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Good News

Readings, Reflections, Prayers

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Monday, November 28: Isaiah 7:1-16

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This month we move through Advent – a time of “waiting,” anticipating Jesus’ first coming/His birth/Christmas. It’s also a time to look forward, in faith and hope, to Jesus’ second coming, when He returns in glory. Historically, Advent has kept these two realities in dynamic tension. We’ll be looking at the unique focus each gospel (Mark, Matthew, Luke, John) brings to the season of Advent and Christmas.

As we have read Jesus’ letters to the churches in Revelation 1-3, we have seen God is on a mission: He wants all people, everywhere to know Him. However, throughout the Old Testament, the nation of Israel never really understood that **they** were called to be a blessing to anyone but themselves. When they did “get it” they certainly struggled to live it out. For instance, Jonah, when called to share God’s love, tried to scurry to the other end of the world rather than tell the Assyrians about God.

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

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

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

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

God promises a sign: *“The virgin will conceive a child. She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’).”* That sounds impossible. It sounds as impossible as Judah being able to defeat the combine armies of Syria/Aram and Israel. But God is telling Ahaz that, if he has faith in God and God’s ability to do the impossible, he and his kingdom will be saved.

The theme throughout the Old Testament (and the theme of Revelation) is that, without God’s help, we cannot solve the BIG problems of our world or the BIG problems of our lives (or even the little problems in our lives). Jesus, Immanuel – God with us – is the One we need. He is God Himself.

The invitation of Advent is to know our God is the One who can do things that seem impossible. This amazing God is with us. Through His Spirit, He never leaves us or forsakes us. He is always here with us. This is good news of great joy for us, and for our world.

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

“God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. Dear friends, since God loved us so much, we surely ought to love each other.

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

*O Father, give us the humility which realizes its ignorance,
admits its mistakes, recognizes its need,
welcomes advice, and accepts rebuke.
Help us always to praise rather than to criticize,
to sympathize rather than to condemn,
to encourage rather than to discourage,
to build rather than to destroy,
and to think of people at their best rather than at their worst.
This we ask for your Name's sake.
Amen.*

William Barclay (1907-1978)

Tuesday, November 29: Isaiah 9:1-7

What do we do when the world (in general) looks bleak? What do we do when our own lives look bleak? Who're you going to call? Ahaz is staring down the spears of two angry armies, one of them his own Jewish brethren from the northern kingdom of Israel. The other, the combined might of Syria and Aram. He sees no hope for his country. And, the traditions of the day being what they were, he sees no hope for himself or his family: captured kings were (at best) executed or (at worst) tortured and then executed, their heads impaled on poles above their own city gate (and I thought I had problems).

In the midst of this stress, God speaks these words of encouragement.

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

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

How do these verses anticipate Jesus coming?

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

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

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

*Dear God, it is so hard for us not to be anxious.
We worry about work and money,
about food and health,
about weather and crops,
about war and politics,
about children and parents,
about friends and enemies,
about life and death,
about loving and being loved.
Show us how perfect love casts out fear.
Amen*

Unknown

Wednesday, November 30: Isaiah 11:1-12

God continues to encourage Ahaz. The *"the shoot/branch from the stump of David's family"* (11:1) and *"heir to David's throne"* (11:10) refers to the fact that the promised Messiah will come from the family of David – AND from Ahaz, himself. Ahaz is a direct descendant of David. So, God is promising Ahaz that his own family will survive this crisis. In fact, Ahaz will provide salvation for his people. That's good news. That's great joy.

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

[2 Kings 16](#) goes on to record how Ahaz made a deal with the devil – King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria – as an ally against the armies of Israel and Syria/Aram. Ahaz took silver and gold from God's Temple in Jerusalem and from his palace treasury, to hire the Assyrian king and his army. While signing his life away to Tiglath-pileser, Ahaz also sees the pagan altar in Damascus and, to please the Assyrians, has a copy built in the Temple in Jerusalem. He removes the Jewish decorations in the Temple, turning it into a pagan temple. Ahaz will not trust God. He does trust King Tiglath-pileser. And he puts his trust in the cruel gods of the Assyrians.

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

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

John encourages us: *"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God. And everyone who loves the Father loves his children, too. We know we love God's children if we love God and obey his commandments. Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome. For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith. And who can win this battle against the world? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God"* (1 John 5:1-5). The Spirit of God who is in us is far more powerful than the forces of evil in the world around us. Through Him we can overcome our own sin and the evil around us. Be encouraged. Be strong and courageous. Keep the faith.

*O God of love, we pray that you would give us love:
love in our thinking,
love in our speaking,
love in our doing,
and love in the hidden places of our souls;
love of our neighbors near and far;
love of our friends, old and new;
love of those with whom we find it hard to bear,
and love of those who find it hard to bear with us;
love of those with whom we work,
and love of those with whom we take our ease;
love in joy,
love in sorrow;
love in life
and love in death;
that so, at length, we may be worthy to dwell with you,
you who are eternal love.
Amen.*

William Temple (1881-1944)

Thursday, December 1: Matthew 1:1-17

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

We often skip these genealogies. Their names mean nothing to us. But these people, each of them insignificant at one level, had critical God-given roles in history. So do you, even though not many people may know or recognize your name. God works through all kinds of people with all kinds of issues:

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

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

Sometimes it seems like history is out of God's control. Governments and leaders seem to ignore or actively oppose God and His values. Good people become corrupted by power and compromise their convictions. In Jewish history, for generation after generation, it seemed like bad thing after bad thing was happening. But God is still able to accomplish His purposes. We need to remember that God still is in control in our world. God works in history, in spite of wretches who lie, cheat, and make rotten decisions. Isn't that good news?

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

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

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

*Lord, because you have made me, I owe you the whole of my love;
because you have redeemed me, I owe you the whole of myself;
because you have promised so much, I owe you my whole being.
Moreover, I owe you as much more love than myself as you are greater than I,
for whom you gave yourself and to whom you promised yourself.
I pray you, Lord, make me taste by love what I taste by knowledge;
let me know by love what I know by understanding.
I owe you more than my whole self, but I have no more,
and by myself I cannot render the whole of it to you.
Draw me to you, Lord, in the fullness of your love.
I am wholly yours by creation; make me all yours, too, in love.
Amen*

Anselm (1033-1109)

Friday, December 2: Matthew 1:18-25

My Bible titles this section, "Good News for Joseph." (These subtitles in our Bible are modern additions, not in the original). It isn't really good news for Joseph though, is it? His fiancée is pregnant, mysteriously. His upcoming marriage should be off. It was unthinkable to marry a lady, pregnant, one must assume, by another man. His life plans are unraveling quickly. Life, as he anticipated it, is over.

Joseph didn't want to expose **Mary** to public disgrace. Neither did **he** want to be the object of public scorn (in a small town, to have your fiancée pregnant by someone else? ... not good). No good news here.

This horrible situation requires the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit. God sends an angel to reassure Joseph. Actually, the angel who appears to Joseph says far more words to him than the angel who appears to Mary to announce her pregnancy (as we shall see in a few days). He quotes God's promises through the prophets to reassure Joseph all is well. I'm not sure if even this can be considered "good news" for Joseph. Give him credit: he is willing to go ahead and marry Mary. But I'm sure tongues are wagging all over Nazareth. And I'm sure his emotions are all over the place as well.

There are times in our lives when there doesn't seem to be much "good news" either. Things seem to be falling apart. The news is more bad than good.

God calls us to be faithful, to keep trusting in Him, to carry on, even though we cannot see a happy ending. The Holy Spirit will help us carry on even through the most confusing, disappointing, and challenging times.

Paul goes on: *"For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory. What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one – for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one – for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us"* (Romans 8:29-34).

Corrie Ten Boom, who survived a Nazi concentration camp, wrote, *"You may never know that JESUS is all you need, until JESUS is all you have."* Lord, help us have such faith ...

*We confess before you our blindness of heart,
our poverty of life,
our littleness,
our meanness,
and our sin.
We have not followed after Christ.
We have not given love to the loveless and lost.
Change our lives, O God.
Give us light that we may be light to those whose lives are darkened.
Give us life that we may be life-giving to those who are dying.
Help and uphold us when the temptations of the world press upon us.
Show us how we can serve you.
Open your will to us, that we may see serve you rightly.
Strengthen us when our hearts grow weak, and hope and faith flicker and fail within us.
Raise us when we fall.
Give us the power to stand.
Lnd us the guiding light of your cross, O Christ,
to lead us home where shadows are no more.
Amen.*

Lauchlan MacLean Watt (1867-1957)

Saturday, December 3: Matthew 2:1-12

One key theme in Matthew is that Jesus is King. He is the "*the shoot/branch from the stump of David's family*" (Isaiah 11:1) and "*heir to David's throne*" (Isaiah 11:10). Matthew is the only gospel writer who records the visit of the Magi – senior court officials, royal advisors, and kingmakers from the Parthian Empire. Such people would only come to honour a royal birth. Matthew wants his (Jewish, male) readers to know that Jesus is King. He is the long-awaited Messiah, King of the Jews, the Saviour promised in Isaiah 7, 9, and 11.

The Magi are not Jews. They are not even Romans. In fact, they are Medes from the Parthian Empire (formerly Persia/Babylon/Assyria). They had been deadly enemies of the Jews for generations. These are descendants of King Tiglath-pileser (to whom Ahaz sold his soul). The Magi are heirs of the people who sacked Jerusalem under King Nebuchadnezzar and took the Jews into captivity in Babylon (Jeremiah, Daniel, etc). At the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman Empire (which included Israel) was at war with the Parthians. (The former Parthian kingdom is modern-day Iran, and parts of Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan; there is still lots of conflict in that part of the world – pray for peace).

The Magi were priests of the Zoroastrian religion. They were personal advisors to the Parthian/Babylonian kings (for example, Nebuchadnezzar's key advisors were "*magi, sorcerers and astrologers*" [Daniel 2:2]). When a king died, the "cabinet" of magi chose the new monarch (not necessarily from father to son).

It is not surprising that Herod and everyone in Jerusalem are "*deeply disturbed*" (2:3) when these foreign priests/royal deputies/kingmakers, from their deadly enemy, arrive unannounced. This would be like three senior Al Qaeda officials arriving in Jerusalem, today, unannounced, asking to speak to a **new** (as yet unknown) Israeli Prime Minister. The present Prime Minister would be "disturbed," to put it mildly.

Herod, Rome's puppet-king, is further disturbed by their search for "*the one who has been born 'king of the Jews.'*" Herod calls himself "King of the Jews." This is treason at best, revolution or invasion at worst.

Today, however, let's focus on Herod and the Jewish leaders' reactions to the news of the Messiah's birth. They have been waiting for the arrival of this promised Messiah and King (so they say). They know the prophecies. Their fear of the Magi should turn to joy: the long-awaited King is born. Foreign leaders have come, in peace, to worship Him. Hope for a new and glorious, peaceful, future should fill them with elation.

What do Herod and the Jewish leaders do? Do **they** check out the news? No ... Why do you think they react as they do? What can we learn from their example? Do we ever do anything similar?

How do we sometimes miss Christ at Christmas? What can we do about it this year? How can we make sure we keep Jesus at the centre of our celebrations?

*Lord, increase my faith,
that I may embrace everything that is your will.
Lord, increase my faith,
that the mountain of difficulty may be removed.
Lord, increase my faith,
that I may never be at a loss for some creative action for you.
Lord, increase my faith,
that I may never be impatient or frustrated.
Lord, increase my faith,
that I may run to you in every situation.
Lord, increase my faith,
that I may trust you in seeming failure or defeat.
Lord, increase my faith,
that I may endure as seeing you who are visible only to the eye of faith.
Lord, fill me with faith, hope, and love, this day and always.
Amen.*

George Appleton (1902-1993)

Sunday, December 4: Matthew 2:1-12 (again)

Reread Matthew 2:1-12, this time focussing on the response of the Magi (rather than the Jewish leaders). What do they risk, coming to Jerusalem?

- They risk being killed as spies by the Romans/Jews.
- They risk being killed as traitors by their own people (for fraternizing with enemy).
- They risk having their belief system, Zoroastrianism, overturned.
- In so doing, they also risk their pampered, privileged, powerful status, and livelihood as priests and advisors to the Phraates V, king of kings of the Parthian Empire.

What does their obedience to their visions from God tell us about them?

When they do find Jesus, what is *their* response? Why do you think they react as they do?

What can we learn from their example? How can we worship Jesus, the true King of Kings, this Christmas?

Paul invites us to draw strength from our relationship with Jesus: *"Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ... No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.*

"I am convinced that 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 8:35-39). How can these verses encourage you, today?

Augustine, one of the early church leaders, wrote, *"The Magi didn't return to the Orient by the same route they arrived on. They returned 'by a different way.'* Learn from the past. *If you want to change your life, then change your way."* That is good wisdom to live by.

How do you need to change your way?

*Days of heavy clouds stifling the sunlight,
the world burdened by greyness and gloom ...
open my eyes, Lord, to the coming of your Light.
Lift the burden of darkness from our lives.
Chill-ness that seeps deep into bones,
hearts and spirits rigid with frost-hardness,
souls wrapped up against coldness and loneliness ...
open my soul, Lord, to the warmth of your coming.
Melt the hardness that keeps us from you and from each other.
Trees - branches bare against the steel skies,
stems crumpled under weight of frost - weight of snow,
last year's leaves - blackened and slippery underfoot -
nature oppressed by wintriness - yet resting - awaiting rebirth.
Come bursting into our wintriness with cheer and joy.
Assure us of your coming and your call to new life.
Assure us of your presence and peace.
Assure us of your comfort and strength,
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer for Advent

Monday, December 5: Psalm 2

Do you ever feel everyone's out to get you? Like the news is always bad news? Your situation is hopeless? I'm sure Joseph feels like that. I'm sure he feels like he's being unfairly targeted by everyone and everything evil ... until the angel encourages him. Psalm 2 is an encouragement to us when we feel under attack. This psalm, of course, is also prophetic, looking forward to the birth of the Messiah ("my Son"). Be encouraged. Ultimately no power and no person can stand against the power of God.

Through history people have tried to "kill" God. In the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche proudly proclaimed, "God is dead." He argued the idea of God was no longer a helpful source of morality, law, or order.

Karl Marx believed religion (and thus God) was the opiate of the people, keeping people in their pathetic circumstances by dulling their senses and keeping them euthanized. Marx believed if you improved people's economic situation then faith in God (whom Marx did not believe was real) would disappear.

Capitalist philosopher, Adam Smith, argued that religion inhibited capitalist growth, and kept people from maximizing their wealth. He refused to believe in God. Accumulating money would solve all the world's ills.

God isn't dead. God hasn't disappeared. Money isn't the answer. God is capable of surviving attacks from the Nietzsches, Marxes, and Adam Smiths of the world (who have long since died and faded away).

Christian educator, Thomas Groome, challenges us: *"All would-be Christians are invited in a specific manner to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. 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 is 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. Without such a conversion it cannot be embodied in social realities. This conversion is to be a constant turning toward God by turning toward our neighbor. Above all other demands the kingdom places on us the radical mandate of love as preached by Jesus."*

Our task is to *"serve the Lord with fear (reverence/awe/wonder)"* (Psalm 2:11). What does that mean for you? What opportunities, gifts, talents, or abilities has God given you?

*O my God, I know that you love me.
And I know that you want me to be joyful, safe and secure.
But sometimes it's so hard to find you in all my troubles.
I'm so worried, God.
Please help me find the support I need.
Please help me not to worry too much.
Please help me to be humble enough to accept help from others.
Please help me to stay away from the "what ifs" and the "if onlys."
Please help me to remember to help others, even when I still need help.
And please help me to trust in your loving kindness, your care and your grace.
Because I know that you love me, and you know that I love you.
And if all you want to give me right now is your love, please let that be enough for me.
Amen*

James Martin

Tuesday, December 6: Psalm 4

A devout Jewish man like Joseph knows the Scriptures inside out. The Psalms are his hymn book and his prayer book. He knows them by heart. I wonder if Psalm 4 was Joseph's prayer when he learned Mary was pregnant? Have you ever prayed words like Psalm 4:1? I have.

As you read through the psalm today, try to hear God speaking to you (through verses 3-5). Psalm 4:6-8 are

wonderful assurances of God's love even during those difficult times. Verse 8 is a wonderful bedtime prayer.

"Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet," notes Helen Keller. *"Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved."* I wish it were not that way. But Keller is right. It is often through the most difficult of times that we grow the most, spiritually.

- **Read Psalm 4.** Listen to what God is saying to you. Try to read slowly, attentively; gently listening to hear a word or phrase that is God's word for you this day.
- **"Ponder this in your heart."** Reflect on the Scripture. Turn it over in your mind. Memorize key phrases. "Ruminate" on it. Mull it over. What verse(s) speak to you?
- **Pray.** As God has spoken to you, personally, offer your life to God.
- **Rest.** Take a moment or two to thank God for transforming you through His word. Simply enjoy God's peace and presence. And take His truth with you into your day ...

*You who are over us,
you who are one of us,
you who are also within us,
may other people see you, in me, also.
May I prepare the way for you;
May I thank you for all that comes my way.
May I never forget the needs of others.
Keep me in your love,
in the same way that I should keep everyone in your love.
May everything in this, my being, be directed to your glory.
May I never despair.
For I am under your hand, and in you is all power and goodness.
Please give me a pure heart – that I may see you;
a humble heart – that I may hear you;
a heart of love – that I may serve you;
a heart of faith – that I may abide in you.
Amen.*

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961)

Wednesday, December 7: 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Advent is a time to look back on Christmas **Past**. But it's also a time to remember Jesus' second coming and reflect on *"How do I live today, in Christmas **Present**?"*

"Whether we are here in this body or away from this body, our goal is to please him," writes Paul (2 Corinthians 5:9). That is to be our goal. But how do we please God? Of course, we please God by responding to His love, by loving Him in return, in faith and trust. But how do we love Him in return?

- We believe that Jesus is God, Himself, come among us.
- We believe Jesus ultimately died on the cross for our sins and sinfulness, that we might be forgiven.
- We believe Jesus rose from the dead, victorious over death.

Those are all good things to believe. But we can believe all these intellectually and still not please God. Jesus said, *"If you love me, you will **obey** what I command"* (John 14:15, 23). Big themes in Scripture are we *"love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strengths"* and *"love our neighbours as ourselves"* in ways that transform how we live. We please God by following Him as Lord of our lives, through the power of – and in obedience to – the Holy Spirit. Joseph and Mary model this kind of life for us.

Jerry Bridges writes, *"Many Christians have what we might call a 'cultural holiness.' They adapt to the character and behaviour pattern of Christians around them. As the 'Christian' culture around them is more or less holy, so these Christians are more or less holy. But God has not called us to be like those around us. He has called us to be like Himself. Holiness is nothing less than conformity to the character of God."*

Let's be honest: some people claim to be "Christian" but certainly don't act like it or live out God's values (as we see during any election campaign). Most of our culture is not even nominally "Christian" anymore. So, if we live just like the culture around us, our lives may not look even remotely like the character of God.

Paradoxically, however, our lives are much more fulfilled and joyful when we do live in obedience to God's will and ways. Life is more satisfying when our lives are holistically integrated: when what we believe, what we say, and how we act are all in harmony with one another. We discover when we try to live as we were created to live, things go better with our souls (surprise?). May the Lord help us to live with the courage, integrity, faith, and calm confidence that Joseph models for us.

*Jesus, you set our feet upon the way
and sometimes where you lead, we do not like or understand.
Bless us with courage where the way is filled with dread or danger.
Bless us with graceful meetings when the way is lonely.
Bless us with good companions where the way demands a common cause.
Bless us with night vision when we travel in the dark.
Bless us with keen hearing when we have no sight,
to hear the reassuring sounds of fellow travelers.
Bless us with humour – we cannot travel lightly weighed down with gravity.
Bless us with humility to learn from those around us.
Bless us with decisiveness when we must move with speed.
Bless us with the rest to stretch and savour.
Bless us with love, given and received.
And most of all, bless us with your presence.
Bless us, lead us, love us, bring us home
bearing the gospel of life.
Amen.*

Kathy Galloway

Thursday, December 8: 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

What if you're only purpose in life is to have as much pleasure as possible till you die? To quote Solomon, "*Meaningless. Meaningless. Everything is meaningless.*" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Few of us would be that cynical about our lives (or anyone else's life). In theory, we don't believe life is so meaningless. We believe we have purpose. But, in practice, do we ever live as though life has no meaning and we have no greater purpose? 2 Corinthians 5 helps us think about these big questions. Why are we "*sent into the world by God*"?

Professor and theologian Henri Nouwen, after nearly two decades teaching at academic institutions including the University of Notre Dame, Yale Divinity School, and Harvard Divinity School, left academia to work with mentally and physically handicapped people at the L'Arche community in Richmond Hill, Ontario. Living in that community, Nouwen wrote, "*We seldom realize fully that we are sent to fulfill God-given tasks. We act as if we were simply dropped down in creation to entertain ourselves until we die. But we were sent into the world by God, just as Jesus was. Once we start living our lives with that conviction, we will soon know what we were sent to do.*" How does that observation move you?

Joseph, Mary, Jesus ... they all have important, God-given tasks in the history of God's Kingdom. Joseph and Mary never really understand all this means (Joseph apparently dies too young to see Jesus' adult ministry). Mary's task – being pregnant before she is married – puts her in a life-threatening situation. She could never have anticipated what was in store for her or for her Son. Jesus will face hardship, opposition, persecution, betrayal, miscarriages of justice, brutal abuse, torture, and a horrific death.

- **Read 2 Corinthians 5:11-21.** Listen to what God is saying to you. Try to read slowly, attentively; gently listening to hear a word or phrase that is God's word for you this day.
- **"Ponder this in your heart."** Reflect on the Scripture. Turn it over in your mind. Memorize key phrases. "Ruminate" on it. Mull it over. What verse(s) speak to you?

- **Pray.** As God has spoken to you, personally, offer your life to God.
- **Rest.** Thank God for transforming you through His word. Simply enjoy God's peace and presence. And take His truth with you into your day ...

*Let the healing grace of your love, O Lord, so transform me
that I may play my part in the transformation of the world
from a place of suffering, death, and corruption,
to a realm of infinite light, joy, and love.
Make me so obedient to your Spirit
that my life may become a living prayer,
and a witness to Your unfailing presence.
Amen.*

Martin Israel (1927-2007)

Friday, December 9: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Life can be difficult. Chip Brogden writes, *"It is not a question of God allowing or not allowing things to happen. It is part of living. Some things we do to ourselves, other things we do to each other. Our Father knows about every bird which falls to the ground, but He does not always prevent it from falling. What are we to learn from this? That our response to what happens is more important than what happens. Here is a mystery: one man's experience drives him to curse God, while another man's identical experience drives him to bless God. Your response to what happens is more important than what happens."*

Our challenge is to live the life to which God has called us. It isn't easy. As Paul lists the struggles and hardships he has faced, he reminds us that Jesus never promises us luxury and ease. Jesus' life was certainly not a walk in the park. But the spiritual, emotional, and relational rewards that come with following Jesus more than make up for the hardships that may come along the way. When we follow Jesus, everything else comes into perspective.

Various translations of verse 1 go like this:

- *"We beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it."*
- *"We urge you not to receive God's grace in vain."*
- *"We beg you, please don't squander one bit of this marvelous life God has given us."*

Eugene Peterson translates 2 Corinthians 6:11-13 like this: *"Dear, dear friends, I can't tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn't fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren't small, but you're living them in a small way. I'm speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively."*

- What does a "small life" look like? How can we live in a "small way"?
- What does a "wide-open, spacious life" and an "open and expansive life" look like?

How can you live an open, spacious, large, expansive life?

*O God, early in the morning I cry to you.
Help me to pray and to concentrate my thoughts on you;
I cannot do this alone.
In me there is darkness, but with you there is light;
I am lonely, but you do not leave me;
I'm feeble in heart, but with you there is help;
I am restless, but with you there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience;
I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me.
Amen.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945, executed by the Nazis)

Saturday, December 10: Genesis 3:1-13 (and 1 John 1:5-9)

This may seem like an odd chapter to read as we prepare for Christmas. One of the themes that runs through the readings from Matthew (and, as we shall see, in Luke) is **FEAR**. Time and again, God says to us, "*Do not be afraid*" (or "*Fear not*"). Why are we so afraid? Sometimes we're afraid of God. Doesn't that seem odd? Why should we fear the One who created us? Who loved us so much He gave us His Son?

The first time "*being afraid*" or "*fear*" is mentioned in the Bible is in Genesis 3. Before the man and the woman deliberately disobeyed God and sinned, their relationship with God was so free and natural they had no fear of God or anything else. In fact, they LOVED being with God.

But their sinful action, their rebellion against God, changed that (Genesis 3). Now they are "*afraid*" of God (v.10). The natural, free, perfect relationship they enjoyed with their Creator was broken. They are afraid because they knew they'd done wrong; they didn't want to be found out; and they didn't want to know what the punishment/consequences might be. They sinned. They felt guilt. And with that came fear.

Are we ever "afraid" of God?

- Do we try to hide parts of our lives from Him? Why?
- Are we afraid obeying God will hurt us? (Does that make any sense?)
- Are we afraid God will find out our problems/mistakes? (Do we really think He doesn't already know?)
- Are we afraid how God will deal with our sin/problems? (How does He deal with them? 1 John 1:5-9)

The good news is that we NEVER need to fear God: He is good. And we certainly don't need to fear punishment: Jesus took our punishment on the cross, reversing the Pandora's Box of evil that Adam and Eve opened. That open, personal relationship with God the first people knew before the Fall is completely restored, through Jesus. We can speak directly with God through prayer about anything, anytime, anywhere. And one day, some day, we shall be with Him as personally as Adam and Eve, at their best, were.

Take some time to bring any things in your life that are blocking your relationship with God before Him. Confess them. Pray that He might give you His joy, driving out all fear. "*Fear is driven out by perfect love*" (1 John 4:18). God's perfect love, shown to us through Jesus.

*Lord may you give us all the courage that we need
to go the way you shepherd us.
When you call may we go.
Where you call may we go.
If you bid us come to yourself across the waters,
may we go un-frightened.
If you bid us climb a hill, may we not notice that it is a hill,
mindful only of the happiness of your company.
You made us for yourself that we should travel with you
and see you at the last in your unveiled beauty in the abiding city,
where you are light, and happiness, and endless home.
Journey with us.
Every step of the way.
All the way home.
Amen.*

Bede Jarrett 1881-1934

Sunday, December 11: Genesis 12

God's answer to the problems of the Fall described in the early chapters of Genesis (murder, unspeakable evil, arrogance, pride) was to call Abram to be blessed and to be a blessing to all nations.

Abram has every right to be afraid. First, he is called to leave his homeland, Haran, for a new country (he is

not told where). That journey, through unknown wilderness filled with who-knows-what-dangers to who-knows-where, would be a terrifying experience. He couldn't google map the route (if there even was one). He had no idea what the road was like, what the risks were, or even where he was going to end up.

Second, Abram, his family, and his flocks face the prospects of famine; that would be terrifying. But in both of those circumstances Abram seems to show no fear. The record simply says he followed God's leading, without questions, anxiety, or fear about the future. He simply obeys God, trusting Him completely. What a wonderful, peaceful, stress-free way to live. May God give me such a simple, sincere, trusting faith.

However, in the third instance, as the family arrives in Egypt, Abram's faith fails. Now he is terrified – to the point of allowing Pharaoh to have his wife. Apparently, even Abram has his "fear-threshold" (I actually find it encouraging that "saints" of the past had feet of clay; they weren't perfect. I can identify with their failures very well). What were the consequences of his decisions, made in fear? What can I learn?

God's great mission is to bring ALL people to faith and to new life in Himself (a restoration of the old Adam-and-Eve-pre-sin-life for which we were created). Our God is a missionary God, always reaching out to all people with His love. He calls Abram to be part of that mission by being a blessing to others. When Abram walks in that calling and confidence, he is unafraid: he knows God is with him and all goes well. When Abram loses sight of God's call and care (in Egypt), he gets himself into trouble. *"All we have – ourselves – we give to Him, and if that be all, that is enough"* (Watchman Nee): that sounds great. But it is so hard to live out.

God's call to us is to "be a blessing" to others as well. When we make that our aim, we need have no fear. To whom can you be a blessing? Lord, give us Your confidence to walk through the uncertain futures of our life unafraid: *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Romans 8:31).

*God of the high and holy places,
where I catch a glimpse of your glory, above the low levels of life,
above the evil and emptiness which drags me down,
beyond the limits of my senses and imagination,
you lift me up.
In the splendor of a sunset, in the silence of the stars,
in the grandeur of the mountains, in the vastness of the sea,
you lift me up.
In the majesty of music, in the mystery of art,
in the freshness of the morning, in the fragrance of a single flower,
you lift me up.
Awe-inspiring God, when I am lost in wonder and lost for words,
receive the homage of my silent worship
but do not let me be content to bear your beauty and be still.
Go with me to the places where I live and work.
Lift the veil of reticence behind which I hide.
Give me the courage to speak of the things which move me,
with simple and unself-conscious delight.
Help me to share my glimpses of glory until others are drawn to your light.
Amen.*

Jean Mortimer

Monday, December 12: Genesis 15

If you haven't already noticed, we're focusing this week on "fear" and God's refrain, over and over again, *"Do not be afraid ..."* Notice how God greets Abram (verse 1). These same words of greeting (with minor variations) are repeated to God's people time and time again. This blessing in v.1 is the same blessing God speaks to you. He is your shield and your reward (see Psalm 18).

There is a wonderful paradox about Abram, however. On the one hand, *"Abram believed the Lord ..."* (v.6). On the other hand, he asks, *"How can I be sure ...?"* (v.8). It is wonderful because I vacillate just as Abram

did. In my better moments I trust God. In my weaker moments I doubt His power and provision, too.

How did God handle Abram's doubts? Did God get angry and blast him? Did God tell him off? Did God give up on Abram? Did God choose someone else? No, God gives Abram assurance ...

Be encouraged. God is your shield and strength. But even in your struggles, know that God can handle your doubts. He will love you and care for you even through those times when you struggle with His care (those times when, as one friend said, "I feel like I have a sign on my back saying, 'God, kick me'"). He will not give up on you. Though we cannot know the future, we can trust the God who was, and is, and is to come.

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference"(Reinhold Niebuhr).

*Oh Lord, give us yourself above all things.
It is only in your coming that we are enriched.
It is in your coming that your true gifts come.
Come, Lord, that we may share the gifts of your presence.
Come, Lord, with healing of the past.
Come and calm our memories.
Come with joy for the present.
Come and give life to our existence.
Come with hope for the future.
Come and give a sense of eternity.
Come with strength for our wills.
Come with power for our thoughts.
Come with love for our heart.
Come and give care to our soul.
Come, Lord, give yourself above all things
and help us to give ourselves to you.
Amen.*

David Adam

Tuesday, December 13: Mark 1:1-15

As we prepare for Christmas, we are in the season of "Advent" (from a Latin word meaning "Coming"). We anticipate celebrating Jesus' birth and we look forward to His return. **Matthew** writes for a Jewish audience. Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the royal heir of David (in his genealogy and in the visit of the Magi). Matthew shows us Jesus as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies, and as the long-awaited Messiah, faithfully observing Jewish feasts and following Jewish traditions. He helps us deal with our **fears** as well.

Mark doesn't mention Christmas at all. We need another chapter – Mark 0 – that tells us Mark's version of Jesus' conception and birth. But it doesn't exist. Why is this?

While we love the stories of Jesus' nativity, the **purpose** of Jesus' incarnation was not to be a cute, cuddly baby. The **reason** Jesus was born was to be the Messiah, the Saviour, the King. Mark, the shortest and most concise of the gospels, is in a hurry to get on to the "good stuff" – Jesus' life and mission.

In Mark, Jesus strides onto the scene fully grown, beginning His public ministry, announcing, *"The time promised by God has come at last. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent of your sins and believe the Good News."*(1:15). This is the good news, the reason/purpose Jesus has come among us.

As Christians we can get annoyed at the commercialization of Christmas. We can get frustrated with the focus on Santa and gift-giving and -getting. We can lament that many people miss "the reason for the season."

But when our "Christian Christmas" is only about the birth of a baby in the manger, with no discussion of the bigger purpose for **WHY** Jesus was born, we do little better than the secular world around us. We may feel

we're being true to the real meaning of Christmas, but Christmas is about far more than the birth of a baby. Simply celebrating Baby Jesus is not good enough. That's just the beginning of a bigger story.

Christmas is really about the fact that the King has come. And nothing has been the same since.

The challenge for us, through Advent and Christmas, is to help a hurting, broken, troubled world that there is Good News. The Saviour of the world has come. The One who saves us from sin has come. The One who is always with us so we don't need to fear, has come. The One who gives us purpose, meaning, and passion to life – to love God and to love our neighbour – has come. The One who give us a true and full life has come.

How is the real message of Christmas – the King has come – Good News?

*O come, Holy Spirit, and inflame my heart,
set it on fire with love.
Burn away my self-centeredness so that I can love unselfishly.
Breathe your life-giving breath into my soul
so I can live freely and joyously, unrestricted by self-consciousness,
and may be ready to go wherever you may send me.
Come like a gentle breeze, give me your still peace
so that I may be quiet and know the wonder of your presence,
and help diffuse it in the world.
Never let me shut you out.
Never let me try to limit you to my capacity.
Act freely in me and through me.
Never leave me, O Lord and giver of life.
Amen.*

Michael Hollings & Etta Gullick

Wednesday, December 14: Luke 1:1-25

As we move through "Advent" (from a Latin word meaning "Coming"), we anticipate celebrating Jesus' birth and we look forward to His return. Today we begin looking at Advent/Christmas according to **Luke**.

- **Matthew** writes for a Jewish audience. Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the royal heir of David (in his genealogy and in the visit of the Magi). He shows us Jesus as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies, and as the long-awaited Messiah, faithfully observing Jewish feasts and traditions. Jesus is the reason we do not need to be afraid.
- **Mark** never mentions Jesus' birth (remember Mark 0, the non-existent chapter). He rushes on to Jesus' ministry. The King has come. What Jesus says and does as an adult are what matter.
- **Luke** is a Gentile (non-Jewish) doctor, writing to another non-Jew, Theophilus (whose name literally means, "One who loves God"). Luke omits or explains some of the more Jewish-y details that fascinate Matthew. And, as an "outsider" himself, he gives us details about other "outsiders" and ordinary people. Luke tells us about Mary (women had no legal status in Israel; Matthew ignored her) and shepherds (the lowest of the low). No Magi, no kings. Throughout Luke's gospel, he tells us about the non-Jews, sick, outcasts, and other marginalized people – ordinary people, like us.

We celebrate Christmas as "*good news of great joy for all people.*" As the events of the first Christmas begin to unfold, however, things seem to be more mixed blessings. I'm sure Zechariah and Elizabeth are thrilled to be anticipating a baby. Or maybe not (look at their ages)? I don't get the sense Zechariah is over the moon about the prospect of being a senior citizen father to a child who will be filled with Spirit from birth (even if it is the Holy Spirit). Zechariah's muteness was certainly NOT good news for him for nine months (although Elizabeth may have enjoyed it).

Sometimes we get surprised by things we never expected. It may NOT be a longed for, unplanned pregnancy in your senior years. But life has all sorts of surprises that are good news (at one level) and not-so-good news (at another level). How do we handle surprises?

As we look toward the future, how do we feel? Are we excited? Tentative? Worried? Like Zechariah:

- Do we doubt God's power? Can God really accomplish this?
- Do we doubt God's goodness? How can this really be a good thing?

Theologian, Paul Tillich wrote, "*Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.*" Our doubts, as we work through them and wait for God's work in our lives to come to pass, can help us grow in faith.

One wise pundit has said, "*Faith is not about everything turning out OK ... faith is about being 'OK' no matter how things turn out.*" As we wait and watch God's hand at work, our faith grows for the future.

*Lord, here we are, out of breath,
out of courage, and almost out of hope.
Caught between the infinity of our desires
and the limitations of our means.
We're tossed about, torn,
pulled here and pulled there, confused, and exhausted.
So, Lord, here we are, finally still, and finally ready to listen.
You have seen our dissatisfaction make us suffer.
You have seen our fear lead us astray in choosing our commitments.
You have seen us afraid of doing too little.
You have seen us afraid of doing too much.
Lord, make us strong enough to do what we should do –
calmly, simply, without wanting to do it all ourselves.
Lord, make us humble in our wish and our will to serve.
Help us above all to find you in our commitments,
for you are the single love in all our loves, in all our efforts.
You are the wellspring, and all things are drawn from you and to you.
So, we come before you Lord, to rest,
to gather our strength,
and to go out to serve.
Amen.*

Michelle Gloucester

Thursday, December 15: Luke 1:26-38

Mary, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, receives some good – and disturbing – news. Mary is "*greatly troubled*" by the angel's greeting and even more confused by the angel's message. For good reason. She is not married. And she will soon be obviously pregnant. What are the probable consequences? People will have to assume she has had a sexual relationship with a man. Pregnancy only happens through sexual activity. 1st Century Israel was not the accepting, "It's-all-OK-sexual-morality-culture" of 21st Century Canada. In traditional Jewish culture, if a woman were to become pregnant before marriage:

- Joseph (her fiancé) would have to break the engagement (to protect *his* reputation).
- At worst she could be stoned (the traditional Jewish punishment for a sexual relationship outside of marriage – although the (pagan) Romans frowned on such things).
- Labelled an "immoral woman," she would have no prospects for marriage, work, or a future.
- She could only anticipate a hard life of shame, eking out a living, begging, as best as she could.

These are very serious consequences for a young woman, probably in her mid- to late- teens.

Have you noticed that Mary's parents are never mentioned? Are they no longer alive? Is she an orphan, to boot? We don't know, but it is a distinct possibility.

Consider Mary's final response to God's call. What a wonderful expression of faith in God. (Though she will

face very tough times, do you think she ever really, in her heart, regrets her obedience?)

God asks us to make Him the centre of our lives. That may challenge us, too. It may challenge us to move out of our comfort zone. It may lead us into challenging situations.

He asks us to "*seek first His Kingdom,*" meaning we make Him the guide to our priorities, decisions, moral choices, ethics, lifestyles, financial choices, recreational plans, time commitments, etc., etc. (Matthew 6:33). Sometimes that might be "troubling" for us, too. What if God turns our world upside down?

What is your response to God's call ... will you put your faith so completely in God's goodness? (There may be tough times, but you will never really regret your obedience). John Ortberg writes, "*For many of us the great danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it.*" Lord, give us the courage to really believe.

*Help me, O God, to put off all pretences and to find my true self.
Help me, O God, to discard all false pictures of you,
whatever the cost to my comfort.
Help me, O God, to let go of all my problems,
and fix my mind on you.
Help me, O God, to see my own sins,
never to judge my neighbor,
and may all the glory be yours.
Into your hands I commend my spirit.
Your will, not mine, be done.
Amen.*

Anthony Bloom (1914-2003)

Friday, December 16: Luke 1:39-56

Given the potential consequences and emotional (dis)stress of Mary's very unplanned pregnancy, it's not surprising she gets out of Nazareth (a very small town) for a while. This is not a tolerant culture for an unwed mom. She could be stoned to death. She will be ostracized. She will have to beg for a lifetime.

Her trip to her older relative, Elizabeth, may be another indication that she doesn't have parental support in Nazareth: Elizabeth may be the closest thing she has to a "Mom."

Isn't it great Elizabeth receives her so warmly? (Elizabeth could easily have been appalled by Mary's pregnancy and pushed her away. After all, what would the "good" religious neighbours say?)

We assume God somehow reveals His plans for Mary to Elizabeth. Perhaps Mary had sent a letter (although it was unlikely Mary or Elizabeth would have been able to read). More likely God somehow revealed His plan through an angel, vision, or dream. What matters is Elizabeth **acts** in love. She warmly welcomes Mary.

In this case, of course, Mary's pregnancy is essential to God's purpose. But that is often not the case. Many of those we come across whose lives are a mess (family, friends, neighbours) are NOT in their situation because it's God's plan at all. Their problems are the result of unfortunate circumstances or their own decisions. What do we do? Can we act in love, even when people's lives are messy?

How would Jesus act? Think about the story of the prodigal son ([Luke 15:11-32](#)): how does the Father (God) react to prodigals? How then should we respond to people in crisis?

Someone said, "*Love doesn't give a person what they deserve, but what they need.*" May we love like that.

Mary's song is a wonderful reflection of God's love for all people. God loves us, not because we deserve it but because we need it. Spend some time with this song.

*God our Father, God beyond us, we adore you.
You are the depth of all that is.
You are the ground of our being.
We can never grasp you, yet you grasp us;
and your love comes to us through Jesus.
God the Son, God beside us, we adore you.
You are the perfection of humanity.
You have shown us what human life should be like.
In you we see divine love and human greatness combined.
God the Spirit, God around us, we adore you.
You draw us to Jesus and the Father.
You are power within us. You give us abundant life
and can make us the men and women we are meant to be.
Father, Son, and Spirit – God, beyond, beside and around us –
we adore you. Amen.*

Caryl Micklem

Saturday, December 17: Luke 1:57-80

Despite Zechariah's initial disbelief, when he regains his speech, he celebrates God's power and promises. John is just a newborn infant, yet Zechariah believes great things for him. Of course, God has promised such wonders (Luke 1:13-17). But it would be difficult to really believe that they will come to pass when you are holding a helpless, crying newborn in your arms.

God has unique possibilities for each one of us. Sometimes we struggle to believe that. What could I possibly contribute? So many years have been wasted ... I am still so imperfect ... I have little to offer ... We may never know how God has used us in the past (perhaps unwittingly), can use us today, or may use us tomorrow. Our challenge is to pray, each day, asking God to help us do some Kingdom-act-of-grace or say some Kingdom-word-of-encouragement – today. If you see an opportunity to act in love – do it.

Don't compare yourself to anyone else. Simply ask God how you can do some little thing, today.

Frank Doyle writes, *"One of the chief dead-ends in developing my spiritual life is to want to have someone else's spiritual life. If, for instance, I see a religious program on TV, I may find myself thinking, 'I wish I could pray like them.' But if I am a schoolteacher, or an accountant, or looking after my children all day, then that rhythm of prayer may just not be suited to me. 'Pray as you can, not as you can't' is an obvious maxim, but one that is frequently overlooked, leading to a lot of unrealistic expectations, and frustration.*

"Finding my own rhythm, a way of praying that suits me, may involve some experimentation with times and places and with different styles and approaches. At times I will need to persevere and not give up on something too easily. I also need, however, to be prepared to say, 'This doesn't work for me.' Finding a way of praying I can sustain is an important step in developing my relationship with God."

Pray that God will help you find a rhythm of relationship that works really well – for you.

*Lord Jesus Christ, alive and at large in the world,
help me to follow and find you there today,
in the places where I work and meet people,
in the places where I spend money and make plans.
Take me as a disciple of your kingdom,
to see through your eyes,
and hear the questions you're asking,
to welcome all others with your trust in truth,
and to change the things that contradict God's love,
by the power of the cross and the freedom of your Spirit.
Amen.*

John Taylor

Sunday, December 18: Luke 2:1-7

The heart of our faith is Jesus. We know about God by looking at Jesus (*"He who has seen me has seen the Father"*). Think about how much the Jews did NOT know about God in the days before Jesus. While we do learn much about God through the Old Testament (the Jewish Bible), our knowledge of Him is SO much richer because He has chosen to reveal Himself as a human being – Jesus.

Jesus shows us what God is like in a language we can really understand – being human.

This is really Good News, isn't it? God is not some remote being we read about philosophically. He is not an abstract metaphysical premise. He is not an illusion, created in our image. God Himself has come to earth, lived a life like ours, and revealed what He Himself is truly like in terms we can understand. He has given His life for us and overcome death. And He now lives within us, as the Holy Spirit.

We can face our own lives and challenges with confidence, knowing we have a God who loves us. We have a God who understands us and our experiences. We have a God who models for us how we ought to live. WE have a God who guides us. This is all great news. This is life transforming news:

- You are dearly loved.
- God cares for you and understands you.
- He saves us from the power of sin and death.
- He calls you to live like Jesus, in a free and open relationship with God through the Spirit.
- One day, some day, you will be with Him.

The tragedy of Luke 2:1-7 is that nearly everyone missed the Messiah's arrival. The tragedy back then was most people also missed the good news of His life, death, and resurrection.

The tragedy then – as now – is that most people miss the incredible transformational power that knowing Jesus can bring about. Most people miss the good news of love and life through Jesus. They miss the call to belong to the family of God. To have their lives matter. And they miss the future hope of being with Him.

Jesus desires to come into every part of your life to transform it to be more like Him: *"to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires"* (2 Peter 1:4).

Will I give Him my time? Talents? Treasures? Decisions? Or just loan Him the stables of my life?

*O God, it is easy to love the whole world,
but hard to love the person I work next to;
O God, it is the easy to wish for world peace,
but hard to contribute to peace within my own home;
O God, it is easy to be fascinated with some new truth,
and miss you in the things I've known so long;
O God, it is easy to share my home and possessions with people I like;
teach me how to be generous towards others.
Enable me to say something, or do something to make a difference
to the discouraged, to the inexperienced, to the despairing.
Let no selfish concern of my own shut me off from anyone needing love today.
For your love's sake.
Amen*

Rita Snowden

Monday, December 19: Luke 2:8-20

Lethbridge is all decorated for Christmas. Park Place Mall and all the other stores are awash in Christmas. Why, then, doesn't everyone understand the Good News about Jesus?

The country shepherds understand something of the significance of Jesus' birth, even if the residents of Bethlehem don't. Shepherds were among the lowest of the low of Jewish society – right down there with sinners and tax collectors. They were considered "unclean" by decent Jewish people. They were not welcome in town. They were not to be seen and not to be heard (not to be smelled probably wasn't an option ☺). They were to stay way out in the fields where they belonged, away from decent people.

Isn't it interesting how, from the beginning, Jesus is known by the least reputable people while "respectable" people don't recognize Him?

Why is that? Why do the "good" people in the gospels have such a hard time seeing Jesus for who He is, the Messiah, God among us? Why do some of the poor and outcasts (the shepherds, sinners, tax collectors, lepers, foreigners) seem to be able to understand more fully who He is?

What is the challenge of this in our culture? Why is it so hard for so many people in Canadian communities to really see Jesus for who He is? Why do people in some poorer nations (for instance parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America where Christianity is exploding) seem to be able to recognize Him, know Him, and follow Him more easily than those of us in wealthy countries, like Canada, do?

- Pray for yourself – that you might worship Jesus for who He is – God among us, to save us, renew us, and change us to be more and more like Himself.
- Pray for those you know and care for who do not yet know Him – or who struggle to know Him – that they may come to know and worship Him, too.
- Pray that Christmas would not just be a fun time of family, friends, food, and festivities – but a time to meet Jesus – our Saviour, our King, and our Master. That's cause for an amazing celebration.

*Lord Jesus, Lord of the harvest,
all around us are men and women, boys and girls
who do not know you, whose sins are unforgiven and
whose lives lack true meaning and purpose.
Have mercy on them and awaken us to their need.*

*May we as a church and as individuals reach out to them in love
with the message of the gospel –
that Jesus Christ died for their sins and rose again
that they and we might have new life and hope for eternity,
freed from guilt and the fear of death.*

*In the power of your Holy Spirit,
may we do this in many right and appropriate ways,
devoting to the task our personal,
financial and creative resources –
our love, our time, our energy and our priorities.*

*Make us a generous and open community,
loving and serving both old friends and newcomers,
So that Jesus may be glorified and
Many souls added to His kingdom.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

New South Wales Churches

Tuesday, December 20: Luke 2:21-35

Charles Haddon Spurgeon writes, "*Rejoice, you who feel that you are lost; your Savior comes to seek and save you. Be of good cheer, you who are in prison, for he comes to set you free. You, who are famished and ready to die, rejoice that he has come to be the Bread of Life to your souls. Rejoice, O sinners everywhere, for the restorer of the castaways, the Savior of the fallen, is born.*"

According to Jewish law a woman became ceremonially unclean on the birth of the child. On the eighth day the child was circumcised and officially named, after which the mother was unclean an additional 33 days – 66 if the child was a girl (why the gender difference? Who knows?). After this, the mother offered a sacrifice – a lamb or, if she was poor, two doves or two young pigeons. What did Mary and Joseph bring? What do we learn about them? In addition, the first son was to be presented to the Lord and then, so to speak, bought back with an offering. Luke emphasizes Jesus' infancy followed all the Old Testament obligations.

These traditions seem strange to us. In Judaism, circumcision, purification rituals, and offerings recognize the inherent sinful nature in all of us. Jesus, of course, was sinless. But from the very beginning He identifies with our very human condition (**we ALL** do sin) by going through these purification ceremonies. Later Jesus would be baptized by John, too, not because He had sinned, but to identify with us in our sinfulness.

We have a Saviour who knows what it is like to be human. He knows what it is like to be tempted, to hunger, to thirst, to get frustrated, to be angry, to hurt, etc. Yet He did not sin. As we begin to look toward a new year, may He help us to "not sin": *"Lord, don't let me yield to temptation, but rescue me from the evil one."*

Simeon waited for the Messiah, who would come as God breaking into human history in his own way, not as a conquering warlord. Simeon lived a life of constant prayer and quiet watchfulness. Here we have the amazing moment of recognition as he embraces the baby. His long wait is over.

Mary and Joseph are amazed at Simeon's words. They do not just nod their heads and say, *"That's just what we expected."* Like all mothers, Mary knows her precious baby is unique. But she is only gradually discovering what that might mean, in His life and in hers. It is only as we continue to live with Jesus and allow Him to fill more and more of our lives that we discover more and more of who He is.

*O God, save me from myself, save me from myself;
this frivolous self which plays with your creation,
this frivolous self which is clever about your creation,
this masterful self which manipulates your creation,
this greedy self which exploits your creation,
this lazy self which soothes itself with your creation;
this self which throws the thick shadow of its own purposes and desires
in every direction in which I try to look,
so that I cannot see what it is that you,
my Lord and God, are showing to me.
Teach me to stand out of my own light, and let your daylight shine.
Amen.*

Austin Farrer (1904-1968)

Wednesday, December 21: Luke 2:36-39; 1 Corinthians 13

Simeon used striking words when he declared Jesus was destined *"to cause the falling and rising of many."* Jesus is the Inescapable One. Sooner or later each of us must decide about Him. We must choose for Him or against Him. What matters to God isn't "doing good" or "being a good person": what really matters is our attitude towards Jesus (though believing in Jesus **SHOULD** result in a good life). What Anna knows is Jesus doesn't want a grudging, *"OK, so I guess I'd say I believe in Jesus."* Anna shows us the kind of relationship Jesus wants with us, one of humble, faithful devotion and love.

Anna had lived to a great age. All we know of her is this moment of recognition and blessing. As Anna takes the baby in her arms and her eyes light up, how Mary must have warmed to her. When we humble ourselves – in wonder, adoration, worship, obedience, and love – He raises us up to new life. Lord, give us that grace of quiet prayer, and of recognising you when you show yourself to us.

Anna was a woman who loved speaking with God every day. Someone once said, *"They pray best together who first pray alone."* Our private prayer gives us equilibrium. The time we spend sitting at the Lord's feet –

listening to Him and sharing with Him – saves us from bitterness in the hard times of our life. Lord, help us love you with the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

May we spend time in prayer with you, reconnect with you, and be filled with your love, peace, hope, and joy.

*God of all faithfulness, we are a big and messy family;
both as humans – and in my own family.
Help me today to be especially patient and loving,
and to forgive those who have hurt me.
Sometimes I forget the sacredness of our family life
and the privilege it is to be together in this bond.
Help me not only love others as you love us,
but to be more aware of those families in the world
who struggle so much with poverty, war and disease.
Help me to pray with and for them today
and to carry an awareness of all families fleeing for safety,
longing for the peace you offer to us all.
May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil
and bring us to everlasting life.
Amen.*

Creighton University

Thursday, December 22: Psalm 71

This psalm may be the reflections of an older person, like Simeon or Anna. The author is certainly a person who knows Scripture. He can look back on God's provision and protection since birth (vs.5–8), even though life has not been easy. It's a psalm for real life.

Like all God's people in Old Testament times, the author of Psalm 71 sees the good and the bad in life as under the ultimate lordship of God (v.20). Still the pressures of life and taunts of his enemies (v.11) cause him to doubt, and to pray God will not cast him off (vs. 9, 18). God promised both his Old Testament saints and his New Testament saints – and us – that he never forsakes them – or us ([Deuteronomy 31:6](#); [Hebrews 13:5](#)). But even the best of us may sometimes doubt. We can all struggle.

The author of Psalm 71 is also a person who sees purpose in old age. Those along in years are not useless. In fact, they have an essential responsibility: to declare God's love and power to the next generations. Those who have experienced God's provision for a lifetime can encourage those starting out on life's journey. Whatever our age, there are opportunities to build up and empower those spiritually younger than we are.

Your challenge for today is to

- let your mind be filled with Scripture
- trust in God's provision
- share your experience with others
- build into the lives of others

*Lord, your harvest is the harvest of love;
love sown in the hearts of people;
love that spreads out like the branches of a great tree
covering all who seek its shelter;
love that inspires and re-creates;
love that is planted in the weak
and the weary, the sick and dying.
The harvest of your love is the life that reaches through
the weeds of sin and death to the sunlight of resurrection.
Lord, nurture my days with your love,
water my soul with the dew of forgiveness,
that the harvest of my life might be your joy.
Amen.*

Frank Topping

Friday, December 23: Psalm 78:1-16

In the “pre-calculators-are-allowed-in-school” days, we memorized multiplication tables by saying them over and over and over again until they were drilled into our heads. The “times tables” took on almost a musical chant-like rhythm that still haunts me day and night. This psalm was written for much the same purpose. For a population who were largely illiterate, “singing history” was a great way of learning.

“Hear my teaching,” says the psalmist (v.1); remember *“what our ancestors have told us”* (v.3); pass it on to your children (v.4). In this way the generations learned about how God had brought their ancestors out of Egypt and molded them into a nation.

Before the account of what God has done, which starts at verse 9 (and continues for the rest of the 72 verses), the psalmist urges obedience to God’s laws – obedience that comes from gratitude to God because of his mighty deeds of deliverance (v.7).

“Faith comes from hearing” (Romans 10:17). Telling someone face-to-face about your own experience of God’s help and guidance in your life can be just as powerful as preaching. It doesn’t have to be “heavy” or over-earnest evangelism, just a chat over a drink or when you bump into someone you haven’t seen for a while. We owe it to God to tell others of his *“power, and the wonders he has done”* (v.4).

With whom can I share God’s love?

*O Lord: in a world where many are lonely:
we thank you for our friendships.
In the world where many are captives:
we thank you for our freedom.
In a world where many are hungry:
we thank you for your provision.
We pray that you will:
enlarge our sympathy,
deepen our compassion,
and give us grateful hearts.
In Christ’s name.
Amen.*

Rev. Terry Waite
(Hostage of Islamic Jihad from 1987-1991)

Saturday, December 24: John 1:1-5 Christmas Eve Services @ 6:00 (kids) and 7:00 (everyone)

John’s description of the birth of Jesus is dramatically different than that of either Matthew (Joseph’s story and the Magi) or Luke (Mary’s story and the shepherds) – Mark, of course, ignores Jesus’ birth completely.

John casts the birth of Jesus on the **BIG** stage of the cosmic drama of God's love for and redemption of all creation. Notice how similar John's opening words are to Genesis 1. John wants us to know that Jesus' coming – God's coming as a human being – is as significant as the creation of the universe itself.

This is a **BIG** deal. God is stepping into the time and space He created to redeem all of creation from the sin and death that resulted from Eve's and Adam's disobedience. God is coming into His creation to restore it to what it was before the mess of Genesis 3. He will renew our relationship with God – and one another – to the free, open, honest relationships we had BEFORE all the bad stuff happened. God is re-booting His cosmos.

"This is the wonder of all wonders," writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "that God loves the lowly ... God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken." This is Good News.

Spend some time with John 1:1-5, today:

- **Read the passage several times.** Listen to what God is saying to you. Try to read slowly, attentively; gently listening to hear a word or phrase that is God's word for you this day.
- **"Ponder this in your heart."** Reflect on the Scripture. Turn it over in your mind. Memorize key phrases. "Ruminate" on it. Mull it over. What verse(s) speak to you? Why? What is God saying?
- **Pray.** As God has spoken to you, personally, offer your life to God.
- **Rest.** Take a moment or two to thank God for transforming you through His word. Simply enjoy God's peace and presence. How can you live this truth today?

*Enter my heart, O Holy Spirit,
come in blessed mercy and set me free.
Throw open, O Lord, the locked doors of my mind;
cleanse the chambers of my thoughts for your dwelling:
light there the fires of your own holy brightness
in new understandings of truth.
O Holy Spirit, very God, whose presence is freedom,
grant me the perfect freedom to be your servant
today, tomorrow, and evermore.
Amen.*

Eric Milner-White (1884-1963)

Sunday, December 25: John 1:1-18 (only one service at 11:00, no 9:30 programmes)

"Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world – stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death – and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem two thousand years ago is the image and brightness of the Eternal Love? Then you can keep Christmas." (Henry Van Dyke)

"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" is how Eugene Peterson translates 1:14. Isn't that an interesting way to think about Christmas? God – in Jesus – is moving into your neighbourhood. *"We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish."*

Christmas really is a time to stand back in awe and wonder – and worship God, who has just happened to move in next door. He understands your life ... that is good news. And He invites you to care for your neighbour ... that is good news, too.

How can this passage help you appreciate Christmas more deeply this year?

*Loving Father, help us remember the birth of Jesus,
that we may share in the song of the angels,
the gladness of the shepherds,
and the wisdom of the wise men.
Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world.
Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting.
Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings
and teach us to be merry with clean hearts.
May Christmas morning make us happy to be your children
and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts,
forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake.
Amen.*

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

Monday, December 26: John 1:19-34

John skips immediately from reflecting on the mystery of Jesus' birth, God-becoming-one-of-us, to telling us exactly who He is so there is no confusion. John the Baptist wants us to understand Jesus' true identity:

- To the Jews, who does John say Jesus is (v.26-28)?
 - What do we learn about Jesus from this?
- As John meets Jesus, who does John say Jesus is (v.29)?
 - What do we learn about Jesus from this?
- As John continues, what more does he tell us about Jesus
 - In verses 30-31? What do we learn about Jesus from this?
 - In verses 32-34? What do we learn about Jesus from this?

Sometimes, at Christmas, we become so entranced with the baby-in-the-manger we forget who Jesus really is. Today, take some time to reflect, pray, and talk about the amazing truth that *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world"* has come. The Lamb of God who takes away my sins has come. And remember, too, that the Lamb of God who takes away all our sins is coming again. How should we then live?

*God, let me put right before interest.
Let me put others before self.
Let me put things of the Spirit before things of the body.
Let me put the attainment of noble ends
above the enjoyment of present pleasures.
Let me put principle above reputation.
Let me put prayer above busy-ness.
Let me put you before all else.
Amen.*

John Baillie (1886-1960)

Tuesday, December 27: Luke 2:40; Luke 14:1-14

"The child grew ..." That last sentence summarises 90% of Jesus' life. Most of Jesus' life is hidden. He grew strong and wise. It took time. He waited. We need to know it is good to live quietly, and to allow time to learn, to grow, to heal, and to develop our relationship with God. Sometimes we are so anxious to "make things happen," to "be someone," to "get ahead." We feel so much pressure to "get on with it," to succeed, to be the best. Maybe God is encouraging us to take time to slow down, to grow strong, to heal, and to become more wise. Maybe we need to reflect on what is REALLY important in life?

Parents feel so much pressure to see their kids achieve – athletically, creatively, academically – maybe kids need time just to grow *"in wisdom and stature, in favour with God and men."* What might that look like?

In Luke 14, Jesus encourages the Pharisees to learn wisdom (God's love and compassion are ALWAYS in season, even on the Sabbath). Jesus also encourages all of us to be humble – to be patient – to wait – to learn – to grow. Is this a time for you to grow stronger and wiser? How will that happen? Start today ...

*May the Lord support us all the day long,
till the shadows lengthen and the evening comes,
and the busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over, and our work is done.
Then in his mercy may he give us a safe lodging
and a holy rest, and peace at the last.
Amen.*

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Wednesday, December 28: Matthew 8:1-4

We have seen throughout this Fall and Advent/Christmas season that God wants ALL people to come to know Him. Jesus certainly models for us the missionary nature of God – reaching out to people of all backgrounds – even those “untouchables” in His culture, those with leprosy. Notice, Jesus did the unthinkable. He reached out and TOUCHED the man (v.3). Chances are no one had touched him in years or decades. For this person this is the greatest gift anyone could ever give him. Christmas – Christ's coming – comes to Him in the form of a Saviour who reaches out to touch him where he is, as he is ...

Who are the “lepers” in our world? In our community? (People who are outcast, forgotten, or avoided) God has a special place in His heart for these people. Time and time again, in both the Old and New Testaments, God's people are encouraged to show love to such people. How can we as a church reach out and make a difference in our community? How can I do that in my own life? (On a tangent, this kind of ministry – to those who are hurting the most – can be exhausting. How did Jesus “recharge His batteries” and keep focussed on the mission of God? What can I learn from Him?)

The good news is that we have a Saviour who reaches out to touch each of us where we are, as we are ... nothing we have done can keep His gift of love, forgiveness, and hope away from us. Will we allow Him to touch our lives? If we do, He we will never be the same again ... Can I handle that?

*Holy Father, God of our yesterdays, our today, and our tomorrows.
Thank You for the year behind us and for the year ahead.
Help us in Your new year, Father, to fret less and laugh more.
To teach our children to laugh by laughing with them.
To teach others to love by loving them.
Knowing, when Love came to the stable in Bethlehem, He came for us.
So that Love could be with us, and we could know You.
That we could share Love with others.
Help us, Father, to hear Your love song in every sunrise,
in the chirping of sparrows in our backyards,
in the stories of our old folks, and the fantasies of our children.
Help us to stop and listen to Your love songs,
so that we may know You better and better.
We rejoice in the world You loved into being.
Thank You for another new year and for new chances every day.
We pray for peace, for light, and for hope,
that we might spread them to others.
Forgive us for falling short this past year.
We leave the irreparable past in your hands,
and step out into the unknown new year knowing You will go with us.
We accept Your gift of a new year and we rejoice in what's ahead,
depending on You to help us do exactly what You want.
I say it again, we rejoice. Amen.*

Unknown

Thursday, December 29: Matthew 9:1-13

We can rejoice God has forgiven our sins. Sometimes, however, we forget that God can forgive other people's sins as easily as He has forgiven us. He wants to forgive other people as much as He wants to forgive us.

- God loves the foreigners (remember the Magi?) of our world. He calls us to love them, too.
- God loves the lepers and ill of our world. He calls us to love them, too.
- God loves the enemies – the Romans – of our world. He calls us to love them, too ([Matthew 8:5-13](#)).
- And God loves the sinners in our world. He calls us to love them, too ([Matthew 9:9-13](#)).

As a missionary, God, through His Spirit, is constantly calling people to repent and return to Himself. Maybe He is asking us to be His hands, feet, and voice, too, spreading His hope, joy, love, and peace this Christmas. Who can you bless with hope this season?

God challenges us to forgive others, as well.

- After the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), the only phrase Jesus chooses to elaborate upon is "*forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us*" (6:12). Directly after the prayer, Jesus adds, "*If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins*" (6:14-15).
- "*When you are praying,*" Jesus says, "*first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too*" (Mark 11:25).
- Peter asked, "*Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?*" Jesus answered, "*No, not seven times, but seventy times seven.*" (Matthew 18:21-22)

Pray for those you know who do not yet know Jesus as their Saviour. And pray for a forgiving spirit, that you can forgive others as God has forgiven you ...

*Why, O Lord, is it so hard for me to keep my heart directed towards you?
Why do the many little things I want to do,
and the many people I know,
keep crowding into my mind,
even during the hours I'm totally free to be with you and you alone?
Why does my mind wander off in so many directions?
And why does my heart desire the things that lead me astray?*

*Are you not enough for me?
Do I keep doubting your love and care, your mercy and grace?
Do I keep wondering, in the center of my being,
whether you will give me all I need if I just keep my eyes on you?
Please accept my distractions, my fatigue,
my irritations, and my faithless wanderings.
You know me more deeply and fully than I know myself.
You love me with a greater love than I can love myself.
You even offer me more than I desire.*

*Look at me, see me in all my misery and inner confusion,
and let me sense your presence in the midst of my turmoil.
The only thing you ask of me is not to hide from you,
not to run away and despair,
not to think of you as a relentless despot.
Take my tired body, my confused mind,
and my restless soul into your arms
and give me rest, simple quiet rest.
Come, Lord Jesus, come.
Amen.*

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996)

Friday, December 30: Colossians 1:1-14

As we look toward the New Year it is good to remember who we are, who Jesus is, and how we can live as His people in 2023.

Some people make being a follower of Jesus into something very complicated. They create all sorts of (official or unofficial) rules, regulations, doctrinal propositions, and technical requirements. We can create checklists of attitudes, convictions, behaviours, beliefs, and policies we think people need to sign assent to. But according to Paul it doesn't really seem all that complicated, does it?

- We are people of God's good news. What is this good news?
- How are we to live in response to God's good news?

Take a few deep breaths. Celebrate the wonder and simplicity of the good news.

Take a few more deep breaths. How is God inviting you to live as His disciple/follower this day?

Don't overcomplicate it. After all, we are simply being invited back to the life for which we were created (Genesis 3:8 describes a wonderful life of open relationship and fellowship with God). We are invited to be thankful for God's blessings and to live as a blessing to the people around us.

Lord, help us to live as your faithful followers today and every day ...

*Dear Lord, please give me...
A few friends who understand me and remain my friends;
A work to do which has real value,
without which the world would be the poorer;
A mind unafraid to travel,
even though the trail be not blazed;
An understanding heart;
A sense of humor;
Time for quiet, silent meditation;
A feeling of the presence of God;
The patience to wait for the coming of these things,
With the wisdom to recognize them when they come.
Amen.*

Anonymous

Saturday, December 31: Colossians 1:9-23

Frank Harrington writes, "*Renewal is rooted in faith, not in resolutions. Resolutions are made for New Year's and forgotten on an average of thirteen days later, say the surveys. Faith is the result of a decision about Christ. I cannot make a new me or a new you, but Christ can make you new and me new, as well, if we decide for Him.*"

In Colossians 1, Paul reminds us who Jesus is. As we have just come through the Advent/Christmas season, what phrases in Paul's description resonate with you (Colossians 1:15-20)?

As you begin a New Year, this Jesus will be with you, each and every day. How does this description of Jesus encourage you for 2023?

"You were once far away from God," comments Paul. *"You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand*

before him without a single fault. Continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News."

In Colossians 1:9-14, Paul prays for people just like us. What does he say in his prayer?

As we begin a New Year it is good to pray that we will:

- have a complete knowledge of his will.
- have spiritual wisdom and understanding.
- live in ways that always honor and please the Lord.
- produce every kind of good fruit.
- grow as we learn to know God better and better.
- be strengthened with all his glorious power
- have all the endurance and patience we need.
- be filled with joy, always thanking the Father.
- celebrate that we share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light.
- give thanks that He has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.
- know Jesus, the visible image of the invisible God (and know Him in terms of all the other wonderful descriptors in 1:15-20).
- know that we are holy and blameless as we stand before Him, thanks to Jesus.
- stand firm in our belief in this Good News.
- continue the work of sharing this Good News in all the world.

*Look upon us, O Lord,
and let all the darkness of our souls vanish
before the beams of your brightness.
Fill us with holy love,
and open to us the treasures of your wisdom.
You know all our desires;
make perfect what you have begun,
and what your Spirit has awakened us to ask in prayer.
We seek your face,
turn your face to us and show us your glory.
Then shall our longing be satisfied,
and our peace shall be perfect.
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

Sunday, January 1: Psalm 23 (only one service at 11:00, no 9:30 programmes)

We often read this psalm at funerals ... and at no other time. But it's a great psalm to read any day of the year and especially as we begin a New Year. It reminds us that

- God will give us rest (vs.1-3a) ... if we allow Him to;
- God will guide us (vs.3b) ... if we will follow His will and His lead;
- God will protect and strengthen us through all the times of life (vs.4-5a) ... if we walk with Him;
- God is with us and will bless us in unexpected ways (vs.5b-6) ... if we take time to notice.

What is it that you need most? Rest? Guidance? Strength? God's blessing and presence?

Slow down. Even stop for a few minutes. All these promises come to pass only when we spend time with, listen to, and commit ourselves to walking with Jesus.

This year, pray for a rhythm of life that allows you time to appreciate Jesus is with you, each moment. Know the Holy Spirit's presence, always. Enjoy the love of the Father, everywhere and everywhen (☺).

If you need to rearrange your schedule to make yourself spiritually healthy ... do it. Nothing will bring you more joy and satisfaction in the coming year than spending time with your Creator, Saviour, and Sustainer ...

Is joy, satisfaction, and meaning in life enough of an incentive for you to actually change things ...?

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I'm going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I'm actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you,
and I hope that I have that desire in all I'm doing.
I hope that I never do anything apart from that desire to please you.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore, I will trust you always.
Though I may seem to be lost in the shadow of death,
I will not fear
for you are with me
and you will never leave me to face any peril alone.
Amen.*

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)