



January 2018

**With Jesus
from Christmas to Easter**

Readings, Reflections, Prayers from Luke

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Monday, January 8: Luke 3:1-20

It's a New Year. It's a new beginning. Life is rushing on faster than ever before. Those of us who spend too much time reading the news are spending too much time reading the news. Where's the good news? Where's our hope? Not on CNN. Not on CBC.

John the Baptist comes talking about new beginnings. We read Isaiah 40 on December 11 (Luke 3:4-6 comes from Isaiah 40:3-5). John's message, however, is not exactly "good news": *"When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: "Brood of snakes. What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin. And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father.' Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there – children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire"*(Luke 3:7-9 The Message). Ouch.

The logical question that follow is, *"Then what are we supposed to do?"* How do **you think** John should answer?

How **does** John answer? *"If you have two coats, give one away. Do the same with your food ... No more extortion – be honest ... No shakedowns, no blackmail – be content with what you have"*(3:11-14).

John goes on to warn people about impending judgment. Luke notes, *"John used many such warnings as he announced **the Good News** to the people"*(3:18).

John, like Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, combines a message of challenge with good news of hope. Jesus, as we shall see, does the same.

The good news is that *"all people will see the salvation sent from God"*(3:6). God's salvation is not simply about having sins forgiven. God's salvation is about people being reborn. We are reborn as the beings God created us to be. We are created to worship God, reflect His image in the world, be wise stewards over His creation, and bless and be a blessing to ALL people and all of creation. John is inviting us ALL back to God. He is inviting us ALL to refocus on God. He is inviting us to reborn as God's children. When God is the foundation of our lives, we are reborn into the life for which we were created. And we change the world by living God's love, God's mercy, God's forgiveness, God's generosity, and God's peace in the world.

John also confronts evil and calls out our sinful attitudes and behaviour. John's message is not simply about a change in behaviour. He is not simply telling us not to do bad things to start doing good things. John is challenging us to change our whole being and identity. We are not "Christian" (or "children of Abraham") because of birth. We must be reborn as God's people. We are the children of God, therefore we love God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and all our strength. We are children of God, therefore we love our neighbour as ourselves.

How can I love Him with my heart, soul, mind, and strength? How can I love my neighbour as myself?

*"Be still and know that I am God."
Lord, Your words lead me to the calmness and greatness of Your Presence.
Your Spirit can draw forth from me a fuller love and life.
Yet my desires are often fixed, caught, on illusions of fulfillment.
I ask that God, through my freedom,
may orchestrate my desires into a vibrant loving melody rich in harmony.
I exist in a web of relationships – links to God, people, nature.
I trace out these links, giving thanks for the life that flows through them.
Some links are twisted or broken: I may feel regret, anger, disappointment.
I pray for the gift of acceptance and forgiveness.
I pray for the gift of love. Amen.*

Tuesday, January 9: Luke 3:21-38

Who am I? Where do I come from? In our culture, we don't emphasize family. But in ancient cultures, family lines and family names were important. They defined you. They located you. They grounded you.

As Jesus comes onto the scene, Luke places Him in the line of David and the line of Abraham. To us, who cares? It really doesn't matter. But to people in the 1st Century this was critical. God's promise was that He would undo the evil and sin from Adam through Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel (Genesis 12:1-3). Luke wants us to know that Jesus is fulfilling this promise. He is the fulfillment of God's promise of saving the whole world through Israel. Jesus will be God's obedient Servant/Messiah (Isaiah 40-55). Through Jesus, God's will shall, in fact, be done on earth as in heaven.

As Jesus is baptized, He is affirmed as the Messiah. He is the promised, blessed one in the line of Abraham and David. He is also the Son of God, fully divine. He will show us what it means to be fully human AND to know, love, and follow God faithfully.

We sometimes limit the "good news" to simply being about sin management. We sin, God forgives, we go to heaven. But sin is a symptom of something much deeper and more primal. People were created to worship **God**. When we do that, we are fulfilling our destiny. *"Worship was and is a matter of gazing with delight, gratitude, and love at the creator God and expressing his praise in wise, articulate speech. Those who do this are formed by this activity to become the generous, humble stewards through whom God's creative and sustaining love is let loose in the world,"* writes biblical scholar, Tom Wright.¹

"That is how things were meant to be," Wright continues, noting we all fail in this grand vocation. *"When humans turn from worshipping the one God to worshipping anything else instead, the problem is not just that they 'do wrong things,' distorting their human minds, bodies, hearts and everything else ... The word for 'sin' in the New Testament means not just 'doing wrong things,' but 'missing the target.' The target is a wise, full human life of worship and stewardship. Idolatry and sin are a failure of responsibility. They are a way of declining the divine summons to reflect God's image. They constitute an insult, an affront, to the loving, wise Creator himself. The Great Playwright has composed a drama and written a wonderful part especially for us to play; and, like a spoiled and silly child, we have torn up the script and smirked our way through a self-serving but ultimately self-destructive plot of our own"*(pp. 100-101).

When we fail to worship God and make Him the Lord and goal of our lives, we give non-divine forces a power and authority they were never supposed to have. We see people doing this all the time: obvious examples are money, sex, power, and nation. Like fire, these "forces" are good servants but horrible masters. In ancient pagan cultures these powers were enshrined as gods and goddesses. They function as de facto gods and goddesses in our world, too. For example, some people get more incensed about how others do or do not worship a national idol (an anthem) than how they do or do not worship God.

John the Baptist and Jesus are inviting us to more than just a way to manage our sins and go to heaven we die. Through baptism, they are inviting us to die to our old selves and literally to be reborn into our genuine humanness. Yes, through Jesus, our sin is forgiven. But more importantly, through Jesus the evil forces underlying those sins are defeated. We are reborn. We are reunited with our Creator. We are refocused on God as the centre of our worship. We rediscover our vocation to love and care for God's people (which is ALL people) and for His creation, which He declared good.

The Messiah has come: do I love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength? Do I live like it?

Do I love my neighbour as myself? How will that shape how I live, act, and speak today?

¹ N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion*, p. 100.

*Lord Jesus, think on me.
Do not let me go astray;
though darkness and perplexity, You point the heavenly way.
Lord Jesus, think on me.
When the flood is past,
may I see Your eternal brightness, and share Your joy at last.
Let me therefore not cling to fleeting things, which slip away and depart,
but to those which are enduring and immovable.
May I hold to these through the grace and loving-kindness of my Lord, Jesus Christ,
Through whom and with whom be glory to the father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever.
Amen*

Synesius of Cyrene (370-414) & Chrysostom (344-407)

Wednesday, January 10: Luke 4:1-13

Temptation happens. The issue is not whether or not we will be tempted, but how we handle it when we are tempted. Fundamentally, temptation is a spiritual challenge: will we trust and obey God in ALL circumstances, or will we trust in something or someone else?

Jesus has just been baptized by John; the Father has spoken; the Spirit has appeared as a dove; Jesus' ministry is now public. It's an "emotional high." He immediately faces temptations. In my experience, it is not uncommon for Christians who have just experienced a spiritual blessing – coming to faith, summer at camp, baptism, marriage, new baby, great concert, Christmas, etc. – to undergo real struggles afterwards. When the Holy Spirit works in our lives and we get excited about Jesus, Satan is not amused. And he often tries to derail our spiritual growth by any means possible, as quickly as possible.

It is also not uncommon for temptations to come when we are physically and emotionally spent. It was AFTER forty days of fasting that Satan came to Jesus. Satan often tempts us to doubt, get angry with God, walk away from His people (the church), stop reading the Bible, give up on prayer, etc. when we are having hard times – when we have lost a loved one, we are unemployed, our investments have dropped, our health is failing, our family is disappointing us, we are struggling with depression ...

This story reminds us Satan is real; he is actively trying to get us away from God. We do ourselves no favours by pretending he doesn't exist or that he isn't working against us. It is good to know our enemy.

But this story also reminds us that Jesus is stronger than Satan. We don't need to be afraid. Ultimately as Jesus is with us, we have the power and authority to say "No!" to temptation through His Spirit's power.

The first temptation Jesus experiences is the temptation to think that life is all about physical things: food (we might add, jobs, clothing, sex, housing, games, cars, TVs, vacations, mutual funds, cruises, ski trips, etc.). God gives us stuff, right? Sometimes that's the God we want: we pray, God gives us what we want. Jesus resists the temptation to become just another miracle worker providing stuff. Jesus/God wants to give us a whole new life in and through Jesus, not more stuff. He will provide what we need (not want).

Jesus is tempted to become a king like every other king. He can gather His armies and rule as the king in Jerusalem. Jesus rejects the idea of God's rule with only one tribe, in one place, at one time. He has come for something much, much bigger: to bring ALL people everywhere into new life with God. He will do this through love, mercy, and sacrifice. We are tempted to use money, power, and force to get our way. We are challenged to see the way to be truly human is to love, be merciful, and sacrifice.

Jesus is tempted to force God's hand, putting Him to the test. Is there a shortcut to being the Messiah, avoiding the pain and the suffering? Jesus refuses. If something as BIG as the world being saved is at stake, it's not going to be easy. We may try to put God in a corner and expect Him to act as we want and make life easy. Sometimes God allows us to go through dark valleys and hard places. He doesn't promise us pleasant paths; He does promise us His presence, strength, and peace.

What controls our decisions? Our desire for stuff? Power? Popularity? Pleasure? Or God? How willing are we to trust God, always? What is God teaching you, today? What does that mean for you?

*God is with me, but more, God is within me, giving me existence.
Let me dwell for a moment on God's life-giving presence
in my body, my mind, my heart and in the whole of my life.
I need to be honest with myself and with God:
God, and only God can give me life, true life, now and forever.
My usual automatic responses are to defend and justify myself.
It is so hard to admit mistakes.
Forgive me, Lord, and help me to discover new areas of growth.
I ask and pray for your Spirit to begin a new work within me.
I pray that I might reach the fresh and challenging possibilities
that God wishes me to realize.
Lord, do not let me leave this time of prayer unchanged, but create in me a new heart.
Spirit fill me with Your life.
Amen.*

Thursday, January 11: Luke 4:14-21

I was born in Dawson Creek, BC. It's one of those towns you are happy to say you're from, but, to be honest, you don't really want to move back to. Today, if you wanted to start a global movement like announcing the Kingdom of God is at hand, you wouldn't start in Dawson Creek. You'd begin in New York, London, Paris, or Beijing.

Jesus begins His ministry in the equivalent of Dawson Creek. He begins in Galilee (4:14), the backwater of Israel. Jesus is in the cultural wilderness, far from the heartbeat of the Jewish world in Jerusalem. He has just experienced the temptation to make a big splash in the big city. Imagine if he had jumped from the Temple in Jerusalem, been crowned King, and miraculously fed everyone with bread? He would have had the biggest crowd for His inauguration, ever. That's the kind of king we would want. That's the kind of king we would want to be.

Jesus rejects that. He begins in a small town, in a remote province. He begins His public ministry quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 (we read this December 19). It's about the coming of the Messiah and Kingdom of God. Jesus is announcing the Kingdom of God has come (exactly what people wanted to hear), but saying it in a way no one expected or understood. It is not about stuff. It is not about power. It is not about personality. Isaiah 61 radically challenges what is important. It's about rediscovering who were created to be: people who worship God, reflect His image, and bless other people and His creation.

Jewish Rabbi Wayne Dosick argues, "*The 'job description' of the messiah contains two tasks. The first is that messiah is supposed to bring or announce (in the words of the famous Christmas carol: 'peace on earth, goodwill to men') ... the concept of 'tikkun olam,' the ultimate perfection of the world through the work of our hands, has been the Jewish mission from the very beginnings of Judaism ... The second thing a messiah can do is offer the promise of a world to come to those whose life on earth merits eternal reward from God.*"² As a Jewish writer, not a Christian, Dosick argues that Jesus failed on both accounts.

Really? Reading Luke 4, Jesus actually does do what the Messiah ought to do. The challenge now – as then – is that people don't always want to hear it or accept it.

What characterizes the Kingdom of God?

- The poor – in spirit, but also those who are poor in social, economic, and political ways – find good news (see Mary's song of praise in Luke 1:46-55).

² Wayne Dosick, *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice*, p.48.

- Captives – spiritually, but also those trapped by injustice, violence, racism, and hatred – find release.
- The blind – spiritually, and those unable to see hope for the future – see light.
- The oppressed – in spirit, but also in tangible physical, social, economic, political ways – find freedom.

Rabbi Dosick writes, *"To be a Jew means to have a special role and purpose, to have a sacred mission. The prayerbook states simply but profoundly that the Jewish mission is to 'perfect the world under the Kingdom of God' (the prayer, 'Alenu'). Created in the image of God, Jews – and all human beings who follow the Jewish model – are not to be mere spectators, mere bystanders, in the unfolding process of creation and daily existence. We are not here on earth just to breathe and live out a measured number of days and then die. Rather we are here on earth to be active participants, partners with God, in the task of building up the world and making it into the best place that it can be."*(pp.37-38).

This mission, coming out of Isaiah 61 and other Old Testament passages (Micah 6:8, Amos 5:24), is the same mission to which Jesus invites us. *"It is a mission, a daily commitment, that we must accept gladly and sincerely,"* counsels Dosick. That is exactly Jesus' message. How can I live this way, today?

*O Lord, holy and true, who opens doors which none can shut;
as you have set before your church an open door into the world,
strengthen your servants to go boldly into the world and declare your Name.
May those who oppose you come to worship you
and know that you love your church and the world.
Grant us patience and strength to keep your Word with diligence and integrity,
and keep us from the hour of trial which is coming upon the whole world
to try all who dwell on the earth.
Encourage all Christians in every land to hold fast to the faith which you have given,
that we may all stand before you as pillars in the temple of God
and bear the name of the heavenly city and your name, O Christ our God.
Father, we give into your care all who are joined to us by natural ties and bonds of love:
the children dear to our hearts, our parents and friends,
our church family, and all who love us.
May all we love, having the Holy Spirit as their helper,
be at peace and have unity and love with us and others.
Grant us, O Lord, strength sufficient for the needs of this present life,
and the assurance of eternal life.
Amen*

Columba (521-597)

Friday, January 12: Luke 4:14-30

"Everyone spoke well of him and was amazed by words of grace that came from his lips ..." The Greek word translated "spoke well" is the word *"martyreo"* – *"to bear witness, testify, give evidence, give a good report"* (from which we get "martyr"). People were talking about Jesus, they had heard what he said, and they were weighing what He said. They were "amazed" at His words of grace – the Greek word *"amazed"* means more like *"awestruck"* or *"astonished out of one's senses."* Jesus stirred the pot. People were not sure what to make of it. They had never heard anything like it before. They were not sure it was a good or not.

Sensing their confusion, Jesus reminds them of their history (and foreshadows the future): the people have heard God's word before. They have a long legacy of rejecting God's prophets. He talks about Elijah and Elisha, prophets of God during one of the lowest times (spiritually) in Israel's history, the time of King Ahab and Jezebel. Back then, most "religious" Israelites supported the evil king, ignored the prophets, and failed to live godly, ethical lives. When Israel was so spiritually dead, the prophets were powerless to do anything in Israel. They did heal people, but only non-Jewish people (1 Kings 17:7-24, 2 Kings 5:1-14).

What is Jesus saying?

- The spiritual climate in His day is as desperate as it was in the days of Elijah and Elisha. Jewish

- religion had sold its soul, values, and integrity to prop up the political establishment of its day.
- God will invite ALL people – not just Jews – to experience His blessings. Non-Jews are welcome.

How did people respond?

They didn't like Jesus comparing them to people back in the days of Ahab and Jezebel. They certainly didn't like His words of grace, extending God's blessing to include non-Jewish people. There is a bitter irony: the devil invited Jesus to throw himself down because God would protect Him; Jesus refused. Now He finds Himself in mortal danger at the hands of His own people. God, of course, protects Him from His own people – not because Jesus is putting on a great show, but because He is being faithful to God's call on His life.

The challenge back then was, *"What will you do? Accept God's message (even if it's hard) – or reject it?"*

Jesus is saying to us:

- The spiritual climate in our community/country isn't great. The rich get richer; the poor get poorer. We tolerate injustice. Not all people are treated with dignity and respect. Money is more important than people. People lie, cheat, and steal. People are greedy, lustful, and bigoted. The church can compromise its integrity to prop up political platforms and lose its true, prophetic voice.
- ALL people are invited to find freedom, true freedom, in Him. Today, the church is growing: mostly in non-Western, non-Caucasian nations and among ethnic minorities in Canada (one of the largest churches in our denomination is Calgary Korean Baptist Church).

How do we respond?

We don't like Jesus challenging our lifestyle, political loyalties, social structures, and the way-we-have-always-done-things. We don't like to think about poverty, how we treat His creation/our environment, racism, homelessness, and injustice. We don't want to really think about who or what is our god. What do we value most? Our stock portfolio? What-is-good-for-me? Or the true God who calls us to love Him with all our being and to love our neighbour as ourselves? The God who challenges our status quo?

*Lord, our God, great, eternal, wonderful in glory,
who keeps covenant and promises with those who love you with their whole heart;
who are the life of all, the help of those who flee to you,
the hope of those who cry to you;
cleanse us from our sins, secret and open,
and from every thought displeasing to your goodness.
Cleanse our bodies and souls, our hearts and consciences,
that with a pure heart and a clear soul,
with perfect love and hope,
we may venture to live confidently and fearlessly for you.
May the power of God preserve us.
May the wisdom of God instruct us and the way of God direct us.
May the hand of God protect us,
and the host of God guard us against the snares of evil and the temptations of the world.
Amen*

Basil (330-379) and Patrick (389-461)

Saturday, January 13: Luke 4:31-37

Familiarity breeds contempt? A prophet is not welcome in his own hometown? When Jesus spoke in his hometown of Nazareth, *"the people were furious ... they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built; they intended to push him over the cliff"* (4:28-29). He was not exactly welcomed as the local-kid-done-well. Jesus performed no miracles in Nazareth. As if acting out the story of Elijah and Elisha, Jesus (God Himself) could do no miracles in His own homeland.

But in Capernaum, beyond Nazareth, Jesus does perform miracles. In Capernaum, the people are (literally) "thunderstruck" by Jesus' teaching (4:31), and recognize a higher authority in His words.

Jesus' sermon in Nazareth is put into practice in Capernaum: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come"* (4:18-19). Jesus, having recently had a showdown with the devil in the wilderness, now comes face-to-face with one of the devil's minions. It isn't much of a battle. Jesus really is who He says is – the Messiah, Immanuel God-with-us, the Holy One. A captive is freed. Liberation is achieved. The man is set free.

- Imagine the man's life before Jesus ...
- Now think about his life after meeting Jesus ...

Jesus has come to help us rediscover and be re-born into our true identity as children of God. We were created to worship God, reflect His image, and be a blessing to other people and to His creation. How does this come true in this man's life? How is this true in my life?

Jesus can help us be reborn into this whole, fully-human, new life as well. In what ways am I poor? Trapped? Blind? Oppressed? Jesus comes offering freedom. It may, however, require a traumatic shake up of my priorities, values, attitudes, and lifestyle. Am I really willing to allow Jesus to change me?

*"Come to me all you who are burdened and I will give you rest."
Here I am, Lord.
I come to seek your presence.
What is stirring in me as I pray?
Am I worried, troubled, left cold?
I imagine Jesus himself standing or sitting at my side, and share my feelings with him.
I long for your healing power.
Father, forgive me.
Cleanse my heart and soul so I may live joyously in Your love.
I long for freedom.
Father, release me.
Help me find true freedom in your Spirit.
I long for a new beginning.
What's holding me back?
Father, forgive me, and give me courage to be willing to change.
Where do I sense hope, encouragement, and growth areas in my life?
By looking back over the last few months,
I may be able to see which activities and occasions have produced rich fruit.
If I do notice such areas, I determine to give those areas both time and space in the future.
Thank You that You delight to hear my prayers.
Amen*

Sunday, January 14: Luke 4:36-44

The quote on Pinterest says, *"People make time for what they want to make time for. People text, call and reply to people they want to talk to. Never believe anyone who says they're too busy. If they wanted to be around you, they would."* That's a bit harsh. But there's some truth to it.

People in Capernaum made time for Jesus. Capernaum was a small fishing village on Lake Galilee. This is the home of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Capernaum was where they were born, lived, fished, and expected to die. Little did they know what Jesus' arrival would mean for their lives. The first time we meet Simon/Peter, his mother-in-law is ill. Jesus heals her. It's a simple act of compassion.

Casting out demons (whatever that means for us in western culture today) is dramatic. But Jesus is not

performing in some road show. He is caring for real people with real problems, whatever those might be. Isn't it nice to know that whatever our issues might be, Jesus cares. And He ministers to us.

Once Mom-in-Law's temperature drops, she gets up and makes tea. Is that surprising? Restored to health, she is the first person who serves Jesus in his public ministry.

The model of Jesus' compassion for those spiritually, mentally, and physically ill inspired Christians to establish the first hospitals. Jesus' example still inspires many Christians to go into medical (and other helping/caring) careers. Jesus inspires people to sacrifice large incomes and even risk their lives in developed countries to care for those in poor nations. Service also happens at more mundane levels – making time to text, call or reply, making tea for a friend, caring for a relative who is ill, praying for a child, spending time with a loved one, helping someone get to an appointment, taking someone shopping.

Are we too busy for Jesus? Are we too busy to learn from Him (reading Scripture)? Too busy to talk with Him (pray)? Too busy to worship Him (church)? Too busy to spend time with people? Our family? Someone who is lonely? What does that say about us and our priorities?

Of course, we can argue it was easier for the Capernaumites (Capernaumians?): Jesus was physically there. We can still make time for Jesus. Spiritual disciplines – practices like prayer, reading Scripture, solitude, fasting, etc. – are tools to help us find focus and refreshment spending time with Jesus. The word "discipline" can carry negative overtones. Consider this: "discipline" and "disciple" both come from the same Latin word meaning "learning, instruction, knowledge." Making time for regular spiritual practices, like reading and prayer, are ways we can learn and grow in our relationship with Jesus.

We make time for who and what we want to make time for. I want to be around Jesus. I want to spend time with key people. How about you? What are you going to do about it?

"This is the day the LORD has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:24)
I need to close out the noise, to rise above the noise;
the noise that interrupts, that separates, the noise that isolates.
I need to listen to God again.
I remind myself that, as I sit here now, God is gazing on me with love.
I pause for a moment and think of this.
I ask, how I am within myself today?
Am I particularly tired, stressed, or off-form?
Is there someone I need to care for, call, or encourage?
If any of these characteristics apply, can I try to let go of the concerns that disturb me?
In this expectant state of mind, help me listen to what God is saying to me.
I believe that the Holy Spirit is present and may reveal whatever the passage has to say to me.
Lord, speak to my heart.
Lord, teach me. Lord, renew me.
Lord, send me.
Amen.

Monday, January 15: Luke 5:1-11

Imagine you're a professional fisherman, cleaning your nets after a hard, disappointing night's work (in the Lake of Gennesaret, apparently, fish are still more easily caught after dark). Get inside Peter's head a bit: you are annoyed, tired, dirty, and just want to get home to bed. You are minding your own business while this teacher is carrying on near you. You probably want him to just stop talking.

Then the rabbi asks you to go back out to sea, in daylight. What do you do? You grumble. You complain. You may argue. For some reason, you do it (He did heal your mother-in-law). He tells you to put down your nets again. That's the last thing you want to do. It means you'll have to pull them up and clean them again. What would you do? What would you say? *"I'm the fisherman. You're the carpenter. No thanks."*

Peter decides the quickest way to get home and to bed is to do what Jesus asks and prove Him wrong. The rest, as they say, is history. A huge catch. A call for help. A struggle to get boats back to land before they sink under the weight of all the fish. And then the moment of truth: Jesus promises the same sort of thing will happen, only now the catch will be people. Will you go off into a new life with only the sketchiest idea of where it will take you? What would you do? What would you say? *"No thanks. I'm the expert ..."*?

Jesus is not trying to "convert" Peter. There is no argument, no debate, no language of winning and losing, no sales pitch, no spiritual laws, no conversion to a doctrine, no sinner's prayer. Jesus invites Peter to join him on a journey. He invites Peter to get to know Him. He invites Peter to learn.

Jesus doesn't debate: *"Peter, just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so there are spiritual laws which govern your relationship with God. Don't you agree? Since you must agree, let's go on to the next law ..."* He does say, *"Don't be afraid."* Following Jesus can be a risky thing. He's right. Jesus may take us on a new journey. We may choose a different path in life. He may turn our priorities upside down. We may not be as "successful" by other people's standards. People may ridicule us.

Peter has no idea who Jesus is yet. He has no concept that *"Jesus Christ is God's **ONLY** provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life."* Peter has met someone who has shown a genuine interest in him. Who has helped him. And who has sincerely asked Peter to be his friend. It will take two or three years of friendship before Jesus would ask, *"Who do you say I am?"* and Peter will be able to answer, *"The Christ (Messiah) of God."* (Luke 9:20).

Peter comes to know and believe in Jesus through friendship. As I reread the gospels, I notice Jesus and Peter are good friends. They have fun and deep discussions together. They laugh and cry together. There are some lessons here for us. We need good friends. We need friends to have fun and deep discussions with. We need friends to laugh and cry with. We need to be that kind of friend with other people.

Peter comes to understand who Jesus is over a lifetime. Jesus gives him time and space to figure things out. He has time to see who Jesus is, what following Jesus involves, what Jesus means when He says, *"from now on you will catch people."* Being with Jesus then, as now, is not always a smooth road. But Peter discovers when you spend time with Jesus, He can help us sort life out.

Will we choose to follow and spend time with Jesus? Will we pray? Read Scripture? Take time to reflect, think, and meditate on God and His word? In that lifelong process of learning, growing, and following we will discover who Jesus is. We will discover who we really are. How can you make time for Jesus?

*What I'm trying to do here is set aside time to focus on my life – both physical and spiritual.
I try to imagine Jesus is sitting here beside me,
and I talk over with Him what has been going on for me.
I attempt to understand that in countless ways, Jesus,
you enter the everyday circumstances of my existence.
But life is fast and full.
Often, pressures and commitments drown out Your voice in my soul.
I know that. And I want to do something about it.
I want to be still and receptive to what Your Spirit might want to teach me.
At any time of the day or night I can call on You.
You are always waiting, listening for my call.
What a wonderful blessing.
No phone needed, no e-mails, no texts, just a whisper.
I try to let go of concerns and worries that may be dragging me down at this present moment.
I place any concerns I have in God's hands – at least for these few minutes of prayer.
Come, Lord Jesus.
Fill my heart, soul, mind and body with Your love and truth.
Amen*

Tuesday, January 16: Luke 5:12-16

If it were against the law to gather to worship, read Scripture, or pray, would it make a practical difference to our daily lives? Do we actually take time for those things? Are those spiritual practices SO important in our lives, that we would defy the law to spend time with Jesus and His people?

Jesus breaks the law to spend time with people. Jesus ought to have sent this leper packing. He should not have spoken with him. According to the Law, this leper was NEVER even allowed in town; he was sinning. Most horrifying: "*Jesus reached out his hand and **touched** the man*"(5:12). Specifically, the Law forbade anyone from touching a leper; his body was riddled with a disease literally eating away at him.

When we read the Old Testament, we skip over the purity laws in books like Leviticus or Deuteronomy. They are not relevant in our modern culture with cutting-edge medicine. But in ancient cultures these laws were crucial to prevent disease. This man was so desperate to see Jesus, he broke the law. Do I yearn for Jesus so much I am willing to make the time, spend the energy (or even take a risk) to be with Him?

Imagine having not been touched by another human being for years – and then this ...

A huge amount of human communication takes place, not in words, but through appropriate touch. To be cut off from all proper touch is horrible, almost as bad as losing your sight or your hearing. Jesus touched an untouchable. He gave hope to a hopeless man. He gave love to an unloved person.

Who are the lepers of our society? Who are the untouchables? The hopeless? The unloved people? The people most of us have given up on? Does Jesus give up on them?

Mike Davis, a Christian author, has a comedy video (in our library) called *I'm **not** Okay*. His whole premise is this: "*I'm not Okay. You're not Okay. But that's okay because God loves us where we are.*" That's the good news. God loves each of us where we are. If Jesus can touch and love a leper, He can bring new life to anyone. Do I yearn to know Jesus? Do I make time for Him? Can I pray for someone who needs Him?

*O Lord, we draw near to you, acknowledging our unworthiness.
We ask that all the errors and sins of our past may be freely pardoned and entirely done away,
through the precious blood of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Rouse us, O Lord, from the sleep of apathy and from tossing to and fro in our thoughts,
that we may no longer live as in a troubled dream.
Help us live as people awake and resolved to finish the work you have given us to do.
By your humble birth, root out of our hearts all pride and arrogance,
may humble ways content us,
so we may serve the humble.
By your life of compassion for those who labour and are heavy laden,
teach us to be concerned one for another and to bear one another's burdens.
By your holy and most bitter anguish on the cross,
help us to worship you, and love you, and follow you, O Christ.
Amen*

Brigid (460-528)

Note: Jesus "*often withdrew ... and prayed*"(5:16). Jesus often prays. His disciples (in Acts) are always praying and are "filled" with the Holy Spirit. Today being "filled" with the Spirit has a very specific meaning for some Christians: dramatic experiences like speaking in tongues. Interestingly, we have no evidence Jesus ever spoke in tongues. Being "filled" with the Spirit was simply the daily experience of God's people who are praying, talking, and walking with God. Luke uses the word "filled" to describe people who are given over to something so it defines their lives. For example, people can be filled with "jealousy" (Acts 5:17, 13:45), "joy" (13:52, 16:34), or "rage" (19:28). We can picture what someone filled with jealousy, rage or joy would be like. Someone "filled with the Spirit" is someone given over to living for Jesus. What does that look like? Jesus invites us to pray that His Spirit to fill our lives so they overflow with His love.

Wednesday, January 17: Luke 5:17-26

The Pharisees had a noble ambition: they wanted their nation, Israel, to become a God-fearing land. They lobbied the government, courts, and anyone else who would listen, to take the teachings of Moses (the Jewish law) and apply them to the marketplaces, bedrooms, bathrooms, and (especially) kitchens of the country. They insisted people be diligent in observing religious practices like tithing, observing the Sabbath, and "ritual purity" (not eating "unclean" foods or with "unclean" people). Pharisees believed that, if people were only more religious, God would heal their land (i.e. drive the Romans out). So they were on a passionate mission to "religious-ize" people.

Jesus' first encounter with Pharisees is recorded in Luke 5:17-26. Jesus is drawing huge crowds. Clearly, He was a charismatic personality. Pharisees from all over the region come to check Him out. They hope He would further their cause by emphasizing observing the letter of the Law (they have no doubt, of course, this is what's needed). If a dynamic, popular teacher were to teach the importance of keeping the Law, having all the right doctrine, and kicking out the Romans – WOW.

What Jesus is supposed to say is, "*Miserable sinner, you need to follow the Law ...*" What Jesus actually says is, "*Friend, your sins are forgiven ...*" Jesus instantly angered the Pharisees:

- Problem 1: Jesus calls sinners "friends" ... and those he ought to call "friends" (the Pharisees) he challenged as if they were sinners.
- Problem 2: Only God can forgive sins. According to the Pharisees, God did this when people ***did religious things*** like presenting sacrifices and attending festivals at the Temple. Jesus dismisses that, declaring this man's sins forgiven because of ***faith in Him*** (not sacrifices).

Sometimes we think Jesus hates the Pharisees. He doesn't. Jesus never says tithing is bad; in fact, it's good. He doesn't say observing the Sabbath is bad; it's good. He never says wanting people to love and honour God is bad; it's good. Pharisees were good religious people, who take God's Law seriously; that's good. Jesus' issue with the Pharisees is they teach all the right things for the wrong reasons. The Pharisees teach "doing religious things" to look good. Jesus challenges their hearts: do they love God? He wants them to love God; then to do the right things from that foundation. He wants them to be godly people from the heart, not just people who are all shows and no passion.

This man's friends get it. They recognize being truly godly people means you love. You love God. You love your friends. They are willing to do crazy things for the sake of their friend. Why? Because they take God's command "*Love your neighbour as yourself*" to heart and live it. The Pharisees don't get it.

We are God's children, His family. We are the body of Christ. We are a community of the Spirit. Our life flows from our worship of the living God and desire to be His blessing to our world. Here, anyone can come with their pains, problems, questions, hopes, and dreams. Here we discover Jesus' love and we share His love, in word and deed, with others. This is who we are. Lord, help us be your love in our world.

*You, O Lord, who commands us to ask, grant that we may receive.
You have put us on a journey, seeking; let us rejoice in finding you.
You have bidden us knock; help us walk through the open door into your heart.
Please, direct and govern all our thoughts and actions.
Help us to be faithful in loving, serving, and obeying you.
Draw us to yourself, so we may always be yours by obedience and love.
Help us, then, to love others with the grace and mercy you show to us.
As you have forgiven us without limit, help us to forgive without reserve.
O Lord, who lives and reigns forever and ever,
fill our souls, guide our hearts, shape our minds,
and direct our steps, today and every day.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Thursday, January 18: Luke 5:27-32

Some people live to eat: meals are carefully planned, meticulously prepared, and lovingly savoured. I eat to live: most lunches are peanut butter/jam sandwiches, fruit and veggies; easy and not bad nutritionally.

In Jesus' day, virtually every meal was an event. You were expected to invite people from your own social class; they would return the favour by inviting you over. Wealthy ate with wealthy, poor with poor. Jews ate with Jews, Romans with Romans. You knew who was in; you knew who was out. Pharisees insisted they, and anyone else who wanted to be "in," must eat according to strict ritual purity laws (that went far beyond the Bible). They would never eat with non-Pharisees because such people didn't follow the same practices of purity; the food would be impure. Besides, what self-respecting religious person would want to be seen eating with "sinners"? Pharisees knew exactly who was in; they also knew who was out.

Jesus is at a party. Yes, Jesus had fun and, apparently, was fun to have as a guest. It wouldn't be so bad if it were a party of the who's who of Jerusalem, or a "ritually pure" dinner with people like Pharisees. But this is a party of the riff-raff: tax collectors and sinners. I don't suppose tax collectors have ever been popular; in Jesus' day they were despised. They were Jews working for the Romans – traitors. They could charge exorbitant commissions, gouging rich and poor among their countrymen. People were going into huge debt as a result. Tax collectors were outcasts, "unclean." No self-respecting Jew would eat with them. To eat with them would suggest you were as bad as them or (heaven forbid) they were as good as you.

When Levi throws his party, it's not surprising most of the guests were other tax collectors; they were his only friends. The Pharisees (also not surprising) are not impressed Jesus is eating with such people. They complain to Jesus' disciples (they would never actually go into Levi's house: someone might get the wrong idea). Imagine Jesus coming outside for a breath of fresh air and hearing the Pharisees grumbling. Jesus doesn't deal with issues of "pure" versus "impure," nor does He deal with matters of etiquette. His comments echo his initial mission statement (Luke 4:18-19): *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"* (5:31-32).

The Pharisees are sure they are healthy. They are sure who is sick: tax collectors and sinners. Jesus challenges the Pharisees: they aren't as healthy as they think they are; they need a doctor, too. Who is really healthy? Who is really sick? Jesus does agree the tax collectors and sinners are sick. Levi and his friends admit it and are willing to come to Jesus to be healed. The Pharisees are in denial.

What are the "issues" in my life that I need Jesus to deal with? Will I allow His Spirit to come into those parts of my life I hold back from Him? Will I let Him heal me? Will I let Him change me?

*Father, I'm beginning to know how much I miss when I fail to talk to you in prayer,
and through prayer, receive into my life the strength and guidance which only you can give.
Forgive me for the pride and the presumption that make me struggle to manage my own affairs –
to the exhaustion of my body, the weariness of my mind, the trial of my faith.
I know You could work your good in me, with so little strain and so little effort.
When I neglect to pray, mine is the loss.
Forgive me, Lord.
I pray, that no future forgetfulness of mine,
false sense of self-sufficiency, spiritual laziness,
or doubt of your faithfulness keep me from taking everything to you in prayer.
I thank you that the fresh breath of heaven
is blowing away the close, damp air of all my failure,
of every doubt and fear.
Help me to pray.
May my prayers reburnish my faith,
brighten my hope, revive and rekindle my love.
Teach me, Lord, to pray,
Amen.*

Friday, January 19: Luke 5:33-39

We talk about sharing "the gospel," spreading "the gospel," preaching "the gospel," "gospel" churches, even "full gospel" churches. We want people to hear "the gospel." What is the "gospel"?³

We have just read four stories of Jesus' interactions with people: Peter, a man with leprosy, a paralyzed man, and a tax collector. Now, Jesus summarizes his "good news" (gospel) with these enigmatic parables.

What is the "gospel"? Maybe you think of John 3:16: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* That IS good news. It's true. It's a beautiful summary of God's eternal provision for us. John 3:16 is wholly true, but it's not the whole truth. It was not a public proclamation. It was one comment to one person in a very private conversation.

- Before Jesus was born, what did the angel say to Mary? *"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus ... he will **reign** (as king) over the house of Jacob forever; his **kingdom** will never end."* (Luke 1:33)
- When Jesus started his ministry what did he say? *"The **kingdom of God** has come near. Repent and believe the good news."* (Mark 1:15)
- What does Jesus say is most important? *"Seek first the **kingdom of God** and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you ..."* (Matthew 6:33)

According to Jesus, the good news (gospel) is: **the kingdom of God has come.** Jesus' mission is much bigger than saving people for eternal life (although that is one of the results). He is bringing the kingdom of God to earth, now. He is re-creating and restoring lives, now. He is changing people, now. We are citizens of this new kingdom now: *"You **are** royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession"* (1 Peter 2:9).

This new kingdom of God is different from the old kingdoms of this world. The kingdom of God, which Jesus has modeled, is not about power politics, military might, or economic elites. It's about rebirth into new life. It's about recovering our created children-of-God identity now: people who worship God, reflect His image, and bless the world with His love, mercy, and grace now. What mattered in the old kingdom (race, social status, gender, ability) is irrelevant. What matters now is faith in Jesus and living as God's kingdom people.

The King has come. That is good news. One of Jesus' favourite metaphors for the kingdom is a feast. As He eats with the "wrong" people, He's showing ALL are welcome. It is GOOD NEWS. Is Jesus good news in my life? Do I enjoy worshipping Him? Do I desire to live for Him day by day?

"As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). Lord, how can I be good news to my neighbours?

'The feast has been prepared. Come to the banquet.' (Matthew 22:4)
*Dear Jesus, usually I come asking for favours.
Today I'd like just to be in Your presence.
Let me know who I am: a beloved child of God.
Thank you for calling me out of darkness into your wonderful light.
Let my heart respond to Your Love.
Help me Lord to be more conscious of your presence.
How do I find myself today? Where am I with God? With others?
Do I have something to be grateful for? Then I give thanks.
Is there something I am sorry for? Then I ask forgiveness.
Teach me to recognize your presence in others.
Help me to reflect your gracious light in all I do and say. Amen*

³ The Greek word is "euangelion" - "good news" ("eu" means "good" and "angelion" means "message/news"). In Old English this was translated as "gud" (good) "spel" (news): "gudspel" or "gospel." Since we don't speak Old English anymore, modern English translations go back to the Greek, translating this as "good news." The word "gospel" is simply Old English for "good news."

Saturday, January 20: Luke 6:1-5

Annabel Robinson writes: *"The word 'Sabbath' comes from a Hebrew word meaning 'cease'. The first reference to this comes in Genesis 2:1-3, when God ceased from his work of creation on the seventh day.*

"The fourth commandment (Exodus 20:8-11) introduces the idea of rest. The implication of the teaching here is that there is more to life than work, and that rest (not inactivity) is the goal of life. The commandment is elaborated in Exodus 31:12-17, with the addition of the explanation that observance of the Sabbath is a sign and is part of the covenant.

"In Leviticus 25:1-7 we read of an extension of this idea: the Sabbath year – the observance of a whole year in which the land was to be left for the poor. This teaching (which was rarely – if ever – observed) reinforced the idea that the Israelites lived under God, who cared about the poor.

"Observing the Sabbath was intended to show the Israelites that:

- *there is more to life than work and money*
- *they were to live as God's people*
- *the land was given to them to use in God's way.*

The prophets repeatedly blast the Israelites for abandoning these principles.

"The Sabbath is mentioned in the New Testament frequently in connection with the Pharisees, who had gone to extreme lengths to identify what counted as work so that they could be sure that neither they nor anyone else broke the Old Testament rules.

"Jesus normally observed the Sabbath, going to the synagogue services (Luke 4:16). However, he did not accept the restrictions devised by the Pharisees. On the contrary, he emphasised the underlying purpose of the Sabbath: to be doing the work of God.

"Sabbath observance was not a matter of legal restrictions but of joyful freedom. There is more to life than work and making money. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

"This raises some important questions for us in the twenty-first century:

- *Have we got our priorities right? Do we show by our lifestyle that work and money are not all-important?*
- *Have we devised our own 'rules' for the Sabbath? Are we critical of those who break them?*
- *What is the legitimate place for leisure in our lives?*
- *Does our lifestyle reflect Jesus' priorities?"*

How would you answer those questions? What do you need to do about them?

*O God, you are all mercy and all truth.
Please, carry on your gracious work in us.
By your grace, O Lord, increase our faith in you, and your faith in us.
By your grace, give us rest.
By your grace, give us peace.
By your grace, help us become what we, in our own human frailty, cannot attain.
By your grace, give us the faith, that in our own strength, we cannot manage to find.
By your grace, shine forth through our lives
despite our all too obvious weaknesses.
By your grace, make us people of grace,
showing your love to those whose paths we cross.
By your grace, inspire us to be Sabbath people.
Lord, give us your help and strength, this day and every day
Amen*

based on Leonine Sacramentary (7th century)

Sunday, January 21: Luke 6:6-11 Potluck Lunch

*"It was probably no accident that many of Jesus' 'mighty works' were associate with the Sabbath. It is likely that Jesus deliberately did them on that day. Within Judaism, the Sabbath had come to be regarded as a symbol of the peace, restoration, and well-being of Israel, and the peaceful enjoyment of the Sabbath was to be one of the signs that the messianic age had come (Isaiah 14:3). Jesus' actions indicated to those who were ready to respond that his mission bore all the marks of the promised Sabbath of Israel."*⁴

This man is not only ashamed of his ugly hand, but of himself. In Jesus' time, illness like this was seen as punishment for some sin he had committed. Other people avoided him, a sinner and unclean. When Jesus restores his hand on the Sabbath, he is doing much more than healing a man's hand. He is healing and making an entire person whole in body, soul, and relationship both with God and other people. This person is re-created as the person God formed him to be. This is good news – the best news.

Jesus is under the watchful/judgmental eyes of the Pharisees, paragons of the letter of the Law. Think about the symbolism of what Jesus is doing here – on the Sabbath ...

- God had called the Israelites to be His people. From the call of Abraham (Genesis 12) on, God's people were called to be a blessing to all nations. Rabbi Dosick, writing today, still understands this as the Jewish mission (see January 11: *"To be a Jew means to have a special role and purpose, to have a sacred mission ... We are not here on earth just to breathe and live out a measured number of days and then die. Rather we are here on earth to be active participants, partners with God, in the task of building up the world and making it into the best place that it can be"*).
- Jesus is saying the Pharisees are like a body with a withered hand. Their religion has shriveled into an ugly, life-destroying list of rules, regulations and rituals. It's rotting. It stinks. The Sabbath, intended as a blessing, has become a curse. The Pharisees' religion is killing people's souls.
- The religion of the day needs the miracle of God's touch to give it life, once again.
- *"Hold out your hand (your hearts, your religion, your life)"* Jesus says, *"and I will make it whole."*

The man takes a risk. He could end up looking like a fool if Jesus cannot heal him. The Pharisees could ostracize him still further. But he is willing to take the risks in order to find real life.

Would the Pharisees take a risk? If they are really sincere about their faith they should see who Jesus is. They should see He can give them a real relationship with God that would transform their lives. They cannot take the risk. They become more angry, more bitter, and more judgmental. Knowing Jesus as Messiah, they could enjoy the feast in the kingdom of God. They choose to be miserable.

What are "withered hands" in our lives? What parts of our lives are lifeless? Dead? What parts of our lives do we keep back from Jesus? *"Hold out your hand ..."* Jesus asks us: *"Will you take the risk of giving those rotten parts of your life to Me, to be healed?"*

*When I am invited into the presence of a friend, I look forward to the event and feel honoured.
When God invites me to spend time in His presence, He desires me to know and feel His love.
With faith and hope I turn my heart and mind to God,
and ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.
"A thick and shapeless tree-trunk would never believe that it could become a statue,
admired as a miracle of sculpture, and would never submit itself to the chisel of the sculptor,
who sees by her genius what she can make of it." (Ignatius)
I ask for the grace to let myself be shaped by my loving Creator.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him
and for any insights I may have been given from His Word.
Amen.*

⁴ Paul John Isaak (Department of Religion and Theology, University of Namibia), *Africa Bible Commentary*, p. 1215

Monday, January 22: Luke 6:12-19

It's good to celebrate and be with people. It's also good to have time alone with God. Notice how 6:12 begins. What is Jesus doing up on the mountain? Praying, alone. Take time, alone, with God.

Jesus does spend much time with His 12 closest companions. By choosing 12, He is intentionally linking His work of establishing the new Kingdom of God with God originally establishing the 12 tribes of Israel in the Promised Land. God is reforming His Kingdom, more wonderful and all-encompassing than the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and the Promise Land. This new Kingdom is for ALL people from ALL nations.

We don't know what criteria Jesus used to select His 12 closest associates. They were a diverse bunch – regularly ornery, frequently confused, sometimes rather thick, and often impulsive. Jesus chooses to work with and on them. One of them, Judas Iscariot, appears to be a faithful follower of Jesus at this point. Does Jesus know Judas will betray Him? We don't know. Judas' presence, however, reminds us that even the most (apparently) faithful people sometimes can go very far astray.

Jesus chooses to work with a team. He could have travelled faster and done more on His own. Alone, He wouldn't have the irritation of dealing with these characters on a daily basis. Sometimes I grumble, "*It's easier, faster, and better if I just do ___ myself – and I know it will be done right.*" I suspect Jesus felt like that most of the time. But He chooses to invest in other people. He teaches them. He mentors them. He lives life with them. His Presence transforms their individual lives. His Presence also forms leaders. He builds into people who would then build the church after His resurrection.

Take time with people. Who can you invest in? Who needs mentoring? You may not think you have the time or it's worth it. But down the road it may really pay off. How can you encourage someone else, today?

*Lord you became human to save, restore, and send us.
You walked and worked on this earth.
You endured the heat and struggled with the cold.
All your time on this earth was spent in caring for humanity.
You healed the sick, you raised the dead.
Most important of all, you saved me from death.
Lord Jesus, Your death on the cross has set me free.
I can live joyously and freely without fear.
Your mercy knows no bounds.
Knowing that God loves me unconditionally, I can afford to be honest about how I am.
How has the last day been, and how do I feel now?
I share my feelings openly with the Lord.
Lord, grant me the grace to have freedom in your Spirit.
Cleanse my heart and soul so I may live joyously in Your love.
Amen*

Tuesday, January 23: Luke 6:20-26

If you were going to make a speech, no coach would recommend beginning with, "*God blesses you who are poor ...*" It might be better to begin, "*God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.*" But Jesus doesn't say that in Luke 6. In fact, Jesus never says that. Neither does Paul. Or Peter. Or John.

Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain" (6:17-49), as this section is often called, is a basic summary of what His new Kingdom of God is all about (the "Sermon on the Mount" is in Matthew 5-7).⁵ When we read these words, as relatively well-off westerners, we tend to spiritualize them: Jesus must be talking about the poor in spirit,

⁵ This "sermon" in Luke is a bit different than that in Matthew. Almost certainly Jesus taught similar principles on many occasions and in many places to many different audiences. Likely Luke and Matthew are recording similar but distinct events in which Jesus taught the same truths and principles to different groups of people.

the spiritually hungry, spiritually sad, etc. That kind of poverty and hunger we can imagine.

Consider, however an African perspective on this passage. Paul John Isaak is Namibian, Head of the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of Namibia. From an African context, he writes:

"In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus issues a major policy statement of the Kingdom of God. This address explains more about the 'good news to the poor' which He announced in Nazareth and which he had demonstrated in messianic acts throughout Galilee. Now he speaks, and the message is revolutionary – a series of bombshells. The Beatitudes take our standard notions of what is acceptable and turn them upside down. The people who Jesus calls 'blessed' the world would call 'wretched'; the people for whom Jesus prophesies 'woe' are those whom the world professes to admire. He completely overturns the world's values.

"These words must have been addressed to the hungry, powerless, and socially dispossessed people around Jesus. His announcement of the reign of God, with its concrete promise of a better future, must have stirred up long latent hopes for a time when justice would prevail and their present hardships would be past. They saw their present life and condition as a scandal in the eyes of God. But they looked to the future to change this. The preaching of Jesus revitalized the messianic hope. It was this hope that those around Jesus took to heart and understood themselves as the 'little flock' who were heirs of the coming reign of God (12:32).

"The Beatitudes, in Luke's telling, are blunt: 'Blessed are you who are poor.' Throughout his Gospel and in Acts, Luke relentlessly shows Jesus' focus on the poor and reveals early Christian groups having the same concern. This image both haunts and inspires us today as we consider what it means to be a Christian community in a world plagued by poverty.

"When Jesus says the poor are blessed, he is stating a principle. We are responsible for formulating concrete ethics and principles and policies that ensure blessedness for the poor today. Theologically speaking, with God's blessings and under the command of God who co-exists with us, we are invited to take up the task of eradicating poverty while addressing and finding solutions to the challenges facing Africa and the world at large."

"The church has a critical role to play in ensuring that the voices of the poor reverberate in the halls of public policy. The location of many churches in the midst of poverty creates strategic opportunity for the faith community to work to eradicate poverty." (Africa Bible Commentary, p. 1216)

Isaak's insight, from one of the poorest countries of the world, challenges us. Yes, Jesus does address our spiritual poverty and hunger. The good news is that Jesus is also passionately concerned about physical poverty and hunger, too. "Integral mission" – Word and deed – is what Jesus' good news is about.

- How can we care for the poor/hungry in our community? Soup Kitchen? Food banks? Can we also dream of ways to deal with some of the **root causes** of poverty and work toward solutions? Can we prevent people from becoming poor or homeless and requiring those services? There are some good things happening in our community. How can we support those initiatives?
- How about globally? Of course we cannot end global poverty/hunger instantly. But those "Gifts for Change" from CBM – a goat/well/education etc. – can be transformative, with potential ripple effects we cannot imagine. Why not use these gifts for birthdays/anniversaries? See www.cbmin.org

*For a few moments, I think of God's presence in all things:
in the elements, giving them existence; in plants, giving them life; in animals, giving them sensation;
and finally, in me, giving me all this and more, making me a temple, a dwelling-place of your Spirit.
If God were trying to tell me something, would I know?
If God were reassuring me or challenging me, would I notice?
I ask for the grace to be free of my own preoccupations and open to what God may be saying to me.
Lord, grant me the grace to be free from the excesses of this life.
Let me not get caught up with the desire for wealth.
Keep my heart and mind free to love and serve you. Amen*

Wednesday, January 24: Luke 6:27-36

The Kingdom of God turns the world upside down. Instead of pride, power, and possessions, Jesus values humility, love, and compassion. *"Do to others as you would like them to do to you"*(6:31) sums it all up. If everyone did that, imagine what a different place the world would be?

Almost every major religion/philosophical school shares this principle,

- *"Do not do to others that which angers you when they do it to you."* (Isocrates, 436-338 BC)
- *"What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."* (Hillel the elder, Judaism)
- *"One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self."* (Hinduism)
- *"Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful."* (Buddhism)
- *Try not to do things to others that you would not like them to do to you."* (Scientology)

Notice these are all NEGATIVE expressions of the same principle: DON'T do what you DON'T want done to you. Jesus, however, words it positively, DO good things. What difference does wording this command positively make in how we choose to live?

- Do I ever pause before I do something and ask myself if I would like the same treatment?
- Do I pause before I say something and ask if I would like to hear those words myself? Do I take God's command to *"DO love my neighbour as myself"* and practice it?

What if we followed Mom's advice: *"If you can't say something good, to say anything at all?"* What if you broadened to include: *"If you can't do something nice, don't do anything at all?"* (We should probably add, *"If you can't text/tweet/Facebook/email/Pinterest/Instagram something good, don't text/tweet/Facebook/email/Pinterest/Instagram anything at all"*).

What if we worded it positively: *"DO something good for someone – anything at all, just do it."*?

Jesus challenges us to see the world through new eyes, God's eyes. In His Kingdom, we don't seek revenge, we choose to love. We might wonder how it is possible to love our enemies (6:27). The answer is: *"Do good to those who hate you."* Those who choose to forgive change the world. Abraham Lincoln has two wonderful insights on this: *"Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?"* and *"I don't like that man. I must get to know him better."* Great counsel. This sort of behaviour is not possible in our own strength. This is where we really need Jesus at the centre of our lives.

We all know that actions speak louder than words, and one kind deed can become a snowball of grace. We can't do this on our own. It's only when we are in constant communication with Him we hope to begin achieving the character He wants us to have. His Spirit gives us the strength we need.

*We beg you, Jesus, be our help and strength.
Save those among us who are suffering,
have pity on the lowly, and lift up the fallen.
Heal the sick, bring back the wandering,
and feed the hungry.
Release those unjustly imprisoned,
lift up those who falter, and strengthen the fainthearted.
Help us to be your people and the sheep of your pasture.
I give thanks to God the Father, through his Son, in the Holy Spirit,
because in his great love he took pity on us,
and when we were dead in our sins he brought us to life with Christ.
In him we are a new creation.
Help me to throw off my old nature and all its ways
and, as I have come to birth in Christ, may I become a new creation in Him.
Amen*

Clement (92-101) and Leo (c.400-461)

Thursday, January 25: Luke 6:37-42

Liz Pacey writes, *"My mother was a great believer in giving people the benefit of the doubt. I would sometimes visit her full of some injustice that I thought I'd suffered. And did I get sympathy? No, absolutely not. She was much more likely to wonder aloud whether the other person might be having a bad day and how that might affect their judgement."*

Doesn't that drive you crazy? Jesus wants us to be understanding (givers of the benefit of the doubt), too. Rather than judging or condemning other people (who, frankly, deserve it) we are to show generosity in both forgiving and giving. I love the description of giving in verse 38: this isn't a case of clicking on Amazon or rushing off to the mall for a last-minute present, it's a matter of taking days or even weeks to really think about and find the gift that is absolutely perfect.

It's pretty much the same with forgiveness. We can quickly and lightly, say the words "I forgive you." The actual working that out in our lives involves a lot more work and can take a lot longer. We need God's help.

Have you ever found yourself judging another person for their faults, only to realize your own issues are just as many or more? Have you found yourself judging another person, and NOT realizing your own problems? It is SO easy to spot the speck of sawdust in the other person's eye and so hard to see the 2x4 in our own. We can be aware of little faults in other while we ignore our own big problems: Jesus calls us out.

When the Bible lists "spiritual gifts," "finding fault" is **NOT** one of them (Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12, etc). Spiritual gifts are blessings like *"serving," "teaching," "encouragement," "giving," "leadership," "mercy,"* and *"help."* Spiritual gifts do NOT include *"criticism," "cynicism,"* or *"fault finding."*

The ability to recognize our own personal shortcomings is something we need to pray about. What issues are there in your life that you're not dealing with? Ask God. Once you recognize them, deal with them.

In our relationships with other people, let's be gracious. May we do to them what we would like done to us (6:31). When we bless them and forgive them, we are blessing them AND blessing ourselves, too.

*Help us, O Lord, to know you, and love you, and rejoice in you.
Even though we know we cannot do these perfectly in this life.
Let us, at least, grow closer to you every day,
till we come to know, love, and rejoice in you in perfection, in heaven.
May our knowledge of you increase in us, day by day.
May our love for you grow every day, more and more.
May our joy become greater and fuller as we live in your presence, each day.
May the gifts of grace you give us fill us so that our joy may be full.
To you, O Lord, be the honor and glory,
who with the Father and Holy Spirit lives and reigns,
one God, world without end.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Friday, January 26: Luke 6:43-49

Don't build a house on the edge of the coulee in Lethbridge. You may lose it. The view may be great, but Lethbridge is built on loosely consolidated sediment, not solid rock. When people who do live on the edge of the coulee overwater their lawns or we have June monsoon rains, the ground along the coulee edge liquifies and flows downhill (the technical geographic term is solifluction).

Jesus understood that. He concludes His message by comparing a house built on a rock foundation versus a house built on no foundation (in a parallel story, in Matthew 7:24-27, He describes the second house as built on sand). They may both look the same above ground, but when the rains come, you discover that one house has a solid foundation; the other does not.

Of course, Jesus is not really talking about good civil engineering practices. He is talking about our lives. We all experience sudden storms: illness, death, loss of a job, family crisis, financial crunch. What then?

Perhaps more often we suffer the insidious damage caused by water seeping under the surface, slowly undermining, rotting, and destroying things. A tiny lie, for example, can lead to bigger and bigger untruths that dig us in deeper. A wrong remembered and unforgiven can fester into a bitter, broken relationship. A bad habit can become an addiction that harms us and those we love. Loneliness, depression, bitterness, resentments – untreated – can rot our souls and destroy our relationships.

Jesus warns us that inevitably whatever we have in our heart will come to the surface. The effects of those problems in our lives will come to the surface. (*"Be sure your sins will find you out ..."*)

The solution is to *"dig deep and lay the foundation (of your life) on solid rock."* What is the solid rock? Jesus (of course). The bigger issue is, how do we dig deep and lay that foundation ...

- Paul John Isaak, in Namibia, writes: *"The essence of Christianity is not merely a belief and a confession (you call me "Lord, Lord") that can be separated from the way we walk in the world (and not do what I say). When the whole self responds totally to one Lord, the result is an indissoluble union between confession and walk or between faith and good works."* Walk the talk.
- Tom Wright adds, *"The question is: are we today so keen on looking for specks in other people's eyes that we can't see the planks in our own? Do our plans and schemes look good on the outside but leave the heart untouched? As we building with a foundation? As we ask those questions about ourselves, and watch out in case we are lured into those traps by others, we must maintain, as our basic rule of life, the generous, free-spirited approach of the previous parts of the sermon. Jesus' radical offer of new and abundant life is so all-embracing, and hence all-demanding, that people try to find alternative ways. These must be resisted, or the house will come down with a crash."*
- *"A biblical text or exhortation from Jesus is not really understood until it is applied. The disciple who responds to Jesus and does what He calls for is able to stand up to the harsh realities of life in a fallen world. The disciple who learns to see and act in the world as Jesus calls the disciple to do is able to face the floods, that is, the disappointments and injuries that life often brings. In contrast, to ignore His teaching is to be set up to suffer a tragic loss. As sad as it is to lose one's home in a flood, it is sadder still for one's life to be swept away because the call and advice of God was ignored."*(Darrel Bock)

What is Jesus saying to you in this passage? How can you make this part of your life?

*Dear God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I **think** that I am following Your will
does not mean that I am actually **doing** so.
But I believe this, and on this will I build my life:
I believe that the desire to please You, does in fact please You.
I hope I have that goal in everything I do.
I hope I never persist in anything apart from the desire to honour you.
And I know that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it at the time.
Therefore, I will trust You always,
for though I may be lost, and in the shadow of death, I will not be afraid,
because I know You will never leave me to face my troubles alone.
Amen.*

Thomas Merton

Saturday, January 27: Luke 7:1-10

Only twice in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) is Jesus described as being "amazed": once at people's unbelief (in His hometown of Nazareth, Mark 6:6) and once, here, at a person's faith and belief (7:9). This amazing man is not even a Jew. He's a Roman, a "Gentile Dog" in Jewish eyes. He represents the political and military rule of Rome. And yet he models faith in Jesus. The centurion's conviction that Jesus can heal – even at a distance – goes way beyond the faith of any of the Jews.

In Jesus' day, centurions were the Sergeant-Majors of the Roman army. They were tough, battle-hardened no-nonsense veterans. Centurions were expected to model exemplary courage, skill, and loyalty. They were the first into battle, leading the charge. They frequently died young, in combat. This man is different. He had a good relationship with the Jews. He was generous to them. He understood authority without being authoritarian. His faith in Jesus is shocking. He recognizes the signs of God's power, words, and presence in Jesus. He believes.

This veteran officer cares about *a servant*. The sick person was not a wife, son, daughter, or fellow officer. In the 1st Century, servants were not citizens. They had no rights. They were not really people at all. Servants were commodities, labour-saving devices, bought and sold at auction. This centurion saw beyond status to see this man's God-given value. He values this slave as a fellow human being. His love for a "non-person" is radical. It certainly exceeds the lack of compassion among the Jewish leadership.

This man is a Roman officer: as a member of the occupying army, he has every right to order Jesus to obey him. Instead, he *"earnestly begs"* Jesus to come. He is a Gentile: according to Jewish Law, a Jew, like Jesus, could not enter the centurion's home. But Jesus is going. His good news is for ALL people.

The centurion never does meet Jesus. But he has amazing faith.

We never "see" God either, but we can still believe in Him. Do I have faith? What do I believe God can do?

*At this instant, as I come to prayer, God is present waiting for me.
God always arrives before me, desiring to connect with me
even more than my most intimate friend.
I take a moment and greet my loving God.
I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns
and be open to what God is asking of me.
I choose to allow my loving Creator to guide me and form me.
How do I find myself today?
Where am I with God? With others?
Do I have something to be grateful for? Then I give thanks.
Is there something I am sorry for? Then I ask forgiveness.
Is there someone I need to pray for? Then I bring them to Jesus.
Is there a situation that needs His healing touch? Then I invite Him in.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.
Amen.*

Sunday, January 28: Luke 7:11-17

We are walking with Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd toward the gates of a village (7:11). Another large crowd, a funeral procession, is coming out of the town (7:12). One crowd is rejoicing. The other crowd is mourning. The two large crowds meet.

The funeral is for a widow's only son. This lady is destitute. Her husband is already dead. Now her only son is gone. In a world where men were the providers and women had few (if any) prospects to earn an income other than begging or prostitution, she is without hope. This is a tragedy.

It would have been easy for the two crowds to go their separate ways. After all, when you're grieving, the last thing you want are joyful revelers. And when you're having a party, the last thing you want is to deal with tragedy. Jesus crosses over from the celebration to the funeral. He changes crowds. He is filled with compassion for the widow. Something profound is happening here.

For a man to speak to a strange woman back then was as unthinkable as for a Roman centurion to ask a favour of a Jewish rabbi, like Jesus (7:1-10). Talking to a woman was as countercultural as saying a slave is as human as a Roman citizen. To us those rules seem silly. But in Jesus' culture they were impenetrable barriers. Jesus loves to break cultural rules: *"In Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith ... there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"*(Galatians 3:27-28). Do we think some people are more or less special than others? Jesus doesn't.

Remember how Jesus described the "good news" of the Kingdom? *"The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor ..."* (4:18-19). We see a man cured of illness (7:1-10) and now a dead man sitting up and talking. God, the King, has come. He is sovereign over all, even sickness and death. That is great news.

- **Jesus is in control** – the Kingdom of God is real and relevant, even when the world seems out of control. I may not understand what He is doing, but He is King.
- **The Kingdom of God is a place of joy and celebration.** Jesus cares especially for those who are suffering, hurting, grieving, and poor. He invites us all in to His presence, where there is joy, peace, love, and hope. Whether I am struggling with illness, grief, loneliness or economic hardship, Jesus meets me where I am, walks with me, and invites me to find joy in His presence.
- **We have good news to *experience*.** In the hard times, I can count on Jesus. He may not heal me physically or raise a loved one from the dead, but I can experience His power and presence throughout life. His Spirit is with me every moment of every day. I can look forward to the fulfillment of the Kingdom where, *"God will wipe every tear from their eyes; there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain"*(Revelation 21:4).
- **We have good news to *share*:** *"In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith ..."* We have an invitation to ALL people to *"taste and see that the Lord is good."* We can share God's forgiveness and eternal life. But our good news is much bigger. It is about the power and presence of God, moment-by-moment, day-by-day in the real world.
- **We have good news to *live out*.** God forgives/saves/fills us so we can share His love with those around us. We are the Presence of God to others as we work, study, love our neighbours, visit those in hospital, call a friend – whatever, wherever. God is building His Kingdom as His Kingdom people (us) live out our love for Jesus. God has a special concern for those who suffer and struggle. Who are the ill, outcasts, and widows of our day? Do we notice those who are lonely, in pain, in need of compassion? Who needs His love today? How can I reach out with His love?

Today, how can I be like Jesus?

*For each step that I might take
Be my guide, O Lord of life.
For each load that I might bear
Be my strength, O Lord of life.
For each mountain I might face
Be my power, O Lord of life.
For each river that might impede
Be my safety, O Lord of life.
For each place where I might rest
Be my peace, O Lord of life.
For each sunrise and sunset
Be my joy, O Lord of life.
Amen.*

www.faithandworship.com

Monday, January 29: Luke 7:18-35

If God were a human being, what would He look like? A bearded old man? A stern judge? An awe-inspiring warrior? If God were a human being would He look like Jesus? That is exactly what John is wondering.

John the Baptist was a towering figure in Israel – fearless, quick to notice others' needs but indifferent to his own. He was a prophet, if ever there was one. Yet his greatest moment is when he points to Jesus as the Lamb of God and says: "*This is how my own happiness is made complete. He must increase and I must decrease*" (John 3:30). John is rejecting the cult of personality and celebrity status. He watches his followers move from him to Jesus. He is preparing for redundancy, for accepting that even he, with Jerusalem at his feet, is dispensable. This is more remarkable than living on locusts and wild honey.

Jesus' works of compassion, mercy, and love are signs He is the promised Messiah. For John, in prison, this is affirmation that his work is done. He has prepared the way. His job is done.

What can we learn from John?

- We don't like playing second fiddle; we love to be front and centre. We love to be loved. John's life challenges us: are we willing to let others get the glory? Can we do what is right, even if it means not getting the notoriety we think we deserve? What really matters?
- Even John has doubts and questions. It's OK to doubt and ask questions. That's how we grow.
- God's Spirit at work. Look at the world around you, look at your life, look at the lives of those you love, and see God at work in mighty ways. God is doing amazing things. The Kingdom has come.

What can we learn from Jesus?

- The Kingdom is about love and grace. Jesus redefines Jewish expectations for the Kingdom of God and the Messiah. The Jews wanted an earthly kingdom and a warrior-king in Jerusalem. Jesus' declaration about Himself (7:22-23) is drawn directly from Scripture (Isaiah 61:1-2/Luke 4:18-19). Jesus simply says: "*Look at Scripture then look at what's happening. Ask the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the poor – they get it.*" Jesus' works of compassion, mercy, and love are signs He is the promised Messiah, the One in and through whom God saves his people. Jesus models a world where God reestablishes peace and justice, as promised in the prophets (see Isaiah 11:1-9).
- The Kingdom of God is a party! Some folks felt John's ultra-simple, austere life was more godly than Jesus' more "fun" life. After all religious people are serious, austere people, right? Does it challenge your image of Jesus that "*The Son of Man feasts and drinks*" and people said, "*He's a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners*" (7:34)? Can you love Jesus and still enjoy life? Can you have (good, clean) fun? If our goal is to be like Jesus, we need to learn to do this!

The Kingdom of God has come. The Spirit is at work. Celebrate! Enjoy the new life you have in Jesus today. He has given us the freedom, and good reason, to be joyful people (and invite others to the party!).

*Make us glad, Lord God, in speaking boldly of your mercies.
Help us rejoice, O Jesus, in adoring your Holiness.
Help us celebrate, O Spirit, your work in our world.
May our chief joy be to glorify and proclaim your holy Name.
Almighty, everlasting God, dwelling in love and power in our souls,
bring people to your light through us.
Make yourself known to the world in us.
May all people know you, the true Light, the bright and morning Star.
May your joy shine in us and through us.
May your love shine in us and through us.
We pray that you would fill the world with your glory
and show yourself by the radiance of your light to all nations.
To you be the glory forever and ever.
Amen*

Gregorian Sacramentary (c.593)

Tuesday, January 30: Luke 7:36-50

Jesus is happy to spend time with a well-educated, religious Pharisee. We're often hard on Pharisees. But Pharisees were good, religious people who lived exemplary moral and religious lives. They took God and Scripture very seriously. They were the good "church-goers" of their day. The Pharisees' biggest fault was they equated true spirituality with doing religious things. Being such "good" people, they felt justified in judging people who didn't take religion as seriously as they did. They often came across as self-righteous, judgmental, and arrogant. They could be hard and cold. Hopefully we don't come across that way.

Jesus is just as willing to meet with "outsiders," people the Pharisees would never associate with: people with physical diseases (Luke 5:17-26), tax collectors who collaborated with the Romans and were dishonest (Matthew 9:9-13), and people with "sin issues" like this lady (we don't know what her past was, but the code words "a sinful life" imply prostitution). God loves not-so-good people, too.

The lady has met Jesus before. At some point, He has already dealt with her past: Jesus comments her many sins **have already been forgiven**. He tells her, "Your faith **has saved** you" (both past tense). Imagine what the first meeting might have been like. In her world, she would know the Kingdom of God is only for "good" people; she's not "good." But in desperation, she comes to Jesus. He sees her faith, deep under all the layers of sin. He forgives her. This is Jesus' good news: no one is beyond God's love.

Now she comes to anoint Jesus' feet. In this culture, the standard welcome to a guest, would have been for a host to greet a guest with a kiss, and anoint his head with oil. A slave would wash and anoint a guest's feet. This lady, overwhelmed by God's forgiveness, is doing for Jesus what a host and slave would do – and more. She is expressing her thanks and worship. She bursts into tears before she can get her jar of expensive oil open. Then, trying to make things better, she makes them worse. She lets down her hair, something only a prostitute would do in public in that day. She kisses and wipes Jesus' feet. How does Jesus respond? Embarrassed? Offended? No. He accepts her love and devotion gently and patiently.

Simon, a religious Pharisee, is watching. He is horrified Jesus allows the woman to come near; if Jesus were a genuine prophet, He would know what kind of woman she was and refuse to see her. Jesus even lets her touch Him; He would be "unclean" by Simon's religious rules. Jesus welcomes everyone.

Jesus is much more than a prophet: He sees through Simon: *"Simon, I have something to tell you. Two people owed money to a certain money lender. One owed him \$5,000 and the other \$500. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"* How would you answer? Like Simon?

The "degree" of debt is not the only point here. What else is Jesus' saying? The subtext in this parable is **BOTH** people owed a debt they could not pay. In the eyes of the law, **both** are guilty. Jesus' point? Simon might be a "better" person, but he is guilty of a debt, too. We all are. Simon misses it. Did you?

The woman is guilty of sins of **commission**; she did bad things. Simon is guilty of sins of **omission**; he didn't do the right things. He has not welcomed Jesus as he ought to. His religion is about legalism, not love.

Jesus is incredibly gracious to all who come to Him, love Him, and desire to follow Him. He forgives us. How do we respond? The result of faith, genuine faith, ought to be love and worship. Worship is our loving response to God's love. Worship is allowing the truth of God's love and grace to fill our whole being, so our lives are transformed. Archbishop William Temple writes that *"To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God; to purge the imagination by the beauty of God; to open the heart to the love of God; and to devote the will to the purpose of God."*

"Good" worship is not really about what happens in church on Sunday morning. "Good" worship is about our hearts – Monday, Tuesday ... through Sunday. Worship is how we live as we ask God to lead us. Worship is living, thankfully and prayerfully, in His presence. Worship is a way of living in which God fills us, through the ups and downs, every day. Worship is a way of living in which we offer every part of our lives

as living sacrifices (worship offerings) to God: our thoughts, our activities, our plans, our words, our hopes, our steps, our fears, and our bodies (Romans 12:1). How will you worship God this week?

*Dear Lord, as I come to you today
fill my heart and my whole being with the wonder of Your presence.
It is so easy to get caught up with the trappings of work, wealth, and worry in this life.
Grant, O Lord, that I may be free from greed and selfishness.
Remind me that the best things in life are free:
love, laughter, caring and sharing.
In Your loving presence, I unwind the past day,
starting from now and looking back, moment by moment.
I attend to the shadows and what they say to me,
seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.
I gather in all the goodness and light of your Spirit, in gratitude.
Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I share with Jesus, may I also learn to be still and listen.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
I open my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
And I listen to what He is saying to me.
I ask Him to help me to place myself fully in His care, to abandon myself to Him,
knowing that He always wants what is best for me.
Amen*

Wednesday, January 31: Luke 8:1-15

In C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series, one of the four central characters is a girl named Susan. She is a solid follower of Aslan (the Jesus' figure) in the early books. She knows Aslan/Jesus and seeks to serve Him faithfully.

But in the final book, *The Last Battle*, Susan is conspicuous by her absence. Her brother, Peter, says that she is "no longer a friend of Narnia" (i.e. the Kingdom of God and following Jesus). Another character comments, "she's interested in nothing now-a-days except nylons and lipstick and invitations." Another friend adds, "She wasted all her school time wanting to be the age she is now, and she'll waste all the rest of her life trying to stay that age. Her whole idea is to race on to the silliest time of one's life as quick as she can and then stop there as long as she can." Susan, herself, when asked about Aslan/Jesus and Narnia/Kingdom of God, replies, "What wonderful memories you have. Fancy you still thinking about all those funny games we used to play when we were children." We're left with the uncomfortable feeling that Susan has let life – the hard path, weeds, birds, nylons, lipstick and invitations – distract her from her true calling as a child of God. She is lost in a frivolous, superficial, hollow world.

Jesus' parable of the sower speaks of God's hope and intent that everyone hears the Word of God and holds it fast in a heart that is faithful and true. Our calling is to hold fast to Jesus as our King and Friend. We keep faith. The result is that by our endurance and patience we bear fruit (What fruit? "*The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*" [Galatians 5:22-23] – is that true of us?)

- What are the hard places in my life – places where I will not let the Word of God soak in? What doors do I close? What parts of my life do I refuse to allow Him to enter? Why?
- What are the rocks that cause my faith to wilt? What tough times cause me to wander away?
- What are the thorns/weeds that choke out my love for God? What distractions, activities, worries, concerns, pastimes, and priorities take time and energy away from my relationship with God?

In the Kingdom of God we are invited to walk with God through all the circumstances of life, and discover the wonder, joy, peace, hope, and love that comes from living with Him. If you have read the *Narnia* books you know how enjoyable, wonderful, and exciting walking with Jesus can be. There are hard times, but Jesus (in Narnia, Aslan) is always there. Some of us, however, like Susan, lose our way. Or push Him aside.

In response to a question from a reader, C.S. Lewis wrote about Susan, *"The books don't tell us what happened to Susan. She is left alive in this world at the end, having turned into a rather silly, conceited young woman. But there's plenty of time for her to mend and perhaps she will get to Aslan's country (heaven) in the end ... in her own way"* (From Lewis' *Letters to Children*, 22 January 1957, to Martin).

What about us? Where are we in Jesus' parable? I may not be silly or conceited (or maybe I am?), but what are my issues? What do I need to deal with? The good news is that there is always time for us to mend. What do you need to talk with Jesus about today?

*Open my heart, O Lord, and enlighten me by the grace of your Holy Spirit,
that I may seek what is well pleasing to your will;
help me to order my doings after your commandments
that I may live a life that pleases you.
May God the Father bless us.
May Christ the Son take care of us.
May the Holy Spirit and enlighten us all the days of our life.
The Lord be our defender and keeper of body and soul
both now and forever and to the ages of ages.
Amen*

Bede (672-735)

Thursday, February 1: Luke 8:16-21

Believing in Jesus is counter-cultural. As Jesus models a Spirit-filled, godly life, it's is not about gaining power, accumulating wealth, or "getting ahead." It is about love, compassion, grace, forgiveness, justice, and mercy. In a dark world, Jesus' life shines like a beacon of hope. People who, filled with a genuine love for Jesus, live those values today shine like lights as well.

Following on from the parable of the sower, Jesus continues to make the point that hearing the Word leads to living the Word – bearing fruit and shining as a light. If we genuinely love Jesus, inevitably it will show in who we are and how we live. Of course, we will never be perfect. (C.S. Lewis once told a story about a nice young man and a *"cantankerous old maid"*(his words). Lewis asks, *"Who's the Christian?"* He says, *"There is no way to tell: maybe the nice young man IS NOT a Christian – who knows how much nicer he would be if he were a Christian. Maybe the cantankerous old maid IS a Christian – who know how much more cantankerous she would be if she were not a Christian"*).

Some of us are nicer than other. God, through His Spirit, can make us even nicer. Some of us are a bit more cantankerous than others. But God, though His Spirit, can de-cantankerize us. The point is not so much where we are now, but what direction are we moving in. Are we becoming more and more like Jesus? Are we not changing at all? Are we become less nice?

In Matthew 12:48-49, when Jesus' mother and brothers want to speak to Him, He asks a question: *"Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?"* Then he points to his disciples and said, *"Look, these are my mother and brothers. **Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven** is my brother and sister and mother."*

When we love Jesus, He sees us as His own brothers, sisters, and mothers. We are His family – His **immediate** family (not some distant cousin-in-law, twenty times removed). You are His brother. You are His sister. How does that make you feel? How might that effect the way you live?

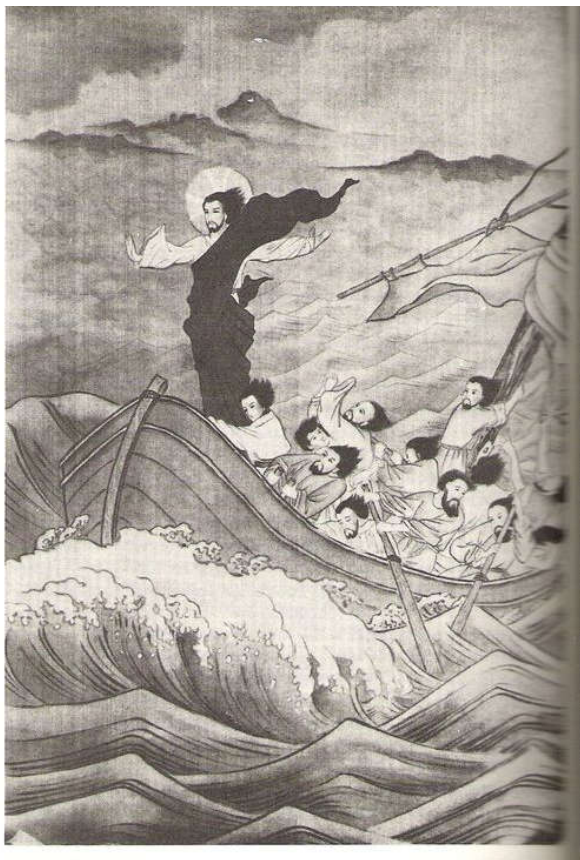
Mother Teresa's daily prayer was this: *"Dear Jesus, help me spread Your fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul with Your Spirit and love. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of Yours. Shine through me. Be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Your presence in my soul. Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus. Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as you shine, so to shine as to be a light to others."*

*O Lord, you willingly gave us your body and your blood.
 Come into my life and put me back together as you created me to be:
 Come into all my body, my emotions, my soul, and my heart.
 You, who are fire, burn up the thorns of all my sins.
 You, who are holy, purify my soul, clean my mind.
 You, who are almighty, strengthen my knees and bones.
 You, who are wisdom, enlighten the simplicity of my five senses.
 You, who alone are worthy of worship, fill me completely with reverence and awe.
 Always protect, guard, and keep me from every soul-destroying word and act.
 Sanctify, purify, forgive, cleanse, and rule me.
 Teach me, give me understanding, and enlighten me.
 Make me a dwelling place of Your Spirit and only your Spirit.
 Just as every evil spirit, temptation, and passion flees before you,
 may the presence of Your Spirit in my life protect me and cause evil to flee from me.
 Take me, I pray, as Your servant.
 Make me, I pray, a child of light.
 You alone are our Saviour, O Jesus.
 You are the radiance of glory that shines in our souls, O Spirit.
 You alone are my Master and King, O God.
 Three-in-one, One-in-three, I give my life to you.
 To You, as our Lord and God, we give all glory, day and night.
 Amen*

Adapted from St. Symeon the Translator (10th century)

Friday, February 2: Luke 8:22-25

Katshushika Hokusai's early 19th-century woodblock print, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, (right) shows a giant wave dwarfing a distant snow-capped Mount Fuji. In two Japanese fishing boats, miniscule crews flinch in one final second, before destruction (it brings up eerie memories of the tsunami in 2011).



A century later, Monika Liu Ho-Peh of China painted a storm at sea in her painting, *Stilling of the Tempest* (left). A Chinese Christ is her focal point, standing left of centre on the prow of a boat, face serene, arms cruciform, hands flexed in rebuke, inner and outer tunics billowing in the squall, sheltering 12 sailors who grip gunwales, oars, the mast, a rope or one another in terror. Jesus is clearly in control. The sailors are not.

Luke and Mark (Mark 4:35-41) both tell this story. Mark focusses on Jesus. Luke tells the story from the disciples' viewpoint. They feel like the terrified Japanese fishermen in Hokusai's woodcut; they can identify with the terror of the 12 in Liu Ho-Peh's painting. They are certain they are about to die. Jesus speaks. All is calm.

He asks His disciples, *"Where is your faith?"* The disciples were terrified and amazed, asking each other, *"Who is this man? When he gives a command, even the wind and waves obey him."*

There are times in our lives when we feel like the Japanese sailors or Chinese disciples. The waves of life are crashing over us. We hold on to whatever gunwales, oars, masts, ropes, or people that we can find. We're desperate. Maybe, we cry out to Jesus. Maybe we pray: *"Master, Master, we're all going to die."* Sometimes it feels like Jesus is sleeping through our tempests.

Notice ...

1. **Hurricanes happen.** Jesus doesn't prevent the storm. Storms in life happen, even to those close to Jesus. Bad (and good) things happen to the godly and the not-so-godly. That's life.
2. **We may be afraid.** Fear is human. Fear, if it simply leads to panic and despair destroys us. Fear, if it draws us closer to Jesus, is OK. Nelson Mandela said, *"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."*
3. **We can conquer the fear.** How? By recognizing Jesus is always in the boat with us. If we could see the reality of the spiritual world as clearly as we see physical reality, we would see Jesus is actually out in front of us, sheltering us, caring for us, providing for us a way through the storm. He is in control. Always. Like the lead sailor in Liu Ho-Peh's painting, we can cling to Him.
4. **Jesus can give us peace.** In the midst of the chaos, He can actually give us "calm."

Pioneer missionary to China, Hudson Taylor (1832-1905), said, *"God isn't looking for people of great faith, but for individuals ready to follow Him."* Faith often looks more like taking small steps forward, following Jesus, holding on to Jesus, and trusting Jesus in the storms. Faith is rarely a dramatic, death-defying leap. It's following Jesus one step at a time. What small step of faith might you need to take this week?

*O God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, grant us, we pray,
to be grounded and settled in your truth.
May the Holy Spirit come into our hearts and give us the gift of true faith.
Help us to trust you in the storm of life
and to be faithful to you in the calms of life.
That which we do not know, reveal to us.
That which is empty or insufficient in us, please fill us up.
That which we know which is true, confirm in us.
That which is evil and sinful, forgive and remove from us.
That which is beautiful, cause to shine through us for your glory.
Keep us blameless in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Clement of Rome (1st Century)

Saturday, February 3: Luke 8:26-39

God's good news is for ALL people of ALL nations. That was the blessing Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites, were supposed to pass on (Genesis 12:1-3). Jesus is finally fulfilling that mission they missed. He is enlarging His disciples' understanding of the kingdom of God, beyond Israel to ALL the world. God's love and grace are for ALL people. As a person without Jewish DNA, I am so thankful.

The region of the Gerasenes (also known as Decapolis or the Ten Cities) is non-Jewish territory (notice they are raising pigs, something no Jewish community would be doing). Today we might call this Palestinian territory. According to religious people like the Pharisees, a Jewish rabbi like Jesus should not be going there. So far, many Jews have recognized Jesus as a great teacher, but they don't understand He is the Messiah. The only beings who have "got it" are angels and demons (Luke 1:32, 4:34, 4:41). This demon-possessed Palestinian declares Jesus is *"the Son of the Most High God."* God's good news is for everyone.

During the storm at sea, Jesus' Jewish disciples were surprised by Jesus' authority (8:21-25). This evil spirit (or, more accurately, this regiment of evil spirits) has no problem recognizing Jesus' power and authority.

It/they know He could instantly banish them to “the bottomless pit.”

I’ve noticed some Christians actually don’t believe God can do much. Meanwhile some non-Christians really believe God can do amazing and miraculous things. They’re flabbergasted by our lack of faith.

Theologian, Craig Gay, writes, *“Thathu, a theological student I teach, recently cast out a demon from a farm worker in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands (South Africa). Just days afterwards, Thathu received the farm owner’s blessing to pastor a church in a disused outbuilding there, for many spiritually hungry labourers who had come to believe in Jesus along with the cleansed man. Animist worldviews enable most of the world’s peoples to identify the realities of demon possession, but affluent postmodern minorities are unaware of demonic elements ensnaring them through addictive Internet use and cyber-living, frenetic busyness, excessive eating or compulsive shopping. The Gerasene’s new-found discipline of solitude, and Jesus’ requirement of homeliness after years of spiritual vagrancy (v 39), are qualities foreign to many in an increasingly spaced-out, globalised and technology-driven culture, with its gravitational pull of hype, extreme mobility and individual isolation.”*

Gay has some provocative and interesting thoughts on “demon possession” in our culture: *“addictive Internet use and cyber-living, frenetic busyness, excessive eating, compulsive shopping ...”* What else would you add? What things pull us away from God? What else do we put our faith in, instead of God?

This story is a microcosm of Jesus’ ministry. He delivers us from the evil crippling us (think about some of those “forces” in Gay’s quote). He restores our true dignity, humanity, self-worth, and social standing. He recreates to be who He created us to be, made in the image of God. He makes us whole. And Jesus gives us a commission and a purpose, *“Go back to your home, and tell them what God has done for you”* (8:39).

This man wanted to go off and spend time with Jesus. That’s a good thing, isn’t it? Yes, it is ... but our faith is something to be lived and shared in our real world. While we do need to spend time with Jesus in study, solitude, prayer, and meditation, *the purpose of that is so we can share what we know about God’s amazing love with those we love.* Some modern spiritual formation is self-indulgent religious consumerism. Spiritual disciplines like prayer, solitude, and study are not intended to make us feel “more spiritual” or “closer to God.” Disciplines are tools to help us know Jesus, so we can share our faith and lives. An old Jewish proverb says, *“Whatever you have learned, you have the responsibility to teach.”*

We don’t need a Ph.D. in theology to share what God is doing in our lives (I know several people with Ph.D’s in theology: one or two have spent too much time studying **about** Jesus, but not much time living **with** Jesus). Jesus challenges us simply to tell people what He has done for us. Share your story.

*“The world is charged with the grandeur of God” (Gerard Manley Hopkins).
I dwell for a moment on the presence of God around me,
in every part of my body, and deep within my being.
I will take refuge in your loving heart.
You are my strength in times of weakness.
You are my comforter in times of sorrow.
Lord God I thank you for the gift of freedom.
I am free to make choices.
Help me to use this gift with integrity.
Help me to choose to follow you, to live in a Christian way by caring for others.
Remind me to consider always those less fortunate than myself,
the poor, the suffering, the foreigner,
those who are not free to worship in public.
Guide me always to seek your holy will in all the events of my life.
Amen*

Sunday, February 4: Luke 8:40-56

Does Jesus love some people more than others? So far, He has shown His grace and mercy to Jewish, Roman, and Palestinian people. He has shown grace to healthy people, demon-possessed people, ill people, "sinful" people, and even dead people. Jesus wants us ALL to know He is the Messiah for ALL people – Jewish, Palestinian, Roman, healthy, ill, good, "sinful" – whatever.

Jesus is returning to Jewish Galilee. After a whirlwind adventure of tempests, culture shock, and casting out of demons, His disciples need to debrief. They need rest. But they are instantly swamped with more people, all wanting Jesus. Luke packs his narrative with people from all sorts of backgrounds, with all sorts of issues and emotions, all coming to Jesus. Jesus welcomes them all.

Now Jesus is met by a grief-stricken father who is watching his 12-year old daughter die. If that isn't enough, a desperate woman reaches out to touch Him. She has been experiencing her own health deteriorating for the same period of 12 years.

What happens? Jesus has time for each one.

In Jairus' timeline, Jesus didn't have time for everyone: his little girl is dying. Jesus seeing her was all that was important. Jesus did NOT have time for this bothersome lady. But Jesus can handle both, just fine. Jesus always has time for us and for others. He is not under any deadlines, even if we are.

"Don't be afraid; just believe ..." (8:50). That is Jesus' message to Jairus, and to us (that phrase, "Don't be afraid" occurs over and over in the Bible.). It's a challenge to not be afraid when it seems like life is falling apart. Yet we never face these crises alone. God is with us. Eleanor Roosevelt wisely said, *"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.'"*

"Just believe ..." sounds so easy. It's not. Quaker theologian, Elton Trueblood, observed, *"Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservations."* We believe in/trust in/have faith in strangers all the time. We put our lives in the hands of doctors, drivers, and airplane pilots without reservation. These are fallible, human people. If we trust these strangers, why would we not trust God, the Creator of the universe, the One who loves us, the wonderful Lord who is with us? It's an interesting question to think about, isn't it?

"God isn't looking for people of great faith, but for individuals ready to follow Him ..." (Hudson Taylor). Face your fears. Give them to Jesus. Trust Him. Follow Him.

"Take the first step in faith," says Martin Luther King Jr., *"You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."* Take a step forward ... and another step ... and another step. As we do that, we discover Jesus is more than faithful ... and powerful.

*I pause for a moment.
I think of the love and the grace that God showers on me,
creating me in his image and likeness,
making me his temple.
"There are very few people who realize what God would make of them
if they abandoned themselves into his hands,
and let themselves be formed by his grace." (Ignatius)
I ask for the grace to trust myself totally to God's love.
Jesus, you speak to me through the words of the gospels.
May I respond to your call today.
Teach me to recognize your hand at work in my daily living.
Teach me to live and share what I have experienced of Jesus.
Help me to go back home, and tell them what God has done for me.
Amen.*