

Today we begin a new series called *Signposts of Hope in a Suffering World*.

I'd like to begin by taking 5-6 minutes to introduce the series itself. From there, we'll jump into today's topic, and then we'll wrap things up with the Lord's Supper. Sound like a plan?

Based on a new book by renowned Bible scholar N.T. Wright,¹ this series explores seven major themes found in the Gospel of John:

Love. Freedom. Power. Beauty. Spirituality. Truth. Justice.

These seven themes serve as "signposts". What does a signpost do? It *points*. A signpost points beyond itself toward a particular reality or destination. And these seven signposts—these grand themes in John's gospel— all point to a few different things at the same time.

First, they point to: **Our deepest human longings**. Let me give you a couple of examples:

- We all yearn for *freedom* in one way or another. Do you ever ache to be free *from* the fears and hang-ups that bind you, so that you can be free *for* living the life of meaning and purpose that you know in your bones you were meant to live?
- And we hunger for *justice*. When you were a kid, I'll bet you said these words more than once: "No fair!" Most of us have this innate sense of fairness, of justice, both for ourselves and hopefully for others as well. And in our better moments, we dream the dream of justice—of a world that functions justly for all, so that people everywhere can flourish. In what ways have you hungered for justice lately?

Our longings for freedom and justice—along with love, power, beauty, spirituality and truth— are longings we share with virtually with all human beings. Regardless of geography, culture, politics or religion, these themes matter deeply to people everywhere, and Jesus has a lot to say about them in John's gospel.

At the same time, the seven signposts also point to the fact that: **The world is not as it should be**. So, sticking with the same two examples:

- As much as we yearn for freedom, it keeps eluding us as we bump up against our fears, compulsions and addictions again and again.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Broken Signposts: How Christianity Makes Sense of the World*.

- And as much as we dream the dream of justice, we always seem to get a rude awakening from that dream, don't we? We wake up to the harsh realities of the daily news reports—and in some cases our own personal experiences— which remind us that we live in a world that in so many ways remains heartbreakingly unjust.

But most importantly, the seven signposts in John's gospel point to how **God is at work in Jesus to set the world right**. Once and for all.

Some Christians think that the message of Jesus is about God providing us with an escape from this broken world. Some believe that one day, God is going to airlift us all up to heaven so we can forever leave this planet and its problems behind. But that line of thinking is not at all biblical.

You see, as Peter was talking about in last Sunday's message, God's plan has never been to rescue us *out of* the world. God's plan is to set the whole world right again through Jesus.

And that is the ultimate destination the seven signposts point to in John's gospel. They offer us hope in a suffering world, because through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has set into motion a decisive plan which will in due time see the entire created order—including you and me— set gloriously right. At that time, our deepest longings will be finally, fully and forever satisfied in Jesus.

For now, we obviously live in dark and difficult times. But as dark as the world can sometimes get, John's message of hope to us is that:

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it. ²

It's also in John's gospel that Jesus tells us:

"I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life." ³

If you follow me, says Jesus, I will be a light for you when all other lights go out. And if you follow me you will become a bearer of my light and my hope to others in this suffering world.

² John 1:5 (NLT)

³ John 8:12b (NLT)

You see, Jesus isn't calling you to just hold on until he returns and finally sets the world right once and for all. He's calling you to join him, here and now, to be an agent of God's *love* in this suffering world.

That brings us to the main topic of this message. *Love* is the signpost we're going to focus on today in John's gospel.

At its heart, love has to do with *relationships*, and as a signpost, loving relationships definitely point to: **Our deepest human longings.**

Especially in this time when "social distancing" and "self-isolation" have not only become part of our daily vocabulary, but part of our daily experience, even the shyest introverts among us are realizing that at the end of the day, we're made for relationships. Somehow, in the core of my being, I know I can't be the "me" I'm supposed to be without others.

And we all long to be loved with a love that will not let us go, that can't be lost, that can't be taken away. When you listen closely enough, don't the whispers, the pangs, the yearnings of your soul tell you that this is exactly the case?

But as a signpost, love also points to the fact that: **The world is not as it should be.** As much as we hunger for loving relationships, we're also keenly aware that relationships are the source of some of our greatest frustrations, hurts and difficulties.

This is true not only on a personal level. Relational breakdown is also responsible for society's worst problems, such as human trafficking and racism, and it also leads to violent conflict between people groups and nations.

Even when our relationships are going well, there's the problem of death, which separates us from those we love. As N.T. Wright puts it, "We either stand on someone else's graveside, or they stand on ours."⁴

So there's this paradox. We long for loving relationships. And yet in so many ways, we find them so very, very difficult.

Above all, though, the theme of love in John's gospel is a signpost of *hope*, because it points to the fact that **God is at work in Jesus to set the world right**, once and for all— and that includes our relationships. In Jesus we have the sure and certain hope that deep, genuine and everlasting love not only exists, but that we can be a part of it, starting now.

⁴ Wright, *Broken Signposts*, 38.

For the remainder of this message, we're going to explore three images in John's gospel that will help us to grasp this love that is the hope of a suffering world.

Those three images are a *Temple*, a *towel* and a *tree*.

1. A Temple

Although preachers today don't really talk about it much, the Temple is a huge theme throughout the whole Bible.

In its various forms of expression, the Temple represents a place where God comes to live with his people.

In Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, the Garden of Eden serves as a natural Temple. It's the place where God walks and talks with Adam and Eve in person. *God had come to live with them there.*

In Exodus, God then comes to dwell in a kind of portable temple—a tent known as the Tabernacle. Wherever the Israelites went, they would carry the Tabernacle, and the presence of God would go with them. *God had come to live with them there.*

Later in the Old Testament, Israel's King Solomon built a permanent Temple in Jerusalem, where God would take up residence provided his people remained faithful to him. *God had come to live with them there.*

Last Sunday Peter was talking about how this is the time of year when parents send their babies off to school. A couple weeks ago Jan and I moved Matthew into residence at Tyndale University, which is right here in town, just near Bayview and Steeles. But as close as he is, we still miss our baby boy!

The fact that Matthew lives nearby does allow him to come home quite easily, and he's done so twice already. Although he hasn't been gone for long, I can't tell you our joy at seeing him come through that front door. Now why would we have such joy when Matthew comes home to visit so soon after he's moved out?

I think it's because at the end of the day: ***You want to be with those you love.***

This truth is at the very heart of the Temple theme in the Bible. God comes to live in the Garden, in the Tabernacle, and in the Jerusalem Temple because he loves his people and wants to be with them.

But God didn't stop there. Because in chapter 1 of John's gospel we read:

So the Word became human and made his home among us.⁵

John tells of this figure called the "Word"— the *logos* in the original Greek— who has been with God from the beginning, who himself is God, and through whom all things were created.⁶

The *Word* is Jesus, and in Jesus, God became human and made his home among us. He came into the middle of this dark, sinful, suffering world as one of us.

If it's true that you want to be with those you love, then for God to go such lengths to be with us — he must really, really love us!

You see, one of the main messages of the Gospel of John is that Jesus has become the true Temple of God. In John chapter 2, we find Jesus standing in the Jerusalem Temple, and there he challenges the religious leaders, saying:

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

"What!" they exclaimed. "It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and you can rebuild it in three days?"

But when Jesus said "this temple," he meant his own body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered he had said this, and they believed both the Scriptures and what Jesus had said.⁷

John is telling us that Jesus is the true Temple. In Jesus, the creator God came to live in a human body, in the midst of his people, at the heart of his own creation. Because he loves us, he came to be with us, *as one of us*. In this way, Jesus becomes the very embodiment of God's love to you and me.

Therefore, if you want to grasp this love that is the hope of a suffering world— you need to keep your eyes on Jesus, because he himself is the ultimate revelation of God the Father's love. One of the most striking ways Jesus reveals God's love involves:

⁵ John 1:14a (NLT)

⁶ See John 1:1-3

⁷ John 2:19b-22 (NLT)

2. A towel

That's our second image. In John 13, we read that:

Before the Passover celebration, Jesus knew that his hour had come to leave this world and return to his Father. He had loved his disciples during his ministry on earth, and now he loved them to the very end. It was time for supper, and the devil had already prompted Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God. So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he had around him.⁸

John tells us that having loved his disciples all along, Jesus now loved them to the very end.

The very end of what? The end of his life. He knew his hour had come, says the text. Jesus was about to go to his cross. In spite of this, Jesus wasn't focused on himself. He was focused on his disciples, and was about to embody God's love to them in a supreme act of humble service. How does he do it?

Master and Lord though he is, Jesus takes on the role of a lowly servant, puts on a towel, grabs a basin of water, and—to the utter shock of the disciples—kneels down to wash their dirt-encrusted feet.

Jesus goes on to tell them:

“A person who has bathed all over does not need to wash, except for the feet, to be entirely clean. And you disciples are clean, but not all of you.” For Jesus knew who would betray him. That is what he meant when he said, “Not all of you are clean.”⁹

You see, this extravagant act of love was about more than clean feet. The footwashing pointed ahead to Jesus' ultimate act of self-giving, self-humiliating love on the cross. That's where he would lay down his life so that sinners like you and I could be made clean.

Around the table that evening, Jesus would stoop to wash the feet of Judas, who betrayed him. He would stoop to wash the feet of Peter, who would deny him. And he would stoop

⁸ John 13:1-5 (NLT)

⁹ John 13:10-11 (NLT)

to wash the feet of all the others— the very feet which would soon run away from him, abandoning Jesus in his hour of greatest need.

He knew they would do these things. Nonetheless, he put on that towel and stooped to wash their feet. The next day, nails would be driven through his own feet, and through his hands as well, as he went to the cross, so that they— so that we— so that all who believe— might be made clean. It was the ultimate act of self-sacrificial, redemptive love.

And so, as Bible scholar N.T. Wright explains:

The creator God, revealed in Jesus... does not simply love us when we are lovable, but loves us all the more—gives his very life for us, in fact, when we are horribly unlovable. ¹⁰

I distinctly remember a conversation I had with our daughter Nicole years ago when she was a toddler. I was putting her to bed, and she had been punished earlier that day for some kind of misbehaviour. I looked deeply into her eyes and assured her, “Nicole, Mommy and Daddy still love you, you know— even if you’re naughty.” I can still see her moist, saucer eyes, drinking in those words, as if into her very soul.

God still loves you— even at your naughtiest— your nastiest. How do you know this is true? The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ¹¹

This is the love your soul needs more than anything. And this is the love that a suffering world needs more than anything.

Because only this love can draw the full fury of sin and evil onto itself through the cross, absorbing, exhausting and defeating it with resurrection power. Only this love has the power to ultimately set the world right again.

If that’s not astounding enough, later in chapter 13, and in several other places in John’s gospel, Jesus calls you and me to join him in bringing this love to the world:

¹⁰ Wright, *Broken Signposts*, 60.

¹¹ Romans 5:8 (NIV)

“So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.”¹²

“Love each other just as I have loved you,” says Jesus. How has he loved us? He’s stooped down to wash our feet again and again, so to speak, making us clean— forgiving us— in spite of our betrayals and denials. He’s loved us unconditionally. He’s loved us sacrificially, laying down his life for us on the hard wood of the cross.

When the world sees those of us who follow Jesus loving one another as Jesus loves us, their hearts— so hungry for authentic loving relationships— will be drawn to the one who loves them just as much as he loves us.

But loving like Jesus loves is much easier said than done. How do we actually do it? How do we, as his disciples, bring the hope of his redeeming love into a suffering world?

That’s where our third and final image comes in, and while I only have time to touch on it briefly, it’s vitally important nonetheless. It’s the image of:

3. A tree

We’ve said that when Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, it was a foreshadowing of his cross. In this way, towel points to tree, so to speak.

But John’s gospel also invites us to consider the image of a tree in another way. More specifically, he invites us to consider the image of a vine and its branches. In John 15, Jesus says:

“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing... I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love... This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you.”¹³

How do we love each other as Jesus has loved us? And how do we bring his love into a suffering world? We do so by *remaining in his love*. Like branches that draw life from a tree trunk, we are called to stay connected to Jesus day in and day out, so that his love fills our lives.

¹² John 13:34-35 (NLT)

¹³ John 15:5, 9, 12 (NLT)

When I remain in Jesus' love, my heart receives all the love it needs, and more. There is an abundance, an overflow, and I find myself free to give his love away to others, knowing I will always have all I need.

Remaining in Jesus' love each and every day—like a branch in a tree trunk— is what enables you to love others as Jesus loves you— freely and generously— even in the midst of a suffering world.

But how do you actually remain in Jesus' love, so that your life can bear the fruit of loving others?

For most of you, it will come as no surprise to hear that daily prayer is an essential practice for remaining in Jesus' love. So, how is your prayer life these days?

If you're looking for a good prayer resource to help you with your prayer life, I'd like to recommend a free app called **Lectio 365**.

So many people are telling me they're finding this app really, really helpful, and I too have found it helpful for my own prayer life. There are beautifully written morning and evening prayers each day, along with rich scripture meditations and helpful reflections. You can read the prayers, or use the audio version which allows you to pray along as you listen.

So look it up in your app store—Lectio 365—and try it as a way of remaining in Jesus' love. Like a branch in a tree trunk, may the flow of Jesus' love fill your life daily, so that you can share it freely. How will you share his love with others in the week ahead?

Today, we've seen that the Gospel of John tells a story of hope for a suffering world that longs for love, and yet finds relationships so very difficult. We find ourselves as we receive and share the exquisite love of Jesus, as expressed in the images of *Temple, towel* and *tree*.

Let's celebrate that love now with the **Lord's Supper**. I invite you to close your eyes for a moment, if you would...

Picture in your mind's eye, if you will, that you are with Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. See him with the towel, stooping to wash your feet. He does so in spite of your sins and shortcomings. See his love as you look into his eyes. You know that this washing points ahead to his cross.

Now see him serve you the bread, and hear him say, "Take, eat. This is my body, broken for you."

See him serve you the cup, and hear him say. "Take, drink. This is my blood, shed for you."

And hear his promise that one day, he will eat and drink in person with you and with all of us in the new heavens and the new earth when he comes again. On that day, the whole world will be made right, and become God's Temple forever, as John tells us in the book of Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true."¹⁴

This is the love that is the hope of a suffering world, and it's your hope and mine. May it fill our hearts and renew us as we eat and drink together now.¹⁵

¹⁴ Revelation 21:1a, 3-5 (NLT)

¹⁵ If you're with us in person today, simply peel back the top layer of your cup to access the bread, and then peel off the second layer for the juice. If you have any difficulty opening your cup, simply raise your hand, and an usher will bring you one that is pre-opened.