

Knowing God: Father, Son, and Spirit

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Readings, Reflections, and Prayers

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Monday, September 3: Psalm 145

This Fall we'll be looking at some of our core beliefs: we share these in common with believers in many denominational traditions. We'll also be looking at a few emphases that are more unique to us as people in the Baptist tradition (like believer's baptism). This September we'll be looking at God: who He is, how He reveals Himself, and how we know Him. These are all core Christian doctrines that people in all Christian traditions hold in common.

When we speak of "God" we mean the God we meet in Scripture: the Creator and Sustainer of everything; the One who saves us; the One who fills us. God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a doctrine called "the Trinity" – God reveals Himself as three-in-one, one-in-three, a tri-unity, or trinity.

God the Father is fully God; Jesus (the Son) is fully God; and the Holy Spirit is fully God. They relate together in perfect love and unity, so they are of one will and mind, despite being three distinct persons. Like a wife and husband in a really, really, really good marriage, each person is unique and distinct, but they act together in perfect harmony, one in mind, will, and goal.

Psalm 145 is a great introduction to who God is. What are some of his characteristics? He is a God

- Of mighty acts and power.
- Of majesty, glorious splendor, and wonderful miracles.
- Of awe-inspiring deeds and greatness.
- Of wonderful goodness and righteousness.
- Of mercy and compassion, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.
- Who helps the fallen and lifts those bent beneath their loads.
- Who gives hope to those who need it.
- Who satisfies the hunger and thirst of every living thing.
- Who is righteous in everything he does;
- Who is filled with kindness.
- Who is close to all who call on him,
- Who grants the desires of those who fear him.
- Who hears their cries for help and rescues them.
- Who Lord protects all those who love him.

If you were to describe God to a friend, how would you do it? What qualities would you emphasize?

If you were to write a psalm to God, what would you say? Try doing just that ...

*Creator of all,
Sustainer of all,
Saviour of all,
Your glory and majesty
are beyond our understanding,
Your power too awesome to behold.
And yet your love enfolds us as a gentle breeze.
Saviour of all,
Sustainer of all,
Creator of all,
help us tell of your glory;
help us share of your love;
help us minister your grace.
We bless your holy name,
Amen*

Tuesday, September 4: Genesis 1:1-3, 26-27 and Colossians 1:15-23

The doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly spelled out in the Bible. There is no single verse of Scripture that reads, *"The one God is three persons."* Instead, this doctrine is the product of a lengthy process of theological reflection from the experience of early Christians. The first followers of Jesus inherited a strict allegiance to the one God – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – from their Old Testament background (Deuteronomy 6:4). But they had also come to confess Jesus as the risen and exalted Saviour, Lord, and God Incarnate (God in human flesh). In addition, they were conscious of the ongoing divine presence within their community, a presence provided by the Holy Spirit, God-within-them.

Christians throughout the ages share this experience of the early believers. Therefore, three non-negotiable aspects of Christian faith and experience provide the building blocks for the understanding of God as the Trinity as one God in three persons:

- The belief in one true God,
- The conviction that Jesus is Lord and God,
- The experience of the indwelling of God, the Holy Spirit.

As we reread the Old Testament with these new understandings of who God is, we see "inklings" – glimpses – of the Trinity throughout the Old Testament (the Old Testament emphasizes the unity of God as one, however, to contrast with religions, like the Greeks and Romans, who believed in a whole host of gods).

As you reread Genesis today: note the role of the Holy Spirit in creation, and of the plural words God uses to describe Himself in creation. In Colossians, note the role of Jesus in creation.

We cannot "get our minds around" the mystery of the Trinity! How can God be one, yet reveal Himself in three persons? That's part of the reason that I – who was skeptical of Christianity – do believe in the God of Scripture: I cannot understand Him. If I, with my finite mind, could understand God, is He really worthy of my worship? But as I become aware of how much greater God is than I and as I become more and more aware of my inability to begin to comprehend His mysteries, I am led to worship Him, more and more!

This week we will focus on how appreciating God as Trinity helps us actually live wisely as followers of Way of Jesus. Theologian, educator, and author Marva Dawn, writes: *"What is worship? Let's begin by realizing that worship is our glad response to the immense grace of the Triune God. All of life is worship if we live it in gratitude and reverence, with mindfulness of God and eagerness to serve him."*

"In the Old Testament the name LORD is often entirely capitalized. This is the customary practice in English Bibles when the Hebrew word to be translated is the name YHWH, which is often vocalized [if it is vocalized; Orthodox Jews still do not say this name] as Yahweh [formerly as Jehovah] which is drawn from the verb root meaning 'to be.' That is the name by which the Lord revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:14-15. It is a term that distinguishes him from all the neighbouring, false deities. He is not just any God, but he alone is the faithful covenant God, the great 'I AM.'

"That name gives us a special reason to worship, for it calls us to amazement at all the precious promises given by this Lord, to trust because this Lord is constantly faithful to his covenant, and to thankfulness for his deliverance of his people from all their captivities. When we worship, we sing to the Lord because of who God is – and God is so astounding that he deserves our worship whether we feel like offering it or not." (Marva Dawn, *How Shall We Worship?*)

Our prayer today is attributed to Patrick, missionary to Ireland (he was from Britain). It is a wonderful trinitarian prayer (here is a link to a musical version, "I Arise Today," by Irish singer, Lisa Kelly:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=nr96YGWDGt4)

*I arise today, through a mighty strength,
the power of the Trinity,
Through the belief in the threeness,
through confession of the oneness
of the Creator of Creation.*

*I arise today through the strength of Christ's birth and his baptism,
Through the strength of his crucifixion and his burial,
Through the strength of his resurrection and his ascension.*

*I arise today through the strength of heaven:
Light of sun, radiance of moon,
splendor of fire, speed of lightning,
swiftness of wind, depth of sea,
stability of earth, firmness of rock.*

*I arise today through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me from snares of devils,
From temptations of vices,
from everyone who shall wish me ill,
afar and anear, alone and in multitude.*

*Christ to shield me today.
Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.*

*I arise today, through a mighty strength,
the power of the Trinity,
Through belief in the threeness,
through confession of the oneness,
of the Creator of Creation.*

Amen

Patrick (385-461)

Wednesday, September 5: John 1:1-18

Christians have tried to understand the mystery of how God is three-in-one and one-in-three by considering analogies from the natural world. One analogy suggests that, just as the one chemical formula H₂O can occur in three forms – ice, water, or steam – so also our one God is three persons. This analogy, however, falls short. Ice, water, and steam are simply three modes in which the same molecules could appear at any given time. Father, Son, and Spirit, in contrast, are not merely three forms in which God could appear; God always exists as all three all the time. As helpful as analogies can be, they can only take us so far. In the end, we cannot adequately visualize the doctrine of the Trinity. But we can declare some of what it entails:

- **God is one:** we believe that the God whom we know through Jesus is the one God whom the Old Testament people called Yahweh. Indeed, there is no other God.
- **God is three:** this one God is three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The one God actually *is* eternally three persons. Three-in-oneness is also the way God acts in the world. Father, Son, and Spirit work – uniquely, yet cooperatively and complementarily – in creation and redemption.
- **God is a diversity:** the one God is a diversity-within-unity. Father, Son, and Spirit carry out unique tasks, and yet work together, in creation and redemption. One role of each may be summarized as: the Father is the originator; the Son is the revealer; and the Spirit is the completer.
- **God is a unity:** despite their varying functions, the three persons of the Trinity are all involved in every area of God's activity in the world. The Father creates the world, through the Son, by the divine Spirit. Jesus, the Son, redeems us, yet it is the Father's will empowered by the Spirit. Although the Spirit fills us today, the Father and Jesus empower us, guide us, and lead us, as well.

How are you doing? Not sure you understand it? Good! It is a mystery. Vernon Grounds writes, *"Explain the Trinity? We can't even begin. We can only accept it – a mystery, disclosed in Scripture. It should be no surprise that the triune Being of God baffles our finite minds. We should be surprised, rather, if we could understand the nature of our Creator. He would be a two-bit deity, not the fathomless Source of all reality."*

Reflect on John 1:1-18 and this quote from Marva Dawn, today: *"Worship is for God. It centers on recognizing that 'great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised' and on responding to that worthiness by gathering with others to praise God, as is his due. If the community – and each of us as individuals in that body – focuses totally on the greatness of the Lord and his deserving to be praised, we will resist all idolatries of self, and comfort and ease, all divinizing of worship leaders, all sacralizing of our tastes and preferences, all gods of power and success."*

- What other things can we "worship" other than God?
- What else, besides God, can become the most important thing in our lives?
- What considerations are most important in your decision making?
- If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

"We can hardly even begin to appreciate the amazing grace of God's love," Dawn continues, "unless we first have known how much we definitely deserve instead our Judge's righteous wrath, how we incontrovertibly deserve the death we each must die. Without such proper 'fear,' we assume that it is easy [and merited] for God to forgive us. We nonchalantly think that were not too bad – that we could actually earn God's favor. We make grace cheap."

"When we totally confront our absolute hopelessness and complete depravity, however, we recognize with awe and trembling the nobility and immeasurability and incomprehensibility of God's love for us. God could at any moment ignore or destroy us; that is what we deserve. But the Lord does not; that is his grace. The Trinity's character is to remain faithful at all times, under all circumstances, to the divine covenant promises. Only with the constant intermingling of fear and love can we genuinely worship such a God."

Lord, help us make you the priority in our lives ...

*Our heavenly Father,
we pray that your blessing may rest on each one of us who profess to be Christians.
Lord, help us to love Christ more than we love ourselves.
Help us to be more like him in our way of life.
Help us, Lord, to walk humbly, prayerfully,
consistently on, in the dust of our pilgrimage
so that others may not stumble over us and say,
"They profess only, but they never do anything."
God, through your Spirit,
help us to live up to what we profess, through you, in Christ Jesus,
and may it be shown in each one of us.
Amen*

D.L. Moody (1837-1899)

Thursday, September 6: Isaiah 9:1-7 and Jeremiah 31:31-34

These passages are prophetic statements about the coming of Jesus – and the Holy Spirit. God the Father will reveal Himself more fully as Trinity through Jesus and the Spirit. How were these prophecies fulfilled?

Both prophecies come out of a context of human sinfulness. In Isaiah, the people of Judah have largely forgotten God – they focus on themselves, their own interests, wealth, passions, and "rights." God's call is back to a God-centred life and faithfulness. In Jeremiah, the people are in exile in Babylon. God will deliver His people ... but, again, He calls them to a God-centred life and faithfulness. One of the strong themes in the Bible is we need to recognize that we are not as good, smart, wise, powerful, or perfect as we like to think. We need to be humble before God! The mystery of the Trinity reminds us how little we really know about God (and life) and we must come, humbly, before God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

Our challenge is to be humble before God, recognizing that

1. we do not begin to understand Him – He is so far beyond our finite minds.
2. we are far from perfect beings – we have all sinned.
3. we all need His forgiveness.
4. His grace and love are so amazing.

Marva Dawn writes, "*One aspect of our faith that vaccinates us against idolatries is the biblical notion of 'fear', for the Lord is 'to be feared above all gods.'* It seems to me that our postmodern times suffer from a lack of genuine 'fear' for God. I put the word 'fear' in quotation marks because its Old Testament usage does not signify 'terror,' nor does it connote simply awe and reverence. When biblical writers named 'the fear of the Lord' that is 'the beginning of wisdom,' they identified a profound realization of our unworthiness before God (and inability to comprehend God) so that we do not take God's gracious love and steadfast mercy for granted, as if we'd deserved it or could earn it or pay it back."

"*More than any other Christian doctrine,*" Stephen Seamands writes, "*the Trinity sets before us the mystery of God and points to the element of mystery in every aspect of our faith.*" As we think about the amazing grace and love of God, we cannot fully understand all the mysteries of Jesus' birth, how His death paid the price for all our sins, how the resurrection could happen, or how the Spirit works in our lives ... We have questions we cannot answer. We have doubts that linger ... So what do we do?

Well, I don't understand a lot of things – from how airplanes can fly to why dark chocolate tastes so good ... But I still get on airplanes: I trust aerospace engineers, Airbus assembly people, Air Canada service crews and pilots – all people I have never met and people as human as myself! And I eat dark chocolate because from experience I know it tastes SOOOO good, even though I cannot explain why.

If I am willing to trust my life to human engineers and pilots, why would I not trust the Creator of the universe? I know from experience God gets me through difficult times, why would I not trust Him now? Lord, help me trust you ... Lord, help me to be obedient to you ...

God, Creator,
Artist supreme,
The potter who forms us,
The father who keeps us,
The strength who holds us,
The word who sustains us,
The love who will not let us go,
We offer you our sacrifice of praise.

Jesus, Messiah,
Saviour and friend,
The rabbi who teaches us,
The prophet who stirs us,
The healer who touches us,
The One who dies for us,
The love who will not let us go,
We offer you our sacrifice of praise.

Spirit, Power,
Breath of Life,
The guide who prompts us,
The truth who inspires us,
The fire who empowers us,
The spirit who enables us,
The love who will not let us go,
We offer you our sacrifice of praise.
Amen.

faithandworship.com

Friday, September 7: Psalm 96

We do not fully understand how the Trinity works (maybe we do not even **begin** to comprehend the Trinity). But that mystery can move us to worship God all the more. He is infinitely beyond us.

Reflect on Psalm 96 and this quote, today: *"Some people come to worship in order to be entertained or to be made to feel good, to be comfortable, rather than to engage actively in worshiping God [which should sometimes make us experience anything but comfort!]. Closely related is the expectation that the worship leaders or preacher will offer us a good performance, instead of serving as stage managers who help all of **us** offer **our** best performance to God, who is the audience of our worship. Also, some churches resort to gimmicks or techniques, instead of relying on the truth of God's word and the power of the Holy Spirit.*

"We spend our lives choosing what pleases us, so it is decidedly countercultural to search instead for what pleases God. That is why it is critically important that our churches not foster such a church shopping disposition by offering choices of different kinds of worship services. Can we learn instead to be a body of diverse people, learning from each other's music how to praise God more fully? (What do you think?)

*"In a culture awash in sacralizations of nations, money, power, prestige, possessions, technology, toys, sexual 'freedom,' and self, Christians completely require the Lord's greatness to withstand, and abstain from, and counter them. The Scriptures we read in worship continue to **expose** these gods by publicly displaying them; the sermons of the preacher can equip parishioners to **disarm** them; the power of the Holy Spirit, with which worship fills us, enables us to **triumph** over them. [These three verbs come from the pattern of Christ's victory over the principalities and powers as described in Colossians 2.] Other elements of the worship service provide other forms of conquest over the powers of idolatry. Giving a monetary offering, for example, continually defeats Mammon (money)" [Marva Dawn]. How do you respond?*

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Trinity is that *"In the deepest mystery of his being, God is an*

intimate relationship, a fellowship, a community of love” (Darrell Johnson). Somehow the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit get along absolutely perfectly! No hint of any problems. No conflict. Perfect harmony. They model for us the “house of love” we would all love to live in.

How can we live in more perfect harmony with one another? Jesus does remind us that while *“The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength,’ the second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”* (Mark 12:29-31)

How can I learn to be part of a body of diverse people, learning from others how to praise God more fully? How can I put others’ needs before my own? How can I love my neighbour?

*Creator God, we glimpse your beauty
in setting sun, mountain top, eagle's wing.
We sense your power in thunder crash,
lightning flash and ocean's roar.
Creator God we praise you.*

*Precious Jesus, we see your love
stretched out upon a cruel cross.
We stand in awe at your sacrifice,
pure love poured out for humankind.
Precious Jesus we praise you.*

*Holy Spirit, we see your power
in lives transformed, hearts on fire.
We listen for your still, small voice,
comforting, guiding, calling.
Holy Spirit we praise you.*

Amen

faithandworship.com

Saturday, September 8: John 14:1-14

“John quotes a curious remark of Philip to Jesus: ‘Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.’ It reminds me of what I have often heard on the lips of exasperated parents to their children: ‘You’re never satisfied.’ Am I ever? Augustine said our hearts are restless till they rest in God. When I see Jesus, I see a human vision of the Infinite God who is beyond my imagination.” (Frank Doyle)

We all have difficulty understanding God. Our finite minds struggle to make sense of an invisible being with the power to create the universe. Jesus shows us how to understand God, not by long abstract theological discussions ... but by loving, healing, rebuking, challenging, living a life of exemplary holiness, stilling storms and raising the dead. This is what God is like! Reading the stories of Jesus and listening to the teaching of Jesus we discover what God – Father, Son, and Spirit – is **really** like!

How can we, people, come to God? How can physical flesh, like us, relate to a Spirit, like God? How can sinful people be accepted by a holy God? At face value it seems impossible, which is why many people give up, or resort to elaborate rituals or sacrifices to try to appease God. None of this is necessary. Jesus has made it possible. By coming among us – God in human flesh – and dying in our place. He has opened the way to God. The idea that Jesus is the only way to God is not popular but it is His unique truth (14:6).

Our immediate futures are unknown and insecure. But we are invited to come to God by believing in Jesus and what Jesus says, and by trusting our lives to him. Trust may be hard, especially when Christian faith seems to make life harder. But Jesus invites us to hang on and take a long-term view (14:1-4).

When we think about the mystery of the Trinity, *“it is not an invitation to theological speculation about three*

persons in one God. Rather it recalls the experience of Jesus, our brother. He spoke of himself as a beloved son, as one who does not send himself but is sent on a mission, and as being joined by the Holy Spirit to the Father. We too, sisters and brothers of Jesus, are sent into this world with a purpose, we are God's beloved children, and we are joined to God by the Holy Spirit – we are temples of the Spirit. Already we are living in the life of the Trinity”(Frank Doyle).

We are sent into this world with a purpose – to be the “image of God” in creation ... loving as He loved, caring as He cared, teaching as He taught, sharing as He shared ...

*Creator God,
you who love us more than we can know,
who chose us from the very beginning to be family,
we praise your holy name.*

*Jesus Christ,
Son of God, Word become flesh,
who dwelt among us and was sacrificed for us,
we praise your holy name.*

*Holy Spirit,
present and power in our lives,
from the moment that we first believed,
we praise your holy name.*

Amen

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Sunday, September 9: Psalm 102

A Scripture Union devotional author writes, *“Three years ago this month my doctor told me I had cancer. I was 47. Many things went through my head of course. One of them was that I almost certainly won’t live as long as I had been expecting to. I found myself saying, with the psalmist, ‘Do not take me away, my God, in the midst of my days’ (v 24). I understand what this man means when he says, ‘I forget to eat my food’ (v 4). And just like him I often ‘lie awake’ (v 7). Those are common symptoms of depression.*

“I’m hopeful that my cancer will be cured. I’m hopeful that I will live a long time yet. I’m praying for both of those things. But I can’t be sure they will happen.

“There are some things that I do know for sure. In fact, I know these things more surely than I did before I had cancer. I know them because God has promised them:

- *I know that God hears people who call when they are in trouble (v 17).*
- *I know that God’s plan extends throughout all generations, so that my children’s children will live in God’s presence (v 28).*
- *I know that the Lord will complete the building of his kingdom, and that we will one day see God’s glory fully revealed (v 16).*

And that’s enough.”

Thank God for what you know for sure. Reflect on what we have been learning about God this week. How can this encourage you through your tough times?

*Lord, who though you were rich, yet for our sakes you became poor,
and you promise in your holy Gospel
that whatever is done for the least of your brothers you will receive as done to you:
Give us grace, we humbly ask you, to be always ready and willing to minister,
as you enable us, to the needs of others,
and to extend the blessings of your kingdom over all the world.*

Amen

Augustine (354-430)

Monday, September 10: Psalm 103

Wouldn't life have been/be wonderful if your parents were perfect? As a parent wouldn't it be great if I were able to be a perfect parent? Unfortunately, our human-ness, inherent ornery-ness, and outright sinfulness make that impossible! We simply fail, as our parents failed before us!

God as "Father" (or as "Parent") is a challenging concept for some people who did not have good relationships with their human parents, especially their fathers.¹ However, as we reflect on God as our Father or Parent we are, of course, thinking about fatherhood/parenthood in its ideal, God-created sense. God is the model of what a perfect parent ought to be. He is the perfection of parenthood. Thinking about this topic is a challenge to every parent to be more and more like God!

We often talk about Jesus. We talk about the Holy Spirit. But we don't really know what to do with God the Father. We sense He is the God of the Old Testament, a God who often makes us a bit uncomfortable: Jesus seems so much kinder and gentler. We avoid God the Father. But it is good for us to get to know our three-in-one God in all His fullness. This week we'll look specifically at God the Father.

As the perfect Father/Parent, we can celebrate that:

1. Our loving Father is the One who created us, called us into being, and gives us life (Psalm 139). We are each His creations – unique, precious, and divinely called. Søren Kierkegaard prays, *"Father in Heaven! When the thought of you wakes in our hearts let it not awaken like a frightened bird that flies about in dismay, but like a child waking from its sleep with a heavenly smile."* Isn't that a wonderful way to relate to God?
2. Our Father loves us as His precious children – not because we have earned His love, made ourselves perfect, or deserved His blessing. There is an unbreakable bond of love God has for each one of us – because He fashioned each of us and brought us into being. Nothing can break that bond of perfect love God has for us (Jesus emphasizes this in the parable of prodigal sons [Luke 15:11-32]).
3. We can pray to our Father. The Lord's Prayer is addressed to *"Our Father ..."* We are not only *welcome* to pray directly to God, this is a *good* thing to do! We are encouraged to do so! We can we should come to our loving Father with our problems, joys, needs, thanks, issues, and celebrations. He delights in time we spend with Him. Jesus goes on to note that, as children, we don't always pray for what is best for ourselves, but, as the perfect loving Parent, God will always do what is best for us (Luke 7:7-11). Sometimes our requests reflect our own immaturity or lack of understanding of the 'big picture' – we can trust that God really does know best.

As you read through Psalm 103, reflect on God as your perfect Parent – the One to whom you can come, anytime ... with whatever is on your heart or mind ... knowing you are always loved and always welcome ... confident that He knows what is best for you. He always has time for you. He always listens to you. Nothing you can say can make Him love you less or cease to love you.

"John Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. The audience is not there to judge the actors, but to enjoy them. This image suggests that God might actually enjoy us, not in any simple sense, of course, but as you enjoy the being of a child even when he is in every way a thorn in your heart. It is another way of suggesting that God looks on us with love: the Prodigal Son's father, scanning the horizon from his window, sees a forlorn, debauched figure slouching towards home, and runs out to meet him, speechless with joy." (Frank Doyle)

- What do you need to talk with God about today?
- Who do you know who really struggles with their relationship with God. Pray for that person, too.

¹ The Bible typically uses the male word "Father" to describe God's parental care for and relationship with us. But God, who created male and female, is of course beyond gender. In some passages God is described in terms that suggest motherly care (Deuteronomy 32:18, Isaiah 49:15, 66:12-13). I will be using the term "Father" simply because this is the most familiar Biblical term.

*Father Almighty,
 creator of everything and the source of all that is good and satisfying,
 help us to be more devoted to you
 with all that we are and with all that we have.
 Forgive my wandering, lustful heart
 that is always looking for something else to quench its insatiable thirst,
 when what I really desire is the grace to be more devoted to you and your Word.
 I have a "God-shaped" hole that can only be filled
 as I consecrate myself to your service.
 Let me be wholly set apart from all that desecrates,
 and consecrate both my inner and outer life,
 my possessions, relationships, and career,
 to the cause of Christ and his Kingdom.
 I pray that the spiritual disciplines of Bible study, meditation,
 fasting, good works, solitude, and corporate worship
 will be pleasing in your sight as I go deeper in your love.
 Amen.*

James Bell Jr.

Tuesday, September 11: Genesis 2:7, Ezekiel 37:1-14

We cannot see God, touch God, smell God, taste God ... It's all rather frustrating! "*God is Spirit*" says Jesus (John 4:24). We know that, but what does it mean? And how do we deal with our loving Father, whom we cannot relate to with our senses the way we do with other people?

"*Spirit*" is a complicated word in Hebrew. The Hebrew word "*ruach*" is translated by at least three English words: "*wind*," "*breath*," and "*spirit*." So, when you read any one of those three words in your English Bible, it could actually be translated by either of the other two words – a translator just made a judgment call.

1. God the Father, as Spirit, gives life. When "*the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground, He **breathed** the **breath** of life into the man's nostrils, and the man became a living person*" (Genesis 2:7). The difference between a living person and a dead person is that living people have breath. In a much deeper sense, God is able to give individuals and churches life, by breathing His breath (His Spirit) into them, just like He did to valley of bones in Ezekiel 37.
2. God, the Father, as Spirit, is a God of power. Remember "*ruach*" also means "*wind*." Here in southern Alberta we know that we cannot see the wind, but we can sure feel its power. Remember the power of those 100+ km/h winds? We cannot see the wind, but we sure know it by its effects. God is like the wind – an unseen force who acts upon things and people. While we cannot see Him, we can the effects in our lives, our church, and our world. What evidence do you see of God's effectiveness in your life and your world?
3. God, the Father, as Spirit, gets things going. Have you ever tried to light a campfire and you just cannot get the flame to catch? But if you get a few embers glowing, then gently blow on them ... poof! ... all of a sudden the fire takes off! Your breath brings the fire to life; that fire has the potential to bless us with warmth and light (or burn the forest down). God breathes life into our faith to bring us to life and sets us on fire – with love for Him and a desire to love those around us and share His love with them.
4. God, the Father, as Spirit, brings refreshment. In the Bible, the west wind ("*ruach*") brought rain to arid lands, resulting in life bursting forth from the ground (Hosea 6:3). In the same way, our Father, brings refreshment to our dry, weary souls, when we open our lives to receive His love.

In John 3:5-8, Jesus says, "*I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the 'ruach' (Spirit/wind/breath). Humans can reproduce only human life, but what is born of the 'ruach' (Spirit/wind/breath) is 'ruach' (Spirit/wind/breath). So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' The 'ruach' (Spirit/wind/breath) blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the 'ruach'*

(Spirit/wind/breath) but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the 'ruach' (Spirit/wind/breath)." We can have life – true life – when God comes into our lives!

- Pray for God to breathe His life/breath/Spirit into you.
- Pray for God to breathe His life/breath/Spirit into our church.
- Pray for that spark of faith in your life to be fanned into a burning fire of love for God and love for those around you.
- Is there someone whose faith is sputtering, whom you can encourage and inspire?

*God of love, we pray that you give us love:
love in our thinking,
love in our speaking,
love in our doing,
and love in the hidden places of our souls;
love of our neighbours, near and far;
love of our friends, old and new;
love of those who we find it hard to bear,
and love of those who find it hard to bear with us;
love of those with whom we work,
and love of those with whom we take our ease;
love in joy,
love in sorrow;
love in life and love in death.
In the end, may we be worthy to dwell with you, who are eternal love –
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – forever and ever.
Amen.*

William Temple (1881-1944)

Wednesday, September 12: Psalm 23, John 10:1-18

One of the most familiar images of God the Father in the Bible comes from Psalm 23:1 – *"The Lord is my shepherd."* It's so familiar, but few of us know much about shepherds these days!

Think about some of the implications of this image for our lives:

1. *The shepherd is dedicated full-time to the welfare of his sheep*, to the point that he often became an outcast in society – he spent all his time with his flock. God, our loving Father, is totally committed to us, too. He goes after us, even when we wander away from him (Luke 15:3-7). He will even give us His Himself (John 10:11-16). That is what a good shepherd – and a great Father – does.
2. *The shepherd knows where food, water, and safety are to be found, and guides his sheep to them.* He is the one who knows where the green pastures and quiet waters are, and he leads them there. God, our Father, is always with us, too. Through gentle guidance He will lead us from potential dangers and guide us to safety and refreshment (Isaiah 40:11) ... if we follow.
3. *We are the sheep of our Father's pasture* (see also Psalm 79:13, 95:7, 100:3) – He cares for each of us desperately. But like sheep, if we are honest, we have to admit that we easily wander off and get ourselves in trouble, we are not self-sufficient (although we like to think so), and we do so much better when we listen to His voice and follow His commands. *"All of us, like sheep, have strayed away; we have left God's paths to follow our own"* (Isaiah 53:6) is an apt summary of our human natures. But as a passionate and loving Father, God continually seeks to bring us back into the safety and blessing of His fold: He never gives up on us. He will never NOT welcome us home.
4. *Our Father God, the Good Shepherd, does not just point us in the direction of the quiet waters and green pastures – He takes us there*, even carrying those too weak to make it alone (Isaiah 40:11). God does not just gives us commands and directions, point us along the path, and then leave us to make it on our own. As a loving Father, He travels with us, guiding us, supporting us, and caring for us. Even through the darkest valleys, He never leaves us. *"Seek to cultivate a buoyant, joyous*

sense of the crowded kindnesses of God in your daily life.” (Alexander McLaren)

Our loving heavenly Father cares so much for us that He gave His own Son, Jesus, as our Saviour. Amazing!

If you are a parent, how does God’s perfect fatherhood and shepherding challenge and inspire you?

We are all encouraged to help others get to know God and grow in their faith. We can be God’s presence to people, helping lead them to those quiet waters and green pastures, walking with them through their dark valleys, comforting, and encouraging them. Who can you encourage today?

*God, whose I am, have mercy on me.
Have mercy on me so that, in love and faith,
in righteousness and humility,
I may follow You with self-denial,
steadfastness,
and courage.
May I meet with You in the silence.
Please give me a pure heart that I may see You,
a humble heart that I may hear You,
A heart of love so I may serve You,
and a heart of faith so I may live in You.
Amen.*

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961)

Thursday, September 13: Psalm 130

It’s dark. The power is out. It’s cold. It’s wet. You hear every strange creak and bump. It’s rather frightening. So you huddle close to the fire (if you have a real fireplace still) and wait for the morning ... And when the light begins to dawn and the sun rises – wow! All of a sudden everything is better. This is the situation the psalmist is describing in Psalm 130 – after a long dark night on sentry duty (this is long before electric lights!), dawn is so welcome. So warm. So comforting. It is a new day.

- **"God is light; in him there is no darkness at all"** (1 John 1:5).
- **"The LORD is my light and my salvation – so why should I be afraid?"** (Psalm 27:1).
- **"For you have rescued me from death; you have kept my feet from slipping. So now I can walk in your presence, O God, in your life-giving light"** (Psalm 104:13).

The image of **God, the Father, as light** runs throughout the Bible.

1. *God, our Father, as light, shows us things as they really are.* In the dim, soft lighting of evening the restaurant was really nice, but the next morning when I went back for something I’d forgotten – the restaurant was rather grubby, threadbare and décor tired. *"The LORD’s light penetrates the human spirit, exposing every hidden motive"* (Proverbs 20:27). God’s light shows us:
 - a. **the good** – the world celebrates the powerful, the glamorous and the wealthy; God celebrates the loving, the compassionate, the peace-makers, and those who make a difference in the world. God helps us recognize the truly “good” ones – the Mother Teresas, Desmond Tutus, and ordinary servants who simply do what is right, day in and day out.
 - b. **the bad** – in a world where what is wrong for me may not necessarily be wrong for you, God exposes the myth of relativism. There are basic moral principles which, if we follow them, help life go well, but which, if we flaunt them, will cause us grief.
 - c. **the possibilities** – is there hope? Do I have a future? A purpose? Absolutely! God shows us that we are all made in His image and are called to be His light, shining in the darkness.
2. *God, our Father, as light, helps us find our way.* Some friends and I went camping at Long Beach, Vancouver Island. We parked around 11 p.m., then hiked a couple of kilometers to the campground

on the beach. We picked our way with flashlights through the dense rainforest – got lost more than a few times – but eventually made it. Without lights we would never have got there. *"Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path,"* the psalmist says (Psalm 119:105). *"You light a lamp for me. The LORD, my God, lights up my darkness"* (Psalm 18:28) – I need to follow.

3. God, our Father, as light, brings hope to a new day. In the Old Testament, people looked forward to the dawn of a new day when the Messiah/Saviour would come. For instance, Malachi looks forward to a time when God will come to visit and save His people: *"The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays"* (Malachi 4:2).² *"The people walking in darkness,"* says Isaiah, *"shall see a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light shall dawn"* (Isaiah 9:2). Psalm 130 reminds us God is the light whom we trust for our new day, an eternal life with Him.

Jesus of course, will say, *"I am the Light of the world"* (John 8:12), continuing His Father's legacy of bringing light into a dark world. We are also challenged to be the *"light of the world,"* too (Matthew 5:14).

One of the things that helped my friends and I get to our campsite that crazy night was also the moon. It was almost a full moon that night. The moon is not nearly as bright as the sun; it certainly doesn't show up all the fallen logs or help illuminate the trail as much as the sun would. The moon, of course, has no light of its own. It is just a lifeless, barren, cold rock. Its light comes from reflecting the light of the sun.

As followers of Jesus we do not produce our own light either – as the *light of the world*, we are simply reflecting the true *Light of the World*. We are invited to reflect the love, grace, peace, joy, and hope we have experienced from God ... sharing that with a dark world. Of course, we will be imperfect and not do as good a job of this as we might like, but we still shine ...

Ultimately, we are just reflections of Someone much greater ... how can we help people see the Light?

*Lord, I make you a present of myself.
I do not know what to do with myself.
So let me make this exchange:
I will place myself entirely in your hands,
if you will cover my ugliness with your beauty,
and tame my unruliness with your love.
Put out the flames of false passion in my heart,
since these flames destroy all that is true within me.
Make me always busy in your service.
Lord, I want no special signs,
nor am I looking for intense emotions in response to your love.
I would rather be free of all emotion than to run the danger
of falling victim once again to false passion.
Let my love for you be pure, without any emotional clothing.
All I am, I give to you.
Amen.*

Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510)

Friday, September 14: Psalm 18 (or just 1-3, 25-31, 46-50)

- *"The LORD is my rock, fortress, and savior; my God is my rock, in whom I find protection"* (18:2)
- *"For who is God except the LORD? Who but our God is a solid rock?"* (18:31)
- *"The LORD lives! Praise to my Rock! May the God of my salvation be exalted!"* (18:46)

I love rocks – especially when they are formed by God into mountains! The image of God as a solid rock, on whom we can depend and who will protect us, is a powerful one throughout scripture. As you read through

² This verse has been made famous in "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing": *"Hail, the heav'n-born Prince of Peace / Hail, the Sun of Righteousness! / Light and life to all He brings / Ris'n with healing in His wings."* Charles Wesley, who wrote the carol, chose rhyme over accuracy in his lyrics substituting "wings" for "rays" – his version makes little sense, but sure rhymes better!

Psalm 18, notice all the various images used to celebrate God's strength, protection, and guidance ...

1. *God, our Father, our rock, is a secure foundation on which to build our lives.* Jesus reminds us that we can either build our lives on sand (which is easily swept away) or rock (which endures the storms of life (Matthew 7:24-27). Our challenge is to recognize that the God who created the universe is the solid rock upon which we should build our faith and life – if we believe that then we should live like it. The vagaries and emptiness of contemporary ethics and philosophical speculation ultimately leave us with nothing concrete to deal with the big questions of life, choices, death, and hereafter.
2. *God, our Father, our rock, provides protection and security.* Do you remember when you were learning to swim and got into water a bit too deep? The desperate panic of not being able to touch bottom? And the incredible relief when your toes actually did find something solid to stand on? In a confusing, challenging, stressful world, you don't have to go it alone. God is the solid rock whom you can always depend on. He never leaves you. Never lets you down.
3. *God, our Father, our rock, never changes.* It seems like everything changes so quickly these days: I cannot keep up with changes in technology, the latest news, economic upheavals, natural disasters, my own changing health ... What can I depend on? What doesn't change? Our loving, heavenly, Father: *"Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow"* (James 1:17).³

People around us are searching for something to believe in. For someone to trust. For a conviction to base their lives on. For a foundation that is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

We have the good news of God's amazing love for every person and the whole world. We have the rock of truth that folks desperately need to know about. How can we share this with others?

As we turn to God in our difficult times, we model that faith and trust for others. Don't be afraid to tell someone today about how God has been your *"rock, fortress, and savior ..."*

*Lord, I am an empty vessel needing to be filled;
my Lord, fill it.
At times I doubt, and am unable to trust You;
Reassure and comfort me.
I am weak in faith;
strengthen and teach me.
I am cold in love;
warm me and make me passionate,
so my love may go out to my neighbour.
Amen.*

Martin Luther

Saturday, September 15: Psalm 86

A student was asked what God is like. The boy replied that, as far as he could make out, God was *"the sort of person who is always snooping around to see if anyone is enjoying himself and then trying to stop it"* (C.S. Lewis). Is that your image of God? Is God a bearded old man? Is He rather reminiscent of Pharaoh – a slave driver? Is He a judge in a powdered wig? What is God like? Have the past few days helped you think about Him differently?

David tells us who God really is: *"O Lord, you are so good, so ready to forgive, so full of unfailing love for all who ask for your help"* (86:5). **Fundamentally, God, our Father – like the entire Trinity – is love.**

³ J.I. Packer writes, *"Nothing can alter the character of God. In the course of a human life, tastes and outlook and temper may change radically: a kind, equable man may turn bitter and crotchety: a man of good-will may grow cynical and callous. But nothing of this sort happens to the Creator. He never becomes less truthful, or merciful, or just, or good, than He used to be."*

He is so good. So ready to forgive. So willing to help.

"God is love," writes, John, "God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins." (1 John 4:8-10)

The essence of God – three-in-one – is love. Father-Son-Spirit are a wonderful team who model perfect love, perfect unity, and wonderful synchronicity. And their desire is that **we** have a perfect relationship:

- of love with Themselves – Jesus came to restore that perfect relationship with God so that we might enjoy His love and be part of the amazing community of His family;
- of love with one another – *"Dear friends,"* John continues, *"since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us"* (1 John 4:11-12);
- and with all of God's creation.

"We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect (1 John 4:16-17). Isn't that profound?

How can we continue to grow in our experience of God's love? Even when we go through the most difficult of times, God is with us as our loving heavenly Father, as our Saviour, and as the Holy Spirit ...

How can we share this love with others? To whom can I show the love of God?

*You are holy, Lord, the only God, and your deeds are wonderful.
You are strong.
You are great.
You are the most high.
You are Almighty.
You, holy Father, are King of Heaven and Earth.
You are three and one, Lord God.
You are good, all good, supreme good, Lord God, living and true.
You are love.
You are wisdom.
You are humility.
You are endurance.
You are rest.
You are peace.
You are joy and gladness.
You are justice and moderation.
You are all our riches, and you suffice for us.
You are beauty.
You are gentleness.
You are our protector.
You are our guardian and defender.
You are our courage.
You are our haven and our hope.
You are our faith, our great consolation.
You are our eternal life, great and wonderful Lord, God Almighty, merciful Savior.
Amen.*

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

Sunday, September 16: Mark 1:1-15 and Mark 8:27-29

Two weeks ago we reflected on how appreciating God as Trinity helps us worship God more meaningfully. Last week we thought about God, our loving heavenly Father: our perfect Parent. This week we will focus on Jesus, fully God and fully human. As we understand Jesus better, we also understand His good news better.

Mark begins his gospel: "*Jesus came proclaiming the good news of God: 'The time has come,' Jesus said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'*" (Mark 1:14-15). What good news is this? What good news do we have for our world? Our community? Our family? Ourselves?

Jesus stunned his disciples by asking the question, "*Who do people say I am?*" The disciples stuttered back, "*Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.*" Jesus persisted: "*But what about you? Who do you say I am?*" Peter burst forth with, "*You are the 'Messiah'*" (Hebrew for the Greek, "*Christ*," English, "*Anointed One*" – the Saviour promised in the Old Testament) (Mark 8:27-29).

"*Peter's Spirit-inspired confession lies at the heart of our faith as well,*" comments Stan Grenz, late professor of theology at Carey Theological College. "*With believers of all ages, we acknowledge that God has acted in this specific human life. Echoing Matthew, who saw in the birth of our Lord the fulfillment of ancient prophecy, we declare that Jesus of Nazareth is 'Immanuel' – 'God with us.'* This lofty declaration, '*Jesus is the Messiah,*' (or '*Christ*') is a central element in every Christian's religious vocabulary. We readily let the statement role from our tongues.

- *But what do we mean when we confess that God was in Jesus?*
- *Does our confession remain intelligible two millennia after Jesus' death?*
- *And if so, how are we to understand Jesus' identity in our context?*
- *How should we answer the question 'Who is Jesus?' in the contemporary world in which we live?*
- *And what difference does it make in how we live?"*⁴

Who do you say that Jesus is? Why? If someone, without any Christian background, were to ask you, "*Who is Jesus?*" how would you answer? Perhaps the most penetrating question is Grenz's final one: ***What difference does Jesus make in how you live?*** How can Jesus be "good news" today?

*Christ Jesus,
when all is darkness and I feel my weakness and helplessness,
Give me the sense of your presence,
your love,
and your strength.
Help me to have perfect trust in your protecting love and strengthening power,
so that nothing may frighten or worry me,
For, living close to You, I shall see your hand,
your purpose,
and your will through all things.
Amen.*

Irenaeus (130-200)

Monday, September 17: Hebrews 1-2

Who is Jesus? Yesterday we heard Jesus asking His disciples, "*Who do people say I am?*" They mirrored some of the confusion of their time: "*Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.*" "*But what about you?*" Jesus pushes them, "*Who do you say I am?*" And Peter exclaims, "*You are the 'Messiah!'*" the promised Saviour from the Old Testament (Mark 8:27-29).

In Hebrews 1 and 2, the author⁵ tackles some of the misconceptions. In Chapter 1, Jesus is the Son of

⁴ Stan Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*.

⁵ The author of Hebrews is not known. He appears to have been a Jewish convert to Jesus, well-schooled in the Old Testament.

God, superior to the angels. There were some in the early church who thought of Jesus as a special sort of angel – the writer emphasizes that Jesus is of a completely different order and magnitude than angels. As the “Son of God,” Jesus is fully God, just as the child of any being is of the same essence as its parent.

In Chapter 2, the author emphasizes that Jesus is also completely human. Jesus is the One who has walked where we walk, lived as we live, struggled as we struggle, hurt as we hurt, loved as we love, laughed as we laugh, cried as we cried ... He has even died the death we will die. And He has been raised from the dead as we will be raised from the dead. *“Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested”* (2:18). That is great news!

The writer goes on to talk about how Jesus fulfills more and more of the Old Testament prophecies and visions of the Messiah as fully God and fully human. He is our great High Priest. In Old Testament Judaism, the role of the High Priest was twofold:

- He is the one who brings God’s grace and forgiveness to the people, and
- He intercedes on behalf of the people to God.

Jesus does both of these – perfectly – for us!

The writer concludes, *“So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.”* (Hebrews 4:14-16)

*Jesus, lift up the light of your countenance upon us;
let peace rule in our hearts,
and may it be our strength and our song, throughout our pilgrimage.
We commit ourselves to your care and keeping this day.
Let your grace be mighty in us,
and sufficient for us,
and let it work in us
both to will and to do of your own good pleasure,
and grant us strength for all the duties of the day.
Keep us from sin.
May your Spirit rule over our own spirits,
and keep us from speaking unadvisedly with our words.
May we live together in peace and holy love,
and grant us your blessing, which is eternal life.
Prepare us for all the events of the day,
for we do not know what a day may bring forth.
Give us grace to deny ourselves;
to take up our cross daily,
and to follow in your steps, our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

Tuesday, September 18: Colossians 1:1-23

“Thank you!” Those are words we all love to hear! They are words we aren’t always good at saying!

Paul’s letter to the Christians in Colossae is all about saying, *“Thank you!”* Paul begins by thanking God that there is a church in Colossae at all (1:3). As Paul prays for the people, he prays that they will be thankful for all God’s blessings, too (1:12). Paul’s key message is about Jesus – and being thankful: *“Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he*

*gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with **thankful** hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving **thanks** through him to God the Father.”(3:16-17)*

What are they to be thankful for? *“He has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins”(1:13-14). The ultimate victory is won: “You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross”(Colossians 2:13-15).*

In Colossians 1:15-20, Paul reminds us who it is we are dealing with! It is worth reading these verses over several times, it is an incredible vision of Jesus! He is:

- the visible image of the invisible God; God in all his fullness lives in Christ;
- Co-Creator and supreme ruler over all creation;
- Creator of all things – things we can see and things we can’t see;
- the head of the church, which is his body;
- He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead;
- Through him God reconciled everything in heaven and on earth to himself.

We need fear no evil, no powers of darkness, no condemnation for our sins, no suffering – for ultimately the Creator and King of all of Creation is our Saviour and constant Companion. He has definitively won the victory over evil on the cross. Difficult times may come – hardships may happen – but we can overcome them all through the strength and presence of the One who is with us. In the end, God wins. Period.

Who is Jesus? He is the Creator! He is the Victor! Our challenge is to live as people of victory. *“Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be **thankful**”(3:12-15).*

*Lord Jesus, teach us, we pray,
to ask you in the right way for the right blessings.
Please steer the ship of our lives towards yourself,
the tranquil haven of all storm-tossed souls.
Show us the course in which we should go.
Renew a willing spirit within us.
Let your Spirit curb our wayward senses,
and guide and enable us toward that which is our true good:
to keep your laws,
and in all we do to rejoice always in your glorious and gladdening presence.
For yours is the glory and praise from all your saints, forever and ever.
Amen.*

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

Wednesday, September 19: Matthew 1:18-23 and 28:16-20

Who is Jesus? Matthew 1:1-17 gives us Jesus’ family tree. Other people’s family trees are, well, about as interesting as other people’s vacation videos. The only time one’s pedigree is important is if you are the heir to some vast fortune. Look back to the beginning of Jesus’ ancestors ... Abraham. God had given this promise to Abraham: *“I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others ... All the families on earth will be blessed through you”(Genesis 12:2-3).* Later the Lord says to Abraham: *“Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That’s how many descendants you will have!”(Genesis 15:5).* Jesus is the heir to these incredible promises.

Jesus' family tree has royalty in it, too – David, Solomon, and their heirs. Jesus is the heir of kings.

This is Jesus' inheritance: He will be the King through whom all families on earth will be blessed ... His family will be as uncountable as the stars in the sky. He is God's anointed eternal King.

Ultimately the judges and kings of Israel *were supposed to be* godly rulers who carried on Abraham's mission of bringing God's blessing to all people. But they limited God's grace to the Jews. And they failed God time and time again by their sinfulness, selfishness, greed, and refusal to worship God and Him alone. These earthly kings never lived up to Abraham's promise. Like each of us, they all fell far short ...

Now, Jesus, the true King of Kings and Lord of Lords has come to truly fulfill those promises:

- The name "*Jesus*" means "*YHWH saves*"(1:21).⁶ Jesus delivers us from the punishment we deserve for our sinfulness! One of the great blessings Jesus offers to all people is the forgiveness of their sin ... if they choose to accept His gift. He has won the victory over the power of sin, evil, and death: "*I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth*"(28:18).
- The name "*Immanuel*" means "*God with us*"(1:23). Another great blessing Jesus offers is that He not only came to live among His people a long time ago, but He continues to be with us through His Holy Spirit: "*Be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*"(28:20).

Who is Jesus? He has come as a blessing for all people, everywhere – as Saviour, Comforter, and King.

As people created in God's image – His ambassadors and representatives – we are called to be a blessing to all people, too: "*Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you*"(28:19-20).

*My soul's desire is to see the face of God,
and to rest in his house.
In Jesus, I see His face.*

*My soul's desire is to study the Scriptures,
and to learn the ways of God.
In Jesus, I learn His ways.*

*My soul's desire is to be freed from all fear and sadness,
and to share Christ's risen life.
In Jesus, I overcome all evils.*

*My soul's desire is to imitate my king,
and to sing his praise always.
In Jesus, I praise His name.*

*My soul's desire is to enter the gates of heaven,
and to gaze upon the light that shines forever.
Dear Lord, you alone know what my soul truly desires;
and you alone can satisfy those desires.
In Jesus, my life is made whole and complete.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

⁶ *YHWH* (literally meaning "I am") is the name God uses for Himself in the Old Testament – it was so holy that Jews would not pronounce it. When they were reading Scripture and came across that word, they would say "*Adonai*" which means "*Lord*." In most Bibles, when you see a capitalized "*LORD*" it is actually the word "*YHWH*" ("I am"). When Christians tried to write this name, they took the letters of God's name "*YHWH*" and added the vowel sounds of "*Adonai*" to make "*Yahowah*" or "*Jehovah*." "*Jehovah*" is an artificial, hybrid word invented in the 16th century by William Tyndale. More properly it would have been pronounced "*Yahweh*" in Hebrew.

Thursday, September 20: John 1:1-18 and John 21:15-19

While Matthew emphasizes Jesus' earthly pedigree, John chooses to emphasize Jesus' divine identity: He is God Himself, in all His glory come among us. Jesus is:

- God, the Creator Himself, become human among us;
- The One who gives life and light to everyone;
- The One who gives us a new status: we are now children of God;
- He is full of unfailing love and faithfulness;
- The One who, from his abundance, blesses us with one gracious blessing after another, including God's unfailing love and faithfulness.

"No one has ever seen God," John muses, "But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us" (1:18). Who is Jesus? He is God among us as a human being.

John records some wonderful stories of how Jesus does show us God's love, including:

- Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus, in which He talks about being born again and gives us the wonderful summary of His good news: "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)
- Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well: "Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life." (John 4:13-14)
- Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead: "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die." (John 11:25-26)
- Jesus reinstating Peter – after Peter had denied Him three times – through a threefold process of commissioning Peter as His servant ... (John 21:15-19). Peter had failed Jesus miserably – and yet Jesus still loved Peter, still believed in him, and still valued what he could contribute to His Kingdom.

Who is Jesus? He is God, Himself, loving, restoring, and empowering us to be His beloved children.

Jesus says to all of us, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20:21). We have this amazing good news of eternal life now and hereafter.

*My Jesus, my God,
I believe most firmly that you watch over all who hope in you,
and that we will need nothing when we rely upon you in all things.
Therefore I am resolved for the future to cast all my cares upon you.
People may deprive me of worldly goods and status.
Sickness may take from me my strength and the means of serving you.
I may even jeopardize our relationship by sin,
but my trust in Jesus shall never leave me.
I will persevere in faith to the last moment of my life,
and the powers of hell shall seek in vain to grab it from me.
Let others seek happiness in their wealth and in their talents.
Let them trust in the purity of their lives,
the severity of their sacrifices,
in the number of their good works,
the enthusiasm of their prayers;
as for me, my rock and my refuge, my confidence in you fills me with hope.
For you, my divine protector, alone have given me hope.
May hope is in Jesus. Amen.*

Claude de la Colombiere (1641-1682)

Friday, September 21: Mark 10:35-52

Tom Wright asks, *"Do you know how a fox get rid of its fleas?"* A fox goes along the hedgerow and collects little bits of sheep's wool. Then he makes it into a ball of wool, which he holds in his mouth. Then he goes into a stream, and slowly, slowly walks down into the water. The fleas move for higher ground – the ball of wool in his mouth. The fox lowers himself right down into the water, with the ball of wool in his mouth, until at last he is totally submerged and only the ball of wool is above the water. Then he lets go, and the ball of wool floats away downstream, carrying all the fleas with it. The fox emerges, clean.

"In this image, Jesus is the ball of wool," observes Wright, *"The spotless Lamb (Jesus) allows the evil of the whole world to be concentrated on himself. He doesn't keep it in circulation by reacting with violence, nor does he escape into the ineffective innocence of quietism. He takes the weight of the world's evil upon himself, so that the world may emerge, clear."*

Jesus came *"not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (10:45).

Mark highlights that Jesus came as our Servant King. It wasn't about status, position, power, or glory – it was about caring for real people in real difficult situations – people like Bartimaeus, and you, and me ...

And Jesus' challenge to us is that life is not about status, position, power, or glory either – *"But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else"* (10:43-44). *"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me"* (Mark 8:34).

"Taking up the cross is not a passive operation," says Wright. *"It comes about as the Church attempts, in the Power of the Spirit, to be for the world what Jesus was for the world – announcing the Kingdom, healing the wounds of the world, challenging the power structures that keep anger and pain in circulation. We need to pray that we will have the courage, as a Church and as Christian persons, to follow the Servant King, wherever he leads ... We have seen what happens when people dream wild dreams of world domination and use the normal methods of force and power to implement them. We have not yet seen what might happen if those who worship the Servant King, now enthroned as Lord of the world, were to take him seriously enough to take up our cross and follow him. But that, as Mark reminds us, is precisely what the servant King calls us to do."*

*Son of God,
you love each one of us
as if there were just one of us;
those who have striven hard
to obey your commands,
those who have drifted here,
unsure of the path they trod,
those who are here simply
because of your mercy,
individuals, all of us,
saved by grace.
Son of God,
you love each one of us
as if there were just one of us,
how can we not sing your praises
for all that you have done for us,
saved by grace.
Amen*

faithandworship.com

Saturday, September 22: Philippians 2:1-18

Has following Jesus made a difference in your life? Has His love for you changed you? Has being part of a church helped you and given you an opportunity to live your faith? I hope so!

If it has, says Paul, live it out! Sometimes we think this is incredibly complicated. But Paul's advice is amazingly practical! It's not rocket science! We can all do it ...

- Love one another.
- Agree wholeheartedly with each other and work together with one mind and purpose.
- Don't be selfish.
- Don't try to impress others.
- Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves.
- Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.
- Do everything without complaining and arguing.
- Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people.
- Hold firmly to the Word of life.

Jesus, of course, is the ultimate example of how we should live. He exemplified these values wonderfully. Who then is Jesus? He is the perfect model of what it means to be truly human!

Read Philippians 2:1-18 over a few times. What are you learning about Jesus? What are you learning about yourself? What one change can you make to live out these verses more consistently, today?

*Lord, make me see your glory in every place:
if mortal beauty sets my heart to glow,
help me see your grace shining even brighter;
if natural wonders stop me in awe,
may your Majesty cause me to worship you even more.
You have given me on earth this spiritual soul,
a prisoner behind these weak walls of flesh;
how can that soul break free?
How can my spirit find its true life?
Dear Lord, I cry to you for help.
Your Spirit alone can save me.
May your Spirit flow through my will and my senses,
redeeming what is sinful,
empowering and inspiring what is good.
All goodness, Lord, must fail without your Spirit:
for you alone have the power and glory.
Amen.*

Michelangelo (1475-1564)

Sunday, September 23: Psalm 33

When we speak of the Holy Spirit we often focus on the New Testament writings. But if God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit, we should find inklings of the Spirit throughout Scripture. There certainly are prophecies about Jesus in the Old Testament. What about the Spirit? Is He in the Old Testament?

The Hebrew (Old Testament) word used for the Spirit is *ruach*. This word has a variety of meanings (just as the word "spirit" does in English). *Ruach* is the Hebrew word for wind, breath, mind, spirit (in general), and Holy Spirit (in particular). At a mundane level, *ruach* can refer to wind. For instance, the four "winds" or points of the compass (Jeremiah 49:36) or the "breath" of living creatures (Genesis 7:15), including people (Isaiah 42:5). At a higher level, *ruach* refers to the human mind or human spirit (Deuteronomy 34:9, Ezekiel

11:5). And at a still higher level, the word refers to our eternal spirits or souls: when I die, my chemical-composed body returns to dust, but my *ruach* will return to God (Genesis 3:19).

In a still more profound way, *ruach* refers to God and His activity in the world. In Genesis 1:2, "*the Spirit (ruach) of God was hovering over the waters ...*" This imagery ("hovering") reflects one of the common metaphors or pictures used to describe the Spirit – a bird (in particular, a dove – see Matthew 3:13-17). What does this image/picture/metaphor of the Holy Spirit suggest?

In Psalm 33:6, "*By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the **ruach** of his mouth.*" This psalm is a beautiful celebration of God as Creator, and His Spirit as key in creation (as in Genesis 1:2). God's Word ⁷/the LORD Himself ⁸/and the Spirit are all in wonderful synchronicity. God – Father (the LORD), Son (the Word of the LORD) and Spirit (*ruach*) – are involved in creating and sustaining the universe and the life within it. Isn't it wonderful to know that God has not only created everything – and created it good – but also continues to support and sustain His creation, too. As you read Psalm 33, notice how active God still is in His creation and in our lives! ⁹

How does Psalm 33 speak to me today? How is God at work in my life today? What promise/encouragement/confidence does this give me for the future?

*My God, I don't ask You to take me out of this life,
but to prove Your power, the power of your Spirit, within it.
I don't ask for tasks more suited to my strength,
but for strength, the strength of your Spirit,
to make me more suited to my tasks.
I pray for a vision from your Spirit that moves me,
strength from your Spirit that endures,
and the grace of Jesus Christ,
who walked our earthly life as a conqueror in triumph.
Amen.*

William Edwin Orchard (1877-1955)

Monday, September 24: Zechariah 7

"*They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his **ruach** through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry*" (7:12). Most biblical prophets did NOT **foretell** the future! There is actually very little *foretelling* prophecy in the Bible! Most prophecy was **forth-telling** God's truth into present circumstances. Through His Spirit, God spoke and applied His truth into people's lives and cultures, helping them see the good, bad, and ugly.

God continues to speak and apply His truth about issues in our lives and society, too:

- God speaks to us through His Word, the Bible.
- God speaks to us through other godly believers (who speak "prophetically" into our lives sometimes, helping us see truth/error, wisdom, affirmation/correction, and direction for today).
- God speaks directly to our consciences, souls, and minds.

To the Israelites, God said "*Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.*" Those were the most crucial issues to Israel at that time. They reflect God's greater commands to "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength*" and to "*Love your neighbour as yourself.*"

⁷ A term used to describe Jesus (John 1:1): Jesus is very involved in creation – see Colossians 1

⁸ Notice "the LORD" (God, the Father) speaks in creation, too: Psalm 33:7-9

⁹ Other Old Testament references to the Holy Spirit include Ezekiel 2:2, Numbers 24:2, 1 Samuel 10:6-10, Exodus 31:3-5, Zechariah 4:6, Genesis 41:38, Deuteronomy 34:9, Judges 14:19, Nehemiah 9:20, Psalm 51:11, etc.

The Spirit may be saying things directly to me that are specific to my life and circumstances. He may be saying things to our church about how we can serve Him and obey Him right now. As I reflect on the great commands ("Love God ..." and "Love your neighbour ...") what are You saying to me, Lord? What are You speaking into my life? What are you saying to our church? How can I make that come into being?

*Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures
of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with good courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your Spirit is filling us,
your hand leading us,
and your love supporting us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Lutheran Book of Worship

Tuesday, September 25: Luke 10:1-22

"Jesus was filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit, and he said, 'O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for hiding these things from those who think themselves wise and clever, and for revealing them to the childlike.'" What qualities of character does the Spirit bring into Jesus' life?

Those who allow the Spirit to control more and more of their lives – who are "filled" with the Spirit – find a deep joy. Joy is different from happiness. Happiness is a mood of the moment. Joy is a deep-seated quality of character that comes from knowing all my life and all my experience is safe in Jesus' hands (our "names are registered in heaven"[Luke 10:20]). Joy sees me through happy and unhappy times. Paul writes, "I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit"(Romans 15:13).¹⁰

The Spirit gives us wisdom and insight. I can be wise and clever in our own eyes – and make a mess of my life (my knowledge is incomplete; my wisdom is often biased and flawed; my cleverness is often not clever). The Spirit can give me the childlike ability – the inner strength – to trust **God's** wisdom, truth, and guidance.

The Spirit gives us power to serve God in His Kingdom. The disciples do not go out in their own strength – I don't live my life – in my home, neighbourhood, school, workplace – in my own strength. The Spirit will give me the courage, insight, and power to be His witness and servant.

Lord, may I know your joy. May I have the childlike faith to trust Your wisdom and Word. May your Spirit empower and equip me to serve You today and every day.

*Almighty God, the giver of all good things,
without whose help all labour is ineffectual,
and without whose grace all wisdom is folly:
grant, I beseech You, that in this my undertaking,
thy Holy Spirit may not be withheld from me,
but that I may promote Your glory,
and the salvation both of myself and others.
Grant this, O Lord, for the sake of Jesus Christ.
Amen. Lord bless me. So be it.*

Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

¹⁰ Russian monks used to speak of a "joyful sorrow" – while Jesus knew He had to suffer and die, He lived joyfully in relationship with His Father and His disciples. "A servant is not greater than his master ..." said Jesus (John 15:20): we can expect hard times but can make it through with this deep foundational joy because of our relationship with our Father, our Saviour, the Spirit, and one another.

Wednesday, September 26: John 3:1-21

John 3 is one of those passages that is very familiar to us. It is a powerful, clear, concise exposition of Jesus' mission and good news for the entire universe ("the world" in 3:16 is the Greek word **κοσμος** – kosmos – which means all of creation, not just people!). We read these verses last month, focussing on Jesus' message of redemption for all creation (not just human beings). This month, reread these verses, focussing on Jesus' teachings on the Holy Spirit, particularly 3:5-8. We often skip over these verses; like Nicodemus we shake our heads, finding them difficult ("How can this be?"[3:9]).

In Greek, as in Hebrew, the word for Spirit (Greek "*pneuma*") is also the word for wind. Translators decide by context which word to use – "Spirit" or "wind." John 3:5-8 reads (note especially v.8): "*I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the **pneuma** (Spirit/wind). **Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the pneuma (Spirit/wind) gives birth to pneuma (Spirit/wind). You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'** The **pneuma (Spirit/wind)* blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the pneuma (Spirit/wind).**" In many translations all but the beginning of v.8 (marked with *) are translated "Spirit" – why change that one translation? I wonder if Jesus did not mean them all to refer to the Spirit? It's a wonderful picture of the Spirit – "*The Spirit blows/moves wherever He pleases. You hear His voice, but you cannot tell where He comes from or where He is going.*" He surprises us!*

We are spiritual beings – images of God – in earthly "temples." "*We are not bodies who have souls,*" writes C.S. Lewis, "*we are Souls who have bodies.*" Both our bodies and our spirits/souls are precious to God! When we recognize that – when we realize we are not just physical beings made of rather common chemical elements (our bodies are mostly composed [‘born’?] of water, after all) – we can begin to appreciate our true, spiritual identity as God's children (who we are, really, is souls born of the Spirit). "*To all who received Him, to those who believed in Him name, he gave the right to become children of God ... born of God*" (John 1:12-13).

Lord, I receive You. I believe in Your name. Thank You that I am Your child. Thank You that I am also born of the Spirit – Your Spirit is in me. May I live by Your truth and Your light (3:20-21).

Thank You, Lord, that Your Holy Spirit moves wherever He pleases – help me see what You are up to so I can be part of building Your kingdom in my community, church, and home.

*I do not know, my God, what may happen to me today.
I only know nothing will happen to me that you haven't foreseen from all eternity,
and that is sufficient, my God, to keep me in peace.
May your Spirit give my spirit peace.
May your Spirit give my Spirit strength.
May your Spirit give my spirit hope.
I adore your eternal designs.
I submit to them with all my heart.
I desire them all and accept them all.
I make a sacrifice of everything.
I unite this sacrifice to that of your dear Son, my Savior,
begging you by his infinite merits, for patience in troubles,
and for the perfect submission which is due to you in all that you will and design for me.
Amen.*

Madame Elizabeth of France, written in prison while awaiting the guillotine (1764-1794)

Thursday, September 27: John 14

Jesus' greatest teachings on the Holy Spirit come during His final meal with His disciples, just before His

arrest and crucifixion, recorded in John 14-16. After supper, Jesus said, "I will be with you only a little longer ... Where I am going, you cannot come" (John 13:33). Out of that context, as He tells His disciples about His impending arrest and death, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled ..." (14:1). Of course they had no clue what He was taking about. Had they understood at all, they certainly would have been troubled!

In our lives we have no idea what the future will bring, either. We never know when a great blessing – or a great tragedy – may come into our lives. We never know whether today will bring good or bad news. To us, unsure of what the rest of today (let alone tomorrow) may bring, Jesus says:

- "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me."
- "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me ... you do know him and have seen him!"
- "If you love me, obey my commandments.
- "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and will be in you."
- "Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me."
- "Because you love me, my Father will love you."
- "I will love you and reveal myself to each of you."
- "All who love me will do what I say."
- "My Father will love you, and we will come and make our home with each of you."
- "When the Father sends the Advocate as my representative – that is, the Holy Spirit – he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you."
- "I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid."

What is Jesus saying to me? What is the Holy Spirit doing in my life? The Holy Spirit does not whisper strange new tidings in my ear, but rather reminds me of You, Jesus, of Your life and of Your words. Help me deepen my understanding of them and apply them to the constantly changing situations which I face.

*How is it, my God, that you have given me this hectic busy life
so I have so little time to enjoy your presence?
Throughout the day people are waiting to speak with me,
and even at meals I have to continue talking to people about their needs and problems.
During sleep itself, I am still thinking and dreaming about the multitude of concerns that surround me.
To me, my present pattern of life is a torment.
Yet I do all this not for my sake but for yours, don't I?
I say, "I it is a sacrifice of love," but maybe I do it more for myself than for you?
I know that you are constantly beside me, yet I'm usually so busy that I ignore you.
Is that worship?*

*Stop me from being so busy!
By your Spirit, force me to think about and love you even in the midst of my hectic activity.
By your Spirit, release me from my busyness!
By your Spirit, show me how others can take over my responsibilities.
God of love, help me to remember that Christ has no body now on earth but ours,
no hand but ours, no feet but ours.
Ours are the eyes that see the needs of the world.
Ours are the hands with which he blesses everyone.
Ours are the feet with which he goes about doing good.
But he does not call me to forfeit my soul to serve him.
By your Spirit, help me never to forget you
in my busy-ness to serve you.
Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Friday, September 28: John 15

We live in the fulfillment of this promise: "*When the Advocate/Counselor/Comforter (Holy Spirit) comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.*" The Holy Spirit has already come in this way (Acts 2). So when tough times come, we have His presence with us. Jesus reminds us, "*No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.*" Following Jesus is not a guaranteed path to popularity, fame, fortune, health, or prosperity. The opposite may often be true. Following Jesus sometimes makes life more difficult!

The opening illustration of John 15 reminds me that, "*The vine-grower has a sharp knife, and a keen eye to the vine's health. If he cuts out, it is to make the plant more vigorous and fruitful. Lord, when I feel your sharp touch, I may resent it; but I trust your love for me*" (Frank Doyle). I need to trust God's work – painful though it may be sometimes – in my life. It's only as I abide/remain in Him that I can take on the challenges that life throws at me.

This imagery also reminds me that the fruits of my Christian life are the work of God. I can see the life and work of God in others - in ministry, love, commitment, courage, endurance, and ordinary daily kindness and compassion. I, too, am gifted in some unique way. I can bear fruit for God's kingdom in a way nobody else can. The nature of this fruit – the way I live and spread the good news of the kingdom – will be different in my life than in someone else's. Prayer can help me recognize the fruit God is cultivating in my life, develop them, and offer them in the service of God and God's people.

How is God speaking to me today? How is His Spirit leading me today? What will I do about it?

*O Holy Spirit of greatest power,
come down upon us and rule over us;
May Your light show us the way and guide our paths.
Father, beloved by all your creation,
from whom all gifts and goodness come.
Shine your mercy into our hearts and shield us from all harm.
Saviour Jesus,
without your grace there is nothing in us that is worthy of merit,
But through your mercy we know the Way, the Truth and the Life..
Your wisdom is what we need most;
Your Word is the counsel we would best obey;
Your presence alone makes life worth living.
When our hearts are hard, make them soft and open to Your Spirit.
When our ways are wandering, guide and welcome us home as our loving Father.
When we stumble and fall, forgive our sins through Your Son, our Saviour.
When we hurt, hold us close, O loving God,
one-in-three and three-in-one.
We put our trust in you, Father, Son, and Spirit.
Amen.*

Saturday, September 29: Acts 2:1-21

Fire is another image used to describe the Spirit (see Matthew 3:11). What does this image/metaphor of the Holy Spirit suggest?

Think of the context: the disciples are not yet blessed with the presence of the Spirit in their lives. They know all about God and Jesus, but they do not yet know Him in a personal way – inside their souls – the way we do. They are waiting for that promised gift (Acts 1:1-5). But they are struggling to believe Jesus' resurrection and His promise of the Spirit. They are also afraid for their lives. They are in a city (Jerusalem) that is anti-Jesus (here He had been crucified 7 weeks earlier), populated with people from many linguistic/

cultural groups. What do you think would be the perfect way for the Holy Spirit to show the truth about God, Jesus, and Himself – to the believers AND to Jerusalem – in that particular time and place?

- The Spirit comes with undeniable signs and power – just what the scared, skeptical disciples and their unbelieving neighbours needed;
- The Spirit comes, blessing the disciples with the ability to talk about Jesus in a multitude of languages (note, these are REAL languages, not unknown tongues) – just what the multi-ethnic Jews and others in the city, who spoke many different languages, needed.
- The Spirit brings unity out of diversity – just what the scattered disciples and new believers needed.

Peter's message – undoubtedly inspired by the same Spirit – is the perfect message to first century Jews, steeped in the Old Testament scriptures: he quotes their prophets to share the good news about Jesus.

What is the perfect way for the Holy Spirit to show the truth about God, Jesus, and Himself to our community, in our times and place? What are the great needs in our culture? They are different from 1st century Jerusalem; they are different from 17th century Britain, from 2012 suburban Chicago (Willow Creek), or even 2012 Calgary. So we can expect the Spirit will work uniquely in our community and church. That is exciting. But also challenging. We have to prayerfully work through who God is calling us to be ...

In 2018 Lethbridge, our issues include:

- *Truth.* How can the Spirit speak truth into our lives? Through us to others?
- *Community.* How can the Spirit build our church to be a genuine community (Acts 2:42-47 a wonderful picture of what a Christian community – a church – can be)? How can we bless our city by being and creating authentic community?
- *Comfort, care, and justice.* Who are those who are struggling most in our city? God has a special place for them (in ancient Israel, they were the orphans, widows, poor, ill, and foreigners: who are these needy people in our city?). How can we provide comfort, care, and justice for them?
- *Authentic worship.* How can we genuinely worship God? How can we help others worship Him?
- *What else???* How can we see God's leading in the midst of this ...

The Spirit will bless us with the gifts we need to be who He has called us to be and do what He has called us to do (1 Corinthians 1:7). Craig Van Gelder writes, "*The Spirit is able to transcend human limitations and failures in bringing about God's redemptive purposes.*" How is the Spirit leading me today? How can I live "in the Spirit" today?

*Here we are in front of you, Holy Spirit.
We feel the weight of our differences,
but we are united together in your name.
Come to us, help us, enter into our hearts.
Teach us what we should do, what path we should follow.
Do for us what you ask us to do.
Be the only one to offer and guide our decisions,
because only you – with the Father and the Son –
have a glorious and holy name.
Do not allow us to miss out on doing what is right,
O Spirit who loves order and peace.
Don't let ignorance lead us away from you.
Don't let human sympathy bias us.
Don't let people or positions influence us.
Keep us intimately close to you, using the gift of your grace,
so that we may be as one with you
and so that nothing can separate us from your truth and love.
Amen.*

Isidore of Seville (560-636)

Sunday, September 30: Psalm 119:105-112

How do we know about God? How do we know God's truth?

The Spirit's mission is to complete God's work in the world. He is the One who leads us to faith in Jesus. He brings us into community with other believers. He is within us. But we must be careful of trusting that "inner voice" – our own emotions, desires, fears, and hopes can shape our sense of God's leading. What we may think is God's voice inside us, may actually be our own feelings, biases, and prejudices talking.

Scripture is one aspect of the Spirit's mission of creating and sustain spiritual life. He both authors the Bible (by inspiring its writers) and speaks through the Bible (helping us apply His truth to our lives and world). So, for objective guidance, we go to God's Word, Scripture, the Bible. We know this is God's truth revealed to us. The Bible records for us the truth of God revealed by His Spirit, directing us to God in Christ, bringing us face-to-face with the loving, Saviour God.

We are a "people of the book." As God's inspired truth, the Bible is foundational for our faith and the source of guidance for our lives. It is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. Scripture reveals God to us, is our moral compass, teaches us truth about God, reveals our sinfulness, and teaches us salvation through Jesus.¹¹ It is also a measuring stick to evaluate those inner promptings. When Paul was in Berea, the Bereans, "*searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth*" (Acts 17:11). If our feelings and beliefs are consistent with God's Word, great. If not, they are not from God.

We believe the Bible *is* God's inspired Word to us. This is why we encourage you to read Scripture every day. Reading other books, listening to music, searching (good) blogs, scouring (reputable) websites can have merit, but ultimately God's truth is found in His Word. We need to read Scripture.

Psalm 119 is a long, passionate poem by a person who loves God's Word (you are welcome to read more of it than verses 105-112). Knowing Scripture is God's Word for us, how can I *love* God's Word? How can I read it with a bit more passion and purpose?

*Your word,
that lamp for our feet,
reveals to us the stony ground
we often tread upon,
where, stumbling
in our weakness,
we reach out a hand
for you to hold,
asking simply
that you lead us once again
to firmer ground.
Lead us to the Rock
which is higher than us –
Jesus, our Saviour and Redeemer –
upon whom our journeying began,
where, in safety, we can rest awhile
with whom, in joy, we can journey on.
Amen*

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¹¹ Having said that, the Bible describes some things – like historical events and "scientific" truth in terms the original authors understood, rather than modern scientific categories – for example, biblical authors describe the sun rising and setting, even though we know the sun stays still and the Earth rotates on its axis. The Bible is not in error or conflict with modern science; its intent is to teach bigger truths about God, sin, salvation, and new life in Jesus. It is not intended to be a modern scientific textbook. There is wisdom in this quote attributed to Galileo: *The Bible teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.*"