



September 2019

**Good News:
God's Hope for our World
Readings, Reflections, Prayers**

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Monday, September 2: Psalm 96

Some of us love the old songs. For some of us that takes us back to the hymns of Charles Wesley. For some of us that takes us back to the 1980's and "Shine, Jesus, Shine." For some of us that takes us back to 2017 and Tim Neufeld's "Our Church." Ah, the good ol' days!

How does Psalm 96 begin? Is there a place for new music in the church?

Who do we sing our songs to? If we are singing our songs "to the Lord" whose opinion matters?

What is the great theme we sing about? *"Each day proclaim the good news that he saves ..."* (96:2). As we noted in Revelation, people need a lot of saving, and God is the great Saviour.

- We need saving from sin. God saves us.
- We need saving from ourselves and our own stupidity. God saves us.
- We need saving from hopelessness and despair. God saves us.
- We need saving from purposelessness. God saves us.
- We need saving from wandering around aimlessly. God saves us.

Yes, God saves us so we will be with Him eternally. But more immediately, God saves us so we can be His people, bringing and being His good news in a sinful, hopeless, purposeless, aimless world. Our purpose is to be His people, challenging and changing a broken world with the good news of God's love.

*"Worship the Lord in all his holy splendor.
Let all the earth tremble before him.
Tell all the nations, 'The Lord reigns!'"* (96:9-10)

*Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.
Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee.
Take my voice, and let me sing always, only, for my King.
Take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from Thee.
Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect, and use every power as Thou shalt choose.
Take my will, and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is Thine own; it shall be Thy royal throne.
Take my love, my Lord, I pour at Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for Thee.
Amen*

Frances Havergal (1836-1879)

Tuesday, September 3: Psalm 97

God is love (1 John 4:8). That is absolutely, 100% true.

But what is "love" actually? In our culture love and sentimentality often go hand in hand. Love is a feeling – a sappy, sentimental, feel-good emotion. You "feel" love when you feel warm, fuzzy, good sensations. When you feel love, all is good. If you cease to feel love, oh well, it was nice while it lasted.

For some people in our society, love is reduced simply to sex.

Love in the Bible is a lot more than a feeling. It is certainly more than sex. Biblically, love is inextricably tied up with positive **action**: *"God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he*

loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins" (1 John 4:9-10).

Love in the Bible is stubborn, unconditional, and sacrificial. It isn't a fleeting emotion. It is a decision to selfless care for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part ... *"God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners"* (Romans 5:8).

Notice the picture of the God of Love in Psalm 97. God is no sappy sentimentalist. He is the awesome, powerful, righteous God, who loves His people – you and me. The great God of thunder and lightning loves you. He cherishes you. He protects you. His Light shines on you. He blesses you. This is good news.

"The full good news," writes Tom Wright, *"is that, in Jesus, God has become king of the world; we look out at the world and see it in a terrible mess, and we are aware in our bones that we want to do something about it ... We humans know in our bones that we are called to bring God's wise order into the world, but for that to become a reality we need ourselves to be rescued from the same problem the rest of the world is in. We are rescued by the blood of the Lamb to be a royal priesthood."* (*Surprised by Scripture*, p. 40). We have this good news to live in deed. And to share in word.

The prayers this month (mostly) are adapted from James S. Bell Jr & Tracy Macon Sumner, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Christian Prayers & Devotions* (don't let the title fool you – it actually is a very good anthology of prayers).

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

D.L. Moody (1837-1899)

Wednesday, September 4: Psalm 98

What's the Bible all about, really? What's the BIG subject of the Bible? Me and my salvation? Or God and His Kingdom?

Certainly when we read Psalms 96-98, the great theme is God and His Kingdom. **God** is the one who has done wonderful deeds and won the mighty victory by his power and holiness (98:1). Yes, there is salvation, but it is the salvation **of our God** (96:3) **God** is the author of salvation. **He** is the great subject of all Scripture. And therefore, in response, we put our faith in **Him** and worship **Him**.

Worship in the Bible is more than just singing songs, praying prayers, and raising our hands. Worship is our expression of love and thanksgiving to God. As our expression of love, worship is active. We show our worship through how we live our lives, in everything we do, every moment of every day.

As we pray (in worship), *"Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy (Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name),"* we also pray, *"May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven (Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven)"* (Matthew 6:9-10). How is God's Kingdom going to come? How will His will be done? His Kingdom comes and His will is done by His people, as we take up His calling to be His salt and His light in a dark and dying world.

What, practically does this mean? On the one hand we share God's good news in Word. We also live God's

good news in deed. God is a God of justice and fairness (98:8). How can we live justly and fairness/equity in our relationship with other people? With God's creation?

*Lord, because you have made me, I owe you all of my love.
Because you have redeemed me, I owe you all of myself.
Because you have promised so much, I owe you all of my being.
Lord, please make me taste by love what I taste by knowledge.
Let me know by love what I know by understanding.
I owe you more than my whole self, but all I can give you is all that I am.
Draw me to you, Lord, in the fullness of love.
I am wholly yours by creation.
Make me all yours, too, in love.
Amen.*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Thursday, September 5: Psalm 146

The greatest story ever told is about a God who loves the world so much He gave His one and only Son – to take up a cross and die – so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. The “weakness” of God is stronger than human strength.

As people who believe in Jesus, our great confidence is in Him. We can be realistic about our politicians and leaders. They are very human people, just like us. They have very human answers to the city's/province's/country's/world's problems, just like us. They have feet of clay, just like us. When we don't expect politicians to be our saviours, we are realistic. We can trust God instead. What a relief.

*"Don't put your confidence in powerful people; there is no help for you there.
When they breathe their last, they return to the earth,
and all their plans die with them." (146:3-4)*

Our real Saviour is God, the creator of all. History has proven that countries, empires, and civilizations rise and fall, but only God endures forever.

Notice what is important in the Kingdom of God ...

- *"He gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry"* – He cares for the needy.
- *"The Lord frees the (unjustly imprisoned) prisoners"* – and those who suffer for their faith.
- *"The Lord opens the eyes of the blind"* – He cares for those with disabilities.
- *"The Lord lifts up those who are weighed down"* – He cares for those who are struggling.
- *"The Lord protects the foreigners among us"* – He cares for immigrants and refugees.
- *"He cares for the orphans and widows"* – He cares for the vulnerable.

"The Lord loves the godly/righteous" (146:8) – people who love what God loves (those listed above). How does that challenge us? Inspire us?

*May I become at all times, both now and forever
a protector for those without protection,
a guide for those who've lost their way,
a ship for those with oceans to cross,
a bridge for those with rivers to traverse,
a sanctuary for those in danger,
a lamp for those without light,
a place of refuge for those who lack shelter,
an encouragement for those who are discouraged,
and a servant to all in need.
Amen.*

Friday, September 6: Psalm 147

What does the Lord delight in? Did you notice? Reread 147:10-11:

*He takes no pleasure in the strength of a horse or in human might.
No, the Lord's delight is in those who fear him,
those who put their hope in his unfailing love.*

By "fear of Lord" the psalmist is not talking about terror. He is talking about reverence, awe, honour, and worship. He is talking about taking God seriously and giving Him the authority He deserves.

The Lord's delight is in those who revere, honour, and worship Him, who put their hope in Him. God loves humble people who seek to follow His ways (147:6).

Notice as well that God cares for all of His creation – not just people. He loves the stars, the skies, the earth, the grass, the animals, and the birds. He is the God of sunshine and soft breezes and Lord of snow, frost, and hail.

To those whom God has revealed His Word – us – we are responsible to keep His laws and decrees. From Genesis 1 on, we are called

- To be good stewards of God's creation. How can we do that well?
- To share His love with others, in terms of how we live (our deeds). How can we do that well?
- To share His love with others, telling them of His love (our words). How can we do that well?

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

William Temple (1881-1944)

Saturday, September 7: Psalm 148

All of God's creation is created by God, is beloved by God, and worships God. God's Kingdom is not just "all about people": He made and loves it all. Worship is not just a human activity: all of creation worships God.

Harkening back to Revelation, Psalm 148 invites us to be part of a chorus of praise rising to our Creator God: angels and heavenly beings, stars, solar systems and planets, skies, clouds and rain, lightning and hail, whales and fish, mountains and hills, apple trees and cedar trees, wild animals and cattle, small creatures and birds. Almost as an afterthought the author adds kings, nations, princes, young men, maidens, old men, and children.

What is unique about people? Among other things, people can choose NOT to worship God – for the others it's automatic. They worship naturally. Why would people choose NOT to worship God?

Psalm 148 also reminds us that "He has raised up for His people a horn ..." – a horn of salvation – Jesus. We worship God all the more because of the new life He gives us through our Saviour. Through Jesus, we have new life now and forever.

Today, enjoy the wonder of creation. And rejoice that this is ALL God's. This world is His masterpiece. All of creation is praising and adoring Him. Will we join in the celebration?

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

Augustine (354-430)

Sunday, September 8: Psalm 150

Worship can be quite a party. Trumpets/ram's horns. Harps and lyres. Tambourines and dancing. Strings and flute. Resounding cymbals.

Worship includes everyone and everything, from the heavens to the earth, to the sea. "Let everything that breathes sing praises to the Lord!" (150:8). People are just a small part of the great chorus.

This morning as we gather to worship, reflect on some of the psalms we have read this week – psalms that encourage us to worship God. In what spirit do you need to come to worship this morning?

This morning as we gather to worship God, remember that we are part of something so much bigger than ourselves. All of creation is worshipping God as we do so, as well. The skies, the mountains, the animals, the trees, the birds, and the fish – all in their own unique ways – are praising God.

Praise the Lord!

*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 praise 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.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Monday, September 9: Matthew 28:18-20

We have spent a week reading some psalms that celebrate God and His goodness to us. This Fall we're thinking about some of God's blessings to us. In particular we are asking the question, "*What is the good news?*" What is God's good news for us, personally? And what is God's good news for our world?

Sometimes we ONLY focus on the question, what is the good news for **ME**? And when I get an answer – God loves **me**, welcomes **me**, forgives **me**, and gives **me** life – I stop there. That's all good.

But the point of my new relationship with God is not that I, personally, simply enjoy His presence now and forever. He has a bigger purpose for my life than simply for me, myself, and I being blessed.

He wants us to be part of building His Kingdom. He wants us to live our faith in deed and word. He wants us to be and to share God's good news with the world.

Michael Frost writes, "*With all the best intentions in the world, some people will tell you that every Christian is an evangelist and bears the responsibility to share Christ with others*" (*Surprise the World*, p. 1). How does that make you feel?

Frost adds, "*I certainly agree with the latter part of that contention (that we bear responsibility to share our love for Jesus with others). But I fear the first part of that statement (that every Christian is an evangelist) is unhelpful ... Certainly the vast majority of Christians I know don't feel much like evangelists*" (p.2).

This week we'll look at how we can – naturally and non-threateningly – share our faith without feeling stressed out.

Today, simply pray for people you know who need to know Jesus ...

*O gracious and loving God, you work everywhere
reconciling, loving, and healing your people and your creation.
In your Son and through the power of your Holy Spirit,
you invite each of us to join you in your work.
We, young and old, ask you to form us
more and more in your image and likeness,
through our prayer and worship of you
and through the study of your scripture,
that our eyes will be fully opened to your mission in the world.
Then, God, into our communities, our nation, and the world,
send us to serve with Christ,
taking risks to give life and hope to all people and all of your creation.
We ask this in Jesus' name.
Amen.*

Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

Tuesday, September 10: Ephesians 4:1-13

We don't use the word "evangelism" much anymore. It conjures up negative images of knocking on doors with tracts, cornering our friends to berate them with "The Four Spiritual Laws," or shifty TV personalities.

Evangelism is not a bad word, just a word that is badly misunderstood. It literally means "good news" ("eu" is Greek for "good"; "angellion" means "news"). So evangelism is really just sharing the "good news" about Jesus. It's a positive thing. Unfortunately a lot of negative cultural baggage has been added over the years.

Among the spiritually gifted people in the church are "evangelists" (4:11). Evangelists are people who are especially gifted at sharing the good news (think of high-profile examples like Paul, himself, Billy Graham,

and Leighton Ford). But not everyone is an evangelist. In fact, not even every church leader identified in 4:11 is an evangelist. But evangelists exist. There are people in our church who are really good at sharing God's good news. Thank God He has gifted His church with evangelists.

Even though you may not have been called to be a specially gifted evangelist, you are called to something more than just being with Jesus when you die. You are called to live a particular kind of life every day, a godly life, a God-honouring life. You are all called to "*lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God*" (4:1). A life characterized by:

- Humility (4:1)
- Gentleness (4:1)
- Patience with each other (4:1)
- Making allowance for each other's faults because of your love (4:1)
- Making every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit (4:2)
- Binding yourselves together with peace (4:2)
- Growing in unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord (4:13)
- Measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ (4:13)

When we live like this, Michael Frost suggests we live "questionable lives" – ***the kind of lives people ask questions about:*** why do you care the way you care? Give the way you give? Live the way you live? Love the way your love? This naturally opens up opportunities for us to talk about Jesus. We simply, naturally, unobtrusively share our faith in Jesus because that's who we are.

Continue to pray for people you know who need to know Jesus ...

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

Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

Wednesday, September 11: Colossians 4:2-6

All of us who love Jesus are "Christians" and, hopefully, can briefly share what that means to us. We are not all called to be pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11). Similarly, all of us who follow Jesus are called to have a general orientation to want to share our faith. But not all of us are specially gifted evangelists.

In Colossians 4, Paul asks for prayers for himself and other gifted evangelists that they have many

opportunities to speak about Jesus, and to proclaim this message clearly (4:3-4). But he doesn't suggest the Colossians pray the same ways for themselves. Instead, we are to pray for our evangelists. Then **we** are to live wisely among those who are not believers. In particular, we can pray that our conversation be gracious and attractive so that we can answer people's questions wisely and well.

Michael Frost breaks it out like this:

Type of Minister	Priorities	Type of Ministry
Gifted Evangelists (a few of us)	Clarity in the gospel; alertness for opportunities	Bold proclamation
Evangelistic believers (most of us)	Prayer, watchfulness, wise conversation	Gracious answers

"Believers," Frost writes, "are to pray like crazy and to conduct themselves, in word and deed, in such a way as to provoke unbelievers to question their beliefs and enter into an evangelistic dialogue" (p.5).

Continue to pray for people you know who need to know Jesus ...

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

Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510)

Thursday, September 12: 1 Peter 3:13-17

Our calling is to live "good lives." Michael Frost puts it like this: "*All believers (can live) **live questionable lives**. If all believers are living the kinds of lives that evoke questions from their friends, then opportunities for sharing faith abound, and chances for the gifted evangelists to boldly proclaim are increased. In brief, our task is to surprise the world!*" (p.5)

In 1 Peter 3, Peter reemphasizes what Paul has said in Colossians 4. When we live godly lives, people inevitably ask questions:

- Why do you live the way you live?
- Why do you forgive the way your forgive?
- Why do you give the way you give?
- Why do you volunteer the way you volunteer?
- Why do you worship the way you worship?
- Why do you love the way you love?

Our task is to simply share the truth: we live this way because of Jesus. We can naturally and nonthreateningly share our faith. Not everyone will respond positively (Peter is honest about that). But that's OK. Our calling is simply to be faithful.

*Stay with me, Lord, and then I shall begin to shine as you shine,
to be a light to others.
The light, Jesus, will be all from you.
None of it will be mine.
No merit belongs to me.
It will be you who shines through me upon others.
Let me praise you, in the way which you love best,
by shining on all those around me.
Give light to them as well as to me;
bring light to them through me.
Teach me to show forth your praise, your truth, your will.
Make me preach you without preaching – not by words
but by my example and by the sympathetic influence of what I do –
by my visible resemblance to your saints,
and the evident fullness of love which my heart bears to you.
Fill my heart, Lord, with overwhelming love for you.
Amen.*

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Friday, September 13: Acts 2:38-47

In Acts, while Peter, Paul, and other gifted evangelists were proclaiming the gospel, thousands – tens of thousands – of “ordinary” believers (like us) were infiltrating every part of society and living the kind of questionable lives that invited curiosity about Jesus. They surprised the Roman Empire by their lifestyles.

For instance, these normal believers devoted themselves to acts of sacrificial grace. They cared for the poor. They fed the hungry. They loved their enemies. They forgave their persecutors. They buried the bodies of those who died from infectious diseases (which no one else would touch).

The Emperor Julian (331-363 AD) was alarmed by the astonishing lives led by Jesus’ followers:

"When it came about that the poor were neglected and overlooked by the (pagan) priests, the (Christians) observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy. And they have gained notoriety through the credit they win from such practices. Just as someone can entice a child with a cake – by throwing pieces to them two or three times – and get them to follow them ... by the same method these (Christians) also begin with their so-called love feast, or hospitality, or service of tables – for they have many ways of carrying it out and call it by many names – and the result is that they have led many into (Christianity)."

Julian decided to go on the offensive, instructing his imperial officials and the Roman priests to *out-love* the Christians by distributing food and building hostels for travelers.

"It is their kindness to strangers, their care for the dead, and the pretend holiness of their lives that have done the most to increase (Christianity). I believe we really and truly ought to practice every one of these virtues. It is disgraceful when the (Christians) support not only their own poor and ours as well."

Julian’s attempts at reform failed miserably. Without the Spirit, his reforms were a flop. Meanwhile, the church grew. Why? Because of the way ordinary believers lived their lives. They fed the poor, they welcomed all people, rich and poor, of every nationality, men and women, young and old. In the highly stratified, harsh world of the Roman Empire, their conduct surprised people. And raised questions.

In a culture shaped by Christian values, we take many of these virtues for granted. They are not as shocking as they once were. But in other ways we still live distinctive lives as believers. In what ways?

How do you live differently, because of your faith in Jesus?

Continue to pray for people you know who need to know Jesus ...

*Lord, help us to see in your crucifixion and resurrection
an example of how to endure and seemingly to die
in the agony and conflict of daily life,
so that we may live more fully and creatively.
You accepted patiently and humbly the rebuffs of human life,
as well as the tortures of your crucifixion and passion.
Help us to accept the pains and conflicts that come to us each day
as opportunities to grow as people and become more like you.
Enable us to go through them patiently and bravely,
trusting that you will support us.
Make us realize that it is only by frequent deaths
of ourselves and our self-centered desires
that we can come to live more fully;
for it is only by dying with you that we can rise with you.
Amen*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Saturday, September 14: Titus 2:1-10

How we live matters.

Paul concludes this passage of advice for his young pastor-friend, Titus with the encouragement that when people live godly lives, "*Then they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive in every way*" (2:10).

Paul's advice for each group in the church is really appropriate for every other group, too.

We should all

- *exercise self-control, be worthy of respect, and live wisely*
- *have sound faith and be filled with love and patience*
- *live in a way that honors God*
- *not slander others or be heavy drinkers*
- *teach others what is good*
- *submit to one another in love*
- *not talk back or steal*
- *show ourselves to be entirely trustworthy and good.*

Some of these are commonly accepted social conventions (like not stealing).

Other of these virtues are counter-cultural. We don't live in a world that values self-control, love, or patience. Mutual submission grates like nails on a chalkboard for some people. Living in a way that honours God sounds odd in our society. But when we live this way, people notice. They ask questions.

Continue to pray for people you know who need to know Jesus ...

*O Lord, in this time of need, strengthen me.
 You are my strength and my shield;
 You are my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
 I know, Father, that Your eyes go to and fro throughout the earth
 to strengthen those whose hearts long for You.
 The body grows weary,
 but my hope is in You to renew my strength.
 I do not fear, for You are with me.
 I am not dismayed or overwhelmed, for You are my God.
 I know You will strengthen me and help me;
 that You will uphold me with Your righteous hand.
 Even as the shadows of illness cover me,
 I feel the comfort of Your strength, O Lord.
 Amen.*

Sunday, September 15: Psalm 1

Psalm 1 is a contrast between two types of people: those "*who delight in the law of the Lord*" and the "*wicked*." Which would you rather be?

The truth of Psalm 1 is in recognizing that there are these two types of people. In fact, good and evil are far bigger categories than just people. While many people are good, God created the universe, including every living being, and declared it all "good" (Genesis 1). While many people are evil, so are some political systems, economic arrangements, tsunamis, and earthquakes.

We live in a world in which good and evil coexist. We interact with both on a regular basis. In fact, we live with both on a regular basis. We know that each of us, ourselves, wrestles with good and evil within our own selves. Soviet dissident, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, wrote, "*If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?*"

This week we're thinking about God's "good news." The Greek word is "euangelion" from which we get "evangelism." The old Shakespearean English word for good news is "gospel."

Sometimes we describe the "gospel" as simply "believe in Jesus in you'll go to heaven when you die." Is that it? This week, I want us to look at the BIG story of the Bible and see how God's good news is much more than that. God's good news takes on the challenge of evil and defeats it. And God's good news gives us purpose for our lives, today and everyday.

In the meantime, reflect on Psalm 1 ... and be encouraged.

*Glory to you, O Lord our God.
 Your love calls us to be your people.
 By sharing our many and diverse gifts we share in your mission.
 We ask you, Lord, to shape us into a community of faith.
 Nourish us by your word and worship
 that we may grow into the image of Jesus.
 Through the power of your Holy Spirit,
 heal us that we, in turn, may heal the wounded.
 Form us to be instruments of love, justice, and peace in our land,
 and send us to proclaim your saving work.
 Renew us, Lord, that we may renew the face of the earth.
 Amen*

Monday, September 16: Romans 1:16-32

Romans 1 sounds shocking. But reading the headlines in the news this morning is just as shocking. Paul's diagnosis of the evil in his day is eerily reminiscent of problems in our world in 2019. Paul's readers, Jewish Christians in Rome, would have read this and said, "Those evil Romans – see I always knew they were terrible people." But in Romans 2, Paul turns the tables and says, "Yes, the Romans are bad, but you've got your problems, too" He quotes Psalm 51: *"No one is righteous – not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one."* (Romans 3:10-12). Ouch.

The BIG story of the Bible is one of God desiring people have a right relationship with Him and with His creation. Initially He blessed Adam and Eve; they sinned. He chose Noah and his family; they failed. He selected Abraham and the Israelites; they blew it. *"For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard"*(Romans 3:23). That's the bad news.

Evil is rampant in our world. It's not just individuals who are evil. Throughout the Bible, God points out that nations oppress other peoples; think of the Egyptians enslaving the Israelites or sub-human factory conditions in parts of the developing world today. Socio-economic systems can become unjust; the prophets are merciless on ancient Israel, when the rich got richer and the poor poorer. What must God think of North American companies in which CEOs earn millions, but average workers don't earn a living wage? Even religious and political systems can become rotten; think of Jesus' unjust trials before both the Jewish and Roman powers-that-be. Think of scandals of abuse by clergy in many different denominations.

The Good News needs to be bigger than just "you go to heaven when you die." A simple heaven-after-death gospel is not really good news for people devastated by Cyclones Idai and Kenneth in Mozambique earlier this year. It's not really good news for refugees from Syria scattered across the globe. It's not Good News for people whose loved ones are swept up in the opioid epidemic. It's not good news for the families of those killed in mass shootings in El Paso or Dayton. To have real good news for our world, we need a bigger "gospel" than simply eternal life in heaven.

Our good news, of course, comes through Jesus. *"When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners ... God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God"* (Romans 5:8-11). On the one hand, this is personal. We are saved through Jesus' death.

We shall also see that God's good news is bigger than just that. Thank God for His salvation through Jesus.

*Dear Lord, during my trials,
I offer up to you my confusion:
Give me clarity.
I offer up to you my despair:
Give me hope.
I offer up to you my weakness:
Give me strength.
I offer up to you my pettiness:
Give me generosity of spirit.
I offer up to you all those negative thoughts from Satan.
When he asks "Where is Your God now?"
Through your Holy Spirit, I respond:
"My God is right here with me, giving me His grace
As a heavenly beam of light penetrating your darkness!" Amen.*

Tuesday, September 17: Romans 5:1-11

A quick glance at this morning's headlines reminds us that evil is part of our world.

We would love to believe that the world is just getting better and better and better, but my newsfeed begs to differ. The world is just as problematic as it was 3000 years ago when the Israelites had forgotten God, were oppressing the poor, taking advantage of the vulnerable, and uncaring about refugees. The world is just as unjust as when self-interest, pride, and "fake news" led to the unfair condemnation of Jesus. Let's be honest: our society has its social, political, and economic evils as well.

The story of Bible is one of human wickedness and a groaning creation. All that evil and wickedness – the personal sins of the chief priests and Pilate, the political sins of Roman power and cruelty, the religious sins of a corrupt Jewish system, the social sins of a crowd who yells "Crucify Him!", even the natural sins of darkness and earthquake, all come crashing down on Jesus as He dies upon the cross.

Jesus suffered for us.

This, paradoxically, is how Jesus deals with the BIG problem of evil in the world. He doesn't helicopter His people out of the suffering. He wades into the midst of the flood of pain Himself, to be with His people in it. He experiences the pain and suffering we experience – and more. He is with us through the "*slings and arrows of outrageous fortune*." And He carries us through the swarming currents.

"The tidal wave of evil crashed over the head of God Himself. The spear went into His side like a plane crashing into a great building. God has been there. He has taken the weight of the world's evil on His own shoulders. This is not an explanation. It is not a philosophical conclusion. It is an event in which, as we gaze on in horror, we may perhaps glimpse God's presence in the deeper darkness of our world, God's strange unlooked-for victory over the evil of our world ..." (Tom Wright, *Surprised by Scripture*, p. 123).

Whatever we're going through – God has been there and done that. He is going through it with us. And He will sustain us. We are not alone. "*Be sure of this*," says Jesus, "*I am with you always, even to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20). That's Good News.

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

James Bell Jr.

Wednesday, September 18: Romans 7:14-25

It's easy to find fault with celebrities and politicians (like Donald Trump). It's not too difficult to see the greed of big corporations (like multinationals destroying the Amazon rainforests). It's possible to see the sin of a socio-economic system that values corporate profits over the welfare of ordinary people and the natural environment. I can see sin "out there" quite easily. What about the sin "in here" – in my own life?

Paul is realistic. We are all part of the problem. How does this passage ring true in your life?

Paul laments, *"Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?"* (7:24)

Paul's response? *"Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord."* (7:25).

Jesus' death is the atonement for our sins, personally. *"God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood"* (Romans 3:24-25). This is Good News.

But Jesus' death also speaks to those bigger problems as well. Through His suffering and death, He takes upon himself the sin of all people, systems, and societies. He walks into the dark places and meets us there. He walks with us through the valley of the shadows, bringing us out the other side. That is Good News.

Jesus is with us through it all. That's Good News.

One day, some day, all will be put to right. The evil powers will be unmasked, judged, and destroyed. In the meantime, God is always with us. That is Good News.

"Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord." (7:25).

*Almighty and merciful Father,
we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the plans and desires
of our own hearts and have broken your holy laws.
We have left undone those things we should have done,
and we have done those things we should not have done.
There is no health in us, but you, Lord,
have mercy upon us miserable offenders.
Spare us, God, who confess to you our faults.
Restore us who are repentant,
according to your promises declared to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.
And grant, most merciful Father, for Jesus' sake,
that from now on we may live godly,
righteous, and self-controlled lives.
Amen.*

Anglican prayer of general confession

Thursday, September 19: Romans 8:1-14

The Good News changes us. Then it changes the world.

Yes, the Good News is that, *"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"* (Romans 8:1-2). We have life. And we are freed from the power of sin.

What, then, is the result? The **call** of the Good News is for the church – us – to implement the victory of God in the world. An essential component of God's Good News is a call to live differently. *"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"* (8:3).

The Good News is we need no longer be controlled by the power of sin. God has given us His Holy Spirit so we can live lives that honour and please Him. His Spirit can make us more and more like Jesus.

What characterized Jesus' live? Love. Love for His friends. Love for His enemies. Love for all. Of course His love led to the cross. His love cost Him His life.

"The cross," writes Tom Wright, *"becomes the only sign by which to address the wickedness of the world. The cross signifies that the pagan empire, symbolized in the might and power of brute force, has been decisively challenged by the power of love – and that this decisive challenge will win the day"* (p. 125).

The answer to evil in the world is for God's people to live the Good News, showing His love in Word and deed. Living a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led life may bring us into difficult places. It is hard to love, unconditionally. But this is who we are called be – people of the cross. How does unconditional love challenge you?

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

Claude de la Colombière (1641-1682)

Friday, September 20: Romans 8:14-27

The good news changes us. In us and through us, the good news changes the world.

All of creation is waiting in eager anticipation for God's people, filled with His Spirit, to live out the Good News. As we read yesterday, *"the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death"* (8:2). Our lives are now home to God's Spirit. If we invite Him in, welcome Him, and are led by Him, we can show the world a different way to live. We will live "questionable lives."

There is tremendous transformative power through lives led by God's Spirit. We saw that in the quotes of Emperor Julian last week. We see it through the fact that the Roman Emperor, Constantine, becomes a Christian himself less than a hundred years after Julian. We see it through the development of schools, hospitals, and safe hostels under the auspices of the church. We see it through social reformers, led by the Spirit, who ended child labour, slavery, and social, racial, and gender-based injustice.

At their best, Christians, in big and small ways, have challenged and changed the world for the better, in the name of Jesus. They have brought an end to some of the death and decay in the world, and brought some of the glorious freedom God desires for His creation (8:21). Of course, we're not there yet. There is much to do. And, ultimately, we will never succeed at totally changing the world for good.

On the one hand, the Good News is this : *"we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us"*(3:23). We look forward to God's full and complete reign.

On the other hand, we can do our small part, in our small part of the world, to make a difference for God where we are. Right here, right now, we can be Good News to someone. How?

Pray (8:26-37). Ask God to help you see how you can be salt and light in your home. In your school. In your workplace. In your community. We are God's gospel – His Good News – to the world.

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

Michelangelo (1475-1564)

Saturday, September 21: Romans 8:26-39

Conquerors lead armies. They are powerful generals, backed by brute force. Aren't they?

The paradox of God's Good News is that Jesus is the ultimate conqueror, but He conquered by love. He conquered by going to the cross. He conquered by taking the weight of all the sin, all the pain, all the evil, and all the wickedness of the world upon Himself.

As we live Spirit-filled, Spirit-led lives, we are *"more than conquerors."* Notice Paul does not imply that it's all going to be a bed of roses. He talks about real challenges we may face as we try to live our faith. God may not protect us from experiencing tough times. He will get us through them all.

Do we live like this?

At our best we do. We can be good at loving our neighbour as ourselves. But we also get a bit selfish, too. Jeffrey MacDonald challenges us, *"The shallowness of much current evangelicalism is shocking. For people who have allegedly removed self from the throne of life and placed Jesus on it, there is an incredible amount of selfishness."* When the good news is reduced to simply a personal pact to go to heaven when you die, selfishness is inevitable. How about you?

We can say, "Yes, well, God is going to come again and set all things right, so I don't have to do anything now." The Spirit is challenging you to actually live the Good News and be God's Good News today.

We can say, "But what if people are unkind? Hurtful? Ungrateful?" Paul is honest. Expect that some will be. That's OK. They opposed Jesus, too. But, through the power of love, He overcame them all.

"Evil is still a four-letter word; so, thank God, is love. God grant us grace to be so filled with love that we may work in our own day with mature, Christian, sober intelligence to address the problem of evil, to implement the victory achieved on the cross, and to agents, heralds, and living embodiments of that new creation in which the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea" (Wright, p. 128).

How can we embody the love of God? What is God saying to you?

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

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

Sunday, September 22: Romans 12:1-3

God loves us as we are, who we are, where we are. But He loves us too much to leave us there. And He has too big a plan – to share His love with the whole world – to go it alone. He calls us to be part of the glorious enterprise of being His people and being His Good News to a hurting, lonely, alienated world.

God wants the best for us. So Paul challenges us to really let the Spirit into our lives. To genuinely allow Him to shape our character. To actually let Him mold our lifestyle and habits. To sincerely follow His leading. When we do that, we *"will learn to know God's will, which is good and pleasing and perfect"* (8:3).

That sounds wonderful. It's hard to authentically put into practice.

Change is difficult. Most of us are in pretty comfortable ruts. We're afraid God will shake us up a bit if we

really let Him into our lives.

We're afraid of living "questionable lives" that mark us as different from other people. It is so much easier to conform and be just like everyone else. *"Trials and tests locate a person,"* writes John Bevere. *"In other words they determine where you are spiritually. They reveal the true condition of your heart. How you react under pressure is how the real you reacts."*

Who is the "real you"?

- You are a person God loves. *"The Son of God loved you and gave himself for you"* (Galatians 2:20).
- You are called to be His Good News. *"Be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless"* (1 Corinthians 15:58).

*Lord, open our eyes
that we may see you in our brothers and sisters.
Lord, open our ears
that we may hear the cries of the hungry,
the cold, the frightened, the oppressed.
Lord, open our hearts
that we may love each other as you love us.
Renew in us your spirit.
Lord, free us and make us one.
Amen*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Monday, September 23: Romans 12:1-8

Each one of us is loved by God. And, each one of us is called by God to live in His Spirit.

For gifted evangelists, that means they should evangelize. For the rest of us, that means living faithfully for Jesus, day by day. We live with integrity. We live with compassion. We live with love.

The good news is that the salvation of the world is not on YOUR shoulders. The salvation of the world is not on my shoulders. We are all part of the church. And together, you are called to do your part, I am called to do mine, and we do amazing things.

In the 19th Century, Susan Warner wrote this wonderful hymn:

*Jesus bids us shine with a clear, pure light,
Like a little candle burning in the night;
In this world of darkness, we must shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.*

*Jesus bids us shine, first of all for Him;
Well He sees and knows it if our light is dim;
He looks down from heaven, sees us shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.*

*Jesus bids us shine, then, for all around
Many kinds of darkness in this world abound:
Sin, and want, and sorrow—we must shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.*

*Jesus bids us shine, as we work for Him,
Bringing those that wander from the paths of sin;
He will ever help us, if we shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.*

How can you shine in your small corner, today?

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

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

Tuesday, September 24: Romans 12:9-21

Michael Frost challenges us to adopt “missional habits” – new ways of living and acting, in accordance with God’s Spirit, that help us share our faith in natural, nonthreatening ways.

“The first habit I want you to consider embracing is that of blessing others. In fact, I’d like you to bless three people each week – at least one of whom is a member of your church and at least one of whom is not. The third can be from either category” (p.29).

He suggests three primary ways we can do this:

1. Words of affirmation – send a note, write an email, text – send words of affirmation and encouragement. Mark Twain once said, *“I can live for two months on one good complement.”*
2. Acts of kindness – help a neighbour, babysit someone’s kids (for free), pay for coffee. Look for opportunities to do little things that make a big difference in someone’s life.
3. Gifts – gifts come in all shapes and sizes: cheering up a struggling person; a food gift certificate for a family, time spent together.

“This means blessings (will) ricochet around your church, as members are affirming, gifting, and performing acts of kindness for each other. It also means church members are propelled outward to bless unbelievers in these ways. Just watch how unleashing a culture of blessing – words of affirmation, acts of kindness, gift giving – binds people to each other. It has the effect of strengthening the Christian community while launching its members more deeply into the lives of outsiders” (Frost, p. 34).

Try it. Bless three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church. It’s not that complicated. It is radical in a self-absorbed, self-oriented, self-gratifying world. It is one way we can live “questionable lives” – lives that invite people to ask us why we do what we do.

Why do we bless others? Because God has blessed us. And we want to pass on the good news of God’s grace and love.

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

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

Wednesday, September 25: Romans 13:8-14

Did you have the opportunity to bless someone yesterday? How about today? Will you try again?

I have a friend who reads too much news. As a result he seems chronically depressed. Each time we get together he is lamenting the global crises of one sort or another. These are all serious, of course. But you and I can do very little about Donald Trump, loss of biodiversity in the rainforests, Boko Haram in Nigeria, or microplastics in the oceans (however we can make some small changes that CAN make a difference – like using reusable shopping bags, driving less, using LED lights, buying fair trade products, etc., etc.).

We can shine as lights in our small corner of the world. We can be God's good news where we are as we encourage people with kind words, do thoughtful things, and give the gifts of time, help, and love.

Paul is continuing to encourage us to see that God's love is the supreme force in the universe – not armies, not bombs, not money, not governments. As we read the news it's good to keep things in proper perspective. And it's good to remember that we CAN make a difference! We can make the world a better place, one small act of love at a time.

Your homework? Bless three people this week (or try to do it every day), at least one of whom is not a member of our church.

*Lord God, you alone are the source of every good gift,
of the vast array of our universe,
and the mystery of each human life.
We praise you and we thank you
for your great power and your tender, faithful love.
Everything we are and everything we have is your gift,
and after having created us,
you have given us into the keeping of your son, Jesus Christ.
Fill our minds with His truth and our hearts with His love,
that in His spirit we may be bonded together
in a community of faith, a church family, a caring people.
In the name and spirit of Jesus,
we commit ourselves to be good stewards of the gifts entrusted to us,
to share in our time, our talent, and our material gifts
as an outward sign of the treasure we hold in Jesus.
Amen.*

Thursday, September 26: Romans 14

There is a large daisy on the east wall of our sanctuary. On each petal is the phrase "He loves me" in ten different languages from our congregation: Karin (Burma), French, Romanian, German, Spanish, Yoruba (Nigeria), English, Dutch, Chinese, and Italian. God loves each us and knows us in our own language. That is Good News. Great news.

Nina and Larry Weaver (who created the daisy) say the inspiration came from the old children's rhyme, "He loves me? He loves me not?" They want to make the point that the good news of the gospel is that God absolutely DOES love each and every one of us more than we can imagine.

God loves each one of us. That's Great News. How are we doing at loving one another?

Unfortunately, sometimes our love for one another is less gracious than God's love for us. Paul is addressing this a bit in Romans 14.

- How can we love one another, even when we disagree?
- How can we bless one another, even when we disagree?

Continue to try to bless three people this week/day, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.

*As I go to work,
Be with me Lord.
Be the patience when I'm frustrated.
Be the endurance when I am tired.
Be the wisdom when I am uncertain.
Be the inspiration when I'm out of ideas.
Be the peacemaker when I feel hurt.
Be the comforter when I feel overwhelmed.
Be the energy when I am weary.
Be the guide when I am confused.
Be the forgiver when I get it wrong.
Be with me Lord, today.
Amen*

Friday, September 27: 1 Corinthians 13

This is one of the most famous passages in the entire Bible. We often read it at weddings and other celebrations of romantic/family "love." But the context of 1 Corinthians 13 is the middle of a letter about issues in a **church**: people are backstabbing their leaders, having ethical problems around sexuality and what they can/can't eat, their worship services are a mess, they are obsessing about the gift of speaking in tongues, et., etc. They are not a healthy "body" at all. In fact, the church is a mess.

When we read this chapter we often focus on the middle few verses and forget the "frames": the first and last paragraphs of the passage. In 13:1-3, Paul reminds us that we can do all sorts of amazing things ... but if they are not done in the spirit of love (defined in 4-7), they don't amount to anything (this immediately follows 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul has talks about the many different gifts present in a church, and how we are all important parts of the church body). Our **attitude** – an attitude of love – is foundational.

The Corinthians were into "looking good" spiritually – talking out loudly in tongues, spouting great prophecies, putting on a show of their faith and even of their charity ... but it was showmanship. These great looking things felt great and impressed the onlookers. But they were not done out of love for God – or for anyone else. The Corinthians were making themselves feel good. And they wanted to "look good" to

other people. Do we ever do things “to look good” and forget the true motivation we should have?

In 13:8-13, Paul tells us that over time – through our lives, as circumstances come our way, as life happens – things change for good or for bad. We change for good or for bad. The church changes for good or for bad. If we build on the foundation of love – God’s love for us, and a genuine love for our neighbour – we’ll be just fine. If our focus is on loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and loving our neighbour as ourselves, we will find life full, rich, and meaningful. The older I get, the more I appreciate that it is relationships – with God, family and friends – that are most important. Focusing on them is what really matters most.

Faith in God, hope in His power and presence, and His ever-lasting love are the most important things in our lives. The greatest of these – the truth that underlies all the others – is His love. And our challenge is to love others with the same richness and depth that He showed to us (13:4-7).

Paul talks about Christian love to a messed up, mixed up, dysfunctional church. Thankfully we’re not nearly as troubled as the Corinthians were ☺! But it is good for us to reflect on what Paul is saying to **us** – as a church – and to **each of us** – individually. Reflect on these verses in various translations ...

<i>New Intern'l Version</i>	<i>New Living Transl'n</i>	<i>The Message Transl'n</i>	<i>New KJV Transl'n</i>
Love is patient	Love is patient	Love never gives up	Love suffers long
Love is kind	Love is kind	Love cares more for others than for self	Love is kind
Love does not envy	Love is not jealous	Love doesn't want what it doesn't have	Love does not envy
Love does not boast	Love is not boastful	Love doesn't strut	Love does not parade itself
Love is not proud	Love is not proud	Love doesn't have a swelled head	Love is not puffed up
Love does not dishonor others	Love is not rude	Love doesn't force itself on others	Love does not behave rudely
Love is not self-seeking	Love does not demand its own way	Love isn't always "me first"	Love does not seek its own
Love is not easily angered	Love is not irritable	Love doesn't fly off the handle	Love is not provoked
Love keeps no record of wrongs	Love keeps no record of being wronged.	Love doesn't keep score of the sins of others	Love thinks no evil
Love does not delight in evil	Love does not rejoice about injustice	Love doesn't revel when others grovel	Love does not rejoice in iniquity
Love rejoices with the truth	Love rejoices whenever the truth wins out.	Love takes pleasure in the flowering of truth	Love rejoices in the truth
Love always protects	Love never gives up	Love puts up with anything	Love bears all things
Love always trusts	Love never loses faith	Love trusts God always	Love believes all things
Love always hopes	Love is always hopeful	Always looks for the best	Love hopes all things
Love always perseveres	Love endures through every circumstance	Never looks back, but keeps going to the end.	Love endures all things
Love never fails	Love will last forever	Love never dies	Love never fails

- How can we incorporate some these virtues into our church?
- Which one/two (or more!) speak to you personally? How can you incorporate them into your life?
- How will that change happen – today?

*My God, I believe in you, but strengthen my faith.
All my hopes are in you, but please protect them.
I love you, but teach me to love you more and more dearly.
I am sorry that I've offended you;
please increase my sorrow and my repentance.
I adore you as my first beginning,
and I aspire after you as my last end.
I give you thanks as my constant benefactor,
and I call upon you as my supreme protector.
Grant, my God, to conduct me by your wisdom,
to control me by your justice,
to comfort me by your mercy,
and to defend me by your power.
I desire to consecrate to you all my thoughts, words, actions, and sufferings
that from now on I may think of you, speak of you,
offer all my actions to your greater glory,
and suffer willingly whatever you shall bring into my life.
Lord, I desire that in all things your will may be done –
because it is your will, and your will is perfectly good.
I beg you to enlighten my understanding, to inflame my will,
to purify my body, and to sanctify my soul.
Amen.*

Richard Challoner (1691-1781)

Saturday, September 28: Romans 15:1-13

It's good to encourage one another. It is good to bless people – in the church and in the community. It's great when our generous lifestyle leads people to ask questions about our faith.

Michael Frost has some helpful words of caution for us, however:

"While blessing others will certainly provide opportunities to share your faith with them, we need to be watchful that we're not being generous friends MERELY in order to convert them. We are called to bless because we were made to bless the nations. No doubt those 4th Century Christians that Emperor Julian was complaining about were feeding the poor, ministering to the dying, and practicing benevolence toward plenty of strangers who didn't convert. It wasn't an evangelistic strategy as such. It was simply their guileless lifestyle. And it was habitual. This was the source of Julian's outrage: the Christians were doing these things with no sense of personal gain in mind.

"We need to develop a rhythm of gift giving, time spending, and affirmation sharing as an end in itself because it fosters a spirit of generosity, it mirrors the character of God, and it alerts others to His reign" (pp.35-36).

Paul writes, *"We should help others do what is right and build them up in the Lord"* (NLT), or *"Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up"* (NIV).

Keep on trying to bless three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.

"I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit" (15:13).

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

Isidore of Seville (560-636)

Sunday, September 29: Psalm 46

Notice the forces of chaos and evil: earthquakes, mountains crumbling, the seas roaring and foaming, the nations in an uproar ... sound familiar? Where is God?

He is in the midst of it all as our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. That's Good News.

God is in the midst of His people (146:5). He is with them. That's Good News.

Sometimes we think we live in a two-tier universe: we live on earth, God is in heaven, never the twain shall meet. What the Bible presents us with is a reality-view in which heaven and earth are not so separate. In fact, God is very much present here among His people – in the good times and in the hard times. He has not abandoned us to forces of chaos, He is with us in the midst of whatever we are going through.

Our challenge is to recognize God in the midst of the tumult. "*Be still and know that I am God!*" God says. It's so hard to be still and listen, and feel, and see.

- Can you hear His voice? In the voice of a caring friend?
- Can you hear His voice? In a word from Scripture?
- Can you feel His touch? In a kind gesture or a gentle hug?
- Can you feel His touch? In the prayer of a friend?
- Can you see His hand? In the work of a doctor or nurse?
- Can you see His hand? Maybe in the kind act of a stranger?

God is with you – always. Be still and know that He is God.

Our Father: *our Creator, Redeemer, Comforter, and Savior.*

In heaven: *you are with the angels and the saints, bathing them in your light that they may be enlightened by your love, and dwelling with them that they may be filled with your joy. You are the supreme good, the eternal good, from whom comes all goodness, and without whom there is no goodness.*

May your name be honored: *May our knowledge of you become ever clearer, that we may know the breadth of your blessings, the length of your promises, the height of your Majesty, and the depth of your judgments.*

May your kingdom come soon: rule in our hearts with your grace, that we may become fit subjects for your kingdom. We desire nothing more than to dwell in your kingdom, where we can watch you on your throne, and enjoy your perfect love.

Your will be done here on earth just as it is in heaven: May we love you with our whole heart by always thinking of you, with our whole soul by always desiring you, with our whole mind by directing all our intentions to you, with our full strength by spending all our energies in your service. And may we love our neighbors as ourselves, drawing them to your love, rejoicing in their good fortunes, and caring for them in their misfortunes.

Give us our food today: in memory and understanding and reverence of the love which our Lord Jesus Christ has for us, revealed by his sacrifice for us on the cross, we ask for the perfect bread of his body.

And forgive us our sins today: we know that you forgive us, through the suffering and death of your beloved Son.

Just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us: enable us to forgive perfectly and without reserve any wrong that has been committed against us. And strengthen our hearts truly to love our enemies, praying for them and striving to serve them.

And don't let us eat yield to temptation: save us not only from obvious and persistent temptations, but also those that are hidden or come suddenly when our guard is lowered.

But deliver us from the evil one: protect us from past evil, protect us against present evil, and free us from future evil.

Amen.

Based on the writings of Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

Monday, September 30: John 3:1-17

If I were to ask you for a single Bible verse that best summarizes the Good News, you might quote John 3:16. It is a great verse. It shows up on bumper stickers, signs at football games, t-shirts, tracts ...

Of course, like every verse in Scripture, it is part of a bigger story. The Bible is not a random collection of otherwise unrelated sayings. It's a series of unified stories and interconnected teachings.

John 3:16 follows John 3:1-15 (surprise!), the story of an influential Jewish leader coming to Jesus to learn more about who He is.

Jesus talks about the "Kingdom of God" (note, not heaven) (3:3-5) and "eternal life" (3:15-16). Jesus actually hardly ever talks about heaven, but he talks a lot about the "kingdom of God" and about "life." Both the "kingdom of God" and "life" include the idea of life-after-death-with-Jesus, but they also refer to a different kind of life, here and now. For instance, when Jesus says, "*I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full*" (John 10:10), He is referring to our ongoing day to day experience, not just eternity.

Jesus wants us to know that, through His life and death, we have new life with Him – today and forever. Eternal life is not just something for one day, some day; it started the moment we welcomed Jesus as our Saviour. We are living God's eternal life, life in the Kingdom of God, at this moment.

Of course, our experience of eternal life and kingdom of God is not as full, rich, and complete as it will be in the future. But remember Romans 8: God has given us His Spirit. He is with, in us, leading us right now. We are living life with Jesus – eternal life – today. That's Good News.

Tom Wright summarizes our Good News like this: "*The work of salvation, in its full sense, is (1) about whole human beings, not merely souls; (2) about the present, not simply the future; and (3) about what God does through us, not merely what God does in and for us.*"

When we invite other people to know Jesus, it's not just to life-after-death, either. We are inviting people to know Jesus right here, right now. That's Good News.

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

Please force me to think about and love you
even in the midst of my hectic activity.
Release me from my busyness!
Show me how others can take over my responsibilities.
God of love, help me to remember that Christ
has no body now on earth but ours,
no hand but ours,
no feet but ours.

Ours are the eyes that see the needs of the world.
Ours are the hands with which he blesses everyone.
Ours are the feet with which he goes about doing good.
But he does not call me to forfeit my soul to serve him.
Help me never to forget you in my busyness to serve you.
Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Tuesday, October 1: John 4:1-26

Jesus likes good people – like you and I. But Jesus doesn't play favourites. He also likes not-so-good people, like this woman.

- She is Samaritan. Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans. They are people they wouldn't talk to, do business with; in fact they would cross to the other side of the street rather than pass by them.
- She is a woman. No self-respecting rabbi would talk to a woman. Women weren't worth a rabbi's time. They were not "real" people. They had no rights and no value except as property.
- She is a woman with a past (5 husbands) and a present (she is currently living with a man to whom she is not married) – a crime worthy of stoning-to-death according to Old Testament law.

What is Jesus' attitude to this lady?

The Good News is that Jesus wants a relationship with EVERYONE – man and woman, from every tribe and nation, with all sorts of interesting backgrounds, in all kinds of troubled situations, even mired in all sorts of ethical quagmires.

God loves each of these ethnic groups as much as any other: First Nations, Arabic, Europeans, Asian, African. Do I love my Muslim neighbour, as much as my First Nations neighbour, as much as my Mennonite

neighbour? Like Jesus, we can love someone without agreeing with everything about their beliefs.

God loves people with various "issues" as much as us. Can I love my LGBTQ neighbour, as much as my modern-day-hippie neighbour, as much as my lawyer neighbour, as much as my LDS/Mormon neighbour, as much as my Mennonite neighbour? Like Jesus, we can love someone without agreeing with everything about their beliefs, lifestyles, or situations.

How can I love as Jesus loved? What is God saying to me?

*Lord, I reach out to you for your guidance.
Please show me which way to turn.
Calm my anxious thoughts, come speak into my mind.
Strengthen me as I falter and feel weary.
May I feel strength rising up within my heart.
Bring clarity into my visions and dreams.
I trust that you are with me, no matter where I go,
Or what I decide to do.
You journey with me always.
Amen.*

Wednesday, October 2: John 6:16-21

Are you afraid of the dark? Then you have scotophobia. Or how about:

- Claustrophobia: Fear of being in constricted, confined spaces
- Aerophobia: Fear of flying
- Arachnophobia: Fear of spiders
- Acrophobia: Fear of heights
- Ophidiophobia: Fear of snakes (me!)

Jesus' disciples are terrified on the Sea of Galilee, but at least a few of them are fishermen. These are not people who have aquaphobia: fear of water. It must have been a nasty storm.

Where is Jesus as the storm rages? He is with them. That is good news.

Is the situation out of control? No, Jesus is very much on top of things.

What storms are you facing in your life? Whatever situation we might be facing, Jesus is still sovereign.

What is the Good News in this passage for you?

*Father in Heaven, You made me Your child
and called me to walk in the Light of Christ.
Free me from darkness and keep me in the Light of Your Truth.
The Light of Jesus has scattered
the darkness of hatred and sin.
Called to that Light, I ask for Your guidance.
Form my life in Your Truth, my heart in Your Love.
Through the blessing of your Spirit,
give me the power of Your Grace
that I may walk in the Light of Jesus and serve Him faithfully.
Amen*

Thursday, October 3: John 14:15-29

God gives us His Spirit. This is a key component of the Good News. Through the Spirit we experience something of God's kingdom, His eternal life, now. God's Spirit is God's real, personal presence with us, every moment of every day. We are never alone.

In John 14, Jesus promises His Spirit as His abiding presence in our lives.

- *"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" (14:16-17).*
- *"You know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you" (14:17)*
- *"No, I will not abandon you as orphans – I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Since I live, you also will live" (4:18-19).*
- *"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**" (14:27).*

It's amazing how often in Scripture the phrase "*don't be afraid*" (King James "*Fear Not!*") occurs: almost 140 times. "*Do not be afraid*" is by far the most often repeated command in Scripture. It's a point God really wants to get across to us.

The reason we "fear not"? Because God is with us. That's the Good News. We are living in the kingdom of God now: the King is with us. We are living life in Him now. The Author of Life is with us.

*O Lord,
You are the light that guides my feet.
You are the map that gives me direction.
You are the peace that makes me strong.
You are the leader whom I faithfully follow.
May your light illuminate my life
And your guidance bring direction.
May I find inspiration in your word
And peace in my heart as I follow you.
Amen.*

Friday, October 4: 1 Peter 1:1-9

If we're having tough times, it means God does not love us, right? If we are struggling, it means God has abandoned us, right? If we're facing real challenges, God has left us, right?

Not at all. God's promise is that He is always with us, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). The Holy Spirit, whom we have been talking about as a key component of the Good News, is always with us.

However, nowhere in Scripture are we promised a stress free, problem free, pain free, challenge free life. In fact, because some people will look down on us or give us grief about our faith, we who believe in Jesus may actually have a HARDER time than people without faith.

Rather than miraculously deliver us from fading tough times, God typically allows life to take its course. But He is with us through the tough times. Remember the familiar words of Psalm 23:4

*"Even when I walk through the darkest valley,
I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.
Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me."*

Note: God has not teleported David out of the dark valley. He is with David in the darkest of times and will get Him through. In Psalm 23:5-6, David adds:

*"You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies.
You honor me by anointing my head with oil.
My cup overflows with blessings.
Surely your goodness and unfailing love
will pursue me all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of the Lord forever."*

Note: David is in the midst of his enemies, not spirited to a place of safety. But God is with him and blesses him in and through that struggle.

Trials are part of life. The Good News is God is always with us, through them all.

What is God's good news to you?

*Lord, you are Holy above all others,
and all of the strength that I need is in your hands.
I am not asking, Lord, that you take this trial away.
Instead, I simply ask that Your will be done in my life.
Whatever that means, that is what I want.*

*But I admit that it's hard, Lord.
Sometimes I feel like I can't go on.
The pain and the fear are too much for me,
and I know that I don't have the strength on my own
to get through this.
I know that I can come to you, Jesus, and that you will hear my prayer.
I know that it is not your intent to bring me to this point
just to leave me in the wilderness alone.*

*Please, Lord, give me the strength that I need to face today.
I don't have to worry about tomorrow.
If you just give me the strength that I need today that is all I need.
Keep me from sinning during this trial.
Instead, help me to keep my eyes on you.
You are the Holy Lord, and all of my hope rests in you.
Amen*

Saturday, October 5: 1 Peter 4:12-19

Being a Christian is all sunshine and roses, right? God promises to bless us in all ways, always, right?

This is a passage we don't like to read too often. It takes us into uncomfortable places. However, it is good to remember that following Jesus is not always a walk in the park. It has its difficult moments. When times get tough, how do we handle it? Are we among those who are tough and the tough get going? Or do we just get fearful, hide away, or walk away?

God does NOT always promise us sweetness and light.

When our friends and neighbours face tough times, how do we respond? Can we walk with them through their trials? Can we be the Good News of God's presence in their lives as we journey with them?

Earlier this month we read 1 Peter 3:13-17: *"Now, who will want to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you suffer for doing what is right, God will reward you for it. So don't worry or be afraid of their threats. Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life.*

"And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ. Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong!"

As we live with integrity for Jesus, people notice. It's such a rare thing for people to actually live principled lives anymore. People ask questions.

We can share God's love by walking with people as Jesus walks with us through our trials. Who can you pray for? Who can you encourage? Who can you walk with, today?

*Lord,
I would love to be with my friend as they manage such hardships.
I would love to hold their hand and whisper words of comfort.
I would love to change their situation and bring new happiness.
I would love to give them peace as they lie to rest.
I would love to wake them with new hope every morning.
I would love to know how to lead them through this hard time.
I would love to bless them with peace and joy and hope.
Use me to be your hands and feet in any way.
I simply make myself available to you.
You are closer, stronger, wiser than I.
You are with them, Heavenly Father.
You are with them,
and will hold them,
and protect them forever.
I trust in you.
Amen.*

Sunday, October 6: Psalm 130

We all blow it. We all make mistakes. We all sin. What happens next?

An essential part of the Good News is that God can and does forgive all our sin. Through Jesus' death, He paid the price we deserve to pay for our sinfulness. Through the death of Jesus, the debt we owe is paid. Through the death of Jesus, we are completely absolved and forgiven. That is Good News.

This week we'll be focusing on the Good News that God forgives us.

The guilt and shame that come with making mistakes can paralyze us. Notice how depressed the author of Psalm 130 seems to be: he is in the depths of despair.

What does the author know about the character of God (130:3-4)?

What advice does the psalmist have for us (130:7)?

No matter how far in the depths we may feel (or how far out of our depth we are), God loves us. He does not keep a record of sins. He is the God who forgives.

What do you need to pray about?

*"Put your hope in the Lord;
for with the Lord there is unfailing love.
His redemption overflows.
He himself will redeem you from every kind of sin."
(130:7-8)*

What is God's good news to you?

What is our good news for our world?

*Dear Lord, I am calling upon you today for
your divine guidance and help.
I am in crisis and need a supporting hand
to keep me on the right and just path.
My heart is troubled but I will
strive to keep it set on you,
as your infinite wisdom
will show me the right way
to a just and right resolution.
Thank you for hearing my prayer and for staying by my side.
Amen!*