudless sky.

He had spent the day working in the same square as Leah Silverman, enjoying playful banter while sifting dirt in the search for ancient coins and sherds of pottery. Leah's legs were brown from weeks in the sun, slender and long beneath her cutoff jeans. She wore a yellow T-shirt from a Go-Go's concert with the sleeves rolled up, a red bandana on her head, and aviator sunglasses. Harley enjoyed looking at her across the sifter, and he loved to make her laugh.

A message from an angel

When the workday was over, he returned to his A-frame dorm for a quick nap before their afternoon classes. Dozing off, he was visited by a wingless but clearly supernatural messenger who told him that Leah was pregnant. Harley was shocked, since the two of them had not slept together and he was not aware that she was seeing

anyone else. *Pregnant? How could that be?* Then the angel said, "Harley, do not be afraid to take Leah as your wife."

What? That was more unexpected than an unplanned pregnancy.

"She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus."

Justice and love

When Harley awoke from sleep in the A-frame, he wondered whether the angel was speaking the truth or not. *How would I know?* He had never received a message from God in a dream. *What would Leah say if I approached her and asked if she were pregnant? Would she marry me? Would she even consider raising a child with me?*

In the dream, Harley wrestled with these questions as he lay in bed and looked out of the dorm at the rays of afternoon sunlight coming through the pine trees of Galilee. Justice was important to him, as was personal responsibility, so he thought Leah should be held accountable for her unplanned pregnancy. He felt anger toward her for flirting with him on the dig site and then spending the night with someone else.

But he also had compassion for her and didn't want to do anything to embarrass her or cause her public humiliation. Wrestling inside him were the virtues of justice and love, fighting for dominance inside Harley just as they had battled inside the New Testament's Joseph. He went back and forth and finally concluded that he should go ahead and marry her.

The challenge of commitment

Harley awoke from his dream in Occoquan, feeling even more confused. He had experienced a dream within a dream. As the fog lifted, he realized that the promise of intimacy with Leah was a fantasy. He was hungry for closeness and camaraderie, attraction and affection, but the reality of his life was that he was feeling a slow boil of anger and frustration.

The dreams seemed to be challenging him to make a commitment to Leah, an offer of unconditional support as she brought a new life into the world. But what was that life, if it was not a baby? *Leah is surely not pregnant*, he thought, *not at age fifty-five*. Only in the dream was she a fertile young woman. But the dream inside the dream was so vivid. *What was God saying to me? Or, if it was not a message from God, what is my subconscious saying to me?*

Harley sipped his coffee while getting dressed, thinking about how the struggle between judgment and compassion had appeared first in Joseph's dream, and then continued throughout the ministry of Jesus. In fact, it was one of the dominant themes of the New Testament, hidden in plain sight. *Why didn't I see it before?*

When confronted with the choice between justice and love, he had to choose love.

Read chapters 11 and 12 of ***City of Peace*** as well as Matthew 1:20-21: An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph "in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'"

Questions:

1. In what areas of life do you stress justice, personal responsibility, and accountability? What aspects of your faith support this?
2. When do you feel compassion toward others? What actions do you take as a result of this feeling?
3. Where do you see the struggle between judgment and compassion in Scripture? What motivates you to choose love over justice, or justice over love?

Week 7: Tradition and Jesus

Pastor Harley Camden was happy to have his boat full of people, especially on such a lovely summer day. He had realized that a large part of his anger over the past year was grounded in loneliness. Yes, he was rightly upset about the way that his wife and daughter had died, and the injustice of their killings continued to anger him, but on a more fundamental level he simply missed them. Companionship was as life-giving to him as food and drink.

"Dirk, how is your music going?" asked Tim, the town maintenance man.

"Not bad," replied the guitar-playing old Marine. "I feel like I'm not drawing the crowds I used to, but Maxine's still likes to have me."

"Well," said Tim. "Occoquan is changing. There are not as many white people as there used to be, natural fans of country music."

Dirk nodded. "Yes, that's true. A lot of changes going on. Not all of them good."

Change and freedom

"But there are certainly some good ones," interjected Leah, an old friend of Harley. "The new places to eat and drink are great, I think. They are turning Occoquan into a real foodie town."

"Yeah, but they are driving up rents and making it harder for regular people to live around here," complained Dirk. "I thought the area was fine as it was."

"You Republicans used to be change agents," Tim said. "Now you are change resisters. You say you support freedom of religion, but all through Northern Virginia you have people objecting to the building of mosques."

"I think that's dead wrong," insisted Dirk. "Anyone who wants to worship in peace should be allowed to do so. Freedom should be for everyone—that's what I fought for. I'll do anything to protect my family, my community, and the American way of life. Anything." He turned in his swivel chair and faced forward along with Harley. "They think I'm a dinosaur, but I'm not. I just value tradition."

"I hear you, Dirk," said Harley. "Where would the church be without tradition?"

"Amen, brother."

"At the same time, you know what God says, don't you? In Revelation? 'I am making all things new.'"

"Now you're just meddling, Pastor," Dirk smiled.

Church tradition

Tradition, Harley thought. So important to the church. And yet, congregations that remained trapped in the past were doomed, because God was always working for transformation, leading people into new understandings of themselves and the people around them.

For most of Christian history, slavery was accepted by the church. Women were long considered second-class citizens. Homosexuals had been routinely condemned. *Bad traditions!* Harley thought.

Harley's awakening on homosexuality had come through a friendship with a fellow seminarian, an Illinois farm boy from a very conservative family, who came out in the 1980s. Although members of the Methodist Church debated the morality of homosexuality for decades, using a variety of biblical and theological arguments, Harley was convinced that gays and lesbians could be good and moral people. For proof, he looked no farther than his friend, who had been a good and righteous man, faithful to the church, and never sexually exploitative.

The Jesus Tradition

Tradition. What about hatred toward Muslims? Is my intervention with Omar another awakening?

Harley sensed that God was leading him into a deeper relationship with Omar and the Bayati family. As he thought about the New Testament, he realized that Jesus always reached out and embraced people at the margins of society—the poor, the sick, women and children. Jesus got in trouble for eating with tax collectors and sinners, and for criticizing the religious leaders of his day.

There was something edgy about Jesus, a willingness to enter into uncharted territory with nothing but love and acceptance. Maybe Jesus would reach out to Muslims today, people who were on the margins of American society. As radical as such an approach seemed, Harley had the feeling that it was absolutely central to the tradition that Jesus started.

Read chapters 13 and 14 of ***City of Peace*** as well as Revelation 21:5, "And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.'"

Questions:

1. What changes in your community are difficult for you to accept? Which changes do you welcome?
2. Which church traditions do you value and want to preserve? What traditions were the Christian community right to abandon, in your opinion?
3. What do you consider to be central to "the Jesus tradition," and how should it be embraced and advanced?

Week 8: Christian Hospitality

As soon as they sat down for dinner, Youssef Ayad offered a prayer. “Be with us, Lord Jesus, as you were with your first followers in the breaking of the bread. Bless this food to our use and ourselves to your service. Amen.”

His wife Sofia passed Harley Camden a plate of lentils and rice with tomato sauce and said that it was called *kosheri*. She followed that dish with stuffed grape leaves, which she called *warah enab*.

Youssef refilled Harley’s glass of iced tea and noted that they ate mostly vegetarian meals, which came from the Coptic Christian practice of abstaining from meat during periods of partial fasting. He said that they were allowed to eat fish through most of the year, but the two of them found that they were satisfied with a largely vegan diet.

From a spiritual point of view, it took them back to the Garden of Eden, said Youssef, where plants were the only food that humans were permitted to eat. Harley nodded,

remembering that according to the Book of Genesis, meat was allowed only after the time of Noah and the ark.

The power of a meal

"This food is delicious," said Harley to Sofia. "Thank you very much. It all seems very healthy."

"Food is important to us," Sofia said. "Think of the many times that Jesus sat down to eat with people—even tax collectors and sinners. Christian hospitality is very important to Youssef and me."

"I do appreciate it," Harley added. "Think of how much better the world would be if people actually sat down and ate with each other."

"No doubt about it," agreed Youssef. "Although the Bayatis are Muslim, they have become some of our closest friends here in Occoquan, largely because we have shared so many meals. Back in Egypt, Christians and Muslims are getting together less and less, which has caused the animosity and violence to increase. Did you hear about the attack last December in Cairo?"

"No, I missed that," admitted Harley.

"A suicide bomber attacked St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral. More than two dozen worshipers were killed, including a ten-year-old girl."

"It was horrible," Sofia said, shaking her head. "The worst attack on Copts in years. The Islamic State claimed responsibility."

"How did the Copts respond?" asked Harley.

"With increased security, of course," said Youssef. "But also with prayer—prayers for the victims, and for their attackers."

Preparation for heaven

Harley was impressed that the Coptic Christian community could respond with prayer for such evildoers. Thinking back over the past year, he hadn't said a single prayer for the terrorists who killed his wife and daughter. And yet he knew that Jesus commanded his followers to pray for the people who persecuted them.

"A Coptic bishop set just the right tone," continued Youssef. "He has a diocese south of Cairo. He challenged us all to love our enemies, to forgive them, and to pray for God to extract evil and darkness from their hearts. This has been my prayer since the bombing, although I admit that it is not easy to do."

"It is the only Christian path," added Sofia. "We need to focus on heaven, and practice heavenly values in this world. After all, our life here is a preparation for heaven."

Read chapters 15 and 16 of ***City of Peace*** as well as Matthew 9:9-13, "As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'"

Questions:

1. Where do you find spirituality in food? What are some of the most meaningful meals you have ever had?

2. Why do you think Jesus chose to eat with tax collectors and sinners? How would the world be a better place if people actually sat down and ate together?
3. Who are the people that you find it most difficult to remember in your prayers? How is prayer, love, forgiveness and Christian hospitality a preparation for heaven?

Week 9: Encountering Jesus

The bishop stepped out of her office in Alexandria and greeted Harley Camden. She was nothing if not perfectly punctual and looked as handsome as ever in a light-blue blouse with clerical collar, black skirt, and black heels. Harley stood, shook her hand, noted that her heels gave her a height advantage, and followed her into her fifth-floor office.

The bishop sat in the tall executive chair, which made Harley feel as though he were a bank customer asking for a loan. It was his first meeting with the bishop since being assigned to a new church.

"So, you've been in Occoquan for how long," asked the bishop, "about six weeks?"

"Yes, started in mid-June. I'm still unpacking but am pretty well set up in the church and the house."

"How do you like the town?"

"So far, so good. It is small enough to have a Mayberry feel, but so close to DC that it doesn't feel isolated."

The bishop smiled. "Let's talk about the church. Did you bring your data sheets?"

Measuring progress as a pastor

Harley pulled out two sets of papers and gave one of them to the bishop. He knew how important metrics were to her. The first page contained numbers for worship attendance, the second was a summary of the church budget, and the third contained information on infant baptisms, adult baptisms, Sunday School attendance, home visits, hospital visits, funerals and weddings. Each page was divided into actuals for the current year and goals for the next year, and at the end was a line for her to sign and date the packet, indicating satisfactory progress by the pastor.

"Okay," she said, looking at the sheets, "walk me through it."

"As you can see," Harley began, "the best worship attendance so far was on my first Sunday—one hundred and five. The church was packed, since everyone wanted to check out the new guy. Since then, we've been fluctuating between sixty and eighty-five. I think a reach-goal for next year would be an average of ninety."

"How about your budget?" asked the bishop. They flipped to the second page of their packets. "Your total budget is one hundred and ninety-eight thousand per year, with sixty-seven pledging units. Average pledge of a little under three thousand per year. Not bad for Northern Virginia."

"I think we are tracking pretty well for contributions," noted Harley. "The summer is often a slow period, but we are receiving about what we expected."

"Things will pick up in the fall," said the bishop. "And you'll do your annual stewardship campaign. What will your goal be for 2018?"

"I'd like to have us shoot to surpass two hundred thousand. I think that will be an important barrier to break. I'd like to do an interfaith speakers series in the new year, and put some money in the budget for that."

"Will that inspire giving?" asked the bishop, with skepticism in her voice.

"It is certainly important," Harley replied, "and I think the people of Occoquan feel it very personally. We had the murder of a Muslim woman this summer, and—"

"Yes, I heard about that," interrupted the bishop.

"Still unsolved," added Harley. "Really weighing heavily on the community. So, we have Muslims in the community, Jews as well. I've gotten to know some Copts, who are Christian, of course, but from the Orthodox tradition."

Clean bathrooms and nurseries

"I can sense your passion," said the bishop, "but I'm not sure you want to base a budget expansion on interfaith relations. People want to get their personal needs met. How about expanding the youth program or doing a series on parenting?"

Harley's heart sank. The bishop was trying to cram Riverside Methodist into a prepackaged program for church growth. *Next thing you know, she's going to ask me about the cleanliness of the bathrooms and the nursery*.

"So, how are your bathrooms?" she asked. "Updated recently? And your nursery? Clean and modern?"

"Not really," Harley admitted. "But I'll take your recommendations back to our church property committee."

Harley had been in a growing church in Sterling, so he knew all about the importance of making a positive impression on families with children and youths. *But how can this be my highest priority with Norah's killer on the loose and a terrorist group preparing to unleash a*

biological weapon? Sprucing up the nursery seemed like repainting the Pentagon right before the 9/11 attack.

"Let's look at your last page," suggested the bishop. "One infant baptism, zero adult baptisms, Sunday School off for the summer, eight home visits, five hospital visits, one funeral and zero weddings. You've only been there for six weeks, so those numbers seem about right. What would you say your most significant visit has been since you arrived?"

Experiencing Jesus

Here's my chance, thought Harley. "Muhammad Bayati, a prisoner in the Prince William County Jail." The bishop's eyebrows raised. "He is the father of the young woman who was murdered. I was called by a corrections officer to visit him and see if I could convince him to end a hunger strike. The good news is that he is eating again, and since then I have developed a relationship with his teenage son. It started when I saved his life on Gunston Cove—his powerboat caught on fire and I was able to pluck him off before it exploded. So anyway, I have stayed in touch with him and we both hope that the killer of his sister will be arrested soon, so that his father will be released. Although this visit with Muhammad has not led to an adult baptism for my data sheet, I think it fits the category of visiting people in prison and maybe even encountering Jesus."

The bishop sat quietly for a few seconds, then picked up a pen, tapped it on her desk, and signed his packet. "Good work, Harley," she said with a smile. "I think I did the right thing by sending you to Occoquan."

Read chapters 17 and 18 of ***City of Peace*** as well as Matthew 25:37-40: "Then the righteous will answer [Jesus the king], 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

Questions:

1. How should progress be measured in Christian ministry? What does success look like?
2. Clean bathrooms and nurseries are often cited as requirements for church growth. What do you look for in a church?
3. Why do you think Jesus promises to appear to us in the "least" of his brothers and sisters? Where, if ever, have you seen him?

Week 10: Spirit in Community

Harley Camden ran into his friend Tawnya Jones at Auntie's Pie Shop. "So, what are you up to today," asked Tawnya, "besides drinking coffee?"

"Writing my Sunday sermon," he said, taking a sip of his drink. "I'm wrestling with Paul's letter to the Romans."

"The one who is righteous will live by faith?"

"You know your Romans," said Harley, offering his hand for a high five. He liked to talk with Baptists because—unlike more liberal Protestants—they knew their Bibles. "But no, the seventh chapter, all the stuff about sin and doing the things that we hate."

"That is a tough passage," Tawnya admitted. "Tough but true." Giving him a smile, she said, "You don't go easy on your congregation in the summer, do you?"

Harley shook his head. "No, they need it. They are a sinful bunch. Very wicked people." She laughed and told him to be nice.

Freedom from sin

"I get what Paul is saying about sin being a controlling force, like an addiction or an obsession," Harley said. "Paul understands human nature, for sure. But how does Jesus actually come in and free us? What does Paul mean when he says, 'Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!'"

Tawnya thought for a second. "I guess it has to do with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, taking our sins on himself, dying so that we can be forgiven."

Harley nodded. "Yes, I get that, and I believe it. Forgiveness is possible because of the cross. But that doesn't seem to be the same as being freed from sin. After all, we can sin, be forgiven, and then sin again."

Tawnya looked out over the parking lot at Riverside Methodist. "I remember that I asked my grandfather about sin after church one Sunday. He showed me a vase that had been in the family for generations, one that he had broken accidentally and then repaired. He said that when we sin, we shatter our relationships with God and each other. Then Jesus comes along and glues us back together through forgiveness. I thought about this for a minute, looked closely at the vase, and then said, 'But Grandpa, I can still see the breaks.'"

"That's it," said Harley. "That's the key question. How do we fix the cracks?"

New life in the Spirit

"I think that comes from the Spirit," Tawnya offered. "Do you have your Bible with you, Pastor?" Harley shook his head. "Well then, give me your phone." She quickly pulled up an internet Bible, and typed in *Romans 8*.

"You know your Bible, Ms. Jones."

"Comes from being in church every Sunday," she said. "Here it is; 'But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.' That's in the chapter right after the one you are preaching on."

"So Jesus rescues us from sin," said Harley, thinking aloud. "And then the Spirit lives in us. The Spirit heals the wounds."

"That's how I understand it," Tawnya agreed, handing Harley's phone back to him. "Paul talks somewhere else about 'the new life of the Spirit.'"

"We Methodists are probably not as tuned into the Spirit as we should be," admitted Harley. "The Spirit is wild and unpredictable, and that makes us uncomfortable. Reminds us of faith-healing and speaking in tongues."

"But that's not all the Spirit does," said Tawnya.

The wind of the Spirit

"You're right," said Harley. "I have felt the Spirit. It has calmed me and guided me. I also believe that the Spirit pulls us together, all of us, and makes us the Body of Christ in the world."

"Sounds like a healing power to me," Tawnya said. "Christ forgives us and the Spirit unites us. And I like what you are saying about the Spirit being active in the community, the church, the Body of Christ."

Suddenly, it hit Harley that he had been fighting too many battles alone. Over the past year, whether he was calling for global justice or nursing his own personal wounds, he acted in isolation. He was a lone voice in the wilderness, a bitter man holding on to his resentments. But these efforts usually ended in frustration and loneliness, because they ignored the presence of something much bigger than himself.

Harley had always believed that God worked most powerfully through communities, but he had been neglecting this truth since the deaths of Jessica and Karen. His pain simply wouldn't allow it. Now, he felt a sudden sense of relief that he didn't have to be alone in his grief and anger and frustration, because the Spirit was with him, really with him. Harley realized that he needed to switch boats. Instead of doing the exhausting work of rowing all by himself, it was time for him to jump into a sailboat and allow the wind of the Spirit to push him forward.

"Thanks, Tawnya," Harley said. "I think you've given me the end of my sermon."

"Happy to help," she said, giving his hand a squeeze. "Hope it's a good one. Now, I better get my pie and head home."

Read chapters 19 and 20 of ***City of Peace*** as well as Romans 8:9, 14, "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. … For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."

Questions:

1. How do you understand the power of sin, and the freedom that comes through Christ?
2. What does the Holy Spirit mean to you? When, if ever, have you experienced it?
3. Where do you look for community, and what benefits does it offer you? What is the connection between Spirit and community?

Week 11: One Spirit-filled body

One Sunday morning, a rock was thrown through the window of the Riverview Bakery. A few hours later, Harley Camden was standing before his congregation, which was surprisingly large for August.

Harley read the scripture verse from First Corinthians and admitted that it was not the passage printed in the bulletin. "I changed my scripture and sermon because of what happened this morning at the Riverview Bakery. As some of you may have heard, our neighbors were attacked once again. The Bayatis had a rock thrown through their window." A murmur went through the congregation, and Harley saw looks of concern.

"I have chosen First Corinthians," he continued, "because we are a congregation with 'varieties of gifts.' Some of you are teachers, some are doctors, some are builders, some are analysts, some are caregivers, some are civil servants. There is virtually no challenge in our community that we cannot tackle and overcome, as a group. But I am afraid that we sometimes forget this, or at least I do. We try to face problems as

individuals, forgetting that our skills and our strengths are seen most clearly in a united community. That is why the apostle Paul says that there are 'varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.' Our many different gifts are connected to one united Spirit. I am convinced that we have not yet tapped into the power of this Spirit."

Harley sensed that he had their attention, with many starting to wonder where he was going. Talk of the power of the Spirit was not always welcome in Methodist churches, where people were not comfortable with worship that felt out of control.

Gifts of the Spirit

"Here is the thing about the gifts of the Spirit," Harley continued. "Although we often think of speaking in tongues or faith-healing, the gifts of the Spirit are much broader. They include any skill or talent that advances Christ's work in the world, and they are given to everyone. Paul says, 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.'" Harley saw a few nods in the congregation but also some confusion.

"Do you know what 'manifestation' means?" There were a few more nods, but also some blank looks. "I didn't," he admitted, "so I had to look it up this morning. Manifestation means 'an action or fact that clearly shows something.' Each of us is given a gift from God that clearly shows the reality of the Spirit to the world. It is through each of us that people can see the presence and the power of the Spirit. They see it in our teaching, our healing, our building, and our caregiving. And here is the most important thing about these gifts: 'to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' Each and every one of these gifts support the common good. If they do not serve all of God's people, they are not true gifts of the Spirit."

The dark side of charisma

Harley went on to say that charismatic leaders had gifts—in fact, the Greek word *charisma* was used in First Corinthians and it meant "gift." But there was a dark side to charismatic leaders, and it usually involved tunnel vision, isolation and arrogance. Such leaders felt that they were above the community and its standards, with freedom to pursue their own agendas, and they rarely pursued the common good. Harley talked

about cult leaders who convinced their followers to commit suicide, and terrorists who inspired their underlings to engage in suicide bombings.

"I have felt the consequences of this dark charisma very personally. My wife and daughter were killed by a man who blew himself up in an act that would be considered abhorrent in the wider Muslim community. But because he was influenced by isolated extremists, he destroyed himself and my family."

The congregation sat still and riveted.

Gifts that advance the common good

"Terrorism is a manifestation of evil," Harley concluded. "It is an act that clearly shows the reality of hatred in the world. I have seen it and felt it. I know it. But fortunately for us, there are gifts available to us that are manifestations of the Spirit, gifts that advance the common good. I have found that when we work together as one community, using the full variety of our gifts, we act in ways that show the reality of God's love to the world, a love that drives out darkness, a love that undermines hatred, a love that actually conquers evil."

Harley got an "amen" and a ripple of nervous laughter. Most were not accustomed to call-and-response preaching in their orderly suburban church.

"So here is what I challenge us to do today. After worship, let's walk as a group to the Riverview Bakery. Let's walk as one body, as the Body of Christ, as the physical presence of our Lord in the world today. Let's line up and support this business as a manifestation of the Spirit, as an act that shows the reality of our love."

Looking out over the congregation during the closing hymn, Harley felt strongly that he was being led by the Spirit of God, with the support of a large number of his church members. In fact, when he gathered with the congregation in the parking lot after the service, he was shocked by the number of people who were interested in walking to the Riverview Bakery.

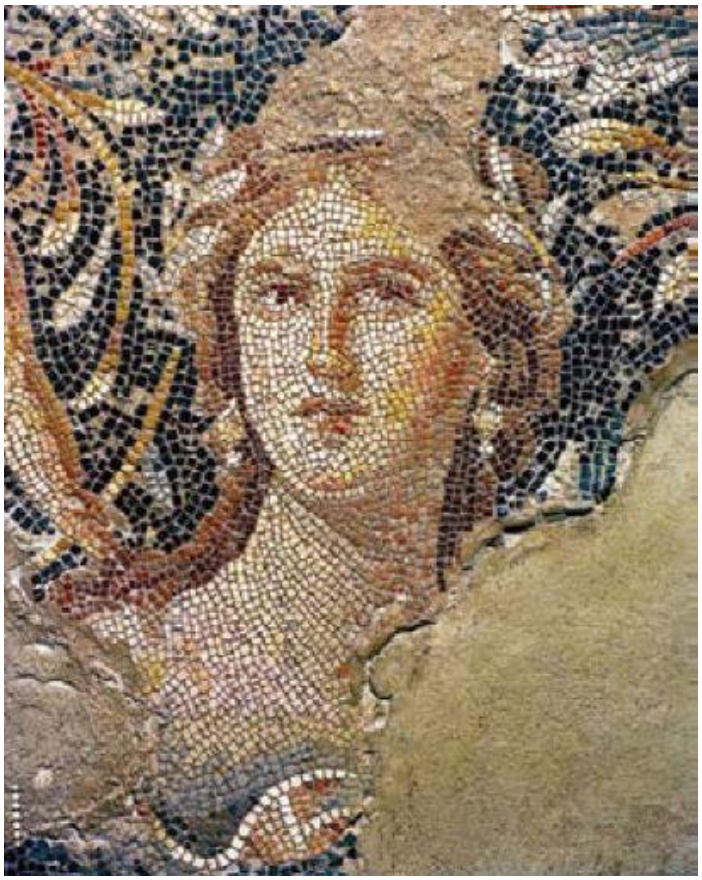
There had been close to a hundred people in worship, and Harley guessed that about seventy-five were ready to march. One white-haired woman even tugged on his sleeve after he gave the benediction, saying that she wanted to participate but couldn't walk that far. She said that she would have her son drive her and drop her off at the bakery. Harley smiled. "Of course," feeling proud to be her pastor.

Read chapters 21 and 22 of ***City of Peace*** as well as 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 12-13: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. … For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

Questions:

1. What varieties of gifts do you see in the community? Why are some more highly regarded than others? What can be done about this?
2. Harley said, "Each and every one of these gifts support the common good. If they do not serve all of God's people, they are not true gifts of the Spirit." Why is "the common good" so important? How do you assess whether a gift is serving this good? Where do you see "dark charisma" at work in the world?
3. When have you taken action as one Spirit-filled body? How were you challenged by this? What was the result?

Week 12: Be a Galilean



For the scripture lesson at Riverside Methodist Church, Harley Camden read from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea," he intoned, pointing up to the stained-glass window behind him.

"Our window shows the sea that Matthew is talking about," he said as an aside, "the Sea of Galilee." Then, returning to the reading, "He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.' From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

Harley closed the Bible and looked out over the faces in the congregation, people that had been strangers to him just two months before. They looked eager, maybe even anxious, to hear what he had to say. Words created reality.

Multicultural Galilee

"Galilee of the Gentiles," said Harley, beginning his sermon. "That's how Matthew describes the place where Jesus lived and worked. He doesn't describe it as 'Galilee of the Jews,' even though Jesus and his disciples were all Jews. No, it is Galilee of the Gentiles. The region was full of Romans and other non-Jews, people called Gentiles. It was a very multicultural place. It was a place in which people had to talk to one another, really communicate with one another, if they were going to live in peace. They had to be willing to do business with each other and be neighbors to each other, if they were going to avoid fighting over culture and religion and politics."

At that moment, the door of the sanctuary opened and Youssef and Sofia Ayad slipped in. They quietly entered and took a seat next to the Bayatis.

"When I was a divinity school student," Harley continued, "I spent a summer doing an archaeological dig in Galilee. I worked in a town called Sepphoris, which is next door to Nazareth. We found a mosaic of a beautiful woman that has come to be known as the Mona Lisa of the Galilee." As Harley pictured the mosaic, he thought of Norah Bayati—maybe she was the Mona Lisa of Occoquan. Shaking off the thought, he returned to his sermon.

City of Peace

"The important thing about Sepphoris is that it was a community in which Jews and Romans lived together in peace. They didn't fight one another, even though Jews in other parts of the country had been involved in violent revolts against the Roman Empire for many years. Instead, Jews and Romans lived as neighbors and did business together. They did so well that it became known as Eirenopolis, 'City of Peace.'"

Sofia Ayad leaned over and whispered something to Fatima Bayati. Harley wondered what it was but kept going. “Here in Occoquan, we live in multicultural place as well: We have Christians, Jews and Muslims, representing different cultures, races and nationalities. We live next to a river, not a sea, but it would be fair to call us ‘Occoquan of the Gentiles.’ The question for us is the same one that faced the people of the Galilee. Will we fight over our differences, or will we live together in peace? Will we accept each other and communicate with each other, or will we live in the kind of isolation that leads to violence?”

Harley went on to say, “I am convinced that isolation is a major problem for us today—just think of those terrorists in Woodbridge, cut off from the larger community and stewing in their resentments, plotting an act of violence that could have killed us all. This could have been a City of Violence! A City of Jihad!” Harley felt his passion rising as he departed from his manuscript.

We should all be Galileans

“My professor on the archaeological dig was a Jew,” Harley said, returning to his text. “He has worked hard over the years to support peace efforts in Israel. He sees the history of Sepphoris as a model for us today, and I remember him saying to us: ‘You should all be Galileans. Learn to live together as the people of Galilee did in Sepphoris. Galilee can be a model for Jews and Palestinians in Israel, and for Jews, Christians and Muslims in the United States.’” Harley saw a few nods through the congregation, and a smile from Youssef Ayad.

“I agree with my professor,” Harley continued. “Occoquan has not been a City of Peace, but it can be. We should all be Galileans here, whatever our religion. We should work together and be good neighbors to each other. Isolation breeds violence, while communication and community lead to peace. Do you remember what I said last week? The Spirit of God gives us gifts to advance the common good. We’ve seen the Spirit at work this week, helping ordinary people to do extraordinary things, including the foiling of a terrorist plot. We should be using these gifts every day here in Occoquan. God’s Spirit is present when people work and live together as one people, but terrible things happen when communities become fractured and polarized. We need to be Galileans!”

Read chapters 23 and 24 of ***City of Peace*** as well as Matthew 4:12-17: "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.' From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

Questions:

1. What does the multicultural Galilee of the first century have to teach us about living in the multicultural United States of the 21st century? Be specific.
2. Where do you see an example of an Eirenopolis, "City of Peace," today? What could you do to make your community such a place?
3. What does it mean to you to be a Galilean? Where do the challenges lie? How could such an identity advance God's will in the world?

Thank you for exploring the Bible through *City of Peace*. I hope that this journey has brought you closer to God and to your neighbors, at a time in which we certainly need more cities of peace.

If you want to continue your study of Scripture, I invite you to pick up my new book *The Bible's Greatest Hits: Top 66 Passages from Genesis to Revelation* (Wipf and Stock, 2021). Written for private devotion and group discussion, the book contains the best in biblical scholarship as well as practical connections to daily life, along with questions for reflection at the end of each chapter. It will give you an introduction to the major characters and stories of Holy Scripture, while making links between contemporary life and the Bible's moral and theological insights. Believe it or not, even the books of Obadiah and Jude have a message for us today!