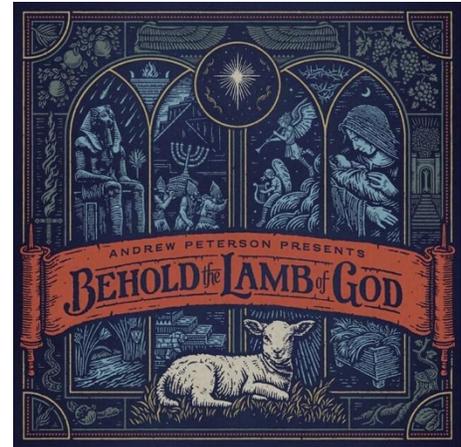


Behold the Lamb of God ~

Study Guide by Katy Attanasi Barker

This four-week series uses the album *Behold the Lamb* as a lens for viewing the historical and theological implications of the Christmas story. We encourage you to listen to the album throughout the season. Each week we'll focus on one or two songs and give you the link to the lyrics. You'll also find links to some relatively short readings that pertain to the weekly themes.



The reading questions are for your personal use. The discussion questions will guide our weekly time together. If you choose to print out the guide, I will send out the links in an email each week so that you can easily click to the readings. As usual, there is more material than we can cover. In order to keep our discussion time more narrowly focused, I've added in some non-musical "Bonus Tracks" that cover topics like why Jews don't believe in Jesus, what supersessionism is and why it is harmful, etc. We won't spend much time on these topics in class, but I hope you find them interesting and helpful. Feel free to email me with questions if you find something confusing or want to talk further!

Mark your calendars for a showing of the Livestream on Saturday, December 18 at 4 pm. All are welcome. Childcare will be provided. We are recommending a \$10 donation to cover costs, but it is not required.

Pastor Katy

katya@broadwayunited.org

Week 1: These Old, Old Stories

The magic of Christmas lies in no small part in the familiar rituals that we share as families and communities. It just wouldn't be Christmas without...the decorations, the meal, candlelight, and Silent Night on Christmas Eve. Sometimes the joy is in the familiarity, and sometimes, like the twisting of a kaleidoscope, a new aspect becomes visible in the re-telling of the Christmas story with different words, songs, or images. Last year, a friend gifted me with a Nativity scene situated in a gourd—and something about the smallness of the figures and the vastness of their space shifted my vision slightly. I was struck by the profound simplicity of the God-child's appearance in this world and the effects of a seemingly small event rippling through time and space. Maybe seeing a recent artist's depiction of Mary,



Joseph, and Jesus enables you to see the story anew; or it might be that one of Peterson's songs helps you to hear the Spirit in a fresh way. Wherever you find yourself, I am grateful for the opportunity to listen in community.

This album brings both the tradition and the twist, which we'll use as an entry point into our reflections on the Christmas story. Our first week looks at different versions of Jesus's birth story in the Bible: why they exist and what we experience when we read them separately and together. We typically harmonize, or merge, the Gospel stories and treat them as one story. Reading the Gospels individually gives us a sense of the authors' intentions and of the community for whom they wrote. We'll also think about what makes Peterson's take new and interesting. You can find the album on Spotify, YouTube, or on Amazon Unlimited. It is 42 minutes in total. If you're listening on a streaming service that automatically shuffles the songs, it is worth it to know and occasionally listen in Peterson's order, above.

Track listing [\[edit \]](#)

All songs by Andrew Peterson unless otherwise noted.

1. "Gather 'Round, Ye Children, Come" – 3:18
2. "Passover Us" – 4:33
3. "So Long, Moses" – 6:13
4. "Deliver Us" – 3:50
5. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" – 2:31
6. "Matthew's Begats" – 2:17
7. "It Came to Pass" – 2:50
8. "Labor of Love" (featuring Jill Phillips) – 4:32
9. "The Holly and the Ivy" (Ben Shive) – 1:53
10. "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks" (Nahum Tate) – 3:23
11. "Behold the Lamb of God" (Andrew Peterson, Laura Story) – 4:02
12. "The Theme of My Song (reprise)" – 4:21



Week 1, Listening:

- Listen and read "Gather 'Round, Ye Children, Come" (lyrics).
<https://genius.com/Andrew-peterson-gather-round-ye-children-come-live-lyrics>

Reading:

- Read Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2
- "Nativity Narratives," Helen K. Bond, "Nativity (Luke 2:1-20)", n.p. [cited 21 Nov 2021]:
Online: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/passages/main-articles/nativity-luke-2120>
- "Andrew Peterson Walks the Long Road of Artistry with 'Behold the Lamb of God'"
<https://americansongwriter.com/andrew-peterson-behold-the-lamb-of-god-album-feature/>

Reading questions:

1. What did you notice when reading the Gospel narratives this year?
2. According to the Bible Odyssey articles, why do the Gospel stories differ? What do we learn from their divergences?
3. How do the Gospel writers' messages and audiences affect the way they tell the story?
4. What do we gain from having both accounts—even when they do not agree?

Discussion questions:

1. What Christmas twists or traditions are you most anticipating this year?
2. How are you challenged to view the Christmas story anew in light of the Gospel readings?

3. What can you see (or do you know) about how Peterson retells the story? What clues are in the title, *Behold the Lamb of God*?
4. In a few weeks, when Christmas is over and the decorations are put away, what story do you hope to tell of this season?

Bonus Track:

Why don't Jews accept Jesus as Messiah?

New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine answers the question in this excerpt from an interview with U.S. Catholic Publication: "That claim that Jews rejected Jesus because he counseled peace and all Jews were looking for some warrior Messiah whose job it would be to get the Romans out of the country misses the variety of messianic ideas that were floating around in the first century. *The majority of Jews did not accept Jesus as a Messiah because most Jews thought that the Messiah and the messianic age came together.* The messianic age meant peace on earth and the end of war, death, disease, and poverty, the ingathering of the exiles, a general resurrection of the dead. When that didn't happen, I suspect quite a number of Jews who were highly attracted to Jesus' message of the kingdom of heaven thought: That's a good message, but we have to keep waiting." (italics, mine)

<https://uscatholic.org/articles/201209/a-jewish-take-on-jesus-amy-jill-levine-talks-the-gospels/>



Bonus track: *What is the relationship between Judaism and Christianity?* Some strains of thought that have been particularly ***harmful*** to Jewish-Christian relations say that Christians have ***replaced*** Jews as the chosen ones of God. This short article gives a brief overview to that harmful view called supersessionism: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/passages/related-articles/supersessionism>

Supersessionism has done great damage to Jewish-Christian beliefs and to Jews by contributing to anti-Semitism. In contrast with supersessionism, the Methodist church believes that there is one God in whom Jews and Christians both believe, and that both the Christian and the Jewish covenants with God are biblical, eternal, and valid. For more on the theology undergirding these commitments and the negative implications of supersessionism, read here: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/book-of-resolutions-united-methodist-guiding-principles-for-christian-jewish-relations>

Bonus Track: “So Long Moses” and the Suffering Servant

“So Long Moses” catalogs Israel’s history and their longing for a king by charting their course from Moses to David. If you’re not familiar with the stories referenced, you can read about them here: Joshua and the Canaanites (the book of Joshua, especially ch 23); Saul (1 Samuel 8, 10: 17-27, 12); David (1 Samuel 16). In asking for a king, the Israelites wished to join their ancient counterparts as a king-led ancient city state. The song contrasts their desired political power with Isaiah’s description of the suffering servant (ch 53) that is used in the Gospels to describe Jesus. Whereas the Israelites sought a military and political power in their King, the suffering servant Isaiah describes is “a man of suffering, familiar with pain” (Mt 8:14-17, Jn 12:37-41, Luke 22:36-38, 1 Peter 2:19-25, Acts 8:32-35).

For more on the suffering servant, read here:

Elizabeth E. Shively, “The Suffering Servant and the New Testament”, n.p. [cited 24 Nov 2021.] Online: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/passages/related-articles/suffering-servant-and-the-new-testament>

“So Long, Moses”: <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Andrew-Peterson/So-Long-Moses>

Bonus reading questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53?
2. How does the Israelite desire for a king or for political power contrast with the words from Isaiah that are used to describe Jesus?
3. Is the description of the suffering servant helpful for us today in thinking about how we can participate in politics? Why or why not?

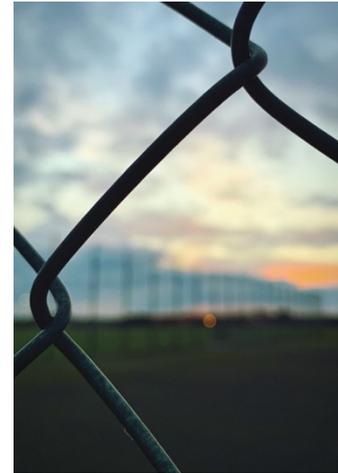
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Week 2: "Deliver Us"

Part 1: If you're following the album list, we've gone from "Gather 'Round," to "Passover Us," to "So Long, Moses." We land this week in the song "Deliver Us," which anticipates Jesus as the new Moses, ready and able to deliver God's people from slavery. In contrast with the enslavement of the Hebrew people by the Egyptians (Exodus 1-14), Peterson says the bondage we face today is of our own making: "our sins...more numerous than all the lambs we slay...Our shackles they were made with our own hands..." The lyrics continue: "Our toil is our atonement and our freedom yours to give...So Yahweh break this silence if you can." Not only is our enslaved situation our own doing, but we find ourselves working for the freedom that only God can give.



I circle back to the word atonement in the line "our toil is our atonement." An atonement model provides an answer to the question "how does God solve the problem of sin through Jesus"? Various models have been argued through history, and the church has held several models in tension. The article (in the Reading list) outlines these models, and you will likely see some familiar themes. Despite the differences, the work of the atonement has *never* been seen as something humans could do on their own. Only God can solve the problem of sin through Jesus. The Methodist teaching on prevenient grace provides a helpful corrective to the belief that humans still need to hustle in order to be saved. Prevenient grace says that salvation begins with God, who calls us into relationship before we were born. For more on the Methodist view of salvation, check out this video by Pastor Laura: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acuAqVni-Zg&list=PLJ9So3PZ8NRBmSeipOu7_k7neQpRTBmg&index=2

Part 2: The song lyrics call for deliverance: "Deliver us, deliver us...Oh Yahweh, hear our cry...And gather us beneath your wings tonight..." The call is followed by the response: "'Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often I have longed...To gather you beneath my gentle wings.'" The call and response quotes the words of Jesus: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34). What a beautiful image—being gathered as chicks under the wings of God. In response to the cry for deliverance Peterson offers a restatement of Jesus' longing to provide comfort. Although the song does not resolve, deliverance will be provided. We have been invited to hear the "old, old story," and we will soon learn more of the deliverance that comes through the "the brave little boy who was God but made himself nothing" (Gather 'Round).

Week 2, Listening:

- “Deliver Us”
<https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Andrew-Peterson/Deliver-Us>

Reading:

- “Ransom, substitute, scapegoat, God: is there one doctrine of the atonement?” by Ben Pugh. Take a look at this article to read some of the answers theologians and church people have given through time. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/29-march/features/features/is-there-one-doctrine-of-the-atonement-ransom-substitute-scapegoat-god>



Reading questions:

1. Which atonement model seems most familiar? Which do you find most compelling? Having listened to the album, which model does Peterson seem to prefer?
2. Where do you see “enslavement” in your life and community? Who are the slaveholders or people in power, and who are the slaves?
3. What does deliverance look like?

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Peterson connect the story of the Hebrews’ enslavement to Jesus’ birth narrative (especially in “Deliver Us” and “Passover Us”)?
2. What does the theme of *deliverance* bring to this celebration, and where else do we see it in the album?
3. In what sense are we humans responsible for the bondage/enslavement we now experience?
4. Where do you see God’s comfort and deliverance at work in the world responding to enslavement? What do they look like?

“God came to us because he wanted to join us on the road, to listen to our story, and to help us realize that we are not walking in circles but moving towards the house of peace and joy. This is the great mystery of Christmas that continues to give us comfort and consolation: we are not alone on our journey. The God of love who gave us life sent his only Son to be with us at all times and in all places, so that we never have to feel lost in our struggles but always can trust that he walks with us. The challenge is to let God be who he wants to be. A part of us clings to our aloneness and does not allow God to touch us where we are most in pain. Often we hide from him precisely those places in ourselves where we feel guilty, ashamed, confused, and lost. Thus we do not give him a chance to be with us where we feel most alone. Christmas is the renewed invitation not to be afraid and to let him-whose love is greater than our own hearts and minds can comprehend-be our companion.” –Henri Nouwen, *Gracias*

Week 3: The Messy Middle

The story of Jesus takes place in history. Although the particulars are left to the imagination, this is no “fairy tale.” Even so, the ways we talk about Christmas often romanticize the story—from the “silent night” to the Little Drummer Boy (as if drumming was ever a desirable background noise for sleeping babies). The songs “Labor of Love” and “It Came to Pass” remind us of the grittier details of the Christmas story. These songs peek past the beautiful parts to illuminate the challenges young Mary in particular faced bringing her first child into the world alone far from family. Although childbirth is a natural part of life, it is also a painful and bloody experience. Even today, with the best of medical interventions, childbirth can be fatal to women and babies, and the realities of ancient life made the risk no less real.

This week we want to enrich our descriptions of Mary and the Holy Family by locating and sharing different images. If you find one that you see as particularly profound, just save the link or the image (or you can send it to me) to share during our class. Christian art and music offer insights that can enliven the faith of all believers, but images of the Virgin Mary have been especially meaningful in the Roman Catholic faith. Historian of American religion Robert Orsi writes, “The Blessed Mother...is so beloved and so feared. Encounters with images of the Virgin are encounters with presence, and they are characterized by the whole range of emotion and behavior that is possible when persons are present to each other in one place.”



There is a great deal of beauty in a silhouette, but sometimes the image grows more beautiful when we see the pain, loneliness, or isolation that Mary and Joseph must have experienced. “Labor of Love” and “It Came to Pass” give one set of insights, we’ll find and share others in our discussion group this week.

Week 3, Listening:

- “Labor of Love”
<https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Andrew-Peterson/Labor-of-Love>
- “It Came to Pass”
<https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Andrew-Peterson/It-Came-to-Pass>

Reading and Assignment

- *Find an artistic depiction of Mary or the Holy Family that resonates with you this season.* For background on how Mary is depicted, read this short article: Jo-Ann Badley, *Madonna in Art*, n.p. [cited 21 Nov. 2021]. Online: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/madonna-in-art>;
- See also: Stephen C. Carlson, “Portraits of Mary in the Gospels”, n.p. [cited 21 Nov 2021]. Online: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/portraits-of-mary-in-the-gospels>

Reading questions:

1. As you read and listen to these two songs what fresh perspective becomes visible?
2. What are the positives and negatives of glossing over the harder parts of Mary’s story?
3. “Labor of Love” highlight the vast difference between the way we imagine things and the way they are; the way we want things to be and the realities we face. Where do you find this tension most visible in your life?
4. What hope or possibility do you find in Mary’s life and experience?

Discussion questions:

1. What image did you find of Mary and the Holy Family, and how does it help you hear or experience the Holy Spirit in a fresh way?
2. It’s natural to focus on the beauty and stillness we hear about in the Christmas songs and images of the Holy Family. But what can we see when we focus differently and consider their pain and suffering?
3. This week challenges us to acknowledge the tension between the fairy tale and the actual experience of Christmas. Where do you experience that tension between the real and the ideal?



O Lord, how hard it is to accept your way. You come to me as a small, powerless child born away from home. You live for me as a stranger in your own land. You die for me as a criminal outside the walls of the city, rejected by your own people, misunderstood by your friends, and feeling abandoned by your God.

As I prepare to celebrate your birth, I am trying to feel loved, accepted, and at home in this world, and I am trying to overcome the feelings of alienation and separation which continue to assail me. But I wonder now if my deep sense of homelessness does not bring me closer to you than my occasional feelings of belonging.

Where do I truly celebrate your birth: in a cozy home or in an unfamiliar house, among welcoming friends or among unknown strangers, with feelings of well-being or with feelings of loneliness?

I do not have to run away from those experiences that are closest to yours. Just as you do not belong to this world, so I do not belong to this world. Every time I feel this way I have an occasion to be grateful and to embrace you better and taste more fully your joy and peace.

Come, Lord Jesus, and be with me where I feel poorest. I trust that this is the place where you will find your manger and bring your light. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Amen.

—Henri Nouwen

Week 4: Behold the Lamb of God

“Behold the Lamb of God” provides both the album’s title and orienting theme. The phrase comes from the gospel of John, in which John the Baptist declares: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:19). The Gospel writer develops this parallel further and depicts Jesus as the Passover lamb. Unlike the other Gospels, in John, Jesus is crucified on the same day that the Passover lambs are killed in the temple.



Peterson picks up on this motif of Jesus as Passover lamb and develops it throughout the album, particularly in “Passover Us” (see above). In the first Passover, recorded in Exodus 12, God sends ten plagues to convince Pharaoh to release the Hebrew people from slavery. Pharaoh finally relents after the 10th and final plague: the death of the firstborn. The Hebrews are warned to spread the blood of a sacrificial lamb on their doorposts so that the Angel of Death passes over their houses. Application of the lamb’s blood means that their firstborns are spared from death. In identifying Jesus as the Passover Lamb, Peterson advances an atonement model: a way of understanding how God takes care of the problem of sin through Jesus. (See Week 2 for further discussion and resources on atonement.)

The song “Behold the Lamb” contrasts the darkness we find ourselves in with the light that Jesus brings to “the people living in darkness” (Isaiah 9:2, Mt 4:16). The album culminates in this honest acknowledgment that Jesus has come for us—for humans—who have broken hearts, who have sinned, and who have fallen far, and we celebrate with grateful hearts.

Week 4, Listening

- Behold the Lamb of God
<https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Andrew-Peterson/Behold-the-Lamb-of-God>
- Passover Us
<https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Andrew-Peterson/Passover-Us>

Reading

- Exodus 12, John 1, Isaiah 9

Reading questions:

1. What do the images of light, a lamb, and a child communicate throughout this album?

2. As you reflect on the depiction of Jesus as the Passover lamb (and *reviewing the reading from Week 2*) *what are the strengths of this approach, and do you find other models important to hold consider?*
3. Where do we most need God's light and deliverance in our world?

Discussion Questions:

1. How has Peterson's album invited us into the story of Jesus's birth, and how do we take this light out into the world?
2. What do you find compelling about Peterson's project?
3. What is the Spirit calling you to do with these fresh perspectives we have encountered?
4. What new twist or ideas have become real to you in this discussion?

How the Light Comes

I cannot tell you
how the light comes.

What I know
is that it is more ancient
than imagining.

That it travels
across an astounding expanse
to reach us.

That it loves
searching out
what is hidden,
what is lost,
what is forgotten
or in peril
or in pain.

That it has a fondness
for the body,
for finding its way
toward flesh,
for tracing the edges
of form,
for shining forth
through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.

I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.

That it will.

That it works its way
into the deepest dark

that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.

And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
to let it find us.
May we bend our bodies
to follow the arc it makes.
May we open
and open more
and open still
to the blessed light
that comes.

—Jan Richardson
from *Circle of Grace*

[http://adventdoor.com/2011/12/21/
christmas-day-how-the-light-comes/](http://adventdoor.com/2011/12/21/christmas-day-how-the-light-comes/)

