



**November 2019**

# **Good News**

**God's Hope for our World 3**

**Readings,  
Reflections,  
Prayers**

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## Monday, November 4: 1 Kings 17

These days life is hard: there are wars, rumours of wars, nasty leaders, and natural disasters. Life, back in Old Testament times was hard, too: there were wars, rumours of wars, nasty leaders, and natural disasters. God calls Elijah to be His prophet, forth-telling His truth to a wicked generation. The King in Israel is Ahab: *"Ahab son of Omri did what was evil in the Lord's sight, even more than any of the kings before him. As though it were not enough to follow the sinful example of Jeroboam, he married Jezebel, the daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and he began to bow down in worship of Baal. First Ahab built a temple and an altar for Baal in Samaria. Then he set up an Asherah pole. He did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than any of the other kings of Israel before him"* (1 Kings 16:30-33).

Elijah speaks up for God against the king's sins. Then he flees for his life from Ahab and Jezebel. There is a drought. He ends up hiding in Sidon, not in Israel (home turf of Jezebel, the Queen of Evil). There he meets a non-Jewish widow who ministers to him and to whom he ministers. It is significant that the "Jewish" King of Israel, Ahab, has spiritually lost his way, following after the gods of the Sidonians. Meanwhile this desperately poor foreign, widow of Sidon leaves Baal, to put her faith in and worship the one true God, the God of Israel.

Jesus comments on this very event. Luke notes that, *"When he (Jesus) came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come'"* (quoting Isaiah 61:1-2).

*"He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them. 'The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day.' Everyone spoke well of him and was amazed by the gracious words that came from his lips. 'How can this be?" they asked. "Isn't this Joseph's son?"*

*"He said, "You will undoubtedly quote me this proverb: 'Physician, heal yourself' – meaning, 'Do miracles here in your hometown like those you did in Capernaum.' But I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his own hometown. There were many needy widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine devastated the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them. He was sent instead to a foreigner, a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon"* (Luke 4:16-26).

Jesus is self-consciously fulfilling that mission of God which was intended for the people of Israel: to be a blessing to **all** people of **all** nations. God is more interested in people's hearts than in their ethnicity. Ahab – although Jewish – is far from God. This non-Jewish Sidonian widow loves God and is blessed for it.

Like Elijah, we are called to share God's mercy and grace with **all** people of all nations – particularly those most in need. We cannot be blinded by ethnicity, race, or people "who are not like us." God loves all people. And our challenge is to love all people as graciously and mercifully as He does ...

*Lord, send me anywhere, only go with me.  
Lay any burden on me, only sustain me.  
Sever any ties except the tie that binds me  
to your service and to your heart.  
Jesus, fill me with your love now, and I ask you,  
accept me, and use me a little for your glory.  
Accept me and my service,  
and take for yourself all the glory.  
Amen*

David Livingstone (1813-1873)

## Tuesday, November 5: Jonah 1

God's Good News is for people just like us, right? Good people. People with Christian heritage. People from an ethnic background like mine ...

*"The LORD gave this message to Jonah: 'Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are.'" Jonah is Jewish. Nineveh was an Assyrian/Syrian city – not Jewish. The Assyrians were the big bad bullies next door to Israel – the major empire that was gradually enslaving nation after nation. Assyrians boasted of their barbarity to captured people. Their historical records describe live dismemberments, forcing people to cut off hands, feet or heads of their own family members, and skinning people alive.*

Jonah is a brave person with faith in God. As we read Jonah 1 we don't get the sense that he is afraid of the Assyrians. He cannot, however, believe God could possibly be offering **them** an opportunity for repentance and forgiveness. In Jonah's mind, evil people – especially **foreign** evil people – should be destroyed. There should be no grace. No mercy. No good news. Justice – retributive justice – should be done: an eye for an eye. So, Jonah "**got up and fled in the opposite direction.**" He was heading for Tarshish. Tarshish is west of Gibraltar, in Spain – the end of the known world in Jonah's day.

Of course there is no escape from God. As the story unfolds, God knows exactly where Jonah is.

Interestingly, Jonah's confession of faith (1:9) and the end of the storm, leads the (non-Jewish) sailors to faith in God. God can work all things together for His good in His own way (even our blatant sins).

Jonah is running from a call to be God's witness to Nineveh – a people whom he believes definitely should NOT have the opportunity to repent. Are there people I don't like? Whom I really don't think deserve God's grace? Jesus' invitation is that God so loves the **whole** world – **all** people – that whoever believes in Him should have eternal life ... Pray for your heart that you can see all people as God sees them – as His precious children whom He loves and whom He desires come to faith in Him ...

Have you ever run from God's call to do something? To forgive someone? To make the first move toward reconciliation? To share your faith? To change a behavior? To come to terms with your fears ... your past ... your future? To confront a sin in your life? Does running work? No, it never does. God always knows where to find us ... we might as well deal with whatever we're running from right now – rather than dig ourselves in deeper (we'll have to deal with it sooner or later). What do you need to face today? Will you?

*Lord, take full possession of my heart.  
Raise there your throne and command from there  
as you do in heaven.  
Being created **by** you, let me live for you.  
Being created **for** you, let me always act for your glory.  
Being redeemed **by** you, let me give to you what is yours  
and let my spirit cling to you alone.  
Amen.*

John Wesley (1707-1788)

## Wednesday, November 6: Jonah 2

Jonah has been inside a fish for three days and three nights. He's still there. This is his prayer. What is his emotional state? Angry? Depressed? Bitter? Worried? Grumpy? Resigned?

In Jonah 2:9, Jonah says, *"With shouts of grateful praise, I will sacrifice to you."* Does this surprise you? Jonah has discovered one of the practices – disciplines – that give us power and draw us closer to God – the practice of thanksgiving and celebration.

Joy is at the heart of God Himself – and He desires joy for us. Joy is a command: "*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice.*" (Philippians 4:4) – Paul writes that from a Roman prison. Lewis Smedes puts it this way: "*To miss out on joy is to miss out on the reason for your existence.*" "*Joy is the serious business of heaven,*" says C.S. Lewis.

John Ortberg comments, "*The Bible puts joy in the non-optional category ... joylessness is a serious sin, one that religious people are particularly prone to indulge in. It may be the sin most readily tolerated by the church.*" How does that challenge you?

Fear accomplishes absolutely nothing. It feeds no one. It helps no one. But joy and thanksgiving can lead us to action. Joy and thanksgiving can motivate us to be a blessing to other people. That is good news.

How can I discipline myself to be more joyful?

I can learn from Jonah: I can cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving. It **IS** a discipline – hard work – to CHOOSE to be thankful and find the joy – even the humour – in life. I can easily find problems and sadness in life. It takes a choice – and the grace and power of God – to be thankful. When I make that choice everything changes; I find joy. What can you thank God for today? Make a list – and thank Him.

Jesus says, "*Remain in my love ... so that **my** joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete*" (John 15:9-11). Celebrate His love ... live in His love ... enjoy His love ... and be thankful.

*God, our true life, to know you is life,  
to serve you is perfect freedom,  
to enjoy you is the kingdom,  
to praise you is the joy and happiness of the soul.  
I praise and bless and adore you.  
I worship you, I glorify you.  
I give thanks to you for your great glory.  
I humbly beg you to live with me, to reign in me,  
to make this heart of mine a holy temple,  
a fit habitation for your divine majesty.  
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

### **Thursday, November 7: Jonah 3**

During his "fish time," Jonah had spent time slowing down, praying, and reflecting on God's Word. God forced him to "*Sit down, shut up, and listen*" (there was not much else to do in a fish's belly for three days, was there?). In response, "*Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh*" (3:3). He figured enough was enough. If this was the end he might as well get it over with. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, he meekly went to meet his Maker. So he thought.

He probably grumbled as he slouched along, "*God doesn't really do anything miraculous, you know. Maybe once, but not now. Stepping out in faith is stepping into oblivion. God doesn't do things anymore. Take a risk for the Lord and prepare to meet your doom.*" But give him credit, Jonah went – albeit reluctantly. He made it in the gate. He began to preach. "*The Ninevites believed God ... and repented*" (3:5). Even the king of Nineveh was convicted, repented, and prayed for God's mercy (3:6-9). It was a miracle.

It shouldn't have happened. The Ninevites should not have repented. Jonah should have been dead. But miracle of miracles, God did the impossible. Good news.

God still does miracles. He may have done one in your own life in the past. He certainly has done miracles in the lives of people in our church. Do you think He can do more miracles in your life and the lives of people you know? Do you believe the God of Jonah is still alive and active in our midst? Do you pray for

miracles still? Do you expect them? Or do you expect business as usual? Do you expect the same old, same old? Surprise of surprises, God *may* choose to do a miracle ... (or He may not – that's part of the mystery of God.). Are you open to that possibility? Will you pray about it?

One of the disciplines we can practice is praying, expecting God to act (rather than just giving up before we even give Him a chance). Do you pray expectantly ... hopefully ... faith-fully that God's kingdom will come and His will may be done ...? If He does act – great. Celebrate that. Be thankful.

If He doesn't do what we'd like, pray for the grace to accept what He is doing. How can I learn through these experiences? How can I grow in faith through the good ... and the bad?

*Christ Jesus, when all is darkness  
and we feel our weakness and helplessness,  
give us the sense of your presence, your love, and your strength.  
Help us to have perfect trust in your protecting love  
and strengthening power,  
so that nothing may frighten or worry us, for, living close to you,  
we shall see your hand, your purpose,  
your will through all things.  
Amen.*

Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556)

#### **Friday, November 8: Jonah 4**

Jonah is not amused by God's miracle. These were Ninevites – Assyrians. Wicked, cruel, despicable people. They deserved to die. And God spared them. Jonah had expected to be killed: we might think he would at least be thankful for his own life. But he's not. All he can do is gripe, complain and wish he were dead.

Jonah is upset because God's actions don't seem fair – to him. It was one thing for Jonah (one of God's chosen people, a Jew) to be saved from a hurricane by a fish. It was quite another for this murderous lot of foreigners to be saved from God's wrath. It's one thing when God does a miracle in my life, it's quite another when he does it in Cousin Fred's life ... Cousin Fred doesn't deserve it. It's one thing when God does something good in the life of a Christian, but when something good happens to a Muslim ...? Do you ever feel that way?

How does God respond to Jonah's anger? Jonah sits on a baking hillside – stewing. God miraculously causes a plant to grow to provide shade. Wonderful. But the next day God allows a worm to come and eat the plant. The hot sun and baking desert wind cause Jonah almost to pass out. Jonah, furious with God for taking the plant away, cries out to God, *"I am so miserable, I want to die."*

God answers, *"But the plant wasn't there in the first place. It was a miracle it sprang up at all. I gave it to you as a gift for a day (a completely unexpected, undeserved surprise). Shouldn't you at least be grateful for that. And if I care enough to give you a plant for a day to ease your discomfort, why should it surprise you that I care about 120,000 people in Nineveh? (a completely unexpected, undeserved surprise)"* The point? When I feel like saying, *"Isn't it great when I experience God's grace, but it's completely unfair when other people do,"* I have to remember that God gives His grace freely to me ... and everyone else.

William Carey, the founder of modern missions, knew all about God's grace. He sailed from England to India in the late 1700s. He never returned to Britain. He buried two wives and three children in India. He learned a dozen languages. His motto was simple: *"Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God."*

That was what Jonah had to learn. God sometimes challenges us as individuals and as churches to do great things, in a spirit of grace. We can run away from God; we can be disobedient for a season. But He will corner us. And He'll ask us again. And again. And again. Fluster and bluster all we want. Argue

commonsense logic all we want. Assemble all the hard data we want. Convince ourselves that we know better than God all we want ... sooner or later God is going to win.

God is asking you to accept His grace – His gift of love. And He is asking you to share His grace – His love – with those around you. Really. That takes a change of heart. That takes discipline. We would rather keep God's grace to ourselves. We would rather not move out of our comfort zone or let other people know we believe in Jesus. Our human natures mean sometimes we would rather not share His love.

Practice NOT running. NOT arguing. Simply believing. How can you *"Expect great things from God, and attempt great things for God"*? Pray about your feelings. Share God's love with one person today.

*Send forth your light and your truth,  
that we may always live near you, our God.  
Let us feel your love, that we may be, as it were,  
already in heaven,  
that we may do our work as the angels do theirs;  
and let us be ready for every work, ready to go out or in,  
to stay or to depart, just as you direct.  
Lord, let us have no will of our own,  
or consider our true happiness as depending in the smallest degree  
on anything that happens to us outwardly,  
but as consisting totally in conformity to your will.  
Amen*

Henry Martyn (1781-1812)

### **Saturday, November 9: Acts 1:1-8**

The stories of Elijah and Jonah remind us that God's good news is for all people. We celebrate this through our partnership with Canadian Baptist Ministries. We live this through our partnership with the Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba.

Hold it. There are more than enough needs in our own community. Why should we care about/support ministries in other communities or countries?

When Jesus establishes His church, He instructs His people to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8).

- Jerusalem – their/our own backyard. After all, if they/we are not going to be Jesus' witnesses to our neighbours, who else will be? We do need to take our local community seriously.
- In all Judea and Samaria – their/our region, roughly the area of southern Alberta. We are called to work with other churches in our region to provide ministries such as camps, food banks, soup kitchens, immigrant supports, etc. to build up His kingdom, things we cannot do on our own. Some of these people will share our faith (Judea), some will not (Samaria). We are called to be God's Good News to all people.
- To the ends of the earth – we have a call to go beyond our own borders to bring God's love – in word and in deed – to a hurting world.

When we work locally, regionally, and globally we have a bigger picture of what God is doing than if we ONLY focus on our own neighbourhood. We learn from other people and cultures. We can draw on more creativity and resources. Working in synergy with others, we are capable of far more together than when we all try to do our own thing.

The Good News is for all nations. How can we grow in our faith through the experiences of others? How is our life together richer because of different cultures?

*Saints of days long gone, standing on seashore and mountain top,  
considered the might of the elements that you had created:  
the roar of the wind and waves,  
the constancy of the tides and seasons.  
To them, Lord it was evidence enough  
that your creative Spirit was still empowering this fragile world,  
encircling their lives as the very wind and mist that swirled around them.  
We have so little time to contemplate this world  
and we complain when wind and rain conspire to spoil our day.  
Yet in doing so we often fail to gain the comfort and reassurance  
that your saints felt in their isolation.  
We forget that it was your creative breath  
that set this universe in motion and still moves across the world -  
Not always predictably -  
but there to be seen and felt -  
there to offer the comfort and reassurance  
of a God who is constant and eternal.  
Thank you, Creator God,  
for the constancy and ample evidence of your love for this world.  
Amen*

John Birch (faithandworship.com)

### **Sunday, November 10: Galatians 1:1-9**

Some churches have unspoken rules – about how to dress, how to act, what you must believe about this, that, and everything else. They can be VERY legalistic. And if you don't become "just like them" you are not welcome. In fact, you are probably not a Christian. Have you ever experienced that? Is that biblical?

Galatians is written by Paul to Christians in Galatia, northern Turkey. To a multiethnic region, Paul emphasizes the Good News that we are saved by God's grace – not by following rules. He also highlights that ALL people who believe in Jesus – from whatever background – are one in Christ. God is building a new Kingdom – one, unified Kingdom of all who believe in Him, regardless of ethnicity, language, or religious heritage. Everyone who has faith in Jesus is part of one big (happy) family. For Jews this created a problem. They were sure the Messiah was only coming for them – to save them and only them. If non-Jews could even become Christians, they should keep all the Old Testament laws including circumcision.

Paul is having none of this. Paul wants us to know that all people can be saved by Jesus. And we are saved by **faith** in Jesus – and only by faith in Jesus. We don't earn our salvation by doing things like obeying the Law. This is counter-intuitive. We like to think good people deserve good things: we earn favour with people – and with God – by doing good things. That "feels" right. But God loves us because He created us. God loves us unconditionally. He loves us whether or not we do anything nice or good. We are saved simply by receiving His grace, love, and mercy. Why is that so hard to accept?

We may do good deeds, but these flow **from** our new life in Jesus. In fact we are called to do good deeds (Ephesians 2:10), but these are results of our salvation, not precursors to it.

Writing about contemporary culture, Carey Nieuwhof comments, *"Every time there is a change in history, there's potential to gain and potential to lose. I believe the potential to gain is greater than the potential to lose. Why? As despairing or as cynical as some might be (sometimes understandably) over the church's future, we have to remind ourselves that the church was Jesus' idea, not ours. It will survive our missteps and whatever cultural trends happen around us. We certainly don't always get things right, but Christ has an incredible history of pulling together Christians in every generation to share his love for a broken world. As a result, the reports of the church's death are greatly exaggerated."*<sup>1</sup> That's good news.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://careynieuwhof.com/2015/02/10-predictions-about-the-future-church-and-shifting-attendance-patterns/>

What additional things – besides faith in Jesus – can churches/Christians add to faith alone as “rules” for salvation? Why? How can we stay true to the Bible’s teaching that we are saved by faith and faith alone?

How can we be one body as Jesus’ people, even though we are so diverse? How can I reach out to others who have faith in Jesus but may express their faith differently from me? How can we be “church” in 2019?

*Grant me, Lord, to know what I ought to know,  
to love what I ought to love,  
to praise what delights you most,  
to value what is precious in your sight,  
to heed what is offensive to you.  
Do not allow me to judge according to the sight of my eyes,  
nor to pass sentence according to the hearing of the ears of ignorant men;  
but to discern true judgment between visible and spiritual,  
and above all, always to inquire what is the good pleasure of your will.  
Lord Jesus, because your way is narrow and despised by the world,  
grant that I may despise the world and imitate you.  
For the servant is not greater than his Lord, nor the disciple above the Master.  
Let your servant be trained in your life,  
for there is my salvation and true holiness.  
Amen.*

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

### **Monday, November 11: Galatians 1:10-24**

Nieuwhof goes on to write, *"Many individual congregations and some entire denominations won't make it. The difference will be between those who cling to the mission and those who cling to the model. When the car was invented, it quickly took over from the horse and buggy. Horse and buggy manufacturers were relegated to boutique status and many went under, but human transportation actually exploded. Suddenly average people could travel at a level they never could before. The mission is travel. The model is a buggy, or car, or motorcycle, or jet. Look at the changes in the publishing, music and even photography industry in the last few years.*

*"See a trend? The mission is reading. It's music. It's photography. The model always shifts ... moving from things like 8 tracks, cassettes and CDs to MP3s and now streaming audio and video. Companies that show innovation around the mission (Apple, Samsung) will always beat companies that remain devoted to the method (Kodak). Churches need to stay focused on the mission (leading people into a growing relationship with Jesus) and be exceptionally innovative in our model."*

The “other” teachers – those who insisted people had to be Jewish to be Christian – doggedly held to the old model: you earned favour with God by going through rituals and following rules. They accused Paul of simply wanting to be popular. After all, if you let non-Jewish men off without being circumcised, more would become Christians – horrors. And that would not be “fair” to Jewish men who had already been circumcised.

Paul, however, is adamant that if he simply wanted to be liked he wouldn't be teaching about Jesus at all. He talks about how popular he was before Jesus: he was on the fast track to Jewish super-stardom. But then God got a hold of him (read the full story in Acts 9) and by His **grace** saved Him (Galatians 1:15), and commissioned him to tell of that same grace to non-Jewish (Gentile) and Jewish people. Paul goes on to talk about the time he spent in Jerusalem with Peter and the other Christians leaders (James was recognized as the “head” of the church in Jerusalem). He makes reference to a Council, where Peter had said, *"We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they (non-Jews) are"* (Acts 15:11). We are saved by God's grace. It's not about rules – that model is finished.

For Paul the important thing is Jesus. His mission is to tell people about Jesus.

As a church our mission is: *"We love Jesus: we want to make Him know locally and globally through Word and deed."* If that's our mission, then the models we use to get there may change a bit over time ...

But do we ever get hung up on the model rather than the mission? Is the "music-I-like" more important than loving people searching for Jesus? Does the dress-code/behaviour-code/I-don't-like-coffee-in-the-sanctuary code trump our hospitality?

What extra expectations do we put on people who come to faith in Jesus? In the past, there have been assumptions that to be a Christian you didn't dance, didn't go to movies, didn't play cards, didn't ... the list went on and on. If you did any of these things, you must not be a Christian. Are those genuine "tests" of faith in Jesus? What about today? Do we have expectations/rules/tests of faith that really are not biblical (have nothing to do with authentic faith in Jesus)? Do we have extra beliefs we add to the basics? Can we welcome people with messy lives into our church?

We are saved **by** faith. We are saved **to show and share God's love**. Paul begins simply by telling his story. All of us are saved so that we can tell our story, too. **You** have a unique story. How did you come to faith in Jesus? Or have you always had faith in Jesus? That's great. How has Jesus made a difference in your life? How is He making a difference in your life today? That's fantastic. Don't be afraid to tell your story. People can argue theology and philosophy, but no one can argue what God has done in your life.

*Lord Jesus, I believe that you're able and willing to deliver me  
from all the care and unrest and bondage in my life.  
I believe you did die to set me free,  
not only in the future, but now and here.  
I believe you are stronger than sin,  
and that you can keep me, even me,  
in my extreme of weakness,  
from falling in its snares or yielding obedience to its commands.  
And Lord, I'm going to trust you to keep me.  
I have tried keeping myself, and I failed, and failed most grievously.  
I am absolutely helpless.  
So now I will trust you.  
I give myself to you.  
I keep back no reserves.  
Body, soul, and spirit, I present myself to you as a piece of clay,  
to be fashioned into anything your love and your wisdom shall choose.  
And now I am yours.  
I believe you do accept that which I present to you;  
I believe that this poor, weak, foolish heart  
has been taken possession of by you;  
and that you have even at this very moment begun to work in me  
to will and to do your good pleasure.  
I trust you utterly, and trust you now.  
Amen.*

Hannah Whitall Smith (1832-1911)

## **Tuesday, November 12: Galatians 2:1-10**

*"Read the comments on this blog or any other church leader blog and you would think that some Christians believe the best thing to do is to give up on Christian gatherings of any kind," writes Carey Nieuwhof. "This is naive. While some will leave, it does not change the fact that the church has always gathered because the church is inherently communal. Additionally, what we can do gathered together far surpasses what we can do alone. Which is why there will always be an organized church of some form. So while our gatherings might shift and look different than they do today, Christians will always gather together to do more than we ever could on our own."*

People have been predicting the demise of the church for centuries. And it isn't happening. But it does challenge us to think about important questions: what is the church? Who is the church? What are the essentials of church? Who is a Christian? Who isn't? How do you know? Can you tell by the clothes they wear? Whether or not they go to church? How they talk? Not really ... But we want to know, however, that our family members/friends are saved ... How do we really know?

To some of the people in Paul's world it was easy. If you were a godly/Christian (man), you would also be (or become) a Jew: therefore (as a man) you would be circumcised and follow all the Jewish Law. After all, it had been so in the Jewish world since the days of Abraham (in the male-centric world of first century Judaism, women don't figure into these debates). Wouldn't it be great to have such an easy diagnostic tool?

Paul, however, is having none of this "you're-saved-because-you're-circumcised-and-therefore-Jewish" nonsense. He makes the point, over and over, that we are saved by faith in Jesus. God does not love one nationality more than another. In the Kingdom of God – in the family of God – there are no divisions based on nationhood or race. We are one in our faith in and love for Jesus.

Today we probably understand that. Our own congregation is multicultural. But do we allow other divisions to get between us? Do we question the real Christian identity of people in other Christian traditions – Roman Catholic? Orthodox? Charismatic? Do we judge who is "in" and who is "out" based on their politics? In practice, do we believe people are saved by faith and faith alone in the grace of God? Or do we add other hoops? Do we insist on other tests? Do we have rules they must obey?

What one command came out of the Council in Jerusalem? *"All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along"* (2:10). "The poor" may have referred to churches who were persecuted and in need: who are the "poor" churches today – those most persecuted and in need? How about churches in the Middle East? It definitely also referred to poor people – locally and globally – Christian or not: one of the greatest witnesses of the early church was its care for the poor of all ethnic, religious, tribal, social, and spiritual backgrounds. Like God, they loved ALL people. How about us?

This Christmas, consider supporting CBM mission projects in Lebanon, Kenya and other countries that seek to care for refugees and those who suffer for their faith (visit [www.cbmin.org](http://www.cbmin.org) or pick up a *Hopeful Gifts for Change* booklet at the church). And support local projects that care for the poor, too.

*We desire, Lord, that you will add to all our other gifts the gift of faith,  
by which we shall trust in you:  
faith that works by love;  
faith that stays with us;  
faith that transforms material things  
and gives them to us in spiritual meanings;  
faith that lights up the world with a light that never sets,  
that shines brighter than the day,  
that completely clears the night out of our experience.  
We humbly ask you to grant us faith  
that shall give us victory over the world and over ourselves  
and that makes us courageous in all temptation and makes us conquerors –  
more than conquerors through him who loved us.  
Amen.*

Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887)

### **Wednesday, November 13: Galatians 2:11-21**

*"Consumer Christianity asks 'What can I get from God? It asks, 'What's in it for me?' That leads us to evaluate our church, our faith, our experience and each other according to our preferences and whims. In many respects, even many critics of the church who have left have done so under the pull of consumer*

*Christianity because 'nothing' meets their needs. All of this is antithetical to the Gospel, which calls us to die to ourselves – to lose ourselves for the sake of Christ. As the church reforms and repents, a more authentic, more selfless church will emerge. Sure, we will still have to make decisions about music, gathering times and even some distinctions about what we believe, but the tone will be different. When you're no longer focused on yourself and your viewpoint, a new tone emerges."* Nieuwhof's thoughts echo Paul's concerns in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. And speak to us in 2019, too.

These verses give an interesting insight into Peter's character we haven't seen before. On the one hand, Peter has been the champion of salvation by faith: "*We believe,*" Peter had said, "*that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 15:11). On the other hand, in the incident Paul refers to here, Peter seems to give in to peer pressure, sliding back into teaching that people have to follow the old Jewish laws to be saved. Perhaps this is why Paul deliberately calls Peter by the Aramaic (the Jewish language at the time) name "Cephas" – Peter was reverting to the old Jewish way of thinking.

Paul goes on to say: "*We know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law*" (2:16).

He goes on: "*When I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law – I stopped trying to meet all its requirements – so that I might live for God. My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*" (2:19-20). The Jewish system didn't work. No one could follow the rules perfectly so no one could be saved. But through faith in Jesus, we have new life – real life.

*"So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die"* (2:20-21). If the old Jewish order of things could save you, why did Jesus come? Why did He die? There was no need for Him to make the amazing sacrifice He made.

God's invitation is to discover that when ***Christ lives in me***, I really, truly begin to live for the first time ... C.S. Lewis writes, "*The more we let God take us over, the more truly ourselves we become – because He made us. He invented us. He invented all the different people that you and I were intended to be ... It is when I turn to Christ, when I give up myself to His personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own.*"

How can I turn over more and more of my life to Jesus? How can our church be more selfless and more committed to reaching out in His love? How can I be more selfless? How can I reach out in love?

*Take from us, God, the care of worldly vanities;  
make us content with only the necessities of life.  
Keep our hearts from delighting in honors,  
treasures, and the pleasures of this life,  
and put in us a desire to be with you in your eternal kingdom.  
Give us Lord, such taste and feeling for your unspeakable joys  
and heaven that we may always long for them,  
and saying, with all your people,  
'Your Kingdom come, Lord; your will be done, Lord;  
in and through my life, Lord';  
for the sake of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns,  
ever one God, world without end.  
Amen.*

Edmund Grindal (1519-1583)

## Thursday, November 14: Galatians 3:1-14

Paul wants to make sure the Galatians really get it. There is no longer any smug ethnic superiority for the Jewish people. Through Jesus, God has saved the whole world. Through Jesus, God has created one Kingdom, one church, one family. Through Jesus, we are all saved – if we put our faith in Him. We are not saved by following a set of rulers, rituals, or practices. As we shall see, there are things we do and do not do **because** we are saved – these are results of our salvation; they are not preconditions to it.

Paul does want us to get the truth that we are “one in Christ” as His people. We are family. We accept, love, and care for one another as family. Whatever our ethnic heritage, age, gender, ability, income, genetic code ... we are one in Christ. We are all brothers and sisters. We are all equally precious to God.

In family life, when one member of the family hurts, everyone hurts. When we hear of Christians suffering in the Middle East we should take it personally. These are our brothers and sisters in Christ. I find it disturbing that the North American church seems to see Palestinian, Middle Eastern and African Christians as “second-class citizens” in the Kingdom of God: we just don’t seem to care. Are we more racist than we realize? We should be very upset when these events happen to anyone – regardless of race or religion.

The Christian churches in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and India are among the oldest churches in the world, founded by apostles like Paul, Peter, James, Mark, Philip, and others. They have been brutally terrorized in recent years. The Syrian conflict has now resulted in the most refugees in modern history. Our brothers and sisters around the world are modelling a much deeper discipleship than simply “going to church.” They are putting their lives on the line for Jesus. Would I do that?

Pray for ALL of the Middle East and North Africa – Christian, Moslem, Jewish – everyone. Pray especially for our brothers and sisters in Christ, their witness, and martyrdom.

North American Christianity has been (rightly) accused of becoming consumerized: we choose a church based on what the church can do for me, not for what I can do for God. But fewer and fewer religious consumers are going to church to get their spiritual “fix”. *“The death of consumer Christianity will change our gatherings,”* comment Nieuwhof. *“Our gatherings will become less about us and more about Jesus and the world he loves. Rather than a gathering of the already-convinced, the churches that remain will be decidedly outsider-focused. And word will be supplemented with deeds. In the future church, being right will be less important than doing right. Sure, that involves social justice and meeting physical needs, but it also involves treating people with kindness, compassion in everyday life and attending to their spiritual well-being. This is the kind of outward focus that drove the rapid expansion of the first century church.”*

May the Lord help us not be consumers of church ... but to be people who live our faith in Word and deed.

*Lord my God, the amazing horrors of darkness were gathered around me and covered me all over,  
and I saw no way to carry on.*

*I felt the misery of my fellow creatures separated from the divine harmony,  
and it was heavier than I could bear, and I was crushed under it.*

*I lifted up my hand and stretched out my arm, but there was none to help me.*

*I looked round about and was amazed.*

*In the depth of misery, Lord, I remembered that you are all-powerful,  
that I had called you Father, and I felt that I loved you.*

*So I was made quiet in your will,  
and I waited for deliverance from you.*

*You had compassion on me when no man could help me.*

*I saw that humility under suffering was shown to us in the most perfect example of your Son.*

*You taught me to follow him, and I said, “Father, your will be done.”*

*Amen.*

John Woolman, in the early stages of smallpox (1720-1772)

## Friday, November 15: Galatians 3:15-29

This is the church according to Paul: *"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"* (3:26-29). The church is people – people united by their faith in Jesus. The church is men and women – spanning all ages, ethnicities, abilities. The church is God's chosen people, heirs of the promise God made to Abraham centuries ago. It's not ethnic. It's not earned. It **IS** about grace and faith.

God's promise to Abraham was *"I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you"* (Genesis 11:2-3). Abraham was blessed to be a blessing. He was to be God's good news to the world. Unfortunately that mission was lost through the centuries and Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, became disobedient, self-absorbed, and corrupt.

Jesus re-establishes God's call to His people to be a blessing to others. His church is the new people of Israel, called to bring His love and good news to the world. We are called to fulfill Abraham's mission.

So church is not a passive thing. It is active. Corrie Mitchell writes, *"Christians are the church – we don't go to church. Sure, we gather on Sundays for teaching and singing and fellowship. But that's a small part of what it means to be part of the church. Church isn't something you can compartmentalize to one hour spent one day of the week in one location. It's life as the body of Christ. Which means that it's a lot greater of a commitment than we often allow it to be. If you let it – and you should – "church" invades your whole life, as it did for the early Christians."*<sup>2</sup>

*"Currently, many churches try to get people to attend, hoping it drives engagement,"* says Carey Nieuwhof. *"In the future, that will flip. The engaged will attend, in large measure because only the engaged will remain. If you really think about this ... engagement driving attendance is exactly what has fueled the church at its best moments throughout history. It's an exciting shift."*

Think about the things you care the most about ... Those are the things you have probably invested a lot of time, energy, and resources into (family? Friends?). And those will be the things you will continue to invest time, energy, and resources into ...

How important is Jesus to you? How important are the people around you to you? God's invitation is to count our blessings – family, friends, and faith – and choose to make them top priorities today and everyday. God's invitation is to get engaged in His mission – to be a blessing to others – how can I do that?

*Lord, fill us so completely with your Spirit that we,  
as we go from one thing to another,  
may go from strength to strength,  
always filled with your praise,  
everywhere filled with your work,  
finding the joy of the Lord to be our strength.  
This until the time when the work of this world is finished,  
the weary hours come to an end,  
and darkness shall come,  
and our eyes shall rest for a while.  
Then give us an abundant entrance into eternal life,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen*

George Dawson (1821-1876)

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2015/01/16/5-words-christians-need-to-reclaim/35896>

## Saturday, November 16: Galatians 4

Paul says to the ragtag band of early followers of Jesus that *"now there is no Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (3:28). **ALL** of us who believe are free through faith in Jesus. Even more than that, God brings us **ALL** into His family as His children.

*"Because you are his sons (and daughters), God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir"* (Galatians 4:6-7). We are **ALL** princes and princesses in the Kingdom of God.

So if we who believe are **ALL** God's children through faith, why would we listen to teachers who try to convince us we are really slaves and we have to grovel and try to earn God's favour? Those who were emphasizing the importance of the Jewish law were doing just that. They were presenting God as a vindictive tyrant, out to find some teensy-weensy fault with us and – if at all possible – blast us into eternal punishment. Some recent Christian teachers try the same hellfire and brimstone strategy to terrify people into faith in God.

Is that what God is really like? In Galatians 4, Paul draws on Jewish history to help his readers understand they are truly free through Jesus. Writing to the Romans, Paul makes the same point more clearly: *"When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But 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 ... So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God"* (Romans 5:6-11). This is the good news.

*"For years, the assumption has been that the more a church grew, the more activity it would offer,"* notes Nieuwhof. *"The challenge, of course, is that church can easily end up burning people out. In some cases, people end up with no life except church life. Some churches offer so many programs for families that families don't even have a chance to be families. The church at its best has always equipped people to live out their faith in the world. But you have to be in the world to influence the world. Churches that focus their energies on the few things the church can uniquely do best will emerge as the most effective churches moving forward. Simplified churches will complement people's witness, not compete with people's witness."*

Nelson Mandela wrote that, *"To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."* True freedom means true responsibility. Our challenge is to live as God's sons and daughters in such a way that the world is a better place because we are here. How can we make a difference for those in need?

*Through every minute of this day, be with me, Lord.  
Through every day of all this week, be with me, Lord.  
Through every week of all this year, be with me, Lord.  
So shall the days and weeks and years be threaded on a golden cord.  
And all draw on under you Spirit's will into your fullness, Lord,  
that so when time is past, by grace, my work here on earth will be done  
and I may, at last, be with you, Lord.  
Amen.*

John Oxenham (1852-1941)

## Sunday, November 17: Galatians 5:1-15

*"So Christ has truly set us free,"* Paul writes. *"Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law"* (Galatians 5:1). None of us are in danger of that, are we? We don't believe in circumcision and all that Old Testament rule stuff.

And yet we do, sometimes, create our own rules and regulations: to be a Christian you have to do (or not

do) certain things, follow (or not follow) certain rules, like (or not like) certain music, believe (or not believe) certain things, be friends (or not be friends) with certain types of people, vote (or not vote) in certain ways ... We can slip into new legalisms.

And we do, sometimes, create our own little rituals and superstitions: we have to pray in just such a way at just such a time – or else; we have to read so much of the Bible at a specific time – or else; we have to do this or that in worship – or else ... If we do things differently – try a new model – we're doomed.

And, sometimes, we try to bargain with God. "God, if you help me get through this, I will go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life/read my Bible every day/give a monthly donation to \_\_\_ ..." We think that God will be impressed by our acts of devotion – which (like the Old Testament Law) we cannot keep.

"We who live by the Spirit," Paul says, "eagerly wait to receive **by faith** the righteousness God has promised to us. For when we place our **faith** in Christ Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised or being uncircumcised. What is important is **faith** expressing itself in love"(5:5-6). It is about faith – not works.

"You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters," Paul emphasizes (5:13). But as Nelson Mandela said (yesterday), freedom is not a gift we are to use for our own self-indulgence. It is a gift we have been given so we can make a difference in the world. "Don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'"(5:13-14).

Martin Luther King Jr. challenges us "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity." None of us is likely to stand in front of tens of thousands and give a speech like King's "I have a dream." But each of us does have opportunities to make a difference in the lives of people around us ... "Faith," King said, "is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." We may not see a staircase of things we can do that will change the world ... but we can find one small step of love that will improve one person's life ...

*I arise today, conscious of the forgiveness of God the Father,  
conscious of the companionship of God the Son,  
conscious of the guidance of God the Spirit,  
conscious of the unity of the Trinity, Three in One  
Christ our healer, Christ our teacher, Our inspiration and purpose.  
Christ our defender, Christ our redeemer, Our liberation and promise.  
Bless both day and night.  
Bless our travelling and arriving.  
Bless our service and our sleeping.  
Christ, our all in all, into your presence I come, Lord;  
a few moments of quietness, closeness,  
in a busy world that demands my attention.  
Breathe on me now, that I might know your power to see this day through.  
Amen*

John Birch (faithandworship.com)

### **Monday, November 18: Galatians 5:16-26**

The sordid tale of human history is one of violence, greed, brutality, intolerance, hatred, and war ... and the inspiring story of human history has been the determined underground resistance to promote honour, peace, freedom, mercy, and love. On a global scale we see this battle played out around the world.

This same battle between good and evil is fought within our own souls. Paul says, "Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to

*carry out your good intentions ...*"(5:16-17). How do you find that to be true in your life?

Paul goes on: *"When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God"*(5:19-21). Paul bluntly says these things are not morally neutral: they are from the Dark Side. Being "in Christ" does not mean go crazy and indulge your passions. Just because it seems to "feel" good and you are "free" doesn't mean all things are good for you.

In contrast, *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"*(5:22-25).

In the battle between good and evil in your life, don't give in to the Dark Side. Fight the good fight to follow the Spirit's leading in every part of your life. When you fail, confess it. Get up. And keep fighting on ...

Ultimately this is not a battle of equally matched forces: God has already decisively won the war when Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. The power of the Spirit, the power of the resurrection – within us – is greater than any power in the world. Even though we have tough battles along the way, be confident.

How would our church be transformed if we were more loving? More joyful? More peace-full? More patient? More kind? More good? More faithful? More gentle? More self-controlled?

How would our families be changed? Our community? Our world?

Pray through the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23). How can you become more loving? More joyful? More peace-full? More patient? More kind? More good? More faithful? More gentle? More self-controlled?

*Lord, I thank you that you know all about us;  
you know our imperfect deeds done on your behalf,  
Our attempts to please you and our lack of perseverance  
as well as impure motives.  
Overlook our failures and take into account the love in our hearts.  
Thank you that it is you who creates a desire in us by your Holy Spirit.  
And it is you who gives us strength, power,  
and passion to fulfill all the good works  
you have ordained for us since the beginning of time.  
We give you the glory and credit for any success or blessing  
we have received as a result of our efforts on your behalf.  
Jesus, increase in us a desire to live as you lived  
for you said you did not come to be served, but to serve.  
You also said the servant is not greater than his master.  
So dear Master, help us to serve you in a way  
that shows forth your person to all we encounter.  
Amen*

James S. Bell, Jr.

## **Tuesday, November 19: Galatians 6:1-10**

*"The word 'blessed' has been utterly abused," says Corrie Mitchell. "People constantly humble-brag on themselves by appending a tweet or status with #blessed. The people are blessed with game wins, amazing boyfriends, and perfect milk-to-cereal ratios. (Yes, I just saw each of those on Twitter.) We've simultaneously twisted the word's true meaning and devalued it. Here's a look at the most popular use of "blessed" in the Bible – the Beatitudes. Who does Jesus say is blessed? The gist is this: the poor in spirit,*

*those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake ... you get the picture. So, not me for a treadmill opening up right when I get to the gym? Hmm.*

*"While it's right to praise God for his provision, the popular thinking around being 'blessed' treads dangerously close to the prosperity gospel. True blessing is the joy of belonging to God, who (in Jesus) rescues from sin and death – which is as true on a vacation in Maui as it is in a hospital bed."*

Yesterday we read, *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* (5:22-23). Paul uses an agricultural metaphor (fruit). Now he continues the farming imagery: *"You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up. Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone – especially to those in the family of faith"* (6:7-10).

Paul gives some practical examples (6:1-6) of what that might look like.

*"Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"* Paul writes (5:25). Paul is emphasizing – in a positive way – that we are saved by God's grace; we are empowered by God's grace; we truly live by God's grace. Anything good we do is the consequence of God's Spirit working in and through us, inspiring us, guiding us, and empowering us. It is all about God. Not us. God's "good works" in me and through me are God's good works, not mine.

*"The Holy Spirit illuminates the minds of people, makes us yearn for God, and takes spiritual truth and makes it understandable to us"* writes Billy Graham – He is the One who deserves all the credit, not us.

Expressing this negatively, Corrie Ten Boom writes, *"Trying to do the Lord's work in your own strength is the most confusing, exhausting, and tedious of all work. But when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the ministry of Jesus just flows out of you."*

If we try to explain everything, accomplish everything, and be everything on our own, we can never be anything more than a shadow of who we can be when we allow the Spirit freedom to move in our lives. Try walking with the Spirit today.

Ask Him to lead you. Ask Him to open your eyes to see possibilities. Ask Him to guide your conversations. Ask Him to give you a deeper appreciation of the beauty around you. Ask Him to help you see how you can help His Kingdom come and His will be done today ... Ask Him to see how you are truly blessed ... and how you can be a blessing to someone else today.

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve,  
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked for health, that I might do great things,  
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.  
I asked for riches, that I might be happy,  
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.  
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men,  
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.  
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life,  
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for – but everything I had looked for.  
Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered.  
I am, among all men, most richly blessed.*

*Amen*

Prayer of a seriously wounded Confederate soldier

## Wednesday, November 20: Galatians 6:11-18

What is the most important thing in your life? Why?

This is how Paul answered that question: *"As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world's interest in me has also died. It doesn't matter whether we have been circumcised or not. What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation"* (6:14-15).

For Paul, his relationship to Jesus was the important thing. Nothing else came close. His identity, as a follower of Jesus, was first and foremost. His occupation – as a tentmaker – was way down the list of ways in which he defined himself. His education, a doctorate in Jewish theology, was irrelevant. His dress/appearance? He never talks about them. His bank account/portfolio/assets? Never mentioned. What Paul really wants us to know about who he is, is that his life only finds meaning, purpose, and identity as a person whom God loves, for whom Jesus died, and in whom the Spirit lives ...

How do you define yourself? In terms of your job? Your education? What you wear? What you own? Who you vote for? Does any of that really matter? Does any of it make you uniquely you? Millions of other people have a similar job, education, clothing, party-loyalty, and other stuff ...

But God loves **you**. He died for **you**. His Spirit fills **you**. **You** are His precious child – a prince or princess in the Kingdom of God. That is who you really are. God wants you to know this, not so that you become arrogant, self-centered, or spoiled ... but so that you can live with integrity. It is from this strong sense of self-identity, as God's child, that you can effectively reach out in love to others. When we know who we are, as God's beloved, we have the ability to share His love with those around us. God wants us to know His love so His love can then overflow our lives to be a blessing to people we know and meet. Paradoxically, the more we appreciate God's love for us, the more love we have to share with others (conversely, the less secure we are about God's love for us, the more self-absorbed and less loving we tend to be).

Scottish theologian, William Barclay, wrote, *"Love always involves responsibility, and love always involves sacrifice. And we do not really love Christ unless we are prepared to face His task and to take up His Cross."*

May the Lord help us to love Him and love our neighbours in simple – and profound – ways ... What might that look like for me, today?

*God, you know our hearts, and you see our temptations and struggles.  
Have pity on us and deliver us from the sins which make war upon our souls.  
You are all-powerful, and we are weak and erring.  
Faithful God, our trust is in you.  
Deliver us from the bondage of evil,  
and grant that we, from now on, be your devoted servants,  
serving you in the freedom of holy love, for Jesus Christ's sake.  
Amen.*

Eugène Bersier (1830-1903)

## Thursday, November 21: Acts 9:1-25

Why is Jesus so important to Paul? Paul had experienced Jesus personally.

Up to the events in Acts 9, Paul (or Saul as he was known) bitterly opposed the church. In fact, Paul was one of witnesses when Stephen, the first Christian to die for his faith, was stoned to death (Acts 7:54-8:1).

Paul/Saul's conversion is certainly dramatic. Some of us have had similar before-Jesus and after-Jesus conversion experiences. We can identify a specific time and place when and where we came to faith.

Others of us came to faith gradually. We know we believe now; we know we didn't believe once upon a time. But how that transition happened we cannot accurately describe.

Still others of us have always believed. We were blessed with Christian homes that nurtured and cultivated our faith so that we never remember a time when we did NOT believe.

The specific process of arriving at our present situation of having faith does not matter. What does matter is that we actually do know Jesus today. Jesus is our Good News right now. Knowing Him at this moment – however that came to pass – is what is critical.

Thank God for your journey of faith ... what ever that looked like. Thank Him that you know Jesus today.

Pray that Jesus would be real to you as you pray with Him.

*Jesus, when I have to deal with those who need you,  
help me to talk to them the way you did.  
When I meet those who are hurting and in need of a kind word or deed,  
help me to reach out to them, just like you did.  
When I see injustice or unrighteousness,  
help me to see it the way you did and to confront it,  
just like you did.  
When I have a decision to make,  
remind me to go to the Father and talk to him about it,  
just like you did.  
When I am mistreated or spoken ill of,  
help me to respond to it without offering an 'eye for an eye,'  
just like you did.  
Amen.*

Tracy Macon Sumner

### **Friday, November 22: Acts 16:6-15**

Does God speak to us? How do we know Jesus and His will for us?

Sometimes His Word makes His will clear to us. Jesus clearly tells us the greatest commands are to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strengths, and to love our neighbours as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40). That's not up for negotiation.

Other times, God leads us through a deep inner conviction or even a vision. Somehow the Spirit led Paul and Silas not to go to Bithynia, in Turkey (16:7), but to go to Macedonia, in Greece (16:9). It wouldn't have been bad for Paul and Silas to go to Bithynia, but God has something even better for them in Macedonia.

Other times, God speaks to us through wise Christian friends. Near Philippi, Paul meets, gets to know, and speaks with Lydia. As Paul is speaking about Jesus with Lydia, "*the Lord opened her heart*" to hear and to respond to the Good News.

Lydia's conversion is not nearly as dramatic as Paul's in Acts 9. Lydia is a good person whose life will be made even better as she gets to know Jesus. It's good to know God wants all people to come to faith – miscreants like Paul and good people like Lydia.

Notice Paul is God's chosen person to speak into Lydia's life, but Acts 16 makes it clear that **the Lord** is the One who is responsible for her coming to faith. God opens her heart. Paul cannot take credit for her faith decision. It is good to know that when we share the Good News about Jesus with others, it's not all up to us to convince them. The Lord will lead the person to faith. We are simply His helpers along the way.

Pray for those you know who need to know Jesus.

*Lord Jesus, I approach your banquet table in fear and trembling,  
for I am a sinner and dare not rely on my own worth  
but only on your goodness and mercy.  
I am corrupted by many sins in body and soul  
and by my careless thoughts and words.  
Gracious God of majesty and awe,  
I seek your protection and look for your healing.  
Poor troubled sinner that I am, I appeal to you, the fountain of all mercy.  
I cannot bear your judgment, but I do trust in your salvation.  
Lord, I show my wounds to you and uncover my shame before you.  
I know my sins are many and great, and they fill me with fear.  
But I hope in your mercies, for they cannot be numbered.  
Lord Jesus Christ, eternal King, God and man, I pray, for I trust in you.  
Have mercy on me, full of sorrow and sin,  
for the depth of your compassion never ends.*

*Praise to you, saving sacrifice,  
offered on the wood of the cross for me and for all mankind.  
Praise to the noble and precious blood,  
flowing from the wounds of my crucified Lord Jesus Christ  
and washing away the sins of the whole world.  
Remember, Lord, your creature, whom you have redeemed with your blood.  
I repent of my sins, and I want to make right the wrong I have done.  
Merciful Father, take away all my offences and sins.  
Purify me in body and soul.  
Amen.*

Ambrose of Milan (340-397)

### **Saturday, November 23: Acts 16:16-34**

Did the jailer understand everything about being a Christian? Not at all. His conversion and baptism are a starting point, not his final destination.

This jailer has a long way to go to understand who Jesus is, who God is, and what salvation really means. He is not a Jewish-background convert, as many early believers were, who already knew a lot about God, the promise of the Messiah, the Ten Commandments, or biblical history. This man has a couple of hours of "Christianity 101" with Paul, in the middle of the night. That's it.

He has a long journey ahead to learn about God, to get to know Jesus, and to figure out how his new faith in Jesus can and will shape his way of life. He has no Bible, no Old Testament, no church – yet. He will struggle to learn and apply the teachings of Jesus to his life and his vocation.

But we all have to begin somewhere. At least he is making a start.

The Good News is that we all start somewhere on our journey of faith. But God will work in us and through us – for our entire lifetimes – to help us learn, grow, and mature in our understanding of what faith means.

We know so much more that this jailer and his household did when they came to faith. But we continue to struggle to apply Jesus' truth, ethics, and ways to our lives, too. As we face new situation in our lives – changes in our families, at work, in our health – we wrestle with how God's Word speaks into our circumstances. As society changes – social media, "fake" news, new political values, technology, culture – we have to think through how our faith shapes how we think, react, and act.

What is your "growing edge" as you continue to grow in your faith?

*Govern everything by your wisdom, Lord,  
so that my soul may always be serving you as you choose,  
not as I choose.  
Do not punish me, I implore you,  
by granting that which I wish or ask for if it offend your love.  
Your love is that which I desire to always live and grow within me.  
Let me die to myself that so I may serve you.  
Let me live to you, who in yourself are the true life.  
Amen*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

### **Sunday, November 24: Psalm 23**

Good News. Reflect on Psalm 23 in *The Message* translation (or your favourite translation):

*God, my shepherd. I don't need a thing.  
You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from.  
True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.*

*Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk at my side.  
Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.*

*You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies.  
You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.*

*Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.  
I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.*

How is God's love, care, and provision good news for you, today?

*You are the peace of all things calm.  
You are the place to hide from harm.  
You are the light that shines in dark.  
You are the heart's eternal spark.  
You are the door that's open wide.  
You are the guest who waits inside.  
You are the stranger at the door.  
You are the calling of the poor.  
You are my Lord and with me from ill.  
You are the light, the truth, the way.  
You are my Saviour this very day.  
Amen.*

Scots Gaelic Prayer (10<sup>th</sup> century)

### **Monday, November 25: Psalm 19**

God has created a glorious universe (19:1-6). It is good to simply enjoy His creation and worship Him as creator. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, the wonders of creation teach us about the creativity, wisdom, glory, provision, and love of God.

How can we worship God better through contemplation of His glorious works?

God has also given us His Word (19:7-11). The Bible gives us much practical instruction, wisdom, and insight into God's truth and character. It is good for us to spend time in Scripture, getting to know God and His will. How does God's Word help you grow closer to Him?

God forgives us all of our sins (19:12-13). Thank God for His amazing grace.

*"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer"*(19:14).

*Hold us fast, Lord of hosts,  
so that we won't fall from you.  
Grant us thankful and obedient hearts,  
that our faith in the love, knowledge,  
and reverence of you will increase daily.  
Increase our faith and help our unbelief,  
that we, being provided for and cared for in all our needs  
by your Fatherly care and divine intervention,  
may live godly lives to the praise and good example of your people  
and after this life reign with you forever,  
through Christ our Savior.  
Amen.*

James Pilkington (1520-1576)

## **Tuesday, November 26: Psalm 24**

The earth – the universe – belongs to God. In the words of the old hymn, *This is my Father's world ...*". The earth and all that is in it was created good, by God. The natural environment around us is God's art gallery. How then should we treat His creation?

David goes on to ask, *"Who may climb the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?"*

How might you answer the question?

How does David answer it?

None of us has perfectly pure hands and hearts. None of us is totally wholehearted in our worship. None of us has complete integrity and is absolutely honest all the time. So what hope is there?

When we open up our hearts and lives to God's love and grace, He freely forgives us all our sin (Psalm 19:12-13). He purifies us from all unrighteousness. By His mercy and compassion we are saved. That's Good News.

How can we open up our lives so the King of glory can enter? What parts of my life do I hold back from His Spirit? Will I allow His grace to come into every part of my life?

*Jesus, poor, unknown, and despised, have mercy on us,  
and let us not be ashamed to follow you.  
Jesus, accused, and wrongfully condemned,  
teach us to bear insults patiently,  
and let us not seek our own glory.  
Jesus, crowned with thorns and hailed in derision;  
buffeted, overwhelmed with injuries, griefs and humiliations;  
Jesus, hanging on the accursed tree,  
bowing the head, giving up the ghost,  
have mercy on us,  
and conform our whole lives to your Spirit.  
Amen.*

John Wesley (1703-1791)

### **Wednesday, November 27: Psalm 8**

God is God ... and we are not. David is very aware of that distinction.

Do we ever act as if we are God? Do we think we know it all? Do we think we have everything figured out? Do we try to make every decision on our own? Do we rationalize that we know better than God? Do we think our personal values/morals/ethics are better than His? Do we believe His Word and truth are out of date and really don't matter anymore? Do we rely on our own strength and smarts for everything?

What is the inevitable result when we think we know better than God?

What are the advantages of deferring to God's wisdom and acknowledging that He does know best?

One of the tasks God has given humanity, from the beginning, is to be wise stewards of His creation: "*to tend and watch over*" His world (Genesis 2:15). He has made us "rulers" of His creation, not as power-hungry despots, but as wise caretakers. He has "*put everything under our feet/put all things under our authority,*" not so that we can trample it, but so we can care for it. How are we doing at tending and watching over His creation?

The Good News is that God can help us to live wise, good, AND purposeful lives.

How is God speaking to you, today?

*Lord, grant us faith,  
the faith that removes the mask from the world  
and shows us God in all things,  
the faith that shows us Christ  
where our eyes see only a poor person,  
the faith that shows us the Savior  
where we feel only pain.  
Lord, grant us the faith that inspires us  
to undertake everything that God wants without hesitation,  
without shame, without fear, and without ever retreating;  
the faith that knows how to go through life  
with calm, peace, and profound joy,  
and that makes the soul completely indifferent  
to everything that is not of you.  
Amen*

Charles de Foucauld (1856-1915)

### **Thursday, November 28: Isaiah 7:1-16**

For the past three months we have been reading about God's Good News: He wants all people, everywhere to know Him. However, throughout the Old Testament, the nation of Israel never really understood that they were called to be a blessing to anyone but themselves. When they did "get it" they certainly struggled to live it out (remember Jonah, trying to scurry off to the end of the world rather than tell the Assyrians about God?).

The story of Scripture is that God dramatically intervenes. Through the coming of Jesus – Christmas (and, later, Easter) – He comes Himself to make things right. Jesus is fully God and fully human – God Himself taking on our humanity – to teach us, to model real life for us, to die for us, and to rise from the dead to destroy the power of sin and death for us. This is the centre point of human history: God comes. Jesus comes. The Spirit comes. And the world will never be the same again.

There is lots of foreshadowing of this astounding event – Jesus’ birth – throughout the Old Testament. One passage is in Isaiah 7. The context is this: what was once one nation of “Israel” under kings like David and Solomon is now divided:

- The northern kingdom, still called Israel, has fallen away from faith in God (FYI King Pekah of Israel had assassinated his way to the kingship – not exactly a man after God’s own heart.).
- The southern kingdom, Judah, is ruled by King Ahaz, direct descendant of King David. God, through Isaiah, is calling Ahaz to put his faith in God’s ability to save Judah from its enemies (specifically the Syrians/Arameans and Judah’s own estranged Jewish brothers in Israel).

What do you see in this passage that anticipates Jesus’ birth? (FYI, Jesus is a direct descendant of King David and thus of King Ahaz as well).

God’s promise of a sign, that *“the virgin will conceive a child and she will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’),”* sounds impossible. It sounds as impossible as Judah being able to defeat the double-edged sword of Syria/Aram and Israel. But God is telling Ahaz that it’s only through faith in God, and God’s ability to do the seemingly impossible, that they will be saved.

A major theme throughout Scripture is that we cannot solve the BIG problems of our world, the BIG problems of our lives (or even the little problems in our lives), without God’s help. Jesus, Immanuel – God with us – is God’s ultimate helper. He is God Himself.

The invitation of Advent – our time of preparation for Christmas – is to know our God is the One who can do things that seem impossible. This amazing God is with us. Through His Spirit, He never leaves us or forsakes us. He is always here.

John writes: *“You belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people (false prophets), because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world ... And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us.*

*“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. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us. Let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:4-13).* There is Good News.

*God, make me pray for life.  
O, braver than this ...  
Let me straighten after pain,  
as a tree straightens after the rain,  
shining and lovely again.  
God, make me pray for life.  
Much braver than this ...  
As the blown grass lifts,  
let me rise from sorrow with quiet eyes,  
knowing your way is wise.  
God, make me brave.  
Life brings such blinding things.  
Help me to keep my sight.  
Help me to see the fact that out of darkness comes light.  
Amen*

Unknown

## Friday, November 29: Isaiah 9:1-7

What do you do when the world (in general) looks bleak? What do you do when your own life looks bleak?

Ahaz was staring down the spears of two angry armies – one of them his own Jewish brethren from the northern kingdom of Israel. He saw no hope for his country. And, the traditions of the day being what they were, he saw no hope for himself or his family: captured kings were (at best) executed or (at worst) tortured and then executed, their heads impaled on poles above their own city gate (and you thought you had stress and worries in your life?!?!).

Amid this distress, God speaks these words of encouragement.

Ultimately, like Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:1-7 looks forward to the coming of Jesus, the great Messiah and Saviour (not just from 8<sup>th</sup> century BC armies, but from the power of sin and death.).

Jesus is our hope when things seem bleak. He is with us always. His Spirit is within us.

How do these verses anticipate Jesus coming?

- Jesus is your Wonderful Counselor: what does that mean to you?
- Jesus is your Mighty God: what does that mean to you?
- Jesus is your Everlasting Father: what does that mean to you?
- Jesus is your Prince of Peace: what does that mean to you?
- His government and its peace will never end: what does that mean to you?

John writes: *"We have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. All who declare that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God. We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect.*

*"So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world. Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear"* (1 John 4:14-18).

*Lord Christ, Lamb of God, Lord of lords,  
call us, who are called to be saints,  
along the way of your cross.  
Draw us, who would draw, nearer our King  
to the foot of your cross.  
Cleanse us, who are not worthy to approach,  
with the pardon of your cross.  
Instruct us, the ignorant and blind,  
in the school of your cross.  
Bring us, in the fellowship of your sufferings,  
to the victory of your cross.  
And seal us in the kingdom of your glory  
among the servants of your cross, crucified Lord,  
who with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns,  
one God, almighty, eternal, world without end.  
Amen.*

Eric Milner-White (1884-1963)

## Saturday, November 30: Isaiah 11:1-12

God continues to encourage Ahaz. The *"the stump of David's family"* (11:1) and *"heir to David's throne"* (11:10) refers to the fact that the promised Messiah will come from the family of David – AND thus from

Ahaz, himself. Ahaz is a direct descendant of David. So God is promising Ahaz that his own family will provide salvation for his people. That's good news.

Unfortunately, Ahaz didn't respond well to all of this. 2 Kings 16:1-4 records that: *"Ahaz did not do what was pleasing in the sight of the Lord his God, as his ancestor David had done. Instead, he followed the example of the kings of Israel, even sacrificing his own son in the fire. In this way, he followed the detestable practices of the pagan nations the Lord had driven from the land ahead of the Israelites. He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the pagan shrines and on the hills and under every green tree ..."*

2 Kings 16 goes on to record that Ahaz made a deal with the devil – King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria – to battle the armies of Israel and Syria/Aram. He took the silver and gold from the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem and the palace treasury and sent it as payment to the Assyrian king. While signing his life away to Tiglath-pileser, Ahaz gets excited about the pagan altar in Damascus and has a copy built in the Temple in Jerusalem. He removes the symbolic Jewish decorations in the Temple, turning it into a pagan temple. Ahaz will not trust God. He puts his trust in King Tiglath-pileser. And he puts his trust in the cruel gods of the Assyrians.

As you read through Isaiah 11, however, notice God has a plan ... despite the evil ways of King Ahaz. Ultimately God will bring something beautiful out of the rotting old stump that has become the line of David (Ahaz in all his faithlessness, rebellion, and downright evil). Despite Ahaz's complete rejection of God, one of his descendants, *"the heir to David's throne,"* – and Ahaz's heir – *"will be a banner of salvation to all the world"* (11:10) – Jesus. God can bring light out of darkness. He can bring life out of death.

Read through Isaiah 11 a couple of times. How do these verses anticipate the coming of Jesus?

John encourages us: *"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God. And everyone who loves the Father loves his children, too. We know we love God's children if we love God and obey his commandments. Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome. For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith. And who can win this battle against the world? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God"* (1 John 5:1-5).

The Spirit of God who is in us is far more powerful than the forces of evil in the world around us. Through Him we can overcome our own sin and the evil around us. Be encouraged. Be strong and courageous. Keep the faith.

*This day is full of beauty and adventure:  
help me Lord to be fully alive to it all.  
During this day, may I become a more thoughtful person,  
a more prayerful person, a more generous and kindly person.  
Help me not to be turned in on myself  
but to be sensitive and helpful to others.  
Let me do nothing today that will hurt anyone,  
but let me help at least a little,  
to make life more pleasant for those I meet.  
When night comes, may I look back on this day without regrets;  
and may nobody be unhappy because of anything  
I have said or done or failed to do.  
Lord God, bless this day for me and all of us.  
Make it a day in which we grow a little more like your Son,  
and be more and more filled with your Holy Spirit.  
Amen.*

Anonymous

## December 1: Matthew 1:1-17

This morning we begin to look at Advent/Christmas according to Matthew. Matthew is the gospel author who writes most specifically for the Jewish people (Mark and Luke's gospel are more directed toward non-Jews). Matthew makes more reference to Old Testament prophecies, comments more on Jewish festivals and traditions, talks more about the Temple, and is more intentional about establishing Jesus' royal/"line-of-David" credentials than the other authors.

We often skip these genealogies.<sup>3</sup> The names mean nothing to us.

But these people, each of them insignificant at one level, had critical God-given roles in history (so do you ... even though not many people may know or recognize your name). God works through all kinds of people with all kinds of issues:

- Jacob played favourites with his children, causing domestic disaster,
- Rahab was a Canaanite (not Jewish) ... and a prostitute
- Another non-Jewish woman, Ruth, was from Moab (then Israel's enemy),
- David seduced another man's wife, then had him murdered (Bathsheba became Solomon's mother)
- Many, many kings (like Ahaz) did not follow God at all

Sometimes it seems like history is out of God's control. Governments and leaders seem to ignore or actively oppose Christian values. They lie. They cheat. Good people become corrupted by power and compromise their convictions. In Jewish history, for generation after generation it seemed like bad thing after bad thing was happening. King after king rejected God. But God was still able to accomplish His purposes.

We need to remember that God still is in control in our world. God works in history, in spite of wretches who make rotten decisions. Isn't that good news?

It is often the case that trials and tests help me locate where I am spiritually. How I react under pressure is how the real me reacts. (Ahaz, under pressure, cracked – and turned to a foreign king and foreign gods)

Author and speaker Helen Keller (also the first deaf-blind person to earn a bachelor of arts degree) wrote, "*Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.*"

When bad (and good) things happen in our lives, God can bring good out of them. Paul wants us to know that, "*The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them*" (Romans 8:26-28). Be encouraged.

*My brother, Jesus.  
It happens every year.  
I think that this will be the year that I have a reflective Advent.  
I look forward to this new season, Jesus.  
But all around me are the signs rushing me to Christmas  
and some kind of celebration  
that equates spending money with love.  
I need your help.*

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<sup>3</sup> Note: Matthew gives us **Joseph's** family tree; Luke gives us **Mary's** – thus some differences. Why does Matthew highlight Joseph's? Because **legally**, Jesus was considered Joseph's son since Joseph was Mary's husband (even though, biologically, Joseph was not Jesus' father). Since Matthew is directing his words most specifically toward the Jewish people (in particular, Jewish **men**), he wants to establish that Jesus is Joseph's son – and David's son – for all legal purposes. This is the established Jewish law of the time.

*I want to slow my world down.  
This year, more than ever, I need Advent,  
these weeks of reflection and longing for hope in the darkness.*

*Jesus, this year, help me to have that longing.  
Help me to feel it in my heart  
and be aware of the hunger and thirst in my own soul.  
Deep down, I know there is something missing in my life,  
but I can't quite reach for it.  
I can't get what is missing.  
I know it is about you, Jesus.  
You are not missing from my life,  
but I might be missing the awareness  
of all of the places you are present there.*

*Be with me, my dear friend.  
Guide me in these weeks  
to what you want to show me this Advent.  
Help me to be vulnerable enough to ask you  
to lead me to the place of my own weakness,  
the very place where I will find you  
the most deeply embedded in my heart,  
loving me without limits.  
Amen.*

Creighton University Online Ministries