



ORBITING JESUS TOGETHER

Living Off Center

November 5, 2023

[Worship Music Playlist](#)

Prelude – Christ our Hope in Life and Death by Boswell, Papa, Getty
Welcome/Announcements (Solitude & Silence Plug)

BREATHING EXERCISE | Calming & Quieting My Soul

Breath In | Lines 1 & 3

Exhale | Lines 2 & 4

1) The Kingdom is within my grasp

2) I don't need to be grabby

3) Already Blessed is life in Jesus

4) My life is hidden in Christ

1) His Thoughts are too many to add up

2) I don't need to get lost in the math

3) Wonderful are The Works of His Hand

4) My soul knows it well

1) Abundant Life is in Relationship

2) Not more, but different, deeper

3) Life is in Jesus, The Light of Life

4) My life flourishes in The Light

CTW | John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16-17

The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word. The Word was God, in readiness for God from day one. **Everything was created through him; nothing—not one thing!— came into being without him. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by...**The Life-Light was the real thing: **Every person entering Life he brings into Light.** He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn't even notice...But whoever did want him, who **believed** he was who he claimed and would **do** what he said, **He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves...**The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish...**We all live off his generous bounty, gift after gift after gift.** We got the basics from Moses, and then this exuberant giving and receiving, This endless knowing and understanding— **all this came through Jesus, the Messiah.**

Song #1 – Christ Our Hope in Life and Death by Boswell, Papa, Getty

Song #2 – To Know You by Citizens

Dismiss Kids

Pre-Sermon | Isaiah 55:6-13

Seek God while he's here to be found, pray to him while he's close at hand. Let the wicked abandon their way of life and the evil their way of thinking. Let them come back to God, who is merciful, come back to our God, who is lavish with forgiveness. **"I don't think the way you think. The way you work isn't the way I work."** Says the LORD. "For as the sky soars high above earth, so the way I work surpasses the way you work, and the way I think is beyond the way you think. Just as rain and snow descend from the skies and don't go back until they've watered the earth, **Doing their work of making things grow and blossom, producing seed for farmers and food for the hungry, So will the words that come out of my mouth not come back empty-handed. They'll do the work I sent them to do, they'll complete the assignment I gave them.** "So you'll go out in joy, you'll be led into a whole and complete life. The mountains and hills will lead the parade, bursting with song. All the trees of the forest will join the procession, exuberant with applause. No more thistles, but evergreen cypress, no more thornbushes, but fragrant myrtle— **Monuments to me, to God, living and lasting evidence of God."**

SERMON | Living Off Center...And In the Flow

“...you’ll go out in joy, you’ll be led into a whole and complete life.” (Isaiah 55:12)

The prophet spoke to a people still in exile. Some listened with a longing for a return to what they knew from experience, others longing for what they could only picture from the community’s collective memories.

Doing their work of making things grow and blossom, producing seed for farmers and food for the hungry, So will the words that come out of my mouth not come back empty-handed. They’ll do the work I sent them to do, they’ll complete the assignment I gave them. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

All waiting in anticipation for the Voice of Life, the Creator Word, to “do the work...complete the assignment” of “making things grow and blossom” to flourish. A wait, says John the Beloved, that is over at the arrival of Jesus, when,

The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. (John 1:14)

The hope of a need met, a glaring lack, that disquieting void we feel when “an unsatisfied capacity [a flourishing, when we are not] corresponding to an unrealized condition [a life free when we are in exile],”¹ now **contented in hope’s arrival**. What was deficient became sufficient in the Life and Light of a new day,

What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by...whoever...believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves... (John 1:4, 12-13)

Able, as it were, to “enter” (experience) the kingdom of God amid everyday living,

...the kingdom of God is in the midst of you, within your grasp. (Luke 17:21)

Through the “Life Light,” Life in, through, and for Jesus’ Life, which is the Light by which we navigate our living,

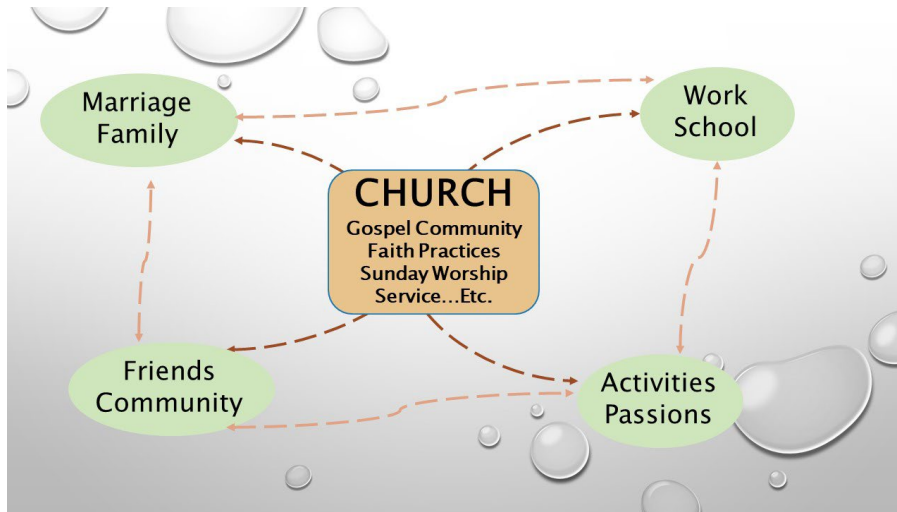
The **Life-Light** was the real thing: *Every person entering Life he brings into Light.* (John 1:9)

For **from** him and **through** him and **to** him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:36)

The question of our faith, of our scriptures, is, **What is required to live in the Life Light?** What is required of us to be our true, child-of-God selves, sharing in and displaying His glory forever?

¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: essays on human existence*, 5.

Life, [as we have learned](#), is relational, a series of processes, interactions, and collisions with others (including The Other) through which we manifest and experience life whole and holy or something less. Believing this, women and men of faith throughout the centuries have organized their individual lives around communities committed to right relating to Life Himself, with purpose and eternity. These communities provide structure to faith, often literally in the form of temples, synagogues, cathedrals, chapels, or any array of building type we call *church*. The physical structures, and all that takes place in and through the structures, *became the centering object through which the interactions that make life flow into and out.*



While the overwhelming majority of life (interactions and collisions) occur outside the community structures, it is “the church” structure(d) that people of faith tend to follow, ordering their lives around the flow and rhythm of its activities. So prevalent was the centering of church that for generations in the West, villages, towns, and even neighborhoods in larger cities were built up around church buildings as a physical representation of our orientation or orbit. Church was at the center of life.

Still today, especially in our place, people organize their lives around the activities and ambitions of “a church.” And while not inherently wrong, entirely unavoidable, nor even at times unnecessary nor unhelpful, perhaps our pattern of orbit contributes to finding ourselves ever so slightly off the compressed path.

Now, I need you to hear this: **being a part of the body of Christ, connected, contributing, and moving through life with others following Jesus together is a God-designed necessity.** Whether in the assumed family language of Jesus:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is *born of water and the Spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:5)

or his vine and branches or flock metaphors,

The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...And I have other sheep that are not of this fold, I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one *flock*, one shepherd. (John 10:3,16)

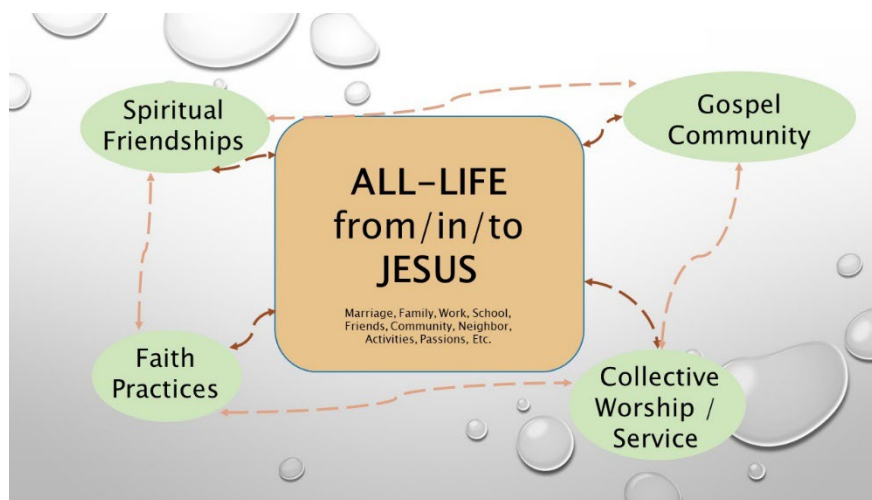
I am the vine; you are the *branches*. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit (John 15:5)

or the apostle Paul's body language, members one of another with Jesus as our head

For as in *one body* we have *many parts*, and the parts do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. (Romans 12:5)

And he [Jesus] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, *maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...*(Ephesians 4:11-13)

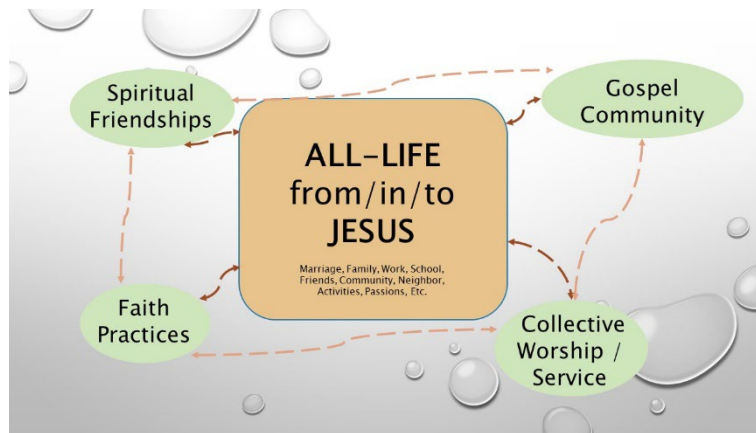
A faithful and faith-filled life brings us together as "the gathered," ecclesia, "the church," now and forever. But, there is a slight but significant shift if our lives are centered on the structures of a community rather than the Person who constructs our life, who both forms and is the form (maturation) of our community.



We need the community, one another, others following Jesus with us, *and* the structured ways of being together. But, in truth and in the end (in the fullness of maturation), we follow Jesus in mutual submission one to another out of reverence of Jesus in all the interactions that make life,

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise...**submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.** Wives....husbands...Christ...the church, his body...Children...parents...Bondservant (employees)...earthly masters (employers)...(Eph. 5:15-6:9)

So, the “activities” of the community/communion are meant to help us get into the flow of life from, in, to Jesus; to draw us into our lives into His and draw others into life with Him, with us.



Like the [already-ness of the Beatitudes](#), sometimes what centers our living—the thing which we make life work around—needs a recalibration to the reality of the Kingdom. Remember what the prophet said,

“I don’t think the way you think. The way you work isn’t the way I work.” Says the LORD. “For as the sky soars high above earth, so the way I work surpasses the way you work, and the way I think is beyond the way you think. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Maybe, just maybe, there is more to the world than our little church-centered lives allow us to see. A whole can complete life—**out there**:

So you’ll **go out** in joy, and you’ll **be led into** a whole and complete life. The mountains and hills will lead the parade, bursting with song. All the trees of the forest will join the procession, exuberant with applause. (Isaiah 55:12)

It’s not that we are entirely missing the point and purpose, but **overlooking enough to keep us from living wholly free in our lives in the Life Light, free in our bound relationships and responsibilities**. Perhaps a physical rather than a word picture would help us see what we are discussing more clearly.

Prophets come in a variety of forms. Some use words, like Isaiah, to call us out of darkened ways back into the Life Light. Others, like Jeremiah, for example, used theatrical-like performances to awaken our awareness. Some, like Hosea, use their life as a prophetic parable. And some use paint.

Do we have any art majors among us? How about anyone who took an art appreciation class in college?



Even if neither is true, I am sure we are all familiar with this painting by Vincent Van Gogh, *Starry Night*. It is one of the most reproduced works of art in history. And while it seems to capture a “starry night” in Arles, France, what if I told you there is more to this prophetic image than a quaint evening?

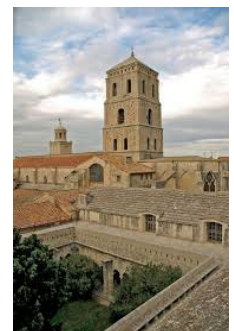
Let me ask you, **what captures your attention in the picture?**

Is it the **movement** throughout the painting? The swirling lines and swishing strokes make everything, even the homes, feel alive. It seems like the stars, the heavens, the hills, the trees, the buildings are moving and living.

Is there a **particular star** that catches your eye? There is a star rising and pronounced, off-centered to the left that is whiter than the others and appears to be riding the light waves pulsating from the mountains. A light that brings our attention to the wind in the heavens swirling towards the brightest and most eye-catching image, a moon that is crescent but is somehow wholly more than a moon’s reflection, giving off a light more like the sun itself. The entire heavens seem to be pulsating with life, which the brush strokes of the other objects seem to reverberate with. Well, almost all the objects.

Do you notice any particular object that stands out as a bit unique in characteristic to the other objects? Maybe the church in the center of the painting?

I actually passed through the relatively small town of Arles in the south of France once on a train from Marseille to Montpellier. It’s beautiful countryside, but you know what was not in view, a steeple. That’s because the church buildings in Arles are stone cathedrals, France being predominately Catholic. In fact, what you can see is the Cathedral of St. Trophime.



So where does Van Gogh get his wooden, white steepled, and still (no wavy/life-lined) church building at the center of his painting?



Did you know that Van Gogh grew up in a family of Dutch Reform pastors and that he trained with full expectation to enter the pastorate? That's right; Van Gogh grew up with the expectation that he was made to serve the church and gave his life to pursue the thing he thought he was made for.

Perhaps because he struggled with mental illness, probably a manic disorder of some sort, he was not permitted to do the thing he'd committed his life to doing. If he couldn't be a pastor in the church, he'd go help start churches, so he thought. So, after not becoming what he thought he was meant to become in the church, Van Gogh became a missionary to the mining communities in Belgium, doing the work of the church. If he couldn't be a formal pastor, he'd nonetheless be a proclaimer of Jesus to a population much of society had pushed to the edges. But, after a year or so, the church mission agency thought Van Gogh's identification with the poor was too familiar. He'd done the unthinkable and moved into their neighborhood! Van Gogh had taken up residence and style of life among those whom he ministered, and once more, he was rejected by the thing he felt had called his life, which **he had centered his identity and purpose on and around and through.**

It is a "white Dutch Reformed" church building that finds its way into the center of the Starry Night, says artist and educator Makoto Fjimura². An imported replica of the structure which Van Gogh felt a deep calling towards and yet could not (by circumstances and/or grace) be the center of his vocation—the thing for which he was made.

Besides lacking the quintessential life-lines, **is there anything else that distinguishes the church from most other buildings?** That's right, **light**. Most of the homes have lights shining from within, while the church building is darkened. **What do you think that could represent?**

Maybe the absence of movement and light in the building is a critique of the structures of the church; certainly, Van Gogh's experience with the institution would lend him such a perspective. While Van Gogh wants us to see a distinction, I think he is trying to lead us to awe and wonder, not cynicism.

² Makoto Fujimura, *Culture Care: reconnecting with beauty for our common life*, 75.

“I think sometimes I **see something deeper, more infinite, more eternal** than the ocean in the expression of the eyes of a little baby when it wakes in the morning...**All nature seems to *speak* it...**I do not understand why everyone does not see and ***feel* it**; nature or **God does it for everyone who has eyes and ears and a heart to understand.**”³ (Vincent Van Gogh)

Perhaps what Van Gogh, the prophetic painter, is trying to help us visualize is the Life that Jesus brings us into the Light, the Living Light found outside the structure that dominated Van Gogh’s (and many of our) thoughts, trainings, and even longings for so long. Maybe his is a critique similar to many others today who claim the church is life and lightless, or perhaps that **the centering structure is not the life, not where we see the light and life and where our attention and schedules should fix their gaze.**



The church is doing its job, bridging earth and heaven, but in a dwarfed manner, yes? **Are there any other vertical objects in the painting?** Anything else pointing from earth to the heavens? Yes, the Cypress trees on the left.

Unlike the church structure, the cypress trees are the first thing we see in perspective; you can’t miss it, yet as massive as they are in contrast to the next largest earthly object (the church building, when in truth they could not outstretch the steeple), they do not dominate but point. **They draw our attention to the Star, which draws us into the flowing swirls of Heavenly Wind, leaving our attention on the mooned-sun.**

Van Gogh may not have been a pastor, but he never missed the symbols depicting the truth of life in God’s actions.

So you’ll **go out** in joy, and you’ll **be led into** a whole and complete life...No more thistles, but **evergreen cypress**, no more thornbushes, but **fragrant myrtle— Monuments to me, to God, living and lasting evidence of God.** (Isaiah 55:12-13)

He knew, as the prophet Isaiah declared, that the cypress tree, our lives going out in joy, led into wholeness and completeness, not the structure of a church building, was the monument to God, the living and lasting evidence of God for us and with us, and that now is the time to seek and find the God who is compassionate, to turn and return to the God who abundantly pardons.

³ Quoted in Peter Leithart, “Van Gogh’s God,” *Frist Things*, accessed here: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/01/van-goghs-god>

A life made possible as the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, when,

“the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun...in the day when the LORD binds up the brokenness of his people...” (Isaiah 30:26) when they follow “your Teacher...saying ‘This is way, walk in it’” (Isaiah 30:20-21).

Maybe it feels strange to have an art observation as part of a sermon, but isn't Van Gogh's painted parable depicting what Jesus has been inviting us into these last seven-plus months, the way our Teacher is telling us to walk in, to live in the Life-Light?



To orient our lives not around the centers of what we think we are called to, but in awareness of something grander and more granular, to live off center, in the ever-green life he has given us, individually and together. To be built up into the fullness of Christ, through and with one another, so that all the earth, starting with the earth we walk atop each day, is, like Van Gogh's paintings portray, **glowing with the glory of the graciousness and majesty of our God; full of the Life Light of Jesus.**

Think of what we and the world would have missed out on if Van Gogh's center had been the structure of the church which he knew, and not the life of Christ lived in comradery with the miners whom he ministered among and ultimately in the art which was born of it, the manifestation (even if too briefly) of his “true-Child-of-God self” glowing in the light of Christ, able to see the light of life all around him. What's true of Van Gogh, but just be true of you and me too?

Like Van Gogh, the structure finds its way into our vision of life with God and others, no matter where we are. And that's not all bad. But, as Van Gogh portrays, the Life Light is not within the structure, but all around, not in the center, but off center. **So how do we who have given ourselves to following Jesus together keep a perspective where the off-centered cypress (the witness and manifestation of God's life in us) is the primary image that draws us and others into the Light Life of Jesus and the flow of the Spirit to the glory of our Father?** That's a conversation for next week! Let's pray.

(if time permits) REFLECTION | To Consider and Discuss

"For *from* him and *through* him and *to* him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen."
(Romans 11:36)

- What strikes you about Isaiah's & Van Gogh's prophetic visions of life with God?

COMMUNION |

We conclude our resting to enter our living...

Through the strength of Christ's birth with His baptism,

Through the strength of His crucifixion with His burial,

Through the strength of His resurrection with His ascension,

Through the strength of His descent for the judgment of doom.

--

Christ with me,

Christ before me,

Christ behind me,

Christ in me,

--

Christ beneath me,

Christ above me,

Christ on my right,

Christ on my left,

--

Christ when I lie down,

Christ when I sit down,

Christ when I arise,

--

Christ in the heart of every person who thinks of me,

Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,

Christ in every eye that sees me,

Christ in every ear that hears me.

--

In

Through

and For

Jesus, we live.

Amen.

SONG #3 – Light of Your Love by Young Oceans

SONG #4 – Christ Be All Around Me by All Sons and Daughters

BENEDICTION | Colossians 1:27-29

God wanted everyone, not just Jews, to know this rich and glorious secret inside and out, regardless of their background, regardless of their religious standing. The mystery in a nutshell is just this: **Christ is in you, so therefore you can look forward to sharing in God's glory.** It's that simple. That is the substance of our Message.

We preach *Christ*, warning people not to add to the Message. We teach in a spirit of profound common sense so that we can bring each person to maturity. **To be mature is to be basic. Christ! No more, no less.**

That's what we're working so hard at day after day, year after year, doing our best with the energy God so generously gives us.