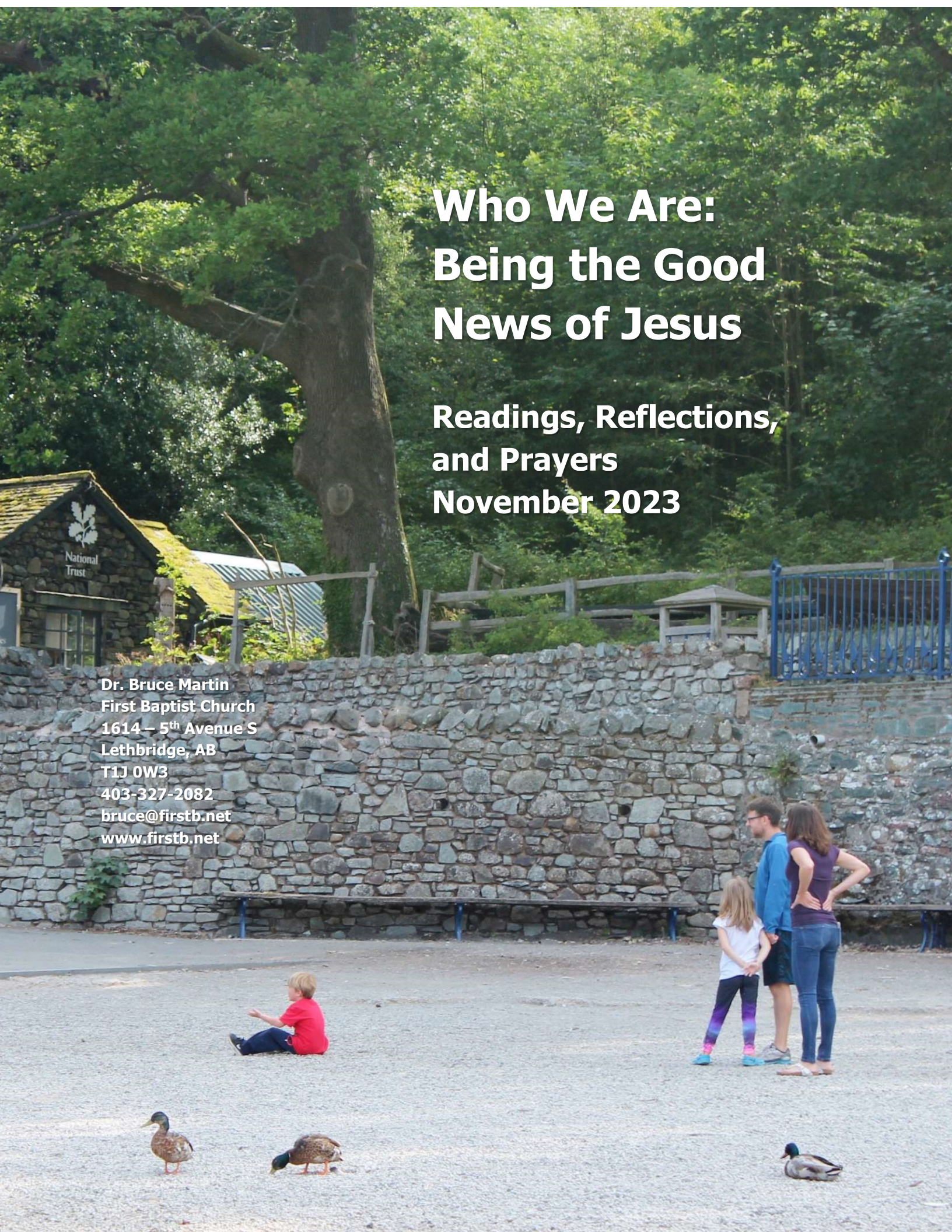


Who We Are: Being the Good News of Jesus

Readings, Reflections,
and Prayers
November 2023

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Monday, November 13: Romans 1:1-12 (Being and bringing Good News for All People)

Our church is part of a family of 180+ churches across Western Canada, the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada, the CBWC (www.cbwc.ca). "Denominations" can get a bad rap these days (sometimes justifiably). They can be autocratic and stifling.

Our churches don't work that way. Our family is "bottom up" not "top down." As a local congregation, our membership – you – makes all our decisions, sets our budget, and determines our priorities. Our own church membership calls our church staff and gives them direction through our elected Church Council.

Then, as a local congregation, we work with other churches for ministry and mission, locally, regionally, and internationally. As a member church of the CBWC, we work with other churches to make decisions, create a budget, and set priorities for the denomination. The CBWC leadership, Executive Minister Rob Ogilvie, Regional Minister Tim Kerber, and other staff, are responsible to the membership, churches like us.

The mission statement of the CBWC is to *"reach people for Christ by seeking the health and extending the ministry of the local church. CBWC prayerfully supports local churches and their communities by training leaders, supporting innovative ministries, responding compassionately to social needs, responding to crises and providing churches with administrative and financial services. In partnership with our local churches, CBWC also plays a collaborative role in seeding new expressions of church for today."*

Being part of the CBWC helps us to do things regionally we cannot do on our own. For instance, we help support small churches in Brooks and Longview and work with five other churches to run Mill Creek Camp. Through our denomination, we sponsor refugees, support Carey Theological College, pastors' retreats, an ordination process (recently Troy, Kyle, Anna), and a medical/pension plan for our staff.

Personally, I appreciate the encouragement and practical support that comes from getting together with fellow pastors. Those of us in our local region (south of Calgary) get together 3-4 times a year to share with, pray with, and encourage one another. We also have pastors' and spouses' retreats which are wonderful opportunities for us and our spouses to share, learn, pray, and grow with one another.

One of the themes that comes through in Paul's letters is the sense of connectedness and community among the churches he works with. He is not just focused on one church. He sees the big picture and appreciates we can do so much more together. At this point, Paul has never been to Rome, but he has heard of the church in the city. He wants to encourage them. *"When we get together, I want to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours,"* he writes (1:12). Please do thank God for the broader community of churches who encourage us, and who we can encourage.

At a personal level, we all benefit when we share with and encourage one another in our church and community. Who can you encourage in their faith? A family member? A friend? A colleague? A neighbour? Simply share your faith in Jesus and see where the conversation leads.

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

John Wesley (1707-1788)

Tuesday, November 14: Romans 1:13-17 (Being and bringing Good News for All People)

A local church like ours, other churches in our city, and a network of churches like the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada, don't exist for themselves. We are a church, and family of churches, whose Lord is Jesus. We want to know Jesus. We want to follow and serve Jesus. We want to share the Good News of Jesus.

Paul, writing to the church in Rome, whom he has never visited, is clear about his priorities. He wants to *"to preach the Good News"* (1:15). Why? *"For I am not ashamed of this **Good News** about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes"* (1:16).

What's the good news? *"This **Good News** tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by **faith**. As the Scriptures say, 'It is through **faith** that a righteous person has life'" (1:17). We are saved by faith in Jesus.*

The earliest Christian confession was that "Jesus Christ is Lord":

- *"If you openly declare that **Jesus is Lord** and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved"* (Romans 10:9-10).
- *"At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that **Jesus Christ is Lord**, to the glory of God the Father"* (Philippians 2:10-11).

It's good for us as a church, a denomination, and as individuals to keep our priorities straight. We are first and foremost **people of JESUS** and the **church of JESUS**. We are people saved by what Jesus has done for us on the cross. We are saved by faith in Him. We don't earn our salvation. We share His Good News.

- What does it mean to you, **personally**, that "Jesus is **your** Lord"? How does that shape how you live? Pray for God's wisdom and lordship in your life.
- What ought it mean to our **church**, together, that "Jesus is **our** Lord"? Pray for our leadership that we may know that and live that truth.
- What is our Good News? Pray that individually and corporately can live and share Good News.

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

Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887)

Wednesday, November 15: Matthew 28:16-20 (Being and bringing Good News for All People)

As the people of Jesus – personally, as a church, and as a family of churches – we believe the good news about Jesus is too good to keep to ourselves. From the beginning, Jesus (our Lord) commissions us to be missional people: people who want others to know and experience the good news of Jesus.

John 3:16 reminds us that God so loved the world He gave His only Son. The love of God has not changed. He still wants ALL people to come, know, and experience His love, mercy, forgiveness, and new life.

However, someone must go and make Him known. That “someone” includes you and me.

One of the strategic priorities that emerged from a time of prayer and discernment for our denomination, the CBWC, was a renewed call to **Engaging in Mission**. We are not called to simply sit back and “do church”: go to services, be part of a small group, and support our ministries in our own church. We are called to **BE** His church: to share His love with the world around us, to be salt and light in a dying and dark world, to be a mission outpost in a world that does not know Him. We need His strength to do this. The same Spirit of God that inspired and empowered the first disciples in us as well.

The love of Jesus is (at least) twofold. On the one hand, we share the message of God’s love, grace, and salvation through Jesus **in Word**. Paul writes, *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?”* (Romans 10:13-14). We can share God’s Good News about Jesus with family, friends, and neighbours.

On the other hand, we also share God’s Good News of love and grace through our actions, **in deed**. Jesus practically cared for people’s needs: He healed them, fed them, touched them, restored them, saw justice done for them, advocated for them, and blessed them in countless ways. Paul certainly shared God’s Good News both in word and in deed: he organized practical support for people, spoke out against racism, and advocated for those who had no voice (slaves, women, children). We follow these models of love in word and deed: we advocate for justice, care for those in need, visit shut-ins, sponsor refugees, etc., etc.

- How can I share God’s good news in Word?
- How can I share God’s love in deed?

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

Augustine (354-430)

Thursday, November 16: Philippians 1:1-11 (Being and bringing Good News for all people)

One of the themes that comes across throughout the Bible is the importance of relationships. Friendships matter. Family relationships matter. Church relationships matter.

When Paul writes this letter, he is in prison in Rome. The Roman emperor is the notorious Nero. Roman historian, Tacitus, records how Nero had Christians *“clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night ...”* Paul was in a stressful situation. But stress was nothing new to Paul or to Christians in Philippi. Philippi was a rough town, full of tough Greek miners who didn’t like Romans, and grizzled veterans of the Roman army who didn’t like Greeks.

Notice WHAT Paul prays. *“I thank my God every time I remember you all ...”* (1:3). Paul had a lot to remember about the Christians in Philippi ([Acts 16:11-40](#)). When you go through major events (being stripped, beaten, flogged, thrown into prison, and miraculously delivered) with other people (or sharing good things, “partnership in the gospel”), you form a special bond.

The second strategic priority emerging from our denomination's days of prayer and discernment is ***Investing in Relationship***. As individual believers, a church, churches in our city, and a denomination, relationships are critical to our growth and health.

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy," says Paul. For Paul, joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness depends on circumstances – the absence of problems. Joy is an attitude of the heart that is independent of circumstances. Even from prison, Paul can write with joy, remembering his friends and living his faith. Godly joy cannot be taken away from us.

One source of Paul's joy is people. He has friends. They are his partners in the Good News. There is something wonderful about family and friends who share a common faith in Jesus Christ. Despite circumstances, we can know God's joy when people encourage us. We can encourage them in return.

Paul's other source of joy – his ultimate source of joy – is God Himself. The same God who was with Paul in hard times in Philippi is present with Him in prison in Rome. God never leaves him. Paul does have to ***choose*** joy. He must ***choose*** to pray, to pray with thanksgiving, and to appreciate these sources of joy.

The same God who was with Paul in Philippi and Rome is ***with you*** right now. Paul is confident the God who began a good work in your life will continue it until it is finished. God will never abandon you. There is nowhere you can go out of His presence ([Psalm 139](#)). He is with you in your home, your workplace, your school. Nothing can happen that can separate you from the love of God ([Romans 8](#)). His presence and power can be just as real to you today as He was to Paul back then. He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion. This is God's promise.

Celebrate your relationships. Draw strength from your friends and family. Give encouragement to your friends and family. Celebrate your faith in Jesus. Draw strength from His Spirit within you.

*Send forth your light and your truth,
that we may always live near you, our God.
Let us feel your love,
that we may be, as it were, already in heaven,
that we may do our work as the angels do theirs.
Let us be ready for every work,
ready to go out or in,
to stay or to depart, just as you direct.
Lord, let us remember that our joy does not depend
on anything that happens to us outwardly,
but is totally based on faith in you and conformity to your will.
Amen.*

Henry Martyn (1781-1812)

Friday, November 17: Philippians 1:12-19 (Being and bringing Good News for all people)

The third strategic priority emerging from our denomination's days of prayer and discernment is ***Cultivating Leadership***. Our church – every church – needs to keep renewing its leadership. Paul is now in prison in Rome. He is no longer free to come, go, preach, and serve. Even though it's difficult, the church in Philippi must adapt and renew its leadership. This is part of Paul's prayer for the church.

Does it ever seem like bad things are happening? Like the roof is caving in, walls are collapsing, and the basement is flooding ... all at the same time? Paul has two problems. First, he is in prison in Rome (1:13). Prison, especially an ancient Roman prison, is not a pleasant place to be. When a missionary like Paul was imprisoned, other believers, like those in Philippi, feared the worst. Notice what Paul says, however: *"I want you to know that what has happened has really served to advance the gospel ..."* (1:12). How can that be? Apparently, Paul has been sharing God's Good News with the palace guards.

Secondly, some people, jealous of Paul's "success" as a speaker and church planter, are trying to build their own empires and make Paul's life in prison more miserable (1:15-17). There is a surprise ending to this little story. Paul insists the truth of Jesus is strong enough to transcend unscrupulous messengers. God can even use the mixed motives of insincere people for His purposes. Paul is confident that, as long as Jesus is being talked about, God's truth will prevail. Still today, some people present a rather skewed picture of Jesus and His teachings. But the good news is that God can even make something good come of that.

J.B. Phillips once said, "*Working with the gospel is like an electrician working with the wiring while the power is still on.*" We can hold the Good News with "kid gloves," treating it as if it's so fragile. We're afraid to share our faith because we're afraid if we get something wrong or forget something, the other person might not be saved. God's Good News is bigger than us. The Holy Spirit of God is alive, and He can take our words – incomplete or incoherent as they may be – and do mighty miracles through them.

Alternatively, we can think it's up to us to protect the Good News. We can get nasty with people we disagree with, even other Christians. God doesn't need us to be His pit bulls. He is quite capable of defending His own honour. He needs us to be His ambassadors of Good News ([2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#)).

Jesus' commitment to us is His Holy Spirit is powerfully alive. Even through the dark times – from Jesus' crucifixion, to Nero's dungeon, to self-serving charlatans – God's truth, will prevail. Share what God is doing in your life. Simply tell your story. People don't need a full theological treatise on atonement. The Spirit can take your plain words and do great wonders through them.

Sometimes, though, we feel "imprisoned" like Paul. We don't seem to have opportunities to tell our story. We're chained to the desk, or chained to the sink, or chained to our home.

Paul was in a situation where he didn't have much opportunity either, but he could speak to one guard. Apparently, that's what he was doing. One person at a time – with the person at the next desk or the toddler in the next room – that's how the good news is always spread.

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

Hannah Whitall Smith (1832-1911)

Saturday, November 18: Philippians 1:20-26 (Being and bring Good News for all people)

What is life all about? What are the most important things in life? Most of us don't really ask ourselves those questions too seriously until we are faced with major crises. Unfortunately, it can take us until we receive some dread diagnosis or end up on life support before we begin to really sort out our priorities and

truly value what ought to be the most important things of all ...

What is most important to Paul? What is his life all about?

Jesus, of course, is the most important foundation of his life. After that? His friends.

Paul is in prison in Rome. Although he doesn't know what the future will hold, it's not looking good. I'm sure Paul knows very well of the ways in which Christians have suffered and been brutally murdered under Nero's vicious rule. But he can keep a positive attitude, even about people who are preaching Jesus out of jealousy and are making Paul's life more miserable.

Viktor Frankl, interred in Auschwitz Concentration Camp, wrote of his experience:

"We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles, along the one road leading from the camp. The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. Anyone with very sore feet supported himself on his neighbor's arm. Hardly a word was spoken; the icy wind did not encourage talk. Hiding his mouth behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me whispered suddenly: 'If our wives could see us now. I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us.'"

"That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking of his wife. Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.

"A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which Man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of Man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved.

"In a position of utter desolation, when Man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way – an honorable way – in such a position Man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, 'The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.'"

When we think about God's amazing love for us – ultimately shown to us in Jesus – when we reflect on the amazing relationships we have with family and friends, life can always be rich and full, no matter what situation we find ourselves in.

Frankl went on to say, *"The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance."*

How can you choose God's joy today? God's peace? God's hope?

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

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

Sunday, November 19: Philippians 1:27-30 (Citizens of Heaven/citizens of Canada)

Paul likens our lives as Christians, as “citizens of heaven,” to a battleground as well. We would like to think everyone is going to love us and be nice to us because we love Jesus. Many people dislike Jesus. They see His values as a threat. Therefore, following Jesus can be tough. *“We are in this struggle together,”* says Paul. *“You have seen my struggle in the past, and you know that I am still in the midst of it”* (1:30).

One of the BIG themes in the Bible is that life can be difficult. This isn’t popular to talk about. We prefer a version of the Good News that promises wealth, health, happiness, hugs, flowers, and sunshine.

We can be thankful we live in a much safer time and place than Paul did. In Canada, in 2023, none of us is seriously concerned about being imprisoned, persecuted, or killed for our faith (let’s not forget this is the reality for millions of Christians in other parts of the world, today, however).

But we will all potentially face health problems, financial problems, work problems, relationship problems, family problems, school problems, _____ problems (fill in the blank).

Paul considers it a privilege to suffer for Jesus. Many early Christians talk about how suffering

- (1) helped them grow in their faith because in tough times they really had to trust in God, and
- (2) made them feel closer to Jesus because they felt they could better appreciate His sufferings, sacrifice, and love. How can difficult times help us grow spiritually?

“The holiest moment of the church service,” Charles Colson writes, *“is the moment when God’s people, strengthened by preaching and sacrament, **go out of the church door into the world.** We don’t **go to church**, we **are the church.**”* We take Jesus into our world.

Church is not a holy huddle where we hide from the world. Church is a place of renewal, encouragement, and support from which we go out and **BE** the church in the world.

As we go into the world this week, may we go as citizens of heaven, as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God. *“Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ,”* says Paul.

We are God’s people, Jesus’ family, citizens of His Kingdom. How does that make you feel? How does that change how we live? *“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:16).

*Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy.
May your Kingdom come.
May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us today the food we need,
and forgive us our sins,
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.
And don't let us yield to temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one.
For yours is the glory, forever and ever.
Amen.*

Monday, November 20: 1 Thessalonians 1 (Citizens of heaven/citizens of Canada)

An African proverb says, "*A stick in the swamp is not a crocodile.*" Simply going to church or reading the Bible doesn't make us Christian. Following Jesus involves a complete turning to God and a deep commitment to following Him into the challenges of life in the real world.

As we travel, each moment of every day with Jesus, we experience the joy, hope, and confidence we need to deal with the issues in our lives. That sounds easy. It can be very challenging.

Thessalonica was a tough place to follow Jesus. Paul and his friends were attacked by a mob, driven from town, and hounded across the countryside (see [Acts 17:1-13](#)). When Paul speaks of "*endurance*" (v.3) and "*severe suffering*" (v.6) he's sharing firsthand experiences. This is not an easy city to believe in Jesus.

- Paul encourages us that "*God has chosen you.*" What does it mean to you that God has chosen you? Spend some time appreciating His love for you.
- His Good News comes to us "*not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit.*" The Holy Spirit is in you; how does that change how you live?
- Our faith gives us "*joy*" through the Holy Spirit. How do you experience God's joy? If this is not your experience, how can you cultivate joy?
- The believers are known for their "*work produced by faith, labor prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*" What "*work produced by faith, labor prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*" are we know for? How is this a challenge and an inspiration to you?
- Paul writes, "*You became imitators of us and of the Lord.*" Paul's own life is an example of growing faithfulness, integrity, and spiritual maturity. Paul is not perfect, but he can hold up the trajectory of his life – toward becoming more and more like Jesus – as a model worth following. Someone does look up to you as an example of faithfulness: you do not need to be perfect. But God is encouraging you to make it your aim to be more and more like Jesus.

"*You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*" writes Paul. An idol is something, anything – other than God – that is most important in your life. It may be a goal, a person, a possession (or something you don't have yet but badly want), a hobby, a job, an investment, a lifestyle, a retirement hope ... It is something that controls your decision making and shapes your life. Our idols are powerful forces that shape our lives, but ultimately and inevitably disappoint us.

What influences you more than God? Are there any idols you need to turn from? They will disappoint you. What do I need to change?

*Lord my God, the amazing horrors of darkness
were gathered around me and covered me all over,
and I saw no way to carry on.
I felt the misery of my fellow creatures separated from the divine harmony,
and it was heavier than I could bear.
I lifted up my hand and stretched out my arm, but there was none to help me.
I looked round about and was amazed.
In the depth of misery, Lord,
I remembered that you are all-powerful,
that I had called you Father,
and I felt I loved you.
So I was made quiet in your will.
I waited for deliverance from you.
You had compassion on me when no man could help me.
I saw that humility under suffering was shown
to us in the most perfect example of your Son.
You taught me to follow him, and I said, "Father, your will be done."
Amen.*

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

Tuesday, November 21: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16 (Citizens of heaven/citizens of Canada)

If we become Christians, will our lives suddenly become peaceful, safe, and blessed? Some media personalities suggest that. In fact, if you send them a big enough donation, they guarantee it ...

Sometimes we are blessed in these ways by God. If you are, thank Him; enjoy those moments. Often, however, life continues to be difficult. But God gets us through. Paul and his friends went through horrendous experiences, but did so keeping themselves "*holy, righteous and blameless*" (2:10). In spite of their pain, they loved the believers in Thessalonica as if they were their own children, "*encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory*" (2:11-12).

When life is good it is easy to forget about God. We feel self-satisfied and self-sufficient. When life is tough we are forced to depend upon His Spirit every moment of every day. Paul's challenge to us is to stay close to the Lord during the good and the hard times. And, in all times, to stay "*holy, righteous and blameless.*"

"*You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches (in Judea/Israel) suffered from the Jews*" (v.14). This was true in Thessalonica ([Acts 17:1-13](#)). Suffering was part of the experience of most early Christians. The Christians in Judea suffered persecution (Paul had been part of that). Paul and his companions had suffered throughout Asia Minor (now Turkiye) and Greece (Philippi). Down the road the suffering would increase, rather than decrease, under emperors like Trajan and Nero.

The Jewish wisdom book, *Ecclesiasticus*, says: "*My child, if you would fear the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal. Be sincere of heart, be steadfast, and do not be alarmed when disaster comes. Cling to him and do not leave him, so that you may be honoured at the end of your days. Whatever happens to you, accept it, and in the uncertainty of your humble state, be patient. For gold is tested in the fire, and the chosen in the furnace of humiliation. Trust him and he will uphold you, follow a straight path and hope in him.*"

"*You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; do not turn aside for fear you fall. You who fear the Lord, trust him, and you will not be robbed of your reward. You who fear the Lord, hope for good gifts of his, everlasting joy and mercy. Look to the generations of old and see: whoever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame? Or whoever, steadfastly fearing him, was forsaken? Or whoever called to him and was ignored? For the Lord is compassionate and merciful, he forgives sins and saves in time of distress*" (2:1-11).

Paul also challenges us to reach out and care for others, even when we feel needy. As we live as citizens of

heaven AND citizens of Canada, the best antidote to our own suffering and pain is to care for others.

Encourage, comfort and urge others to live lives worthy of God, who calls them into His kingdom and glory.

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

Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556)

Wednesday, November 22: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5 (Citizens of heaven/citizens of Canada)

Here in the real world, life can be difficult. We need to be honest with ourselves and other people. Problems come. Sickness and death are real. In the movie, *The Princess Bride*, in a rather cynical moment, a character muses, "*Life is pain. Anyone who tells you otherwise is trying to sell you something.*" That might be a bit too hardnosed. But it has some truth to it.

Sometimes we present the good news about Jesus too much the opposite way. We suggest that, if you believe in Jesus, life will be so good – in terms of health, wealth, and every other way. We may present a Jesus who wants us all to be rich, well-fed, perfectly healthy, and enjoying the creature comforts of life.

This "health and wealth" theology is a uniquely North American version of the good news. It gives us spiritual permission to enjoy the self-indulgence and hedonism of our culture. After all, God wants us to have a brand new Mercedes and several huge screen TVs. Health-and-wealth-ism may have an initial appeal in poorer countries, but it doesn't last. It just doesn't ring true to people's lived experience.

A gospel emphasizing wealth and health is certainly not biblical. It runs contrary to Jesus' own life and teachings, the experience of Paul, the Thessalonians, and most early Christians. Paul and Silas were driven from Thessalonica after only a couple of weeks. Their critics followed them to Berea. In Athens and Corinth, they continued to experience opposition. This health/wealth emphasis makes a mockery of Jesus' warnings about the dangers of wealth. This is a consistent theme in the Old and New Testaments.

When people experience the pain of real life, health-and-wealth theology can't cope with reality. What do you do when you've been promised Jesus will give you all the comforts in this world and it doesn't happen? Paul is worried that somehow the Thessalonians Christians had got this message and might fall away from following Jesus, disillusioned.

Writing later, Paul will say, "*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ... We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*" (2 Corinthians 4:8-17).

When hard times come (and they will) be encouraged that God is with you through them all. Your light and

momentary troubles are achieving for you an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

As Oswald Chambers writes, *"God does not waste suffering, nor does He discipline out of caprice. If He plows, it is because He proposes a crop."* What is God saying to you?

*How can we praise you in life's ordinary moments,
bus, car or train,
pedestrian moments at home and employment,
with all those distractions?
How can we praise you?
How can we praise you when time is so precious,
appointments and targets
distracting our focus, muddying waters,
made clean for your purpose?
How can we praise you?
How can we praise you through all of our actions?
A smile and a greeting,
a shoulder to lean on, a word in due season,
love and compassion, in all situations?
Lord help us praise you.
Amen*

John Birch

Thursday, November 23: 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13 (Citizens of heaven/citizens of Canada)

As we live through new challenges and new experiences, we wrestle with how our faith shapes how we live in these times. We all need to keep learning. Being a disciple/follower/student of Jesus is a lifelong process of being teachable – by the word of God, by other mature Christians, and directly from the Holy Spirit.

- Are you a teachable person?
- Do you wrestle through how your faith shapes your life?
- Do you ask questions about how you could or should respond to personal, civic, and international issues as a Christian?
- Do you pray about how we can make a difference in our community?
- Are you restless, thinking you can do something more for the Lord?

This kind of "holy discontent" is good. It keeps us spiritually growing and alive.

Paul is worried the Thessalonians have either given in to the pressures around them or they have become disillusioned by the fact that they are suffering, despite their faith (in fact, they are suffering because of their faith). The truth is that the Thessalonians are standing firm. They are faithful to God. Wonderful.

They are resolute in their faith, but there are still things they need to learn. Paul longs to come and *"supply what is lacking in their faith"* (v.10). They can always learn more – about Jesus, about Scripture, about God – and about how their faith relates to the challenges of daily life.

Paul wants to come alongside his friends to help them learn how to live their faith. All of us need mentors – encouragers, teachers, and friends – who will help us grow in our faith.

Who has been a mentor/encourager/teacher to you? How have they helped you?

Is there someone you can help to grow, spiritually? Can you encourage someone? Who is Jesus putting on your heart?

*Dear Father, grower of spiritual fruit,
Let the fruit of the Spirit blossom, mature, and ripen in my life:*

*love,
joy,
peace,
patience,
kindness,
goodness,
faithfulness,
gentleness,
and self-control.*

There is no law against these.

Let me possess them.

Since I belong to Christ, I have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Let me live by the Spirit.

Let me walk by the Spirit.

*Let me show no self-conceit, give no provocation,
have no envy toward anyone else.*

*Let me live in, through, and for Christ Jesus,
as he lives in, through, and for me and his whole church.*

*In the name of Jesus I ask you to perfect us, whatever that may take,
and give us the grace to endure your renovation process.*

Amen.

Eldon Degge

Friday, November 24: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 (Citizens of heaven/citizens of Canada)

Listen to Paul's counsel:

- *"Live in a way that pleases God ..."*
- *"God's will is for you to be holy ..."*
- *"Love each other ..."*
- *"Live a quiet life, minding your own business ..."*

(Why would this have been particularly good counsel in Thessalonica? [see [Acts 17:1-13](#)])

Twice, Paul adds words to the effect that, *"You live this way already, and we encourage you to do so even more."* Just as following Jesus is a matter of life-long learning, it is also a matter of life-long improvement. We are not perfect yet – we never will be. The challenge is never to give up and say, *"I'm good enough,"* or *"I have arrived,"* or *"I know what I need to know to live as a Christian; I can stop learning and thinking now."*

We all face new challenges that push us to think through how our faith shapes our decisions and our lives. Constant and never-ending improvement is what we are called to.

"Then people who are not Christians will respect the way you live ..." As we are genuine about our lives, honest that we are not perfect yet, and sincere in our desire to improve and keep learning, people will see the reality of God's work in our lives.

People can accept our problems IF we admit them honestly. They will respect us when we have the integrity to recognize our weaknesses. And they will appreciate it when they see our resolve to keep on trying to improve, to aim for godliness, holiness, and integrity.

"God's will is for you to be holy ... You live this way already, but do so even more." May God help us to "do so even more, and more, and more ..."

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

George Dawson (1821-1876)

Saturday, November 25: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (Citizens of heaven/citizens of Canada)

We are citizens of heaven and citizens of Canada. One day, we do believe we will be with Jesus. In meantime, we try to live for Jesus as well as we can.

One of the issues in the church in Thessalonica concerned the fate of some of their fellow believers who had died. Paul's answer is simple: Jesus died but was raised to life again (resurrection). In the same way we will die but be raised to life again (we will be resurrected, too).

In 4:15-18, Paul encourages the Thessalonians that our future hope is that *"we will be with the Lord forever"* (v.17). A lot has been made of what this might look like, how this will transpire, and what our personal experience will be. Paul's point is not to deal with practical, technical questions like when or how a "rapture" might take place (the word "rapture" is NOT found in Scripture anywhere – search the scriptures).

New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, comments, *"Christian language about the future is a set of signposts pointing into a mist. Signposts don't normally provide you with advance photographs of what you'll find at the end of the road, but that doesn't mean they aren't pointing in the right direction."*

The imagery used here would have been less confusing to Paul's first readers than to us. Many of the early believers were Jewish, steeped in the Old Testament (17:4). They would have understood Paul's imagery:

- They know the story of Moses coming down the mountain after being away a long time, to personally lead and teach his people ([Exodus 32](#)). Jesus' return is similar; He will return to lead His people. Hopefully they are more faithful than Moses' folks, who made an idol of a golden calf.
- They know [Daniel 7](#), which describes the suffering people of God being saved by the coming of *"one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven."* Paul says Jesus' return is similar. He will come back to be with, save and protect His people during their times of suffering. He will lead them into a time of resurrection and peace.
- They also lived in a culture where, when a king or emperor came to visit your town, you went out of your city to meet him (remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, [Matthew 21:1-11](#)). You didn't wait in your home until the king arrived. That would be rude. People would rush to meet the king and escort him into their city. It's a celebration. Now, Jesus, the King of Kings, is returning. Since it was a familiar picture of what happened in that day when the king came to your town, Paul is using the imagery of going out (or up) to meet Him, then escorting Him back to our world. Paul is emphasizing that Jesus, the rightful King of Kings and Lord of all, is coming to visit us. Will we welcome Him into our town? Our homes? Our lives?

There is LOTS of imagery to think about here. The key points are the truth of Jesus' coming, our

resurrection, and His presence. Regarding the specific details, times, and how-it-all-happens, we'll just have to wait and see. These verses in Thessalonians are absolutely true about what they tell us about:

- *Jesus.* He is resurrected now. He will be personally physically present with His people again one day in the future.
- *Those who have died who believe.* They will be resurrected to eternal life with Jesus.
- *Christians alive when Jesus returns.* They will be "transformed" with bodies like those who are resurrected ([1 Corinthians 15:41-54](#), [Philippians 3:21](#)).
- *Our eternal reality.* We will be with the Lord forever.

Paul's concern is a pastoral one. He wants suffering people to know that there will be a resurrection of all people. Ultimately those of us who believe, and our loved ones who believe, will be with the Lord forever. That is good news. Thank God for that tremendous promise. Paul isn't necessarily giving us all the details of when that will happen, how it will happen, or what it will look like.

In the meantime, we live every moment or every day knowing Jesus is with us, through His Spirit. Yes, one day we will be with Jesus. But He is with us right here, right now. No matter what challenges we face in life, Jesus is with us always. Everywhere. At every moment.

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

John Oxenham (1852-1941)

Sunday, November 26: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 (Citizens of heaven/citizens of Canada)

For us, this past year has been tough. To be honest, there are mornings when I've approached the day ahead with fear and trepidation: What bad thing is going to happen, today?

Wouldn't it be nice to know in advance what today will bring? Or maybe not? Maybe it's good we don't know the good things that will happen? We can be pleasantly surprised. And thankful.

Maybe it's good not to know ahead of time about the bad things that might happen?

As Paul has spoken about Jesus' return, he reminds us not to worry about when this will all take place. Paul's words echo the warnings of Jesus: "*No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard. Be alert. You do not know when that time will come*" (Mark 13:32-33).

Jesus uses a variety of parables to talk about this. For instance, He tells stories about virgins and lamps ([Matthew 25:1-13](#)), people given talents ([Matthew 25:14-30](#), "talents" are units of money, not abilities), sheep and goats ([Matthew 25:31-46](#)), and watchful gatekeepers ([Mark 13:34-37](#)).

Paul uses metaphors to try to speak of this mystery, too. The Lord's return will be like

- A thief coming in the night ... what does that suggest? No warning? What else (think on it)?
- A woman going into labour ... what does that suggest? A surprise? What else (think on it)?

Therefore, we should be like a wide-awake, sober person putting on his armour. What does that suggest? Alertness? Preparation? What else (think on it)? (For a giggle, picture the opposite – a drunken, half-

asleep person trying to put on armour – ouch. As the warnings on TV say, “Kids, don’t try this at home”)

Paul’s main concern, again, is pastoral. How should we live knowing Jesus will return, the dead will be resurrected, those who are still living will be transformed, and we will be with the Lord forever?

- Live as a “*child of the light*” or a “*child of the day*.” What does this mean to you? Perhaps think about the opposite: what would a “child of darkness” or a “child of the night” be like? In contrast then, what would a “child of the light” or a “child of the day” be like?
- *Be alert and self-controlled.* In what areas of your life do you struggle with self-control? How can you prayerfully work on it?
- *Let faith and love guard your heart.* Do you get overly stressed, worried, fearful? How does this hurt you? How can you work on your faith in Jesus and God’s love to know His peace and joy?
- *Make the hope of salvation the protection for your mind.* Do you find yourself with doubts? Fears? Wandering off in strange directions? Hold onto Jesus as the anchor of your faith.

“Encourage one another and build each other up. Just as in fact you are doing” (5:11). Paul encourages them that they are already doing this. But we can always do better at this sort of thing, can’t we?

How can we encourage one another?

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

James S. Bell, Jr.

Monday, November 27: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 (Citizens of heaven/citizens of Canada)

Paul’s final words for living wisely in the world flow out of verse 11 (*“Encourage one another and build each other up ...”*) His advice is pretty straightforward. Read it over several times. What is God saying to you?

To help you see this passage with fresh eyes, read it in Eugene Peterson’s translation, *The Message*:

“And now, friends, we ask you to honor those leaders who work so hard for you, who have been given the responsibility of urging and guiding you along in your obedience. Overwhelm them with appreciation and love. Get along among yourselves, each of you doing your part. Our counsel is that you warn the freeloaders to get a move on. Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet.

“Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs. And be careful that when you get on each other’s nerves you don’t snap at each other. Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out.

"Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.

"Don't suppress the Spirit, and don't stifle those who have a word from the Master. On the other hand, don't be gullible. Check out everything. Keep only what's good. Throw out anything tainted with evil.

"May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together — spirit, soul, and body — and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it.

"Friends, keep up your prayers for us. Greet all the followers of Jesus there with a holy embrace. And make sure this letter gets read to all the brothers and sisters. Don't leave anyone out. The amazing grace of Jesus Christ be with you." The amazing grace of Jesus Christ be with you, today.

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

Prayer of a seriously wounded U.S. Civil War soldier

Tuesday, November 28: Acts 1:1-8 (Sharing our faith, globally)

We are called to share the good news of Jesus locally with other churches in our city (for Jesus' disciples, *"in Jerusalem"*). We are called to share the love of Jesus in our regional area (*"in Judea"* back then): we do this through our network of churches in the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada (CBWC). We also want to share Jesus' message and mercy globally (*"to the ends of the earth"*). We, in the CBWC, partner with sister denominations in Ontario-Quebec, Atlantic Provinces, and Francophone Baptists to do overseas missions through **Canadian Baptist Ministries (CBM)** www.cbmin.org). CBM is the global mission effort of over 1000 Canadian Baptist churches across the country. We can do more together than we could do separately.

We could say, *"There is enough need in Lethbridge; why do anything beyond ourselves?"* The first believers could have done the same. But the church grew and became healthy by having a BIGGER vision than just itself, by having a BIGGER faith than just its own backyard, and by stretching itself to what seemed impossible. Within a generation they had expanded from a handful of believers in Jerusalem to churches throughout the known world: from India, to North Africa, to Rome itself. Within 300 years, the Roman Emperor was a Christian and Christianity had spread throughout the Roman Empire.

With the Spirit of God guiding us, inspiring us, and empowering us, we can do BIGGER things than we imagine, too. Our work in Cuba with CBM is an example of this. Our Cuba ministry teams have been able to open the door for other Canadian churches to partner with churches in Cuba and help those churches grow. At the same time, our partnership with Cuban churches has blessed us with a BIGGER sense of purpose and mission than just our own community.

CBM, as a global mission organization, is committed to expressing His love through word and deed. They emphasize working in partnership through local churches rather than coming in as the outside "experts."

Our Cuba teams are a great example of this: rather than thinking we have all the answers, we support, encourage, resource, and strengthen local Cuban churches. We can learn from them, in partnership, too.

Pray for our global ministry. CBM works in some of the most challenging countries in the world including Lebanon, Rwanda, Bolivia, Cameroon, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Philippines, and India.

Pray for the Cuban Baptist Churches. And pray for our Cuba team for February 2024: Lenna Isleifson, Ezra Isleifson, Silas Klassen, Harvey Dyck, Anne Dyck, Lucy Graham, Cara Horwood, and Troy Taylor.

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

John Wesley (1703-1791)

Wednesday, November 29: Acts 2:1-21 (Sharing our faith, globally)

Having a global vision sounds great, but it feels overwhelming. How can we as one church – how can I as one individual – make a difference for Jesus in the world?

The first disciples were fearfully huddled together in a room with much the same prayer. How could a few badly frightened, ordinary people make a difference for Jesus? What happened?

What do we learn about the power of God through this story?

If we read on in Acts 2, we see that, after Peter's sermon (2:14-36), *"Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day – about 3,000 in all"* (2:41). Frankly, Peter's sermon was not that great. It would get a solid "C+" in preaching class.

What makes the difference is God's Spirit moving in the hearts and minds of those who hear it.

When we pray, things happen.

We may glibly say, *"Prayer is the greatest force in the universe,"* but do we really believe it? Acts 2 is inviting us to truly believe that. And if we do **believe** it, do we actually **pray**?

Most of us cannot go to Bolivia, Lebanon, or even Cuba as long-term missionaries or even on a short-term mission trip. But we can be part of our global mission movement by praying for those who are involved and for the churches and believers they work with. Prayer is the greatest force in the universe. Pray for

- Mark, Dawn, Alea, Lorraine, renae, and Aaron Blankenstyn at Rosslyn Academy in Nairobi, Kenya.
- The Cuban Baptist Churches and our Ministry Team for February 2024
- The churches of Bolivia and CBM field staff: David and Suzannah Nacho, Tim and Kallie Hutton, Bruno and Kathleen Soucey
- Lisa Ratzlaff (SIM Zambia)

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

Tracy Macon Sumner

Thursday, November 30: Acts 3:1-16 (Sharing our faith, globally)

We want all people to know the good news about Jesus. We want people to know that, when they come to Jesus in repentance and faith, their sins are forgiven, they have new life with Him, and life has purpose. This is sharing the **good news in WORD**: we want people to hear and know this good news about Jesus.

But Jesus' good news is about more than just the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Jesus healed people. He touched people. He fed people. He brought people into community. He met people's practical needs. Throughout the Book of Acts, the early church cared for people's physical and practical needs as well as sharing the message of salvation. This is the **good news in DEED**.

Canadian Baptist Ministries (CBM), our global ministry, emphasizes ministry in the name of Jesus through both Word and Deed – **integral mission**. Integral mission, caring for both people's spiritual, physical, social, and emotional needs, creates lasting impact and lasting change.

CBM is involved in

- **Pioneer outreach and global discipleship.** Sharing the good **in Word** with those who have not heard it before, then discipling them to be followers of Jesus.
- **Sustainable community development.** Relief and development projects that positively change communities by demonstrating God's love **in deed**.
- **Grassroots leadership development.** Empowering and educating local leaders who can take over the work. We try to work ourselves out of a job.

In our own local community we seek to model integral mission as well.

- We want to share the good news of Jesus' mercy, forgiveness, and new life **in word**. We do this in our services, small groups, youth ministry, children's programmes, day camps, AND (I hope) through our personal witness to how Jesus has impacted our lives.
- We also want to share God's love **in deed**: we do this through refugee sponsorship, the Food Bank, Soup Kitchen, Days-for-Girls, Stitch-in-time ministry, visiting, and so much more.

How about us?

- Pray for an opportunity this week to share God's love **in Word** with someone: who can you

- encourage in faith? Who can you invite to church?
- Pray for an opportunity to share God's love **in deed** with someone: who can you help in a practical way, in the name of Jesus?

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

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Friday, December 1: Acts 4:1-22 (Sharing our faith, globally)

If anyone ever tells you that following Jesus is all sweetness and light, invite them to actually read the Bible.

Was it sweetness and light for Peter and John?

Here are some challenging thoughts from our sister churches in Lebanon: *"In the West today, there exists both confusion and discord among many on the issues of migration and refugees, even among Christians. Post something on social media, and you'll invite others to either scourge or praise you, depending on your and their positions. We as theologians and practitioners can learn from the church in Lebanon about how it has responded to the refugee and migrant crisis.*

"The church in Lebanon is small and are only a tiny speck within the global Christian landscape, but perhaps here in Lebanon we have something to say. The church, as a minority people, has persevered despite brutal wars, political gerrymandering, and economic exploitation because of political identity and religious convictions. Despite its suffering and marginalization, the church in Lebanon has sought ways to show the love of Christ to migrants, immigrants, and refugees ...

"Lebanon, a country of 4 million people, has received 1.5 million Syrian refugees and another 500,000 migrants (this number is much debated) into Lebanon's 10,000 square kilometers. One out of three people on Lebanese soil is a refugee or a migrant. The refugee and migrant population has become a challenge for Lebanon as it attempts to remain a protective place for the displaced as well as call for refugees to return home. In reality, what the West is facing is miniscule in comparison to what Lebanon faces.

"The church also has responded in many ways, as examples for the global church. One such ministry started small and has developed into an early childhood development (ECD) program for at-risk poor Lebanese, Syrian refugee, and migrant children, caring for both documented and undocumented children. Additionally, they work with parents through their Positive Parenting Project by helping them develop the skills they need to create lasting, healthy, and active relationships with their children. Another ministry focuses on medical and food parcel/card distribution in Beirut and refugee camps. This ministry provides free medical care for refugees and migrants. They also provide monthly food help for a number of families. A key characteristic is that they do not distinguish between religion or documented or undocumented status in their provision of relief.

"Both ministries are underfunded and overworked. But the staff are unfazed, because they believe that they're making a real difference in the lives of the downtrodden. They understand their work as mission. The reality of Syrian refugees and migrant peoples actually helps inform the church that we cannot sit idly by while we are aware of the plight of so many who need help. I believe we need Kairos [(καιρός) –ancient

Greek for right, critical, or opportune] moments to converge a coalition to act in the name of Jesus.

"Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection provide the best framework to inform our responses and engagement with the question of migration and refugees. As Christians, we need to take our cues from Jesus' life and ministry rather than social media or political leaders as we navigate xenophobic objections and push back against what we are witnessing.

"In the gospels, we learn that the Kingdom of God is ushered in through Jesus establishing a new relationship between humanity and God. In the person of Jesus, we are confronted with Kingdom ethics and morality. And this Kingdom is a kingdom of "truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love, and peace." Jesus' life and ministry in the gospels is a stark contrast to what is offered by the empires of the world which seek to enact laws, close themselves off, or dominate the weak, the stranger, and the foreigner. Jesus Himself was all of those.

"Born in a stable in Bethlehem, his family fled as refugees to Egypt because of Herod's infanticidal policy, eliminating firstborn boys. Jesus grows, lives, and works in Galilee, an area known as being on the outskirts, the backwaters, the margins of society (Mk. 1:16). Jesus' first message was that He came to "preach the good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives... [to give] sight to the blind... [to let the] oppressed go free... [and to] proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19) Jesus informs our attitudes towards refugees, foreigners, and strangers. Jesus had table fellowship with Samaritans, tax collectors, the sick, and the sinful—all the excluded of society. He was with the weak, such as women and children, and radically taught of forgiveness (Matt. 18: 21-35) and love for enemies (Luke 6:27-36).

"But some may ask — does that mean we have to let them in?

"The question itself touches on the complexities of migration and forced displacement. Do we exclude or find ways and policies to welcome them? As a pastor and practitioner, I choose to inform my practice from Jesus' ministry. He demonstrated the importance of human relationships by calling us to give our time, money, and energies into helping the poor, caring for the excluded, and welcoming the stranger. Jesus' life, words, and ministry provide us with a consistent framework to measure both our internal attitudes towards refugees and migrants and our actual responses. Through Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection we see God moving to the poor, the alien, and the disenfranchised. We learn that Jesus does not limit his care and grace to his own community, but rather expands grace to include all peoples with whom He comes into contact.

"From our context in Lebanon, the issue of migrants and refugees is ever present. While there are a lot of systemic socio-economic inequalities and harmful policies and practices that directly affect migrant and refugee communities in destructive ways, we also see signs of hope. We see Christians from all churches having the theological and emotional courage to challenge systemic problems by starting free medical clinics and dispensaries, schools and safe spaces for children, giving food parcels and vouchers, and welcoming all peoples into our churches as brothers and sisters created in His likeness (imago Dei).

"What happens to poor refugees and migrants who experience segregated living conditions, curfews, confiscated IDs, limited residency permits, business closures, and other conditions of vulnerability? What happens if widespread arrests are made for lapsed residency permits, causing separated and broken up families? What happens if vulnerable children do not have access to education and development? And what happens to the witness of the gospel when the church chooses to do nothing? Hosea 6:6 (cited by Jesus in Matthew 9:13; 12:7), reads 'for I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings'; or in other words when we Christians acknowledge God, there is an internal motivating impulse that calls us to act mercifully. For us, we choose to welcome migrants and refugees."

Peter and John face a hard choice: to obey God or to listen to other voices. What about us: "Do you think God wants us to obey you (the voices of power and fear) rather than him?"

*Jesus, fill me with your love now,
and I ask you, accept me,
and use me a little for your glory.
Accept me and my service,
and take for yourself all the glory.
Amen*

David Livingstone (1813-1873)

Saturday, December 2: Acts 6:1-7 (Sharing our faith, globally)

Sharing the love of God **in word** and **in deed** (integral mission) are two wings of the same bird. In the early church, people were committed to "*prayer and teaching the word*" (6:4). People were also committed to the practical support of widows and others in need. It was not **EITHER** sharing the good news in word **OR** sharing the good news in deed, it was **BOTH** telling the good news about Jesus in word **AND** living the good news in practice. The result of this two-fold approach was dramatic growth in the church.

Throughout church history the pendulum has tended to swing from one extreme to the other:

- Some churches have been all about just "sharing the gospel" in word. They don't want to get involved in caring for people's practical needs. That's a distraction from what's really important.
- Other churches have only emphasized practical help and have not wanted to share the good news in word. That's a distraction from what's really important.

Biblically, BOTH are essential. It's not either/or. It's always both/and. At its best, the church has emphasized BOTH aspects of ministry.

How can we be a church that shares the good in word? In deed?

*Hold us fast, Lord of hosts,
that we won't fall from you.
Grant us thankful and obedient hearts,
that our faith in the love, knowledge,
and worship of you will increase daily.
Increase our faith and help our unbelief,
that we, being provided for and cared for in all our needs
by your Fatherly care and divine intervention,
we may live godly lives to be a good example of your people,
and bless others with the blessings you have given us.
May we live fully engaged in this world as the people of Jesus,
and after this life reign with you forever,
through Christ our Savior.
Amen.*

James Pilkington (1520-1576)

Sunday, December 3: Isaiah 9:1-7 (1st Sunday in Advent) – HOPE

2023 has been a crazy year. As a family we had some health crises. Several emergency flights across the country. Three of us faced imminent evacuation during the Halifax wildfire. I wonder what 2024 will bring?

As we look toward Advent, Christmas, and a New Year, in whom do we put our hope? Who do we trust?

The world into which Jesus came was a crazy place, too. Israel was occupied by the Romans. Tax collectors could charge outrageous "service fees." People had health crises. Poverty was widespread. People experienced racism, sexism, ageism, ability-ism and much more. There seemed to be no hope.

The people of Israel looked back to the prophets for the hope of a coming "Messiah" (Hebrew), "Christ"

(Greek), "Anointed One" (English) – a Saviour who would deliver them once and for all from their enemies. Isaiah 9 is one of those passages First Century Jews looked to for hope in hopeless times.

When Isaiah 9 was written, the deep darkness of foreign conquest and exile was falling on the kingdom of Judah. Babylon was coming for them. Yet even in that oppressing dark night of ultimate despair, God offers hope for restoration (9:3-5), a reference to Gideon defeating the Midianites at Jezreel ([Judges 7](#)).

How will God save His people? Isaiah speaks of a child who will be born, a light that will shine in the darkness (9:2, [John 1:1-5](#)). Isaiah 9:6-7 are clear prophetic words about the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. Only Jesus is God Himself among us. Only He can truly save us.

Isaiah's Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. At that time, God did not miraculously deliver His people. He allowed them to be "humbled" by letting them experience the consequences of their decision to trust in their army, economy, politicians, and allies rather than God. God's purpose is not to punish them. His intent is that, as His people suffer, they turn to Him in genuine repentance and faith. When God's people put their hope in Him, He can "honour" them in the future (9:1).

Jesus, of course, did come from Nazareth, in Galilee (9:1). But He was finally "crowned" and recognized as king when He was hung on the cross in David's city, Jerusalem (9:7). The sign when Jesus was crucified read, *"This is the King of the Jews"* (Matthew 27:37).

Into a violent, stress-filled world 2000+ years ago, God came in love. Into a brutal time and place, God came as a defenseless, helpless child. He came as a suffering Saviour. In humility, on the cross, He defeated the military superpowers of His age and all ages. God's love wins completely and absolutely.

By taking on Himself all the sin and oppression of all people, Jesus can truly give freedom, hope, peace, love, and joy in a deep, profound way no government or power can take away. This has been the experience of (even the most persecuted) Christians through the ages.

Jesus, in His apparent weakness – as He was crucified – won a victory that has outlasted every empire. The power of His love and grace is far more powerful than President Xi, Vladimir Putin, or any U.S. president.

It is a reminder that throughout history great powers have come and gone and will continue to come and go. We, God's people, may suffer. But Jesus and His church have always survived and will always survive.

Let's be honest. In 2023, with all our problems, stress, and worries, like the Israelites of old, we often forget about God. We may say we believe in Him, but in reality we trust in banks, bonds, and markets. We trust in bombs and missiles. We trust in politicians and business leaders. How's that all working for us?

God's will for us is always hope, joy, freedom, and peace. If we choose to put our faith in things other than Jesus, we may face the logical consequences of our choices. He will not save us from our own dumb decisions. However, even when we hurt ourselves, He can bring good things from the wreckage.

If we do put our hope in Him, we will still face challenges, problems, and difficulties. But we do so with our God and King, our Saviour and Lord, always with us. He will get us through. Counterintuitively, God's way – the way of humility, love, grace, mercy, and peace, always win. Completely. Absolutely.

"Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us. Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ... No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us" (Romans 8:34-37).

Reflect on 9:6-7. As we face the uncertainties of 2024 ...

- Jesus is our **Wonderful Counselor**. What does that mean for you, today?
- Jesus is our **Mighty God**. What does that mean for you, today?
- Jesus is our **Everlasting Father**. What does that mean for you, today?
- Jesus is our **Prince of Peace**. What does that mean for you, today?

*Lord Jesus, I approach your banquet table today.
I am a sinner and dare not rely on my own worth.
I rely only on your goodness and mercy.*

*Gracious God of majesty and awe,
I seek your protection and look for your healing.
I appeal to you, the fountain of all mercy.
I cannot bear your judgment, but I do trust in your salvation.
Lord, I know my sins are many and great.
But I hope in your mercies.
Lord Jesus Christ, eternal King, God and man,
I pray, for I trust in you.*

*Have mercy on me, full of sorrow and sin,
for the depth of your compassion never ends.
Praise to you, saving sacrifice,
offered on the cross for me and for all mankind.
Praise to the noble and precious blood,
flowing from the wounds of my crucified Lord Jesus Christ
and washing away the sins of the whole world.
Remember, Lord, your people, whom you have redeemed with your blood.
Merciful Father, take away all my offences and sins.
Purify me in body and soul, today and all days.
Amen.*

Ambrose of Milan (340-397)