



January 2024

**Readings,
Reflections, Prayers
from the Gospel of John**

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Monday, January 8: Romans 12

Faith in Jesus is about more than just believing the right things. We try to live for Jesus. We try to live like Jesus. We try to live our faith in Word and in deed. We live our faith in the community of the church and the broader community as well.

How are we to live with one another?

- Really loving other people. Not just pretending to do so.
- Working hard.
- Keeping on praying.
- Helping people out.
- Practicing hospitality.
- Blessing those who persecute us.
- Being happy with those who are happy.
- Weeping with those who weep.
- Living in harmony with other people.
- Never paying back evil with evil.
- Never taking revenge.
- Conquering evil by doing good.

How are you doing at that?

What ought our underlying attitude to be? *"I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice – the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think"*(12:1-3). J.B. Phillips translates this as *"Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold ..."* What does that mean in practice?

"Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect"(12:3)

Paul goes on to talk about diversity within the unity of Christ's body, the church. We are a hodgepodge of very different people, but we are one body – one church – united by Jesus.

One of the areas of diversity is our various skills, abilities, talents, resources, and gifts (12:6-8). Rather than this diversity being a weakness, it's actually a strength when we all contribute what we can contribute. When we each use our unique backgrounds, skills, and gifts to serve God, the church grows stronger, has a more effective witness, and becomes a more mature community. When we don't bring our talents, abilities, and blessings together into the community, what happens?

- What are your skills and abilities?
- What is your background and experience?
- What are your gifts and talents?

How can you use those God-given blessings to bless other people?

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

Tuesday, January 9: 1 Corinthians 12:1-26

One snowflake doesn't change much. But a million or a billion snowflakes can transform the world into a winter wonderland.

Paul emphasizes that one person, all on their own, isn't going to accomplish a lot. But all of us together – using our unique gifts, talents, skills, abilities, experiences, and resources – can be a strong, dynamic body that can change the world. Together we can be Jesus to our world, bringing hope, love, joy, and peace.

Of course, not all of us are the same. We all bring our individual personalities, talents, and gifts into the mix. The body metaphor which Paul develops, emphasizes this. We're all different. We're all important. We don't need to compare ourselves to one another, feel less worthy, or get overly proud. We can be ourselves. Together, with all our diversity, we can make a tremendous difference in our world.

- How does this metaphor describe the church well?
- What happens when one part of the body isn't engaged with the whole?

Continue to reflect on

- What are your skills and abilities?
- What is your background and experience?
- What are your gifts and talents?

How can you use those God-given blessings to bless other people?

Who has gifts, abilities and resources who needs to connect with the body? Who can you encourage?

*O God, I thank You for this universe, my great home.
I thank you for its vastness and its riches,
and for the life which teems upon it,
and of which I am part.
I praise You for the arching sky and the blessed winds.
I praise you for the driving clouds and the constellations on high.
I praise You for the salt sea and the running water,
for the hills, for the trees,
and for the grass under my feet.
I thank You for my senses
by which I can see the splendor of the morning,
and hear the jubilant songs of love,
and smell the breath of the springtime.
Grant me, I pray, a heart wide open to all this joy and beauty,
and save my soul from being so steeped in care
or so darkened by passion
that I pass heedless and unseeing
when even the thorn-bush by the wayside
is aflame with the glory of God.
Amen.*

Wednesday, January 10: 1 Corinthians 12:27-31

How many people have you met in your life; from the day you were born until today? Dozens? Hundreds? Thousands? Have any of those people been identical? No. Of course not.

It's incredible that God can create each one of us unique. We look different. We think differently. We act differently. We have different experiences. We have different insights. We have different gifts and talents.

Is any one of those hundreds or thousands of people you met more precious to God than any other? Less precious to God than any other? No. Of course not.

God loves each of us. You've never met a person God love any more or less than He loves you.

God has given each of us blessings of time, talent, experiences, resources, abilities, compassion, knowledge, wisdom, insight, skill, and much, much more. We each have a role we can play in seeing God's Kingdom come and His will be done here on earth, as it is in heaven.

God can help each of us make a difference in someone else's life. Be loving. Be joyful. Be a peace-maker. Be patient. Be kind. Be "good." Keep the faith. Be gentle. Be self-controlled. These are the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. If nothing else, pray for someone today. Smile at someone today. Be "nice" today.

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

Thursday, January 11: 1 Corinthians 13

Did you notice the last phrase of 1 Corinthians 12, yesterday's reading? *"Earnestly desire the most helpful gifts. But now let me show you **a way of life that is best of all.**"* Were you left hanging in suspense? What is *"the way of life that is best of all?"*

What follows 1 Corinthians 12? 1 Corinthians 13. (Remember chapter breaks were added in the 16th Century)

I think I've read this passage at almost every wedding I've officiated. It works well for a wedding. But this familiar passage follows directly after 1 Corinthians 12 (on the church as the body of Christ, in which everyone takes part), and right before 1 Corinthians 14 (on life together in the church). This chapter on love is really about the church, not marriage. We can apply it to Christian relationships like marriage. But its context is relationships in the church: how we, together, are the body of Christ and serve Jesus (chapter 12) and how we, together, work and worship together (chapter 14).

As I was preparing this devotional, I was tempted to ask, *"Does this chapter describe your experience with other people at church?"* But that just opens the door for us to be angry, divisive, and critical people.

The better question is, *"Does this chapter describe **ME** in my relationships with other people at church?"*

Am I

- patient and kind?
- not jealous or boastful or proud or rude?
- not irritable?

Do I

- not demand my own way?
- keep no record of being wronged?
- not rejoice about injustice, but rejoice whenever the truth wins out?

Does my love

- never give up,
- never lose faith,
- is always hopeful,
- and endures through every circumstance?

Let's be honest, none of us is perfect at this kind of love ...

- What aspect(s) of love do you most need to work on?
- What is one practical thing you can do today to show your love in a new way?

*Today, I pray through the words of 1 Corinthians 13,
reflecting on how you are speaking to me, Lord.*

*Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.*

*Lord, may that kind of love characterize my relationship with you
And my relationship with the people in my life.
Amen*

Friday, January 12: Matthew 22:33-40

Paul said that "a way of life that is best of all" (1 Corinthians 12:31) is the way of love (1 Corinthians 13).

Jesus, when asked by a teacher of the Law, "*Which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?*", answered, "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.*" *This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.*"

- What does "love" for God look like in practice?
- What does "love for our neighbour" look like in practice?

Think about the qualities of love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13. Apply them to these great commands.

Does our **love for God** fill our hearts? Our souls? Our minds. Is our love for God patient and kind? Is our relationship with God ever jealous or boastful or proud or rude? Do we demand our own way from God? Do we get irritable with God? Do we keep a record of how we think God has wronged us? Does our love for God get upset by injustice? Do we rejoice whenever the truth wins out? Does our love for God never give up? Does our love for God never lose faith? Loving God, are we always hopeful? Loving God, do we endure through every circumstance?

Do we **love our neighbour** as ourselves? Are we patient and kind with others? Do we get jealous or boastful or proud or rude with people? Do we ever demand our own way? With other people, are we ever irritable? Do we keep a record of being wronged by others? Do we get upset when we see injustice? Do we rejoice whenever the truth wins out? Does our love for other people never give up? Do we never lose faith in other people? Are we always hopeful about other people? Does our love for our neighbour endure through every circumstance?

How can we live out these commands in practice?

*I pause for a moment and reflect on God's life-giving presence in the whole of my life.
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 listen to God again.*

*In God's loving presence I unwind the past day,
starting from now and looking back, moment by moment.
I gather in all the goodness and light, in gratitude.
I attend to the shadows and what they say to me,
seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.*

*What is stirring in me as I pray?
Am I consoled, troubled, left cold?*

*I imagine Jesus himself standing or sitting at my side and share my feelings with him.
Thank you, God, that I have been able to spend a few moments alone with You.
Thank You for what I have learned and how I have grown.
Amen.*

Saturday, January 13: Micah 6:1-8

A big theme in the Bible is that, though all of us might like to live out the noble words of 1 Corinthians 13 ("Love is patient, love is kind ..."), we all struggle. We want to obey the great commands, to love God and to love our neighbour, but they're difficult. Certainly, people throughout the Old Testament era fell short of God's call to love God with all their hearts, to love their neighbours as themselves, and to live holy lives.

The prophet Micah was one of many prophets through whom God spoke. He helped them see how far short of God's will they fell, time and time again.

What does God require of us? What does love for God and love for neighbour look like?

God, through His messenger Micah, says, "O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8).

Think about each of those phrases:

- **To walk humbly with God.** We love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. That love includes the recognition that God knows the truth about life, love, and everything much better than we do. Therefore, in humility, we listen to the God who loves us. And we follow His way.
- **To love mercy.** We love our neighbour as ourselves. What do we want from others? Love. Mercy. Grace. Forgiveness. Compassion. Help. Understanding. Peace. We try to love others as Jesus does.

- **To do what is right.** We try to honour God. We try to live like Jesus. Walking humbly with God, we live lives that are loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled.

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

Sunday, January 14: John 1:1-5

Through Easter we'll be reading through the Gospel of John. Reading through a gospel helps us get a sense of Jesus' life and ministry, from His birth through His teaching, His crucifixion, and His resurrection.

We have four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are relatively similar. While each is a bit different, they all give us a synopsis of Jesus' life and teaching, miracles, conversations, arrest, death, and rising again. When you read through these three gospels you often sense some déjà vu. They often include the same stories, with minor twists. Much of the material in each of them is also found in the others.

John's gospel is very different.

- There is almost no overlap in content with Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Instead, John, one of Jesus' closest companions, provides a very intimate, personal, firsthand account of his experiences with Jesus. He includes teachings, signs, and stories none of the other writers records.
- John's gospel is very structured. There are seven signs, closely related to seven great "I am ..." statements (such as "*I am the light of the world*," "*I am the resurrection and the life*").
- John uses the word "sign" rather than "miracle" as he sees these events pointing to Jesus as Messiah.

The gospel, John says, is written, "*so you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name*" (John 20:31).

As John begins, his words echo the structure of Genesis 1 ("*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth ...* "). He wants us to understand that Jesus' coming is as cosmically significant as creation itself. In the beginning, God creates all of creation. He creates human beings for an open, free, loving relationship with Himself, with each other, and with all of creation. Of course, Adam and Eve's disobedience and sin destroys that "shalom"/peace (Genesis 3). The rest of the Old Testament is the story of God calling His people back to faithfulness, His deliverance, and their repeated failures.

Jesus' coming is a reboot of creation. The original order of things, in which Adam and Eve walk in open and free fellowship with God, is going to be restored through Jesus' death and resurrection. What the Old Testament Law and prophets could never accomplish, the renewal and change of people's hearts, souls, and minds, will happen through Jesus. Paul will describe Jesus as the "new Adam," because we are restored to that perfect relationship love and life that Adam and Eve experienced ([Romans 5](#), [1 Corinthians 15](#)). With Jesus, everything starts over.

What do we learn about Jesus in this passage?

- **Jesus is God.** Remember our discussion of the Trinity, a few months ago? Jesus is not just a good teacher or a nice man. He is fully human AND fully divine, Emmanuel, God with us.
- **Jesus gives life to everything.** Not just people. Everything.
- **Jesus is light.** He shines in the darkness. He drives out darkness. He helps us see what's really there. He lights our paths. He brings warmth. He brings hope. What else?
- **Jesus is the Power of Powers.** Nothing and no one can ever overcome Him.

*I dwell for a moment on the presence of God around me,
in every part of my body, and deep within my being.
I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns and be open to what God is asking of me,
to let myself be guided and formed by my loving Creator.*

*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.*

*Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.
I picture the gentleness in His eyes and the smile full of love as he gazes on me.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
I will open up my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
I will ask Him to help me to place myself fully in His care, to abandon myself to Him,
knowing that He always wants what is best for me.
Thank You, God that I have been able to spend a few moments alone with You.
Amen.*

Monday, January 15: John 1:6-18

It's a bit confusing. We have two "Johns": John, the gospel writer, and another John, John the Baptist.

John, the gospel writer, tends to go in circles in these opening few sentences, talking about John the Baptist and Jesus, both at the same time.

What does John, the gospel writer, tell us about John the Baptist? John the Baptist has been described as the last of the Old Testament prophets. Like prophets of the past, John the Baptist's role is twofold.

- First, John the Baptist helps people see the sin and evil in their world and their lives. He challenges them to repent. Matthew records John the Baptist's message in more detail: *"Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire"*(Matthew 3:2-10). Ouch.
- Second, John the Baptist points people to Jesus. *"God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light."* He says, *"This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.'"*

John, the Gospel writer, tells us a lot more about Jesus.

- He is *the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.*
- *He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him.*
- *He came to his own people, and even they rejected him.*
- *To all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn, not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.*
- *The Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness.*
- *We have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.*
- *From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ.*
- *No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us.*

- What are we learning about Jesus from these opening sentences in John's gospel?
- What Good News do we have for people around us about Jesus?
- Like both John the Baptist and John, the gospel writer, how can we point people to Jesus?

*Lord, may I know your joy.
 Help me to not follow the advice of the wicked,
 or stand around with sinners,
 or join in with mockers.
 Lord, may I delight in your law,
 meditating on it day and night.
 Thank you, Lord, that you watch over the path of the godly:
 may my family, our church, and I be like trees planted along the riverbank,
 bearing fruit each season.
 May our leaves never wither,
 and may we find life in all we do for you, in your name.
 Lord, may I know your joy.
 Amen.*

Tuesday, January 16: John 1:19-28

I've only preached about John the Baptist once or twice in 30+ years. I suspect he might say that is once or twice too many. John ALWAYS points us away from himself, directing us to look at **JESUS**. Jesus is the One who matters. He is the Saviour. John would want us to preach about Jesus. John, himself, is insignificant.

To describe his own life and ministry, John the Baptist quotes Isaiah 40. Below is more from that chapter. As you read through it, reflect on how it is appropriate for John the Baptist's message of sin and repentance **AND** of hope in the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. I've selected key verses. [Feel free to read all Isaiah 40.](#)

*"Comfort, comfort my people," says your God.
 "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.
 Tell her that her sad days are gone and her sins are pardoned.
 Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting,
 "Clear the way through the wilderness for the Lord!
 Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God! ...
 O Zion, messenger of good news, shout from the mountaintops!
 Shout it louder, O Jerusalem. Shout, and do not be afraid.
 Tell the towns of Judah, "Your God is coming!"
 Yes, the Sovereign Lord is coming in power.
 He will rule with a powerful arm.
 See, he brings his reward with him as he comes.
 He will feed his flock like a shepherd.
 He will carry the lambs in his arms,
 holding them close to his heart.
 He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young. ...
 Have you never heard? Have you never understood?
 The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth.
 He never grows weak or weary.
 No one can measure the depths of his understanding.
 He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless.
 Even youths will become weak and tired,
 and young men will fall in exhaustion.
 But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength.
 They will soar high on wings like eagles.
 They will run and not grow weary.
 They will walk and not faint.*

- What do we learn about Jesus from Isaiah 40?
- How can Jesus help you through the ups and downs of life?

*Lord, what I'm trying to do is set aside time to focus on my life - both temporal and spiritual.
 Jesus, I try to imagine that You are sitting here beside me,
 and I talk over with You what has been going on for me.
 Jesus, I attempt to understand that in a myriad of ways
 You enter the everyday circumstances of my existence.
 But life is fast and full.
 Often, pressures and commitments drown out the little voice at my core.
 I know that.
 I want to do something about it.
 Knowing that You love me unconditionally, I can afford to be honest about how I am.
 How has the last day been, and how do I feel now?
 Thank You, Lord, that I can share my feelings openly with You.
 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.
 I try to become still and receptive to what Your Holy Spirit might want to impart to me.
 Thank You for these few moments spent alone with You
 and for the insights I have been given.
 Amen.*

Wednesday, January 17: John 1:29-34

Last summer, we were trying to find our way to the Kettle Valley Railway in Summerland, BC. The station is located on winding, twisting roads up behind the town. Thankfully there are plenty of signposts.

Those signposts serve a purpose. They point the way to the railway station. The station, with its steam engine and vintage cars, is the real destination. To be honest, I didn't stop and take any pictures of the signs. I did take lots of pictures of the steam engine. We had a great ride on the train, too.

John the Baptist sees himself as a signpost, pointing to Jesus. He's perfectly happy staying out of the limelight, directing people to the One who really matters, Jesus, "*the Chosen One of God.*" The signpost – John – doesn't matter. The destination – Jesus – is all important.

- How can I avoid drawing attention to myself, be a signpost, and simply point people to Jesus?
- What is the Good News about Jesus that I can point people towards?

*Who is like you, Jesus, sweet Jesus?
 You are the light of those who are spiritually lost.
 You are the life of those who are spiritually dead.
 You are the liberation of those who are imprisoned by guilt.
 You are the glory of those who hate themselves.
 You are the guardian of those who are paralyzed by fear.
 You are the guide of those who are bewildered by falsehood.
 You are the peace of those who are in turmoil.
 You are the prince of those who yearn to be led.
 You are the priest of those who seek the truth.
 Amen.*

Johann Freylinghausen (1670-1739)

Thursday, January 18: John 1:35-42

Do you know why you were given the name you have? Was it a family name? Did your parents just like the name? Or did your parents pick the name because of its meaning?

In the time of John the Baptist and Jesus, the meaning of names mattered. The name "Jesus"/"Joshua" means "God saves." That's appropriate, isn't it?

Today's passage includes some significant names/words we need to consider as we go along.

Andrew, following John the Baptist direction, chooses to follow Jesus. He finds his brother, Simon. He tells Simon they have found "the Messiah" (Hebrew), "the Christ" (Greek), "the anointed One" (English) – the promised King/Saviour/Deliverer from the prophets. (Note "Christ" is a title, not Jesus' last name).

When Simon meets Jesus, Jesus gives him a new name: "Cephas" (Aramaic/Hebrew), "Peter" (Greek), "Rock" (English). (Most often, we know him as Peter, the Greek version. If you recall, at one point, Paul refers to Simon/Peter by the Aramaic/Hebrew name "Cephas," when Peter reverts back to a Jewish "you-have-to-become-a-Jew-to-be-saved" theology and backs away from salvation by faith alone ([Galatians 2:11-14](#))).

Simon is the original "Rocky" – that's exactly what the Greek word "peter" and Aramaic/Hebrew word "cephas" mean. (It's interesting that, when Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answers correctly, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus replies, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are **Peter**, and on this **rock** ("peter" – same word) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:15-18). Peter's confession of faith in Jesus is our rock-solid foundation. Peter is also living up to his name, identifying that solid rock upon whom we can build our lives, Jesus.)

When people genuinely meet Jesus, they rarely remain unchanged. John the Baptist's disciples, hearing John repeatedly point to Jesus as the Messiah, choose to follow Him. Simon/Cephas/Peter will follow Jesus.

What difference has Jesus made in your life? How can you share that with someone else?

*Heavenly Father, I pray for purity in my heart,
today and on everyday.
Purify my thoughts, actions, and motives, Lord.
Bring up to me those things that are not pleasing in your sight
that I might repent.
Please lead me in the ways that I should go.
I make my thoughts obedient to You, Jesus.
I lay down my own goals.
I look away from titles and positions,
and I seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness.*

*Cleanse me today.
Holy Spirit renew a right spirit in me,
and take away my heart of stone and give me Your heart.
Put to death the misdeeds of my flesh.
I pray that the inner recesses of my mind,
body and soul are purged and pleasing to you.
When I know that you are pleased with me,
my heart and spirit are filled with Your joy.
Thank you Jesus.
In Your Mighty Name.
Amen.*

J. Reese

Friday, January 19: John 1:43-51

The traditional Jewish ideal of “shalom” or “peace” is to be meditating on God under the shade of your own grape vine or fig-tree. Life didn’t get any better than that. Nathaniel is living the 1st century Jewish dream.

When Philip tells Nathaniel about Jesus, Nathaniel is skeptical: *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* People are often judged by where they come from, their ethnic group, their gender, the way they speak, the colour of their skin, their education or occupation, or their status in society. Do I ever do that?

Despite Nathaniel’s outburst, he is open-minded enough to see God might be doing something new. He is willing to go with Philip and meet Jesus. One pundit quipped, *“Many people’s minds are like concrete: a little bit of everything and thoroughly set.”* In other words, they are unwilling to entertain the possibility that something new and different could be good. Am I ever like that?

Nathaniel sees Jesus for who He really is: *“You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.”* It’s interesting that the next time these two titles are repeated is when Jesus is crucified. It’s a Roman soldier who says, *“Surely he was a son of God”* (Matthew 27:54). It’s a Roman sign on the cross that reads, *“This is Jesus, the king of the Jews”* (Matthew 27:37). As we get to know Jesus, we are brought into the mystery of life, suffering, and death. Let’s be honest, life is often painful. But our Saviour and King understands, comforts us, and can even bring blessings out of our hardships.

The promise in 1:51 is that God is in Jesus. Through Jesus, He is in our world. This image refers to a dream Jacob had of a ladder stretching from heaven to earth, with God’s angels going up and down ([Genesis 28:10-19](#)). God spoke to Jacob. The point? God is not “way up there somewhere” disengaged from us and our world. He is actively involved with us and in our world – down here – through His messengers (angels) and His personal presence, the Holy Spirit. God is with us, through His Spirit, in our lives and world.

This side of eternity, pain and suffering are still real, but we have a living Saviour who has overcome it all – even death itself. Jesus is able to give us the consolation, encouragement, and victory we need through tough times. He is not “way up there somewhere.” He is with us, always.

How do you see God’s presence in your life? Pray that you will experience His comfort, strength, and leading.

Pray for an opportunity to share God’s love with people around you. Perhaps through a smile or a kind word. Perhaps through practical help. Or perhaps through introducing them to Jesus. People may be skeptical too. Our task is simply to tell them of the hope, peace, joy, and love we have found in Jesus. They Spirit will bring them to the point of really recognizing Jesus for who He is.

*Our Father, help me feel your love,
a love that surrounds me, a love that will not let me go but will ever bring me back –
back to your side, back to your will, back to your way.
That is the way in which I would walk.
O Lord, though all of us like sheep have gone astray, like sheep, we are tired –
tired of missing your path and stumbling along paths of our own choosing.
Like a sheep, I want to return to your fold.
I would come back to you,
confessing that I’m not proud the mistakes I’ve made.
I am conscious not of my successes, but of my failures.
I am in no boastful mood, O Lord, as I look ahead.
I ask for your forgiveness for my stupidity and my obstinacy, for the blindness of my heart,
for the wrong choices that grieved you and subtracted from my own happiness.
Humble and grateful, I open my heart to receive the great miracle of your grace.
I thank you for the fresh, strong wind of your Spirit
which comes to bring refreshment, cleansing, and perfect peace.
Amen.*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949), one-time Chaplain to the U.S. Senate

Saturday, January 20: John 2:1-12

"*This was the first of Jesus' miraculous **signs** ...*" (2:11). In John's gospel, the word "sign" is important. It's a word John only uses when he wants to make a point. A sign is literally a signpost to help us see who Jesus is and what He is up to. When John speaks of a sign, he is highlighting a time when heaven and earth come together (remember that image of Jacob's ladder yesterday?). God has come from on high to be among us. So this story is not really about helping a party host to save face. It's not about obeying your mother. It is a sign of something much, much greater: for the first time we see heaven and earth coming together. We see Jesus, God Himself among us, showing us who God is. We see God at work in our world.

What is Jesus doing? He is transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. Earlier Jesus had taken a gruff fisherman like Simon, renamed him Peter (literally "the Rock"), and invited him to build a Kingdom (it will take a lot of chipping and polishing to shape Peter into what he could be, but the process has begun). God is in the business of transforming ordinary things – including ordinary people – into extraordinary things/people.

The host had been serving mediocre wine. But when Jesus touches some water, it becomes extraordinary wine. Life without Jesus is OK. But when He touches our lives, they can become extraordinary. Life in God's Spirit is that much better than life without Jesus. Jesus transforms us as much as He transforms this water.

There is a lot of symbolism in this story:

- We meet Mary, Jesus' mother. The only other time John mentions Mary is when she is at the foot of the cross ([John 19](#)). This makes sense of Jesus' remark, "*My time has not come yet.*" Jesus' ultimate appointed "time" is when He dies on the cross. This a foreshadowing of His death.
- Notice when this miracle happens (2:1) – "*on the third day.*" This foreshadows His resurrection.
- It's a wedding feast, a foretaste of the great heavenly feast awaiting God's people when heaven and earth come together in the renewal and restoration of all things ([Revelation 21:1-2](#)).

Jesus has come that we might have and have it to the full ([John 10:10](#)). He has come to transform ordinary people into extraordinary people. But that kind of transformation only happens when we take Mary's words seriously: "*Do whatever he tells you.*" Are we willing to do that?

What might Jesus be calling us to do? Who is He calling us to be? Pray that His Spirit might help us become the people He created and called us to be ...

*As a pilgrim, conscious of life's varying scenes,
may I learn by faith, my Father, to cling to you.
I know that you will be in the future as you have been in the past.
I know that you will lead me on through all the tomorrows
as you have led me through the yesterdays.
I know you will not let me go, even when I,
in willful neglect and indulgence, try to wander from your way.
As I set my face toward the New Year,
I know full well that it will bring many changes.
The old must give way to the new.
Time does not stand still, nor the world cease from its turning.
Please give me the courage and fortitude that will enable me to stand upon my faith
as the Spirit of the living Lord gives me strength.
In your strong name I pray.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Sunday, January 21: John 2:13-25

Tom Wright comments, "*The Temple was the beating heart of Judaism. It wasn't just a church on a street corner. It was the centre of worship and music, of politics and society, of national celebration and mourning. It*

was also the place where you would find more animals (alive and dead) than anywhere else. But towering over all of these, it was the place where Israel's God, YHWH, had promised to live in the midst of his people. It was the focal point of the nation, and of the national way of life ..."

The Temple was the centre of Jewish life and identity. It represented the personal presence of God among them. The Jewish people believed quite literally that it was here, and only here, that God's presence was to be found on Earth. They didn't believe He was within them always (as we believe). They didn't expect to feel His presence on a regular basis. They didn't anticipate His inner guidance. The Holy Spirit – God's personal presence within us – was a prophetic vision for future times when the Messiah comes ([Joel 2:28-29](#)). Imagine a life in which you **knew** all **about** God, but you could not relate to Him personally? God was all theory, but no experience? When you left the Temple in Jerusalem, you left Him behind?

Jeremiah, another prophet, looks forward to our experience, contrasting it with what the Jewish people knew before Jesus: *"The day is coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife," says the Lord. "But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days," says the Lord. "I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, "You should know the Lord." For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know me already," says the Lord. "And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins."* (Jeremiah 31:31-34). But in John 2 this is still in the future.

In the Temple, where God is present, traders sell pilgrims animals to sacrifice. Their focus has shifted from God to money. Their presence is a distraction from the real purpose of pilgrims' visit: to worship God. Economics trump worship. The businessmen had set up their shops in the Court of the Gentiles, where non-Jews (like most of us) were supposed to come to worship. We, non-Jews, are no longer welcome. Judaism had become an exclusive ethnic club. Non-Jews need not come. They had lost any missional zeal.

The good news is that Joel 2 (*"I will pour out my Spirit upon all people ..."*) and Jeremiah 31 are fulfilled through Jesus. God is now personally present in EACH of us. God IS in each of us. He is not limited to one Temple in a far-off city. We are each temples of God. *"Do you not know," says Paul, "that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?"* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

The Holy Spirit is God's personal presence within each of us who believe.

The purpose of our journey through life is to love God and be loved by God. However, there are things that, although good in themselves, can be a distraction from that purpose. We are God's temples.

We're invited to "declutter" our lives and keep the things that really matter, that are worthy and honourable in God's temple. What really matters? What needs to go?

*O Lord, I pause to look back on the long way you have brought me,
on the long journey in which you consistently treated me,
not according to what I deserved, but by your loving mercy.
Let me meditate upon the dark nights through which I have come,
the sinister things from which I have been delivered – and have a grateful heart.
Let me meditate upon my sins forgiven, for my shame unpublished – and have a grateful heart.
I thank you, O Lord, that, in your mercy, so many things I feared never came to pass.
Fill my heart with thankful praise.
Help me to repay in service to others the debt of your unmerited benefits and mercies.
May the memories of sorrows that disciplined my spirit keep me humble and make me grateful
that my God is no celestial Santa Claus, but a divine Savior.
In his name I offer this sacrifice of praise.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Monday, January 22: John 3:1-13

I went swimming at Long Beach on Vancouver Island. I forgot I had my wallet in my shorts' pocket. When I got back to the car, my wallet was gone. I could get the bank card cancelled and replaced easily. But I was about to do the final exam for my driver's license, and I needed my birth certificate. It was gone. The Department of Motor Vehicles wouldn't let me write/drive the exam until I could prove I was born. A birth certificate proves a birth took place. But there I was in person. Of course a birth took place. But when? And where? The Motor Vehicles Branch needed more evidence for my birth than just my physical presence.

For any practical purpose these birth details are trivial (other than government forms). What matters is who I am *now*. I am certainly no longer the 6 pound 7 ounce baby I was when I was born in Dawson Creek.

When we talk about our "new birth" spiritually, it's good to keep it in perspective. Some people have a dramatic spiritual birth experience. They faced a crisis, they made a decision for Jesus, and then there was a profound sense of relief, joy, and celebration. These people can name the exact time, place, and details of their "new birth" in the Lord. They know all about their "birth certificate."

Other people cannot recall a specific time and place. They know they love Jesus now, and they desire to serve Him now. But the details of when, where, and how they came to this place of faith are vague.

Either experience is fine. It doesn't matter whether you can describe the details or not. Here you are. If you are a person who believes in Jesus, that's what matters. You are born again, spiritually. You are a child of God.

Sometimes we metaphorically "frame" our spiritual birth certificates and put them on the wall. We're so excited about our conversion we think this dramatic experience is all Christian life is about. We go back to that birth experience over and over again. We never move on. Our faith never grows beyond infancy.

It certainly does matter that we are "born again" with faith in Jesus. (Tom Wright comments, "*Sadly, there are many, inside the church as well as outside, whose present state suggests that one ought to go back to examine whether in fact a real spiritual birth took place at all.*") But a healthy person needs to eat, be nurtured, and keep growing to maturity. This involves a lifetime of spending time with Jesus, listening to Him and His Word, walking with other Christians, serving Jesus, making the right – difficult – choices, working through problems, and taking opportunities to share our faith. We are spiritual lifelong learners.

When we keep growing, we find the Spirit leading us in unexpected directions. We may have our plans neatly in order. But then God's Spirit blows like wind, scattering our tidy goals for our lives. Divine surprises can challenge us, but also give us new opportunities.

Part of being "born again" is accepting that we have a loving heavenly Father who wants us to grow: He may push us, challenge us, develop us, grow us – and provide for us – in ways we never imagined.

*My Father, sometimes you seem so far away, as if you are hiding.
Yet I know you are far more willing to be found than I am to seek.
You have promised, "If with all your heart you truly seek me, you shall surely find me."
And you have assured me that you are with me always.
Help me, now, to be as aware of your nearness as I am of the material things of every day.
Help me to recognize your voice with as much assurance as I recognize the sounds of the world around me.
Help me find you now in the privacy of my heart, in the quiet of this moment.
I would know, my Father, that you are near me and beside me;
that you love me and are interested in all I do, that you are concerned about all my affairs.
May I become aware of your companionship, as he who walks beside me.
At times when I feel forsaken, may I know the presence of the Holy Spirit
who brings comfort to everyone when we are willing to surrender ourselves to you.
May I be convinced that even before I reach up to you, you are reaching down to me.
These blessings, together with the unexpressed longings in my heart,
I ask in the strong name of Jesus Christ, my Lord.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Tuesday, January 23: John 3:1-21

I love Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park near Milk River, AB ... in winter. I don't go there in summer. The area is well known for rattlesnakes. I have a phobia of snakes. I've always felt my snake-phobia (ophidiophobia) links back to events in the Garden of Eden ([Genesis 3](#)). There's something biblical about a healthy dislike of serpents. It is hard to think of any creature more interwoven with evil in folklore than the snake.

John 3:14 refers to an incident in [Numbers 21:4-9](#). When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, complaining about everything, they were punished by poisonous snakes coming into the camp. Many people died. God gave Moses a remedy: he was to make a bronze model of a snake, put it on a pole, and hold it up for people to see. Anyone who looked to the pole would live. Under attack by deadly forces, Moses put the serpent on the pole. Whoever looked up to it lived. (The image of a snake on a pole as a symbol of healing also shows up in the Greek image of the Rod of Asclepius. Asclepius was the Greek god of medicine and healing – various medical associations have adopted the symbol of a snake on a pole).

Jesus is anticipating His crucifixion. God will allow Jesus to be raised up on a pole/cross. Whoever looks to Him will live. All of us are under constant attack by evil forces in our world, suffering and pain, sin and failure, and the power of death. But when we look to Jesus, we find life. Real life.

When we think about this logically, however, it seems backward. In Moses' day, the snake was the problem (the evil thing). It made sense to pillory a snake on a pole. But in Jesus' case, He's not the problem. He's holy. He's perfect. Why would He be crucified? Part of the mystery of the gospel is that God will allow all the evil, all the sin, all the brokenness of the world to be laid upon Jesus. He took ALL evil upon Himself. He became the epitome of evil. *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"* (2 Corinthians 5:21). We look to Him who carries our sin. And we can live.

This is the wonder of God's amazing grace and love. We ought to be the ones hung upon the cross. But Jesus takes all our sin and the punishment we deserve upon Himself. When we look to Him, in hope, faith, and love, we have life – eternal life, now and forever. This is the good news we share with our world.

"You don't have to let the snake kill you. God's action in the crucifixion of Jesus has planted a sign in the middle of history. And the sign says: Believe, and live" (Tom Wright).

*Forgive me, Lord Jesus, for the things I have done that make me feel uncomfortable in your presence.
The fine front that I polish so carefully for others to see, does not deceive you.
You know every thought that has left its shadow in my memory.
You have marked every motive that curdled something sweet within me.
I acknowledge, with sorrow and true repentance,
that I have desired that which I should not have;
I have toyed with what I knew was not for me;
I've been preoccupied with self-interest;
I have invited unclean thoughts into my mind and entertained them as honoured guests;
my ears have often been deaf to your whisper;
my eyes have often been blind to the signs of your guidance.
Make me willing to be changed, even though it requires
surgery of the soul, and the therapy of discipline.
Make my heart warm and soft, that I may receive and accept now the blessing of your forgiveness,
the benediction of your "Go in peace – and sin no more."
In Jesus' name.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Wednesday, January 24: John 3:22-36

Have you ever "googled" yourself? Have you ever put your name into Google to see if you can find yourself in the internet world? It's interesting how long you have to search ... or not.

Of course, if you were famous (or infamous), you show up right away. Wikipedia lists two "Bruce Martins": one a New Zealand cricketer, the other an Australian cricket umpire (maybe I should learn to play cricket). The "Bruce Martin" at brucemartin.ca is a chartered accountant in Kamloops, BC. My namesake at brucemartin.com is an agricultural and grain bin contractor (Portageville, Missouri). Brucemartin.net's Bruce is a web designer in Canberra, Australia. In the UK, one Bruce Martin is a social media consultant, another *"a consultant (specialist) in anaesthesia and critical care based at The Heart hospital, with an interest in paediatric anaesthesia at University College hospital, London."* The Twitter handle @brucemartin belongs to a *"Ginger Londoner into social media, travel, music, politics, Chelsea, good beer & being a dad."*

There is also one of "me" who is president of charitycards.ca (Toronto), a lawyer (Edmonton), an excavating contractor (Saint John, NB), a paediatrician (Fort Worth, TX), an assistant professor in the School of Sport and Exercise Science at the University of Northern Colorado, Senior Pastor of Calvary Temple (Winnipeg), and on and on. There are more than 450 "Bruce Martin"s on Facebook. There are many more famous "me"s than me.

If the paparazzi were after a "Bruce Martin" it would not be me. I'm far down the list of "me"s in the world. Personally, I'm relieved. But part of us would like to be famous; it would nice to be a bit of a celebrity ...

John the Baptist's disciples have their noses out of joint. This new upstart – Jesus – is stealing the limelight from their mentor, John. But John doesn't see it that way. His job has been to be a signpost, pointing people to the Messiah, Jesus. If people are turning to Jesus, John has done his job well. C.S. Lewis once commented that **"we need to learn to play great parts without pride and small parts without shame."** John is doing just that. He's helping people find Jesus. He does that very, very well.

The great part we are called to play is to point people to Jesus. We do this by how we live, by our love, by our actions, by our choices, by our values, by our ethics, and by our words. If no one remembers us, but does find Jesus, we have done our part well. If God does have a little part for us to play in building His church, we can do it to the best of our ability. If no one ever notices or thanks us, that's OK. We do it for God, not for recognition from other people.

What part is God calling me to play? Who can I pray for? Who can I talk with? How can I live with integrity?

*I dare to pray that something will happen to me in your presence.
Lord, I know I need to be changed.
The visions that once swept across the leaden skies of monotony, like white winged calls,
have dimmed and faded, and I need to see them again. Open my eyes.
Shame fills my heart as I remember the aspirations I've breathed before you,
the vows I made, the resolves that were born.
I blush to remember the withering blight that has touched them all – my failures, my shortcomings.
Lord, I confess before you that:
I have had longings and nudges from you which I did not translate into action;
I have made decisions without consulting you, and blamed you when things went wrong.
I have said that I trusted you yet have not turned my affairs over to you.
I have been greedy for present delights and pleasures,
unwilling to wait for those joys which time and discipline alone can give.
I've often sought the easy way, have consistently drawn back from the road that is hard.
I have been fond of giving myself to dreams of what I'm going to do some time,
yet have been slow in getting started to do them.
Forgive me for all the intentions that were born and somehow never lived.
These, Lord Jesus, are sins, grievous in your sight and grievous in mine.
And now I claim your promise to change me.
Please do for me what I cannot do for myself.
Lead me into a new tomorrow with a new spirit.
Cleanse my heart, create within me new attitudes and new ideas, as only you can create them.
For these good gifts I thank you Lord.
Amen.*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Thursday, January 25: John 4:1-15

When I think of a "Samaritan," I think of a "good Samaritan," a fellow who cared for someone he didn't need to help. The Good Samaritan is a wonderful example of compassion and grace ([Luke 10:30-37](#)). But in Jesus' day Samaritans and Jews lived separate lives. Although Samaritans had common ancestry with the Jews and shared the same faith, for generations they had nothing to do with one another. They despised one another.

Samaritans are descended from those who remained in the Land of Israel during the time many Jews were taken into exile to Babylon (597-539 BC). Most Jews are descended from those returned exiles. To this day, Samaritans say their worship retains the true religion of the ancient Israelites, faithfully preserved from before the Babylonian Exile. Samaritans would say the Judaism of those who went into exile and returned (what is now modern Judaism) has been compromised and corrupted. Most Jews, of course, **STRONGLY** disagree.

In Jesus' day, Jews looked down their noses at Samaritans. Samaritans were outcasts. Jews would never have a conversation or share a meal with a Samaritan. Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan is such a potent and provocative story because a Samaritan – who had been insulted, abused, and rejected by Jews all his life – cares for a wounded Jewish man. That Jewish man, were he well, would never have anything to do with the Samaritan. In Jesus' parable, the godly person is not one of the insiders, the Jewish folks. The godly person is the outsider, the Samaritan. This would really upset His Jewish listeners.

Now Jesus is talking with a **Samaritan**. This is unheard of for a Jew. Even worse, He is talking with a Samaritan **woman**. What would people say? A man was not allowed to speak with a woman alone; a close family member should always be present. Still worse, she is a woman **with a past** and **a disreputable present** (as we shall see tomorrow, she is living with a man to whom she isn't married (4:17-18)) in an age when that was not tolerated. In our open-minded society, all of this is just fine. But in first century Israel it was scandalous. People are whispering, *"What have she and Jesus been up to? You know the kind of woman she is ..."* Jesus' reputation as a spiritual teacher and holy person is taking a real hit.

None of that matters to Jesus. He recognizes a thirst within this troubled Samaritan woman that is more profound than simply a physical need for H₂O. Like all of us, this deeply wounded lady yearns for a genuine connection with God, for an authentic sense of identity, for a deeper meaning and purpose to her life.

I know I have that sort of a yearning, longing, hunger, and thirst for God. If you think about it, if we were created by God, in the image of God, for relationship with God, to serve God (reread Genesis 1-2), then it only makes sense that we have a God-shaped void in our lives. The Holy Spirit is actively calling each of us back to a real, personal relationship with our loving Father. In the 4th Century, Augustine (354-430), wrote, *"You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."* That is true.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer, and philosopher, commented, *"What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself."*

Jesus can satisfy that deep longing. *"I have come,"* Jesus will say, *"that you may have life, and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). It doesn't matter about our ethnic heritage, religious tradition, gender, education, age, ability, or past. Jesus introduces us to eternal life that comes through knowing Him. It's a quality of life now and a quantity of life hereafter. Nothing else can give us that deep satisfaction in life we're searching for.

- With what else do we try to fill the emptiness and longing in our lives? How is that working for us?
- What does it mean to you, that you are no random accident. God made you for Himself?
- How can Jesus fill that deep longing in your soul?

Pray that Jesus would help you really know Him as the source of your identity, purpose, and life ...

*Forgive me, O God, for my small concept of the heart of the Eternal,
 for the doubting suspicion with which I regard the heart, love, and wisdom of God.
 Give me more faith. I have so little faith ... or so I say.
 Yet I have faith in people –
 in cheques and banks, in trains and airplanes, in cooks, and in strangers who drive me in cabs.
 Forgive me this stupidity:
 I have faith in people, who I do not know,
 and yet I am so reluctant to have faith in you who knows me completely.
 I am always striving to find a complicated way through life when you have a plan, and I refuse to walk in it.
 So many of my troubles I bring on myself. How silly I am ...
 Please give me a faith that I can deposit in the bank of your love,
 so that I may receive the dividends and interest you are so willing to give me.
 I ask this all in the lovely name of Jesus Christ, my Saviour.
 Amen.*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Friday, January 26: John 4:16-26

Eric Weiner, an American journalist, writes, *"Canadian niceness is pure, and untainted by the passive-aggressive undertones found in American niceness (have a good day, or else!). It's also abundant. Canada is to niceness as Saudi Arabia is to oil. It's awash in the stuff, and it's about time, I say, the rest of the world imported some. (France, Russia and the UK topped one recent list of rude countries as perceived by travellers). Researchers have yet to analyse Canadian niceness empirically, but studies have found that Canadians, perhaps in an effort not to offend, use an overabundance of 'hedge words,' such as 'could be' and 'not bad.'*

"Then there is the most coveted of Canadian words: 'sorry.' Canadians will apologize for anything and to anything. 'I've apologized to a tree that I walked into,' confessed Michael Valpy, a journalist and author, noting that many of his fellow citizens have done the same ..."

Ok, maybe it's a bit overdone. Of course, a Canadian would never write such drivel, because we're too "nice" and too humble to brag about our niceness. It's great to know at least one foreigner likes us.

Jesus is being more than nice to this hurting lady. He brushes aside the issues that are so important in His day: her checkered past, different religious traditions, ethnicity, and gender. Jesus has a delightful – annoying – habit of speaking with people decent folk wouldn't talk to: this woman of "ill repute," severely ill people, mentally ill people, "sinners" (prostitutes, tax collectors and the like), Romans/Phoenicians/Samaritans, the poorest of the poor. Do we ever avoid talking with certain people? What would Jesus do?

Jesus wants this lady (and us) to know the past doesn't matter, church tradition is irrelevant, and ethnicity and gender are not important. Jesus offers new life and a new beginning to all of us.

"Life is hard enough, with plenty of jagged edges and pointy bits," adds Eric Weiner. "Why not coat it with a glaze of politeness and humility? Politeness, at its best, is a way of honouring others, especially strangers. Politeness is the lubricant that makes social interactions run smoothly and reduces the risk of conflagrations. The world, I think, would be a better place if we were all a bit more Canadian. Fortunately, Canadian niceness is contagious. On my annual northern migration, I find myself slowing down, saying 'thank you' and 'please' more often than I usually do. Maybe I go too far and cross the line from polite to unctuous. If I do, I can only say, in true Canadian fashion, 'I'm sorry.'"

The world would certainly be a better place if we were all a bit more like Jesus.

The next time you have an opportunity to speak with someone you wouldn't normally speak with, take the risk. The Holy Spirit will give you the words to say. You'll never know the impact you may have on their life.

Peter Marshall, one-time Chaplain to the U.S. Senate, has a wonderful prayer for us, today ...

*I do need you, Lord.
 I need you now.
 I know that I can do without many of the things that I once thought were necessities.
 But without you I cannot live, and I dare not die.
 I needed you when sorrow came,
 when shadows were thrown across the threshold of my life,
 and you did not fail me then.
 I needed you when sickness lay a clammy hand upon my family,
 and I cried you, and you heard.
 I needed you when perplexity brought me to a parting of the ways,
 and I didn't know how to turn.
 You did not fail me then, but in many ways, big and little, you showed me a better way.
 And though the sun is shining around me today,
 I know that I need you even in the sunshine,
 and I shall still need you tomorrow.
 I give you my thanks for that constant sense of need that keeps me close to your side.
 Help me to keep my hand in yours and my ears open to the wisdom of your voice.
 Speak to me, that I may hear you giving me courage
 for hard times and strength for difficult places;
 giving me determination for challenging tasks.
 I do not ask for an easy way, but just your grace that is sufficient for every need,
 so that no matter how hard the way,
 how challenging the hour, how dark the sky,
 I may be enabled to overcome.
 In your strength, who has overcome the world, I make this prayer.
 Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Saturday, January 27: John 4:27-42

Here in southern Alberta we can appreciate Jesus' agricultural image: "*Four months more and then the harvest.*" By mid-September (four months after seeding) the fields will be ripe for harvest.

Jesus sees the crowds of people around him as a harvest, ripe for the picking. He honestly believes people (a) are anxious to hear God's good news that the Messiah has come, and (b) will respond to it in faith.

Do we see those positive possibilities? Do we honestly believe that people around us are anxious to and need to hear good news about God's love, Jesus' salvation, and life in the Spirit? Do we believe people will respond if we share our experience of Jesus with them?

The woman doesn't have things all figured out yet. Even so, she goes to her friends asking, "*Could this be the Christ?*" "*Many of the Samaritans believed*" even while she is trying to make sense of it herself. She just tells her story ("*This man told me everything I ever did*"). The Holy Spirit does the rest.

Sometimes we think "that was then, this is now." God is not at work like this anymore. But maybe He is? Maybe if we simply told our story more, God could use our experience in a similar way?

It is helpful to know what we believe and why. Reading scripture, good books, reputable websites, and other resources are great for us to clarify what we believe about Jesus (these devotions are a great start, but there are lots of other great resources, too. Talk with us and we can point you in some good directions).

Ultimately it is the Holy Spirit – God's personal presence – that leads people to faith. It is when people meet Jesus for themselves that they experience His transformation in their lives. We are only God's signposts.

But what a privilege: to be able to allow God to use our stories – warts and all – to make a difference in a person's life? Pray for the opportunity to share your story ...

Today let's pray the words of Psalm 23 (I have chosen the less familiar *Message* translation to encourage you to really think about the words, but feel free to use your preferred translation):

*God, my shepherd.
I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word, you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.
Even when the way goes through Death Valley,
I'm not afraid when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.
You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.
Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.
Amen.*

Sunday, January 28: John 4:43-54

This is the second "sign" in John's gospel (the first was turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana). John is telling us something VERY significant is happening – heaven and earth are coming together again. We are seeing Jesus, fully human and fully God, in a powerful way. What's the sign?

This is the first **physical healing** in John's gospel. At one level, this is a sign of what the Kingdom of God is like here and now. God cares for those who suffer. He brings healing and hope to real people, right now. Yes, sometimes He heals us physically. But sometimes He doesn't. If we allow His Spirit to speak into our pain, He always cares for us spiritually and emotionally. That's a powerful truth.

How many of us have felt God's special presence and power – and we have grown spiritually – during tough times? Curiously, it is often in our hardest moments that we grow most with God.

At a much deeper level, this is a sign of the Kingdom of God, yet to come. One day, some day, when we are with the Lord forever, all pain, suffering, illness, and disease will be gone. Our bodies, minds, and souls will be made totally new, without blemish, weakness, or disability.

When Jesus talks about "life" He never just talks about physical life here and now, He also talks about "*eternal life*" (John 3:16, 4:14). Eternal life comes from the personal presence of God **now** and the certain hope of life **hereafter**. When Jesus says, "*Your son will live*," He is implying real life today, AND a deeper, richer experience than just living and breathing for another few years. "Life" includes a relationship with Jesus – **now**. And life includes the potential of an eternal relationship with Jesus forever – **hereafter**.

The wonderful thing about this passage is that the royal official "*took Jesus at his word*." Unlike folks in Cana, this fellow doesn't believe because He has seen a miracle – yet. He believes Jesus, even though he has no evidence yet, that Jesus has done anything for his son. He sets off on the 20 km journey back home to Capernaum, believing Jesus' words. He trusts in Jesus. He has faith. He believes.

Can I take Jesus at His word? Or do I need "proof"? What "proof" is enough? Am I like Thomas – "*I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side*" (John 20:25). Jesus' responds to Thomas: "*You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me*" (John 20:29). Signs point us to something more than "proof."

The signs point us to life – true life in all its fullness, now and forever. All the proofs in the world won't change how I live or give me hope or joy. But knowing Jesus can. Can I take Him at His word?

*Father, I'm beginning to know how much I miss when I fail to talk to you in prayer,
and through prayer to receive into my life
the strength and guidance which only you can give.
Forgive me for the pride and the presumption
that make me continue to struggle to manage my own affairs,
to the exhaustion of my body, the weariness of my mind, the trial of my faith.
In a moment like this I know that you could have worked your good in me
with so little strain, with so little effort.
And then to you would have been given the praise and glory.
When I neglect to pray, mine is the loss.
Forgive me, Lord.
Let not, I pray, any future forgetfulness of mine,
or a false sense of self-sufficiency, any 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.
I ask you for that soul tonic of prayer that shall reburnish my faith,
brighten my hope, revive, and rekindle my love.
In your name, I pray.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Monday, January 29: John 5:1-9

How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb?

I've heard two different answers:

1. At least 12. One to change the bulb and the others to bring the potluck supper.
2. "Change?!?!?!?!?!?"

The sick man in this story has eked out a living (of sorts) for 38 years. When Jesus meets him, He asks him a pointed question: "*Do you want to get well?*" In essence, do you want to change the light bulb?

To get well will radically change this man's life:

- The pros? He'll be able to walk, move around, and explore his world.
- The cons? He can't beg by the poolside anymore. He'll have to work and earn a living and he has no skills except begging. He'll have to deal with a whole world he hasn't had to survive in for 38 years.

"*Do you want to get well?*" For this man, it's not such an easy question to answer. What would you say?

There are things in our lives that hold us back from being who God created us to be:

- We don't spend the time in prayer, with God, reading His word that we ought ...
- We don't take time to call or encourage the person we know we ought to call and encourage ...
- We insist on making our own moral choices, ignoring God's wisdom ...

We all know there are things in our lives that are not as they should be:

- We know we should support God's work more generously, but ...
- We know we have these vices, bad habits, wrong priorities, but ...
- We know this is the wrong moral choice, but ...

When Jesus helps us recognize our problems, He asks us "*Do you want to get well?*" Do you want to change the light bulb? Will we gather 11 other people, have a party, and resolve to change (those 11 friends can help you, encourage you, and hold you accountable)? Or will we react with "Change?!?!?!?!?!?"

Jesus is doing some amazing things ... foreshadowing His resurrection in all its glory. Will we take Him at His word? Will we listen to His guidance and correction? Will we take the risk? Will we change?

*Lord Jesus, as I look into the future, may no fear assail me.
 Help me to be as confident that you will be with me in the future as I know you have been in the past.
 I know that my Christianity is no insurance policy against trouble,
 rather the guarantee that you'll be with me in the trouble.
 That should give me a strong heart and confident faith.
 For so long as you're beside me, loving me, helping me, what have I to fear?
 Bless me this day as I try to live as a Christian.
 Where I am inclined to be satisfied with myself as I am, make me willing to be changed.
 Give me a more sincere kind of faith, a stronger faith, a more live-able faith,
 not a religion that only smacks of Sunday,
 but the kind of faith that can be used on Monday and will not have evaporated by Saturday.
 Hear me as I pray, standing on the threshold of time.
 You alone can equip me for the tasks and duties that are mine.
 May I do my very best.
 In your strong name I pray.
 Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Tuesday, January 30: John 5:9-18

I had a conference call at 7 p.m. Toronto time (5 p.m. Lethbridge time). But I was in Beirut, Lebanon. For me the call started at 2 a.m. Ontario people were talking about what they'd just had for dinner. The Vancouverite on the call (4 p.m.) had not yet decided what to have for supper. And I was groggily waking up in the wee small hours of the morning. I'm not sure I had a lot of useful insight to contribute to the meeting. It's interesting how being in a different time zone changes one's perceptions of things.

Physicists love to tell us that time is not as simple as we'd like to think. It all gets very confusing. Einstein quipped, "*People like us who believe in physics know that the distinction between the past, the present and the future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.*" That's not too helpful. Equally obtuse is Doctor Who's comment, "*People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually, from a nonlinear, non-subjective viewpoint, it's more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey stuff.*"

Jesus challenges us to see time as more complicated than we like to think, as well. The very religious people in His day saw the time from sundown Friday through sundown Saturday (the Sabbath) as sacred. There are still at least 39 prohibited activities (from work to even lighting a candle or turning on a light switch – see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Activities_prohibited_on_Shabbat). In their narrow, legalistic interpretation, Jesus healing a cripple and then the cripple carrying his mat violated God's "time" of Sabbath rest.

Jesus invites them to see time very differently. "*My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working*" (5:17). There is something bigger going on. In Jewish law, the only exception to the Sabbath law is when a human life is in danger. A Jew is only allowed to violate a Sabbath law to save a person's life. God is in the business of saving people who are spiritually and physically dying. That's a task from which He never takes a rest. Neither does Jesus. It's life and death. Every day.

More deeply, Jesus is also announcing a whole new time – a whole new era – the Kingdom of God. In the old system, one day a week people were to celebrate God, but otherwise they got on with life without Him (remember the Holy Spirit was not as personal then as He is to us now). In the new time – our new time – Kingdom of God time – we experience God as a 24-7-365¼ reality, not a sundown-Friday-to-sundown-Saturday thing. Jesus is with us always. God's presence and grace come through faith in Jesus – every moment of every day – not through the legalistic observation of picayune laws.

The principles of the Sabbath are all important – a regular time for rest and celebration, a time for remembrance and worship, a time for family and friends. They are timeless. Don't lose them. We can get so busy that we never slow down to revel in, enjoy, and celebrate the love, grace, and gifts of faith, friends, and family that He has given us. But it's not Law. Observing Sabbath doesn't save us.

As people of Jesus, we're invite into a profound sense of God's presence, worship, joy, hope, peace, and love – an ongoing reality of life in the Spirit – interwoven into every moment and experience of our lives. God is with us always. He isn't limited to a specific 24-hour period each week. We can pray always without ceasing, but also worship and enjoy God's presence always, without ceasing, too ([1 Thessalonians 5:16-18](#)).

God is redefining time. He is redefining reality. He is reframing life. The new reality is that God is with us always, through His Spirit. That changes everything. How do you experience His presence in your life?

*Forgive me that as I have grown, my faith has been blighted with doubts,
withered with worry, tainted with sophistication.
I pray, Lord, that you would make me like a child again in faith –
not childish, but childlike, in the simplicity of a faith that is willing to trust you,
even though I cannot see what tomorrow will bring.
Please give me that childlike faith, that simplicity of mind
which is willing to lay aside all egotism and conceit,
which recognizes vanity for what it is –
an empty show which shows I am incapable of thinking the thoughts of God –
which is willing to be humble again.
Then may I feel once more as the child who whispers his love to you,
tracing with chubby little fingers the pictures of Jesus in a picture book –
those pictures that portray you, Lord Jesus, with a hurt lamb in your arms or a child on your knee.
Help me, even now, to feel again like that,
that I may be as loving, as trusting, as innocent, as grateful, as affectionate.
And as I am willing to kneel again as a child,
may I discover the glory you have revealed again,
and find the wonder of it gripping my heart and preparing me for your peace.
So shall I, along with the children, enter into the kingdom of God,
and know it, and feel it, and rejoice in it.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Wednesday, January 31: John 5:19-29

In many traditional cultures, children learn their trades from their parents. Girls learn the skills they need to be adult women from their mothers and grandmothers. Sons learn their occupations from their fathers and grandfathers. In Jesus' world, family "apprenticeship" was just the way it was. You had little or no choice of occupation (in some ways that would save a lot of stress). Since Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, was a carpenter, then of course Jesus would have learned carpentry, too. He would have apprenticed with Joseph.

But Jesus also has a heavenly father, God. And Jesus, the Son, does what His Father does. He brings healing. He brings hope. He brings forgiveness. He brings peace. He brings love. He brings life.

By Jesus' time, most Jews did believe in some sort of resurrection, although they debated some of the finer points of what that would look like. One group, the Sadducees, did not believe in resurrection at all.

Who does the resurrecting? God, of course. And Jesus, the Son of God, is about the same work as His Father.

In John 5:18 (yesterday), the authorities were upset with Jesus: "*not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*" In this passage, Jesus is even more bluntly claiming that He and the Father are together in this amazing enterprise of bringing in the Kingdom, this new time of God's presence and reign over all His creation. God is at work in and among us all the time.

What is our response? "*Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life*" (5:24). We are saved by faith in Jesus. We don't deserve God's love. We don't earn salvation. We don't become "good enough" for God. He graciously gives His forgiveness and love to us as a free gift, through faith in Jesus.

We live in an era with two very different realities (5:27-29). On the one hand, there still is much evil, pain, sin, and death. We are not in heaven yet. We look forward to when all the evil is wiped away, when Jesus returns.

On the other hand, God's Kingdom has come. His Spirit is real in our lives and relationships. We celebrate His personal presence through His Spirit. We have already crossed over from death to life. Even though our physical bodies will die, we live in the assurance of resurrection and eternal life.

At the end of a long discussion on resurrection and eternal life, Paul writes, "*When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain*"([1 Corinthians 15:54-58](#)). Your labour in the Lord is not in vain. Praise be to God.

*O Lord Jesus, I remember that you have said:
'Do not lay out for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust corrupt.'
Deliver me from falling in love with things.
Help me rather to love people, to love principles, to love righteousness, to love you.
You have commanded me to 'seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,'
and then you promise that if my heart and mind and soul and will are thus dedicated,
I should receive as dividends all the very things I seek –
and abundant ministry to all my needs.
Oh God, help me to believe this.
Help me to practice it, that I may find for myself that the promise is true, that all my needs shall be met.
You have invited me 'to ask, to seek, to knock' –
assuring me that if I ask, it shall be given to me.
If I seek, I shall find.
If I knock, it shall be opened to me.
Help me to believe that, O God.
Give me the faith to ask, knowing that I shall receive.
Give me the faith to seek, believing that I shall surely find.
Give me the faith and persistence to knock, knowing that it shall be indeed opened to me.
Help me to live the Christian life in daring faith and humble trust,
that there may be worked out in me, even in me, your righteousness and goodness.
With a sense of adventure, I make this prayer.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Thursday, February 1: John 5:30-47

I love the *Lord of the Rings* **movies**. I love the *Lord of the Rings* **books** much more. If the world of Middle Earth actually existed, I would love **reality** infinitely more than the books. It would be incredible to walk the Shire with Hobbits or ride with the Rohirrim ...

Sometimes we settle for the movie or the book rather than the genuine thing. In Jesus day, the Jews had drifted from worshipping the true God – alive and active and real in the world in all sorts of tangible ways – to worshipping what God had written. They loved the Scriptures, but they missed God Himself, the One about whom the Scriptures speaks. They adored the text. They worshipped the laws. But they missed God. And they couldn't recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah.

We can know a lot about God but not actually know God. We can get so enamoured with the Bible (which is good) that we forget the Bible is a tool to lead us to the real Truth, the actual Person, Jesus (who is the BEST). The Bible is not the centre of our faith. Jesus is.

The Bible didn't die on the cross. Jesus did. The Bible doesn't save us. Jesus does. The Scriptures point us to the One who can give life, Jesus. If you love the Bible, great. But make sure you love Jesus more.

Jesus consistently draws us back from words to works. For Jesus, the words of Scripture are important. He values God's Word highly. But words are signposts leading to life, real life, in Him. The words on the page are not life in themselves, they lead us to the Word of God, Jesus Himself, the way, the truth, the life.

Jesus tells the Jews that, while He respects the testimony of the Scriptures and John the Baptist, the crucial evidences of His divine identity are the works He is doing in obedience to his Father. "The proof is in the pudding" – Jesus is emphatically the Messiah, the Saviour, God-with-us because He does the things God has called Him to do. As the apprenticed Son, He does what the Father does.

Love Scripture. Read it. Study it. That's good. But don't forget to discover the BEST – the Saviour to whom the Bible leads us. You are invited to a personal relationship with Jesus.

Like John, our call is to announce Jesus in word and deed. If people were to look at my life and my actions – rather than just my words – would they see Jesus? Are my works on par with my profession?

Jesus loves to ask good, probing, searching, thought-provoking questions (5:47). Don't be afraid to ask questions, too. If a colleague at work is a Muslim, try saying, "I've never really talked to a Muslim before – what do you believe?" LISTEN and LEARN. If you have a friend who is an atheist, try asking, "Tell me about what you do believe?" LISTEN and LEARN.

When we authentically listen, we can have great conversations building on where people are at. Let the Holy Spirit lead the conversation. He is the One who will lead people to Jesus ...

*We confess, our Father, that we know in our hearts how much we need You,
yet our swelled heads and our stubborn wills keep us trying to do without You.
Forgive us for making so many mountains out of molehills
and for exaggerating both our own importance
and the problems that confront us.
Make us willing to let You show us what a difference You can make in our work,
increasing our successes and diminishing our failures.
We never seem to learn how to live by faith and still prefer worry to trust.
We know what worry does to us,
yet we are reluctant to discover what faith could do.
Give us a new standard of values.
Give us the ability to know a trifle when we see it and to deal with it as such.
Give us the faith to believe that if we would give You a hearing
that You would give us the answers we cannot find by ourselves.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Friday, February 2: John 6:1-15

For centuries, the texts we have in the Bible were laboriously handwritten on expensive parchment. Every word cost time and money. No words were wasted. Each word was there for a reason. The little detail in this passage, "*The Jewish Passover Feast was near*" (6:4), is significant.

The Passover celebrated the time when God dramatically saved His people from of slavery in Egypt, leading them across the Red Sea, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. The words, "*The Passover Feast*," is shorthand for God's amazing grace, freedom, salvation, and gift of new life.

One of the key components of the original Passover was that, when the people were wandering in the wilderness, God miraculously fed them with manna, bread from heaven ([Exodus 16](#)). In John 6, people are out in the wilderness. Jesus miraculously feeds them. This is Passover. At a more profound level. More than just deliverance from physical slavery, Jesus is leading us from an old order of things, slavery to our past and our sinful nature, into something new, freedom and new life in Gods Spirit, now and for eternity.

Notice some of the people in this story:

- Philip – he doesn't know what to do.
- Andrew – he doesn't know what to do either. But he does do one thing. He introduces a boy with a few barley loaves and fish (a modest lunch for a poor person) to Jesus.
- The boy – he might have stayed quiet about his little store of food, but he let Andrew know about it.

So often we, ourselves, have no idea what to do. But we can always start by just bringing what we do have, insufficient though it seems, to Jesus' attention. We may not have much to bring, but He can use whatever we do have. Jesus can use anything we bring him. We'll never know what He'll do with it until we give it to Him. This is part of the miracle of God's Kingdom, already among us.

What do I have to offer? It may not look like much. But only God knows what the potential is. Offer what you have, insignificant though it may seem. See what He can do ...

*Lord Jesus, you know the things that are trembling on my lips,
stirring in my heart, and along the corridors of my soul,
walking on tiptoe across the cloistered spaces of my consciousness,
looking expectantly upward,
making prayers without words,
breathing aspirations that have only wings.
Hear me, I pray, as I call upon you for help,
for strength, for peace,
for grace, for reassurance,
for companionship, for love,
for pardon, for health,
for salvation – for joy.
Hear me, Lord Jesus.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Saturday, February 3: John 6:16-25

What was one of the other big events of the Passover experience? The Israelites, fleeing from the Egyptians, come to the Red Sea. They are trapped between the sea and the Egyptian army. They're sure they will be recaptured, slaughtered, or drowned. But God miraculously parts the sea, and they pass through it.

In this story, Jesus' disciples are trapped, in a desperate situation. What happens?

Jesus miraculously deals with problems on the sea. Jesus' disciples – and the Jews on the shore – may have seen the "sign of the times." The Passover back in Exodus days was one thing. Now God is doing something at least as big as, or even bigger than, the Exodus.

There are times in our lives when the wind comes up, the waves crash, and the storm rages around us. We never know when those times will hit. They just happen. We struggle to make it through, but it seems like we make no headway. We're afraid we'll go under.

(Do the storms happen most often when we've left Jesus behind and gone on, on our own? Jesus is taking time to pray – the disciples are too anxious to stay – they're rushing on to the next thing. In their haste, they get themselves in trouble. I wonder what might have happened if they had stayed and prayed with Jesus? What if they had gone on His schedule, with Him present all the time? Do I ever rush ahead of Jesus?)

Where is Jesus during the storms?

He is coming to us, saying, "*Don't be afraid.*" It's amazing how often that phrase occurs in Scripture.

If we are willing to take Jesus on board as Captain of our lives, the storms may blow, but we'll get through. We may find ourselves at the harbour, calm and secure, sooner than we expected.

Joe Sakic, who played professionally for the NHL's Quebec Nordiques and Colorado Avalanche, once said, "*There are always ups and downs in a season; the captain is the guy players look to in those situations.*" Sakic speaks with credibility: while still a member of the Swift Current Broncos of the WHL, after a bus crash that killed four of his teammates, Sakic was the emotional leader of his team.

When Colorado won the Stanley Cup, the captain is supposed to be the first to skate around with the Cup; instead, Sakic passed it to teammate Ray Bourque. Bourque, one of the best defencemen to ever play, had been traded to the Avalanche the year before after spending 21 years with the Boston Bruins. He set the record for most games played *without* winning the Cup.

Maybe you're doing OK, but you know someone who feels like their life is taking on water and they're going under. Can you come alongside? Can you be Jesus' ambassador, saying "*Don't be afraid – He is with you*"...

Do you know a Ray Bourque – someone who is plodding on day by day but just never seems to get a break? Can you be the person who sees the 21 years of futility, and passes them the Cup?

*Father, I am tired, wearied with the strains that life imposes upon me,
the pressures under which I'm forced to live.
You did not design me to live like this.
I thank you, my Father, for a moment like this,
when I may forget the sounds that have beaten upon my eardrums with relentless monotony.
I thank you for a moment in which I can no longer hear the chattering of typewriters [computer keys?],
jingling of bells, jangling of money on counters,
whining of cash registers, ringing of telephones,
and noise of traffic.
And now, I forget all these – and think only of you.
Please make within my heart a quiet place.
I release to you my demand to see what the future holds.
I rest in you, content to know your love and care in this present hour.
I release to you my struggle to cram too many activities and commitments into every hour.
I rest in the knowledge that all of eternity, an infinitude of time, is your great gift to me.
I release to you the greed and over-ambition
that has made me try to grasp too much of life too quickly.
Help me to be content with simple tasks directed by you,
done heartily and joyously as unto the Lord.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Sunday, February 4: John 6:26-35

It is helpful to keep this passage in the context of the Passover (6:4). Jesus reminds people how God miraculously provided bread for the Israelites in the desert. Alas, the Israelites enjoyed the food but lost sight of the God who gave it. They took Him for granted. They wouldn't trust Him.

We can get so caught up in the day-to-day grind of life we lose sight of the bigger issues. Is it all about getting our daily bread, or is there something bigger?

What gives us meaning? Purpose? Hope? Joy? Where does our relationship with God fit in?

To the woman at well, Jesus says physical water is great, but, "*Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*" (John 4:13-14). To these folks, Jesus is saying physical bread is great, but "*I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty*" (John 6:35).

Jesus invites us to think about more than our stomachs. He wants us to think about more than our careers, our bank accounts, and our next vacation. He is challenging us to think about our souls, our spirits, that deep, inner part of our being that longs for more than just food and drink.

To help people understand this, Jesus moves from the image of manna in the wilderness to the Passover Meal, the annual meal the Jewish people celebrated every year to mark their deliverance from slavery. Each item in the annual Passover meal has meaning. Key components of the meal are:

- Bread, specifically unleavened bread. This reminds us that when the Jews fled Egypt, they took unleavened bread as they did not have time to let yeast rise.
- Four cups of wine. Each cup represents one of God's promises in Exodus 6:6-7: *"I am the LORD, and **I will bring you out** from under the yoke of the Egyptians. **I will free you** from being slaves to them, and **I will redeem you** with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. **I will take you** as my own people, and I will be your God."*

The bread and the wine represent God's deliverance from slavery, freedom into new life, redemption (salvation) from judgment, and new identity as God's chosen people.

Jesus offers us all of this and more through His sacrifice on the cross:

- Deliverance from our past. We are forgiven and given a new beginning.
- New life. In the Spirit we discover hope, joy, peace, and love, now and forever.
- New identity. We are children of God, Jesus' friends, His brothers/sisters, chosen of God.
- Victory over death. As Jesus overcomes the cross, we have the assurance of everlasting life.

This bread and wine – Jesus' body and blood given for us – give us new life, now and forever.

The Jewish Passover Meal always concludes with a prayer of hope, looking forward to the coming Messiah: *"L'shanah haba'ah b'Yerushalayim – Next year in Jerusalem."* The Messiah has come. Jesus.

As people of the resurrection, we now look to Jesus' return in glory. We look forward to fullness of new life with Him when all evil is wiped away – *"Next year in the **new** Jerusalem"* (Revelation 21-22). We look forward to Jesus' return, and to the wonder of His completed new creation.

In the meantime, we have good news for those around us: good news of deliverance, freedom, salvation, and new identity in Christ. God is with us, now and always.

*Father, I know it is not right for so much of my hope, joy, and peace
to be stolen from me everyday.
Yet sometimes there seems to be no escape from the treadmill of my daily life.
I ask you to help me, to guide me into a finer way of living.
Check my impulse to spread myself so thin that I'm exposed to fear and doubt,
to the weariness and impatience that makes my temper wear thin,
that robs me of peace of mind,
that makes skies gray when they should be blue,
that stifles a song all along the corridors of my heart.*

*May I have: the mercy of God to forgive me;
the strength of God to make me resolute do your will;
the grace of God to be kind, tender, and affectionate to others;
the patience of God to believe in the ultimate triumph of his kingdom on earth.
This I ask in his name in whom all peace resides.*

Amen

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)