



February 2019

**Readings, Reflections, Prayers
From the Gospel of John**

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Monday, February 4: John 9:1-12

A lot of things in life are predictably cause and effect. If I write a text on my phone and hit the little "Send" icon, I expect it will be sent – and I will (hopefully) get a reply. If I get stopped at a police check stop and I have not had a drink, I expect to have no problem.

Some things in life are a bit greyer. If I do a good turn for someone I might hope to get a polite "Thank you." If I do – great. If not, that's ok, too. If I don't smoke I might expect I will not get lung cancer – statistically that's a very good bet, it's not guaranteed.

Some things in life are completely unrelated to anything I do at all. Why is it snowy the day I have to drive to Calgary? Why does a drunk driver come through a red light and hit my friend? Why is a baby born blind? We might like trite answers to these questions, but most often there are none. We live in a fallen, broken world where bad things happen. God is not a robot who micromanages every detail based on how good or bad we are. There is a certain amount of chaos in the world. Through Jesus God has – once and for all – defeated the powers of sin and death, but until He comes again we live with great good and great evil.

Jesus has just talked about being the "Light of the World." Here is dramatic proof – a "sign" – to illustrate his point. Just as, in the beginning, God brought light into the initial chaos of creation, through Jesus God is bringing light into the chaos of our contemporary lives. Jesus allows us to see the world differently:

- We don't have to have answers for everything – bad things do happen, there is mystery in that;
- Even when bad things happen, we know God is with us – always;
- When, in faith, we turn to God during those tough times, He gets us through them;
- We often grow most through the toughest of times.

"Through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see. So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold – though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world" (1 Peter 1:5-7).

May God give us eyes to see His hand upon our lives, in mercy and grace, today ...

This month's prayers are adapted from *Celtic Daily Prayer from the Northumbria Community*.

*I praise the wounds and the blood of the Lamb that heals the weaknesses of my body,
I praise the wounds and the blood of the Lamb that heals the weaknesses of my soul,
I praise the wounds and the blood of the Lamb that heals the weaknesses of my spirit.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that covers all my sins so they can no longer be seen,
I praise the blood of the Lamb that cleanses me from all my sins and makes me as white as snow.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that has power to free me from all my bondages and chains of sin.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that is stronger than my own sin-infested blood
and remoulds me into the image of God.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that is victorious over all powers that seek to oppress me,
over every power of the enemy.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that protects me from all the devious attacks of the enemy.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that prepares me for the wedding feast of the Lamb.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that makes all things new.
Hallelujah.
Amen*

Tuesday, February 5: John 9:13-23

I am (just ☺) old enough to remember the Cold War, when the West (NATO) was at an uneasy standoff with the Soviet Union bloc (the Warsaw Pact). Vancouver still had air raid sirens which were tested regularly – just in case. I didn't know any Russians, but they were caricatured in movies, the media, and by politicians all as cold, unfeeling, heartless sociopaths (Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV*, General Gogol in the Bond movies). We were afraid of Russians. But the first Russian I met – during my university days – was really nice and became a good friend. How could I reconcile my mental preconception with reality?

These days, many North Americans have a similar suspicion of all Muslims. The impressions some people have is that all Muslims are all cold, unfeeling sociopaths out to destroy our society. Do you actually know a Muslim? I have met lots, both overseas (in Turkey, Lebanon, and Europe), and in Canada. They have (almost) all been really, really nice. Yes, there certainly are radicals within Islam, but they are a very, very small – very, very well-publicized – minority. We need to be careful not to tar all Muslims with the same brush. After all, there are a very, very small number of pretty horrible white people (even "Christians") who are nasty and violent, too (recent mass shootings in the US) – I don't want to be tarred with their brush.

When you actually get to know someone different than yourself, you may discover they are really a nice person. That doesn't mean you have to agree with their religion, politics, or other ideas. But you discover you have a lot more in common than not. You make a friend. And you aren't afraid anymore.

The Pharisees are afraid. They are afraid of who Jesus is and what He represents. He is upsetting their understanding of who God is, what God should (and should not) do, and what it means to be Jewish. Ever since the kerfuffle in the Temple (John 2) and Jesus healing of the lame man on the Sabbath (John 5), they are realizing that Jesus is fundamentally challenging many of their assumptions. Their knee-jerk reaction is to eliminate the potential threat: *"Anyone saying Jesus was the Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue"* (9:23). That didn't just mean you couldn't go to worship anymore – it meant you were kicked out of the community. The synagogue was the heart and soul of life. To be expelled meant you were cut off from life – no one would talk with you, do business with you, visit you, or be friends with you anymore.

No wonder the blind man's parents wanted to stay neutral. *"Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself"* is hardly the response you would expect from loving parents – but the risk was so enormous.

Fear: it prevented the Pharisees from seeing Jesus for who He was. Fear: it caused parents to leave their recently healed son alone and vulnerable. Fear: what does it do to us? How does it affect the way we react to the news? Relate to (or avoid) people different from us? Stop us from doing things we would like to do?

Travel writer Rick Steeves has some great insights on fear: *"Fear has always been a barrier to travel. And, after 9/11, the US became even more fearful...and more isolated. Of course, there are serious risks that deserve our careful attention. But it's all too easy to mistake fear for actual danger. Statistically, even in the most sobering days of post-9/11 anxiety, travel to most international destinations remained safer than a drive to your neighborhood grocery store. Franklin D. Roosevelt's assertion that we have nothing to fear but fear itself feels just as relevant today as when he first said it in 1933.*

"While I don't want to seem paranoid, I worry that people in positions of power have become expert at manipulating the fear of the American people. History is rife with examples of leaders who use fear to distract, mislead, and undermine the will of the very people who entrusted them with power. Our own recent history is no exception. If you want to sell weapons to Columbia, exaggerate the threat of drug lords. If you want to build a wall between the US and Mexico, trump up the fear of illegal immigrants. If you want to invade Iraq, you say you "don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud." If you want to build an expensive missile-defense system, terrify people with predictions of nuclear holocaust. My travels have taught me to have a healthy skepticism towards those who peddle fear. And in so many cases, I've learned that the flipside of fear is understanding.

"I'm hardly a fearless traveler. I can think of many times I've been afraid before a trip. Years ago, I heard that in Egypt, the beggars were relentless, there were no maps, and it was so hot that car tires melted to the streets. For three years, I had plane tickets to India but bailed out, finding other places closer to my comfort zone. Before flying to Iran to film a public television show, I was so uneasy, I nearly left our big video camera in Greece for its own safety. But in each case, when I finally went to these countries, I realized my fears were unfounded.

"I got an email recently from a man who wrote, 'Thanks for the TV shows. They will provide a historical documentation of a time when Europe was white and not Muslim. Keep filming your beloved Europe before it's gone.' Reading this, I thought how feisty fear has become in our society. A fear of African Americans swept the USA in the 1960s. Jews have been feared in many places throughout history. And today, Muslims are feared. But we have a choice whether or not to be afraid.

"Of course, terrorism — which is designed to be emotional and frighten the masses — makes it more difficult to overcome fear. But my travels have helped me distinguish between the fear of terrorism ... and the actual danger of terrorism. I was in London on 7/7/07 ... a date the Brits consider their 9/11. A series of devastating bombs ripped through the subway system, killing 52 and injuring 700 people. Remembering the impact of 9/11 on the United States, I thought, 'Oh my goodness, everything will be shut down.'

"Instead, I witnessed a country that, as a matter of principle, refused to be terrorized. The prime minister returned from meetings in Scotland to organize a smart response. Within a couple of days, he was back in Scotland, London was functioning as normal, and they set out to catch the bad guys — which they did. There was no lingering panic. People mourned the tragedy, even as they kept it in perspective. The terrorists were brought to justice, Britain made a point to learn from the event (by reviewing security on public transit and making an effort to deal more constructively with its Muslim minority) ... and life went on. The American reaction to the shocking and grotesque events of 9/11 is understandable. But seeing another society respond so differently to its own disaster forced me to grapple with a new perspective. If the goal of terrorists is to terrify us into submission, those who refuse to become fearful stand defiantly against them.

"Every time I'm stuck in a long security line at the airport, I reflect on one of the most disconcerting results of terrorism: The very people who would benefit most from international travel — those who needlessly fear people and places they don't understand — decide to stay home. I believe the most powerful things an individual can do to fight terrorism are to travel a lot, learn about the world, come home with a new perspective, and then work to help our country fit more comfortably and less fearfully into this planet."¹

"Perfect love casts out fear" writes John (1 John 4:18). How can I love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength – so I am not afraid? How can I love my neighbour as myself – so I am not afraid?

*Christ, as a light, illumine and guide me.
Christ, as a shield, overshadow me.
Christ under me;
Christ over me;
Christ beside me on my left in my right.
This day be within and without me, lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.
Be in the heart of each to whom I speak;
and the mouth of each who speaks to me.
This day be within and without me, lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.
Christ as a light;
Christ as a shield;
Christ beside me on my left and my right. Amen*

¹ <https://www.ricksteves.com/about-rick/social-activism-philanthropy/how-to-travel-as-a-political-act/overcome-fear>

Wednesday, February 6: John 9:24-34

If John Newton had written *Amazing Grace* in 31 AD rather than 1779 AD, the ex-blind man (let's call him Fred, just for convenience) might have sung it for the Pharisees:

*Amazing grace. How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.*

Fred doesn't understand it all. He hasn't got all the answers. In fact he doesn't understand much at all. He simply knows that life has changed – infinitely for the better.

The Pharisees on the other hand, are trying to figure it all out. They know only God can do incredible things like giving a man born blind his sight. They also know Jesus doesn't fit their preconceived notion of what a man from God should look like, talk like, and act like. The only possible solution to this conundrum – that they are willing to discuss publicly – is that God is doing miraculous things which just happen to accidentally coincide with the presence of Jesus, this miserable "sinner." That's one – rather unlikely – possibility.

Unfortunately, the Pharisees are stumped by the fact that Jesus clearly *did* something directly related to this particular healing – He made mud from clay and spittle and put it on the man's eyes. Fred states the obvious: *"We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will. Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. If this man were not from God, he couldn't have done it"* (9:31-33). Good question. What do you do when your worldview is being shaken up by Jesus? What do you do when Jesus doesn't "fit" your preconceptions?

Tom Wright comments, *"Being a Christian is often confusing. People try to interpret your experience for you, to put you in this or that category, to label you. Often this is so that they needn't take you quite seriously. What you must do is to stick to what you know. 'I used to be blind, now I can see.' It may be costly, but paying that cost is better than the still more costly route of denying what, in Jesus, God has truly done for you."* What has God, in Jesus, done in you? How can you live and share that truth today?

*Arise, shine, for the Light of the World has come!
Darkness covers the earth and its people,
but the radiance of God's Light burns away its shadows,
illuminates the smallest corner,
and heralds in the start of a new dawn,
where hearts no longer fear,
souls might be set free,
and sister shall follow brother,
nation shall follow nation,
and kings and princes bow down in awe
before the one who comes to reign.
Arise, shine, for the Light of the World has come!
Alleluia!
Amen*

Thursday, February 7: John 9 recap (especially 9:35-41)

Put yourselves in the shoes of various people in the story of the ex-blind man:

- The disciples (9:1) – what are you thinking and feeling? What other questions do you have?
- The neighbours (9:8) – what are you thinking and feeling? What other questions do you have?

- The Pharisees (9:13-34) – why do they react as they do? What is going on in their hearts/minds?
- The man's parents (9:18-23) – what are you thinking and feeling? What questions do you have?
- A casual observer of all this – what are you thinking and feeling? What questions do you have?
- The blind man now healed – what are you thinking and feeling? What questions do you have?

Who do you most identify with in the story? Why?

Are we blind in some ways? Are there things we should see, but we can't? How do we know?

Pray that God would show us our blindnesses ... Or better yet, pray that Jesus would *heal* our blindnesses and help us to see the world as He sees it.

Why not pray that He would help you see what He sees? ... our perspective on everything might change. Can I take that risk? That opportunity? That challenge?

*Father, I abandon myself into Your hands.
Do with me what You will.
Whatever You do, I will thank You.
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only Your will be done in me, as in all Your creatures,
and I'll ask nothing else, my Lord.
Into Your hands I commend my spirit;
I give it to You with all the love of my heart, for I love You, Lord.
I give myself; I surrender myself into Your hands with a trust beyond all measure,
because You are my Father.
Amen*

Friday, February 8: John 10:1-10

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full ..." says Jesus (10:10). What does a "full" life look like to Jesus, the One who created us?

A full life is not necessarily physical health. Jesus is much more concerned with spiritual health – a good relationship with God, a clean conscience through forgiveness of sin, a sincere desire to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Jesus does physically heal people (and us) on occasion, too, but many, many people then and now live full lives as they live with chronic health problems (including me.)

A full life does include our relationships with other people. In Jesus' teaching, a full life includes love and peace with our family and friends. It includes a spirit of forgiveness, and a compassion to offer assistance to those in need. This all comes from a commitment to love our neighbour as ourselves and love one another.

A full life is shaped by values of love, hope, peace, and joy. These things transcend our physical health and, ultimately, as we pass through this life into our eternal life with God, these are the treasures we take with us. A full life is one filled with and fully devoted to God.

There are, of course, a lot of other teachers who will counsel us in other directions. Using the metaphor of a shepherd, Jesus asks us who we would believe: those who are out to make a profit from us through the latest seminar, self-help book, or investment opportunity? Or the One who laid down His life for us? When hard times come, will the latest motivational guru or financial advisor stand with you, or like the hired hand will they head for cover?

Who will never leave you? Who really has your best interest in mind? Only Jesus.

In faith, we are called to put our hope and trust in God. Like the Jews back in Jesus' day we can come up with all sorts of excuses **not** to trust our lives to Him. I can stubbornly resist Him as well as anybody.

But ultimately, Jesus says, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him"* (John 14:6-7). Do I really want to live – really live? If so, will I trust Jesus? What will that mean? How will I live differently if I truly do put my faith in Him?

*Teach us, dear Lord, to number our days,
that we may apply our hearts to seeking Your wisdom.
Please teach us and satisfy us early with Your mercy,
that we may rejoice and be glad all of our days.
May the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us
and establish the work of our hands, dear Lord.
May nothing disturb us,
nothing frighten us –
all these evil things pass away, but God never changes.
Lord help us to have the patience to endure all things
that we might attain all things;
Possess us so completely that we seek to possess nothing other than You –
for You alone meet all our needs.
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen*

Saturday, February 9: John 10:11-18

The word "pastor" is from the Latin word meaning "shepherd." A pastor, literally, is to be a shepherd to their sheep – their congregation.

When I was writing my Ph.D. thesis, I interviewed a number of clergy about words they used to describe themselves and what they did. One of the questions I asked was, *"Complete the phrase, 'Pastor as _____.'" I got many predictable answers: "Pastor as **teacher**," "Pastor as **caregiver**," "Pastor as **preacher**." I also got some unexpected answers: "Pastor as **octopus**" (this person felt they were doing too many totally unrelated tasks all the time); "Pastor as **midwife**" (a lady pastor who described her job as *"recognizing there is so much creativity and so many great ideas in these people, and my task is simply to help them be born"* – isn't that great?).*

In a conversation with a Catholic priest, he commented he never liked to see himself as "Pastor as shepherd." *"I was a priest in Central America for years,"* he said, *"and I learned that sheep are smelly, stupid, and pig-headed. I don't want to think of the people in my parish as smelly, stupid, and pig-headed."* I wonder if Jesus sees us as smelly, stupid, and pig-headed? In my case 2 out of 3 are probably pretty accurate (I do shower daily so hopefully I'm not too stinky ☺).

The point of Jesus' metaphor is not really the dubious qualities of sheep (and us.). His point is the amazing love – potentially the amazing sacrificial love – of the good shepherd. As we read these words, on this side of the cross and resurrection, we know what Jesus is talking about. He gave his life for us. His disciples would have been a bit confused by all this talk of sacrificing His life and taking it back again.

The other point of Jesus' talk is to emphasize that *"I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd"* (10:16). Jesus is the good shepherd – the good pastor – not just for the Jewish people, but for ALL people.

The mission of sharing God's love for all people – which the Jewish people had long forgotten – is being

reborn. As Paul writes, *"the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would declare the Gentiles to be righteous because of their faith. God proclaimed this good news to Abraham long ago when he said, 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So all who put their faith in Christ share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith ... For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you"* (Galatians 3:8-9, 26-29).

We are ALL welcome to come to discover fullness of life through Jesus. And He desires that ALL people come to faith in Him – to new life in Him – as well. Pray that we may have the opportunity to share His love, in Word and in deed, with those around us ...

*Deliver me, Lord, from every evil and grant me peace this day.
In Your mercy, Lord, keep me free from sin,
and protect me from all anxiety
as I wait in joyful hope for the coming of my Savior, Jesus Christ.
Let Your kingdom come, Lord, in me.
I pray the protection of Christ to clothe me,
Christ to enfold me,
to surround me and guard me this day and every day,
surrounding me and my companions,
enfolding me and every friend.
I pray for the gift of friendship and faithfulness;
that I would be freed from selfishness.
Please teach me how I can deepen and strengthen the faith of others.
Lord, give me the desire to love goodness,
to passionately love righteousness;
teach me moderation in all things;
teach me to love wisdom,
and to greatly love Your law.
Amen.*

Sunday, February 10: John 10:19-33

When you think of Jesus as "the good shepherd" what picture comes to mind? Jesus, dressed in spotless clothes, sitting peacefully, holding a smiling child or two, surrounded by fluffy white lambs ...? So peaceful. So serene. So happy. But notice where Jesus talks about being a good shepherd actually leads: *"Once again the people picked up stones to kill him ..."* (10:31). Not much peace and serenity here. What is going on? What is this all about?

This happens during the Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights and Feast of Dedication. Hanukkah is an eight-day holiday commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire (2nd century BC). Since the days of Alexander the Great (332 BC), the Seleucids (Greeks) had ruled Judea. In 167 BC, the Seleucid king, Antiochus, ordered an altar to Zeus to be constructed in the Jewish Temple. He outlawed Judaism, banned circumcision, and ordered pigs to be sacrificed at the altar of the Temple. Horrified by the desecration of the Temple, the persecution of Jewish people, and outlawing of their faith, Judah "Maccabee,"² son of a priest, began a revolt. He led a ragtag

² Early in the rebellion, Judah (Greek: Judas) was given the nickname "Maccabee" (Maccabeus). Why is not clear. The most common theory is that it comes from the Aramaic *"maqqaba"* (*"makebet"* in Hebrew), *"hammer"* or *"sledgehammer,"* celebrating his strength in battle. The name could also be shorthand for a battle-cry to motivate troops - Exodus 15:11: *"Mi kamokha ba'elim Adona!"* - *"Who among the gods is like you, O Lord?"* Others suggest the name is a shortened form of the Hebrew *"maqqab-ya 'hu,"* meaning *"the one designated by Yahweh."* One rabbi argues it is an acronym for his father's name, Mattityahu Kohen Ben Yochanan. Who knows.

army of Jewish dissidents to victory through guerrilla warfare (this is recorded in the apocryphal books, 1 and 2 Maccabees). Hanukkah is the annual celebration of the purifying and rededication of the Temple after their victory.

The Menorah (a nine-lighted candelabra) is used for Hanukkah. Each night during Hanukkah the lights are lit and this hymn is sung: *"We kindle these lights for the miracles and the wonders, for the redemption and the battles that you made for our forefathers, in those days at this season, through your holy priests. During all eight days of Hanukkah these lights are sacred, and we are not permitted to make ordinary use of them except for to look at them in order to express thanks and praise to Your great Name for Your miracles, Your wonders and Your salvations."*

After the crushing defeat of the Seleucids, the family of Judah Maccabee became the royal family of Judea – until 37 BC when the last of their dynasty, Antigonus II, was executed by Herod the Great. Herod – a non-Jew – had been proclaimed "King of the Jews" by Roman Senate in 39 BC. He also married Antigonus' niece, Mariamne, to establish a legitimate claim to the throne and to appear Jewish (unfortunately, Herod already had a wife, Doris, and a three-year-old son, Antipater; he simply chose to banish them both).

So when Jews in Jesus' day celebrated Hanukkah, they thought of freedom. They thought of great heroes – deliverers – kings – good shepherds who led them and saved them. And now here is Jesus, walking in the Temple during Hanukkah, talking about being a good shepherd, claiming to be One with the Father.

People wanted miracles. Here was the hope of a miracle. The Messiah has come. But though the Maccabean dynasty had only lasted 130 years, Jesus promises that *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me, for my Father has given them to me, and he is more powerful than anyone else. No one can snatch them from the Father's hand"* (10:27-29). He is talking about an eternal kingdom. Eternal freedom.

The great news of the Good Shepherd is that the fickle fortunes of kings and dynasties, of politics and power may come and go. But we are safe – always – in God's hands. This doesn't mean bad things will not happen to us – but none of them have the power to separate us from God. James – who would be beheaded for his faith – writes, *"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing"* (James 1:2-4). No one can snatch you from the Father's hand.

*Lord, I am assailed from within and without;
self-doubt and loathing, disrespect and insult.
The world closes in, swamps, and would consume me.
I am sinking, yet will not drown.
For you endured all this and much more,
beaten, hated, scourged and whipped,
humiliated and killed, yet rising victorious,
to demonstrate the paradox of strength through weakness,
love conquering all.
I am weak, but through the grace of Christ I am strong
and together we shall overcome.
Amen*

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Monday, February 11: John 10:31-42

Who is Jesus? The Jewish powers-that-be are pretty sure His claim to be One with the Father is blasphemy. But Jesus says, *"It is written in your own Scriptures that God said to certain leaders of the people, 'I say, you are gods.' ... So if those people who received God's message were called 'gods,' why do you call it*

blasphemy when I say, 'I am the Son of God?'" He is quoting Psalm 82. Here it is in its entirety:

*"God presides over heaven's court; he pronounces judgment on the gods:
'How long will you hand down unjust decisions by favoring the wicked?
Give justice to the poor and the orphan; uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute.
Rescue the poor and helpless; deliver them from the grasp of evil people.
But these oppressors know nothing; they are so ignorant.
They wander about in darkness, while the whole world is shaken to the core.
I say, "You are gods; you are all children of the Most High.
But you will die like mere mortals and fall like every other ruler."
Rise up, O God, and judge the earth, for all the nations belong to you."*

Psalm 82 is about judgment on those who are leaders³ – be they heavenly beings or people – who lead and judge in un-God-like ways. Human beings are created in the image of God, to be steward God's creation, and to live as His faithful people. Human leaders are to shepherd His people in righteous, godly ways. As God's representatives, they are to lead the people as God would lead them were He actually present. The judgment in Psalm 82 is that the leaders – who were called to function in God-like ways, in the image of God – were doing nothing of the sort.

Jesus is drawing the Pharisees back to Psalm 82. They are not acting in godly ways either. But Jesus is. He is doing what we would expect God to do were he actually present. Actions speak louder than words, Jesus is saying: *"Don't believe me unless I carry out my Father's work. But if I do his work, believe in the evidence of the miraculous works I have done, even if you don't believe me. Then you will know and understand that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father."*

When people – ordinary people – looked at the leaders in Israel, they saw the epitome of Psalm 82: injustice, oppression, evil, and darkness. When people – ordinary people – looked at Jesus they saw love, compassion, mercy, hope, justice, and grace. This is exactly what you would expect from God, and exactly what you would expect from a true representative of God. No wonder many of them decided to follow Jesus, not the rulers of the people.

US Senator Cory Booker (a Christian) recently posted, *"Before you speak to me about your religion, first show it to me in how you treat other people; before you tell me how much you love your God, show me in how much you love all His children; before you preach to me of your passion for your faith, teach me about it through your compassion for your neighbors. In the end, I'm not as interested in what you have to tell or sell as in how you choose to live and give."* That's great counsel for all of us.

*Thanks to You, O ever-gentle Christ,
for raising me from the black and darkness of the night
into the kindly light of this day.
You pour Your life into me,
giving me speech, sense, desire,
giving me thought and action.
You mark the way before me.
As I remember saints who have journeyed before me, Lord,
teach me the way of their simplicity:
strength with humility, at peace in the love and fear of God.
May I also go wherever I am led.
On Your path, O my God, and not my own, be all my journeying.
Rule this heart of mine that it be only Yours.
Amen.*

³ There is much debate about whether the "gods" in this passage refers to angels or human beings. In light of Jesus' use of the passage, it would appear He is interpreting it as meaning human leaders.

Tuesday, February 12: John 11:1-16

There's an old adage, "*Fools rush in where angels fear to tread ...*"

We typically read this story as a story about Lazarus – and it is. But it also is a story about Jesus. At the end of John 10, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem want to stone Him. Bethany, where Lazarus is, is less than 3 kilometres from Jerusalem: does He really want to go back there? The disciples think not (11:8). Two days Jesus waited. What was Jesus doing for those two days before making the journey?

Knowing Jesus' character, we can assume He spent at least some of the time praying – undoubtedly praying for the situation with Lazarus (see John 11:41-42), but probably also praying for God's wisdom and guidance. The two are interconnected. Jesus' miraculous intervention for Lazarus will be one of the final straws that breaks the camel's back; it will directly lead to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion (11:45-57).

Sometimes we rush into action before we take time to seek God's wisdom. What may be more needful than our instant intervention and activity is the willingness to take time to seek God's wisdom, direction, and strength – first. Perhaps we would save ourselves a lot of pain, grief – and mistakes – if we chose to seek God's guidance first, rather than think we always know best. Time spent in prayer may be the best choice.

Jesus' cryptic line in 11:9 speaks to this: if we walk in the light of day we will be just fine. Remember Jesus is the "*Light of the World*" (John 1:4-5, 3:19-21, 8:12), the One who gives sight to the blind (John 9). If we walk in His "light" we won't stumble and fall. However if we walk at night – without the light (Jesus) – we're liable to stumble or fall. In other words – do spend the time seeking God's wisdom and guidance – pray. It may save you from a LOT of grief. It is worth waiting for His light to guide us on the way.

If Jesus routinely spent time in prayer with His Father – waiting and listening for His voice – how much more should we? God says, "*Be still and know that I am God ...*" (Psalm 46:10). Lord, give me the discipline and patience to be still. To pray. To listen – to Your voice. To not be the fool who rushes in.

*I call all heaven to witness today that I have put on Christ.
I choose no other Lord than the Maker of heaven and earth.
This day I walk with Him and He will walk with me.
I will walk in the Light.
I fasten close to me this day that same Jesus who came to us as flesh and blood
and was Himself baptized in the Jordan River.
He died upon a cross to rescue me, broke free from death, its conqueror.
He left us, to return the more certainly.
All these truths and their power I fasten close to me this day.
I will walk in the Light.
Resisting my own selfishness and sin,
refusing to live as a slave to riches, pleasure our reputation,
rejecting Satan and all his lies,
I call on heaven to witness today that I have put on Christ.
I will walk in the Light.
Amen*

Wednesday, February 13: John 11:17-37

"*If only you had been here ...*" Martha says (11:21). How many times in our lives do we say, "*If only ...*" If only the markets hadn't crashed ... If only the cancer hadn't come ... If only the teacher had been better ... But "*if only's*" don't change anything. They refer to the past. And the past is now history – it's in the books.

Jesus doesn't bother to deal with the past. What He does do is talk about the future: "*Your brother will rise*

again"(11:23). It is always good to keep this eternal perspective in mind. But the future, as we shall see, is also inextricably intertwined with the present. Eternal life is a present reality, not just a future assurance.

Jesus chooses to focus on the present moment: "*I am* (present tense) *the resurrection and the life ...*" ("I am" – that claim to be God again). Jesus emphasizes it's not just about being with the Lord when we die – it's also about experiencing His resurrection life now, in the interim, as well. At a very practical level, for Lazarus this means being able to share more of life with his sisters. He will come out of his tomb, a shuffling, sightless figure, to be unwrapped and released into the world of life and light.⁴

In a sense, this is a graphic metaphor of what happens to all of us when we "*die to our old selves*" and are "*raised with Christ*" – it's as if we experience a whole new birth. In this new life, we appreciate that all we have and are is a gift from God ... right now. And we walk in His presence, the Holy Spirit, in the present.

Jesus asks us the same question: *Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life?* In the long run nothing is more important than my answer to this. Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

*Lord, help me now to unclutter my life,
to organize myself in the direction of simplicity.
Lord, teach me to listen to my heart;
teach me to welcome change instead of fearing it.
Lord, I give you the stirrings inside me,
I give you my discontent,
I give you my restlessness,
I give you my doubt,
I give you my despair;
I give you all the longings I hold inside.
Help me to listen to these signs of change, of growth;
to listen seriously and follow where they lead
through the breathtaking empty space of an open door.
Lord, help me now to listen to you,
and to walk the paths where your Spirit leads me.
Amen.*

Thursday, February 14: John 11:28-46

Jesus was not the first person to rise from the dead. On the third day (recall Jesus had waited for two days, 11:6), Jesus went up to Bethany, and ... Well, we know what happened. Interesting, isn't it? English teachers like to talk about the literary device of foreshadowing – in hindsight, we can see there is no more obvious foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection than this.

The disciples didn't want him to be here: "*Rabbi, only a few days ago the people in Judea were trying to stone you. Are you going there again?*"(11:8). When Jesus is determined, Thomas, rather gloomily, says, "*Let's go, too – and die with Jesus*"(11:16). Jesus says, "*I am the resurrection and the life*"(11:25) – He is referring to Lazarus' resurrection, but also hinting at what is to come for Himself. There is a lot about death and resurrection going on here – about Lazarus, but even more about what is to come for Jesus (and us).

At a physical level, we also look forward to eternal life with God. In one of the great mysteries and promises of Jesus, we will be raised to new, physical, lives through our own physical deaths, too (1 Corinthians 15).

But this is also a metaphor – a picture – of what we experience through the new life God the Father gives us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and through the presence and power of His Spirit (Romans 8):

⁴ Which is all very wonderful, but I also feel some pangs of pity for Lazarus too – he will have to experience the process of physically dying a second time ... somehow that is not very attractive to me. He has the dubious honour of dying twice as well.

"So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit.

"Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

"But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you ... And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

"Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." (Romans 8:1-14). May God help us experience this new life through Jesus. Holy Spirit, lead us. Holy Spirit, lead me.

*We are drawn to your feet in worship,
Your creation facing its creator,
hearts laid bare by your light
humbly asking for your mercy.
We come to you as a people in need
of assurance and forgiveness.
We come to you as a people in need
of healing and wholeness.
We come dependent upon your love.
Draw us close.
Enfold us in your arms.
Fill us with your Spirit
that we might reflect your light
within this dark world,
speak your Word with boldness
and draw others to your feet.
We ask this through your dear Son Jesus Christ.
Amen*

Friday, February 15: John 11:47-57

God can do surprising things through surprising people. Most often, people who are well-tuned to God's voice hear Him leading through prayer and Scripture. But sometimes God uses people who seem out-of-sync with His ways to speak or do His truth. He used Babylon as His chosen instrument to straighten out Judah back in the days of the prophets. He spoke to Nebuchadnezzar in the days of Daniel. He even uses the high priest, Caiaphas. It's all rather annoying.

Notice the controversy swirling around Caiaphas, high priest at the time, who says, *"It's better for you that one man should die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed"* (11:50).

Writing retrospectively, John comments, *"He did not say this on his own; as high priest at that time he was led to prophesy that Jesus would die for the entire nation. And not only for that nation, but to bring together and unite all the children of God scattered around the world"* (11:51-52).

Caiaphas, although he was the high priest, was not open to listening to God. Early Jewish historians note his main "accomplishment" as keeping peace by appeasing the Romans – a rather dubious honour. He was very much at the epicentre of the "chief priests and Pharisees" who wanted to get rid of Jesus. We will see later on that, Caiaphas, other leading priests, and the Sanhedrin interrogate Jesus, bribe false witnesses, and look for false evidence with which to frame Him. Jesus remains silent throughout the proceedings until Caiaphas demands Jesus say whether or not He is the Messiah. Jesus replies *"You have said so"* (Matthew 26:64), and *"I am (a claim to be God). And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God's right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven"* (Mark 14:62). Caiaphas and the others charge him with blasphemy, order him beaten and taken to Pontius Pilate, screaming for His execution.

When God is speaking to us are we listening?

Dallas Willard, in a wonderful book, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, writes, *"Our failure to hear His voice when we want to is due to the fact that we do not in general want to hear it, that we want it only when we think we need it."* His insight – and refreshing honesty – are helpful. God tells us a lot through His Word. He guides us through our consciences. Wise friends give us sage advice. But often we don't like what He is saying. We prefer (to quote Frank Sinatra), to say, *"I did it my way."*

The wiser course is to let our minds be formed by God and to live by the principles God gives us. Then most of the decisions we have to make simply fall into place because our souls are shaped by God's Spirit. Willard writes, *"The union Christ had with the Father was the greatest that we can conceive of in this life – if indeed we can conceive of it. Yet we have no indication that even Jesus was constantly awash with revelations as to what he should do. His union with the Father was so great that he was at all times obedient. This obedience was something that rested in his mature will and understanding of his life before God, not on always being told "Now do this" and "Now do that" with regard to every details of his life or work."* Of course we will never be perfect like Jesus. But *"let the Holy Spirit guide your lives"* or *"walk in step with the Spirit"* (Galatians 5:25). And most of the time, we will make right choices. Give it a try.

When you do fail ... it's not the end of the world. Confess it. Get up. Begin again ... With a renewed prayer and resolve to walk each moment of each day with Jesus.

*Lord, your Spirit brooded over the face of the deep,
and out of the chaos brought forth life and beauty.
All we have to bring you is our brokenness and chaos.
In me, O Lord, let there be life.*

*Jesus, you are the living water, pouring yourself out for us,
like a flood, quenching our thirst with your love.
O let all who thirst, let them come to the water.
And let all who have nothing, let them come to the Lord:
without money, without price.*

*Why should you pay the price, except for the Lord?
And let all who seek, let them come to the water.
And let all who have nothing, let them come to the Lord:
without money, without strife.*

*Why should you spend your life, except for the Lord?
And let all who toil, let them come to the water.
And let all who are weary, let them come to the Lord:
all who labor, without rest.*

*How can your soul find rest, except for the Lord?
And let all the poor, let them come to the water.
Bring the ones who are laden, bring them all to the Lord:
bring the children without might.
Easy the load and light: come to the Lord.
Amen*

Saturday, February 16: John 12:1-8

The story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead ends with the sombre prophecy of Caiaphas: *"It is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."* No wonder Jesus prayed for two days before going to Bethany to deal with Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. His graphic miracle, this sign demonstrating *"I am the resurrection and life,"* has set wheels in motion that will end at the cross ...

John 12 brings us back to Bethany, to the home of the same family: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Shortly after Jesus' miracle in Lazarus' life, they are having a party in Jesus' honour (not surprising given recent events). Notice the different people and what they are doing:

- **Lazarus** is enjoying the moment, soaking it all in.
- **Martha** is in the kitchen and at the table, making sure everyone had what they needed. She gets rather annoyed at Mary (and probably Lazarus) for not helping out (see Luke 10:38-42).
- **Mary**, for some reason, takes some expensive perfume and anoints his feet with it. It is a radical move of devotion:
 - The perfume was expensive, and we sense these are not wealthy people; this could have cost Mary a lot of her life savings.
 - She "let her hair down" – an unthinkable brazen action in polite Jewish society – rather like a lady hiking a fine ballroom dress up over her knees and getting down on the floor ... what would people say? But Mary didn't care what other people thought; she did what she felt God wanted her to do.
 - Jesus interprets it as a prophetic foreshadowing of His death. Did Mary understand it that way? We don't know. For her it might have just been an act of devotion for the moment. But it does help us recognize that Jesus knows what's going on here and what's to come ...
- **Judas** is concerned about the financial implications of the party: can they afford it? (Of course we also get some disturbing insight into Judas' character that betray other concerns, too).
- **The crowd** has come along out of curiosity ... some don't want to commit one way or another; it's just fun to check it out. But some, in spite of the open hostility of the Jewish authorities, *"were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him."* That was a brave thing to do.
- **The Jewish authorities** were up to their usual nasty-ness ...

Where are you in the story? Are you a Lazarus – a Martha – a Mary? Can you identify a bit with Judas? If you were in the crowd, would you "go over to Jesus" and put your faith in Him? Or not?

John routinely confronts us with these basic choices: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil ..."*(John 3:16-19).

To believe or not to believe? ... that is the question. And if you believe, will you

- Enjoy His company – like Lazarus?
- Find ways to serve Him – like Martha ?
- Give your life to Him in whole-hearted devotion – like Mary?

*Great God of wisdom, great God of mercy,
give me of your fullness
and of your guidance
at the turning of each path.
Christ's cross would I carry,
my own struggles forget.
Christ's death would I ponder,
my own death remember.
Christ's agony would I embrace,
my love to God make warmer.
The love of Christ would I feel,
my own love waken.*

*Great God of shielding, great God of surrounding,
give me of Your holiness and of Your peace.
Give me Your surrounding
and Your peace through all my life.
Peace between me and my God.
Peace between me and my neighbour.
May I tread the path to the gates of glory.
Rule this heart of mine that it be only Yours.
God's path would I travel, my own path refuse.
May I tread the path to the gates of glory.
Amen.*

Sunday, February 17: John 12:9-19

At Hanukkah, Jesus spoke about being a good shepherd (John 10). Hanukkah is when Jews remember how Judah Maccabee drove out the Greeks and purified the temple. Here is a portion of the story:

"Judas Maccabeus and his followers, under the leadership of the Lord, recaptured the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. They tore down the altars which foreigners had set up in the marketplace and destroyed the other places of worship that had been built. They purified the Temple and built a new altar. Then, with new fire started by striking flint, they offered sacrifice for the first time in two years, burned incense, lighted the lamps, and set out the sacred loaves. After they had done all this, they lay face down on the ground and prayed that the Lord would never again let such disasters strike them. They begged him to be merciful when he punished them for future sins and not hand them over any more to barbaric, pagan Gentiles. They rededicated the Temple on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Kislev, the same day of the same month on which the Temple had been desecrated by the Gentiles. The happy celebration lasted eight days ...

***Carrying green palm branches** and sticks decorated with ivy, they paraded around, singing grateful praises to him who had brought about the purification of his own Temple" (2 Maccabees 10:1-7).⁵*

Now, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, people parade around, singing grateful praises ... The people remember how Judah Maccabee had driven out the foreigners. They saw in Jesus the spark of a deliverer, too ...

Jesus comes riding on a donkey's colt. That doesn't sound too exciting. But the Jewish people also remembered the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: *"Rejoice, O people of Zion. Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem. Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey - riding on a donkey's colt."* Zechariah's prophecy goes on (as the people well knew) to talk about

⁵ This event is also recorded in 1 Maccabees 13:51: *"On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the year 171, there was a great celebration in the city because this terrible threat to the security of Israel had come to an end. Simon (Judah Maccabee's brother) and his men entered the fort singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving, while carrying palm branches and playing harps, cymbals, and lyres."*

the destruction of their enemies (9:15). It concludes with a fantastic vision: *"On that day the Lord their God will rescue his people, just as a shepherd rescues his sheep. They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown. How wonderful and beautiful they will be. The young men will thrive on abundant grain, and the young women will flourish on new wine"*(9:16-17). Could Jesus be bringing this prophecy to life?

Jesus and His followers are bringing Hanukkah (deliverance from the Greeks), the Passover (when the Jews celebrated their deliverance from slavery in Egypt), and Zechariah's Messianic prophecy (about the final deliverance from all enemies) together. Jesus is the true King, the Messiah, the One who will set Israel free once and for all. All of Jewish history is rushing together in this moment, in this place, in this person.

"Freedom," as the people in Jesus' day understood it, would mean throwing off the burden of Rome. But Jesus is coming with a much more profound, transformative definition of freedom. He is talking about freedom from sin and guilt, freedom from just a human perspective on the world, and, ultimately, freedom from the power of death itself. Nationalistic freedom may be good, but the spiritual-emotional-physical-social-cultural freedom that comes from being filled and transformed by His Spirit is so, so much better.

The reality was that deliverance from slavery in Egypt (the Passover) was great – but the people fell back into evil patterns, selfish and sinful ways, and soon created a corrupt and unjust society. They would be conquered by the Assyrians. Deliverance from the Seleucids/Greeks was great – but the people quickly slid back into evil, sinful, corrupt, and ungodly ways. They fell under the rule of Rome. Just another political/military victory was **not** going to deal with the real problems in Israel – and the entire world. The vision of Zechariah would never – could never – come to fruition without some really radical change.

John's description of Jesus entering Jerusalem is framed by the story of Lazarus. Jesus *is* making radical changes. People are rising from the dead. This is not "business as usual." The new kingdom of God which Jesus is inaugurating has different rules. Lives can be reborn. We can have life – new life – in Jesus.

There is more to life than what we can see, touch, smell, taste, or hear. There is a whole spiritual reality that is just as real. We know it as we struggle with guilt. We know it as our consciences nag at us. We know it when we sense beauty in a sunset. We know it when we feel compassion. Jesus is inviting us to make Him King – of the seen and the unseen – parts of our lives. He can change us, renew us, raise us to new life as profoundly as He did Lazarus. Will I let Him?

*Hear my voice when I call, O Lord;
be merciful to me and answer me.
My heart says of you, 'Seek His face.'
Your face, Lord I will seek.
Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away;
you are my helper and Lord.
Lord, I have heard your voice calling at a distance.
Guide my steps to you, Lord, guide my steps to you.
Lord, I have heard your voice calling at a distance.
Guard my way to you, Lord, guard my way to you.
Lord, I have heard your voice calling at a distance.
Keep my heart for you, Lord, keep my heart for you.
Softly as the dew-fall of heaven, may the Holy Spirit come upon me to aid me and to raise me,
to bind my prayer firmly before the throne of the King of life.
Your will, O God, would I do, my own will bridle;
Your due, O God, would I give, my own due yield;
your path, O God, would I travel, my own path refuse.
All whom I love, into your safekeeping;
all that I am, into your tender care;
all that I will be, into your perfect will. Amen.*

Monday, February 18: John 12:20-26

We compost the organic waste that comes through our kitchen. Coffee grounds, tea bags, browned lettuce, onion skins, orange and banana peels, cauliflower stalks, garlic stubs, moldy strawberries – they all end up in the compost bin in the backyard. Once a year I dig out the old compost, which has now become rich black soil, and spread it over the garden. Much to my surprise, we now have strawberry plants. We never intentionally planted them. But the seeds in those moldy strawberries that I threw into the bin? ... they were just waiting for the opportunity to burst forth into new plants. That's what seeds do.

Jesus is preparing His disciples for what is to come. He is talking about deep things now that we – in hindsight – can understand better than His disciples could. He will die, be cast off, more or less tossed into the bin – but then He will rise, gloriously, as Something/Someone so much more incredible than we could imagine. The wheat kernel analogy barely scratches the surface of the profundity of Jesus' death and resurrection, but His point is helpful. As He gives His life away, He will be a blessing to an incalculable harvest of others. By giving Himself away, He will become more than He ever was before.

Paul picks up this dying/reborn imagery to describe baptism and our new life in Jesus: *"When we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death. For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him ... When he died, he died once to break the power of sin. But now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God. So you also should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus.*

"Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God. Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace" (Romans 6:3-14).

As people who live under the freedom of God's grace, Jesus' challenge to us is that as we give ourselves away – to serve Him and to care for other people. And by giving ourselves away, we will gain more than we ever had before, too. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive. How can I be a blessing today?

*This day is Your gift to me;
I take it, Lord, from Your hand and thank You for the wonder of it.
God, be with me in this Your day, every day and every way, with me and for me in this Your day.
All that I am, Lord, I place into Your hands.
All that I do, Lord, I place into Your hands.
Everything I work for I place into Your hands.
Everything I hope for I place into Your hands.
The troubles that weary me I place into Your hands.
The thoughts that disturb me I place into Your hands.
I place into Your hands, Lord, the choices that I face.
Guard me from choosing the perilous way which ends in heart-pain and secret tears.
You Lord, are rich in counsel:
show me the way that is plain and safe.
May I feel Your presence at the heart of my desire, and so know it for Your desire for me.
Walking in Your way I shall have success, because my purpose is from you,
and it is Your power which does the good that shall endure.
Amen.*

Tuesday, February 19: John 12:27-36

When I began grade 1 (they didn't have kindergarten way back then), I looked at the Grade 12 students and thought, *"I'll never make it. I'll never graduate."* But the time came. When I began university, four years for a degree seemed an eternity. But the time came. When Marianne and I got engaged the wait until the wedding seemed like forever. But the time came. The appointed time comes. It always does.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus had said, *"My time has not yet come"* (John 2:4). Later, Jesus would not go up to Jerusalem: *"I'm not going to this festival, because my time has not yet come"* (John 7:30). Now notice John 12:23: *"Now the time has come ..."* *"The time for judging this world has come, when Satan, the ruler of this world, will be cast out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself"* (John 12:31-32). The time has come. But this appointed time – Jesus' appointed time – is going to be brutally painful, excruciatingly difficult ... and time-shatteringly, cosmos-shakingly powerful.

John – alone among the gospel writers because He alone was actually there – gives us insight into Jesus' emotions during this season of His life. *"My soul is deeply troubled ..."* (12:27).

Can you handle a God whose soul is deeply troubled? Remember Jesus may be fully God but He is also fully human; I find it reassuring that He understands – really understands – the emotions I face when I am facing difficult times in my life. He really does understand. He really can empathize.

Jesus says, *"I could pray, 'Father, save me from this hour.'"* But what would that accomplish? He has just told us about the seed – that has to "die" and be buried in order to bear fruit. *"This is the very reason I came."* Jesus says (12:27). He goes on, *"Father, bring glory to your name"* (12:28).⁶

And with that prayer, God speaks from heaven. Those who have ears to hear, hear God. Those who assume God doesn't really exist or think He doesn't really do anything, think they simply hear thunder.

We do have a Saviour who understands. As a fully human person He has been there, done that. *"Because God's children are human beings – made of flesh and blood – the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying ... Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested"* (Hebrews 2:14-18). That is great news.

Like Jesus, when we face suffering and testing we can simply pray, *"Father, save me from this hour."* That's OK. It's very human. But dare we pray, *"Father, bring glory to your name"*? Is it possible – just possible – that God can bring glory to His name as we are tested? Is it possible – just possible – that people can be drawn to the lifted up Saviour as we endure our tough times, in His power and in His strength?

"Put your trust in the light," says Jesus, *"then you will become children of the light."* Glory to His name.

*Lord, may this day be a place of peace.
May this day be a place of peace as I do Your will.
May this day be a place of peace as I serve my neighbour.
May this day be a place of peace as I obey You.
May this day be a place of peace as I praise You from dawn to dawn.
Lord, take this day and fill it with Your blessing.
Lord, take this day and fill it with Yourself.
Amen*

⁶ Note how similar this is to Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: *"My Father. If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine"* (Matthew 26:39).

Wednesday, February 20: John 12:37-43

As a geographer, I love God's creation. I have a hard time driving through the Rockies because I'm so distracted looking at the peaks, glaciers, cols, arêtes, cirques, tarns, truncated spurs, hanging valleys, waterfalls ... you get the idea. I find myself plotting out potential hiking/climbing routes to the summits of various mountains. Yes, I am a distracted driver – not by a cellphone, but the beauty of God's creation.

But other people blast past, hell-bent to get from Calgary to Vancouver as quickly as possible – all they see is the road.

Imagine if we could have been watching as God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. Wouldn't it have been incredible? Imaging seeing God create galaxies and gophers, continents and caterpillars. I get excited just thinking about the amazing show. But imagine if most of the audience were oblivious to the incredibleness going on around them. Instead, they were huddled together, carrying on their own conversations critiquing the latest angel-robe fashions, complaining about the seraphim's new techno-pop music, grumbling about their celestial cellphone plan ... When they did look up they belly-ached about the fact that mountains got in the way of their proposed bypass. And that the constellations didn't look at all like what they thought they should look like. God needed to get it right – "their" right.

John has been telling us about the kingdom of God – a new creation: water is turned into wine (John 2), a nobleman's son is healed (John 4), a crippled man is made whole (John 5), miraculous bread feeds people in the desert (John 6), a blind man sees (John 9), a dead man comes back to life (John 9). Isn't that amazing. Wouldn't it have been incredible to see all of that. But, John tells us, most of the "audience" has been huddled in their own trivial conversations – they missed it altogether. If they did take notice, all they could do was complain that God wasn't doing things the way they thought He should. God needed to do it right.

Part of the mystery of human nature is that we often just don't get it. When Moses confronted Pharaoh, he did miracle after miracle, followed by plague after plague – but Pharaoh didn't get it. When prophets like Isaiah challenged the Israelites about their flagrant sin and flirtation with foreign gods, they wouldn't – or couldn't – hear them. And now, as Jesus is performing miracle after miracle, most people are as blind, deaf, and hard-hearted as Pharaoh and Isaiah's compatriots were back in their days. Even those who did "get it" were too afraid to do anything about, slinking back to their old, dull, dreary, hopeless lives, *"For they loved human praise more than the praise of God"* (12:43).

Can we look up and see the new creation? Can we look up and see what God is doing in our world? In our own lives? Or do we get distracted by all the trivia of life? And if we do look up, do we just complain?

Take time to be thankful. Take time to celebrate. Take some time simply to enjoy the wonders of God ...

*My eyes, my eyes have seen the King.
The vision of His beauty has pierced me deep within.
To whom else can I go?
My heart, my heart desires Him.
He's touched something inside of me;
I'm now reaching out for Him.
And I know I must go.*

*My God is my Love, my Guard, and my Healing One;
my bright Love is my merciful Lord;
my sweet Love is Christ;
His heart is my delight.
All my love to You, O King of glory.
Amen.*

Thursday, February 21: John 12:44-50

C.S. Lewis writes. *"Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to?"*

"The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself."

When we built the addition to the church I looked over the plans a few times. The basic architectural drawings (floor plans and elevations) I could understand pretty well. But when it came to the drawings of the electrical and mechanical systems I was lost. And yet, because we trusted the architect, we knew it would all work out alright.

Imagine you are building an entire palace. Can you imagine what the plans would be like? I could handle the floor plan and the elevations, but there would be so many specialized details and essential little bits that I could never possibly comprehend it all. But if we trusted the architect, we know it would be just fine.

Now imagine you are building a whole new Kingdom. This Kingdom is as different from the mundane, day-to-day reality of Lethbridge (or wherever you are) than a palace fit for the King of Kings would be from a drab, pre-fabricated cottage. What must those plans look like?

Jesus is showing us the plans to His house, His palace, His kingdom. He is shining a light on to what God is doing in Him and through Him ... if we want to look. He is doing this by making little changes here and there – healing a man's son, restoring a cripple's legs, giving a blind man sight, raising another from the dead. But, Jesus says, fundamentally everything is changing. And it is going to be more wonderful, more astounding, more incredible, and more glorious than we can possibly imagine. Because these are God's plans. He is the master architect. We cannot possibly hope to understand them all – it's all far too complicated and wonderful – but because we trust Him, we know it's going to be awesome.

Earlier Jesus said to Nicodemus, *"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son. And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants"* (John 3:16-21).

We may not understand it all. We will not understand it all. Intuitively we "get" the metaphor of light and darkness, yet we cannot grasp all the details. Not fully getting it is OK. God is building His Kingdom – in us and through us. We can trust the Master Builder.

What that means ... what that will eventually look like ... what all the details of the master plan are ... I don't know. But I know the foundation: Jesus has saved us and defeated the power of sin and death. I know the floorplan: as we put our faith in Him, we are part of His family and His Kingdom. And I know the big picture for the future: He will return to finally sweep away all the residual evil; we will be with Him eternally. That is good news. That is light in a dark world. Lord, help me to live in the light ... Lord, help me to be light – your light ...

*O King of Kings, O King of the universe,
 King who will be and who is,
 may You forgive me.
 Accept my prayer, O King of grace.
 If I claim to be in the light, but hate my brother or sister, I'm still in the darkness.
 Lower my vengeance, my anger and my hatred,
 and banish my wicked thoughts from me;
 send down a drop from heaven of Your Holy Spirit
 to vanquish this heart of rock of mine.*

*Lord, let my memory provide no shelter for grievance against another;
 let my heart provide no harbor for hatred of another.
 Lord, let my tongue be no accomplice in the judgment of another.*

*Jesus, great Son of God,
 I call on Your name to shield me in the battle in my life.
 Jesus, only Son of the Father,
 who shed Your heart's blood, dearly to buy me:
 protect me,
 accompany me,
 be ever near me.*

*Jesus, only Son of the Father and High King, Your name is above every name:
 In the name of Jesus let no evil be welcome in my heart or in my house.
 Instead, Lord Jesus, You are welcome in my heart and house.
 Fill them completely with Your Spirit, I pray.
 Amen.*

Friday, February 22: John 13:1-11

Some of us like our "personal space." We really like our "personal space." So if someone comes up to talk to us and gets too close we back away. Or if someone who is a natural "hugger" comes around the corner, we head for the door. That kind of physical contact is just not our comfort zone. If that's you, imagine if someone wanted to wash your feet? That is definitely NOT going to be a comfortable experience.

In fairness, times were different in Jesus' day. In His time, when you spent the day walking in open sandals on dusty roads, washing feet was more common – and more necessary – than now. When a traveler entered a person's home, a servant – a slave – would wash a guest's feet. It was a slave's job. It was certainly not something a rabbi would do. It was definitely not something a person who claims to be the Messiah, who has raised a person from the dead, and who has claimed to be God, would do. But Jesus has been trying to get through to His disciples – and to us – that this is exactly the kind of thing we should expect the Messiah – God – would do. Jesus has already said, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep ... The Father loves me because I sacrifice my life so I may take it back again. No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily."* (John 10:11, 17-18). Here John comments, *"He had loved his disciples during his ministry on earth, and now he loved them to the very end"* (John 13:1). This is what love – real love – God's love – looks like: the Creator washing the stinky, dusty, calloused feet of His creatures – you and I. This is what love – real love – God's love – looks like: the Creator giving Himself for His creation, serving us selflessly, to the end.

Peter doesn't get it. So Jesus tries to help him understand that this act of foot washing is just a sign – a metaphor – a picture – a parable – of what is to come. Jesus' point is not really foot care. His point is that our whole being – body-soul-spirit – needs to be cleaned. Ultimately Jesus will do this as He dies on the cross. He will clean us – inside-out – as He gives Himself completely and fully for us on the cross.

In Philippians 2:6-8, Paul writes, *"Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to*

cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross." The point is NOT just that Jesus comes from the Father and happens to wash our feet and happens to die on a cross. The point **IS** that washing our feet and dying on the cross was precisely what He came to do, because He had come from God the Father. Humble foot washing – and the ultimate act of sacrificial love, the crucifixion itself – is Jesus' way of showing us who God is. This is who God is: the One who loves us selflessly. This is who God is: the One who gives Himself, sacrificially, to cleanse and save us. This is what God does: He cleanses us from the power of sin and death.

Some of us don't like to let Jesus into our "personal space." We like God well enough – as long as He keeps His distance. As long as He doesn't get too personal. As long as He doesn't change anything. But Jesus isn't content to relate to us like that: "*Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me.*" Unless we let Him set the priorities in our lives ... unless let we let Him shape our values and ethics ... unless we let Him deal with those deep, dark corners of our lives ... unless we let Him deal with those very private and personal "issues" we know we have ... unless we let Him love us – really love the real us ...

Will you allow God's Spirit in to the most intimate, personal spaces of your life ... and allow Him to do some house cleaning? What parts of your life do you hide from Him? Will you let Him into your personal space?

*My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
Lord, You have always given bread for the coming day;
and though I am poor, today I believe.
Lord You have always given strength for the coming day;
and though I am weak, today I believe.
Lord, You have always given peace for the coming day;
and though of anxious heart, today I believe.

Lord, You have always kept me safe in trials;
and now, tried as I am, today I believe.
Lord, You have always marked the road for the coming day;
and though it may be hidden, today I believe.
Lord, you have always lightened this darkness of mine;
and though the night is here, today I believe.
Lord, you have always spoken when time was ripe;
and though You be silent now, today I believe.

I will wait for the Lord.
My soul waits, and in His word do I hope.
Amen.*

Saturday, February 23: John 13:12-20

When I was beginning in fulltime ministry I had three pastoral opportunities. One was at a church on Cape Breton. One was a two-church pastorate on PEI. And one was as an associate pastor in Truro, NS. I chose Truro – I figured I would learn more from working with a wise, experienced mentor than on my own. I would rather learn from someone else's mistakes than make all my own mistakes. It really was a wonderful experience to be able to talk with, learn from, and be mentored by a mature pastor.

Many occupations intentionally require this sort of a mentoring relationship: trades people apprentice with journeymen (journey-people?), medical grads do residencies, law grads article, dentistry grads often work with an established dentist for a couple of years, accounting grads work with experienced partners ... Academic-book-school learning is great. But there is a wealth of knowledge and wisdom that only come from hands-on experience with people who have been in the trade for a lot of years.

"Since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet," Jesus says. "I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you" (11:14). Jesus is probably not specifically meaning that at the next church potluck each of us should get up from the table, take off our outer clothes, wrap towels around our waists, pour water into basins, wash one another's feet, and dry them with the towel we have wrapped around ourselves. That might be rather creepy, actually.

His point is that we should emulate His example of sacrificial, selfless care, compassion, and love for one another. Just as He gave up His status, pride, and position to serve us, we ought to be willing to serve one another self-sacrificially, too. We will do the humblest of necessary tasks for one another, with no thought of reward, payment, or even a "thank you." We serve one another just because that's what Jesus did for us.

I continue to learn from wise mentors: people in our church who quietly care for and visit our shut ins, volunteer throughout the community, and give their time and energy to help others; people who do all sorts of essential tasks under the radar – cleaning the kitchens and bathrooms, maintaining the boiler, changing lightbulbs, weeding the gardens; people who use their gifts – of creativity, practical know-how, music, hospitality – to serve others. These folks do so with no thought of recognition or reward. They just do it.

I find that when I do something completely selflessly and discretely – and don't tell anyone about it – I feel so much better than when people do know. (to stay humble, I'm not going to mention any examples ... ☺)

Can you imagine how amazing our community would be – our country would be – if we all just did one or two "random acts of kindness" a week?

What can you do this week for someone else – just because it's the right thing to do? How can you be a blessing, in the name of Jesus, today? A call? A visit? An encouraging word? A compliment? A helping hand? A secret gift? Don't expect (or even want) to get thanked.

*Christ, You are the Truth;
You are the Light.
You are the keeper of the treasure we seek so blindly.
My soul's desire is to see the face of God
and to rest in his house.
My soul's desire is to study the Scriptures
and to learn the ways of God.
My soul's desire is to be freed from all fear and sadness,
and to share Christ's risen life.
My soul's desire is to imitate my King,
and to sing His purposes always.
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.
When I am weak, I ask that You send only what I can bear,
when I am strong, may I shrink from no testing.
I trust in You, O Lord.
I say, 'You are my God.
My times are in Your hand.
My times are in your hand'
Amen.*

Sunday, February 24: John 13:21-30

Have you ever been stabbed in the back? Hopefully not literally. But figuratively – have you ever been betrayed by a good friend? Have you told a trusted companion a secret, only to have it shared with the whole world? Have you ever had a close associate use and abuse your friendship for their personal gain? Has a person you thought loved you thrown you to the wolves? How did that make you feel?

Judas seems like just another of the disciples: when he goes out the others just think he is going to pay for the food or to give some money to the poor. There's no prior indication that anything is wrong or that he's planning any treachery. There are no signs of depression, suicide, or other suspicious behaviour.

The comments about Judas are "*the devil had prompted Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus*" (13:4) and "*when Judas had eaten the bread, Satan entered into him*" (13:27). John's analysis is interesting. Satan/the devil is implicated as the driving force behind Judas' actions. This is NOT to say Judas is an unwilling, reluctant, remotely-controlled robot who has no free agency. It is to say that Satan tempted Judas, and Judas acted on that. No one – not even Satan – is able to force Judas to make bad decisions. He does that on his own.

Satan does tempt people – even people (maybe especially people) who are close to Jesus. And if those people act on those nasty needlings, bad things can happen. But no one can force us to sin. "*The devil made me do it*" is never accurate. The devil can tempt you to do it. But ultimately you always have your own free will: you can either choose to do it – or not. Don't give the devil more credit than he deserves.

Satan will tempt you. How are you going to handle it? It's good to think about it BEFORE the situation:

- When you are aware of a temptation, refuse to think about it. The more you let your mind entertain a tempting thought, the more likely you are to give in.
- The instant you are tempted, choose to occupy your mind with something else: "*Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise*" (Philippians 4:8). Listen to a worship song. Read the Bible. Pray. Get together with (godly) friends. Get some physical exercise.
- This is war. The devil will try to trip you again and again. Be alert. Be disciplined. "*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you*" (James 4:7).
- If you do fail, the world hasn't ended. Confess it. God will forgive you. You can begin again.
- If you have failed (once, twice, or a hundred times) don't give up. Don't say, "I can't do any better." Ask God for help. His Spirit can give you the strength you need to overcome. You are not in this alone. You cannot do it alone. God's Spirit can get you through.

*Even though the day be laden
and my task dreary
and my strength small,
a song keeps singing in my heart.
For I know that I'm Yours.*

*I am part of You.
You are my Father, my Brother, and my Counsellor.*

*I trust in You, O Lord;
I say, 'You are my God.'
My times are in Your hand;
my times are in Your hand.
Blessed be the Lord,
for He has wondrously shown His steadfast love to me,
His steadfast love to me.
Amen.*

Monday, February 25: John 13:31-38

The Barna Research Group asked the question, "Are Christians more like Jesus or more like Pharisees?"⁷ They developed 20 agree-or-disagree statements: 5 actions and 5 attitudes that seem to best encapsulate the actions and attitudes of Jesus Christ during his ministry on earth; and 5 actions and 5 attitudes that seem to best encapsulate the actions and attitudes of the self-righteous Pharisees (we can quibble over these, but that is not the point).

Actions like Jesus:

- I listen to others to learn their story before telling them about my faith.
- In recent years, I have influenced multiple people to consider following Christ.
- I regularly choose to have meals with people with very different faith or morals from me.
- I try to discover the needs of non-Christians rather than waiting for them to come to me.
- I am personally spending time with non-believers to help them follow Jesus.

Attitudes like Jesus:

- I see God-given value in every person, regardless of their past or present condition.
- I believe God is for everyone.
- I see God working in people's lives, even when they are not following him.
- It is more important to help people know God is for them than to ensure they know they're sinners.
- I feel compassion for people who are not following God and doing immoral things.

Self-Righteous Actions:

- I tell others the most important thing in my life is following God's rules.
- I don't talk about my sins or struggles. That's between me and God.
- I try to avoid spending time with people who are openly gay or lesbian.
- I like to point out those who do not have the right theology or doctrine.
- I prefer to serve people who attend my church rather than those outside the church.

Self-Righteous Attitudes:

- I find it hard to be friends with people who seem to constantly do the wrong things.
- It's not my responsibility to help people who won't help themselves.
- I feel grateful to be a Christian when I see other people's failures and flaws.
- I believe we should stand against those who are opposed to Christian values.
- People who follow God's rules are better than those who do not.

How would you do?

The results of the study: *"The findings reveal that most self-identified Christians in the U.S. are characterized by having the attitudes and actions researchers identified as Pharisaical. Just over half of the nation's Christians qualify for this category (51%). They tend to have attitudes and actions that are characterized by self-righteousness. On the other end of the spectrum, 14% of today's self-identified Christians – just one out of every 7 Christians – seem to represent the actions and attitudes researchers found to be consistent with those of Jesus. In the middle are those who have some mix of action and attitude. About 1/5 of Christians are Christ-like in attitude, but often represent Pharisaical actions (21%). Another 14% of respondents tend to be defined as Christ-like in action, but seem to be motivated by self-righteous or hypocritical attitudes."*

In conclusion the authors write: *"Our team discovered that 84% of young non-Christians say they know a Christian personally, yet only 15% say the lifestyles of those believers are noticeably different in a good way. This new study helps to explain that gap. It is not surprising that believers miss the mark in terms of*

⁷ Read the whole study here: https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/611-christians-more-like-jesus-or-pharisees#.VSvxh_nF9RY

representing Jesus, because transformation in Christ is so difficult and so rare. In particular, evangelicals seem to know the right way to behave, but they often admit to harboring sanctimonious motives.

"Many Christians are more concerned with what they call unrighteousness than they are with self-righteousness. It's a lot easier to point fingers at how the culture is immoral than it is to confront Christians in their comfortable spiritual patterns. Perhaps pastors and teachers might take another look at how and what they communicate. Do people somehow get the message that the 'right action' is more important than the 'right attitude'? Do church leaders have a tendency to focus more on tangible results, like actions, because those are easier to see and measure than attitudes?"

"Finally, the question of authentic faith is a particularly sore topic for many Millennials who are often leaving church due in large part to the hypocrisy they experience. No research is a perfect measure, but this study points out a sobering possibility: that the perception so many young people have of Christians contains more than a kernel of truth. Just as the New Testament writer Paul demonstrates in Galatians 2:11-16, the responsibility of the Christian community is to challenge hypocrisy just as boldly as other kinds of sin."

How does this square with Jesus' words: *"So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples"*(13:34-35). May the Lord give us the vision, passion – and strength – to have the attitudes and live the actions of Jesus. May people really know we are Christians by our love.

*I am no longer my own, but Yours.
Put me to do what You will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for You,
or laid aside for you;
let me be exalted for you,
or brought low for you;
let me be full,
let me be empty;
let me have all things,
let me have nothing;
I freely and heartily yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine, and I am yours.
So be it.
And the covenant of commitment which I have made on Earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen.*

Tuesday, February 26: John 14:1-11

"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." (www.sacredspace.ie)

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, forgiving, washing feet, encouraging, 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 beings, 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 they 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. When some people read, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me"* they are offended by the exclusivity of Jesus' comment. But think of it positively: through Jesus there actually IS a way to God; there actually is truth; there really is life. Without Him there are none of these. There is no other way to authentic relationship with the living God. There is no other source of absolute truth. There is no other way to a full and complete life here and hereafter.

When we look at the life of Jesus – as we have over the past several weeks – we have to acknowledge that Jesus is not just another ordinary person. He is God. He and the Father are one. In the long term we know that our lives are secure in His hands.

Our immediate futures are unknown and insecure. But we are invited to come to God by believing what Jesus says, and by trusting our lives to him. There may be tough times. We may encounter struggles most of our earthly lives. But we know our lives are safe and complete in Him.

"God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps. He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed. Once you were like sheep who wandered away. But now you have turned to your Shepherd, the Guardian of your souls" (1 Peter 2:21-25).

Lord, help me to do good ...

*In my journeying with you,
may I never lose my sense of direction,
never lose sight of the landmark
towards which I travel.
And should cloud or rain obscure my vision,
may I draw closer to you,
so that my feet may tread
in your footsteps,
your words be my encouragement,
and your love my protection
against the storms that assail me.
Your light is the only light I need
as I travel through life's mystery.
Your word the only voice I hear,
that still small voice that leads me
to the place where I should be.
Your presence is the only company I need,
as I walk this narrow road.
Your fellowship the warmth I crave
to help me on my way.
Amen.*

www.faithandworship.com

Wednesday, February 27: John 14:12-21

Jesus came to show us the Father. But Jesus has gone back to heaven. How then is God present with us today? Through the Spirit.

Just as Jesus models the Father for us, the Spirit models the Father and Son for us. He is at work in us before we believe, showing us our need for God, and drawing us towards God. We come to faith through the Spirit's work. When we believe, He shows us what is true, who we are, and He leads us into a deeper personal relationship with God. He comes to help us with the difficult business of loving and obeying. Like Jesus, He comes loving, healing, rebuking, challenging, forgiving, encouraging, calling us to live lives of exemplary holiness, stilling storms, and raising the dead. He transforms us to be more and more like Jesus.

The word translated "*counselor*" or "*helper*" (used in John 14-16) is very difficult to translate into English. It speaks of someone who stands with us and is for us. Imagine you were arrested and facing trial in a foreign country where you have no knowledge of the language, culture, or justice system. Wouldn't it be great to have a defense attorney – an advocate – who would not only guide you through the process, but would also represent you, defend you, and save you? In many ways that is what the Spirit does for us. We can think of The Spirit as our advocate, mentor, teacher, tutor, counselor, comforter, confidante, and defense attorney. He is with us and for us.

Dallas Willard writes, "*What are the feelings that will dominate in a life that has been inwardly transformed to be like Christ's? They are the feelings associated with love, joy, and peace. Love, joy, and peace fostered in divine fellowship simply crowd out fear, anger, unsatisfied desire, woundedness, rejection. Belonging to Christ does not immediately eliminate bad feelings, and we must not be drawn into pretense that it does. But it does **crucify** them. 'Those who belong to Christ Jesus,' we read, 'have crucified [past tense] the flesh with its passions and desires' [Galatians 5:24].*

"For many of us, just coming to honest terms with what our feelings really are will be a huge task. Very few people are without deep negative feelings towards others who are or have been closely related to them. Wounds carried steadily through the years have weighed us down and prevented spiritual growth in love, joy, and peace. They may have seeped over into our identity. We wouldn't know who we are without them. But they can be healed or dismissed, if we are ready to give them up to God and receive the healing ministry of his Word and Spirit." Are there things in your life that you need to "give up to God"?

*O God, I cannot undo the past, or make it never have happened.
Neither can You.*

*There are some things that are not possible even for You – but not many.
But You can forgive me.*

*I ask you, humbly, from the bottom of my heart:
Please, God, would you write straight with my crooked lines?
Out of the serious mistakes of my life will You make something beautiful for You?*

*Teach me to live at peace with You,
to make peace with others and even with myself.*

Give me fresh vision.

*Let me experience Your love so deeply
that I am free to face the future with a steady eye, forgiven, and strong in hope.*

All that I love I give into Your keeping.

All that I care for I give into Your care.

Be with me by day, be with me by night;

*and as dark closes the eyelids with sleep, may I waken to the peace of a new day,
rested and refreshed, filled with Your Spirit.*

At rest.

Amen

Thursday, February 28: John 14:15-31

Bilbo Baggins, one of the main characters in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, is a Hobbit. Hobbits are gentle, peace-loving, simple folk. Much to the consternation of Bilbo's quiet, peaceful, home-loving, non-adventurous neighbours, Bilbo has travelled far beyond the borders of the Shire and has had some wild experiences with trolls, goblins, and dragons. Bilbo tells his young nephew, Frodo, *"It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."*

We live in a crazy world where, if we don't keep our wits about us, there's no knowing where we might be swept off to, too. Jesus promises us His Holy Spirit – His personal presence in our lives – to help us keep our heads, hearts, and souls, and bodies safe on the unpredictable journey of life: *"And 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 later will be in 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"* (John 14:16-17, 26-27).

Jesus is not preparing His disciples to live in a holy huddle in some Christian fortress. He is preparing them to live their faith in the real knock-about world of work and family, school and friendships, health and sickness, stress and strife, success and defeat. When we step out the front door every morning we are in a rough and tumble world where we need Jesus' wisdom, His guidance, and His strength. His Spirit provides that.

Gandalf, a wise wizard, says of Bilbo: *"There is a lot more in him than you guess, and a deal more than he has any idea of himself."* When we are put in stressful situations we almost always find there is a lot more strength and resilience within ourselves than we imagine, too. Especially as people who love Jesus, we find it is when we have to rely on God, and God alone, our faith can actually grow the most. When we are stretched beyond what we – in our own human strength – can handle we discover He can get us through.

But *"God won't give me more than I am able to bear,"* right? If you look, there is no such statement in the Bible.⁸ In fact God may well allow us to face more than we can handle – on our own and in our own strength. Because when we face more than **we** can bear we turn, in humble faith and dependence, to **God**.

Peter writes, *"Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad – for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. If you are insulted because you bear the name of Christ, you will be blessed, for the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you. If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people's affairs. But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his name. ... So if you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you"* (1 Peter 4:12-19).

God's Spirit is in you. There is a lot more in you than you guess – God is there. There is much more to you than you can imagine – His Spirit is in you.

How can you live bravely, boldly, and missionally this week?

⁸ The closest verse is 1 Corinthians 10:13: *"The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure."* Notice this is specifically about **temptation**, not difficulties, hard times, or obstacles.

*Lord, why do I spend so much time laying out my week
and yet fail to plan a time for You, my Creator?
Why am I so busy speaking with others,
yet manage to find so little time for prayer with You, my Saviour?*

*Why am I always running to and fro,
yet find no energy for the joy and pleasure and blessing of prayer?
Why is my life so full of bustle and busyness, yet so little satisfaction?
Why so many meetings with people, yet so few meetings with God?*

*Why so little time being alone,
so little thirsting in my soul for the calm, sweet hours of unbroken solitude,
when God and His child – me – hold fellowship together as if we could never part?
In one single quiet hour of prayer my soul will often make more progress
than days of company with others doing busy things.*

*It is in God's presence alone,
that my soul truly gathers in wondrous refreshment and power and energy.
And it is in this way that I become truly useful to others.
When I come out fresh from communion with God
I can go forth to do His work successfully.*

*In nearness to God the vessel of my life is so filled with blessing,
that, when I come forth, I cannot contain it to myself
but must, as a blessed necessity, pour it out wherever I go.*

*Lord, help me put as a high apriority on time with You
as I do on the most essential parts of my week.*

*Truly, nothing is more important
than time well spent with the Author of Life.*

Amen.

Friday, March 1: John 15:1-8

John 14 ends with Jesus saying, *"I don't have much more time to talk to you, because the ruler of this world approaches ..."* (14:30). It's an ominous sentence. On the one hand, it is quite literally true – Imperial Roman soldiers, guided by the traitor, Judas, are on their way to arrest Him. On the other hand, He is also referring to the dark spiritual forces at work, driving Judas, motivating Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders, influencing Pontius Pilate. All the powers of evil are coming together to try to destroy Him ...

Jesus has just shared His final meal with His disciples, symbolically washed their feet, begun to talk about His death and resurrection – and promised His Holy Spirit. He concludes, *"Come, let's be going"* (14:31). They are leaving the upper room where they shared their last supper together and are heading toward the Garden of Gethsemane, through the dark streets of Jerusalem (dark, literally as it is now night, but also dark, spiritually, as the forces of evil move through the streets, searching to destroy Jesus).

As they make their way into the garden, at the foot of the Mount of Olives, they walk through vineyards. Jesus, master teacher that He is, uses the vines growing around them as an object lesson. Vines are not like trees with a large trunk out of which branches grow, one branching off the other, branches on branches on branches. Vines have one central stem out of which *each* branch grows. *Each* branch is connected directly to the stem. *Each* branch draws nourishment directly from the central vine.

As we walk through the dark streets and dusky gardens of our world, Jesus tells us we need to be connected to Him, just like that. We need to have a personal relationship with Him. We need to know Him directly, not relying on a pastor, an author, a blogger, a relative, a musician, or a friend. That takes work. Just as a gardener is always cultivating the vine to ensure it is healthy and thriving, we need to keep ensuring we are

directly connected to Jesus, so we are healthy and thriving spiritually, too. Personal prayer and Bible study, corporate worship, small group study, good friends are some of ways that we might keep connected with the vine – Jesus. What can I do to keep connected to Jesus?

When we do stay connected with Him, we bear fruit. He does not specify what the fruit is, but the context suggests that it is that which draws attention to God and glorifies him: our character, attitudes, actions, and speech. Paul is more explicit: "*The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23).

I wonder if a vine likes to be pruned? In plant terms, it must hurt. But pruning is a process that directs the plant's energy so the fruit is bigger or more plentiful. Jesus does not say what **our** pruning process looks like in His metaphor. It may hurt, too. The results are clear: anything which is dead is removed, and the person's life/fruit is enriched. We are more fruitful.

While we may not like the idea of being "pruned," we can assume that He wants to remove the "dead" parts of our lives so that we become more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled – that's good. What might He need to prune from my life? Will I let Him?

*Lord may I think often of You,
by day, by night, in my business, and even in my diversions.
You are always near me and with me;
You never leave me alone.
I would think it rude to leave a friend alone who came to visit me:
why then do I ever neglect You, my God?
You come to me so often, so many ways each and every day.
May I never forget You, but think of You often.
May I adore You continually.
May I live and die with You.*

*This life, spent always and only with You,
is the glorious wonder of being a Christian.
Lord, I yearn to be with You as you are with me.
I yearn to know You as You know me.
I yearn to love You as You love me.
And in being with, knowing, and loving You
I will be with, know and love Your people.
May I love them with the same self-sacrificing love You showed to me.
Amen.*

Saturday, March 2: John 15:9-17

When I was an undergraduate at university (working on my bachelor's degree) we called our professors Dr. Ley, Dr. McRae, Dr. Parsons. When I began working on my graduate degrees (master's and doctorate), it was on a first name basis: David, Andrew, and Jim. In that transition from undergrad to grad school, we transitioned from a professor-student to a friend-friend relationship. Of course David, Andrew, and Jim were much, much more knowledgeable and wiser than I was – I was still their student and they my mentors – but we also spent time "hanging out" and doing social things together. I got to know them as people – their joys and sorrows, successes and struggles.

Jesus is describing a transition in His relationship with His disciples. They are going from knowing Him as a Rabbi and Teacher, to knowing Him as a friend. He is sharing with them His knowledge and wisdom, but also His joy and His sorrow, His success and His struggle. Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine: He struggles through these final days/hours with the overwhelming burden He carries. He needs friends.

Of course Jesus is still much, much more knowledgeable and wise than His disciples then – or us today. He still teaches them (and us). But the tone of His teaching has become much more intimate and much more personal: *"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends ... I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me."*

Friendship is characterized by love – sacrificial, unconditional, unwavering love:

- *"I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love."*
- *"When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love."*
- *"This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."*
- *"This is my command: Love each other."*

Friendship is also characterized by obedience – obedience, informed and formed by honour and respect for a wise mentor. Knowing your wise mentor knows best, you choose to listen, to learn, and to obey:

- *"When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love."*
- *"This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you."*
- *"This is my command: Love each other."*

How do you feel knowing Jesus calls you His "friend"? How do friends relate? What do they do together? How can that describe your relationship with Jesus? Ask Him to help you get to know Him more and more ... *"I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow."*

*I get down on my knees before the Father,
this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth.
I ask him to strengthen me by his Spirit
– not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength –
that Christ will live in me as I open the door and invite him in.
And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love,
I will be able to take in, with all followers of Jesus,
the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love.
Lord, help me reach out and experience the breadth.
Test its length.
Plumb the depths.
Rise to the heights.*

*Lord, help me live a full life, full in the fullness of God.
God can do anything –
far more than I could ever imagine or guess
or request in my wildest dreams.
He does it not by pushing us around, but by working within us,
His Spirit deeply and gently within us.*

*Glory to God in the church.
Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus.
Glory down all the generations.
Glory through all millennia, forever and ever.
Amen*

Sunday, March 3: John 15:18-27

Living for Jesus is not always easy. Not only do we stumble and fail now and then, but people do not always like us. Why not? After all, we are people who teach about God's love and who try to live by maxims like, "Love your neighbour as yourself"? Are we not loveable people?

Jesus reminds us that He came teaching those same truths – and His own people killed Him for it. The reality is that in our world, despite all the rhetoric, true self-giving "love" is not a popular theme. Certain aspects of "love" are very popular – sex, for instance. But self-giving love that seeks to bring justice, peace, and equality is not well-received by many people in our culture. Why not? Because many people have a lot to lose if everyone were selfless and self-giving – economic profits, personal power and prestige, control and influence, and political clout. The kingdom of God introduces a radical reordering of society where the wealthy and powerful choose to "give up" some of their privilege to empower the poor and powerless. That is counter-cultural.

How many of us want to pay more taxes to help provide services for those who are homeless, have disabilities, or are poor? Our human "default" is selfish: we want to keep it all for ourselves ...

But historically Christians, inspired and empowered by the Spirit, have ended slavery, introduced public education and healthcare, fought for minority rights, cared for the needy and disadvantaged, championed gender equality, and much, much more – all of which were very unpopular with many people at the time. All of which cost time, money, and energy. They gave sacrificially – in the name of Jesus and His love.

Today as we care for the poor (soup kitchen, food banks, homeless shelter), advocate for peace in our world, seek to ensure justice for all, and care for God's creation, we can still be unpopular with some people. But we still do it – because it's the right thing to do. We are called to give as generously as Jesus: He gave His life for us. What do I give for Him, His Kingdom, His people?

The good news is that "the Spirit of truth will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me" – Jesus will be with us through His Holy Spirit. Praise God.

We are called to "love our neighbor" in our own community? How can we do that courageously?

*As gulls in hunger's flight keep to the boat's track,
may I follow in Jesus' wake.
As I hunger and thirst for truth,
may I follow in Jesus' wake.
May I sound the depths of love for Jesus' sake.*

*In the strong name of Jesus, I bless all that is living
and recognize in all that is living the reflection of the Word ...
the One who said, 'Let there be life' ... and it lives.*

*Teach me to care for all that is entrusted to me,
and nurture every sign of your presence.
Circle my dear ones in Your love and blessing;
and protect us all from evil and from danger.
Give me open eyes to see beyond what others say is possible.
Give me the insight to recognize and name deceit.
Give me a generosity that pushes back the boundaries,
for even death by you as been defeated.
All my power I find in You.
The Light shines on, and my life is only lived in You.
Amen*