

The background of the entire page is a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's 'Head of Christ' painting. It depicts the face of Jesus with his eyes closed, showing a serene and suffering expression. The texture of the painting is visible, with soft shading and fine details in the hair and skin.

January 2023

Jesus Changes Everything

Readings, Reflections, Prayers from Luke

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Leonardo Da Vinci, 'Head of Christ'

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Monday, January 2: Psalm 27

It's a New Year. Life is rushing on faster than ever before. Those of us who spend too much time reading the news are spending too much time reading the news. Things are changing all around us. I recently read, "*Culture never asks permission to change. It just changes.*" Where's the good news? Where's our hope? Not on CBC. Or CTV. Or CNN. Or Fox.

Psalm 27, though less well known than Psalm 23 (yesterday), is an encouragement for us as we begin 2023:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation – so why should I be afraid?
The Lord is my fortress, protecting me from danger, so why should I tremble?
When evil people come to devour me, when my enemies and foes attack me, they will stumble and fall.
Though a mighty army surrounds me, my heart will not be afraid.
Even if I am attacked, I will remain confident.*

Psalm 27 was one of Ruth Wyton's favourite psalms. Ruth was a wonderful member of our church, who passed away last September. A staunch friend, incorrigible encourager, and faithful prayer-warrior, she highlighted these verses in her notes:

*The one thing I ask of the Lord – the thing I seek most –
is to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
delighting in the Lord's perfections and meditating in his Temple ...
My heart has heard you say, "Come and talk with me."
And my heart responds, "Lord, I am coming."*

These are wonderful verses to reflect on for the year ahead. I need to prioritize my personal time with God, and my time with God's people, in community, in church.

David concludes Psalm 27 with these wise words:

*Wait patiently for the Lord. Be brave and courageous.
Yes, wait patiently for the Lord.*

Lord, in 2023, may we wait patiently for you. And then move forward, bravely, courageously, in Jesus.

*"Be still and know that I am God."
Lord, Your words lead me to the calmness and greatness of Your Presence.
Your Spirit can draw forth from me a fuller love and life.
Yet my desires are often fixed, caught, on illusions of fulfillment.
I ask that God, through my freedom,
may orchestrate my desires into a vibrant loving melody rich in harmony.
I exist in a web of relationships – links to God, people, nature.
I trace out these links, giving thanks for the life that flows through them.
Some links are twisted or broken. I may feel regret, anger, disappointment.
I pray for the gift of acceptance and forgiveness.
I pray for the gift of love.
Amen.*

Tuesday, January 3: Luke 1:1-4

This winter, we'll read the gospel of Luke from start to finish. We'll get an overview of the whole scope of Jesus' birth, teaching, challenges, trials, crucifixion, and resurrection. We'll begin by rereading passages from Luke 1 and 2 which we read before Christmas. We'll see them in the context of the bigger drama of

Jesus' life, ministry, and victory through the cross and empty tomb.

The author of the gospel is Luke. Luke was a non-Jewish convert to Jesus. In his gospel, he speaks less about Jewish traditions and quotes the Jewish scriptures much less than Matthew. He is a physician (Colossians 4:14), with a logical mind, trying to provide an orderly, scholarly account of Jesus' life and ministry. Luke was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry himself. He was a companion of Paul on several of his trips (recorded in the Book Of Acts) and is mentioned by Paul in three of his letters. He also wrote Acts.

Tradition states that Luke was from Antioch (Syria) and died in Boeotia, Greece, age 84. He was hung from a tree for his faith in Jesus. Luke's tomb is located in Thebes, Greece.

Luke is concerned about truth and accuracy: he has carefully investigated everything from the beginning and is using eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. As a result, we can trust Luke's gospel is accurate and true. In an era of fake news, that's good news.

As we read through Luke's gospel, pray the Holy Spirit will help us get to know Jesus better. Pray that we would learn more. And pray that we would genuinely know Him more as our Saviour, guide, companion, teacher, Lord, and God.

*Lord Jesus, think on me.
Do not let me go astray;
though darkness and perplexity, You point the heavenly way.
Lord Jesus, think on me.
When the flood is past,
may I see Your eternal brightness, and share Your joy at last.
Let me therefore not cling to fleeting things, which slip away and depart,
but to those which are enduring and immovable.
May I hold to these through the grace and loving-kindness of my Lord, Jesus Christ,
Through whom be glory to the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever.
Amen*

Synesius of Cyrene (370-414) & Chrysostom (344-407)

Wednesday, January 4: Luke 1:5-25

For the first time in Luke's gospel, we read the words, "Don't be afraid" (1:13). We'll hear it seven more times in our journey through Luke – two more times just in chapters 1 and 2.

That phrase (or close variations of it) is one of the most common in Scripture. In the Old Testament, it is often preceded by "Be strong and courageous." For example:

- *"This is my command – be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).*
- *"Be strong and courageous. Don't be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you" (1 Chronicles 28:20).*

To be courageous does not mean we live without fear. To be courageous means we act in the face of fear. When we face fear-inducing situations, we do not act out of fear, we respond with faith in God.

Unfortunately, Zechariah doesn't believe God's words (1:20). In the end, he will come to genuine faith as he sees the wonders God is doing. Now he responds out of his doubt and fear.

Notice some of the prophecies the angel gives us about John the Baptist (1:14-17):

- He will bring great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,
- He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, a man with the spirit and power of Elijah.
- He will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God.

- He will be He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.
- He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.

As we think about "good news of great joy for all people," think about John as a messenger of God's joy, hope, peace, and love. How is John going to be good news?

As I begin 2023, am I afraid? Worried? Anxious? God is saying to me, *"Be strong and courageous. Don't be afraid."*

Am I open to hearing God's good news of great joy and gladness? Today, where do I see God at work in my life? In our church? In our world? Can I give thanks and rejoice in that?

God is with me, but more, God is within me, giving me existence.

*Let me dwell for a moment on God's life-giving presence
in my body, my mind, my heart and in the whole of my life.*

I need to be honest with myself and with God:

God, and only God can give me life, true life, now and forever.

My usual automatic responses are to defend and justify myself.

It is so hard to admit mistakes.

Forgive me, Lord, and help me to discover new areas of growth.

I ask and pray for your Spirit to begin a new work within me.

*I pray that I might reach the fresh and challenging possibilities
that God wishes me to realize.*

Lord, do not let me leave this time of prayer unchanged, but create in me a new heart.

Spirit, fill me with Your life.

Amen.

Thursday, January 5: Luke 1:26-38

Today we read "Don't be afraid" for the second time in two days (the first was the angel's message to Zechariah yesterday, 1:13). As we begin a New Year and slog through January, we need this good news.

On December 15, we focused on **Mary's** experience in this passage. We noted that Mary, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, receives some good – and troubling – news. Mary is *"confused and disturbed"* by the angel's greeting. She is stressed. Worried. Anxious. For good reason. She is not married. And she will soon be obviously pregnant. In First Century Jewish culture, her engagement should be over, she could only look forward to a life of shame and poverty as an unwed mother. According to Old Testament Law, she could even be stoned to death.

Mary bravely accepts God's call on her life. With faith in God, she is willing to step into the unknown. There is a lot we can learn from Mary about faith, courage, and moving forward trusting God and His guidance.

Today, however, let's focus on what the angel says about who our Messiah, our Saviour, Jesus will be.

- *"You will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus"* – the name "Jesus," the same as the Hebrew name "Joshua," means "Yahweh saves/(is) salvation."
- *"He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High."* In the Old Testament, the "Son of the Most High" refers to the long-awaited Messiah/Saviour/Deliverer. As the Son of God, He is fully God, as divine, powerful, holy, and glorious as His Father.
- *"The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David."* The promised Messiah is the heir of David, the greatest king/deliverer in Jewish history.
- *"He will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"* Jesus, as God, will rule His Kingdom forever and ever. He will come and reign now and eternally. He was, is, and is to come.
- *"The baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God."* Jesus is the holy One.

When we see Jesus, see God. When we know Jesus, we know God. When we talk with Jesus, we are talking with God Himself.

- *"The word of God will never fail."* This is the promise of God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the One who was, is, and is to come.

When we face troubling, confusing, and disturbing circumstances, God's good news of great joy is that, we have a Saviour, Jesus, who is always with us. He is our salvation. He is God Himself, the One who created us, loves us, and sent His Son to save us. We don't need to be afraid. We can be strong and courageous.

As we move into 2023, we do so walking with Jesus, every moment of every day. The son of God – God Himself – is with you. His Kingdom will never end. He reigns today, tomorrow, and forever. *"Don't be afraid ... for the word of God will never fail."*

*O Lord, holy and true, who opens doors which none can shut;
as you have set before your church an open door into the world.
Strengthen your servants to go boldly into the world and declare your Name.
May those who oppose you, come to worship you,
and know you love your church and the world.
Grant us patience and strength to keep your Word with diligence and integrity.
Encourage all Christians in every land
to hold fast to the faith which you have given,
that we may all stand before you as pillars in the temple of God
and bear the name of the heavenly city and your name, O Christ our God.
Father, we give into your care all who are joined to us by natural ties and bonds of love:
the children dear to our hearts, our parents and friends,
our church family, and all who love us.
Having the Holy Spirit as their helper,
may all we love be at peace and have unity with us and others.
Grant us, O Lord, strength sufficient for the needs of this present life,
and the assurance of eternal life.
Amen*

Columba (521-597)

Friday, January 6: Luke 1:39-56

Think about the good news of great joy in this passage.

First, Elizabeth warmly welcomes Mary. Given Mary's unmarried status and pregnancy, this is not a given. In that culture, an unwed mother should be shunned. She should be treated as a sinner. Scorned. However clearly God has intervened in Elizabeth's heart. Yes, God can, and does, speak to us.

Second, Mary sees some of the blessings that will come through Jesus' birth. It's all upside-down:

- We would expect God to choose a high status, wealthy, well-known noblewoman to bear His Son. Only she would be worthy. Instead, *"he took notice of his lowly servant girl."*
- We would expect people to judge and condemn Mary as a sinful girl, pregnant out of wedlock. Instead, *"from now on all generations will call me blessed."*
- We would expect God to work through the princes, tycoons, millionaires, and moguls of that age. Instead, *"He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble."*
- We would expect God to bless the rich, successful ones, and pass over those who have no influence, no voice, and no power. Instead, *"He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands."*

God's Kingdom is often topsy-turvy from what we would expect. It's upside-down from how our culture

normally operates. God raises up the lowly and (sometimes) humbles the proud.

The good news for us – most of whom are NOT princes, business tycoons, rich, or proud people – is that God notices us. He lifts us up. He fills our lives with blessings. Those blessings may not be vast treasures of wealth. But, like Mary, He blesses us with His presence, His power, His guidance, His care, His love, His peace, His joy, and His mercy. Like Mary, He blesses us with a community of love, care, and support.

Stan Coxson, living in Martha's House, recently sent me a text: *"This is my prayer. God, please teach me how to fill up the spare time of my life with praise and thanksgiving. This discipline will enable me to live close to you in your loving presence."*

What are you thankful for, today? Try to discipline yourself to be thankful, today and every day, for the big and the small blessings in your life.

Our prayer today is Psalm 146 (see how similar it is to Mary's song of praise):

*Praise the Lord! Let all that I am praise the Lord.
I will praise the Lord as long as I live.
I will sing praises to my God with my dying breath.*

*Don't put your confidence in powerful people; there is no help for you there.
When they breathe their last, they return to the earth, and all their plans die with them.
But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper,
whose hope is in the Lord their God.*

*He made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them.
He keeps every promise forever.
He gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry.
The Lord frees the prisoners.
The Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are weighed down.
The Lord loves the godly.
The Lord protects the foreigners among us.
He cares for the orphans and widows,
but he frustrates the plans of the wicked.*

*The Lord will reign forever.
He will be your God, O Jerusalem, throughout the generations.
Praise the Lord!*

Saturday, January 7: Luke 1:57-66

Naming a baby can be challenging. When our kids were born, Marianne and I had no difficulty agreeing on boys' names, but we couldn't come up with a girl's name we liked. By God's grace, we had three boys.

In some cultures, names really matter. Sons are named after fathers, and daughters are named after mothers. In this passage, people wanted to follow the traditional Jewish pattern of naming the firstborn son after his father, Zechariah.

Sometimes names are chosen because of their meaning. For instance, in the Old Testament, the prophet Hosea was commanded to name his children as prophetic statements about Israel's unfaithfulness to God. The name of Hosea's daughter, *Lo-ruhamah*, means 'not pitied.' It is a sign of God's displeasure with the people of Israel for abandoning Him. The name of Hosea's son, *Lo-ammi*, means 'not my people.' It is a sign of the Lord's displeasure with the people of Israel for following other gods. How would you like to go through life named "Not-pitied" or "Not-my-people"???

In this passage, Elizabeth and Zechariah follow God's instruction and name their baby boy, John. "John" literally means, "Yahweh is Gracious" or "Yahweh is Merciful." Remember Wednesday's reading? The angel says to Zechariah, *"Don't be afraid! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly"* (1:13-17).

How is John's name appropriate? How will John share God's grace? God's mercy?

God is still filling people with His Holy Spirit. He is still turning people to the Lord their God. He is still changing the hearts of parents to their children. He is still leading those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly. How is this good news in 2023?

*Lord, you are our God, great, eternal, wonderful in glory.
You keep covenant with those who love you with their whole heart.
You are the life of all. You are the help of those who flee to you.
You are the hope of those who cry to you.
Cleanse us from our sins, secret and open,
and from every thought displeasing to your goodness.
Cleanse our bodies and souls, our hearts and consciences.
May we venture to live confidently and fearlessly for you,
with a pure heart and a clear soul,
and with perfect love and hope.
May the power of God preserve us.
May the wisdom of God instruct us.
May the way of God direct us.
May the hand of God protect us.
May God guard us against the snares of evil and temptations of the world.
Amen*

Basil (330-379) and Patrick (389-461)

Sunday, January 8: Luke 1:67-80

As we have seen in Luke 1, names matter. The name "Zechariah" means "God remembers."

As Zechariah speaks, he celebrates that God has **remembered** His promise to send a "mighty Saviour" who will save His people from their enemies (the greatest of which are sin and death).

As a result:

- *We will find salvation through forgiveness of our sins. (1:77)*
- *Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven has broken upon us. (1:78)*
- *He gives light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. (1:79)*
- *He will guide us to the path of peace. (1:79)*
- *We can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live. (1:74-75)*

What good news do we hear from Zechariah?

As you move into 2023, know that God remembers you. He has never forgotten you in the past. He knows you today. He will remember you in every tomorrow. That is good news for you today and every day.

How can you live this good news? Who can you share it with this year?

*"Come to me all you who are burdened and I will give you rest."
 Here I am, Lord.
 I come to seek your presence.
 What is stirring in me as I pray?
 Am I worried, troubled, left cold?
 I imagine Jesus himself standing or sitting at my side, and share my feelings with him.
 I long for your healing power.
 Father, forgive me.
 Cleanse my heart and soul so I may live joyously in Your love.
 I long for freedom.
 Father, release me.
 Help me find true freedom in your Spirit.
 I long for a new beginning.
 What's holding me back?
 Father, forgive me, and give me courage to be willing to change.
 Where do I sense hope, encouragement, and growth areas in my life?
 By looking back over the last few months,
 I may be able to see which activities and occasions have produced rich fruit.
 If I do notice such areas, I determine to give those areas both time and space in the future.
 Thank You that You delight to hear my prayers.
 Amen*

Monday, January 9: Luke 2:1-7

This is a familiar passage we read each Christmas.

These words are SO familiar, we read them nostalgically. And we add details and characters not in the Bible at all: Mary rides to Bethlehem *on a donkey*. In the stable, there are *cattle, an ox, a donkey, even a little drummer boy* (Seriously??? What a brand-new mother and newborn baby want is a drum solo???). Thankfully (according to the carol), *"The Baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus no crying He makes ..."* In Christmas cards, Mary looks *composed* and *relaxed*, with no hair out of place. Joseph is beaming, a proud papa. We add in *three kings from the Orient* for good measure.

Reread the actual words in Luke 2:1-7, as if you were reading them for the first time. Mary is nine months pregnant. They must travel 160 kms through rough, dangerous terrain from Nazareth to Bethlehem (a 32 hour walk today – longer back then). Is Mary riding a donkey? We don't know. None is mentioned.

When they reach Bethlehem, Mary goes into labour. We know the story: there is no room at the inn. She gives birth in a stable. Who is present? Joseph (we assume). A midwife? None mentioned. A doctor? Any helper? None mentioned? Any barnyard animals? None mentioned. Kings? "Magi" came several days later when the family are in a "house." They were advisors to the kings of Parthia, not kings themselves. We have no idea how many there were, only that they brought three types of gifts (Matthew 2:11).

Joseph and Mary are miles from home, in a strange town, with no support. They are totally on their own. Can we even begin to imagine how stressful, lonely, even pathetic the scene is? Jewish culture, by definition, valued life and cared for moms in childbirth ... except when God's Son was born. It's a travesty.

We prefer the sweet Thomas Kinkade version.

Luke deliberately won't give us a safe, sanitized, romantic, Christmas card picture. He wants us to feel the pathos. He wants us to be angry the whole town misses the birth of the Messiah. They miss not just the birth of any baby, they miss the arrival of God's Son, the Saviour. Luke wants us to be uncomfortable. He wants us to think about how we can be so busy, we can just as easily miss the reality of Jesus in our lives.

At Christmas, we focus on Jesus a lot. But Christmas is over. It is January 9. When was the last time you really thought about Jesus? His presence in your life? When was the last time you talked with – really talked with – Jesus?

Jesus is with you every moment of every day. How can you make that truth a meaningful focus in your life?

"This is the day the LORD has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:24)
I need to close out the noise, to rise above the noise –
the noise that interrupts, that separates, the noise that isolates.
I need to speak with Jesus again.
I remind myself that, as I sit here now, Jesus is gazing on me with love.
I pause for a moment and think of this.
I ask, how I am within myself today?
Am I particularly tired, stressed, or off-form?
Is there someone I need to care for, call, or encourage?
If any of these characteristics apply, can I try to let go of the concerns that disturb me?
In this expectant state of mind, help me listen to what Jesus is saying to me.
I believe that the Holy Spirit is present and may reveal whatever the passage has to say to me.
Lord, speak to my heart.
Lord, teach me. Lord, renew me. Lord, send me.
Amen.

Tuesday, January 10: Luke 2:8-20

Yesterday, I was a bit harsh when I critiqued our nostalgic, romanticized, Christmas card version of the manger scene: a relaxed Mary, a calm Joseph, cattle, oxen, donkeys, kings, and a bizarre drummer boy. What we do get right are the shepherds.

What we may not appreciate is shepherds are the lowest of the low in Israelite society. They don't own their sheep. They're badly paid servants of wealthy landowners. They're desperately poor. They're uneducated. They live on the land. They smell bad. They're crude. They're not welcome in town. When they do dare to come into a village, people shun them. They are almost down there with tax-collectors and lepers as undesirables. Yet these people – the outcasts – are the only ones who see what God is doing.

Residents of Bethlehem are making a small fortune off travelers moving for the census. They are making money but miss what matters most. They miss the arrival of their long-awaited Messiah, the Saviour.

As we get back to "normal" after the Christmas craziness of fun, family times, and festivities, it's easy to slip back into "business as usual." We're working. We're getting kids to hockey practice. We're playing pickle ball. We're watching football. We're catching up on emails. We're posting on Instagram. We're shoveling the sidewalk. We're planning our summer vacation. We're skimming YouTube or TikTok videos. We're making popcorn. We're cleaning out the furnace room. We're busy. Really busy.

We're doing so many GOOD things. But are they the BEST things?

Where does time with Jesus – quality time with Jesus – fit into our schedules?

"Don't be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy to all people. The Saviour – yes, the Messiah, the Lord – has been born today." The Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord has come among us. He is with you this moment. Every moment. Today. Everyday.

- How is that good news?
- How does that bring great joy?

How can you live in His presence more fully today? Tomorrow?

*What I'm trying to do here is set aside time to focus on my life – both physical and spiritual.
 I try to imagine Jesus is sitting here beside me,
 and I talk over with Him what has been going on for me.
 I attempt to understand that in countless ways, Jesus,
 you enter the everyday circumstances of my existence.
 But life is fast and full.
 Often, pressures and commitments drown out Your voice in my soul.
 I know that. And I want to do something about it.
 I want to be still and receptive to what Your Spirit might want to teach me.
 At any time of the day or night I can call on You.
 You are always waiting, listening for my call.
 What a wonderful blessing.
 No phone needed, no e-mails, no texts, just a whisper.
 I try to let go of worries that may be dragging me down at this moment.
 I place any concerns I have in God's hands – at least for these few minutes of prayer.
 Come, Lord Jesus.
 Fill my heart, soul, mind and body with Your love and truth.
 Amen*

Wednesday, January 11: Luke 2:21-35

Yesterday, we heard an angel say to some shepherds, "Don't be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy to all people. The Saviour – yes, the Messiah, the Lord – has been born today."

*Today we hear Simeon say, "Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for **all people**. He is a light to reveal God to **the nations**, and he is the glory of your people Israel!"*

Jesus is good news for ALL people, ALL nations.

The Israelites at the time thought the Messiah was good news for THEM. And only for THEM.

In fact, God does love ALL people. He wants ALL people to have a wonderful, free, forgiven, open relationship with Himself. That's good news for all of us who are not ethnically Jewish. It's good news for all of us who are less than perfect (which is ALL of us). It's good news for all of us who need hope (which is all of us). How is Jesus good news for you?

How can you spend time with Jesus today?

*O Lord, we draw near to you,
 acknowledging our unworthiness.
 We ask that all the errors and sins of our past may be freely pardoned
 and entirely done away,
 through the precious blood of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.
 Rouse us, O Lord, from the sleep of apathy and from tossing to and fro in our thoughts,
 that we may no longer live as in a troubled dream.
 Help us live as people awake and resolved to finish the work you have given us to do.
 By your humble birth, root out of our hearts all pride and arrogance,
 may humble ways content us, so we may serve the humble.
 By your life of compassion for those who labour and are heavy laden,
 teach us to be concerned one for another and to bear one another's burdens.
 By your holy and most bitter anguish on the cross,
 help us to worship you, and love you, and follow you, O Christ.
 Amen*

Thursday, January 12: Luke 2:25-40

Have you ever been waiting and waiting and waiting for something? You wonder if it will ever come?

Have you ever been waiting and waiting and waiting for someone? You wonder if they'll ever come?

Simeon and Anna have been waiting for good news of great joy. They have been waiting for the long-promised Messiah. Like generations of God's faithful people before them, they were waiting and waiting and waiting. How do you think they feel when God reveals to them this baby IS the long-awaited One?

They are old enough they won't live to see their hopes totally fulfilled. They won't see Jesus grow, preach, heal, teach, love, forgive, bless, and ultimately rise from the dead. But knowing God is beginning something new and wonderful is enough. Knowing the Spirit is alive and at work gives them hope and joy.

Jesus will spend thirty years waiting. For thirty years, all we really know is *"the child grew up healthy and strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him."* That's great. But it's not spectacular.

It's January 12, 2023. We would love to see God do mighty miracles today. But chances are, this will be a day much like any other. But God is doing new things today, and every day. They may be small things. He is working within us. He is blessing us with faith. Friends. Family. Sunshine. Hope. Forgiveness. Daily bread. Joy. Church. Music. Warmth. These blessings are not spectacular. But they are very real.

In Irving Berlin's musical, *White Christmas*, Bob has this advice, *"If you're worried and you can't sleep, just count your blessings instead of sheep, and you'll fall asleep counting your blessings."*

Yes, we may be waiting for something grander, better, and more wonderful. But God is at work this day. Take stock. What blessings do you see in your life today? Count your blessings. Be thankful.

*Father, I'm beginning to know how much I miss when I fail to talk to you in prayer,
and through prayer, receive into my life the strength and guidance which only you can give.
Forgive me for the pride and the presumption that make me struggle to manage my own affairs –
to the exhaustion of my body, the weariness of my mind, the trial of my faith.
I know You could work your good in me, with so little strain and so little effort.
When I neglect to pray, mine is the loss.
Forgive me, Lord.
I pray, that no future forgetfulness of mine,
false sense of self-sufficiency, spiritual laziness,
or doubt of your faithfulness keep me from taking everything to you in prayer.
I thank you that the fresh breath of heaven
is blowing away the close, damp air of all my failure,
of every doubt and fear.
Help me to pray.
May my prayers rekindle my faith,
brighten my hope, revive and rekindle my love.
Teach me, Lord, to pray,
Amen.*

Friday, January 13: Luke 2:41-52

If someone were to ask you to tell one – and only one – story from your childhood, **what story** would you tell? **Why** would you tell that one, in particular?

This story in Luke 2 is the ONLY story we have from Jesus' childhood. **Why** do you think this is the one that was passed on to Luke? What is it about THIS story that's so significant?

It does help us see that Jesus is not an ordinary child.

- He clearly understands who He is. He is His Father's (God's) son.
- His mind and spirit are filled by God and with God. He can understand and explain deep spiritual mysteries to the wisest of teachers.
- He clearly realizes His time has not yet come. He is willing to go back with Mary and Joseph to Nazareth. He is willing to wait. He is willing to follow His Father's lead.

It also helps us understand the character of Jesus, the character of God.

- **Jesus doesn't force His will on people.** First, He listens. Second, He asks questions. Third, He answers. People are amazed at his understanding. Jesus listens to us. He wants to understand us. Then He speaks with us. Do I follow that example? Do I genuinely listen to people first? Do I ask questions? Or do I tell people what I think they need to hear, before I know what's going on?
- **Jesus is patient.** If I were God, I would have sent Jesus centuries earlier, fully grown, teaching, and preaching immediately. We don't know why He takes so long to send Jesus. We don't know why it takes Jesus, who is fully human AND fully God, thirty years of preparation before He begins His public ministry. God is patient. As a non-patient person, I need to learn that preparation and patience are OK. Patience is listed as a virtue nine times in the New Testament.
- **God changes things.** Just because I don't see God working through me in amazing ways yet, doesn't mean He won't do things today, tomorrow, or the next day. God is always at work.

Luke says of Jesus, "*He grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people.*" Maybe this is a season when I can grow in **wisdom** and in **stature** (perhaps not physically, but spiritually, emotionally, socially), and **in favor with God and all the people**? What might that look like in my life?

*When I am invited into the presence of a friend, I look forward to the event and feel honoured.
When God invites me to spend time in His presence, He desires me to know and feel His love.*

*With faith and hope I turn my heart and mind to God,
and ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.*

*"A thick and shapeless tree-trunk would never believe that it could become a statue,
admired as a miracle of sculpture, and would never submit itself to the chisel of the sculptor,
who sees by her genius what she can make of it." (Ignatius)*

I ask for the grace to let myself be shaped by my loving Creator.

*I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him
and for any insights I may have been given from His Word.*

Amen.

Saturday, January 14: Luke 3:1-6, Isaiah 40

Thirty years have passed since Jesus' birth. John the Baptist is in the wilderness.

Remember what the angel told Zechariah about John? "*He will be great in the eyes of the Lord ... He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly*" (Luke 1:15-17).

After a time of preparation and waiting, God calls John to fulfill his destiny. John begins "*preaching that people should be baptized to show they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven*" (3:3). We think of baptism as a uniquely Christian practice, but it was occasionally part of Jewish conversions and rededications, too. Baptism is a symbolic washing, through which we wash away our old lives and the sin that goes with them. We are "born again" – washed, cleansed, restored, and recommitted to God.

Luke quotes Isaiah 40 to show how John fulfills Old Testament prophecy, preparing the way for the Messiah. Luke gives us just a teaser of a much longer passage that talks about the hope, healing, new life, and joy that will accompany the Messiah's – Jesus' – arrival.

Read Isaiah 40.

- How is this appropriate for John the Baptist?
- For Jesus?

What good news of great joy is there in Isaiah 40?

*You, O Lord, who commands us to ask, grant that we may receive.
You have put us on a journey, seeking; let us rejoice in finding you.
You have bidden us knock; help us walk through the open door into your heart.
Please, direct and govern all our thoughts and actions.
Help us to be faithful in loving, serving, and obeying you.
Draw us to yourself, so we may always be yours by obedience and love.
Help us, then, to love others with the grace and mercy you show to us.
As you have forgiven us without limit, help us to forgive without reserve.
O Lord, who lives and reigns forever and ever,
fill our souls, guide our hearts, shape our minds,
and direct our steps, today and every day.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Sunday, January 15: Luke 3:7-20

John's message, however, is not exactly "good news": *"When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: "Brood of snakes. What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin. And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father.' Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there – children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire"* (Luke 3:7-9 The Message). Ouch.

The logical question that follows his tirade is what people do ask: *"Then what are we supposed to do?"*

How do **you think** John should answer?

How **does** John answer? *"If you have two coats, give one away. Do the same with your food ... No more extortion – be honest ... No shakedowns, no blackmail – be content with what you have"* (3:11-14).

John goes on to warn people about impending judgment. Luke notes, *"John used many such warnings as he announced **the Good News** to the people"* (3:18).

John, like Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, combines a message of challenge and confession with good news of mercy and hope. Jesus, as we shall see, does the same.

John confronts evil and calls out our sinful attitudes and behaviour. John's message is not simply about a change in behaviour. He is not telling us simply to not do bad things to start doing good things. John is challenging us to change our whole being and identity.

The good news is *"all people will see the salvation sent from God"* (3:6). God's salvation is not simply about having sins forgiven. God's salvation is about people being reborn. John is inviting us ALL back to God. He is inviting us ALL to find our identity in God. He is inviting us ALL to reborn as God's children. When God is

the foundation of our lives, we are reborn into the life for which we were created. We are not "Christian" (or "children of Abraham") because of birth. We are reborn as God's people by faith in Jesus.

We are created to worship God, reflect His image in the world, be wise stewards over His creation, and bless and be a blessing to ALL people and all of creation. We are the children of God by faith in Jesus, therefore we love God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and all our strength. By faith, we are children of God, therefore we love our neighbour as ourselves. And we change the world by living God's love, God's mercy, God's forgiveness, God's generosity, and God's peace in the world.

How can I love Him with my heart, soul, mind, and strength? How can I love my neighbour as myself?

*Open my heart, O Lord, and enlighten me by the grace of your Holy Spirit,
that I may seek what is well pleasing to your will;
help me to order my doings after your commandments
that I may live a life that pleases you.
May God the Father bless us.
May Christ the Son take care of us.
May the Holy Spirit and enlighten us all the days of our life.
The Lord be our defender and keeper of body and soul
both now and forever and to the ages of ages.
Amen*

Bede (672-735)

Monday, January 16: Luke 3:21-22

In our church, we associate baptism with coming to faith in Jesus. We are baptized when we believe Jesus is God Himself and our Saviour, when we confess our sins and receive His forgiveness, and when we choose to try to follow Him as our Lord. Baptism is a starting point in our journey of faith with Jesus. It marks the beginning of a lifetime of learning to walk with Jesus. Through faith, we are reborn, with a new identity.

So why was Jesus baptized? John's baptism was explicitly a baptism for repentance from sin (Luke 3:3). Jesus is sinless. He doesn't need to start a journey of faith in God, He IS God.

Matthew records that when Jesus comes to John to be baptized, John tries to talk Him out of it. John says, "I am the one who needs to be baptized by you, so why are you coming to me?" Jesus replies, "It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires" (Matthew 3:14-15).

Jesus' baptism does mark a turning point in His life. From here on, He will publicly teach, heal, preach, and minister. Although Jesus is NOT coming to faith at His baptism (He IS God, after all), He is showing us how baptism can symbolically mark the beginning of something new and wonderful in our walks with God.

As Jesus is baptized, He sets an example for us. Some of us resist the idea of being baptized. It's so public. It seems a bit ... embarrassing. It's only symbolic, after all. And yet here is Jesus – God Himself – our Saviour and King – choosing to be baptized. If Jesus is willing to be baptized, when He certainly didn't NEED to be, do my excuses hold water? Notice God's response to Jesus' (and our) baptism: pure joy (3:22).

Baptism is also a command in Scripture (Matthew 28:18-20).

Baptism is one of those moments when we publicly declare our faith in Jesus. In the future, when we're struggling, we can look back on milestones like our baptism, and draw strength from them. Those times when we were really excited by and close to Jesus can help us when times get tough.

- If you haven't been baptized, what stopping you? Speak with a trusted friend or a pastor.
- If you have been baptized, think back on what it meant to you. How have you grown since then? Praise God. Do you need encouragement? How can your baptism encourage you today?

'The feast has been prepared. Come to the banquet.' (Matthew 22:4)
Dear Jesus, usually I come asking for favours.
Today I'd like just to be in Your presence.
Let me know who I am: a beloved child of God.
Thank you for calling me out of darkness into your wonderful light.
Let my heart respond to Your Love.
Help me Lord to be more conscious of your presence.
How do I find myself today? Where am I with God? With others?
Do I have something to be grateful for? Then I give thanks.
Is there something I am sorry for? Then I ask forgiveness.
Teach me to recognize your presence in others.
Help me to reflect your gracious light in all I do and say.
Amen

Tuesday, January 17: Luke 3:23-38

Who am I? Where do I come from? In our culture, we don't emphasize family. But in ancient cultures, family lines and family names were important. They located you. They defined you. They grounded you.

As Jesus comes onto the scene, Luke places Him in the line of Abraham and David. In 21st Century Canada, this wouldn't matter. But in 1st Century Israel, this was critical. God's promise was that it would be through Abraham's and David's family lines that He would undo the powers of sin and evil. Luke wants us to clearly see Jesus is God's great promise come among us. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise of saving the **whole world** through Israel. Jesus will be God's obedient Servant/Messiah (Isaiah 40-55).

We sometimes limit the "good news" to simply being about sin management. We sin; God forgives us; when we die we go to heaven. But sin is a symptom of something deeper and more primal. People are created to worship **God**. When we do that, we are fulfilling our destiny. *"Worship was and is a matter of gazing with delight, gratitude, and love at the creator God and expressing his praise in wise, articulate speech. Those who do this are formed by this activity to become the generous, humble stewards through whom God's creative and sustaining love is let loose in the world,"* writes biblical scholar, Tom Wright.

"That is how things were meant to be," Wright continues, noting we all fail in this grand vocation. *"When humans turn from worshipping the one God to worshipping anything else instead, the problem is not just that they 'do wrong things,' distorting their human minds, bodies, hearts and everything else ... The word for 'sin' in the New Testament means not just 'doing wrong things,' but 'missing the target.' The target is a wise, full human life of worship and stewardship. Idolatry and sin are a failure of responsibility. They are a way of declining the divine summons to reflect God's image. They constitute an insult, an affront, to the loving, wise Creator himself. The Great Playwright has composed a drama and written a wonderful part especially for us to play; and, like a spoiled and silly child, we have torn up the script and smirked our way through a self-serving but ultimately self-destructive plot of our own."*

When we fail to worship God and don't make Him the Lord of our lives, we give non-divine forces power and authority only God is supposed to have. We do this all the time: obvious examples are money, sex, power, celebrity, and nation. In ancient cultures these alternative powers were enshrined as gods and goddesses. They still function as de facto gods and goddesses in our world. For example, some people listen more to celebrities than God. They make their decisions more on principles of politics than God. Money controls their life choices. Like fire, these "forces" are good servants but horrible masters.

John the Baptist and Jesus invite us to more than managing sin so we go to heaven when we die. They invite us to be reborn into our genuine identity, as the people God created us to be. Yes, through Jesus, our sin is forgiven. But more importantly, through Jesus the evil forces underlying those sins are defeated. We are reborn. We are reunited with our Creator. We are refocussed with God as the centre of our worship. We rediscover our vocation to love and care for God's people (which is ALL people) and for all His creation

(which He declared good).

- The Messiah has come: do I love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength? Do I live like it?
- Do I love my neighbour as myself? How will that shape how I live, act, and speak today?

*O God, you are all mercy and all truth.
Please, carry on your gracious work in us.
By your grace, O Lord, increase our faith in you, and your faith in us.
By your grace, give us rest.
By your grace, give us peace.
By your grace, help us become what we, in our own human frailty, cannot attain.
By your grace, give us the faith, that in our own strength, we cannot manage to find.
By your grace, shine forth through our lives
despite our all too obvious weaknesses.
By your grace, make us people of grace,
showing your love to those whose paths we cross.
By your grace, inspire us to be Sabbath people.
Lord, give us your help and strength, this day, and every day
Amen*

based on Leonine Sacramentary (7th century)

Wednesday, January 18: Luke 4:1-13

Temptation happens. The issue is not whether or not we will be tempted, but how we handle it when we are tempted. Fundamentally, temptation is a spiritual challenge. Will we trust and obey God in ALL circumstances, or will we trust in something or someone else?

Jesus has just been baptized by John. The Father has affirmed Him. The Spirit has come upon Him. Jesus' ministry is now public. It's an "emotional high." He immediately faces temptations.

In my experience, it is not uncommon for people who have experienced a spiritual blessing – coming to faith, summer at camp, baptism, marriage, new baby, great concert, Christmas, a new job, mission trip, etc. – to undergo struggles. When the Holy Spirit works in our lives and we get excited about Jesus, Satan is not amused. He often tries to derail our spiritual growth as quickly as possible, by any means possible.

It is AFTER forty days of Jesus fasting, alone, that Satan confronts Him. It's common for temptations to come when we are physically and emotionally spent. Satan tempts us to doubt, get angry with God, walk away from church, stop reading the Bible, or give up on prayer, when we're having hard times – when we've lost a loved one, we're unemployed, our investments have dropped, our health is failing, our family is disappointing us, we're struggling with depression, or we're just exhausted. We're vulnerable.

This story reminds us **Satan is real**. He is actively trying to get us away from God. Ignoring Satan or pretending he doesn't exist isn't helpful. It is good to recognize temptation is real. And to know our enemy.

This story also reminds us **Jesus is stronger than Satan**. We don't need to be afraid. Jesus is with us. He gives us power and authority to say "No!" to temptation through His Spirit's power.

The first temptation Jesus experiences is to think life is all about stuff: food (we might add, jobs, clothing, sex, games, cars, TVs, cruises, ski trips, etc.). We like a Santa-Claus-God: when we pray, God should give us what we want. But the most satisfying things in life are not things at all, but God and people. Jesus resists the temptation to become just another miracle worker providing stuff. Jesus/God wants to give us a whole new life in and through Jesus. He will provide what we need (not want).

Secondly, Jesus is tempted to become a king like every other king. He could gather an army and reign as King of the Jews in Jerusalem in 27 AD. Jesus rejects ruling one tribe, in one place, at one time. He has come for something much bigger: to bring ALL people, everywhere, at all times, into new life with God. He

will do this through love, mercy, and sacrifice. We are tempted to use money, power, and force to get our way. We are challenged to see the way to be truly human is to love, be merciful, and sacrifice.

Finally, Jesus is tempted to force God's hand, putting Him to the test. Is there a shortcut to being the Messiah, avoiding the pain and suffering? No. If something as BIG as saving the world is at stake, it's not going to be easy. We may try to put God in a corner and expect Him to act as we want, when we want. We want the easy way. Sometimes God allows us to go through dark valleys and hard places for a long time. He doesn't promise pleasant paths. He does promise His presence, strength, and peace.

How are we tempted? What controls our decisions? Our desire for stuff? Power? Popularity? Pleasure? Or God? How willing are we to trust God, always? What is God teaching us, today?

*Lord you became human to save, restore, and send us.
You walked and worked on this earth.
You endured the heat and struggled with the cold.
All your time on this earth was spent in caring for humanity.
You healed the sick, you raised the dead.
Most important of all, you saved me from death.
Lord Jesus, Your death on the cross has set me free.
I can live joyously and freely without fear.
Your mercy knows no bounds.
Knowing that God loves me unconditionally, I can afford to be honest about how I am.
How has the last day been, and how do I feel now?
I share my feelings openly with the Lord.
Lord, grant me the grace to have freedom in your Spirit.
Cleanse my heart and soul so I may live joyously in Your love.
Amen*

Thursday, January 19: Luke 4:14-21

I was born in Dawson Creek, BC. It's one of those towns you are happy to say you're from, but, to be honest, you may not really want to move back to (apologies to the Dawson Creek Fan Club). Today, if you want to start a global movement (for instance, announcing the Kingdom of God is at hand), you wouldn't start in Dawson Creek, BC. You'd begin in New York, London, Mumbai, or Beijing.

Jesus begins His ministry in the equivalent of Dawson Creek. He begins in Galilee, the back of beyond in Israel. He is in a cultural wilderness, far from the bright lights of Jerusalem. He has just been tempted to make a big splash in the big city. Imagine if he had miraculously fed everyone with bread, been crowned King, and jumped from the Temple in Jerusalem? He would have had the biggest crowd for any inauguration, ever. That's the kind of king we would want. Jesus rejects that fame.

He begins in a small town, in a remote province. He begins His public ministry quoting [Isaiah 61:1-2](#). It's a passage about the coming of the Messiah and Kingdom of God. Jesus is announcing the Kingdom of God has come (exactly what people want to hear) but saying it in a place and a way no one expects. It's not about stuff. It's not about power. It's not about personality. It's not about place. It's about rediscovering who were created to be: people who worship God, reflect His image, and bless other people and His creation.

Jewish Rabbi Wayne Dosick argues, "*The 'job description' of the messiah contains two tasks. The first is that messiah is supposed to bring or announce (in the words of the famous Christmas carol: 'peace on earth, goodwill to men') ... the concept of 'tikkun olam,' the ultimate perfection of the world through the work of our hands, has been the Jewish mission from the very beginnings of Judaism ... The second thing a messiah can do is offer the promise of a world to come to those whose life on earth merits eternal reward from God.*" As a Jewish writer, not a Christian, Dosick argues that Jesus failed on both accounts.

Is Dosick correct? Reading Luke 4, Jesus does what the Messiah ought to do. The challenge now – as then

– is that people don't always want to hear it or accept it.

What characterizes the Kingdom of God?

- The poor – in spirit, but also those who are poor in social, economic, and political ways – hear good news (see Mary's song of praise in [Luke 1:46-55](#)).
- Captives – spiritually, but also those trapped by injustice, violence, racism, and hatred – find release.
- The blind – spiritually, and those unable to see hope for the future – see light.
- The oppressed – in spirit, but also in tangible physical, social, economic, political ways – find freedom.

Rabbi Dosick writes, *"To be a Jew means to have a special role and purpose, to have a sacred mission. The prayerbook states simply but profoundly that the Jewish mission is to 'perfect the world under the Kingdom of God' (the prayer, 'Alenu'). Created in the image of God, Jews – and all human beings who follow the Jewish model – are not to be mere spectators, mere bystanders, in the unfolding process of creation and daily existence. We are not here on earth just to breathe and live out a measured number of days and then die. Rather we are here on earth to be active participants, partners with God, in the task of building up the world and making it into the best place that it can be."*

This mission is the same mission to which Jesus invites us as He reads Isaiah 61. *"It is a mission, a daily commitment, that we must accept gladly and sincerely,"* counsels Dosick. That is exactly Jesus' message. How can I live this way, today?

*For a few moments, I think of God's presence in all things:
in the elements, giving them existence.
In plants, giving them life.
In animals, giving them sensation.
Finally, in me, giving me all this and more,
making me a temple, a dwelling-place of His Spirit.
If God were trying to tell me something, would I know?
If God were reassuring me or challenging me, would I notice?
I ask for the grace to be free of my own preoccupations and open to what God may be saying to me.
Lord, grant me the grace to be free from the excesses of this life.
Let me not get caught up with the desire for wealth.
Keep my heart and mind free to love and serve you.
Amen*

Friday, January 20: Luke 4:14-30

People are "amazed" at Jesus' words of grace – the Greek word "amazed" means more like "awestruck," "dumbfounded," or 'astonished out of one's senses.'

However, Jesus stirs the pot. People are not sure what to make of Him. They have never heard anything like it before. Some love it. Others are not sure it's so good.

Sensing their confusion, Jesus reminds them of their history (and foreshadows the future): people have heard God's words before. Unfortunately, they have a long legacy of rejecting God's prophets. He talks about Elijah and Elisha, prophets of God during the spiritually low times in Israel's history when King Ahab and Jezebel ruled the nation. Back then, most "religious" Israelites backed the evil king, ignored the prophets, and live ungodly lives. When Israel was so spiritually dead, true prophets were powerless to do anything in Israel. They did heal people, but only non-Jewish people ([1 Kings 17:7-24](#), [2 Kings 5:1-14](#)).

What is Jesus saying?

- The spiritual climate in His day is as desperate as it was in the days of Elijah and Elisha. Jewish

- religion had sold its soul, values, and integrity to prop up the political establishment of its day.
- God will invite ALL people – not just Jews – to experience His blessings. Non-Jews are welcome.

How do people respond?

They don't like Jesus comparing them to people of Ahab's and Jezebel's day. They think their religion is pure and holy, not political. They certainly don't like Him extending God's grace to non-Jewish people.

Jesus is saying to us:

- The spiritual climate in our country isn't great. The rich get richer; the poor get poorer. We tolerate injustice. All people are not treated with dignity. Money seems more important than people. People lie, cheat, and are greedy, lustful, and bigoted. We make idols of politicians, political parties, economic theories, and nation. Caught up in culture, the church loses its true, prophetic voice.
- ALL people are invited to find freedom, true freedom, in Him. Today, the church is growing: mostly in non-Western, non-Caucasian nations and among ethnic minorities in Canada (the fastest growing church in our denomination is an ethnically Iranian church in Vancouver).

How do we respond?

We don't like Jesus challenging our lifestyle, politics, social structures, and the way-we-have-always-done-things. We don't like to think about poverty, how we treat His creation, racism, homelessness, and injustice. We don't want to really think about who or what is our god. What do we with a God who calls us to love Him with all our being? Who calls us to love our neighbour as ourselves? Who challenges our status quo?

*We beg you, Jesus, be our help and strength.
Save those among us who are suffering.
Have pity on the lowly. Lift up the fallen.
Heal the sick. Bring back the wandering.
Feed the hungry.
Release those unjustly imprisoned.
Lift up those who falter. Strengthen the fainthearted.
Help us to be your people and the sheep of your pasture.
I give thanks to God the Father, through his Son, in the Holy Spirit,
because in his great love he took pity on us.
When we were dead in our sins he brought us to life with Christ.
In him we are a new creation.
Help me to throw off my old nature and all its ways.
As I have come to birth in Christ, may I become a new creation in Him.
Amen*

Clement (92-101) and Leo (c.400-461)

Saturday, January 21: Luke 4:31-37

Familiarity breeds contempt? A prophet is not welcome in his own backyard?

When Jesus spoke in his hometown of Nazareth, *"the people were furious ... they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built; they intended to push him over the cliff"* (4:28-29). He was not exactly the local-kid-done-well. Significantly, Jesus performs no miracles in Nazareth. As if acting out the story of Elijah and Elisha, Jesus (God Himself) cannot do any miracles in His own hometown.

But in Capernaum, beyond Nazareth, Jesus does perform miracles. In Capernaum, the people are (literally) "thunderstruck" by Jesus' teaching (4:31) and recognize a higher authority in His words.

Jesus' sermon in Nazareth is lived out in Capernaum: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed*

me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and the time of the Lord's favor has come" (4:18-19).

Jesus, having recently had a showdown with the devil in the wilderness, now does battle with one of Satan's minions. It isn't much of a contest. Jesus really is who He says is – the Messiah, Immanuel God-with-us, the Holy One. He crushes the opposition. Liberation is achieved. A captive is set free.

- Imagine the man's life before Jesus ...
- Now think about his life after meeting Jesus ...

Jesus has come to help us rediscover and be re-born into our true identity as God's children. In a dramatic way, this is what this man experiences. How has Jesus changed my life?

We are created to worship God, reflect His image, and be a blessing to other people and to His creation. How does this come true in this man's life? How is this true in my life?

Jesus can help us be reborn into this whole, fully-human, new life as well. In what ways am I poor? Trapped? Blind? Oppressed? Jesus comes offering freedom. It may, however, require a traumatic shake up of my priorities, values, attitudes, and lifestyle. Am I really willing to allow Jesus to change me?

*Dear God, I have no idea where I am 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** that I am following Your will
does not mean that I am actually **doing** so.
But I believe this, and on this will I build my life:
I believe that the desire to please You, does in fact please You.
I hope I have that goal in everything I do.
I hope I never persist in anything apart from the desire to honour you.
And I know that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it at the time.
Therefore, I will trust You always,
for though I may be lost, and in the shadow of death, I will not be afraid,
because I know You will never leave me to face my troubles alone.
Amen.*

Thomas Merton

Sunday, January 22: Luke 4:36-44

The quote on Pinterest says, "*People make time for what they what want to make time for. People text, call and reply to people they want to talk to. Never believe anyone who says they're too busy. If they wanted to be around you, they would.*" That's a bit harsh. But there's some truth to it.

People in Capernaum made time for Jesus. Capernaum is a small fishing village on Lake Galilee. This is the home of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Capernaum is where they were born, lived, fished, and expected to die. Little do they know what Jesus' arrival will mean for their lives.

The first time we meet Simon/Peter, his mother-in-law is ill. Jesus heals her. It's a simple act of love.

Casting out demons (whatever that means for us in western culture today) is dramatic. But Jesus is not performing in some travelling road show. He is caring for real people with real problems, whatever those might be. Isn't it nice to know that whatever our issues are, Jesus cares. And He ministers to us.

Once Mom-in-Law's temperature drops, she gets up and makes tea. Is that surprising? Restored to health,

she is the first person who serves Jesus in his public ministry.

Jesus' example of compassion for those spiritually, mentally, and physically ill has inspired Christians to establish the first hospitals. Jesus' example still inspires many Christians to go into helping/caring careers. Jesus inspires people to sacrifice financially and even risk their lives to care for those in poor nations. Service also happens at more mundane levels – making time to text, call or reply, making tea for a friend, caring for a relative who is ill, praying for a child, spending time with a loved one, helping someone get to an appointment, taking someone shopping. How else?

Are we too busy for Jesus? Are we too busy to learn from Him (reading Scripture)? Too busy to talk with Him (pray)? Too busy to worship Him (church)? Too busy to help? Too busy to spend time with people? Our family? Someone who is lonely? What does that say about us and our priorities?

Of course, we can argue it was easier for the Capernaumites (Capernaumians?): Jesus was physically there.

We can still make time for Jesus. Spiritual disciplines – practices like prayer, reading Scripture, solitude, fasting, etc. – are tools to help us focus and spend time with Jesus. The discipline of spending time with people is important. The word "*discipline*" can carry negative overtones. However "*discipline*" and "*disciple*" come from the same Latin word meaning "*learning, instruction, knowledge.*" Making time for regular practices, like reading, prayer, and caring are ways we can learn and grow with Jesus.

We make time for who and what really matter. What matters most to you? Is Jesus important to you? Who are the key people in your life? What are you going to do about it?

*Help us, O Lord, to know you, and love you, and rejoice in you.
Even though we know we cannot do these perfectly in this life.
Let us, at least, grow closer to you every day,
till we come to know, love, and rejoice in you in perfection, in heaven.
May our knowledge of you increase in us, day by day.
May our love for you grow every day, more and more.
May our joy become greater and fuller as we live in your presence, each day.
May the gifts of grace you give us fill us so that our joy may be full.
To you, O Lord, be the honor and glory,
who with the Father and Holy Spirit lives and reigns,
one God, world without end.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Monday, January 23: Luke 5:1-11

Imagine you're a professional fisherman, cleaning your nets after a long, hard, disappointing night of work (in the Lake of Gennesaret/Sea of Galilee, apparently, fish are still more easily caught after dark). Get inside Peter's head a bit: you are disappointed, tired, dirty, and just want to get home to bed. You are minding your own business while some teacher is carrying on near you. You probably want him to just stop talking.

Then the rabbi asks you to go back out to sea. What do you do? You grumble. You complain. You may argue. For some reason, you do it (He did heal your mother-in-law). He tells you to put down your nets again. That's the last thing you want to do. It means you'll have to pull them up again and clean them again. What would you say? "*I'm the fisherman. You're the carpenter. Back off!*"? What would you do?

Peter decides the quickest way to get home to bed is to do what Jesus asks. Peter is sure he will prove Jesus wrong. The rest, as they say, is history. A huge catch. A call for help. A struggle to get boats back to land before they sink under the weight of all the fish. A bumper catch. They will eat well tonight.

And then the moment of truth: Jesus promises an exciting future, but the catch will be people. Will you go off into a new life with only the sketchiest idea of where it will take you? What would you do? What would

you say? *"No thanks. I'm the expert ..."*

Jesus does not "convert" Peter. There is no argument, no debate, no language of winning and losing, no sales pitch, no spiritual laws, no conversion to a doctrine, no sinner's prayer. Jesus simply invites Peter to join Him on a journey. He invites Peter to get to know Him. He invites Peter to learn from Him.

Jesus doesn't debate: *"Peter, just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so there are spiritual laws which govern your relationship with God. Don't you agree? Since you must agree, let's go on to the next law ..."* He does say, *"Don't be afraid."* Following Jesus can be risky.

Peter has no idea who Jesus is yet. He has no concept that *"Jesus Christ is God's **ONLY** provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life."* Peter has met someone who has shown a genuine interest in him. Who has helped him. And who sincerely asks Peter to be His friend. It will take two or three years of sharing life together before Jesus will ask, *"Who do you say I am?"* and Peter will be able to answer, *"The Christ (Messiah) of God."* (Luke 9:20).

Peter comes to know and believe in Jesus through friendship. As I reread the gospels, we see Jesus and Peter are good friends. They have fun and deep discussions together. They laugh and cry together. Peter comes to know Jesus over a lifetime. Jesus gives him time and space to figure things out. He has time to see who Jesus is, what following Jesus involves, what Jesus means when He says, *"from now on you will catch people."* Peter discovers when you spend time with Jesus, He can help sort life out.

There are lessons here for us. Jesus may take us on a new journey. Knowing Jesus takes time. It may be risky. We may choose a different path in life than we had thought. He may turn our priorities upside down. We may not be "successful" by other people's standards. Being with Jesus then, as now, is not always a smooth road. Jesus is patient. He will walk with us always.

We also learn we need good friends. We need friends to have fun and deep discussions with. We need friends to laugh and cry with. We need to be that kind of friend with other people.

Will we choose to follow and spend time with Jesus? Will we pray? Read Scripture? Take time to reflect, think, and meditate on God and His word? In that lifelong process of learning, growing, and following we will discover who Jesus is. We will discover who we really are. How can we make time for Jesus?

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

www.faithandworship.com

Tuesday, January 24: Luke 5:12-16

During Covid, we had to move worship online for a few months. Some Christians saw this as a brutal attack on God's church. It wasn't. Of course, it was nothing like real persecution faced by believers in parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia in 2023, where practicing your faith (even online) is punishable by death. If it were against the law to worship in-person OR online, read Scripture, pray, listen to Christian music, or have spiritual conversations, how would we respond? Do we practice those spiritual disciplines regularly? Are they SO important to us, we would defy the law to spend time with Jesus and His people?

Jesus does break the law to spend time with people. According to the Law, this leper is NEVER allowed in town. He is sinning. Jesus ought to send this leper packing. He shouldn't speak with him. Specifically, the Law forbids anyone from touching a leper; his body is riddled with a disease literally eating away at him. Horrifyingly, "*Jesus reached out his hand and **touch**ed the man*" (5:12). Now Jesus is unclean.

When we read the Old Testament, we skip over purity laws in books like Leviticus or Deuteronomy. They aren't relevant in our modern culture with cutting-edge medical care. In ancient cultures these laws were crucial to prevent the spread of disease. Yet this man is so desperate to see Jesus, he breaks the law. Do I yearn for Jesus so much I make the time, spend the energy (or even take a risk) to be with Him?

Imagine being this person. You haven't been touched by anyone else for years. Then this ...

As we discovered during Covid, a huge amount of human care and communication takes place, not in words, but through appropriate touch. To be cut off from all proper touch is horrible, almost as bad as losing your sight or hearing. Jesus touches an untouchable. He gives hope to a hopeless man. He gives love to an unloved person. He gives this man a new identity. He gives him a new life.

Who are the lepers of our society? Who are the untouchables? The hopeless? The unloved people? The people most people have given up on? Does Jesus give up on them?

Mike Davis, a Christian author, has a comedy video (in our library) called *I'm **Not** Okay*. His whole premise is this: "*I'm not Okay. You're not Okay. But that's okay because God loves us where we are.*" That's the good news. God loves each of us where we are. If Jesus can touch and love a leper, He can bring new life to anyone. Do I yearn to know Jesus? Do I make time for Him? Can I pray for someone who needs Him?

Note: Jesus "*often withdrew ... and prayed*" (5:16). Jesus often prays. His disciples (in Acts) often pray and are "*filled with the Holy Spirit.*" Today being "filled" with the Spirit has a specific meaning for some Christians: dramatic experiences like speaking in tongues. Interestingly, we have no evidence Jesus ever spoke in tongues. Being "filled with the Spirit" simply referred to the daily experience of God's people who are praying, talking, and walking with God. Luke uses the word "filled" to describe people who are given over to something to the extent it defines their lives. For example, people can be filled with "jealousy" (Acts 5:17, 13:45), "joy" (13:52, 16:34), or "rage" (19:28). We can picture what someone filled with jealousy, rage or joy looks like. Someone "filled with the Spirit" is someone given over to living for Jesus. What does that look like? Jesus invites us to pray that His Spirit to fill our lives, so they overflow with His love.

*Make us glad, Lord God, in speaking boldly of your mercies.
Help us rejoice, O Jesus, in adoring your Holiness.
Help us celebrate, O Spirit, your work in our world.
May our chief joy be to glorify and proclaim your holy Name.
Almighty, everlasting God, dwelling in love and power in our souls,
bring people to your light through us.
Make yourself known to the world in us.
May all people know you, the true Light, the bright and morning Star.
May your joy shine in us and through us.
May your love shine in us and through us.
We pray that you would fill the world with your glory
and show yourself by the radiance of your light to all nations.
To you be the glory forever and ever.
Amen*

Gregorian Sacramentary (c.593)

Wednesday, January 25: Luke 5:17-26

The Pharisees have a noble ambition: they want their nation to be a God-fearing country. They lobby the government, the courts, and anyone else who would listen, to take the teachings of Moses

(the Jewish law) and apply them to the marketplaces, houses, and dining rooms of their nation. They insist people be diligent in observing religious practices like tithing, observing the Sabbath, and "ritual purity" (not eating "unclean" foods or with "unclean" people). Pharisees believe that, if people were only more religious, God will heal their land (i.e. drive the Romans out). So they are on a passionate mission to "religious-ize" people.

Jesus' first encounter with Pharisees is recorded in Luke 5:17-26. Jesus is drawing huge crowds. Pharisees from all over the region come to check Him out. They hope He will further their cause by emphasizing the letter of the Law (they have no doubt, of course, this is what's needed). If a dynamic, popular teacher were to teach the importance of keeping every bit of the Law and having all the right doctrine – WOW. That would be fantastic. The Romans would be history ...

What Jesus is supposed to say is, "*Miserable sinner, you need to follow the Law ...*" What Jesus actually says is, "*Friend, your sins are forgiven ...*" Jesus instantly upsets the Pharisees:

- **Problem 1:** Jesus calls sinners, "friends." Those he ought to call "friends," the Pharisees, He challenges as if they are sinners. The Pharisees don't like that.
- **Problem 2:** Only God can forgive sins. For the Pharisees, God forgives sin if people **do religious things**, like bringing sacrifices to the Temple and attending festivals. Jesus says sin is forgiven by **faith in Him**. No Temple. No sacrifices. No religious festivals. Only Him.

Sometimes we think Jesus hates the Pharisees. He doesn't. Pharisees were good religious people, who take God's Law seriously; that's good. Jesus never says tithing is bad; it's good. He doesn't say observing the Sabbath is bad; it's good. He never says wanting people to love and honour God is bad; it's good.

Jesus' issue with the Pharisees is they teach the right things for the wrong reason. They teach "doing religious things" to earn God's love. Jesus challenges their hearts: do they actually love God? He wants them to love God. Then they will do the right things because of their love for their King. Jesus wants them to be godly from the heart, not people going through the motions.

This man's friends get it. They recognize being godly people means you love. You love God. You love your friends. They are willing to do a crazy thing out of love for their friend. Why? Because they take God's command "*Love your neighbour as yourself*" to heart. They live it. The Pharisees don't understand.

We are God's children, His family. We are the body of Christ. We are a community of the Spirit. Here, anyone can come with their pains, problems, questions, hopes, and dreams. Here, we discover Jesus' love, and we share His love, in word and deed, with others. Here, life flows from our love for the living God, so we desire to be His blessing to our world. This is who we are. Lord, help us be your love in our world.

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God" (Gerard Manley Hopkins).
I dwell for a moment on the presence of God around me,
in every part of my body, and deep within my being.
I will take refuge in your loving heart.
You are my strength in times of weakness.
You are my comforter in times of sorrow.
Lord God I thank you for the gift of freedom.
I am free to make choices.
Help me to use this gift with integrity.
Help me to choose to follow you, to live in a Christian way by caring for others.
Remind me to consider always those less fortunate than myself,
the poor, the suffering, the foreigner,
those who are not free to worship in public.
Guide me always to seek your holy will in all the events of my life.
Amen

Thursday, January 26: Luke 5:27-32

Some people love dining well: meals are carefully planned, meticulously prepared, and lovingly savoured. I'm less fussy: most lunches are peanut butter/jam sandwiches, fruit, veggies. Easy. And boring.

In Jesus' day, many meals were an event. You invite people from your own social class; they return the favour by inviting you over. Wealthy eat with wealthy, poor with poor. Jews eat with Jews, Romans with Romans. You know who is in; you knew who is out. Pharisees insist they, and anyone else who want to be "in," must eat according to strict ritual purity laws (that went far beyond the Bible). They'd never eat with non-Pharisees because such people didn't follow their high standards of purity. Besides, what self-respecting religious person would want to be seen eating with "sinners" or non-Jews?

Jesus is at a party. Jesus had fun and, apparently, was fun to have as a guest. That would be fine if this were a party of Jerusalem's who's-who or a "ritually pure" dinner with Pharisees. But this is a party of riff-raff: tax collectors and sinners. I don't suppose tax collectors have ever been popular. In Jesus' day, they were despised. They were Jews working for the Romans, enemy collaborators. They could charge exorbitant commissions, gouging their countrymen. People were forced into debt by their graft and greed. Consequently, tax collectors were outcasts, "unclean." No self-respecting "good" Jew would eat with them. To eat with them would suggest you were as bad as them, or (heaven forbid) they were as good as you.

When Levi throws his party, it's not surprising his only friends are other tax collectors. The Pharisees (also not surprising) are not happy Jesus is eating with these people. They complain to His disciples (they'd never go into Levi's house to see Jesus: that would taint them). Imagine Jesus coming outside for a breath of fresh air and hearing the grumbling. Jesus doesn't deal with matters of etiquette or issues of "pure" versus "impure." His comments echo his initial mission statement ([Luke 4:18-19](#)): *"Healthy people don't need a doctor – sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent"* (5:31-32).

The Pharisees are sure THEY are healthy. They are sure the tax collectors and sinners are sick. Jesus challenges them: are they as healthy as they think they are? They need a doctor, too. Jesus does agree the tax collectors and sinners are sick. However, at least Levi and his friends know it. They are willing to come to Jesus to be healed. Who is really healthy? Who is really sick? Are the Pharisees in denial?

What are the "issues" in my life that I need Jesus to deal with? Will I allow His Spirit to come into those parts of my life I hold back from Him? Will I let Him heal me? Will I let Him change me?

*O Lord, you willingly gave us your body and your blood.
Come into my life and put me back together as you created me to be:
Come into all my body, my emotions, my soul, and my heart.
You, who are fire, burn up the thorns of all my sins.
You, who are holy, purify my soul, clean my mind.
You, who are almighty, strengthen my knees and bones.
You, who are wisdom, enlighten the simplicity of my five senses.
You, who alone are worthy of worship, fill me completely with reverence and awe.
Always protect, guard, and keep me from every soul-destroying word and act.
Sanctify, purify, forgive, cleanse, and rule me.
Teach me, give me understanding, and enlighten me.
Make me a dwelling place of Your Spirit and only your Spirit.
Take me, I pray, as Your servant.
Make me, I pray, a child of light.
You alone are our Saviour, O Jesus.
You are the radiance of glory that shines in our souls, O Spirit.
You alone are my Master and King, O God.
To You, as our Lord and God, we give all glory, day and night. Amen*

Symeon the Translator (10th century)

Friday, January 27: Luke 5:33-39

We talk about sharing "the gospel," spreading "the gospel," preaching "the gospel," even "'full' gospel" churches. We want people to hear "the gospel." What is the "gospel"? For the linguists among us, the Greek word translated "gospel" is "euangelion" – literally "good news." "Eu" is Greek for "good" and "angelion" means "message/news." In Old English this was translated as "gud" (good) "spel" (news): "gudspel" or "gospel." The word "gospel" is simply Old English for "good news." Since we don't speak Old English anymore, most modern English translations translate the Greek literally as "good news."

We've just read four stories of Jesus' interactions with people: Peter, a man with leprosy, a paralyzed man, and a tax collector. Now, Jesus summarizes his "good news" (gospel) with these enigmatic parables.

What is the "good news"? Maybe you think of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." That IS good news. It's a beautiful summary of God's eternal provision for us. John 3:16 is wholly true, but it's not the whole truth. It wasn't a public proclamation. It was one comment to one person in one very private conversation, at night.

- Before Jesus was born, what did the angel say to Mary? "You will conceive and give birth to a son ... he will **reign** (as king) over the house of Jacob forever; his **kingdom** will never end." (Luke 1:33)
- When Jesus started his ministry what did he say? "The **kingdom of God** has come near. Repent and believe the good news." (Mark 1:15)
- What does Jesus say is most important? "Seek first the **kingdom of God** and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you ..." (Matthew 6:33)

According to Jesus, the good news (gospel) is: **the kingdom of God has come.** Jesus' mission is bigger than saving people for eternal life (although that's one part of it). He is bringing the **kingdom of God** to earth, now. He is re-creating and restoring lives, now. He is changing people, now. We are citizens of His new kingdom now: "You **are** royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession" (1 Peter 2:9).

This **kingdom of God** is different from kingdoms of our world. What matters in most kingdoms (race, social status, gender, ability) is irrelevant in the kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is not about power politics, military might, or economic elites. What matters in God's kingdom is rebirth into new life, now. Recovering our created children-of-God identity, now. Being people who worship God, reflect His image, and bless the world with His love and grace, now. Faith in Jesus and living as His people, now.

The King has come. This is good news. One of Jesus' favourite metaphors for the kingdom is a feast. As He eats with the "wrong" people, He's showing ALL are welcome at His table, now. It is GOOD NEWS, now. Is Jesus good news in my life? Do I enjoy worshipping Him? Do I desire to live for Him day by day?

"As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). Lord, how can I be good news to my neighbours?

*O God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, grant us, we pray,
to be grounded and settled in your truth.
May the Holy Spirit come into our hearts and give us the gift of true faith.
Help us to trust you in the storm of life
and to be faithful to you in the calms of life.
That which we do not know, reveal to us.
That which is empty or insufficient in us, please fill us up.
That which we know which is true, confirm in us.
That which is evil and sinful, forgive and remove from us.
That which is beautiful, cause to shine through us for your glory.
Keep us blameless in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Clement of Rome (1st Century)

Saturday, January 28: Luke 6:1-5

Annabel Robinson writes: "The word 'Sabbath' comes from a Hebrew word meaning 'cease'. The first reference to this comes in Genesis 2:1-3, when God ceased from his work of creation on the seventh day.

"The fourth commandment (Exodus 20:8-11) introduces the idea of rest. The implication of the teaching here is that there is more to life than work, and that rest (not inactivity) is the goal of life. The commandment is elaborated in Exodus 31:12-17, with the addition of the explanation that observance of the Sabbath is a sign and is part of the covenant.

"In Leviticus 25:1-7 we read of an extension of this idea: the Sabbath year – the observance of a whole year in which the land was to be left for the poor. This teaching (which was rarely – if ever – observed) reinforced the idea that the Israelites lived under God, who cared about the poor. Observing the Sabbath was intended to show the Israelites that:

- there is more to life than work and money
- they were to live as God's people
- the land was given to them to use in God's way.

The prophets repeatedly blast the Israelites for abandoning these principles.

"The Sabbath is mentioned in the New Testament frequently in connection with the Pharisees, who had gone to extreme lengths to identify what counted as work so that they could be sure that neither they nor anyone else broke the Old Testament rules.

"Jesus normally observed the Sabbath, going to the synagogue services (Luke 4:16). However, he did not accept the restrictions devised by the Pharisees. On the contrary, he emphasised the underlying purpose of the Sabbath: to be doing the work of God.

"Sabbath observance was not a matter of legal restrictions but of joyful freedom. There is more to life than work and making money. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

"This raises some important questions for us in the twenty-first century:

- Have we got our priorities right? Do we show by our lifestyle that work and money are not all-important?
- Have we devised our own 'rules' for the Sabbath? Are we critical of those who break them?
- What is the legitimate place for leisure in our lives?
- Does our lifestyle reflect Jesus' priorities?"

How would you answer those questions? What do you need to do about them?

*Dear Lord, as I come to you today
fill my heart and my whole being with the wonder of Your presence.
It is so easy to get caught up with the trappings of work, wealth, and worry in this life.
Remind me that the best things in life are free:
love, laughter, caring and sharing.
In Your loving presence, I unwind the past day.
I attend to the shadows and what they say to me,
seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.
I gather in all the goodness and light of your Spirit, in gratitude.
Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I share with Jesus, may I also learn to be still and listen.
I open my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
And I listen to what He is saying to me.
I ask Him to help me to place myself fully in His care,
knowing that He always wants what is best for me.
Amen*

Sunday, January 29: Luke 6:6-11

Paul Isaak writes, *"It was probably no accident that many of Jesus' 'mighty works' were associate with the Sabbath. It is likely Jesus deliberately did them on that day. Within Judaism, the Sabbath had come to be regarded as a symbol of the peace, restoration, and well-being of Israel, and the peaceful enjoyment of the Sabbath was to be one of the signs that the messianic age had come (Isaiah 14:3). Jesus' actions indicated to those who were ready to respond that his mission bore all the marks of the promised Sabbath of Israel."*

This man is ashamed of his ugly hand, but also of himself. In Jesus' time, illness like this was thought to be a punishment for some sin he'd committed. Other people avoid him, a sinner, unclean. When Jesus restores his hand, he is doing more than healing a man's appendage. He's healing and making this person whole in body, soul, and relationship both with God and other people. This person is re-created as the person God created him to be. He is made new, reborn. This is good news, the best news.

Jesus is under the watchful/judgmental eyes of the Pharisees, paragons of the letter of the Law. Think about the symbolism of what Jesus is doing here – on the Sabbath of all days:

- God had called the Israelites to be His people. From the call of Abraham (Genesis 12) on, God's people were called to be a blessing to all nations. Rabbi Dosick, writing today, still understands this as the Jewish mission (see January 19: *"To be a Jew means to have a special role and purpose, to have a sacred mission ... We are not here on earth just to breathe and live out a measured number of days and then die. Rather we are here on earth to be active participants, partners with God, in the task of building up the world and making it into the best place that it can be"*).
- Jesus is saying the Pharisees are like a body with a deformed hand. Their religion has devolved into an ugly, life-destroying list of rules and rituals. It doesn't work. It's broken. The Sabbath, intended as a blessing, has become a curse. The Pharisees' religion is shriveling people's souls.
- The religion of the day needs the miracle of God's touch to give it life, once again.
- *"Hold out your hand (your hearts, your religion, your life)"* Jesus says, *"and I will make it whole."*

The man takes a risk. He could end up looking like a fool if Jesus cannot heal him. The Pharisees could ostracize him still further. He is willing to take a risk with Jesus, to find new life, real life.

Would the Pharisees take a risk? If they are sincere about their faith, they should see who Jesus is. They should see He can give them a genuine relationship with God that will transform their lives. Knowing Jesus as Messiah, they could enjoy the promised feast in the kingdom of God, now and forever.

They won't take the risk. They become more angry, bitter, and judgmental. They choose to be miserable.

What are the "withered hands" in our lives? What parts of our lives are lifeless? Dead? What parts of our lives do we keep back from Jesus?

Jesus asks you and me, *"Will you give the withered/broken parts of your life to Me, to be healed?"* Will I?

*I pause for a moment.
I think of the love and the grace that God showers on me,
creating me in his image and likeness, making me his temple.
"There are very few people who realize what God would make of them
if they abandoned themselves into his hands,
and let themselves be formed by his grace." (Ignatius)
I ask for the grace to trust myself totally to God's love.
Jesus, you speak to me through the words of the gospels.
May I respond to your call today.
Teach me to recognize your hand at work in my daily living.
Teach me to live and share what I have experienced of Jesus.
Help me to go back home and tell them what God has done for me. Amen.*