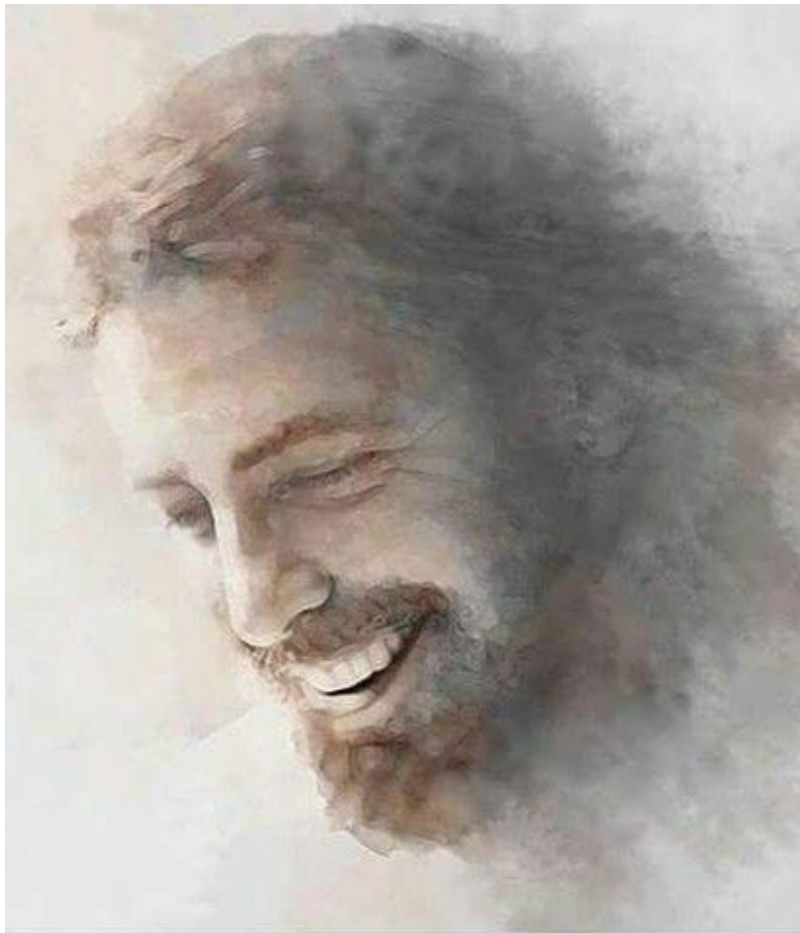


January 2021

What Does the Lord Require of You?

Readings, Reflections, Prayers



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Monday, January 4: Colossians 4

"Remember my chains," says Paul (4:18). Paul is in prison in Rome. His life is coming to an end.

As we age, we often take better stock of what is most important. Those essentials may or may not be what seemed so critical earlier in our lives. Early on, many of us focus on our appearance, clothes, possessions, career, bank account, vacations, home, vehicle. But as we get older (and wiser?), our priorities change.

This month we are thinking about what is important to God ... and what should, therefore, be important to us. As we finish up Colossians, we get some initial insight.

What is on Paul's mind?

- *Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart.*
- *Pray for yourself and others that God will give us many opportunities to speak about Christ.*
- *Pray that we will proclaim this message as clearly as we can.*
- *Live wisely among those who are not believers and make the most of every opportunity.*
- *Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so you have the right response for everyone.*

Prayer. Thanksgiving. Sharing the love of God in Jesus. Living a wise, godly life. Following the example of Jesus. Being a living testimony to Jesus. Being gracious. This is what is on Paul's mind. As people age, hopefully we become more concerned to be doing what God wants us to do, and more sensitive to God's leading. We see opportunities God gives us to love others and to share our faith in Jesus with others. God, Jesus, the Spirit become more central in our lives. How can I learn that lesson earlier rather than later?

Paul is connected. Even though he is in prison, he has wonderful relationships with his friends. These people are important to him. As we age, we often become more and more focused on family and friends.

How come it often takes aging to help us realize what's really important?

1. Our relationship with God – prayer, sharing our faith, living for Him ...
2. Our relationships with people – being gracious, family and friends ...

As we begin a New Year, think through:

- What really **are** the most important things in your life?
- What would **you like** the most important things in your life to be?
- Are you living in a way that really prioritizes those "most important things"?
- Do you need to rearrange your life so that you really do put the most important things first?

"Be sure to carry out the ministry the Lord gave you" (4:17). What opportunity is God giving you today?

*May God make this New Year a blessed one!
Not by shielding me from all sorrows and pain,
but by strengthening me to bear it, as it comes;
Not by making my path easy,
but by making me sturdy to travel any path;
Not by taking hardships from me,
but by taking fear from my heart;
Not by granting me unbroken sunshine,
but by keeping my face bright, even in the shadows;
Not by making my life always pleasant,
but by showing me when people and their causes need me most,
and by making me anxious to be there to help.
May God's love, peace, hope and joy be for all us for the year ahead. Amen*

Unknown

Tuesday, January 5: Luke 19:1-10; Matthew 19:16-26

"The fact is," comments Christopher Wright, "we human beings **need** a lot of saving. And God **does** a lot of saving in the Bible ..."

These two stories are interesting contrasts: here are two wealthy people with similar questions/issues ...

- Zacchaeus "wanted to see who Jesus was ... 'today salvation has come to this house'" (Luke 19:3, 9).
- The rich, young ruler: "What good thing must I do to get eternal life? ... Who then can be saved" (Matthew 19:16, 25).

Both wanted to know about Jesus, His message of salvation, and new life in the Kingdom of God.

Zacchaeus had a party. But the wealthy man, in Matthew 19, "went away sad." Why the difference? Zacchaeus discovered salvation through Jesus. The other, anonymous, man in Matthew 19, did not.

It is important to note that Zacchaeus didn't **earn** Jesus' favour; his salvation was not achieved by his generosity. Nor did the rich, young man jeopardize his salvation by any "good thing" he did or did not do. We are not saved by good works. It is their **faith responses** to Jesus that are significant:

- Zacchaeus was willing to put his faith completely in Jesus. Consequently, he did not need to hoard wealth; he trusted Jesus. And the natural outflow of his trust of and love for Jesus was to be generous, going way beyond anything prescribed in the Law;
- The rich, young man ultimately would not put his faith in Jesus: Jesus' financial challenge was a diagnostic question – what is this man's true god? Would he trust God to provide for his needs if his security blanket (his wealth) was gone? Apparently not. The young man's answer is revealing.

Their responses are symptomatic of what is really going on in their hearts. Who does each really trust? Zacchaeus trusts Jesus. His life is transformed. He will be financially a bit less well off. But he has found true fulfilment. The other man does not trust Jesus. He will save his millions but will live out his life with only his bank account for comfort and hope. His departure is dreadfully sad.

What about me? Whom do I really trust? If Jesus were to ask me to give up my security – money, career, comfort, vacation, time, recreation – would I? Why? Why not? What is going on in my heart?

Jesus says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." When I give what is most precious – time, money, energy, love, whatever – paradoxically it is incredibly fulfilling. By losing my life, for Jesus' sake, I find it. What is Jesus saying to me?

*Jesus, You are with us in every transition and change.
As we enter into this New Year with excitement and even some anxiety,
we recall your deep compassion, presence, and abounding love.
We thank you for the gifts, talents and skills with which you have blessed us.
We thank you for the experiences that have brought us to this moment.
We thank you for the work of others that gives breadth and depth to our own work.
Be with us as we move forward, rejoicing with you and supporting one another.
May our lives be centered on You and You alone.
Amen.*

Wednesday, January 6: Revelation 7:9-11; Psalm 23

Biblical scholar, Christopher Wright, comments, "We tend to think of salvation as something centering on ourselves. **We** are the ones who need to 'get saved'; **we** want to know how to find salvation; **we** tell others about how **we** found salvation, and how they can, too. But from beginning to end, we should remember, salvation is something that belongs to **God**, not to us. Salvation is **God's** property." Salvation is God's

gracious gift to us; it's not our accomplishment or reward. Salvation is about God and His grace, not us.

The great multitude of the redeemed knows exactly *who* it is who saves them:

- Not themselves, by their good deeds, good lives, or religious activities;
- Not princes, governments, armed forces, or stock markets (Psalm 146:3, Psalm 33:16-17)
- Not other gods (Isaiah 43:11-13, 45:20-21)
- It is the one true God, revealed to us in Scripture. It is Him and Him alone.

One popular metaphor about different world religions is that they are all different paths up the same mountain. The goal – the mountain top – is salvation (or God in some sense). In this theory, we all struggle to find salvation: we can all get there in the end, even though the paths *we* climb may be different.

But there is a problem – this popular metaphor assumes salvation is something *you* achieve as the end result of *your* long, hard struggle up the hillside of your religion (in our case, Christianity). *But*, as a follower of Jesus, you are not saved because you climb a Christian mountainside and do Christian things. You are saved because *God has already acted*, in Jesus, to accomplish your salvation; He simply calls you to trust Him. Our God meets us at the bottom of the mountain, offering salvation by His grace – not at the top, waiting for us to earn it. Trusting Jesus for our salvation – already accomplished by Him – is unique among all religions.

Salvation is not at the end of a long, hard journey. It's not some distant ending place. Salvation is God's gift, in Jesus. It's your starting point; it's where you already are.

Yes, life is a long journey. You may feel you are climbing a tall mountain. But you are not trying to achieve salvation or to find God. You are already saved. He is already with you. He is walking the path with you. Wherever you are, "*You need fear no evil for I am with you; my rod and staff they comfort you ...*"

If you have accepted God's gift of salvation, you are already part of this great multitude in Revelation 7. You are saved. It is finished. Accomplished. Completed. Enjoy it. Praise Him. Be thankful. Do you know someone who needs this good news? Get together with them and encourage them.

*Oh God, I ask not for easier tasks.
I ask for stronger aptitudes and greater talents to meet any tasks which may come my way.
Help me to help others so that their lives may be made easier and happier.
Strengthen my confidence in my fellow men in spite of what they may do or say.
Give me strength to live according to the Golden Rule
(Do to others what you want them to do to you),
enthusiasm to inspire those around me,
sympathy to help lighten the burdens of those who suffer,
and a spirit of joy and gladness to share with others.
Amen*

Thursday, January 7: Micah 1:1-9

Salvation is a theme that runs through the entire Bible, including the prophets.

What do we do with the prophets? More than a quarter of our Bibles is written by the prophets (Isaiah through Malachi), but we rarely read them. The language can be challenging. They sometimes seem irrelevant. And they seem a bit depressing. We often skip right over, zooming on to the gospels.

But Jesus quotes the prophets often. He sees His ministry as the fulfillment of the prophets' message. He uses words from the prophets to highlight the issues and problems people have. The prophets help us see what "sin" is and to understand why we need a Saviour. They help us appreciate salvation. And they help us think through how we live, faithfully, for God.

The two big themes in the prophets are:

1. **Faithfulness to and worship of the one true God.** People often get seduced into loving and trusting in other things than God: wealth, possessions, power, pleasure. The prophets call us back to God.
2. **Justice.** When we love and worship God, the One who is holy and just, we yearn to see justice done. This means more than a good legal system. Biblical justice means we live with honesty and integrity in our relationships, compassion and care for the poor, forgiveness, mercy, and empowerment.

Micah (whose name means, "Who is like Yahweh") is a country boy who sees the crime and corruption in the land, especially in the cities of Jerusalem (capital of Judah) and Samaria (capital of Israel). Micah calls people back to faithfulness to God and speaks out against the oppression of the poor, underprivileged, and foreigners.

We "get" the call back to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength in prophets like Micah. It's spiritual good news. We struggle with the prophets' obsession with personal and national integrity, care for the poor, advocacy for the vulnerable, and compassion for refugees: God is concerned we love our neighbour as ourselves in very practical ways. We wrestle with this call to be physical, economic, and practical good news.

When Jesus was asked, "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?" He replied, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:36-40).

For God, faithfulness is BOTH loving God wholeheartedly AND loving our neighbour as we would be loved ourselves. It is not an EITHER/OR. It is BOTH/AND. How can I do both today? How can I love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength today? How can I love my neighbour as myself, today?

*Gracious God, thank you for the gift of today. Refresh me.
Invite me to discover your presence in each person that I meet
and in every event that I encounter.
Teach me when to speak and when to listen,
when to ponder and when to share.
In moments of challenge and decision attune my heart to the whisperings of your Wisdom.
As I undertake ordinary and unnoticed tasks, gift me with simple joy.
When my day goes well, may I rejoice.
When it grows difficult, surprise me with your powerful Presence
and with new possibilities.
When life is overwhelming, call me to sabbath moments of rest
to restore your peace and your joy in my soul.
May my living today reveal your grace, mercy, and love to a hurting world.
Amen.*

Pat Bergen

Friday, January 8: Micah 1:10-16

Has Micah depressed you yet? So far, he has had only bad news for the people of Samaria (the northern kingdom of Israel) and Jerusalem (the southern kingdom of Judah). In Micah 2 he will help us understand why God is so angry with His people.

God's people were blessed to be a blessing. Way back in Genesis 12:2, God says to Abram, "I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others." God's call on the people of Israel was that they were to be His people. And as His people, bearing the image of God, they were to love, care for, and bring His good news into all the earth. They failed miserably. The result will

be exile in Babylon. During Micah's lifetime the northern kingdom of Israel will fall. Shortly after his death, Judah would capitulate. The Bible sees exile as judgement upon Israel and Judah for their sins.

One of the themes Micah highlights for us is that God takes sin seriously. We know that when we, personally, sin, it's a bad thing. We need to confess it to God. We need to change our ways (repent). And, if we have hurt someone else, we need to confess, apologise, and try to rebuild the relationship.

Spend some time in reflection: is there anything in your life that is "sin" in God's eyes? Will you confess it? Will you do what you need to do to make things right? *"If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness"*(1 John 1:8-9).

However, the prophets highlight that when we, as a community/nation/culture, sin we also have to confess it to God. We need to change our collective ways (repent). If we have hurt someone or a group, we need to confess, apologise, and try to rebuild the relationship. It is good, for instance, for us as a nation to have apologised to indigenous people for the evils of the residential schools and to seek to help First Nations become thriving communities. This is the kind of justice God calls us to through the prophets.

Spend some time in reflection: is there anything in our society that is "sin" in God's eyes? Talk with God about it? Is there anything you can do to begin to make things right?

*O Lord, holy and true, who opens doors which none can shut;
as you have set before your church an open door into the world,
There are Christians who have hysterical reactions
As if the world had slipped out of God's hands.
They are violent as if they were risking everything.
But we believe in history – in His story – in Jesus.
The world is not a roll of the dice on its way toward chaos.
A new world has begun to happen since Christ has risen!
Jesus Christ, we rejoice in your definitive triumph!
With our bodies still in the breach, our souls in tension;
We cry our first "Hurrah!" until eternity unfolds itself.
Jesus, your sorrow now has passed.
Your enemies have failed.
You are the definitive hope for humankind.
What matter the wait now for us?
We accept the struggle and the death,
Because you, our love, will not die!
We march behind you on the road to the future.
You are with us. You are our immortality.
Take away the sadness from our faces; we are not in a game of chance!
You have the last word!
Beyond the crushing of our bones, now has begun the eternal "Alleluia!"
From the thousands of openings in our wounded bodies and souls,
There now arises a triumphal song!
So teach us to give voice to your new life throughout the world,
Because you dry the tears of the oppressed forever, and death will disappear.
Amen*

Luis Espinal

Saturday, January 9: Micah 2:1-11

I was reading the news this morning. It's business as usual.

- Covid. Enough said.

- Certain world leaders are embroiled in personal ethical scandals.
- Nations, businesses, oligarchs, leaders are obsessed with “them first” – whatever will bring them the most economic gain, at whatever cost to others, is best. Everyone else is collateral damage.
- Abuse and inequalities based on gender, race, age, income, and ability are rampant.
- Children, women, and the elderly are victimized in conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.
- Homes in Canadian cities are unaffordable.
- Those who speak out about this greed and corruption are “bad people” with “fake news.”

Not much has changed since Micah spoke to his people in 2700 years ago!

- They covet fields and grab them, find homes and take them.
- They bully their neighbor and their families, seeing people only for what they can get out of them.
- They rob unsuspecting people out for an evening stroll.
- They take their coats off the backs of the vulnerable, like soldiers who plunder the defenseless.
- They drive widows out of their homes.
- They make victims of poor children, leaving them vulnerable to violence and vice.
- “Don’t preach about this evil,” say the preachers. “Preach things that support the wealthy/powerful.”

There are eerily familiar echoes that reverberate in our times, aren’t there?

The message people want to hear, of course, is that everything is good (2:6); we will be richer than ever before (2:11). God’s people will be great again! The Jewish people back then were certain God would never allow anything bad to happen to them; they were His chosen people. Many North Americans share the same values: the important thing is to get rich, accumulate more, and look after ourselves first. In God we trust.

What is Micah’s message to God’s people? *“God has had enough. He says, ‘I have some plans of my own: Disaster because of this interbreeding evil! Your necks are on the line. You’re not walking away from this. It’s doomsday for you. Mocking ballads will be sung of you, and you yourselves will sing the blues: “Our lives are ruined, our homes and lands auctioned off. They take everything, leave us nothing! All is sold to the highest bidder.”’ And there’ll be no one to stand up for you, no one to speak for you before God and his jury”*(2:3-5 *The Message* translation).

God does not value greed. God does not reward a “me-first” attitude. God does not tolerate powerful people taking advantage of weaker people. God is not pleased when the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. Inequality and vice – locally and globally – is abhorrent to Him.

As we look at the news today, we struggle to stand outside of the cultural values of our time. We get sucked into the me-first, accumulate-more-and-more, to hell-with-the-rest-of-the-world, make-my-investment-grow attitudes. We cannot change the world. But we can make ethical choices in our lives. We can make sure we speak about and treat people from other races with dignity and respect. We can support fair trade initiatives. In small ways we can choose to live justly. We can choose to “love our neighbour.”

*Give us, O Lord,
steadfast hearts, which no unworthy thought can drag downwards;
unconquered hearts, which no tribulation can wear out,
and upright hearts, which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside.
Give us, O Lord, understanding to know You,
diligence to seek You,
wisdom to find You,
and faithfulness that we may be embraced by Your love.
Give us also, O Lord, inspired hearts, filled with Your mercy,
pure hearts, led by your Spirit,
and generous hearts, endowed with your grace.
Amen.*

adapted from Thomas Aquinas

Sunday, January 10: Micah 2:12-13

There is good news: God loves His people. He will not abandon them.

They will go through hard times. They will be conquered and go into exile, but eventually God will rescue them. God is always faithful.

In Ezekiel, written during the exile in Babylon, God says this: *"As shepherds go after their flocks when they get scattered, I'm going after my sheep. I'll rescue them from all the places they've been scattered to in the storms. I'll bring them back from foreign peoples, gather them from foreign countries, and bring them back to their home country. I'll feed them on the mountains of Israel, along the streams, among their own people. I'll lead them into lush pasture so they can roam the mountain pastures of Israel, graze at leisure, feed in the rich pastures on the mountains of Israel. And I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I myself will make sure they get plenty of rest. I'll go after the lost, I'll collect the strays, I'll doctor the injured, I'll build up the weak ones and oversee the strong ones so they're not exploited"*(Ezekiel 34:11-16 *The Message*). Notice the theme of justice and God's concern for the weak ones.

God continues: *"And as for you, my dear flock, I'm stepping in and judging between one sheep and another, between rams and goats. Aren't you satisfied to feed in good pasture without taking over the whole place? Can't you be satisfied to drink from the clear stream without muddying the water with your feet? Why do the rest of my sheep have to make do with grass that's trampled down and water that's been muddied? Therefore, God, the Master, says: 'I myself am stepping in and making things right between the plump sheep and the skinny sheep. Because you forced your way with shoulder and rump and butted at all the weaker animals with your horns till you scattered them all over the hills, I'll come in and save my dear flock, no longer let them be pushed around. I'll step in and set things right between one sheep and another'"*(34:17-22). God does not tolerate greed, bullying, throwing-your-weight-around, or lack of compassion.

In Ezekiel 34:23-24, God looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus: *"I'll appoint one shepherd over them all: my servant David. He'll feed them. He'll be their shepherd. And I, God, will be their God. My servant David will be their prince"*(Jesus is from the line of David, Matthew 1:1-17).

Jesus picks up on both Micah and Ezekiel's words when He describes Himself as the "Good Shepherd" (John 10:11-18). Jesus has come to save us. He saves us **from** sin and death. He saves us **to** a life of worship, love, and compassion, being His blessing to the world around us. How can I be a blessing today?

*Dear God, I pray today that you grant this request:
May I know who I am and what I am, every moment of every day.
May I know I am your child,
beloved, forgiven, cherished, and held firm in your great hands.
May I be a catalyst for light and love,
and bring inspiration to those whom I meet.
May I have the strength to stand tall in the face of conflict,
and the courage to speak truth in love and love in truth, even when I'm scared.
May I have the humility to see where you lead.
And may I have the courage – and faith – to follow.
Today I surrender anything that stands between us:
Forgive my sin;
Forgive my pride;
Forgive my stubbornness.
Forgive my subtle enjoyment in feeling sorry for myself that I push you away,
May your love overwhelm and completely fill me that I may choose faith over fear.
May I be so aware of your love, grace, and mercy
that I am compelled to be just as loving, just as gracious, and just as merciful
to those around me as you are to me.
Amen*

Monday, January 11: Micah 3

Corrupt politicians. Rich people getting richer; poor people getting poorer. Ring any bells?

Micah is riled up. *"But me – I'm filled with God's power, filled with God's Spirit of justice and strength, ready to confront Jacob's crime and Israel's sin"* (3:8). This is a man on a mission.

The leaders of Judah – both the politicians and the religious leaders – are evil. Far from defending the poor and the powerless, they have become cannibal-like, exploiting the "common" people. In particular, religious leaders collude with politicians, speaking messages that endorse the leaders' greed and make the rich feel good. Rather than fearlessly speaking the Word of God and His justice, they tell their wealthy benefactors what they want to hear. It's a good thing no religious leader does that today (Bruce writes, facetiously).

The ultimate result of the corruption and greed of the political and religious leaders will be exile and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the heart and soul of the Jewish nation and Jewish identity.

Jessica Nicholas, in her thought-provoking book, *God Loves Justice: A User-Friendly Guide to Biblical Justice and Righteousness*, writes, *"Western views of justice are primarily focused on how things should be done – laws, rules, and what should happen when laws are broken. In Hebrew thought, justice is focused on what life should be like. Justice in the Hebrew world was concerned not just with laws, but with enhancing all human life, especially the social world."* For many of us, justice is something static, entrenched in legal tomes. In contrast, biblical justice is dynamic, realistic, and practical: justice is simply how we live in God's world in a way that respects other people and God's creation, treating everyone with respect and honour.

Righteousness is related to justice. When we live righteously, we live justly. Nicholas goes on to say, *"It might seem that righteousness means you have to live up to God's standards, like when you are in school and have to do everything right in order to get a good grade. But a better way to think of righteousness is living inside God's intended order."* Living righteously and living justly mean living life as God intended it to be lived. We live His principles. When we do that, things go well. When we don't, bad things happen. God knows what we need to do to stay healthy, balanced, and free within the design of His creation. His Word is His how-to-guide for living our healthiest, most relationally rich and happy life. Staying inside His boundary lines is ultimately for our own benefit. When we go outside them, we hurt ourselves and others.

Re-read [Micah 2:12-13](#). God makes two BIG points in these two little verses:

- 2:12 – God emphasizes His presence, protection AND the importance of community – He will keep us safe; we are His flock; we are His people. We needn't be alone – solitary sheep do not last long; sheep have safety and strength as a flock! God is with us. How can that encourage you?
- 2:13 – God's commission – sending you into the world to be His witnesses, with His presence and power. You have a purpose – to follow Jesus into the highways and byways of life, being a blessing to others. Where is Jesus as you go out into the world? He is leading the way. He is with you. How is that empowering? How is that "empurposing" to you today? (If "empowering" means being filled with power, then surely "empurposing" could mean being filled with purpose 😊).

*Grant me, O 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 hate what is offensive to You.*

*Do not suffer 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 with a true judgment between things visible and spiritual,
and above all, always to inquire what is the good pleasure of Your will.
Amen.*

Thomas À Kempis

Tuesday, January 12: Micah 4:1-5

Is there any hope? Is there any light at the end of the tunnel? Reading the news, we're not too sure ...

Micah 4:1 literally begins, *"In days to come ..."* These verses may refer to

1. the return of the Jewish people from exile in Babylon (which began in 537 BC) **OR**
2. the coming of Jesus in the first century (Christmas) and the establishment of the church, **OR**
3. the ultimate "Day of the Lord" when Jesus returns in glory and judgment in the future.

Which is correct? We don't know. Probably ALL are, working to together to complete God's purpose:

1. in part, this prophecy was fulfilled when the people rebuilt Jerusalem after the exile.
2. in part, Jesus' first coming accomplished some of this, establishing His church.
3. we still await its complete fulfillment with His second coming, in the future.

Micah 3 was about destruction. Micah 4:1-5 are about reconstruction. God rebuilds His Temple and city, Jerusalem. He brings peace. He brings reconciliation. He brings justice. Notice that this includes "many nations" – fulfilling God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12). God is a missionary God bringing all peoples together. This is not exclusively about just one nation, ethnic group, or tribe (thankfully!).

Think about how Peter's words speak about the fulfillment of this prophecy: *"You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple ... And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God. As the Scriptures say, 'I am placing a cornerstone in Jerusalem, chosen for great honor, and anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced.' ... You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light"* (1 Peter 2:4-9).

We await the ultimate realization of this vision when Jesus returns. However, it is interesting to note what is important in the Kingdom of God. As we pray *"Your Kingdom come and your will be done"* how can we help to see this vision come into being in our own little worlds?

- A vision of peace between different ethnic groups (4:3): what might that mean in our community?
- A vision of "sufficiency" – everyone has enough but no one has too little or too much (4:4): what would that look like in our community?
- A vision of safety and security (4:4); what would this look like on our community?

How can I be a peacemaker? How can I live with a balance of "sufficiency" and generosity? How can I help my community be a safe place for all people, for people of all nations?

*God, help us
to be generous in our opinions of others,
to be considerate of all we meet,
to be patient with those with whom we work,
to be faithful to every trust,
to be courageous in the face of danger,
to be humble in all our living,
to be prayerful every hour of the day,
to be joyous in all life's experience,
and to be dependent upon You
for strength in facing life's uncertainties.
Amen*

Wednesday, January 13: Micah 4:6-13 and 1 Peter 2:9-10

Back in elementary school, when we picked teams for soccer at recess, the strongest, fastest, biggest, most

talented, most popular kids always got picked first. It only made sense. If your goal is a winning team, you picked the best players. If you want to lose, you would choose the slow, small, weak, less gifted kids.

Who does God choose to build His Kingdom (4:6-7)? Does this surprise you?

One of the challenges with the prophets is figuring out the time frame. Is this prophecy referring to:

1. The return of the Jewish people from exile in Babylon? **or**
2. Jesus' life, death and resurrection? **or**
3. Jesus' second coming at the end of history?

Some teachers may be adamant **they know** it means one or the other. The truth is that Scripture doesn't clearly tell us. In humility, we have to admit *we don't know* the time frame of this vision. It may actually – it probably does – refer to all three. Certainly, some verses seem to be specifically about the exile in Babylon (4:9-11). But is this a description of the reestablishment of the geographical/historical kingdom of Israel, ruled by a perfect, human king? That has not happened. Until Jesus returns, it never will.

Micah 4 describes a future greater than the Jewish people returning from exile (4:1-8, 13). The new kingdom described here is **not** a geographical/historical unit – the physical nation we call "Israel." This new kingdom is ruled directly by God – He is its King. This is about the creation of the "Kingdom of God," a phrase Jesus uses repeatedly in His mission to describe what **He** is establishing.

As Jesus declares it, what is the kingdom of God like? It is not a physical kingdom, but a kingdom of the heart. His Kingdom includes those of us who allow Him to be King – to rule – in our lives (people from every nation on earth). The Kingdom of God is a hidden kingdom, transcending time and space, nation and nationality, as the Holy Spirit rules in our and others' lives. As we allow His Spirit to rule in our hearts, peace, reconciliation, justice, joy, and love inevitably result – His Kingdom comes. God often chooses the lame, weak, and outcasts (those picked last at recess) to be people of special honour in His Kingdom.

This Kingdom, ruled by the Lord – by Jesus – is called (in the New Testament) "the church." Micah 4:6-7 are a wonderful picture of the emergence of Jesus' church – gathered together, as a faithful remnant, as a strong nation, under His lordship. Compare these verses with 1 Peter 2:9-10.

Spend some time reflecting on Micah 4:6-7 and 1 Peter 2:9-10. How can these images of who you are as a believer – of who we are as the church – encourage and empower you today? What is (y)our mission?

*May today there be peace within.
May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.
May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.
May you use those gifts that you have received,
and pass on the love that has been given to you
May you be confident knowing you are a child of God.
Let His Presence settle into your bones,
and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love.
He is there for each and every one of us.
Amen*

Thérèse of Lisieux and Teresa of Avila

Thursday, January 14: Micah 5

Once the Egyptian empire dominated the world. Then Greece. Then Rome. In Asia, China, the Mongols, and other empires held sway. At the time, these global superpowers seemed unstoppable and eternal. But we know the verdict of history: those empires faded away. The sombre warning of Micah 5 is that putting our trust in earthly kings and kingdoms will end in disappointment. Judah is fighting for its freedom in Micah's day (5:1), but God makes the point that all of the kings **born in proud Jerusalem** will fail.

However, the promise of Micah 5 is that a ruler will come from God – the Messiah – whose reign will never

end. It is the two kings **born in humble Bethlehem** (first, David; second, the new, perfect, ideal ruler to come – the Messiah [literally “the anointed one”]) – who will save the people. This clearly anticipates Jesus’ birth. (*Ephrathah* is the name of the district in Judah where Bethlehem is located).

Micah 5:2-6 speak of the establishment of the church – those who believe in Him from among the Israelites and others (“his brothers”). Spend some time reflecting on 5:4-5a. This is speaking about us – His people, His church. This is speaking about us, His church. *“He will stand and shepherd his flock – us – in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they – we – will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their – our – peace.”*

Micah 5b-8 might be speaking about the future of the Jewish people. Or, in context of the Messianic discussion in 5:1-5a, probably refer to the church – us. Believers, people filled with the Holy Spirit – God’s Kingdom – are scattered in every nation. Even in countries where Christians are bitterly persecuted, His Kingdom is growing. What an encouragement.

Recent statistics from the Baptist World Alliance show that, from 1990-2019, the number of Christians just in Baptist churches grew

- +76% in the Caribbean Baptist Fellowship
- +122% in the Asia-Pacific Baptist Fellowship (including China and India)
- +193% in the Union of Baptists in Latin America
- +832% in the All Africa Baptist Fellowship
- +1% in the European Baptist fellowship

(North American Baptists shrank -34%, a sad comment on the health of North American churches!)

Ultimately, we know that God’s kingdom will prevail in justice (Micah 5:9-15). But in the meantime, many Christians are brutally abused and killed for their faith in many countries. Pray for the church globally. In particular, pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters who are persecuted in various parts of the world.

*It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.
The Kingdom of God is not only beyond our efforts,
it is beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete,
which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.
No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives include everything.
This is what we are about: we plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.
Amen*

Oscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, assassinated in 1980

Friday, January 15: Micah 6:1-8

"What does the LORD require of you?" "What does the LORD require of **ME**?" That is a big question.

Before we think about the answer, remember God is speaking to His people – already saved – already part of His Kingdom. This **IS NOT** about what do I have to do to be saved. You are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus. That is not something you can earn, achieve, or accomplish by your efforts, goodness, or accomplishments. It is God's gift. We simply need to trust Him, in faith. That's it.

This **IS** about: "So now that I am saved, how am I going to live my life?"

God reminds us that it is not about "religiosity" – doing all the right religious things. Those spiritual exercises are fantastic when offered out of thankful hearts, by those who love the Lord. But if a person is just going through "religious motions" (like offering sacrifices in the Jewish tradition) with no love for God, or passion for His kingdom behind them – they are meaningless and hollow.

"He has shown all you people what is good ..." It's not rocket science.

- act justly
- love mercy
- walk humbly with your God.

When Jesus was asked what are the most important commands, how did He answer?

- "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength" (is this not saying roughly the same thing as "walk humbly with your God"?);
- "Love your neighbour as yourself" (If we "act justly" and "love mercy" are we not doing just that?) (I love the way God's Word is so consistent. Of course, I should not be surprised ...)

If you believe in Jesus, you **ARE** saved. Spend some time prayerfully reflecting on what it means for you to

- Act justly?
- Love mercy?
- Walk humbly with your God?

*I give You thanks, that You are a light that knows no evening and a sun that never sets.
You cannot remain hidden,
for You fill all things with your glory.
You never hide Yourself from anyone.
For where could You hide Yourself, since You are everywhere, always, and forever?
Or why should You hide, since You turn away from no one and are afraid of none?
May your Spirit dwell within me, gracious Master;
Take up Your place in me now and remain in me, Your servant,
unceasingly, inseparably, to the end.
Stay with me, Master, do not leave me alone.
You did not forget me, Master, when I was in the world and sunk in ignorance,
but You chose me and separated me from the world
and set me up in the presence of Your glory.
Keep me constant and unshaken in my soul.
Possessing You, though poor, I am forever rich, more wealthy than any king.
Eating and drinking You, clothing myself in You from day to day,
I shall be filled with blessings and delight beyond all telling.
For You are every blessing and all splendor and all joy.
Glory to You, holy, eternal, and life-giving Trinity,
worshipped and adored in Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

Symeon the Theologian

Saturday, January 16: Micah 6:9-16, Galatians 5:1,13-15

In my construction days, I had a foreman who intentionally over-ordered supplies for the job. Then he would ask us labourers to load the extra bags of cement, cans of paint, and tools into the trunk of his car (so that, if we were caught, it would be us who would take the blame, I suppose). We refused to do it. He was VERY angry. After all, everyone else was taking advantage of the system, so why not him?

Apparently, his entire back yard was fenced, patio-ed, and landscaped "courtesy" of Vancouver taxpayers.

The people of Judah did not "act justly." They short-changed people ("short ephah" – a measure of weight), had dishonest scales, were violent, lied, cheated ... and basically were everything but just/honest. What other forms of not "acting justly" do you see in our community? Remember – God takes injustice seriously.

Reflecting on recent global economic stresses, Frank Doyle writes:

"Lord, all this financial turmoil seems to touch my prayer in two ways.

- *Sometimes I feel moral indignation at the greed of the fat cats whose desire for ever-greater profits has exploited the weak. I hope that they may move from blindness to a sense of the real world of people, and realise the futility of their greed that wants more and more money. 'What does it profit to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of your soul?' (Mark 8:36) But I know that such indignation is not always from the good spirit; it may be mixed with an envy in which there is little charity; I may just be jealous I did not make a bundle. I need to watch it.*
- *At other times I feel fear and insecurity for myself and my loved ones. This pushes me to look at myself. Does insecurity make me more self-seeking and less caring about the needs of others, lessening my humanity, clouding my sense that people matter more than money? Or does this worldwide turmoil strengthen my compassion? Poverty is not good in itself, but where it leads to a deeper dependence on God and coexists with generosity it can be a rare grace - remember Jesus marvelling at the widow's mite (Mark 12:41-43).*

'Trop est avare à qui Dieu ne suffit.' 'You're too greedy if God is not enough for you.'"

Remember: we are saved by Jesus.

- Spend some time reflecting on your salvation through Jesus. What a wonderful gift. Celebrate His love. Give God thanks for your salvation.

Therefore: we are called to live wisely, "by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:1-15). How do these verses in Galatians help you think through and apply Micah 6 to your life?

How can you "live justly" today?

*O, Jesus, you who are the Way, the Truth, and the Life,
I lift my heart to You.
Guide me in the Way this day,
enlighten me with the Truth,
and grant me the more abundant Life which You alone can give.
This I ask, not that I may selfishly get good or glory for myself,
but that I may do good to others and so glorify Your name.
Amen.*

Sunday, January 17: Micah 7:1-7, Galatians 5:16-26

We had a geography student exchange between the ourselves (UBC Vancouver) and the University of

Washington (Seattle). When we visited Seattle, we were given maps. About certain neighbourhoods in Seattle, we were told, "Even in daytime, don't go there. They aren't safe." When the U of Washington students came to Vancouver, they asked for similar maps. We looked at them rather blankly. There were no neighbourhoods – certainly in daytime – that we considered that dangerous.

Israel, in Micah's day, was a dangerous place. Even in daytime you lived in fear. The hope is in 7:7: *"But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me."*

If you are feeling afraid – if you are feeling like all the world is against you and times are tough – if you need hope – reflect on this verse. Pray. And wait for God. He hears you.

Paul continues to remind us how we are to "act justly" in this crazy world. Read Galatians 5:16-26.

What are some of the not-so-good things that can do if we do not allow the Spirit to guide or lives?

What are the fruit we might expect in our lives if we allow the Spirit to fill us and guide us?

Spend some time reflecting on the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Are you becoming more and more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled? Or less so? Choose one or two of those fruit that you need to work on ... what can you do today to put that into practice? Pray that God would help you ...

*Jesus Christ, Son of God, make yourself known through me.
Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, speak through me to others.
Almighty God, by your grace you have given us new life in Jesus Christ,
and by your Spirit you have called us to proclaim his name throughout the nations:
Awaken in us such a love for you and your world
that we may so boldly proclaim Jesus Christ
by word
and deed
that all people may come to know him as Savior
and follow him as Lord, to the glory of your Name.
Jesus Christ, Son of God, make yourself known through me.
Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, speak through me to others.
Amen.*

Anglican Fellowship of Prayer

Monday, January 18: Micah 7:8-20

Have you ever made a choice – a poor choice – and instantly regretted it? But the deed is done and you have to live with the consequences.

As you read through the narrative parts of the Bible, it's amazing how many people make bad choices. Then they have to deal with the consequences. In Genesis 13, Lot makes a choice – a selfish choice, eagerly putting his selfish interests before his uncle – by opting for fertile, great-looking land, but he is also choosing to live among evil people; he pays a high price. David looks out from a rooftop, sees Bathsheba bathing, and make a choice that will lead to rape, murder, and grief. Isn't it fascinating how we cannot resist the lure of "me-first," wealth, and "success" – even though they lead us into all sorts of stress and problems.

Micah's world is also a culture of evil, injustice, and me-first. But Micah sees hope. *"Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."*

We live in hope: Jesus demonstrates God's love, mercy, and compassion by taking on Himself all our sins so

we are completely forgiven. Isn't that great news?

Perhaps you need to spend some time confessing your sins to God? Confess them, not to wallow in them, not to be paralyzed or overwhelmed by them, and not to be consumed by them. Confess your sins to God so you can be free of them. Reflect and confess your sins so they can be, once and for all, trod underfoot and hurled into the depths of the sea. If you are a visual person, imagine each of your sins being ground into the dust or thrown into the depths of the ocean. They are gone. Finished. Dealt with. Forever.

John writes these very honest words: *"This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth."*

Then John goes on to say, *"But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."* (1 John 1:5-9). That is great news! Confess to God whatever you need to ...

*Come, let us sing to the Lord!
Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation.
Let us come to him with thanksgiving.
Let us sing psalms of praise to him.
For the Lord is a great God, a great King above all gods.
He holds in his hands the depths of the earth and the mightiest mountains.
The sea belongs to him, for he made it. His hands formed the dry land, too.
Come, let us worship and bow down.
Let us kneel before the Lord our maker, for he is our God.
We are the people he watches over, the flock under his care.
Come, let us sing to the Lord!
Amen.*

Tuesday, January 19: Psalm 28

What does the Lord require of me?

- To act justly: we thought about that last week.
- **To love mercy: we will think about this, this week.**
- To walk humbly with my God: next week!

Our great model for "acting justly" is God Himself – He will always do what is right, true, and just. God is also our perfect model of "mercy." God is just: He is also merciful: He does not punish me according to what I deserve. Though I have sinned against Him, He does not condemn me. Instead, He offers me forgiveness. He offers me grace. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, He offers me mercy – a new beginning – forgiven, restored, renewed, and filled with His Spirit.

Psalm 28 is a celebration of God's mercy. How do I experience God's mercy?

- I can confess my sins and know His forgiveness.
- I can come with my troubles and trials, and He will get me through.

What does mercy look like in my life ...

- Mercy for others in difficult circumstances (like David in Psalm 28)? How can I help them?
- For those who have sinned against me? (*"Forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those who ..."*?)

Mother Teresa says, *"It is not enough for us to say: 'I love God.' I also have to love my neighbour. In the Scriptures, John says that you are a liar if you say you love God and you do not love your neighbour. How can you love God whom you do not see, if you do not love your neighbour whom you see, whom you touch,*

with whom you live? And he uses a very big word: 'You are a liar.' It is one of those words that is frightening to read and yet it is really true." How can I live out God's mercy?

*Lord, I am an empty vessel that needs to be filled.
My Lord, fill me.
I am weak in the faith.
Strengthen me.
I am cold in love.
Warm me and make me fervent, that my love may go out to my neighbor.
I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether.
O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you.
In you I have sealed the treasure of all I have.
I am poor.
You are rich and came to be merciful to the poor.
I am a sinner.
You are upright.
With me there is an abundance of sin; in you is the fullness of righteousness.
Therefore I will remain with you, of whom I can receive, but to whom I may not give.
Amen.*

Martin Luther

Wednesday, January 20: Psalm 86

Times are tough right now. Just 12 short months ago, all seemed right with the world. Now we wonder if things will ever be good again ...

It is good to remember God's mercy. During periods in our history, as wars raged, people suffered, and nations struggled, I'm sure people prayed prayers like Psalm 86, asking God to protect and save His people.

We often think of salvation in purely spiritual terms (our sins are forgiven; we go to heaven when we die). This psalm reminds us God's salvation can be very practical, too. God can save us from our enemies. The story of world history – if we choose to open our eyes to see it – is that God does, ultimately, ensure that His kingdom comes and His will is done, despite human evil. Having said that, God does give humanity a lot of freedom to do a lot of evil, wreak a lot of havoc, and cause a lot of pain. He lets us reap what we sow. But in the end His kingdom prevails over evil.

In Micah's day, God preserved the Jewish people, despite hideous persecution.

Throughout history, despite persecution and corruption, God has preserved His church. God saves us despite our own stupidity, folly, and poor choices.

Are you going through difficult times? Pray Psalm 86. This is God's mercy. "*Loving mercy*" includes knowing God's mercy in my life. Give thanks. Be patient. Know God's presence and peace through your hard times.

Do you have a friend or family member going through stress? You can be a messenger of God's mercy by being a friend – coming alongside, encouraging, helping, phoning, caring. You can be God's mercy. "*Loving mercy*" includes being God's "angel of mercy" (did you know the word "angel" literally translated means "messenger"?).

"Do you want to do something beautiful for God? There is a person who needs you. This is your chance."
(Mother Teresa)

*Dear heavenly Father,
Give me clean hands, clean words, and clean thoughts;
Help me to stand for the hard right against the easy wrong;
save me from habits that harm;
Teach me to work as hard, and play as fair in Your sight alone,
as if the whole world saw;
Forgive me when I am unkind, and help me to forgive those who are unkind to me;
And keep me ready to help others.
Amen*

Thursday, January 21: Luke 5:12-16

I'm an ophidiophobe: I'm afraid of snakes. I do not like snakes. I do not like to see a snake. I certainly will not touch snake. I blame it all on the serpent back in Genesis 3.

In the First Century, most people were leperophobes: they were afraid of lepers. Lepers were the 'untouchables' (and still are in parts of the world where the disease is prevalent). Peter Greaves, a contemporary leprosy patient, reflects, *"I was recognizably human; I had at least the usual complement of legs and arms; but I might have been some shameful piece of garbage. There was something indecent about the way in which I was being furtively shuffled out of life."*

Lepers are completely cut off from "normal" society, family and friends – exiled to leper colonies. Perhaps for first time for most of us, Covid has helped us appreciate – a little bit – the experience of having human contact severed. It's awful, isn't it? What did Jesus do? He *reached out* and *touched* this man ... What a wonderful picture of mercy – for this leper, having someone touch him was an incredible gift of love.

Dr. Bob Cochrane, a Scottish missionary doctor in India over 50 years ago, pioneered medical treatment with lepers. He used to say, *"I'm not interested in Christianity. I'm interested in Christ, which is an entirely different matter."* How are Christ and Christianity different? What do you think?

"Citing the example of Jesus, who had broken cultural taboos by reaching out to victims of leprosy, Cochrane led a campaign against the prevailing social stigma. He sent shock waves through the medical community by hiring leprosy patients to work in his home, one as his personal cook and the other as his gardener" (Paul Brand & Philip Yancey, *The Gift of Pain*, p. 88). What a wonderful picture of mercy. To treat lepers like human beings who can live meaningful lives is an incredible gift of love. To build relationships with "untouchables" is a beautiful act of mercy.

Who are the "lepers" – the "untouchables" – in our culture? How can I show them mercy?

"Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can" (John Wesley).

*Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.
Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst for the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth, we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.
Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.
We ask You to push back the horizons of our hopes;
And to push us into the future in strength, courage, hope, and love.
Amen*

Friday, January 22: Luke 5:17-26

It sounds great: God is love (1 John 4:16). The incredible truth is that God's love is practical. He showed His love for us in 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).

Mercy is practical. A paralyzed fellow's friends bring him to Jesus. And Jesus heals him. We may not have the gift of healing like this, but any practical help is a tremendous blessing to those in need (faithful servants, such as Mother Teresa, model this practical mercy so beautifully for us). "Love," as Jesus embodied and taught it, is not a warm feeling. Love is always put into action. It always has hands and feet attached to it. So if I "love mercy" I don't just "feel" warm and compassionate – I do something merciful.

Mercy also sees the spiritual root of the problem. Yes, this man needs to walk; Jesus provides that very practical help. But He also sees into the man's soul and knows he needs God's forgiveness and presence. Being able to walk – but not having a soul cleansed and forgiven by God – is not enough. He needs Jesus.

Through Jesus' love, I can help people practically. But out of mercy and love, I can also help people meet Jesus, who can bring spiritual healing.

Historically, some Christians have mostly emphasized social concern and justice – if we feed, educate, clothe, provide health care for people, we have done all we need to do. Other Christians have just emphasized spirituality – people only need to know Jesus as Saviour; we should not get involved in practical things like medical care, housing, agriculture, etc. This story makes it clear that, for Jesus, social justice (practical acts of mercy) and evangelism (Jesus' message of God's love and forgiveness) are not exclusive. They are not either/or. They are both/and. Both are both essential aspects of God's mercy.

Our mission organization, Canadian Baptist Ministries (www.cbmin.org) emphasizes both of these components. It's not either/or; it's both/and. As our church seeks to be missional in our community, we want to share our faith with our friends, neighbours, families, etc. **AND** providing practical help through visiting, providing community, the Soup Kitchen, Food Banks, Days for Girls, sponsoring refugees, etc.

"Charity (we might say "mercy") begins today. Today somebody is suffering. Today somebody is in the street. Today somebody is hungry. Our work is for today; yesterday has gone; tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today to make Jesus known, loved, served, fed, clothed, sheltered. Do not wait for tomorrow. Tomorrow we will not have them if we do not feed them today"(Mother Teresa).

Who can I help, practically, today? Who can I share my faith in Jesus with today?

*Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth:
Set up your kingdom in our midst.
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God:
Have mercy on me, a sinner.
Holy Spirit, breath of the living God:
Renew me and all the world. Amen*

N.T. Wright (1948-)

Saturday, January 23: Luke 5:27-32

Lepers were the 'untouchables' of the first century. Tax collectors were the 'unlikeables' of the first century. It's not just that people back then didn't like paying taxes. In Jesus' day, tax collectors were usually Jews working for the Romans – they were enemy collaborators. Even worse, while the Romans required tax collectors to collect a given lump sum from their region, they then allowed tax collectors to charge as large a "service fee" as they wished. So they routinely gouged their countrymen – becoming fabulously wealthy at their neighbours' expense (remember the story of Zacchaeus, Luke 19:1-12). They were the 'unlikeables'.

But Jesus shows mercy, even to the enemy, the unlikeable. *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven"*(Matthew 5:43-45). Does that irritate you? It bothers me. If I were a Jew back then, dealing with a tax collector, I wouldn't like it at all. I would have said to Jesus, *"Fine – if you do it, I'll do it."*

Jesus did do it. He showed mercy by restoring relationships with tax collectors. Ultimately, Jesus demonstrated what it means to "love your enemies" on the cross. When under attack, He did not fight to defend Himself. What He did was say to His enemies – those who falsely accused him, who ensured justice miscarried, who hammered the nails into his hands and feet, who mocked and laughed at Him – *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"*(Luke 23:34). Mercy. Mercy. Mercy.

"Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbour," advises C.S. Lewis. *"Act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."* I find if I actively do pray for those who annoy me, I become much more compassionate, much less irritated, and can "get over it" so much easier.

Try Jesus' advice. Pray for those you don't like. Do them a good turn. You will find your attitude change. And you will find that your life is much more joyful as you let go of all those old grudges. When I am angry with someone, it usually doesn't hurt them at all, but it eats me alive. It only hurts me. I need to let go. *"Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"*(Abraham Lincoln)

*Lord God, you are everything to me.
My spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.
Thank you for seeking me when I was lost and for finding me.
Thank you for choosing me to go forth and bear lasting fruit in your name.
Thank you for enabling me to bear fruit for you, Lord.
Without you, I can do nothing.
You are good, O Lord, and you are always ready to forgive.
Thank you for your plentiful mercy in my life which I always receive when I call upon you.
You are always there to help me; therefore, I will never be confounded.
You truly are a very present help to me, and I am receiving your help even now as I pray.
Thank you, Father.
You are my refuge and strength, and because this is true, I will not fear anything or anyone.
You are in my midst, and I will not be moved.
You are always there to help me speedily.
You are with me, Lord.
Knowing this, I will be still.
I know that you are my God.
Thank you for your constant help in my life, Lord.
Amen*

Sunday, January 24: Genesis 16

In the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), Jesus encourages us to ask:

*May your Kingdom come soon.
May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us today the food we need.
Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us.
Don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.*

Notice the last two of these five requests involve sin and temptation. Obviously, Jesus thinks these are

important issues we will have to deal with in our lives.

A case study in temptation and sin is Genesis 16. God has promised Abram and Sarai descendants (see Genesis 12:1-3), but so far nothing. No children. Do they believe God's promise? I can understand Abram and Sarai's impatience – I am not a patient person either. Searching for an "easy" answer, they give in to temptation and sin. How often do I, in my impatience, do stupid things, too?

Later in the Bible, Abram is held up as a shining example of faith (Romans 3, Hebrews 11:8-12). – but he was far from perfect. This is one of his least noble moments. Isn't it encouraging to know that even those closest to God's heart – people like Abram and David – made some **BIG** mistakes? And yet God forgives them and continues to work in and through them in wonderful ways. What a merciful God. (But it would still be another *fourteen* long years of waiting until their son Isaac would be born ...)

Unfortunately, Sarai is anything but merciful to Hagar. She mistreats Hagar. I may be able to understand Sarai's frustration and anger, too. I may be able to empathize with Sarai, but that does not excuse her – or my – behaviour. I am called to be merciful and gracious to others – whether I feel like it or not, whether life is fair or not, whether I like them or not.

If I love God – and love His mercy for me – I need to extend that same unconditional love and mercy to others. "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*" (Luke 6:36). That's not easy. Let's be honest about that. Not being easy, though, is no excuse. I'm still called to live it. Jesus never promises an "easy" life.

God is so merciful. His further promise to Hagar is proof of this. His mercy goes on and on. Sometimes, however, we have to learn hard lessons like patience.

And our challenge is to love mercy just as much as God does. His promise is this: "*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*" (Matthew 5:7).

*If we had a fraction of the faith in you that you have in us
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we showed a fraction of the love that you show to us
then this world would be transformed, Lord
If we possessed a fraction of the patience that you display with us
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we shared just a portion of the blessings that we have received from you
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we showed as much trust in others as you have shown in us
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we claimed just a fraction of the power you promised to your Church
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
Transform us first, Lord, that we might transform this world
through your love and your power.
Amen.*

faithandworship.com

Monday, January 25: Luke 10:25-37

- How is this a story of God's mercy?
- Mercy for one another?
- How can this story teach you today?

Notice the context of this story. "*One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: 'Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?'*" Jesus replies citing two key Old Testament principles, "*'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.'* And, '*Love your neighbor as yourself.*'"

In Matthew and Mark, Jesus emphasizes the same two commands, but in a slightly different context: "*One of them, an expert in religious law, **tried to trap him** with this question: "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?"*" (Matthew 22:35-36). Loving God and loving our neighbour are the most important commandments in the Law AND keys to eternal life. No excuses. This is crucial stuff.

In Luke 10, the lawyer wants to wiggle out of his responsibility so he asks Jesus to specify who his neighbour is. He is expecting to hear his neighbour is only his Jewish, adult, male, close relative/friend. Certainly not a non-Jew, or non-male non-person (which is how Jewish men saw anyone non-Jewish, non-adult, and non-male). In particular, "*Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans*" (John 4:9).

Notice the victim in this story is an adult Jewish male. The hero is the non-person, the Samaritan. Jesus is deliberately challenging the lawyer's racism, prejudice, and pre-conceptions about many things, including that "other" person. James writes, "*Don't speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God's law. But your job is to obey the law, not to judge whether it applies to you. God alone, who gave the law, is the Judge. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you have to judge your neighbor?*" (James 4:11-12).

A neighbour is simply someone who shows a fellow human being mercy (Luke 10:37).

Jesus ends by telling the lawyer, "*Go and do the same.*" What is Jesus saying to me?

I appreciate these insights from C.S. Lewis:

- "*Though our feelings come and go, God's love for us does not.*"
- "*Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone you will presently come to love him.*"
- "*Love is unselfishly choosing for another's highest good.*"
- "*Love is not affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person's ultimate good.*"

Today, how can you ...

- Love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind?
- Love your neighbor as yourself?

*Keep me from deliberate sins! Don't let them control me.
Then I will be free of guilt and innocent of great sin.
May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer (Psalm 19:13-14).
O Holy Spirit of God, abide with us;
inspire all our thoughts;
pervade our imaginations;
suggest all our decisions;
order all our doings.
Be with us in our silence and in our speech,
in our haste and in our leisure,
in company and in solitude,
in the freshness of the morning and in the weariness of the evening;
and give us grace at all times humbly to rejoice in Your companionship.
Amen*

Tuesday, January 26: : Genesis 17

What does the Lord require of me?

- To act justly: we thought about that two weeks ago.
- To love mercy: we thought about this last week.
- To walk humbly with my God: this week.

Our great model for "acting justly" is God Himself – He always does what is right and true. God is also our perfect model of "mercy." In His justice, God is also merciful: He does not punish me according to what I deserve: He offers me grace and mercy through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus, when He washed His disciples' feet, said, "*I have set you and example that you should do as I have done for you*"(John 13:15) – we are then to show mercy to one another.

We are also called to walk humbly with God. What does it mean to "walk with God"? Throughout the Bible, God reminds His people that He "walked" with them out of Egypt and through the wilderness and continues to walk with them. He has never left us. He has always been there; He is always faithful.

And how did the Israelites in Micah's day respond? Did they "walk with God"? Periodically they came to the Temple making a big production of their gifts and offerings. But their religion was mostly a matter of following rules and bringing routine gifts. There was no sense of "walking with God" – just occasional formal, ritual visits to the temple. Their daily walk through life was marred by injustice, violence, bigotry, and hatred, showing no evidence of being touched, shaped, or renewed by the Spirit of God.

Abram, despite his failings (as in Genesis 16), sincerely tries to walk with God. The story of his life is of leaving his old home in Haran – walking with God. For over two decades he has believed God will give Sarai and him a child – walking with God (true – he stumbles, in his impatient relationship with Hagar). It is now 24 years after God's promise (in Genesis 12:1-3) and Abraham is still faithful – walking with God.

What does it mean for you to walk with God? Do you think of your life that way? If so, how does it shape how you live? If not, how might you live differently if you consciously tried walking with God? Will you try it?

Imagine God is walking with you everywhere (He actually does by His Spirit): how will you relate to others, make choices, invest time, spend money? Ask God for His patience, wisdom, strength, comfort, guidance, and resolve.

*Dear Jesus, help me to spread Your fragrance everywhere I go.
Flood my soul with Your spirit and love.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly
that all my life may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through me and be so in me
that every soul I come in contact with may feel Your presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus.
Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as You shine,
so to shine as to be a light to others.
Amen*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Wednesday, January 27: Proverbs 3:1-18

And old hymn goes like this: "*When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word, what a glory He sheds on our way! While we do His good will, He abides with us still, And with all who will trust and obey. Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*" [Watch it here.](#)

God wants us to "walk with" Him on the paths of life: "*in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight*"(Proverbs 3:6). But we can "walk with" someone in different ways. For instance, I can go for a walk around Henderson Lake with my wife, Marianne, in different ways:

- I could walk ahead of her, behind her, even beside her, but never talk with her, listen to her, or interact with her. If my real priority is the **"walk"** itself – accomplishing the goal of getting around the lake; who I'm with (or even if I'm with anyone at all) may be incidental.
- **Or** we could walk around the lake and we could listen and talk. We could share our thoughts and minds. We could share our experiences and plans, our worries and concerns, our hopes and dreams. The real issue would be the **"with"** – the fact that it is Marianne that I'm with, that we are spending time together, sharing our lives with one another. The destination would be incidental (Henderson Lake? Our back lane? It wouldn't really matter); the journey is the important part.

How do you walk with God?

- Is the main focus of your life getting somewhere (work-wise? Money-wise? Health-wise? Family-wise? Retirement-wise?). For many of us, the destination is the important thing – a promotion, a secure retirement, good health, raising the kids. But how are you walking in the meantime? Who are you walking with? Are you really walking alone? Is the fact that He is with you (Matthew 28:20) incidental to your life?
- **Or** is the really important thing **who** you are walking with? Whether you are at school, work, home, travelling, parenting, or resting, God is with you. He is less concerned with what you are accomplishing than who you are becoming. He is most concerned with getting to know and you getting to know Him. He genuinely wants to walk **with** you.

The challenge of Scripture is that your destination is less important than your journey. Proverbs 3 gives you wisdom for your journey – how you can walk with God. Spend some time reflecting on these verses.

*O most sweet and loving Lord, whom I now devoutly wish to receive,
 you know my weaknesses and my needs.
 You know how many bad habits and vices I have.
 You know how often I am burdened, tempted, shaken and stained by sin.
 I come to you for healing.
 I pray to you for comfort and support.
 I speak to you, who know all things, to whom all my inmost thoughts are evident.
 You alone can adequately comfort me and help me.
 You know what good things I need most, and you know how poor I am in virtue.
 Look! I stand before you poor and naked,
 asking your grace and imploring your mercy.
 Feed me, for I am hungry.
 Inflame my coldness with the fire of your love.
 Illuminate my blindness with the light of your presence.
 Make all that leads me from you not worth thinking about.
 Make me forget it all.
 Lift up my heart to you in heaven,
 and let me not wander aimlessly about the world.
 From now on, you will be my only delight; you alone are my food and drink,
 my love and joy, my sweetness and whole good.
 Oh, that by your presence you would set me fully on fire,
 totally consume me and transform me into you,
 so that through the grace of inner union
 and by melting in love's flames I would become one spirit with you.
 Do not leave me hungry and thirsty,
 but treat me mercifully as you have so often and so admirably treated your saints.
 How wonderful it would be if I were burned and wholly consumed for you,
 since you are a fire always burning and never consuming,
 a love that purifies the heart and enlightens the mind.
 Amen*

Thomas À Kempis (1380-1471)

Thursday, January 28: Deuteronomy 10:12-22

Author, C.S. Lewis, writes, "True humility isn't thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less."

Micah 6:8 does not simply say "walk with God;" it says "walk **humbly** with God." The Hebrew word "(t)sana" – "humbly" – occurs only in this verse in the entire Old Testament. As scholars have tried to translate it into English, they have come up with words like "modestly," "circumspectly," "guardedly," "carefully," "advisedly," "sensibly," "reflectively," "prudently," and "with discernment."

A few years ago, at a pastors' conference in Banff, we had two speakers – Tony Campolo and Philip Yancey – both of whom I respect tremendously. If I had had opportunity to walk with either of those men (alas, I didn't), what would that walk have looked like? Would I have walked ahead/behind/beside either man but never talked with him? Of course not. I would have wanted to walk **"with"** that fellow. It would not have mattered where we walked (downtown, along the river, up the hillside) – the journey would have been the important part.

How would we have walked? Would I have talked and talked about myself, my problems, my successes, what a good person I am? Or would I have mostly listened. Would I have asked questions? Would I have taken the opportunity to learn from a wiser person? Would I have walked (t)sana – humbly? You bet.

Now imagine you have the opportunity to go for a walk with someone you respect tremendously – whoever that is. What would the walk look like? The destination would be irrelevant, wouldn't it? The journey would be the real issue. You would walk (t)sana, wouldn't you? – enjoying the wisdom and conversation of your companion?

In Deuteronomy 10:12-22 and Micah 6:8, God is saying, "Walk with me. Walk (t)sana with me. It doesn't matter where we're going. It matters that we're going together." It's an invitation to a journey. In Genesis 2:8, there is a wonderful picture of God, walking in the garden of Eden in the cool of the day, looking for Adam and Eve, to walk with them. It wouldn't have mattered where. But it sure would have been wonderful to walk with God, wouldn't it? To listen to Him. To hear His counsel. Wouldn't it be great to go for a walk with God?

The astounding truth of the Bible is that God does want to walk with you. Today. In fact, He does walk with you. Today. Everyday. Every moment. Everywhere. Just as God walked with the Israelites constantly out of Egypt and through the wilderness, so God walks with us, constantly, as we journey through our week in Lethbridge. If we choose to recognize Him. If we choose to be still. If we choose to listen to Him.

Am I too busy trying to get somewhere, do something, or finish some project to notice **Who** is walking beside me – God? Am I talking too much and listening to Jesus too little? Do I need to think of myself less? Do I need to walk – *humbly, modestly, sensibly, circumspectly, guardedly, carefully, advisedly, reflectively, prudently, with discernment* – with Jesus – today?

*Thank You, thank You, thank You, generous God!
You have injected life with joy, thus we know laughter.
You have dabbed creation with color, thus we enjoy beauty.
You have whistled a divine tune into the rhythm of life, thus we hear music.
You have filled our minds with questions, thus we appreciate mystery.
You have entered our hearts with compassion, thus we experience faith.
Thank You, God, Thank You. Thank You.
Amen.*

Friday, January 29: Psalm 119:1-16

In J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo, the very reluctant hero, complains about the challenges he is facing in his dark world, "I wish it (in his case, war) need not have happened in my time."

"So do I," says his wise mentor, Gandalf. "And so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

We face challenges in our lives and in our world, too. We might wish the problems we struggle with (Covid?) might not have happened in our time, too. But we cannot choose the big issues we face. Things happen. Like Frodo, however, we **can** decide what we will **do** with the time that is given us.

Psalm 119 is a song in praise of God and His Word, Scripture. The funny symbols/words dividing the psalm every 8 verses in most translations, are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (the Hebrew equivalents of "A, B, C, D" etc.). In the original Hebrew, the first word of each of the 22 sections begins with the next letter, in order, of the Hebrew alphabet. Today we are reading the "A" and "B" sections.

The theme of the entire psalm is 119:1: *"Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD."* Psalm 119 invites us to decide to walk through life with God and His wisdom. Life is a journey – a long walk. And if we walk according to the law of the Lord/God's principles (if we love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength; love your neighbour as yourself) – if we walk humbly with God – things are more likely to go well for us than if we don't.

I appreciate the psalmist's honesty in 119:5 (*"Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees"*) – he aspires to walk with integrity, holiness, and purity, but it is difficult. Notice, however, that he doesn't use this as an excuse, rather an inspiration to keep on trying and learning (*"I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws"*[119:7]).

I am not going to be instantly perfect at walking humbly with God – I will stumble along the way – but I need to keep learning and keep moving forward. How can I do that?

- By seeking to live according to God's ways – making that choice and having that resolve (v.9);
- By asking for God's help – I need His Spirit's strength and guidance (v.10);
- By internalizing God's truth into my heart – allowing Him to fill all of my life (v.11);
- By celebrating God's truth as joy-full and liberating expressions of His love – not seeing His law as petty restrictions that limit my enjoyment or fulfillment (vs.12-14);
- By taking time to meditate and think hard on what God's words mean in my circumstances (v.15);
- By diligently reading His word and praying – keeping at it even when I don't want to (v.16).

We can decide what to do with the time that is given us. What is God saying to you?

*The fruit of silence is prayer: Lord grant me silence.
The fruit of prayer is faith: Lord, help me pray.
The fruit of faith is love: Lord, grant me faith.
The fruit of love is service: Lord, gift me with love.,
The fruit of service is peace: Lord, help me serve.
Lord, grant me your peace.
Amen*

Saturday, January 30: Psalm 119:97-112

Many years ago, a contemporary Bible translation translated Psalm 119:105 as *"Your words are a flashlight to light the path ahead of me and keep me from stumbling."* The translators were roasted for being disrespectful and for messing up the text. But in many ways, their translation captures the meaning of the text brilliantly. When we are going through dark times and dark places, we need light – the kind of light (in our world) that would come from a powerful flashlight.

119:97-104 speak about the wisdom I can gain from walking humbly with God and reflecting on His Word, for my life's journey. I can learn a lot from good authors, seminars, speakers, videos, and even pastors, but

ultimately God's Word – the Bible – is the true source of wisdom. I need to keep going back to Scripture, first. These other teachers and pastors – good though they may be – cannot satisfy me like God can. Do read good books and listen to good teachers ... but don't rely on them: never let them replace the Bible.

Read and listen to Scripture – the Word of God – first.

Now think about the imagery in Psalm 119:105. How have you found this to be true in your life?

Are you walking through some dark places? How can God's presence help you through? Read Psalm 23:4 together with this verse – Psalm 23:4 literally reads "*even though I walk through the darkest valley.*" The Hebrew in Psalm 23:4 does not actually say "*the valley of the shadow of death.*" In Hebrew it literally reads, "*the valley of very deep shadow.*" This has often been taken (and thus translated) as a metaphor for death. However, the English words "of death" have been added by translators; they are not there in original Hebrew text. Psalm 23:4 is accurately about walking through any dark time – life-threatening or not – as in the Israelites wandering in the darkness of the wilderness during the exodus (Jeremiah 2:6). The BIG theme of Psalm 23:4 is God's protection and guidance – whether the challenge be death or not.

Notice that walking humbly with God does not guarantee that things will be easy (119:107-110), but with a steadfast commitment, resolve, and determination – and the power and presence of God – we are called to persevere. And He will get us through.

While God gifts us with His Spirit to empower and strengthen us, notice the importance of **our** choice and **our** determination of will: "**My** heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end" (119:112). When you are tempted to compromise, give up, or get too busy doing other things, **get stubborn with yourself**. Set your heart, resolutely, on keeping God's decrees to the very end. Don't let yourself off easy. Don't make up excuses. Keep committed to constant and never-ending improvement, following God's way. Finish well.

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

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Sunday, January 31: Ephesians 4:17-32

When we come to faith in Jesus, God changes us. He intends us to become people shaped by His Spirit to be more and more like Jesus.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes, "*Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.*"

As the people of God we are called to live by a different way of life, by a higher ethical standard than the non-Christian people around us.

Paul challenges us to think about the before and after of coming to faith in Jesus. How should faith in Jesus change us?

What aspects of this passage challenge you most? Why?

What do you need to work on in your life? What practical steps can you take today to make this happen ...? Pray that God will help you make this change in your life ...

*O gracious and holy Father,
Give us wisdom to perceive you,
intelligence to understand you,
diligence to seek you,
patience to wait for you,
eyes to see you,
a heart to meditate on you,
and a life to proclaim you,
through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Monday, February 1: Ephesians 5:1-21

USC philosophy professor, pastor, and author Dallas Willard writes, *"The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as 'Christians' will become disciples – students, apprentices, practitioners – of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence."* His point is that the people who say they follow Jesus, need to actually follow Jesus.

"Be careful how you live," says, Paul. *"Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do"*(5:15-17) It's not brain surgery. But it does take hard work. It does take a decision, will power, determination, and intentionality to make practical changes like these happen in your life. I sometimes think that if I just *want* to change and *pray* about it – *poof!* – I should be a different person instantly. But then I go and make the same mistake – again. I react the same way – again. Nothing is different – again. What's wrong? I prayed ... I wanted to change ...

Wanting to change is an essential starting point. Praying is the right second step (both confessing my sin and praying for God to help me change).

But real change will take some HARD work on my part, too. That's the third stage. I have to be ...

- **Intentional:** I need to be aware of what the problems in my life are, how I fall into temptation, what brings me down, and do what I need to do to avoid those things. I have to find ways to change. God will help me – but I need to be intentional about modifying my behaviors and attitudes, too.
- **Determined:** I *will* keep at it. God will help me become more and more *"in step with the Spirit"* – I have to not get discouraged and give up. Even when I stumble and fall, I need to ask forgiveness, and continue to carry on.
- **Uncompromising:** I can never be satisfied that I'm "good enough." I need to continue to reflect on what it means to *"live wisely"* – and become more and more like Jesus. What does it mean for my life to do what the Lord wants me to do?

Living wisely – living as God want me to – is a lifetime commitment to moment-by-moment conversation with, obedience to, and love for my Lord. It is not easy. Jesus never said it would be. But it is the richest possible way of living life to its fullest. Jesus, help me ...

*May there always be work for my hands to do;
May my purse always hold a coin or two;
May the sun always shine upon my windowpane;
May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain;
May the hand of a friend always be near to me, and
May God fill my heart with gladness to cheer me.
Amen.*

Tuesday, February 2: Luke 18:1-8

Parables are powerful teaching tools. Reflect on what Jesus is saying in this parable in Luke 18. Here is a parable I received by email. It gives me pause for reflection, too:

A young woman went to her mother and told her about her life and how things were so hard for her. She was tired of fighting and struggling. It seemed as one problem was solved, a new one arose. Her mother took her to the kitchen. She filled three pots with water and placed each on high heat. When the pots came to boil, she placed carrots in the first pot, eggs in the second, and ground coffee beans in the last. In about twenty minutes she turned off the burners. She fished the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee out and placed it in a bowl. Turning to her daughter, she asked, 'Tell me what you see.'

'Carrots, eggs, and coffee,' she replied.

Her mother brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots; they were soft. The mother then asked the daughter to take an egg and break it; it was now hard boiled. Finally, the mother asked the daughter to sip the coffee; it tasted wonderful. The daughter then asked, 'What is the point?'

'Each of these objects had faced the same adversity,' her mother explained: 'boiling water. But each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting; but after being in the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg had been fragile; its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside became hard. The ground coffee beans, however, after they were in the boiling water, changed the water into something wonderful.'

'Which are you?' the mother asked her daughter.

Which am I?

- *Am I the carrot that seems strong, but with pain and adversity do I wilt and lose my strength?*
- *Am I the egg that starts with a tender heart, but changes with the heat? Was I gentle and soft, but – after trials and struggles – have I become hard and inflexible? Does my shell look the same, but am I bitter and tough on the inside?*
- *Or am I like the coffee bean? The bean actually changes the hot water, the very circumstance that brings the pain. When the water gets hot, it releases the fragrance and flavor. If you are like the bean, when things are at their worst, you get better and change the situation around you.*

How do you handle adversity? Are you a carrot, an egg, or a coffee bean? To be the coffee bean, we need to stay close to Jesus, walk humbly with Him moment-by-moment – and pray. Jesus' parable reminds me that I need to pray, and keep on praying, through the good times and the hard times. Prayer changes everything.

*Breathe in me O Holy Spirit,
that my thoughts may all be holy.
Act in me O Holy Spirit,
that my work, too, may be holy.
Draw my heart O Holy Spirit,
that I love but what is holy.
Strengthen me O Holy Spirit,
to defend all that is holy.
Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit,
that I always may be holy.
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

Wednesday, February 3: Luke 18:9-14

What have you done that you would like to tell other people about? What would you like to boast to God about? There are times when we want to tell Him – and other people – either about how good we are or the good we have done. We may look down on others' moral or spiritual lives; we are so much more "together." We know the right way to do things; others are wrong. We all struggle with humility ...

With honesty, however, I need to look on what is good in myself and recognize that anything good is a gift from God – my talents, possessions, and what I have made of them. All I have, all I am. I also have to be honest that I may not be as good – or right – as I think I am; perhaps my sin is self-righteousness and a little bit (or a lot) of pride. I may begin with the prayer of the Pharisee, but I need to end with the prayer of the taxman: *"Cover me O Lord with your mercy, for, with all my good deeds and intentions, there is a deeply sinful side of me which needs your mercy."*

A wise pundit has quipped: *"May you have enough happiness to make you sweet, enough trials to make you strong, enough sorrow to keep you human, and enough hope to make you happy."* As those who believe in Jesus we might modify this: *"May you have enough joy to make you thankful, enough trials to keep you humble, enough sorrow to keep you depending on Jesus, and enough hope to keep you faithful to the end."*

What is God saying to you through this parable?

*I enter this day with joy –
knowing you are with me every step of the way,
knowing there is a purpose to each breath that I take,
knowing there is a hope toward which I walk.
I enter this day with faith –
knowing you are the strength which I depend on,
knowing you are the love that is all embracing,
knowing it is your peace which calms my soul.
I enter this day with praise –
knowing that I worship with service as with voice,
hoping that my words might reveal your truth,
hoping that your grace might touch another heart.
Amen*

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Thursday, February 4: Luke 18:15-17

J.R.R. Tolkien is one of my favourite authors. One of my favourite Tolkien quotes is this: *"If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world."*

One of the things about children is that they value food, cheer, and song far above gold. Frank Doyle comments, *"You remember the Gospel scene where Jesus encountered noisy children. A crowd of them interrupted his preaching, and the apostles were shooing them away. They were boisterous, energetic, enjoying life, running instinctively towards someone who also enjoyed it. The apostles spoke sternly to those who brought them. ('These kids are not serious. We are here to listen to serious teaching and we can't hear him properly with all this noise and commotion.')*

"Jesus intervened, invited the children closer and laid his hands on them. He gave them two precious things that cost no money: time and affection. These days, parents often experience a famine of time, so that children suffer from too little attention. Concern about children's safety means that children suffer from not being touched. Yet children's needs remain the same."

Doyle's insights are interesting and thought-provoking as we reflect on our children/grandchildren/nieces/nephews/kids at church. Who can you give some time and affection to?

How do children "receive the kingdom of God" (18:17)? They simply come to Jesus, with love and trust. They enjoy His presence. And – no doubt – they seek to bring Him joy not sorrow. They value food, cheer, and song. Jesus asks us to "receive the kingdom of God like a little child." That sounds easy. But what does that mean? What does it mean for me to "receive the kingdom of God like a little child"?

I simply come to Jesus, with love and trust. I enjoy His presence. I try to live in such a way that I bring Him joy not sorrow (after all, His guidelines are for my good, not to make my life miserable.). That sounds so simple. Why is it so difficult to live out in practice? Lord help me to live more childlike-ly for you.

Jesus, You are the ever-living one.

Jesus, You are without beginning, like the Father, and co-eternal with the Spirit.

Jesus, You are He who made all things out of nothing.

Jesus, You are the Prince of the angels.

Jesus, You are He at whom the depths tremble.

Jesus, You are He who is covered with light as with the garment.

Jesus, You are He who made us, and fashioned us at birth.

Jesus, You are He who formed things invisible.

Lord Jesus, help me see You and know You as my King, my Saviour, my God!

Amen.

Hippolytus of Rome (165-235)

Friday, February 5: Matthew 25:1-13

One day, some day, Jesus will return. Then, once and for all, He will put all things right and inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth. What that all means or looks like, we cannot begin to imagine. But it will be wonderful.

As we think about "what does the Lord require of us?" one of the themes in the Jesus' teaching is that He wants us to be ready for the day of His return.

I need to be wise. I need to make good choices. As an adult, I cannot blame parents or schooling or peers for decisions I make. I can't say, "The devil made me do it." I have been given freedom and must answer for it. What does it mean to be ready? Simply to live wisely and walk humbly with Jesus.

Think about this story: why would someone take a lamp and not oil? – it makes no sense (like going camping with firewood but no matches). Jesus offers us a full and meaningful life: why would anyone **not** accept the gift? It really makes no sense. Jesus challenges us to make a choice – to accept that life and to love Him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and love our neighbour as ourselves (to act justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God). The choice we make about Jesus makes all the difference for a fulfilling, content life. Five ladies made a wise choice; that made the difference.

The other girls were too late because they put off making the choice for life with Jesus.

"Recently a pilot was practicing high-speed maneuvers in a jet fighter," relates Dallas Willard. "She turned the controls for what she thought was a steep ascent—and flew straight into the ground. She was unaware that she had been flying upside down. This is a parable of human existence in our times—not exactly that everyone is crashing, though there is enough of that—but most of us as individuals, and world society as a whole, live at high-speed, and often with no clue to whether we are flying upside down or right-side up. Indeed, we are haunted by a strong suspicion that there may be no difference—or at least that it is unknown or irrelevant."

Am I flying right-side up or upside-down? Is there anything in my life that I keep postponing? What is Jesus saying to me?

*As I adventure with you today be the compass that guides me,
the light that shines on my path, the only one I follow.
As I adventure with you today be the word that encourages,
the hand that reaches out each time I stumble
As I adventure with you today let me glimpse our destination
and appreciate the places through which you lead me
As I adventure with you today be the strength I need to follow
and as the day draws to a close let me rest in your embrace.
Amen.*

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Saturday, February 6: Matthew 25:14-30

Former NFL quarterback Jim McMahon said, *"Risk taking is inherently failure-prone. Otherwise, it would be called sure-thing-taking."* Canadians are notoriously **not** risk takers. We are the most heavily insured nation in the world (which has probably been to our banks' advantage during past economic upheavals). Overall, playing things safe is not a bad thing. To a point.

There come times when must make decisions or take actions that stretch us beyond our comfort zone, that lead us into the unknown. There are times when *"sure-thing-taking"* is not possible. We have to choose a school, a job, a spouse, a vocation, a direction, etc. We have to choose to believe in Jesus. We have to choose to trust Jesus. We have to choose to take a risk and step out in faith with Jesus ...

These are opportunities for us to grow personally. To stretch ourselves mentally. To further develop emotionally. To cultivate faith spiritually. It's only when we step out in faith that we begin to mature. Spiritual growth happens with adventure and risk.

The path for each of us will be unique. We are all unique, different individuals. We will all move in the same direction. That's fine. Each of us can use the gifts we have in the situation we are placed. That will stretch us. It will challenge us. But when we lean on God's strength, in faith, we grow. We mature. Through taking small risks, we learn faith that we can exercise in more – bigger – circumstances.

I am responsible to take advantage of the opportunities God has given me. If I look at life honestly, my time, abilities, and money are not really my own – they are gifts from God (I am a caretaker, not an owner). How well I am using what I have? God simply invites me to celebrate the gifts He has given me by using them for His glory. Be honest – God has given you unique abilities, talents, experiences, interests, and resources. How can you use them for His kingdom?

*Holy Spirit, powerful Consoler,
 sacred Bond of the Father and the Son,
 Hope of the afflicted,
 descend into my heart and be the loving Lord of all my life.
 Enkindle in my tepid soul the fire of your Love
 so that I may be wholly subject to you.
 We believe that when you dwell in us,
 you also prepare a dwelling for the Father and the Son.
 Come to me, Consoler of abandoned souls, and Protector of the needy.
 Help the afflicted,
 strengthen the weak,
 and support the wavering.
 Come and purify me.
 Let no evil desire take possession of me.
 You love the humble and resist the proud.
 Come to me, glory of the living, and hope of the dying.
 Lead me by your grace that I may always be pleasing to you.
 Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

Sunday, February 7: Matthew 25: 31-46

What does the Lord require of us? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our Lord. Isn't that exactly what this parable is all about?

God has a special place in His heart for the poor and suffering. As a church we want to model that – which is why we invest heavily in mission through our budget (>10%) and individual support of missions and ministry, AND by our practical work with the Soup Kitchen, food banks, lodges, sponsoring refugees, homelessness, shelters, new Canadian programmes, and other organizations that work with those struggling. What can you do?

- Feed the poor and struggling
 - Contribute with donations of food or money to our local food banks
 - Volunteer in the community
 - Support a missionary or mission project (for ideas check out www.cbmin.org)
 - Contribute to help us sponsor a refugee couple
 - Do you have an idea to help the needy? Let us know.
- Work for justice for the poor:
 - Volunteer
 - Help other agencies that work with those in need
 - Beware of negative attitudes you may have toward certain groups of people – and change them.
 - Do you have a specific idea? Let us know.

Another encouraging theme in this parable is that God is pleased with all we do, even things we are unaware that we may be doing. What we think of as small things may be huge in the Kingdom of God. So ...

- Cultivate a loving lifestyle: God is generous in His love; be generous in your love. God is patient: be patient. God is "longsuffering" in His mercy and grace; be longsuffering in your relationships.
- God's will is at least as much about how you live in the "ordinary times" as in the big decision times: the things you might dismiss as unimportant – making a phone call, sending a message of encouragement, greeting a neighbour – may make all the difference to other people.
- Find "little moments" in your day to help people out. People learn more about Jesus through how we open the door for them, thank them when they serve us, shovel a neighbour's walk, speak with a friend, offer to shop for someone in need, than all the words we say.

*May the strength of God pilot us,
May the power of God preserve us,
May the wisdom of God instruct us,
May the hand of God protect us,
May the way of God direct us,
May the shield of God defend us,
May the host of God guard us against the snares of evil
and the temptations of the world.
Amen*

Patrick (390-460)