



September 2022

What the Spirit says to the Churches 1

**Readings, Reflections, Prayers
about following Jesus
in Revelation 1-3**

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Photo: Ephesus, Turkiye

Monday, September 12: 1 John 4:7-21

This Fall we will look at what “the Spirit says to the churches.” In particular, we’ll look at Revelation 1-3, in which Jesus speaks directly to several churches.

Revelation is very different from other New Testament documents. It is a complex book, separated from us by 20 centuries, 9,544 km (the distance from Lethbridge to Patmos), and a world of cultural experience and knowledge. Remember Revelation was written **FIRST** by John **FOR** Christians suffering intense persecution in (what is now) western Türkiye (Turkey), in the 1st Century AD. He was writing to help them understand **their** experiences and **their** world and to encourage them to keep the faith amid **their** terrible suffering. He was **not** writing, primarily, to North American Christians in Fall 2022.

Revelation is a book of “revealing.” The Greek title is “*apocalupsis*” – from which we get our word “apocalypse.” We may think of apocalypse in terms of massive battles, natural disasters, and the end of all things. In fact, the word simply means “unveiling” or “revealing.” It is often translated as “revelation,” based on the Latin word “*revelare*” meaning “*unveil, uncover, lay bare*.” There is a long Jewish tradition of apocalyptic/revealing literature (for example, passages in Daniel and Ezekiel) in which visions, symbols, fantastic beasts, and cataclysmic events unveil spiritual battles, powers, and realities. These books “reveal” hidden spiritual realities. The symbolism and images in Revelation, although obscure to us, were familiar to believers in the 1st Century, who knew the Old Testament prophets and other Jewish apocalyptic/revelation writings. The (to us) fantastic creatures, symbols, and visions were part of the familiar religious culture of the believers in John’s world. They recognized these images immediately.

Revelation contains prophecy. In the Bible, prophecy most often means **forth-telling God’s truth into present circumstances**. Very infrequently, prophecy foretold the future. The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 certainly speak directly to the situation in those churches when John was writing. Yes, they still speak to us today. But first, John’s words spoke to specific people in their own context.

As we study Revelation, let’s never lose sight of the amazing love of God reveals to us in Jesus. Today, I’ve invited us to read 1 John 4:7-21 to help us set the context for Revelation 1-3 (John also wrote Revelation).

1. John reminds us of God’s incredible love.
2. John reminds us we are called to live as God’s people, His Kingdom ambassadors, reflecting His love and grace through our lives.

How do these great truths change your life? How can you live them today?

*Almighty God, we praise You
that we have wakened to the light of another day.
This is the day the Lord has made.
Let us be glad and rejoice in it.
Our days are Yours, let them be spent for You.
Our days are few, let them be spent with care.
We ask You to shine on this day.
Lord, we go to our daily work; help us to take pleasure in it.
Show us clearly what our duty is; help us to be faithful in doing it.
When we cannot love our work, let us think of it as a task we do for You.
Let all we do be well done, fit for Your eye to see.
Give us strength to do.
Give us patience to bear.
Let our courage never fail.
By our love to You, make unlovely things shine in the light of Your great love.
Amen.*

George Dawson (1821-1876)

Tuesday, September 13: 1 John 1:5-10, 1 John 5:1-12

Before we begin Revelation 1-3, let's remind ourselves of the good news of new life in Jesus from one of John's other writings, his letter we call 1 John.

- What do you learn in 1 John 1:5-10?
- What do you learn in 1 John 5:1-12?

We have new life in Jesus. That's great news. It's good for us to keep these fundamental truths in mind as we read Revelation. Revelation has so much symbolism in it. Fundamentally it is about "good news."

People reading Revelation often approach it with different assumptions:

- Some interpret Revelation as all **yet to be fulfilled**: it is all about Jesus' **future** return. None of it has happened yet (or it's happening now in 2022). Certainly, there are yet-to-be-fulfilled events (like Jesus' return), but this view means Revelation had nothing to say to people in John's day, to whom it was written, who were suffering persecution. This approach leads us to read every event from 2022 into Revelation. People have been doing this for centuries and always been wrong.
- Some people interpret the book as all about the sufferings of the church, only **in John's day**. While, yes, Jesus' return is yet to happen, the other events described in Revelation all occurred in the first century, when the church was intensely persecuted. This view can suggest Revelation has little to say to us today. Surely Revelation has meaning for us, too.
- Some people see the book as **symbolic** – the images, vision, and beasts had **symbolic** meaning both in the 1st Century and in 21st Century. They do not refer to actual historic events. Revelation **is** far more symbolic than many of us imagine, because we don't know Jewish apocalyptic writings. John is drawing on a rich Jewish literary tradition, full of meaning. This is a helpful approach.

We will read Revelation on its own terms, trying to understand each passage as John records it. We will consider all three levels of interpretation. As we begin, it's helpful to see the big picture Revelation reveals to us (so we don't get obsessed with individual symbols or events and miss the real point God is making):

1. Our God is an awesome God. He is sovereign: in all things God is King
2. Jesus' sacrificial death brings complete salvation to all who believe. We can have new life in Him.
3. God's judgment on sin is real. No matter how things appear now, ultimately sin does not go unpunished. God will judge in righteousness.
4. God's people are called to be faithful. We can expect hard times. But He will get us through.
5. God's plan and God's hope is for ALL people, from every nation.
6. We have hope. We look forward with confidence to Jesus' return and a new heaven and a new earth. What awaits us far exceeds our present struggles.

Keep this big picture perspective in mind. Keep the truths in 1 John in mind, too, as we move forward ...

*Father,
we pray that your Spirit may give us the will and the courage
to act to make a difference,
to make real your kingdom among us.
Help us to walk as Jesus walked,
with compassion, grace, and unconditional love.
May we all live together
in peace, truth, justice and love,
sharing your love and
sharing the resources of your earth.
Amen.*

Wednesday, September 14: Revelation 1:1-5

The movie theatre goes dark. Very dark. And quiet. Eerily quiet. On the screen is a slide telling you to put on your 3D glasses. Suddenly BOOM. Dramatic music and banging sound-effects. Brilliant images and dramatic action. You are immersed in the experience. You are swept up in the story.

Without your 3D glasses, the image is blurry. You can make it out – sort of. But it hurts to try. With the 3D glasses, everything is clear.

Revelation is a bit like this. John is telling us to put on our 3D glasses, sit back, and get caught up in the grand narrative of what God is doing in the universe. As we begin,

1. Notice WHOSE "apocalupsis"/revelation/revealing this is. **GOD** reveals **His** truth to Jesus, who gives it to an angel, who passes it on to His servant John, who communicates it to specific churches ... and us. This is **God** revealing **His** truth. It is a witness/testimony to **God's** truth (1:1-2). (Note: The Greek word we translate as "angel" is literally the word "messenger")
2. It's a blessing to read this book (I hope you think so) (1:3). This doesn't necessarily mean it will be simple or comfortable, but you will be blessed as you work hard, to read through it.
3. "The time is near" (1:3). This has led many writers/speculators to get excited. Remember the first readers of this letter heard these words 2000 years ago. We honestly have **NO** idea what God's timeline might be unless we're smarter than Jesus ([Matthew 24:36-44](#)). We always need to be about the business of living out His grace and peace, not speculating on end times ([Matthew 25](#)).
4. It's addressed to seven specific churches ([Revelation 1:11](#), [2-3](#)). This is a letter to specific Christian churches in a specific place and time, facing horrific persecution, the like of which we cannot imagine (1:4). There were many more than seven churches in Asia (what we now call Turkiye). Seven is a symbolic number for God's perfection (thus the sevenfold Spirit of God [see [Isaiah 11:2](#)], seven lampstands, seven stars, seven angels [[Revelation 1:12-20](#), [3:1](#)], seven eyes of the Lamb [[Revelation 5:6](#)]). These seven churches represent ALL Jesus' churches, in all places, at all times (even Lethbridge in 2022).
5. Everything is about Jesus. He is the central figure in the whole cosmic drama that is being revealed.

Jesus "is the faithful witness to these things, the first to rise from the dead, and the ruler of all the kings of the world. All glory to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us."

How does reflecting on God's good news in 1 John (Monday and Tuesday), complement what John is telling us in Revelation 1:1-5?

*Lord, teach me to be generous.
To serve you as you deserve.
To give and not to count the cost.
To fight and not to heed the wounds.
To toil and not to seek to rest.
To love and not to require love in return.
To share your Word and not to be afraid.
To labour and to ask for no reward
save that of knowing I do your will.
Amen.*

Jacques Sevin (1887-1951)

Thursday, September 15: Revelation 4:1-6

In Revelation 1:1-5 (yesterday) we read that this is "*a revelation from **Jesus Christ**, which **God** gave him to show his servants the events that must soon take place ... This is his report of the word of **God** and the testimony of **Jesus Christ** ... Grace and peace to you from the **One who is, who always was, and who is still to come**; from the **sevenfold Spirit** before his throne; and from **Jesus Christ**.*"

In John's vision, he reminds us we are in the presence of **God**. This is **God's** Word. God, of course, is the author and subject of all Scripture, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. God reveals Himself in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the Creator and Sustainer of everything; the One who saves us; the One who fills us. This is a doctrine called "the Trinity" – God is three-in-one, one-in-three, a tri-unity, or trinity.

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

Let's skip ahead to Revelation 4, as John helps gives us a glimpse into this mystery. He sees an open door, leading into a heavenly temple, a throne room, God's presence. We join John as God invites him (and us) into the throne room of heaven.

John's readers are familiar with temples and throne rooms. Roman Emperors built temples all over the place, with huge images of themselves inside, seated on thrones. People were required to go to these awe-inspiring edifices and worship Caesar as a god (how would you deal with that?). John is helping them (and us) appreciate that earthly powers (be they emperors, prime ministers, or presidents) are crude parodies of the real Power beyond the universe – the Creator God, the King, the Almighty. For John's contemporaries, suffering vicious persecution under Caesar, it is good to remember that what they see and experience on earth is not all there is. Ultimately, God – the real God, the real King – is still very much in control.

John's readers, knowing the Old Testament, would recognize John is writing in the tradition of [Isaiah 6](#) and [Ezekiel 1](#). Isaiah and Ezekiel also found themselves in God's very overwhelming, indescribable presence. Now, John is trying to describe what he sees, but his experience is so incredible he struggles to find words adequate for what he sees. Words like "awesome" or "amazing" simply fall short.

John uses imagery with rich biblical meaning. His readers would recognize them (do we?):

- An emerald aura circles the throne, like a rainbow. This evokes God's everlasting promise of love and mercy to Noah ([Genesis 9:1-17](#))
- There are 24 elders. These represent all believers. People have tried to account for the number 24 – 12 is a significant number (12 tribes of Israel, 12 apostles of the church). 24=2x12 – referring to the whole church/Christian community, Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus.
- They are dressed in white. This symbolizes God's forgiven people, made holy and pure by Jesus.
- They wear crowns. Crowns were the reward for victors in athletic competitions. They are symbolic of believers who persevere to the end (see the end of each of the letters to the seven churches).
- There is thunder and lightning. This symbolizes God's glory and power ([Exodus 19:16](#), [20:18](#)).
- The "sea" shows the incredible glory of the heavenly throne room and God's all-encompassing power ([Ezekiel 1:24](#), [Psalm 104:3](#), [148:4](#)). Solomon's temple had a "bronze sea" – a bowl for the priests to wash in ([1 Kings 7:23-44](#)), showing God ruled the entire cosmos, land, and sea.

Now and then, it's good to be awestruck by God. Yes, it's great to encourage people to know God as our loving Saviour, as our divine Friend, and as our Comforter – all good and wonderful things. But it also good sometimes to remember this loving, personal, forgiving, caring, compassionate God is also the Almighty King of Glory. When we face tough times, this great God is with us and is for us. *"Nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our*

worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). That is GREAT news.

*Lift up our hearts, O Christ, above the false show of things,
above fear, above laziness,
above selfishness and covetousness,
above custom and fashion,
up to the everlasting truth and order that come from you.
Take from us, O Lord God, all pride and vanity,
all boasting and selfishness.
Give us the true courage that shows itself in gentleness.
The true wisdom that shows itself in simplicity.
The true power that shows itself in compassion.
Help us live joyfully and freely,
in faithful trust that you are our Saviour, our example, and our friend,
both now and for evermore.
Amen*

Friday, September 16: John 1:1-18

Christians have tried to understand the mystery of how God is three-in-one and one-in-three by considering analogies from the natural world. One analogy suggests that, just as the one chemical formula, H_2O , can occur in three forms – ice, water, or steam – so also our one God is three persons. This analogy, however, falls short. Ice, water, and steam are simply three modes in which the same molecules could appear in the right conditions. Father, Son, and Spirit, in contrast, are not merely three forms in which God could appear; God always exists as all three, all the time. As helpful as analogies are, they only take us so far.

In the end, we cannot adequately describe the Trinity. But we can state some of what Trinity entails:

- **God is one:** we believe that the God whom we know through Jesus is the one God whom the Old Testament people called "I am" or "Yahweh" ([Exodus 3](#)). There is no other God.
- **God is three:** the one God actually *is* eternally, always three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three-in-oneness is also the way God acts in the world. Father, Son, and Spirit work – uniquely, yet cooperatively and complementarily – in creation and redemption.
- **God is a diversity:** the one God is a diversity-within-unity. Father, Son, and Spirit carry out unique tasks, and yet work together, in creation and redemption. One role of each may be summarized as: the Father is the originator; the Son is the revealer; and the Spirit is the completer.
- **God is a unity:** despite their varying functions, the three persons of the Trinity are all involved in every area of God's activity in the world. The Father creates the world, through the Son, by the divine Spirit. Jesus, the Son, redeems us, yet it is the Father's will empowered by the Spirit. Although the Spirit fills us today, the Father and Jesus empower us, guide us, and lead us, as well.

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

Reflect on John 1:1-18 and this quote from Marva Dawn, today: "*Worship is for God. It centers on recognizing that 'great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised' and on responding to that worthiness by gathering with others to praise God, as is his due. If the community – and each of us as individuals in that*

body – focuses totally on the greatness of the Lord and his deserving to be praised, we will resist all idolatries of self, and comfort and ease, all divinizing of worship leaders, all sacralizing of our tastes and preferences, all gods of power and success.”

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

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

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

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

*Lord, fill us with your love.
Lead us from death to life.
Lead us from falsehood to truth.
Lead us from despair to hope
Lead us from fear to trust.
Let peace fill our hearts, our world and our universe.
Let us dream together, pray together and work together,
to build one world of peace and justice for all.
Lord, fill us with your life-transforming, life-giving love,
And help us live your love in our relationships with one another.
Amen.*

Saturday, September 17: Revelation 4:1-11

In the Westminster Catechism (1646), the first question asked is *“What is the chief end of man?”* What is our fundamental purpose in life? How would answer? Think about that question as we reread Revelation 4.

John is in exile on a remote island. But John can see beyond his limitations. He sees far beyond the scruffy little island of Patmos and is invited into God's Temple/throne room. What is happening here?

Four creatures representing humanity, wild animals (king of beasts, the lion), domesticated animals (king of which is the ox), birds (king of which is the eagle) are all praising God (compare the Old Testament imagery in [Isaiah 6](#) or [Ezekiel 1](#)). We tend to think of worship as a uniquely human activity, but **ALL** creation worships Him. Non-human creatures do not worship God as we do, but they do worship Him in their own ways (see [Psalms 19:1-6](#), [104](#), [148](#), [Job 38-42](#)). We are reminded that, although humans are different from any other created being (we are created in the “image of God” ([Genesis 1:27](#))), we are still intimately connected to the rest of creation. We – and wild animals, domesticated animals, birds, and everything else in all creation – are all beloved and precious to God. Part of the meaning of being created in the image of God is we are to be wise stewards of all creation, caring for our fellow worshipers ([Genesis 2:15](#)).

There is another difference between humans and non-human creation, however. Notice the two praise

passages. The four **living creatures** praise God: "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty – the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come*" (4:8). It is a wonderful straightforward song of praise.

The 24 **human** elders exclaim, "*You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power because you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased*" (4:11). People can express **why** God deserves worship. The elders can see the broad scope of creation, history, and salvation. They are able to praise God in a profound and rich way, expressing **why** God is worthy of praise.

Let's go back to that question from the Westminster Catechism: "*What is the chief end of man?*" In the Catechism, the answer is, "*Man's chief end – our fundamental purpose – is to **glorify God**, and to **enjoy him** forever.*" How does that strike you?

Especially in my younger days, if you were to ask me about the purpose of our lives, I would have answered that my real purpose is to grow in my faith, read Scripture, serve God in all sorts of ways, talk with people about Jesus, volunteer at the food bank, lead this group and that class, raise money for a mission project, write this study ... These are all good things. Necessary things. But in my busy-ness I can sometimes forget **WHO** it is really all about – **God**. I can forget to take time simply to worship **God**. I can forget to take time to reflect on **WHY** I worship God ...

Today's reading is a call to simply take time to worship God. God is holy. He is almighty. He existed before creation and will outlast it. And He is the One who delights to love us. Praise Him.

*Father, humble us.
Inspire us.
Empower us.
We ask that your Spirit may give us the will and the courage
to act to make a difference,
to make real your kingdom among us.
May we all live together
in peace, truth, justice and love,
with mercy, forgiveness, and grace,
caring for one another and sharing your gifts.
Amen.*

Sunday, September 18: Psalm 130

It's dark. The power is out. It's cold. It's wet. You hear every strange creak and bump. It's rather frightening. So you huddle close to the fire (if you have a fireplace still) and wait for the morning ... And when the light begins to dawn, and the sun rises – wow. Suddenly everything is better.

This is the situation the psalmist describes in Psalm 130 – after a pitch-black night of sentry duty, dawn is so welcome (this is long before electric lights). So warm. So comforting. Fears disappear. It is a new day.

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

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

1. *God, our Father, as light, shows us things as they really are.* In the dim, soft lighting of evening the restaurant was really nice, but the next morning when I went back for something I'd forgotten – the restaurant was rather grubby, threadbare and décor tired. "*The LORD's light penetrates the human spirit, exposing every hidden motive*" (Proverbs 20:27). God's light shows us:

- a. ***the good*** – the world celebrates the powerful, the glamorous and the wealthy; God celebrates the loving, the compassionate, the peace-makers, and those who make the world a better place. God helps us recognize the truly “good” ones – the Desmond Tutus, Billy Grahams, and ordinary servants who simply do what is right, day in and day out.
 - b. ***the bad*** – in a world where I may think what is wrong for you, may not necessarily be wrong for me, God exposes the myth of relativism. There are basic principles which, if we follow them, help life go well, but which, if we flaunt them, will cause us (and others) grief.
 - c. ***the possibilities*** – is there hope? Do I have a future? A purpose? Absolutely. God shows us that we are all made in His image and are called to be His light, shining in the darkness.
2. *God, our Father, as light, helps us find our way.* Once, friends and I went camping at Long Beach, Vancouver Island. We parked around 11 p.m., then hiked through the dense rainforest a couple of kilometers to the campground on the beach. We picked our way with flashlights, getting lost more than a few times. Eventually we made it. Without lights we would never have got there. *"Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path,"* the psalmist says (Psalm 119:105). *"You light a lamp for me. The LORD, my God, lights up my darkness"* (Psalm 18:28) – I need to follow.
 3. God, our Father, as light, brings hope to a new day. In the Old Testament, people looked forward to the dawn of a new day when the Messiah/Saviour would come. For instance, Isaiah says, *"The people walking in darkness shall see a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light shall dawn"* (Isaiah 9:2). Malachi looks forward to a time when God will come to visit and save His people: *"The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays"* (Malachi 4:2 – this verse has been made famous in *"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing"*: *"Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace / Hail, the Sun of Righteousness. / Light and life to all He brings / Risen with healing in His wings."* Charles Wesley, who wrote the carol, chose rhyme over accuracy in his lyrics substituting “wings” for “rays” – his version makes little sense, but sure rhymes better).

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

One of the things that helped my friends and I get to our campsite that crazy night was also the moon. There was almost a full moon that night. The moon is not nearly as bright as the sun; it certainly doesn’t show up all the fallen logs or help illuminate the trail as much as the sun would, but it’s better than nothing. The moon, of course, has no light of its own. Its light comes from reflecting the light of the sun.

As followers of Jesus, like the moon, we do not produce our own light. We are simply reflecting the true *Light of the World*. We are invited to reflect the love, grace, peace, joy, and hope we have experienced from God ... sharing what we know with a hard, divided, hurting, violent, dark world. Of course, we will be imperfect “lights” and not do as good a job of this as Jesus Himself. But we can still shine in the darkness ...

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

*In everything we do, O Lord,
give us the humility to listen to Jesus, the Head of the Church.
Give us a desire to seek out the truth.
Give us a willingness to heed the advice of others.
Give us wisdom in reaching decisions.
Give us faith to believe in our conclusions.
Give us courage to put our ideas to the test.
If we prove ourselves wrong, give us the grace to admit it.
Amen.*

Monday, September 19: Revelation 1:1-8

Revelation 1 introduces us to God – Father, Son, and Spirit. Last week we considered God as Trinity. This week we'll look more at who Jesus is, according to Revelation 1. John gives us a picture of Jesus' return one day, when the Kingdom of God will come fully, and all things will be perfect and complete. *"Yes, he's on his way! Riding the clouds, he'll be seen by every eye, those who mocked and killed him will see him. People from all nations and all times will tear their clothes in lament"*(1:7 *The Message*).

John also gives us a vision of who Jesus is NOW, as well as who he will be when He returns. *"I **am** the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end. I **am** the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come – the Almighty One"*(1:8). This is Jesus – not as we have met Him in the gospels: dusty and tired, hungry and sad, beaten and bruised, crucified on a Roman cross – this is the risen Jesus in all His glory.

- He is the faithful witness to all things (1:5)
- He is the first to rise, victoriously, from the dead (1:5)
- He is the all-powerful ruler of all kings of the world (1:5)
- He loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us
- He is the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end (Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet: in other words, Jesus is the A-Z – the sum total of everything)
- He is the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come – the eternal, Almighty One.

It is good for us to reflect on Jesus as we meet Him in the gospels. Our teacher. Our good shepherd. Our friend. Our guide. The One who suffers and dies on the cross, on our behalf.

But it is also good to reflect on the risen, glorified Jesus. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords who sits at God's right hand. In glory. In power. Forever.

When we go through difficult times, Jesus – our shepherd, teacher, comforter, and mentor – is with us. But so too is Jesus – our beginning and end of all things, the Almighty One. We are in good hands. The best of hands. Always.

*Lord Jesus, as I start this day,
I gaze at your face, your pierced side,
and your wounded heart showing God's love for us.
I thank you for your cross and for my salvation.
I also gaze at you, in all your risen glory.
I gaze upon you, risen and victorious as Lord and King.
I thank you for your Spirit dwelling within me.
Take, Lord, and receive my heart:
the words of faith that I speak,
the fruit of the Spirit I would live out,
the works of justice I would do,
my joys and sufferings.
In your grace, may my life make a difference in your world today.
Amen.*

Tuesday, September 20: Revelation 1:1-18

If I were to ask, "What is your mental picture of Jesus?" what image comes to mind? Right now, if you were to visualize Jesus quickly, what would He look like? Hold that picture in your mind ...

Now read John's vision: *"I heard a loud voice behind me, trumpet-clear and piercing ... I turned and saw the voice. I saw a gold menorah with seven branches, and in the center, the Son of Man, in a robe and gold breastplate, hair a blizzard of white, eyes pouring fire-blaze, both feet furnace-fired bronze, His voice a roar,*

right hand holding the Seven Stars, His mouth a sharp-biting sword, and his face a blinding sun.”(1:10-16).

Did your first-impression mental picture of Jesus look anything like that? This is no *"gentle Jesus, meek and mild."* This is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, in all His power and glory.

As we begin Revelation, John wants us to remember this book is about Jesus, the risen Jesus. Read John's description of Jesus a few times. Try to picture Him in your mind. What is your response?

John's response is, *"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead"*(1:17). Not surprising.

Notice how Jesus responds to John: *"He laid his right hand on me and said, 'Don't be afraid.'"*(1:17).

Describing John's world in the 1st century, Tom Wright comments, *"Yes, the times are strange and hard, with harsh and severe rulers running the world and imposing their will on city after city. But the seven churches – seven is the number of perfection, and the churches listed in verse 11 thus stand for all churches in the world, all places and all times – need to know that Jesus himself is standing in their midst and that the 'angels' who represent and look after each of them are held in his right hand. And the Jesus in question has, as his credentials, the fact that he 'was dead' and is 'alive for ever' (verse 18). Like someone whispering to us that they know the secret way out of the dungeon where we have been imprisoned, he says, 'I've got the keys. The keys of death and Hades – I have them right here. There's nothing more you need to worry about.'"*

Jesus is mind-blowing. He is the King of Kings. He is co-Creator of the universe. If we could genuinely see Him as He is, we would fall to the floor in awe and worship alongside John. He is also the One who says, *"Don't be afraid."* He is our good shepherd. He is our loving Saviour. He is our comforter. He is the One who helps us understand what is going on now ... and what will happen in the future (1:19).

John's suffering (his exile) gave him time and space to spend more time with Jesus. As a result, we have this amazing vision. Through John's pain, he is able to experience God in new ways. God can bring something good out of any circumstance. Wherever you are at in life, spend some time with Jesus, today. Ask Him to speak to you. What is He saying?

*God of peace and justice, help us to be your people.
Help us to be your people and live your love.
May we work for a world that mirrors your mercy and grace.
May we live by your wisdom.
Help us to do what is right and act justly.
Help us to love mercy.
Give us the desire to act in solidarity
so that the pillars of injustice crumble
and those now crushed are set free.
Help us to walk humbly with you,
our Saviour and our God.
Amen.*

Wednesday, September 21: Revelation 1:1-20

We often rush through Revelation 1, wanting to get to the "good stuff" – horses, trumpets, beasts, battles ... After all, some of us are sure these prophecies are coming to fruition in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, on this very September 21, 2022. After all, Revelation is all about us, southern Albertans, in Fall 2022 – right? We need to get on with trying to interpret all the coded messages as we read the *Lethbridge Herald*, right?

In 1974, sociologist Jib Fowler coined the term, "chronocentrism." It describes *"the belief that one's own times are paramount, that other periods pale in comparison."* Author Tom Standage defines it as *"the*

egotism that one's own generation is poised on the very cusp of history." Simply put, we think we're the most important generation ever. Therefore, Revelation must be all about **us**, right? It had nothing really to say to people in the 1st Century or for the past 20+ centuries, right? It's about our time and place, right?

But John is told, *"Write down what you have seen – both the things that are **now** happening and the things that **will happen**"*(1:19). Clearly Revelation was about things happening in John's **"now"** (the 1st Century) and that **"will happen"** – possibly later in the 1st Century, the 11th Century, the 21st Century, or some future century. We just don't know. Let's be humble and honest. We don't understand much of this.

Way back when (in 2008!) science fiction author, Tim Powers, wrote about how we all think our time is the most important time, ever: *"You hear people use the phrase, 'that's so last week' to dismiss ideas that have gone stale; my attitude toward currently compelling issues is the skeptical thought, 'that's so today.'*

*"When a book takes you on a stroll into history – or in the other direction, into the future – you've got to set aside your personal charm bracelet of birthdays and the default opinions that came with them. A time travel story is a remedy for our natural impulse toward **chronocentrism**: the chauvinist idea that we're smarter, more moral, more correct than those people, the ones who live over there in some other century.*

"A history book can do it too, of course. But a time travel story forces the point by breaking our calendars and shoving a guy from one century into another. As we read, we share the character's discovery that 2008 is not, after all, the most enlightened year there's ever been." ([A Cure for Chronocentrism,' Forbes 2008](#))

Believe it or not, 2008 was not the most enlightened year there's ever been. Neither is 2022. When we read Scripture, we come to God – Father, Son, and Spirit – who was, is, and is to come, in whom all time and space came into being and exist. In humility, we must confess we don't understand everything there is to know about *"the mystery of the seven stars ... the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches"*(1:20) or a lot of other things in Revelation. That's OK. When we humble ourselves and pray, God can teach us. God can help us apply His Word to our lives, today ...

*Lord, lead us from doubt to faith.
Lead us from unbelief to faith in Jesus.
Lead us from death to life.
Lead us from falsehood to truth.
Lead us from despair to hope.
Lead us from fear to trust.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Let your peace fill our hearts and our world.
Let us dream together, pray together and work together,
to build one world of peace and love,
of faith and hope,
and justice for all.
Amen*

Thursday, September 22: Revelation 5:1-7

Back in my geography days, I ordered some topographic maps from the Ordnance Survey, the British government office responsible for such things. They arrived in a very official looking envelope with large black letters across the top: **"ON HER BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S OFFICIAL SERVICE."** I wondered if I was worthy to open something from the Queen (well, not really from the Queen, of course, but it kind of felt like it). I kept that envelope for years because it made me feel really special.

In Revelation 5, John gives us another image of Jesus, from within God's throne room.

In God's right hand is a scroll with seven seals (the perfect, divine number seven again). In ancient cultures, **right** hands symbolized power and authority (Latin for "right" is "dexter" from which get dextrous, a good thing). **Left** hands (Latin "sinister" – really, look it up) were a symbol of lesser power, even evil.

An invitation goes out to all creation: *"Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and open it?"* We are not sure what the scroll represents. Perhaps it is the Lamb's Book of Life, containing the names of all of us who believe? Who can open it so we can receive God's blessing of life? Perhaps it contains God's plan for salvation and a new heaven and earth? Who can open it so the plan can be put into effect?

There's a huge problem. No one, in all creation, is worthy to open it. Think way back: in Genesis 1-2, God created human beings, in His image, to tend and care for His creation. They sinned. God called the people of Israel to be His true humanity, modelling His life and way for the whole world. They failed. It seems like God's great plan of salvation and redemption is doomed. No one is good enough. John bursts into tears.

But one of the 24 elders says to John, *"Stop weeping. Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne, has won the victory. He is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals."* "Lion of Judah" is a description of the anticipated Messiah ([Genesis 49:9-10](#), [Hosea 5:13-15](#), [2 Esdras 12](#) (this is in the Apocrypha, which we are unfamiliar with, but John's readers would have known well)). "Root of David" is another Old Testament description of the Messiah, appointed to rule all nations with God's power and peace ([Isaiah 11:1-10](#); [Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15](#); [Zechariah 3:8-9, 6:12-13](#)).

Who does John see when he looks for the **Lion** of Judah – the King of Beasts? A **Lamb** – a slaughtered Lamb. A slaughtered Lamb stands where God sits, on the throne. This slaughtered Lamb is all powerful (with seven horns) and all-seeing/all-knowing (with seven eyes). This, of course, is **Jesus, the Lamb of God**, who sacrificially died for us so that our sin might be forgiven, we might have a renewed relationship with God, we might experience eternal life, and that all of creation might begin to be made new ...

"What John has HEARD is the announcement of the lion. What he then SEES is the lamb. He is to hold what he has heard in his head while gazing at what he now sees; and he is to hold what he is seeing in his head as he reflects on what he has heard. The two seem radically different. The lion is the symbol both of ultimate power and of supreme royalty, while the lamb symbolizes both gentle vulnerability and, through its sacrifice, the ultimate weakness of death. But the two are now to be fused together, completely and forever.

"From this moment on, John, and we as his careful readers, are to understand that the victory won by the lion is accomplished through the sacrifice of the lamb, and in no other way. But we are also to understand that what has been accomplished by the lamb's sacrifice is not merely the wiping away of sin for a few people here and there. The victory won by the lamb is God's lion-like victory ... over all the forces of corruption and death, over everything that would destroy and obliterate God's good, powerful, and lovely creation" (Tom Wright, pp. 53-4).

- Jesus is the Lion of Judah – what does that mean to you?
- Jesus is the sacrificed Lamb of God – what does that mean to you?
- Jesus, alone, is worthy – what does that mean to you?

*All powerful and ever-living God,
in your abundant love you give us more than we deserve
and more than we ask for.
Grant us your mercy in great measure.
Forgive us when we have gone against our conscience.
Help us to love as you love.
Give us what we dare not even pray for.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Friday, September 23: Hebrews 1:1-12

I feel sorry for my sons: people say they look like me. It's too bad they didn't take more after Marianne ☺. How about you and your family? Can people tell you are a "chip off the old block"? Or not? Is that a good thing? Or not?

The Book of Hebrews begins helping us understand that Jesus is very much "a chip off the old block" – "*The Son is the radiance of **God's** glory and the exact representation of **his** (God's) being ...*" If you want to know who God is and what He is like, look at Jesus. The family resemblance is unmistakable.

The Book of Hebrews is all about Jesus. The author divides history into two epochs: the time before Jesus and the era after His birth. We see this in our dating: B.C. – before Christ – and A.D. – *Anno Domini* (Latin for "year of our Lord"). Note A.D. does not stand for "after death": that would leave 30+ years unaccounted for. Why is one set of our commonly used dates in English another Latin? I have no idea.

Jesus' coming – God's coming among us – is the most significant event in world history. The author goes on to emphasize that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies:

- He is our Prophet, speaking for God to us (1:2)
- He is our Priest, accomplishing forgiveness of our sins, representing us to God (1:3)
- He is our King, as Creator (1:2), Sustainer (1:3) and now as Ruler at God's right hand (1:4)
- He is far superior to angels and other angelic beings (apparently a question back then).

As we move through Fall 2022, it's good to remember that we go forward confident of the continuing, powerful presence of Jesus: He is "*sustaining all things by his powerful word*"... He has "*provided purification for sins*"... He is "*at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*" He is with us.

Robert Browning writes, "*The year's at the spring / And day's at the morn / Morning's at seven / The hill-side's dew-pearled / The lark's on the wing / The snail's on the thorn / God's in His heaven – / All's right with the world.*" OK, it's Fall, not spring. But God is still in His heaven. Jesus is still at His right hand. All **IS** right with the world. How is this encouraging to you, today?

*Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have given us.
Thank you for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us,
for the salvation you bought for us on the cross.
Help us to live for you in word and deed.
Most merciful Redeemer, Friend, and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.*

Richard of Chichester (1197-1253)

Saturday, September 24: Revelation 7

English theologian, Tom Wright, writes, "*The great multitude in Revelation which no man can number aren't playing cricket. They aren't going shopping. They are WORSHIPPING. Sounds boring? If so, it shows how impoverished our idea of worship has become ... Worship is the central characteristic of the heavenly life; and that worship is focused on the God we know in Jesus*" (For All God's Worth, p. 7).

What is worship for? Or, more appropriately, **WHO** is worship for? Throughout the Book of Revelation, worship is central (reread Revelation 4-5). God's people (and heavenly beings from elders, to bizarre "living creatures," to angels) are all worshipping **God**. Their worship is not for themselves, it's for **God**. There are no "worship wars," no complaints about song choices, no criticism of how loud the thunderclaps are or how

bright the lightning is, and no grumbling about how repetitive the lyrics might be. They are not complaining about if they are “getting anything out of worship” or not. Their worship is not seeker-sensitive.

Who is worship for? Worship is for **God** – Father, Son, and Spirit. Only for **God**. The chief aim of worship is to please **God** and to praise **God**, whether by adoration and song, prayer and proclamation, confession and offering, thanksgiving or commitment, thunderclaps, lightning, or all these together. It’s not about us.

Why worship God? Because of who God is. God is the One who created us, the One who saves us, and the One who is within us. God **has done** great things and He **is still doing** great things. Wright adds, *“When John found himself looking into the open door of heaven, he didn’t see the God he might have wanted; he saw all creation worshipping the awesome and majestic creator God; and, when he looked closer, he saw a Lamb that had been killed and was now alive forevermore ... The true God is not detached from the evil of the world, but has come to share it and bear it in his own body. We do not say, ‘God so loved the world that he sent somebody else’; we say, ‘God so loved the world that he sent his only beloved Son.’*

“And the God who sent the Son is the God who sends the Spirit of the Son, to put into practice, to implement, what the Son achieved ... God came in Jesus to the place where pain was greatest, to take it upon himself God comes today, in the Spirit, to the place where the pain is still at its height, to share the groanings of his world in order to bring the world to new life. But the Spirit doesn’t do that in isolation. The Spirit does it by dwelling within Christians and enabling them to stand, in prayer and in suffering, at that place of pain” (For all God’s Worth, p. 30). In the Spirit, we bring God’s hope and new life to the world.

“Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb” (Revelation 7:10). Praise Him.

*O God our Father,
help us all through this day so to live that we may bring help to others.
May we all we do and say bring honour to Jesus, whose name we bear.
May we bring joy to those that love us, and to you, our King.
Help us to be cheerful when things go wrong.
May we persevere when things are difficult.
Help us be serene when things are irritating.
Enable us to be helpful to those in difficulties.
May we be kind to those in need,
and sympathetic to those whose hearts are sore and sad.
Grant that nothing may make us lose our tempers,
nothing may take away our joy,
nothing may ruffle our peace,
and nothing may make us bitter towards anyone.
You love us through all things.
Help us to love one another through all things as well.
Amen.*

William Barclay (1907-1978)

Sunday, September 25: Psalm 33

In Revelation 1:1-5 we read, this is *“a revelation from **Jesus Christ**, which **God** gave him to show his servants the events that must soon take place ... This is his report of the word of **God** and the testimony of **Jesus Christ** ... Grace and peace to you from the **One who is, who always was, and who is still to come**; from the **sevenfold Spirit** before his throne; and from **Jesus Christ**.”*

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

The Hebrew (Old Testament) word used for the Spirit is *ruach*. This word has a variety of meanings (just as the word "spirit" does in English). *Ruach* is the Hebrew word for wind, breath, mind, spirit (in general), and Holy Spirit (in particular). At a mundane level, *ruach* can refer to wind. For instance, the four "winds" or points of the compass ([Jeremiah 49:36](#)) or the "breath" of living creatures ([Genesis 7:15](#)), including people ([Isaiah 42:5](#)). At a higher level, *ruach* refers to the human mind or human spirit ([Deuteronomy 34:9](#), [Ezekiel 11:5](#)). And at a still higher level, the word refers to our eternal spirits or souls: when I die, my chemical-composed body returns to dust, but my *ruach* will return to God (Genesis 3:19).

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

In Psalm 33:6, "*By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the **ruach** of his mouth.*" This psalm is a beautiful celebration of God as Creator, and His Spirit as key in creation (as in Genesis 1:2). God – Father (the LORD), Son (the Word of the LORD) and Spirit (*ruach*) – are involved in creating and sustaining the universe and the life within it. Isn't it wonderful to know that God has not only created everything – and created it good – but also continues to support and sustain His creation, too. As you read Psalm 33, notice how active God still is in His creation and in our lives. (Other Old Testament references to the Holy Spirit/*ruach* include [Genesis 41:38](#), [Exodus 31:1-5](#), [Deuteronomy 34:9](#), [Numbers 24:2](#), [Judges 14:19](#), [1 Samuel 10:6-10](#), [Nehemiah 9:20](#), [Psalm 51:11](#), [Ezekiel 2:1-2](#), [Zechariah 4:6](#), etc.)

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

*Father, we gather in your presence in prayer and praise.
We thank you for our health and happiness,
for forgiveness and healing,
for our talents and gifts,
and for our family and friends.
We thank you for the wonderful world you have given us
to explore and to use to your greater glory.
We thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ, your Son,
who died that we might have life and live it to the full.
Send your Spirit to accompany us on our daily journey.
Give us wisdom that we may find you in all things.
Give us understanding that we may learn life lessons well.
Give us compassion that we may show your face to those we meet.
Give us generosity that we may share the gifts you have given us.
Give us faith that we may have confidence in your presence within us.
Above all give us love that we may bring joy into the lives of those around us.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Monday, September 26: Zechariah 7

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

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

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

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

The Spirit may be saying things directly to me that are specific to my life and circumstances. He may be saying things to our church about how we can serve Him and obey Him right now.

As I reflect on the great commands (*"Love God ..."* and *"Love your neighbour ..."*) what is God saying to me? What is He speaking into my life? What is He saying to our church? How can I help that come into being?

O Lord,
*help us to worship you in Spirit and in truth.
 Give us a mind that is humble, quiet, peaceable,
 patient, and charitable.
 We pray for a taste of your Holy Spirit
 in all our thoughts, words and deeds.*
 O Lord,
*give us a lively faith, a firm hope,
 a fervent charity,
 a deep love of you.
 Take from us all lukewarmness of devotion
 and all dullness in prayer.
 Give us fervour and delight in thinking of you,
 your grace, and your tender compassion toward us.
 Give us, good Lord,
 the grace to work for the things we pray for.
 Amen*

Thomas More (1478-1535)

Tuesday, September 27: Luke 10:1-22

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

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

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

The Spirit gives us power to serve God in His Kingdom. The disciples do not go out in their own strength.

The Spirit empowers them. I don't live my life – in my home, neighbourhood, school, workplace – in my own strength. The Spirit will give me the courage, insight, and power to be His witness and servant.

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

*God, our almighty Father,
Perfect Saviour, guiding Spirit,
to you we dedicate our hearts, minds, and strength.
Open our minds and our hearts
so that we may be grateful for our gifts and the gifts of others.
May we be generous men and women for others.
May we be compassionate with the needy.
May we be loving towards others.
May we be faith-filled in our beliefs, with hope in the future.
May we be eloquent and truthful in our speech.
May we be learning to find God in all things.
May we be curious to know God in our lives.
May we be engaged with the world.
May we be committed to change for the better.
May we use the resources of the earth prudently.
May we be set a godly example by our conduct,
so that we may employ our knowledge to benefit others
and create one family of all nations to the greater glory of God.
Amen*

Wednesday, September 28: John 3:1-21

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

In Greek, as in Hebrew, the word for Spirit is also the word for wind (Greek "*pneuma*"). Translators decide by context and personal preference which word to use – "Spirit" or "wind."

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

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

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

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

*Lord, thank you for the invitation to praise you. Praise the Lord.
May I worship you as well as the stars, angels, mountains, and birds worship you.
Jesus, may your cross lead me to confession of my own sinfulness.
Lead me to genuine repentance.
Please give me a fresh knowledge that I am forgiven and free in your grace.
Holy Spirit, may your flame light a fire in my heart
that no cares, no worries, and no distractions can extinguish.
Prepare me today to worship you in Spirit and in truth.
May my worship be a gob-smacked, punched-in-the-solar-plexus pleasure.
Help me to be a little giddy with awe and delight and amazement.
Amen*

Thursday, September 29: John 14:1-29

Jesus' greatest teachings on the Holy Spirit come during His final meal with His disciples, just before His arrest and crucifixion, recorded in John 14-16. After supper, Jesus said, *"I will be with you only a little longer ... Where I am going, you cannot come"* (John 13:33). Out of that context, as He tells His disciples about His impending arrest and death, Jesus says, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled ..."* (14:1).

Of course, they had no clue what He was taking about. Had they understood at all, they certainly would have been very troubled.

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

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

What is Jesus saying to me? What is the Holy Spirit doing in my life? The Holy Spirit does not whisper strange new tidings in my ear, but rather reminds me of You, Jesus, of Your life and of Your words.

Help me deepen my understanding of Your truth and know You in the constantly changing situations of life.

*With great devotion
 I desire to worship you and serve you, O God.
 Help me to share the love of Christ the consoler.
 Help me to share the love of Christ the redeemer.
 Help me to share the love of Christ the healer,
 the liberator,
 the enricher,
 the strengthener.
 Through your Spirit, may I be able to help another person:
 to console, liberate and give them courage;
 to bring them light not only for their spirit,
 but also for their bodies.
 Help me to love each and every one of my neighbours
 as much as you love me.
 I ask this through Christ our Lord.
 Amen.*

adapted from Pierre Favre (1506-1546)

Friday, September 30: John 15

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

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

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

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

*Lord God, our loving Father,
 you know all my sins and failures,
 my weaknesses and temptations.
 I come to you with deep sorrow in my heart
 for the wrong I have done
 and for the good I have failed to do.
 Lord Jesus, through your death on the cross,
 Forgive me,
 accept me,
 and by Your Spirit strengthen me,
 now and always.
 Amen.*

David Konstant (b.1930)

Saturday, October 1: Revelation 1:1-6

Reread Revelation 1:5-6: *"Jesus Christ is the faithful witness to these things, the first to rise from the dead, and the ruler of all the kings of the world. All glory to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us. **He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father.** All glory and power to him forever and ever. Amen."* We – you and I – show up in Revelation 1.

On the one hand we are blown away by the majesty and glory of God, Father-Son-Spirit, revealed here to us. On the other hand, John wants us to remember God's amazing grace, love, and peace: He loves us and He has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us.

John also wants us to know that we have an important, meaningful place now, and in the cosmic drama to come. We are *"a Kingdom of priests for God his (Jesus') Father."*

(1) We are a **"kingdom ... for God."** Jesus, throughout His ministry, talks about the Kingdom of God. In the beginning, Jesus announces, *"The time promised by God has come at last. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent of your sins and believe the Good News."* (Mark 1:15). We still await the return of the King, when Jesus returns and all is made perfect. In the meantime, however the Kingdom of God has already begun.

A "kingdom" exists where a King has dominion. Where his name is honoured. Where his rule is obeyed. The "Kingdom of God," therefore, exists wherever God/Jesus/the Spirit have authority and dominion. Where God's name is honoured. Where His rule is acknowledged. If **we** believe in God, honour His name, and follow His rule, the Kingdom of God is within **us**.

The Kingdom of God is NOT a geographic domain, like the Kingdom of Denmark. It is a Kingdom of the heart, within us. Jesus says, *"The Kingdom of God can't be detected by visible signs. You won't be able to say, 'Here it is.' or 'It's over there.' For the Kingdom of God is within you"* (Luke 17:20-21). The Kingdom of God exists subversively within every nation on Earth, within each of us who believes. In any country, where a person acknowledges the kingship of Jesus, honours Him, and follow Him – the Kingdom of God is there.

(2) We are a **"kingdom of priests."** In John's Jewish tradition, priests do two key things:

1. Priests offer up prayers on behalf of **people to God**. We represent people to God. We pray for others. On behalf of others (and our world), we ask God to make Himself known, to open hearts, to heal, to guide, to comfort, to strengthen, to bring peace, to provide for, to ____ (fill in the blank).
2. Priests also bring **God's grace and peace to people**. As those who know Jesus, we have good news for our world. We share God's good news **in WORD**, telling people about the love, mercy, and grace of God. **AND** we share God's love **in DEED**. We care for people's practical needs for love, food, justice, shelter, friendship, wisdom, equality, and ____ (fill in the blank).

How can we be *"a Kingdom of priests for God"* today?

*Jesus, thank you for the cross.
Christ, by your body given for me, save me.
Christ, by your blood shed more me, make me holy.
Christ, by your wounds, cleanse and heal me.
Christ, by your suffering, strengthen me.
O good Jesus, hear me.
Within your mercy hide me.
Let me not be separated from you.
From the enemy defend me,
At my death call me and bid me, come to you,
that with your saints I may praise you, forever and ever.
Amen*

Sunday, October 2: Revelation 5:6-14

I have only been to a dinner theatre once. It was a memorable experience. As dinner ended, the room went black. A flute began to play quietly. The lights came up a bit – you were dimly aware of shadowy figures. Other instruments joined in. The lights got brighter; the scene got clearer. The music became fuller and louder. And you suddenly realized there was no stage – you were the stage. The entire play took place in and around the tables. Actors would interact with guests, asking questions, and improvising by working with audience answers. We were part of the plot, the script, and the story ... Some people were a bit uncomfortable being co-opted into the drama. I thought it was brilliant.

In John's vision, the 24 elders represent all of us, God's people. They are all on stage, falling down in worship, and what? *"Each one had a harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of God's people"* (5:8). We are on stage, represented by the elders. AND we are on stage because **our prayers** are here in Jesus'/God's presence. AND **our worship** – off-key and faltering – is here in Jesus'/God's presence, represented by harps. In all our weakness and imperfection, **we** are on stage with the Lamb of God; we're part of the divine, cosmic drama. No more sitting in the stands as spectators. We are "in the game" of life, serving God in His Kingdom, whether we want to be or not.

The elders/we sing three new songs:

In the **first song**, the 24 elders (we) celebrate we are saved by the Lamb's (Jesus') sacrificial death. Why are we saved? We are saved for a purpose. We are **"a kingdom and priests to serve God ..."** (5:10). To glorify God. To share God's love and grace with all people. To model a new Kingdom way of living.

The **second song** – in which thousands upon thousands, ten thousand times ten thousand, angels join – moves from what the Lamb has **done** (saved us and established us as His Kingdom), to what the Lamb **deserves** – all the honour and praise in the universe. Note: all power, wealth, wisdom, and strength belong to **Him**, not us. Jesus is the source of our comfort and hope. He is also the One to whom all our money, time, energy, wisdom, education, position, employment, health truly belongs. Any good gift we enjoy in life still belongs to Him. We continue to be called as wise stewards, not owners, of all we have.

For the **third song**, every creature – on land, sea, and air (and under the earth) – joins in praise of the Lamb and God the Father (the One who sits on the throne) as well. Feeling overwhelmed yet?

Take a moment to catch your breath and step back ... what are we learning about ourselves?

1. We are created to worship and praise God – Father, Son, and Spirit.
2. We are called to be a kingdom and priests serving God ... lifting up prayers and praises to God for ourselves and others, living His Kingdom values and principles, and sharing God's love with others.
3. All we have – every good gift – comes as a blessing from God, to be used to build His Kingdom.

What is God saying to you, today? How do you need to respond?

*Lord, as we think about communion
We remember that You are the bread of life.
You feed our souls, you nourish our hearts
and You give us sustenance to run the race before us.
As we break the bread, we feel the softness of Your love for us.
We smell the fragrance of the grace You release afresh each day.
We thank you with all our hearts for the great price You paid
when You were crucified on the cross for us.
Yet just as the yeast has caused this bread to rise,
You rose again, triumphant over death
as Lord of Lords and King of Kings forever, and our beloved Saviour.*

*We remember that you are the giver of life.
 You are forgiveness.
 You bring deep peace to our souls and Your love flows within us.
 As we pour out the wine, we see Your sacrifice poured out for us.
 We notice the depth of Your goodness, and the pain You suffered for us.
 We dwell upon the intricacy of human life,
 and the price You paid to set humanity free.
 Yet just as the tombstone rolled away to unleash the Risen Lord,
 Your light shines in our hearts now,
 extinguishing all darkness to release Heaven's blessings upon us.
 Thank you, Lord.
 Amen.*

Monday, October 3: Acts 2:32-47

As we've noted, in Revelation we are described as "**a kingdom and priests to serve God ...**" (1:6, 5:10). We are saved for a purpose. To glorify God. To share God's love and grace with all people. To model a new Kingdom way of living. As we consider seven letters to seven churches in Revelation 2-3, we'll think about who we are, what our purpose is, what we do, and why we do what we do, as God's church.

Thomas Groome, an education professor at Boston University, writes, "*The church is to be a community of those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, who ratify that faith by baptism, and who manifest the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus, by proclaiming in word, celebrating in worship, and living in deed the Kingdom already and the Kingdom promised.*" That's a mouthful. It is also very profound.

We, the church, are people, God's people (not a building). The Greek New Testament word for "church" is "*ekklesia*," literally meaning "*called out ones*" or "*called together ones*." God has called us out, to be His distinctive kingdom of God community. We are called together to be the church. Church is not an option.

(NOTE: from this Greek word "*ekklesia*" comes the French "*église*" and Spanish "*iglesia*." Our English word "*church*" (like the German "*Kirche*") comes from another Greek word, "*kuriakos*," meaning "*belonging to the Lord*." Both are wonderful expressions of what it means to be a community of Christians/kingdom of priests: we are "called out"/"called together" by God **AND** we are **His** people, we belong to the Lord)

We are a people who belong to God, called out to be a community together by the Holy Spirit, bound to one another through our common faith in Jesus.

We are a people who live out (manifest) the Kingdom of God in what we do and how we live. The faith that is within us naturally shines through and overflows our lives:

- We talk about our faith. Part of this is learning, teaching, and mentoring **within** a Christian community – a church (2:42). Part of this sharing our faith **with others** (Peter certainly did);
- We celebrate Him in worship and prayer, in community and individually (2:46-47)
- We live out Jesus' Kingdom of God values in our relationships with one another and in the world as we "*love our neighbour as ourselves*" (2:44-47).

"*They'll know we are Christians by our love ...*" goes the old song. That was what was happening in Jerusalem (2:47). Pray that the Lord help us be His church.

- How can you show God's love, today?
- How can we, as a church, show the love of Christ to our community?

Father,
I abandon myself into your hands.
Do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you.
I am ready for all, accept all.
Let only your will be done in me
and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my soul.
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord, and so I need to give myself.
I surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.
Amen.

Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916)

Tuesday, October 4: 1 Peter 2:1-12

Boston University professor, Thomas Groome, goes on to say, *"All would-be Christians are invited to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. To do this means to accept the demands of membership in the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus. As he invited decision in his own time, so he invites decision in our time: to seek first the Kingdom of God as he modeled and preached it. This a constant call to continuing conversion and repentance. 'This is the time of fulfillment: The reign of God is at hand. Reform your lives and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1:15). The Kingdom must always begin in the hearts of its members ..."*

We, those who love Jesus and welcome Him as our Saviour and Lord, are the church. Peter uses a building metaphor. He is not saying the church is a physical building; he is saying that the church is a community of the people of God. We can only be our best or reach our fullest potential as Christians if we are part of the church (a brick off by itself isn't good for much). Each one of us is a critically important building block in the church: the church is only complete when we're part of it. Each of us has an invaluable role to play. We **don't go to** church. We **are** the church.

God sees us as *"royal priests, a holy nation, His very own possession."* This is true individually. But Peter uses the plural here – this is how God sees us **all, together**. As a church, we all are His people. We all are His "chosen" people, the community He has called out and called together. Peter quotes Hosea, calling us to a new identity as His kingdom of priests for God: *"Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people"* (the Book of Hosea is a wonderful story of God's unconditional forgiveness, love, and grace).

As God's church, however, we no longer fit easily into this world, marred and corrupted by sin. In 2:11, Peter says we live as *"foreigners and exiles, temporary residents and foreigners, aliens and strangers"* in this world (depending on your translation). We are "called out" to be God's distinctive people. When we are born into new life in Christ, when we live in the Kingdom of God, we no longer live as everyone else around us lives. We now live as "citizens of heaven," foreigners in a foreign land. While we adapt in small ways, in important ways we remain distinctly different. We live kingdom of God values and a better way of life.

We may not want to stand out. We may simply prefer to fit into the happy-go-lucky, dog-eat-dog world around us. But when lose our distinctiveness, we don't find the joy, peace, enthusiasm, and power that God promises. We struggle with a mediocre faith, a restless spirit, and a sense of "missing something" spiritually.

Or we can choose to live as a Christian counterculture: *"You can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light"* (2:9). It will not be easy. But it will be rewarding.

I appreciate how Eugene Peterson translates 1 Peter 2:10-12. Reflect on these verses today: *"You are the*

ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you – from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted. Friends, this world is not your home, so don't make yourselves cozy in it. Don't indulge your ego at the expense of your soul. Live an exemplary life among the natives so that your actions will refute their prejudices. Then they'll be won over to God's side and be there to join in the celebration when he arrives." How can I live my faith today?

*Be silent.
Be still.
Alone.
Empty before your God.
Say nothing.
Ask nothing.
Be silent.
Be still.
Let your God look upon you.
That is all.
God knows.
God understands.
God loves you with an enormous love
and only wants to look upon you with that generous love.
Quiet.
Be still.
Let your God love you.
Amen*

Wednesday, October 5: Galatians 3:1-14

Way back in the Old Testament, Abraham and his descendants were chosen by God. The Jewish people came to see themselves as "God's (only) chosen people." They believed God loved them and only them. Every non-Jewish person (like me) was a "Gentile." In their opinion, no Gentile was part of God's covenant or could be loved by God. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, a contemporary of Paul, wrote that the mind of every Gentile is *"always intent upon idolatry and they have no share in the world to come."* In the 4th Century AD, Rabbi Judah ben Ilai, taught Jews to pray daily, *"Blessed be thou who has not made me a Gentile."*

That's not what God intended. God chose and blessed Abraham with these words, *"I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and **you will be a blessing to others ... All the families on earth will be blessed through you**"* (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham and his descendants were supposed to be a blessing to ALL peoples. They were chosen to be ambassadors of God's love and grace. They were supposed to be God's messengers. They were called to share God's love with ALL nations. It was not about building walls but building bridges. The Israelites never understood that.

Jesus came to reboot God's plan for ALL nations to know Him. Jesus came with God's message of hope, mercy, grace, forgiveness, and love for ALL people – Jews, Europeans (Romans and Greeks), Arabic people ([Mark 7:24-30](#)), rich, poor, young, old ... In [Acts 2:9-11](#), the disciples share God's love in the languages of Parthians, Medes, Elamites (Iran), people from Mesopotamia (Iraq), Judea (Israel), Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia (Turkiye), Egypt, and the areas of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome, Cretans (Europe), and Arabs (Saudi Arabia). Later Philip leads an Ethiopian to faith, and Paul plants churches throughout what are now Turkiye and Greece.

The people of God – the church, us – are NOT defined by ethnicity. We are defined by faith in Jesus. We are saved by faith in Jesus: *"The real children of Abraham are those who put their faith in God."* Specifically, Paul points us to the cross: we are those who know our sin is forgiven by Jesus' death on the cross.

We don't earn our salvation. New life in Jesus is God's gift to us, by His grace, which we can only accept by faith. This gift is for all people, everywhere. The Holy Spirit, God's personal presence within our lives, is also available to all people, everywhere. The days of ethnic Israel, defined by bloodline, are over. The people of God are those who have faith in Jesus and know God's grace through His Spirit.

We – the church – are God's people, saved by His grace and empowered by His Spirit. We are called by the same purpose as Abraham was, to *"be a blessing to others ... all the families on earth will be blessed through you."* As Jesus reframes this call, *"I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:18-20).

"He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father" (Revelation 1:6, 5:10). We pray to God on behalf of ALL people. And we bring the good news of God's love and grace to ALL people. We are blessed to be a blessing, being God's good news in our world.

*Father in heaven, you have made us for yourself.
Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.
Fulfill this longing through Jesus, the bread of life,
so that we may witness to him who alone satisfies the hungers of the human family.
Hear our prayers for our friends, families, and colleagues.
Hear our prayers for our hurting world.
And hear our prayers as we desire to be your ambassadors of grace and love.
Help us to be good news to our world.
Amen.*

Thursday, October 6: Galatians 3:15-29

What's your impression of "Old Testament Law"? Joseph Campbell perhaps captures it when he writes, *"Computers are like Old Testament gods; lots of rules and no mercy."* Lots of rules and no mercy.

There are **lots of rules** in the Old Testament. Most were simply to help people understand how a good, orderly, respectful, civil society worked: don't murder, steal, lie, cheat, etc. Some, such as various food and hygiene laws, were principles to ensure good health. Others were focussed on spiritual faithfulness: keeping oneself faithful to God and God alone. None were simply petty restrictions simply to test people to see if they would mess up. All of them can be grouped together as either ways to *"Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength,"* or, *"Love your neighbour as yourself."*

There is **lots of mercy** in the Old Testament. For instance, in Psalm 103:8-14, we read, *"The Lord is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He does not punish us for all our sins; he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve. For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he knows how weak we are; he remembers we are only dust."* In His mercy, God forgives those who confess their sin.

In Jesus, however, God writes His message of **MERCY** and **LOVE** in capital letters too big for us to miss. On the cross, Jesus takes upon Himself all sin and evil. The good news – for all people, everywhere – is that, in His mercy, God can forgive all sin, through the death of Jesus. This is good news for ALL people.

Paul summarizes his point in Galatians 3:26-29: *"For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham*

belongs to you." For us – almost all of whom are ethnically non-Jewish – that is great news.

Who are we then? We are people who

- have "*put on Christ, like putting on new clothes*" – what does that mean?
- are "*all one in Christ Jesus*" – what does that mean?
- We "*belong to Christ*" – what does that mean?
- We are "*the true children of Abraham, his heirs*" (Genesis 12:1-3, 15:5) – what does that mean?

Jesus' church is at its best when we are multi-ethnic, multi-generational, multi-rich/poor/whatever, multi-ability, multi-you-name-it, empowering women and men of all ages, abilities, cultures, and gifts. What unites us is our faith in Jesus. That's what matters. In our fractured world today, how is this description of the church good news? How is this a challenge to live out? How can we put aside our differences?

*Crucified God,
we wear beautiful crosses around our necks, and hang them on our walls.
We have made the hideous symbol of suffering a decoration,
when what it really needs to be is a definition.
Define us by your cross, Lord.
Define us by your sacrificial love.
In our remembrance of Christ's sacrifice for us,
let us show by the offering of our hearts and hands
the depth of our commitment to live for him who died for us.
With gratitude, we celebrate all the gifts that are ours through Christ crucified –
new life, real freedom, eternal life, and a meaningful purpose.
Fill us now again with the power of your Spirit
that we might be bold in our witness to Jesus Christ,
till all the world adores his name.
In lives of sacrifice and service, empower our witness to Jesus Christ,
whose cross so powerfully proclaims your love.
Amen*

Friday, October 7: Galatians 5

If you were to ask people on the street, "What is church?" what do you think they might say? Many people would give you a blank stare. A few might talk about some positive things. Many others would be critical – they have been hurt by church people, felt judged in church, found it irrelevant, have seen or read unflattering news stories, or ____ (fill in the blank).

If you were to read through the New Testament, how would you answer the question, "What is church?" You would have to conclude that:

1. Church is **not** something **we go to**. It's who **we are**, in community with other believers.
2. As Christians, we can't disassociate from church anymore than, as persons, we can disassociate from humanity. Part and parcel of believing in Jesus is being part of His people, the church.
3. The church is not a human invention. The church is God's idea. Most of the New Testament is about church – God's gift to spread the good news about Jesus through ordinary people, like you and me.
4. The church is messy. People sin. Leaders mess up. The Bible is not a story of an idealized church where everything worked perfectly. Amazingly, God uses real people, like us.
5. We believers need each other, now more than ever. The world needs to see people of Jesus working together humbly, lovingly, unitedly, forgivingly, to care for our hurting world.

The church is people whom God has set free: "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free*" (Galatians 5:1). What are we set free from? We are free from the power of sin and death: through Jesus, our sin is forgiven.

We are free to live again: because the past is forgiven, we begin anew. We are free to live in the Spirit: the Spirit correct, empowers, and guides us into new ways of living. We are free to be a blessing: life is not about us – we are free to live for God and be a blessing to others. How else are we free???

Our identity is as those who are called out, called together, and belong to the Lord. We are called out, together, to walk in and by the Spirit as a kingdom of priests for God. Do we do that perfectly? Absolutely not. But we keep on aiming to be the people God has called us to be.

Humbly, we live in the freedom we have in Jesus: *"Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good – crucified. Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. ..."*

"What happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely" (Galatians 5:24-25, 22-23, *The Message* translation).

*Jesus, your cross is the hope of those of us who believe.
Through the power of the cross, You are the resurrection of the dead.
Through the power of the cross, You are the way of the lost.
Through the power of the cross, You are the Saviour of the lost.
Through the power of the cross, You are the staff of the lame.
Through the power of the cross, You are the guide of the blind.
Through the power of the cross, You are the strength of the weak.
Through the power of the cross, You are the doctor of the sick.
Through the power of the cross, You are the hope of the hopeless.
Through the power of the cross, You are the freedom of the slaves.
Through the power of the cross, You are the cloth of the naked.
Through the power of the cross, You are the water of the seeds.
Through the power of the cross, You are the source of those who seek water.
Through the power of the cross, You are the answer for those who need wisdom.
We thank you, Jesus, for the cross.
Amen*

Saturday, October 8: Revelation 2:1-7 (Ephesus)

Jesus gives specific messages to each of seven churches represented by golden lampstands and shining stars in Revelation 1. Each letter speaks directly to issues in that church in the 1st Century. However, the principles Jesus communicates are timeless and universal. They are as relevant today as they were 20 centuries ago. This is not surprising since Jesus is *"the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come"* (1:8) – He never changes. Today we read Jesus' letter to the church in Ephesus.

What is Jesus' message in Revelation 2:4-5? What is their "first love"? Of course, we are to love Jesus, first and foremost. But we are also called to love one another. The two are inseparable.

Jesus always holds these in tension. When tested to give the greatest commandment, He says: *"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'"* (Matthew 22:37-39).

- We love Jesus because he first loved us.
- We love one another as Jesus loved the church – sacrificially, unconditionally, at all times: *"Imitate*

God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God” (Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 5:1-2).

Have you known Christians or churches who work very hard, hold fast to truth, endure dreadful suffering – and yet are **unloving**? Hard? Judgmental? Legalistic? Hurtful? Angry? Gossipy? Cut themselves off?

Have you known Christians or churches who work very hard, hold to the truth, have gone through hard times – and yet are **loving**? Joyful? At peace? Patient? Kind? Good? Faithful? Gentle? Self-controlled?

This is the ideal to which God is calling us. We are called to love Jesus – passionately – but also to love our neighbour – just as passionately. “Integral mission” – the truth that people need to know God personally AND have their practical needs met is a key value in God’s Kingdom. We live the gospel in word and deed.

We have another letter written to the church in Ephesus, too. In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he prays for people in this church: *“I pray that God, the Father, from his glorious, unlimited resources, will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God’s **love** and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his **love** is. May you experience the **love** of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.*

“Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.” (Ephesians 3:16-21).

“You have forsaken the love you had at first/You don’t love me or each other as you did at first” (Revelation 2:4). How do we struggle to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength? How do we find it challenging to love our neighbours as ourselves? Pray for God’s help to love Him and others ...

*Merciful God,
give us the same attitude as Jesus,
who emptied himself
and was obedient to you
all the way to his death on the cross.
Make us eager to put others before ourselves,
and their needs before our own.
We ask this through your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen.*

Thanksgiving Sunday, October 9: Acts 18:18-28 (Ephesus)

At one time Turkiye, called Asia Minor in New Testament times, had a large Christian population. Turkish journalist, Uzey Bulut, comments, *“Even though Christians are a tiny minority in Turkiye today, Christianity has a long history in Asia Minor, the birthplace of many Christian Apostles and Saints, including Paul of Tarsus, Timothy, Nicholas of Myra, and Polycarp of Smyrna. All of the first seven Ecumenical Councils were held in what is today Turkiye. Two out of the five centers (Patriarchates) of the ancient Pentarchy – Constantinople (Istanbul) and Antioch (Antakya) – are also situated there ... Turkiye is also home to the Seven Churches of Asia, to which John sent the Revelation. During the centuries that followed, countless churches were established throughout the region ...”*

We are first introduced to Ephesus in Acts 18. Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of "Asia" (western Asia Minor). Ephesus had an estimated population of 175,000, second in importance and size only to Rome. Paul planted the first seeds of Christian faith in the city. It was home to one of the earliest, strongest, and most missional churches in the 1st Century.

A man named Apollos was also part of the church in Ephesus. Note Luke's comment about Apollos, *"He had been taught the way of the Lord, and he taught others about Jesus with an enthusiastic spirit and with accuracy. However, he knew only about John's baptism. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preaching boldly in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately"* (Acts 18:25-26). What do we learn about Apollos' character?

- Apollos loves to teach others about Jesus enthusiastically. Isn't that great?
- He has learned a lot about Jesus, but still doesn't know everything (he knew you could confess and repent of your sin, but nothing about the new life that comes through Jesus and the Spirit).
- He is teachable. He is willing to learn. He is willing to be corrected. He is humble.

Being teachable is a wonderful quality. What about us? Are we teachable? Do we think deeply? Are we open to being corrected? Let's be honest: most of us are quite happy to tell others what ***we*** know, but we're not so good at being teachable ourselves. We certainly don't like to be corrected. Many of us are sure we never need to be corrected anyway; we know we're right. If someone thinks differently than us, they must be wrong. Perhaps we're not always as teachable as we think we are ...

For us to be a healthy, welcoming church we need to be a place where the Pauls, Apolloses, Priscillas, and Aquilas (and others) can have deep, meaningful conversations. People grow in their faith when they feel safe to ask questions – even heretical questions – and discover biblical answers. We come aside from our busy-ness, we work together through the big questions, and we grow spiritually. We welcome one another, listen to one another, encourage one another, love one another, and learn from one another.

Note Luke's follow-up comment on Apollos: when he went on to Achaia, and *"he refuted the Jews with powerful arguments in public debate. Using the Scriptures, he explained to them that Jesus was the Messiah"* (18:28). Aquila and Priscilla's investment of time AND Apollos' teachability paid off – big time.

Who can you invest some time in? Who can you encourage in their faith? Who can you mentor a little bit? Only God knows what that investment can mean in one person's life – and in His Kingdom.

*Holy Jesus, You came down from heaven;
You were pleased to pay the ransom on the cross for us,
so that You might redeem us from all sin,
and purify to Yourself a Kingdom of priests, zealous for good works.
Thank you for your amazing grace.
Thank you that you are alive in us, today, through your Spirit.
We ask You write Your law on our hearts that we may understand it.
May we know You and the power of Your resurrection.
May we express your grace in turning from our sinful ways.
May we express your love in loving other people as you love us.
May we express your mercy in forgiving those who sin against us.
May we express our thanksgiving by giving you all the glory.
May you rule our hearts by faith.
May we, being dead to sin and alive to your Spirit, live rightly,
and be your ambassadors of love.
Amen*

based on Henry Hammond (1605-1660)