



February 2024

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

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Monday, February 5: John 6:36-59

Doctor Who is a whacky British TV science fiction series about a "Time Lord," Doctor Who, who can travel to any place and time. Sometimes the series also gives brilliant insights into life, meaning, reality, and truth.

In one episode, the Doctor travels France in 1890 to visit Vincent Van Gogh. Van Gogh describes one of his most famous paintings, [*The Starry Night*](#). He comments on how he sees the world: *"Look at the sky. It's not dark and black and without character. The black is, in fact deep blue. And over there: lighter blue and blowing through the blues and blackness the winds swirling through the air and then shining, burning, bursting through: the stars. It seems to me there's so much more to the world than the average eye is allowed to see. I believe, if you look hard, there are more wonders in this universe than you could ever have dreamt of."*

Is Van Gogh crazy? Or is he just seeing things in a deeper, more creative – possibly more complete – way? Interestingly, scientists now acknowledge that Van Gogh's painting accurately depicts the fluid dynamics in the atmosphere in ways science is only now appreciating. He got it right. [Check this article out.](#)

Jesus is challenging people in His day to ask what is real, too. He says, *"I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, but they all died. Anyone who eats the bread from heaven, however, will never die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and this bread, which I will offer so the world may live, is my flesh."* (6:48-51)

Many people thought Jesus was crazy.

Or, was Jesus trying to help people see reality in a much, much deeper way? There are things that are true, powerful, and profound that we may not be able to see with our eyes or feel with our senses – like eddies in the atmosphere – but are very real and very important.

Jesus continues with the Passover metaphor, describing himself as the bread that symbolizes God's salvation and deliverance from slavery. The first Exodus brought people out of Egypt into the physical land of Canaan. This new Exodus will lead people out of slavery to sin and death and into new life and freedom with God, now and forever.

Jesus also describes His blood as the wine that brings freedom and new life. Of course, this is not literal imagery (some Roman writers, hearing these words, did accuse early Christians of cannibalism).

The imagery of "eating and drinking" the Son of Man (Daniel's code name for the Messiah), is significant. When you eat something, it becomes an essential part of who you are. If you eat lots of sugar, it becomes who you are (as pounds you gain). If you eat healthy and exercise, people will see it in you. Believing in Jesus becomes an essential part of who we are, too. It changes us. It shapes us. When people meet us they (should) see Him in us.

Faith in Jesus is not like an outfit we just put on for Sunday mornings – it is a fundamental part of who we are 24/7/365¼ – whatever we are doing, wherever we are, whatever we are wearing, whoever we are with.

This is the truth: *"anyone who believes has eternal life"* (6:47). That eternal life – God's Holy Spirit – moves in us – shaping us, transforming us, forming us – in ways we may not see, but are profoundly real. If you look, God is doing more wonders than we could dream of.

- How is God changing you? Thank Him.
- What still needs to change? Invite Him to move into more and more aspects of your life ...

*Father, I ask you to take from me now all that harasses and annoys,
 all that has laid upon my heart burdens of anxiety and care,
 all the guilt and shame that weighs me down.
 I thank you for the stillness of this time of prayer –
 this oasis in my busy day when I can relax before you,
 lay my burdens down,
 and hand over to you all my anxieties, failures, and aspirations.
 At this moment, I open my heart to receive your blessing, knowing that in your presence:
 the furrows are being smoothed from my brow,
 the lines from my face,
 the load from my heart,
 the doubts from my mind,
 the fears from my soul,
 the lost hopes from my dreams – and I am at peace.
 And now I thank you, not only for quietness without,
 but for the quietness at the heart of the universe and for quietness within.
 In your peace, I pray.
 Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Tuesday, February 6: John 6:60-71

What do you do when you struggle with your faith?

Jesus' teaching is knocking holes in many of the Jewish teachings of His time. The rabbis presumed the Messiah would literally be like Moses, physically delivering the people out from their oppressors (this time the Romans not the Egyptians). The Messiah would establish a physical Promised Land within the historic geographic boundaries of the nation of Israel, specifically and exclusively for the Jewish people.

But Jesus is talking about liberation at a deeper level – freedom from our inner demons not outer warlords. He is talking about a Kingdom of the heart, not a geographically defined dominion.

As their preconceived notions are challenged, people have two options:

- They can shake their heads and walk away. Many did.
- They can stay. This means searching for harder answers. It means living with unanswered questions. It means accepting a certain amount of mystery. But because they trust the Person – Jesus – they can accept the fact they don't understand everything. Not yet. Maybe never.

There are times when we find things hard to understand – whether it be biblical things (like all the violence in the Old Testament), life experience things (like why our loved one got sick), philosophical things (how do mental illness and faith coexist?), or practical things (I find it hard to pray). We face our own challenges – some not too bad, some seemingly impossible. What do we do?

- Do we shake our heads and walk away from Jesus? Many do. We live in a "walk away/throw away" culture. If your TV, job, marriage, or faith isn't working the way you want, just walk away.
- Do we stay? This will mean searching for harder answers – and maybe not finding any. It may mean living with questions. I may mean accepting a certain amount of mystery. It But because you trust the Person – Jesus – you can accept the fact that you don't understand everything. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Which is the better approach? The nobler approach? The harder approach?

- Will you take up the challenge, although you will never have all the answers?
- Can you say, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

*Lord, you said our Father in heaven notes even the fall of a sparrow to the ground.
 Help me to believe, O God, that you are concerned
 not only with the rolling of the spheres in their orbits,
 but even with me, my doubts, and complexities.
 I know all too well the bitter results when I've tried to run my life my own way,
 when I try to steer my own craft.
 Please come aboard, Lord Jesus, and set a true course,
 for I am weary of life's demands, tired of my own blundering ways.
 Please give me a clear light to shine upon my troubled way.
 Please give me clearer directions.
 Where I have missed the way and wandered far,
 please bring me back at whatever cost to my pride.
 Please take away my stubborn self-will,
 for I know that in your will alone is my peace.
 I seek that peace.
 I pray in that name which is above every name, even Jesus Christ the Lord.
 Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Wednesday, February 7: John 7:1-9

Susan had gone through medical test after medical test. All sorts of potential problems had been ruled out. But now, as she sits in the doctor's office, comes the final verdict: "*You have lupus.*" On the one hand, that's awful news. It is a challenging diagnosis. On the other hand, now the doctors know what the problem is, they can begin to treat it. She must do her part, of course. She has to accept the diagnosis, take her meds, exercise, and adjust her diet. But if she does, she can have a long and fulfilling life (FYI Susan now has a Ph.D. in medical genetics and a law degree; she is doing research at a major university).

Jesus is giving "the world" His – God's – verdict: they are "evil" (7:7). Who is "the world"? At one level it is the entire universe, all of God's creation (the Greek word is "kosmos"). All of creation is marred by sin. At another level, Jesus is referring specifically to the centre of the Jewish world, Judea/Jerusalem where the Jewish leaders were plotting his death (7:1). The Jewish establishment is evil. He chooses to stay in Galilee, to the north.

How are they "evil"? Jesus doesn't give any details, but we have already seen how the people reject God, reject Jesus, legalize the letter of the law (but miss the spirit), are violent, unjust, greedy, and lack integrity.

Jesus is diagnosing the problem. What happens next? His brothers want Him to go up from rural Galilee to where the real action is, the big city of Jerusalem. There Jesus could make a splash, demonstrating His wonder-working power. But Jesus knows (as those of us who have read further already know) that going to Jerusalem will result in the ultimate showdown between Himself and the religious/civil powers of the day. He has not come to the appointed time to do that ... yet.

The "world" – in the BIG sense, including us – doesn't like being told we're evil. We want to hear, "*I'm OK, you're OK.*" But if someone does show us our shortcomings, if we accept the verdict, and if we begin to make changes, then life actually will be much better. We will be healthier mentally, socially, and spiritually.

What will that mean to us? It means we have to accept the diagnosis. It means trusting the doctor, Jesus. It means putting our faith in Him, confessing our sin, changing our lifestyle, reorganizing our priorities, and moving forward in hope.

"God so loved the world ('kosmos') that He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life" (3:16). Lord, heal me.

*Lord, thank you that you know what it means to be human.
 You understand and sympathize with my life.
 You walked upon this earth and have not forgotten what it is to be tired,
 what it is to know aching muscles, as you worked long hours at the carpenter's bench.
 You have not forgotten what it is like to feel the sharp stabs of pain, or hunger, or thirst.
 You know what it is to be forgotten, to be lonely.
 You remember the feel of hot tears running down your cheeks.
 I thank you that you were willing to come to earth and share the weaknesses of the flesh,
 for now, I know that you understand all the things I am called upon to bear.
 I know that you, my God, are still able to do more than I ask or expect.
 I pray that you would bless me, not according to what I deserve,
 but according to the riches in glory of Jesus, my Lord.
 Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Thursday, February 8: John 7:10-30

I'll admit it: I don't like paying taxes. I don't like paying the GST. I don't like paying income tax. I don't like paying property tax. I don't like taxes on fuel. I don't like the taxes on my utility bills. I could go on and on. And many of us do. Taxes seem like an unfair imposition. They are taking what is MINE. My life would be better if I didn't have to pay any tax. In fact, I would just as soon they got rid of taxes, and photo radar, and speed limits, and, and, and ...

BUT, I really appreciate having roads, sewers, streetlights, and emergency services. I really, really appreciate our publicly funded health care system. I love the high-quality schools and educational services we have. I appreciate those who provide fantastic public service whether it be at the city, provincial, or federal levels. I appreciate the safety that comes as a result of photo radar, speed limits, and, and, and ...

I may sound heretical living in Alberta, but I don't mind paying taxes when I see money being well invested into people and services that benefit everyone, especially the needy. In fact, I would pay more tax *if* I had confidence in our governments that the money would be well spent to improve services for those in need.

Jesus quietly comes to Jerusalem. When He gets there, He challenges the Jews to think about how they see the law of Moses. Do people see God (and thus the law) as a big kill-joy imposing unfair penalties on us? Is God an evil tax-collector? Is He trying to ruin our lives? Is He mean?

Or, does God give us His law to give us life? Does He give us His principles so that we can create a fantastic community where we can live in peace and safety, where those in need are cared for, where everyone is treated well, and where we have a just and honourable society? We can choose to see God's law as restrictive and oppressive. Or we can see His ways as life-giving and empowering. Do we trust Him?

Jesus specifically refers to the Sabbath laws and His healing of the man by the pool (John 5:1-15), which took place the last time He was in Jerusalem. In Jewish tradition, a baby boy was to be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, even if the eighth day was a Sabbath. The Sabbath could be "broken" to make one tiny part of a baby boy's body conform to God's will.

Wouldn't it make sense that if a person's entire body was out of sync with God's will (like the poor lame man), that it would be great to make his entire person whole, even on the Sabbath? The Sabbath law was not about restriction and punishment. Sabbath is about celebrating God's new life coming into His creation.

How do you see God's wisdom? Do you see His guidelines, principles, and ethics as limiting? Punishment? A "tax"? Or do you see them as empowering and freeing, leading to a purposeful and content life? God's desire is that you have life to the full (John 10:10). A "full" life happens as we live in the ways He created us to live, honouring Him with our minds, hearts, souls, and bodies ... and loving our neighbour as ourselves.

*Stop us, O God, for a few moments of prayer.
 Stop our anxious minds from wandering,
 and our hearts from desiring anything but to know your will.
 Let me give my full attention to You and hear what You would say to me.
 I believe You can tell me not only what to do, but also how to do it.
 If it means making up my mind, then You who made my mind can show me how to make it up.
 If it means changing my mind, You can work that miracle, too.
 If it means taking action, help me, Lord, to take action.
 If it means patiently waiting, help me, Lord, to wait patiently.
 If it means offering compassion, give me a tender heart, Lord.
 Whatever it takes to obediently follow your will, Lord, do that work of grace within me.
 Stop us, O God, for a few moments of prayer.
 Then set us to work, to be and do your will.
 Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Friday, February 9: John 7:31-39

It's only February. But think way ahead to Thanksgiving. The Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot, when these events occur (7:2), is celebrated on the 15th day of the month of Tishrei which happens in the Fall. The Feast reminds people of the fragile tents/tabernacles in which the Israelites lived during their 40 years of travel in the desert after the Exodus, fleeing from slavery in Egypt toward the Promised Land.

Agriculturally, Sukkot is also a harvest festival and is sometimes referred to as the "Festival of Ingathering," celebrating the harvest (like our Thanksgiving.). On the last day of the Feast (7:37) priests would pour water and wine around the altar in the Temple, to celebrate God's goodness, bounty, and blessing.

In this context, Jesus says, *"Anyone who is thirsty may come to me. Anyone who believes in me may come and drink. For the Scriptures declare, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his heart'"* (7:37-38). If you really want to experience God's blessing, it's not about grain and grapes, it's about something much deeper.

Where does the Bible say, *"Rivers of living water will flow from his heart?"* Nowhere, directly. Probably Jesus is referring to Ezekiel 47:1-12: *"In my vision, the man brought me back to the entrance of the Temple. There I saw a stream flowing east from beneath the door of the Temple and passing to the right of the altar on its south side. The man brought me outside the wall through the north gateway and led me around to the eastern entrance. There I could see the water flowing out through the south side of the east gateway."*

"He asked me, 'Have you been watching, son of man?' Then he led me back along the riverbank. When I returned, I was surprised by the sight of many trees growing on both sides of the river."

"Then he said to me, 'This river flows east through the desert into the valley of the Dead Sea. The waters of this stream will make the salty waters of the Dead Sea fresh and pure. There will be swarms of living things wherever the water of this river flows. Fish will abound in the Dead Sea, for its waters will become fresh. Life will flourish wherever this water flows. Fishermen will stand along the shores of the Dead Sea. All the way from En-gedi to En-eglaim, the shores will be covered with nets drying in the sun. Fish of every kind will fill the Dead Sea, just as they fill the Mediterranean ... Fruit trees of all kinds will grow along both sides of the river. The leaves of these trees will never turn brown and fall, and there will always be fruit on their branches. There will be a new crop every month, for they are watered by the river flowing from the Temple. The fruit will be for food and the leaves for healing.'"

The Dead Sea is dead; it's 10X as salty as the ocean. Its high salinity prevents any organisms from living in it, from fish to aquatic plants. What Ezekiel looks forward to is a time when a river will flow from the Temple in Jerusalem into the Dead Sea and make it fresh enough water that what is dead will become alive.

The dead will come to life. This is only possible with a divine life-giving, life-transforming miracle.

Ezekiel is one of those apocalyptic books using symbolism to express deeper spiritual truths (like Revelation, Daniel 7-11, and Zechariah).

- The Temple represents God's presence (the Jews believed God's actual presence on earth was in the Holy of Holies in the Temple).
- The river, as John tells us, represents the Holy Spirit.
- So, the Holy Spirit, flowing from God Himself, Jesus, will bring life – new life – unimaginable life – teeming life – impossible life – to a dead world. This is what Jesus does in the world. For us.

Jesus comes into the "evil world" – a dead world (7:7) – and brings new and abundant life. Jesus comes into our hearts – our dead hearts – and brings new life. Celebrate the fact that we have this fantastic life through Jesus. How can I live as His Spirit-filled person, today?

*Lord, forgive me that when life's circumstances lift me to the crest of a wave,
I tend to forget you.
Yet, like an errant child, even as I credit myself with every success,
I have blamed you with my every failure.
When my fears evaporate like the morning mist,
then vainly I imagine that I'm sufficient unto myself,
that material resources and human resources are enough.
I need you when the sun shines, lest I forget the storm in the dark.
I need you when I'm popular,
when my friends and those who work beside me approve and compliment me.
I need you more than, lest my head began to swell.
Oh God, forgive me for my stupidity, my blindness in success, my lack of trust in you.
Be my Saviour in success.
Save me from conceit.
Save me from pettiness.
Save me from myself.
And take this success, I pray, and use it for your glory.
In your strength I pray.
Amen.*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Saturday, February 10: John 7:40-52

How do we assess people? Honestly. Do we notice people's ethnicity? Education? Age? Appearance? Ability? Gender? Social status? Clothes? Do we treat different people differently? Do we stereotype them?

Some people look at Jesus' family tree, hometown, education, and credentials and quickly dismiss him – they can't get over their stereotypes. Others see Jesus for who He is – a godly person, a teacher with authority, a compassionate caregiver, an inspiring leader – a person who truly is God among us. These people are beginning to see Him as the Messiah, God's chosen Saviour.

How do I respond to Jesus?

- Do I say, "*He is the Christ.*" And having said that, will I follow Him? Will I do what He calls me to do? If I am going to say, "*He is the Messiah,*" am I prepared to trust His word and follow Him?
- Do I ask, "*How can the Christ come from Galilee?*" Do I say, "*He's a nice guy, but ...?*" There are parts about Jesus that are OK, but I really won't trust Him? Do I think I know better?

At the end of the day we have to make a choice about who Jesus is

- **Is He God?** If He is, I need to take Him, His word, His truth, and His guidance seriously. If He is God, He knows best. And I owe Him my worship, my obedience, and my unconditional loyalty. My life – now and eternally – is safe in His hands.
- **Or is He just a nice guy?** If He is, I can pick and choose what I want to take from Him. But at the end of the day, I know best. My life, now, has no real meaning. My life, eternally, is non-existent. Death is the end. If Jesus is just a good teacher, He really has nothing to offer.

"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve," said Joshua (Joshua 24:15). Whom will I serve?

*You know, Father, the misunderstandings that have arisen
between me and other people – friends or family.
Perhaps I have spoken harsh and thoughtless words.
I know this rift grieves you;
you would be far more impressed with the sacrifice of reconciliation on my part
than with any vows of loyalty or material gift I could make to you.
I dare not make this a prayer for you to change _____;
this person is your responsibility.
I know that always I must begin with my responsibility – myself and my own shortcomings.
In subtle ways I confess to you that I have used friendship
to cushion and make comfortable my own ego.
All too often I have sought my friends for my own pleasure and convenience;
all too seldom have I thought of what pleasure I could give.
You have asked me to love my neighbors and friends to the extent that I love myself.
That, Lord, would be a lot of loving.
Enable me now to let all false pride go.
Give me the grace of the outstretched hand and the open heart.
Give me the courage that will enable me to go to _____ and be the first to say,
'I have been wrong here and here and here. I'm sorry. Forgive me.'*
Amen

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Sunday, February 11: John 7:53-8:11

When you point a finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing back at you. Try it.

The scribes and the Pharisees were using this unfortunate woman as bait in their trap. From what they had seen of Jesus, they suspected He would want to say her sins are forgiven. But that would mean Jesus was teaching that the Torah (the Old Testament law given by God to Moses, including the Ten Commandments) didn't matter. If Jesus were the Messiah (the question hotly debated in John 7), He would never do that. God could not ignore His own laws. Jesus would be trapped. He would be shown up for the charlatan they believed He was. They rubbed their hands in sadistic glee.

Jesus' answer displays profound wisdom (are we surprised?). He does not discredit the Law. What He does say is that, if you are going to get serious about sin, you are going to find yourself guilty, too. If we look honestly in the mirror, we **all** sin and we **all** fall short of God's perfection.

Jesus does NOT say sin doesn't matter. The whole message of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is that sin REALLY does matter. It matters so much He, Himself, takes it all upon Himself, and dies on the cross.

This woman is rescued from death by Jesus' intervention. He rescues us all from the punishment we deserve by His intervention on the cross. Ultimately, He will die for her sin (and all our sin).

Forgiveness is not the same thing as approval. Sin, whether it is adultery or self-righteousness, is always ugly. Jesus always confronts it. He always forgives. But He also always says, "Go and sin no more."

When I look in the mirror, what do I see in my life that I know is wrong? Where do I fall short of God's perfection? Jesus doesn't condone, approve, or ignore it. He takes it seriously. My sin is part of the weight He carried on the cross. But He also freely forgives me. And now He says to me, "*Go and sin no more.*"

And if I blow it again, He will forgive me again, and invite me, once again, to live a holy life. Thank Jesus for His amazing grace.

*Lord, what is the matter with me that I am so fitful and moody, so changeable –
one moment professing my love for you,
and the next moment yielding to temptations that lure me away from you?
One moment cheerful, smiling, and kind,
and the next, glum and surly.
Lord, I do not understand myself.
What a strange creature I am.
Yet I do not pray, my Father, that always everything should be the same,
for I would get tired of unending sunshine, and long for a shower of rain.
I do not pray that my way may always lie on level places,
for then I would long to see a mountain.
I do not pray that my lot always be favoured with pleasant strains of music,
for then I would long for the ministry of silence.
But I do pray, O Lord, that there might be some pattern of consistency in my relations with you.
Teach me how to maintain life on an even keel,
that with a balanced life of faith and trust in you,
and kindness and love towards others,
I will not be at one moment up in the sky and at the next at the bottom of a well.
Help me to walk with my hand in your hand,
knowing you yourself came down from the mountain tops to walk in the valleys.
So may I not give way to despair when I, too, must return to the valley,
but know that the trail will wind upward again.
Lord, whether on the mountaintop or in the valley,
may I always be aware that you are walking beside me.
And if you are with me, what difference does it make where I am?
In your name, I pray.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Monday, February 12: John 8:12-29

During the Feast of Tabernacles (or Sukkot), four massive golden candlesticks are lit to recall how the people of Israel were led through the wilderness by supernatural light ([Exodus 13:21-22](#)). In the days before streetlights, light from these huge candlesticks shone across the night sky of Jerusalem. Perhaps the nearest equivalent we can find would be a brilliant firework display on New Year's or July 1.

Jesus uses this image to highlight who He is. The great candles are amazing. But they only provide some light, in a limited area, for just a few days. Anywhere behind a wall would still be in the shadows. And as you moved further away, the light would get fainter. After a few days they are extinguished until next year.

However, the light Jesus brings is universal and eternal. It pokes into the darkest shadows, lights up hidden places, prevents us from ever again "walking in darkness." Jesus' light reaches into "*all the world.*" John will describe the New Jerusalem in these same terms: "*I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light*" (Revelation 21:22-23). The Jewish people believed the only place on Earth God was present was in the Holy of Holies, in the heart of the Temple. In the New

Jerusalem, God Himself is everywhere, therefore there is no need for a Temple to “contain” Him.

John began by introducing Jesus as the light that shines in the darkness (John 1:5). John 8 highlights how deep the darkness is. People can’t seem to grasp Jesus is the Messiah. They continually challenge what He says (8:22) and who He claims to be (8:25). “*They did not understand ...*” (8:27). They are in darkness.

John 8 also emphasizes how Jesus is Light. He drives away darkness and shadow. He shows everything as it really is. But sometimes clouds obscure the sun, casting shadows on the land. Jesus doesn’t want that to happen in our lives. He wants to shine His light on us always, illuminating every part of our lives.

- Do you sense the light of Jesus’ love shining on you? Or do you feel in the shadows? Is there something you need to deal with? Be honest with the Lord.
- Sometimes clouds do come between ourselves and the Lord. Perhaps something is worrying you, you’ve been too busy, you’re stuck in certain habits or ways of coping, or you’ve sinned. Give each of these issues over to God. Entrust to Him anything that has cast shadows on your relationship with Him. Each cloud is blown away by His gracious forgiveness and love for you.

Behind the clouds, the sun never stops shining. Jesus never stops loving you. Try to open your heart to His light as you go through your day. Seek His guidance. Sense His love. Know His peace.

*Father, teach me that, as your child, worry has no place in my life.
I know that it helps nothing.
I know that by worrying I cannot add a single inch to my stature.
I know that fretting overcomes no difficulty.
Often in the past, Lord, I have come to you with heavy heart and burdened life.
And you have answered my prayers and graciously lifted the burden from me.
Yet with a strange perversion, I still refuse to leave my burdens with you.
Always I gather them up – those heavy bundles of fears and anxieties – and shoulder them again.
Do now for me what I cannot do for myself:
please break these habit patterns, reverse the direction of my negative thoughts,
lift from me once again all anxieties and apprehensions.
Give me in their place a calm and confident trust in you.
Make me willing to live just one day at a time.
May my heart re-echo to your promise that only as I rest in you can the desires of my heart be given to me.
And now help me to do my part by placing a guard around my thoughts,
by resolutely refusing to return to my old haunts of distrust.
I thank you for your love for me and for your help.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Tuesday, February 13: John 8:30-36

Andy Bannister writes, “*Everybody makes truth claims. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists – everybody. My atheist friends are increasingly confident about putting forth their truth claims out for all to see, whether it’s bestselling books from atheist authors like Richard Dawkins, snarky remarks by atheists chat show hosts, or secular advertisement on the sides of buses ...*”

Jesus says, “*You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. You will know the **truth**, and the **truth** will set you free*” (John 8:31-32). That is certainly a truth claim. It doesn’t go over well.

What is “the **truth**”? The truth, as Jews in Jesus’ day saw it, was that (1) as ethnic Jews (children of Abraham), they had never been slaves to anyone, and therefore (2) had nothing from which to be set free. But was it true that “*We have never been slaves to anyone*”? What about all those years in Egypt? In Babylon? Under the Greeks? Now under the heel of Imperial Rome? There is some ultra-ethnic, ultra-

nationalistic creative historical revisionism and self-deception going on here.

Jesus cuts to the heart of the matter: "*I tell you the **truth**, everyone who sins is a slave of sin*" (8:34) – another **truth** claim. The real slavery issue for all people, Jesus is saying, is not political oppression. There is a much more basic problem: sin. Sin controls our lives. In our society we are desensitized to "sin": we excuse it, write it off as stuffy Victorian morality, situationalize it (it might have been wrong once but we're passed that), and personalize it (if it's wrong for you, don't do it, but it's OK for me). We argue there's no absolute morality and therefore there's no truth called "sin." We are "free," right?

Yet we (most of us) can agree that rape, human trafficking, child pornography, racial discrimination, violence against the innocent, fraud of seniors, mass shootings – even blatant dishonesty by politicians – are wrong. We know that the cumulative effect of all of this "sin" is a society that is enslaved. We live in fear. We're afraid to talk with strangers, open the door, let our children go out alone, walk at night, or ...

We also know that cumulative effect of sin in our own lives (whether it be telling just a "little" lie, taking just a bit from work, viewing too much pornography, or whatever) is we get ourselves ensnared in a trap of guilt, temptation, shame, and webs of lies we cannot escape. We are enslaved by shame and habits we want to break, fear, and frustration trying to be who we want to be.

Jesus' contemporaries have it all wrong. Just because they are ethnic descendants of Abraham, they are not "part of the family." They are not "free." They can be part of God's family – truly free – only because Jesus sets us free at the deepest level. He frees us from sin. That is the **truth** everyone needs to understand.

Jesus is challenging us that we are not "free" – part of God's family – just because we have the right DNA, go to the right church, or have the right friends. We are free when we know the **truth**: freedom comes through faith in Jesus, God-with-us. Freedom comes from being faithful to His teachings. Freedom comes through knowing our lives are safe in His hands, no matter what.

Jesus wants us to be free because we know the **truth**. And what is the **truth**? The **truth** is that "*if the Son sets you free, you are **truly** free*" (8:36). If Jesus forgives us, we are forgiven indeed.

Lord, may I know the true freedom that only comes through knowing you as my Saviour, and my Lord ...

*Forbid it, Lord, that my roots become too firmly attached to this earth,
that I should fall in love with things.
Help me to understand that the pilgrimage of this life is only an introduction,
a preface, a training school for what is to come.
Then shall I see all of life in its true perspective.
Then shall I not fall in love with the things of time,
but come to love the things that endure.
Then shall I be saved from the tyranny of possessions which I have no leisure to enjoy,
of property whose care becomes a burden.
Give me, I pray, the courage to simplify my life.
So may I be mature in my faith, childlike but never childish,
humble but never cringing, understanding but never conceited.
So help me, O God, to live and not merely to exist,
that I may have joy in my work.
In your name, who alone can give me moderation and balance and zest for living, I pray.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Ash Wednesday, February 14: John 8:34-48

Lent, the 40-day preparation time for Easter, begins today (FYI Sundays don't count in those 40 days).

Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist Carl Jung published a book in which there was a picture of Adolf Hitler. Under it was the quotation: *"For over five years this man has been chasing around Europe like a madman in search of something he could set on fire."* Sounds appropriate, doesn't it?

The problem is this quote was actually something **Hitler** said to describe **Winston Churchill**. Jung argues this is an example of the psychological phenomenon of "projection": *"Rather than face our defects as revealed by the shadow,"* says Jung, *"we project them onto others – for instance, onto our political enemies."* We accuse someone else of the very thing we are guilty of ourselves. So, for example, a dishonest businessperson will accuse their (honest) competitor or being a cheat or a thief.

Do I ever do that? Do I ever criticize someone else, when I struggle with the same problem? It is so easy to find fault in another person but to be blind to the problems in my own life (or try to hide them).

The mob around Jesus is accusing Him of being *"a Samaritan devil"* (8:48). They are threatening to kill him. Is murder what Abraham, a godly person of faith, would have done to someone who challenged him? Is that what God would do? Of course not. The "devil" description describes them not Jesus (perhaps this is psychological projection, too?) Therefore, Jesus is saying, although these people might be biological descendants of Abraham, they certainly don't bear any family resemblance to their father.

One must, therefore, question whether they really are children of Abraham at all.

If one is going to look at family resemblance, Jesus says it looks more like these folks are actually children of the devil than descendants of a godly ancestor like Abraham. Jesus is right, of course. Not many people take it as a complement when you call them a "son/daughter of the devil." This adds more fuel to the fire of opposition against Him.

On the surface most of us have some physical resemblance to our biological parents, grandparents, or siblings. You can often tell people who are related by how they look. And by how they act and react. At a deeper level we can now do DNA testing to tell who is biologically related to whom without doubt.

Through Jesus' life (and His death and resurrection), He's inviting us to be part of the family of God, not based on DNA or ethnicity, but something much deeper: *"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. But 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"* (John 1:10-13).

We may all look different. But we can still act, react, live, and love as God's family, as our Father does. We can show who our Father is by how we live. The family resemblance to our Father – and our brother, Jesus – can shine through our lives. Does it?

- How can I live with my family in a way that honours my Father?
- How can I study at school or work at my job in a way that honours my Father?
- How can I have fun in ways that honour my Father?
- How can I live with my sisters and brothers in Christ in a way that honours my Father?
- How can I love my neighbour in a way that honours my Father?
- How can I act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with my God?

*O Lord, our God, have mercy on us,
who have so little mercy in our own hearts.
We give, but not in kindness.
We give because the sound of crying disturbs us,
and we want to be free to look after the things that really interest us.
We want peace without pain and security without sacrifice.
We have had to accept the responsibilities of war,
but we do not want to accept the responsibilities of peace.
O Lord, be patient with us.
Give us more time to learn what love is,
and how love should act,
and how love can change us as individuals,
and how love can transform our nation.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Thursday, February 15: John 8:48-59

Who is Jesus, really? When asked whether they have a positive or negative opinion of Jesus, a 2023 survey found that 71% of Americans say they view Jesus positively ([People like Jesus. The church is a different matter!](#)). Through John 7 and 8 there is an ongoing controversy about who Jesus is. Is He a madman? A devil? A nice polite teacher? Or the Messiah/God-with-us? What is the **truth** about Jesus?

Jesus makes a direct claim about who He is: "*I tell you the **truth**, before Abraham was even born, I AM.*" This is a direct claim to be God: He exists from before the beginning; He uses God's name as His own.

(Linguistic aside: "I AM" – Hebrew "YHWH" is the name God takes on for Himself in [Exodus 3:14-15](#). Jews would NEVER say this name aloud as Jesus just does. It was considered too holy. When Jews were reading Scripture aloud, whenever they came across one of the 6519 times the name "YHWH" is written, they would read aloud the word "Adonai," which means "Lord." In most Bibles, when you see "LORD" (capitalized) in the Old Testament, it is the Hebrew "YHWH" – literally "I AM" – God's proper name.)

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "*Jesus told people their sins were forgiven. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin ... I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.'* That is the one thing we must not say.

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You can shut Him up for a fool; you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

Jesus said to the people who believed in him, "*You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the **truth**, and the **truth** will set you free*" (John 8:32-33). Jesus challenges people: remain faithful to my teachings/do what I say/give it a try/see for yourself. If you actually try living Jesus' way, you will discover the truth – Jesus really is the Messiah, God Himself with us. This is the point Jesus made earlier: "*If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own*" (7:17). If we are genuinely seeking God, we will inevitably discover Jesus really is the Saviour.

When you live according to His will and recognize that He is the Saviour, you will discover freedom.

The truth will set you free from what?

- Freedom from sin and guilt. He forgives us.
- Freedom from stress and worry. Our lives are in His hands.
- Freedom from moral chaos and confusion. He gives us wisdom.
- Freedom from fear. All of life and death is in His care, the care of God Almighty.
- Freedom to face the future with confidence. His promise is that He is with us always.
- Freedom to live life to the full. He teaches us how to live through His Spirit.

In what area of your life do you not feel “free”? Why not? How can Jesus make a difference in your life? Do you know someone who is trapped by something? Can you encourage them to find freedom in Jesus?

*Jesus, I come to you for a blessing,
to seal within my heart the inspirations and memories of your work in my life.
I ask you for the blessing of:
quietness when my heart is troubled,
rest when my soul is weary,
new faith and courage when I feel exhausted by the tasks of the day.
I would rest now in you,
and find in this hour your stillness and your peace to bring me into quiet harmony with your will.
I give you thanks for:
every challenge that this day will bring,
every new vision of you that will wing its way across my skies,
every whisper of you that I will sense in the beauty of your world,
every thought of you that will come in quiet moments,
every need of you that will bring me back again to you in prayer.
Watch over me through the hours of the day.
Refresh me in spirit as well as in body.
Help me to face the tasks of this day with steady faith and without fear,
conscious of your presence and your guidance,
knowing that I am yours, as I have placed all my trust in you.
I know that you are still able to keep that which I've committed to you.
And now may the love of God the Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest upon me
and abide with me now and forever more.
Amen*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Friday, February 16: John 9:1-12

A lot of things are predictably cause and effect. If I write a text on my phone and hit the little “Send” icon, I expect it will be sent. I expect (hopefully) to get a reply. If I get stopped at a police check stop and I have not had a drink, I expect to have no problem. If someone were drinking, well, you know what to expect.

Some things in life are a bit greyer. If I do a good turn for someone, I might get a polite “Thank you.” If I do, great. If not, that’s ok, too. If I don’t smoke, I might expect I will not get lung cancer. Statistically that’s a good bet. It’s not guaranteed.

Some things in life are completely unrelated to anything I do at all. Why is it snowy the day I have to drive to Calgary? Why was my friend’s buddy’s house one of the 150 burned in the Halifax wildfire? Why is a baby born blind? We might like trite answers to these questions, but most often there are none. We live in a fallen, broken world where bad things happen. God is not a robot who micromanages every detail based on how good or bad we are. There is a certain amount of unpredictability in the world.

Through Jesus, God has ultimately defeated the powers of sin and death once and for all, but until He comes again, we live with great good and great evil.

Jesus has just talked about being the "Light of the World." Here is dramatic proof – a "sign" – to illustrate His point. Just as, in the beginning, God brought light into the initial chaos of creation, through Jesus, God is bringing light into the chaos of our daily lives. Jesus allows us to see the world differently:

- We don't have to have answers for everything. Bad things do happen, there is mystery in that.
- Even when bad things happen, we know God is with us. Always.
- When, in faith, we turn to God during those tough times, He gets us through them.
- We often grow most through the toughest of times.

"Through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see. So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold – though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world" (1 Peter 1:5-7).

May God give us eyes to see His hand upon our lives, in mercy and grace, today ...

*I praise the wounds and the blood of the Lamb that heals the weaknesses of my body,
I praise the wounds and the blood of the Lamb that heals the weaknesses of my soul,
I praise the wounds and the blood of the Lamb that heals the weaknesses of my spirit.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that covers all my sins so they can no longer be seen,
I praise the blood of the Lamb that cleanses me from all my sins and makes me as white as snow.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that has power to free me from all my bondages and chains of sin.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that is stronger than my own sin-infested blood
and remoulds me into the image of God.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that is victorious over all powers that seek to oppress me,
over every power of the enemy.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that protects me from all the devious attacks of the enemy.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that prepares me for the wedding feast of the Lamb.
I praise the blood of the Lamb that makes all things new.
Hallelujah.
Amen*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Saturday, February 17: John 9:13-23

I am just old enough to remember the Cold War, when the West (NATO) was at an uneasy standoff with the Soviet Union bloc (the Warsaw Pact). In my youth, Vancouver still had air raid sirens which were tested regularly, just in case. I didn't know any Russians, but they were caricatured in movies, the media, and by politicians all as cold, unfeeling, heartless sociopaths (think of Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV*, General Gogol in the Bond movies). We were afraid of Russians.

The first Russian I met, during my university days, was really nice and became a good friend. How could I reconcile my mental preconception with reality?

Since September 1, 2001, many North Americans have a similar suspicion of Muslims. The impressions some people had was all Muslims were sociopaths out to destroy our society. I have met lots of Muslim people both here in Canada (in high school, university, Edmonton, Lethbridge) and overseas (in Turkey, Lebanon, and Europe), and in Canada. They have (almost) all been really nice. Yes, there certainly are radicals within Islam, but they are a very small – very well-publicized – minority. We need to be careful not

to be racist. After all, there are a small number of pretty horrible white people (even “Christians”) who are nasty and violent, too (recent mass shootings in the US). I don’t want to be tarred with their brush.

When you actually get to know someone different than yourself, you may discover they are really a nice person. That doesn’t mean you have to agree with their religion, politics, or other ideas. But you discover you have a lot more in common than not. You make a friend. And you aren’t afraid anymore.

The Pharisees are afraid. They are afraid of who Jesus is and what He represents. He is upsetting their understanding of who God is, what God should and should not do, and what it means to be Jewish. Ever since the kerfuffle in the Temple (John 2) and Jesus healing of the lame man on the Sabbath (John 5), they are realizing that Jesus is fundamentally challenging many of their assumptions.

Their knee-jerk reaction to Jesus is to eliminate the potential threat: *“Anyone saying Jesus was the Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue”* (9:23). That didn’t just mean you couldn’t go to worship anymore – it meant you were kicked out of the community. The synagogue was the heart and soul of life. To be expelled meant you were cut off from life – no one would talk with you, do business with you, visit you, or be friends with you anymore.

No wonder the blind man’s parents want to stay neutral. *“Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself”* is hardly the response you would expect from loving parents. The risk is enormous.

- Fear. It prevents the Pharisees from seeing Jesus for who He was.
- Fear. It causes parents to leave their recently healed son alone and vulnerable.
- Fear. What does it do to us? How does it affect the way we react to the news? Relate to (or avoid) people different from us? Stop us from doing things we would like to do?

Travel writer Rick Steeves has some great insights on fear: *“Fear has always been a barrier to travel. And, after 9/11, the US became even more fearful...and more isolated. Of course, there are serious risks that deserve our careful attention. But it’s all too easy to mistake fear for actual danger. Statistically, even in the most sobering days of post-9/11 anxiety, travel to most international destinations remained safer than a drive to your neighborhood grocery store. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s assertion that we have nothing to fear but fear itself feels just as relevant today as when he first said it in 1933.*

“While I don’t want to seem paranoid, I worry that people in positions of power have become expert at manipulating the fear of the American people. History is rife with examples of leaders who use fear to distract, mislead, and undermine the will of the very people who entrusted them with power. Our own recent history is no exception. If you want to sell weapons to Columbia, exaggerate the threat of drug lords. If you want to build a wall between the US and Mexico, trump up the fear of illegal immigrants. If you want to invade Iraq, you say you “don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.” If you want to build an expensive missile-defense system, terrify people with predictions of nuclear holocaust. My travels have taught me to have a healthy skepticism towards those who peddle fear. And in so many cases, I’ve learned that the flipside of fear is understanding.

“I’m hardly a fearless traveler. I can think of many times I’ve been afraid before a trip. Years ago, I heard that in Egypt, the beggars were relentless, there were no maps, and it was so hot that car tires melted to the streets. For three years, I had plane tickets to India but bailed out, finding other places closer to my comfort zone. Before flying to Iran to film a public television show, I was so uneasy, I nearly left our big video camera in Greece for its own safety. But in each case, when I finally went to these countries, I realized my fears were unfounded.

“I got an email recently from a man who wrote, ‘Thanks for the TV shows. They will provide a historical documentation of a time when Europe was white and not Muslim. Keep filming your beloved Europe before it’s gone.’ Reading this, I thought how feisty fear has become in our society. A fear of African Americans

swept the USA in the 1960s. Jews have been feared in many places throughout history. And today, Muslims are feared. But we have a choice whether or not to be afraid.

"Of course, terrorism — which is designed to be emotional and frighten the masses — makes it more difficult to overcome fear. But my travels have helped me distinguish between the fear of terrorism ... and the actual danger of terrorism. I was in London on 7/7/07 ... a date the Brits consider their 9/11. A series of devastating bombs ripped through the subway system, killing 52 and injuring 700 people. Remembering the impact of 9/11 on the United States, I thought, 'Oh my goodness, everything will be shut down.'

"Instead, I witnessed a country that, as a matter of principle, refused to be terrorized. The prime minister returned from meetings in Scotland to organize a smart response. Within a couple of days, he was back in Scotland, London was functioning as normal, and they set out to catch the bad guys — which they did. There was no lingering panic. People mourned the tragedy, even as they kept it in perspective. The terrorists were brought to justice, Britain made a point to learn from the event (by reviewing security on public transit and making an effort to deal more constructively with its Muslim minority) ... and life went on.

"The American reaction to the shocking and grotesque events of 9/11 is understandable. But seeing another society respond so differently to its own disaster forced me to grapple with a new perspective. If the goal of terrorists is to terrify us into submission, those who refuse to become fearful stand defiantly against them.

"Every time I'm stuck in a long security line at the airport, I reflect on one of the most disconcerting results of terrorism: The very people who would benefit most from international travel — those who needlessly fear people and places they don't understand — decide to stay home. I believe the most powerful things an individual can do to fight terrorism are to travel a lot, learn about the world, come home with a new perspective, and then work to help our country fit more comfortably and less fearfully into this planet."

(<https://www.ricksteves.com/about-rick/social-activism-philanthropy/how-to-travel-as-a-political-act/overcome-fear>)

"Perfect love casts out fear" writes John (1 John 4:18). How can I love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength — so I am not afraid? How can I love my neighbour as myself — so I am not afraid?

Christ, as a light, illumine and guide me.

Christ, as a shield, overshadow me.

Christ under me.

Christ over me.

Christ beside me on my left in my right.

This day be within and without me, lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.

Be in the heart of each to whom I speak;

and the mouth of each who speaks to me.

This day be within and without me, lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.

Christ as a light.

Christ as a shield.

Christ beside me on my left and my right.

Amen

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Sunday, February 18: John 9:24-34

If John Newton had written *Amazing Grace* in 31 AD rather than 1779 AD, the ex-blind man (let's call him Fred, just for convenience) might have sung it for the Pharisees:

Amazing grace. How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found;

Was blind, but now I see.

Fred doesn't understand it all. He hasn't got all the answers. In fact, he doesn't understand much of anything. He simply knows that his life has changed, infinitely for the better.

The Pharisees on the other hand, don't understand either. They know **only God** can do incredible things like giving a man born blind his sight. They also know **Jesus** doesn't fit their preconceived notion of what a man from God should look like, talk like, and act like. The only possible solution to this conundrum – that they are willing to discuss publicly – is that God is doing miraculous things which just happen to coincide with the presence of Jesus, this miserable "sinner." That's one possibility. Unlikely. But possible.

Unfortunately, the Pharisees are stumped by the fact that Jesus clearly **does** something directly related to this particular healing. He made mud from clay and spittle and put it on the man's eyes. Fred states the obvious: *"We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will. Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. If this man were not from God, he couldn't have done it"* (9:31-33). Good point. What do you do when your worldview is being shaken up by Jesus? What do you do when Jesus doesn't "fit" your preconceptions?

Tom Wright comments, *"Being a Christian is often confusing. People try to interpret your experience for you, to put you in this or that category, to label you. Often this is so that they needn't take you quite seriously. What you must do is to stick to what you know. 'I used to be blind, now I can see.' It may be costly, but paying that cost is better than the still more costly route of denying what, in Jesus, God has truly done for you."* What has God, in Jesus, done in you? How can you live and share that truth today?

*Arise, shine, for the Light of the World has come!
Darkness covers the earth and its people,
but the radiance of God's Light burns away its shadows,
illuminates the smallest corner,
and heralds in the start of a new dawn,
where hearts no longer fear,
souls might be set free,
and sister shall follow brother,
nation shall follow nation,
and kings and princes bow down in awe
before the one who comes to reign.
Arise, shine, for the Light of the World has come!
Alleluia!
Amen*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Monday, February 19: John 9 recap (especially 9:35-41)

Put yourselves in the shoes of various people in the story of the ex-blind man:

- The disciples (9:1). What are you thinking and feeling? What other questions do you have?
- The neighbours (9:8). What are you thinking and feeling? What other questions do you have?
- The Pharisees (9:13-34). Why do they react as they do? What is going on in their hearts/minds?
- The man's parents (9:18-23). What are you thinking and feeling? What questions do you have?
- A casual observer of all this. What are you thinking and feeling? What questions do you have?
- The blind man now healed. What are you thinking and feeling? What questions do you have?

Who do you most identify with in the story? Why?

Are we blind in some ways? Are there things we should see, but we can't? How do we know?

Pray that God would show us our blindnesses ... Or better yet, pray that Jesus would **heal** our blindnesses

and help us to see the world as He sees it.

Why not pray that He would help you see what He sees? ... our perspective on everything might change. Can I take that risk? That opportunity? That challenge?

*Father, I abandon myself into Your hands.
Do with me what You will.
Whatever You do, I will thank You.
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only Your will be done in me, as in all Your creatures,
and I'll ask nothing else, my Lord.
Into Your hands I commend my spirit;
I give it to You with all the love of my heart, for I love You, Lord.
I give myself; I surrender myself into Your hands with a trust beyond all measure,
because You are my Father.
Amen*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Tuesday, February 20: John 10:1-10

Jesus says, *"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full ..."* What does a "full" life look like to Jesus, the One who created us?

A full life is not necessarily physical health. Jesus is much more concerned with spiritual health – a good relationship with God, a clean conscience through forgiveness of sin, a sincere desire to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Jesus does physically heal people (and us) on occasion, too, but many, many people then and now live full lives as they live with chronic health problems (including me).

A full life also includes our relationships with other people. In Jesus' teaching, a full life includes a spirit of forgiveness, compassion, mercy, and grace. It includes love and peace with our family and friends. This all comes from a commitment to love our neighbour as ourselves and love one another.

A full life is shaped by values of love, hope, peace, and joy. These things transcend our physical health and, ultimately, as we pass through this life into our eternal life with God, these are the treasures we take with us. A full life is one filled with and fully devoted to God.

There are, of course, a lot of other teachers who will counsel us in other directions. Using the metaphor of a shepherd, Jesus asks us who we believe. Do we trust those who are out to make a profit from us through the latest seminar, self-help book, or investment opportunity? When hard times come, will the latest motivational guru, financial advisor, or political candidate stand with you, or like the hired hand, will they head for cover? Or do we believe in the One who laid down His life for us?

Who will never leave you? Who really has your best interest in mind? Only Jesus.

In faith, we are called to put our hope and trust in God. Like the Jews back in Jesus' day we can come up with all sorts of excuses **not** to trust our lives to Him. I can stubbornly resist Him as well as anybody.

But ultimately, Jesus says, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him"* (John 14:6-7).

- Do I really want to live – really live a full life? If so, will I trust Jesus? What will that mean?
- How will I live differently if I truly do put my faith in Him?

*Teach us, dear Lord, to number our days,
 that we may apply our hearts to seeking Your wisdom.
 Please teach us and satisfy us early with Your mercy,
 that we may rejoice and be glad all of our days.
 May the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us
 and establish the work of our hands, dear Lord.
 May nothing disturb us,
 nothing frighten us –
 all these evil things pass away, but God never changes.
 Lord help us to have the patience to endure all things
 that we might attain all things;
 Possess us so completely that we seek to possess nothing other than You –
 for You alone meet all our needs.
 In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
 Amen*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Wednesday, February 21: John 10:11-18

The word “pastor” is from the Latin word for “shepherd.” A pastor, literally, is a shepherd to their sheep, their congregation.

When I was writing my Ph.D. thesis, I interviewed a number of clergy about words they used to describe themselves and what they did. One of the questions I asked was, “*Complete the phrase, ‘Pastor as _____.’*” I got many predictable answers: “Pastor as **teacher**,” “Pastor as **caregiver**,” “Pastor as **preacher**.” I also got some unexpected answers: “Pastor as **octopus**” (this person felt they were doing too many totally unrelated tasks all the time); “Pastor as **midwife**” (a lady pastor who described her job as “*recognizing there is so much creativity and so many great ideas in these people, and my task is simply to help them be born*” – isn’t that great?).

A Catholic priest commented he never thought of himself as “Pastor as shepherd.” “*I was a priest in Central America for years,*” he said, “*and I learned that sheep are smelly, stupid, and pig-headed. I don’t want to think of the people in my parish as smelly, stupid, and pig-headed.*” I wonder if Jesus sees us as smelly, stupid, and pig-headed? Do these qualities describe me? In my case, 2 out of 3 are probably accurate (I do shower daily, so hopefully I’m not too stinky).

The point of Jesus’ metaphor is not really the dubious qualities of **sheep** (and us/me). His point is the amazing sacrificial love of the good **shepherd**. As we read these words, on this side of the cross and resurrection, we know what Jesus is talking about. He will give His life for us. Before Jesus’ crucifixion, His disciples would have been confused by this talk of sacrificing His life and taking it back again.

The other point of Jesus’ talk is that, “*I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd*” (10:16). Jesus is the good shepherd – the good pastor – not just for the Jewish people, but for **ALL** people.

The mission of sharing God’s love for **ALL** people, which the Jewish people had long forgotten, is being reborn. As Paul writes, “*the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would declare the Gentiles to be righteous because of their faith. God proclaimed this good news to Abraham long ago when he said, ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So all who put their faith in Christ share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith ... For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God’s promise to Abraham belongs to you*” (Galatians 3:8-9, 26-29).

We are **ALL** welcome to come to discover fullness of life through Jesus. And He desires that **ALL** people come to faith in Him – to new life in Him – as well. Pray that we may have the opportunity to share His love, in Word and in deed, with those around us ...

*Deliver me, Lord, from every evil and grant me peace this day.
In Your mercy, Lord, keep me free from sin,
and protect me from all anxiety
as I wait in joyful hope for the coming of my Savior, Jesus Christ.
Let Your kingdom come, Lord, in me.
I pray the protection of Christ to clothe me,
Christ to enfold me,
to surround me and guard me this day and every day,
surrounding me and my companions,
enfolding me and every friend.
I pray for the gift of friendship and faithfulness,
that I would be freed from selfishness.
Please teach me how I can deepen and strengthen the faith of others.
Lord, give me the desire to love goodness,
to passionately love righteousness.
Teach me moderation in all things.
Teach me to love wisdom,
and to greatly love Your Word.
Amen.*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Thursday, February 22: John 10:19-33

When you think of Jesus as “the good shepherd” what picture comes to mind? Jesus, dressed in spotless clothes, sitting peacefully, holding a smiling child or two, surrounded by fluffy white lambs? So peaceful. So serene. So happy. But notice where Jesus talks about being a good shepherd actually leads: “*Once again the people picked up stones to kill him ...*” (10:31). Not much peace and serenity here. What is going on? What is this all about?

This happens during Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights and Feast of Dedication. Hanukkah is an eight-day holiday commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabean Revolt against the Greek/Seleucid Empire (2nd century BC). Since the days of Alexander the Great (332 BC), the Greeks/Seleucids had ruled Judea. In 167 BC, the Seleucid king, Antiochus, ordered an altar to Zeus to be constructed in the Jewish Temple. He outlawed Judaism, banned circumcision, and ordered pigs to be sacrificed at the altar of the Temple.

Judah “Maccabee,” son of a priest, horrified by the, the persecution of Jewish people, outlawing of their faith, and desecration of the Temple began a revolt. He led a ragtag army of Jewish dissidents to victory through guerrilla warfare. This is recorded in the apocryphal books, 1 and 2 Maccabees. Hanukkah is the annual celebration of the purifying and rededication of the Temple after their victory.

The Menorah (a nine-lighted candelabra) is used for Hanukkah. Each night during Hanukkah the lights are lit. This hymn is sung: “*We kindle these lights for the miracles and the wonders, for the redemption and the battles that you made for our forefathers, in those days at this season, through your holy priests. During all eight days of Hanukkah these lights are sacred, and we are not permitted to make ordinary use of them except for to look at them in order to express thanks and praise to Your great Name for Your miracles, Your wonders and Your salvations.*”

After the crushing defeat of the Seleucids, the family of Judah Maccabee became the royal family of Judea, until 37 BC. Then the last of their dynasty, Antigonius II, was executed by Herod the Great. Herod, a non-

Jew, was proclaimed "King of the Jews" by the Roman Senate in 39 BC. He also married Antigonus' niece, Mariamne, to establish a dubious claim to the throne and to appear Jewish (unfortunately, Herod already had a wife, Doris, and a three-year-old son, Antipater. He simply chose to banish them. Problem solved).

So, when Jews in Jesus' day celebrated Hanukkah, they thought of freedom. They thought of great heroes – deliverers – kings – good shepherds who led them and saved them. Now, here is Jesus, walking in the Temple during Hanukkah, talking about being a good shepherd, claiming to be One with the Father.

People wanted miracles. Here was the hope of a miracle. The Messiah has come. The Maccabean dynasty had only lasted 130 years. But Jesus promises that *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me, for my Father has given them to me, and he is more powerful than anyone else. No one can snatch them from the Father's hand"*(10:27-29). He is talking about an eternal kingdom. Eternal freedom.

The great news of the Good Shepherd is that the fickle fortunes of kings and dynasties, of politics and power may come and go. But we are safe – always – in God's hands. This doesn't mean bad things won't happen to us. It does mean that nothing has the power to separate us from God.

James, who would be beheaded for his faith, writes, *"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing"*(James 1:2-4). No one can snatch you from the Father's hand.

*Lord, I am assailed from within and without;
self-doubt and loathing, disrespect and insult.
The world closes in, swamps, and would consume me.
I am sinking, yet will not drown.
For you endured all this and much more,
beaten, hated, scourged and whipped,
humiliated and killed, yet rising victorious,
to demonstrate the paradox of strength through weakness,
love conquering all.
I am weak, but through the grace of Christ I am strong
and together we shall overcome.
Amen*

John Birch

Friday, February 23: John 10:31-42

Who is Jesus? The Jewish powers-that-be are certain His claim to be One with the Father is blasphemy.

But Jesus says, *"It is written in your own Scriptures that God said to certain leaders of the people, 'I say, you are gods.' ... So if those people who received God's message were called 'gods,' why do you call it blasphemy when I say, 'I am the Son of God'?"* He is quoting Psalm 82. Here it is in its entirety:

*"God presides over heaven's court; he pronounces judgment on the gods:
'How long will you hand down unjust decisions by favoring the wicked?
Give justice to the poor and the orphan; uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute.
Rescue the poor and helpless; deliver them from the grasp of evil people.
But these oppressors know nothing; they are so ignorant.
They wander about in darkness, while the whole world is shaken to the core.
I say, "You are gods; you are all children of the Most High.
But you will die like mere mortals and fall like every other ruler."
Rise up, O God, and judge the earth, for all the nations belong to you."*

Psalm 82 is about judgment on those who are leaders who lead in un-God-like ways. Human beings are created in the image of God, to be steward God's creation, and to live as His faithful people. Human leaders are to shepherd His people in righteous, godly ways. As God's representatives, they are to lead the people as God would lead them were He actually present. The judgment in Psalm 82 is that the leaders who were called to function in God-like ways, in the image of God, are doing nothing of the sort.

Jesus is drawing the Pharisees back to Psalm 82. They are not acting in God-like ways either. But Jesus is. He is doing what we would expect God to do were he actually present. Actions speak louder than words, Jesus is saying: *"Don't believe me unless I carry out my Father's work. But if I do his work, believe in the evidence of the miraculous works I have done, even if you don't believe me. Then you will know and understand that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father."*

When people – ordinary people – looked at the leaders in Israel, they saw the epitome of Psalm 82: injustice, oppression, evil, and darkness. When people – ordinary people – looked at Jesus they saw love, compassion, mercy, hope, justice, and grace. This is exactly what you would expect from God, and exactly what you would expect from a true representative of God. No wonder many of them decided to follow Jesus, not the rulers of the people.

Cory Booker writes, *"Before you speak to me about your religion, first show it to me in how you treat other people; before you tell me how much you love your God, show me in how much you love all His children; before you preach to me of your passion for your faith, teach me about it through your compassion for your neighbors. In the end, I'm not as interested in what you have to tell or sell as in how you choose to live and give."* That's great counsel for all of us.

*Thanks to You, O ever-gentle Christ,
for raising me from the black and darkness of the night
into the kindly light of this day.
You pour Your life into me,
giving me speech, sense, desire,
giving me thought and action.
You mark the way before me.
As I remember saints who have journeyed before me, Lord,
teach me the way of their simplicity:
strength with humility, at peace in the love and fear of God.
May I also go wherever I am led.
On Your path, O my God, and not my own, be all my journeying.
Rule this heart of mine that it be only Yours.
Amen.*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Saturday, February 24: John 11:1-16

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) wrote, *"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread ..."*

We typically read this as a story about Lazarus. It is. But it's also a story about Jesus. At the end of John 10, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem want to stone Him. Bethany, where Lazarus is, is less than 3 kilometres from Jerusalem. Does Jesus really want to go back there? The disciples think not (11:8). For two days Jesus waited. What was Jesus doing for those two days before making the journey?

Knowing Jesus' character, we can assume He spent some of the time praying. Undoubtedly He was praying for the situation with Lazarus (see John 11:41-42). Probably He was also praying for God's wisdom and guidance. The two are interconnected. Jesus' miraculous intervention for Lazarus will be one of the final crises for the Jewish leaders. This will lead directly to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion (11:45-57).

Sometimes we rush into action before taking time to seek God's wisdom. We might save ourselves a lot of pain and grief if we asked God's guidance first, rather than rushing ahead, certain we always know best. Time spent in prayer may be the better choice. Alexander Pope also wrote, *"To err is human; to forgive, divine."* Thankfully God forgives us when we do make mistakes.

Jesus' cryptic line in 11:9 speaks to this: if we walk in the light of day we will be just fine. Remember Jesus is the *"Light of the World"* (John 1:4-5, 3:19-21, 8:12), the One who gives sight to the blind (John 9). If we walk in His "light" we won't stumble and fall. However, if we walk at night, without the light (Jesus), we're liable to stumble or fall. In other words, do spend the time seeking God's wisdom and guidance. Pray. It may save you from a LOT of grief. It is worth waiting for His light to guide us on the way.

If Jesus routinely spent time in prayer with His Father – waiting and listening for His voice – how much more should we? God says, *"Be still and know that I am God"* (Psalm 46:10).

Lord, give me the discipline and patience to be still. To pray. To listen – to Your voice. To not be the fool who rushes in. Thank you that when I do make mistakes, you forgive them all.

*I call all heaven to witness today that I have put on Christ.
I choose no other Lord than the Maker of heaven and earth.
This day I walk with Him and He will walk with me.
I will walk in the Light.
I fasten close to me this day that same Jesus who came to us as flesh and blood
and was Himself baptized in the Jordan River.
He died upon a cross to rescue me, broke free from death, its conqueror.
He left us, to return the more certainly.
All these truths and their power I fasten close to me this day.
I will walk in the Light.
Resisting my own selfishness and sin,
refusing to live as a slave to riches, pleasure or reputation,
rejecting Satan and all his lies,
I call on heaven to witness today that I have put on Christ.
I will walk in the Light.
Amen*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Sunday, February 25: John 11:17-37

"If only you had been here ..." Martha says (11:21). How many times in our lives do we say, *"If only ..."* If only the markets hadn't crashed ... If only the cancer hadn't come ... If only the teacher had been better ... But *"if only's"* don't change anything. They refer to the past. And the past is history. It's in the books.

Jesus doesn't bother to deal with the past. What He does do is talk about the future: *"Your brother will rise again"* (11:23). It is always good to keep this eternal perspective in mind. But the future, as we shall see, is also inextricably intertwined with the present. Eternal life is a present reality, not just a future assurance.

Jesus chooses to focus on the present moment: *"I **AM** (present tense) the resurrection and the life ..."* ("I AM" – that claim to be God again). Jesus emphasizes it's not just about being with the Lord when we die – it's also about experiencing His resurrection life now, while we're living, as well. At a very practical level, for Lazarus, this means being able to share more of life with his sisters. He will come out of his tomb, a shuffling, sightless figure, to be unwrapped and released into the world of life, light, and love.

(This is all very wonderful, but I also feel some pangs of pity for Lazarus too. He will have to experience the process of physically dying a second time. Somehow that's not very attractive to me)

In a sense, this is a graphic metaphor of what happens to all of us when we "*die to our old selves*" and are "*raised with Christ*." When we meet Jesus, we experience a new birth. In this new life, we appreciate that all we have and are is a gift from God ... right now. We walk in His presence, the Holy Spirit, in the present.

Jesus asks us the same question: *Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life?*

- It's a question about our eternal future.
- It's a question about our present moment. Do we believe Jesus can give us a full life now (John 10:10)?

*Lord, help me now to unclutter my life,
to organize myself in the direction of simplicity.
Lord, teach me to listen to my heart;
teach me to welcome change instead of fearing it.
Lord, I give you the stirrings inside me.
I give you my discontent.
I give you my restlessness.
I give you my doubt.
I give you my despair.
I give you all the longings I hold inside.
Help me to listen to these signs of change, of growth;
to listen seriously and follow where they lead
through the breathtaking empty space of an open door.
Lord, help me now to listen to you,
and to walk the paths where your Spirit leads me.
Amen.*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Monday, February 26: John 11:38-46

Jesus was not the first person to rise from the dead. On the third day (recall Jesus had waited for two days, 11:6), Jesus went up to Bethany, and Lazarus is raised from the dead. Interesting, isn't it? English teachers like to talk about the literary device of foreshadowing. In hindsight, we can see there is no more obvious foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection on the third day than this.

The disciples don't want Jesus to be here: "*Rabbi, only a few days ago the people in Judea were trying to stone you. Are you going there again?*" (11:8). When Jesus is determined, Thomas, rather gloomily, says, "*Let's go, too – and die with Jesus*" (11:16).

Jesus says, "*I am the resurrection and the life*" (11:25). He is referring to Lazarus' resurrection, but also hinting at what is to come for Himself. And for us.

At a physical level, we also look forward to eternal life with God. In one of the great mysteries and promises of Jesus, we will be raised to new, physical, lives through our own physical deaths, too ([1 Corinthians 15](#)).

But this is also a metaphor – a picture – of what we experience through the new life God the Father gives us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and through the presence and power of His Spirit (Romans 8):

"So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of

the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit.

"Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

"But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you ... And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

"Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."

May God help us experience this new life through Jesus. Holy Spirit, lead us. Holy Spirit, lead me.

*We are drawn to your feet in worship,
Your creation facing its creator,
hearts laid bare by your light
humbly asking for your mercy.
We come to you as a people in need
of assurance and forgiveness.
We come to you as a people in need
of healing and wholeness.
We come dependent upon your love.
Draw us close.
Enfold us in your arms.
Fill us with your Spirit
that we might reflect your light
within this dark world,
speak your Word with boldness
and draw others to your feet.
We ask this through your dear Son Jesus Christ.
Amen*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Tuesday, February 27: John 11:47-57

God can do surprising things through surprising people. Most often, people who are well-tuned to God's voice hear Him leading through prayer and Scripture.

But sometimes God uses people who seem out-of-sync with His ways to speak or do His truth. He used Babylon as His chosen instrument to straighten out Judah back in the days of the prophets. He spoke to Nebuchadnezzar in the days of Daniel. He even uses the high priest, Caiaphas. It's all rather annoying.

Notice the controversy swirling around Caiaphas, high priest at the time, who says, *"It's better for you that one man should die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed"* (11:50).

Writing retrospectively, John comments, *"He did not say this on his own; as high priest at that time he was led to prophesy that Jesus would die for the entire nation. And not only for that nation, but to bring*

together and unite all the children of God scattered around the world”(11:51-52).

Caiaphas, although he was high priest, was not open to listening to God. Early Jewish historians note his main “accomplishment” was keeping peace by appeasing the Romans, a rather dubious honour. He was very much at the epicentre of the “chief priests and Pharisees” who want to get rid of Jesus.

We will see later that Caiaphas, other leading priests, and the Sanhedrin interrogate Jesus, bribe false witnesses, and look for false evidence to frame Him. Jesus remains silent throughout the proceedings until Caiaphas demands Jesus say whether or not He is the Messiah. Jesus replies *“You have said so”* (Matthew 26:64), and *“I AM* (a claim to be God). *And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God’s right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven”* (Mark 14:62). Caiaphas and the others charge him with blasphemy, order him beaten and taken to Pontius Pilate. They scream for His execution.

When God is speaking to us are we listening?

Dallas Willard, in a wonderful book, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, writes, *“Our failure to hear His voice when we want to is due to the fact that we do not in general want to hear it, that we want it only when we think we need it.”* His insight and honesty are helpful. God tells us a lot through His Word. He guides us through our consciences. Wise friends give us sage advice. But often we don’t like what He is saying. We prefer to say, *“I did it my way”* (to quote Frank Sinatra).

The wise course is to let our minds be formed by God and to live by the principles God gives us. Then most of the decisions we have to make simply fall into place because our souls are shaped by God’s Spirit. Willard writes, *“The union Christ had with the Father was the greatest that we can conceive of in this life – if indeed we can conceive of it. Yet we have no indication that even Jesus was constantly awash with revelations as to what he should do. His union with the Father was so great that he was at all times obedient. This obedience was something that rested in his mature will and understanding of his life before God, not on always being told “Now do this” and “Now do that” with regard to every details of his life or work.”*

Of course we will never be perfect like Jesus. But *“let the Holy Spirit guide your lives”* or *“walk in step with the Spirit”* (Galatians 5:25). And most of the time, we will make right choices. Give it a try.

When you do fail ... it’s not the end of the world. Confess it. Get up. Begin again ... With a renewed prayer and resolve to walk each moment of each day with Jesus.

*Lord, your Spirit brooded over the face of the deep,
and out of the chaos brought forth life and beauty.
All we have to bring you is our brokenness and chaos.
In me, O Lord, let there be life.*

*Jesus, you are the living water, pouring yourself out for us,
like a flood, quenching our thirst with your love.
O let all who thirst, let them come to the water.
And let all who have nothing, let them come to the Lord:
without money, without price.*

*Why should you pay the price, except for the Lord?
And let all who seek, let them come to the water.
And let all who have nothing, let them come to the Lord:
without money, without strife.*

*Why should you spend your life, except for the Lord?
And let all who toil, let them come to the water.
And let all who are weary, let them come to the Lord:
all who labor, without rest.*

*How can your soul find rest, except for the Lord?
And let all the poor, let them come to the water.
Bring the ones who are laden, bring them all to the Lord:
bring the children without might.
Easy the load and light: come to the Lord.
Amen*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Wednesday, February 28: John 12:1-8

The story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead ends with the sombre prophecy of Caiaphas: *"It is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."*

No wonder Jesus prayed for two days before going to Bethany to deal with Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. His sign demonstrating *"I am the resurrection and life"* – raising Lazarus from the dead on the third day – has set wheels in motion that will end at the cross.

John 12 brings us back to Bethany, to the home of the same family: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Shortly after Jesus' miracle in Lazarus' life, they are having a party in Jesus' honour (not surprising given recent events). Notice the different people and what they are doing:

- **Lazarus** is enjoying the moment, soaking it all in.
- **Martha** is in the kitchen and at the table, making sure everyone has what they need. She gets rather annoyed at Mary (and probably Lazarus) for not helping out (see [Luke 10:38-42](#)).
- **Mary**, for some reason, takes some expensive perfume and anoints his feet with it. It is a radical move of devotion:
 - The perfume was expensive and we sense these are not wealthy people. This could have cost Mary a lot of her life savings.
 - She "let her hair down" – an unthinkable brazen action in polite Jewish society – rather like a lady hiking a fine ballroom dress up over her knees and getting down on the floor ... what would people say? But Mary didn't care what other people thought; she did what she felt God wanted her to do.
 - Jesus interprets it as a prophetic foreshadowing of His death. Did Mary understand it that way? We don't know. For her it might have just been an act of devotion for the moment. But it does help us recognize that Jesus knows what's going on here and what's to come ...
- **Judas** is concerned about the financial implications of the party. Can they afford it? (Of course we also get some disturbing insight into Judas' character that betrays other concerns, too).
- **The crowd** has come along out of curiosity. Most don't want to commit one way or another about who Jesus is. It's just fun to check it out. Some, despite open hostility from the Jewish authorities, *"were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him."* This is a brave thing to do.
- **The Jewish authorities** are up to their usual nasty-ness ...

Where are you in the story? Are you a Lazarus – a Martha – a Mary? Can you identify a bit with Judas? If you were in the crowd, would you "go over to Jesus" and put your faith in Him? Or not?

John routinely confronts us with these basic choices: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and*

only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil ...”(John 3:16-19).

To believe or not to believe? ... that is the question. And if you believe, will you

- Enjoy His company – like Lazarus?
- Find ways to serve Him – like Martha ?
- Give your life to Him in whole-hearted devotion – like Mary?

*Great God of wisdom, great God of mercy,
give me of your fullness
and of your guidance
at the turning of each path.
Christ's cross would I carry,
my own struggles forget.
Christ's death would I ponder,
my own death remember.
Christ's agony would I embrace,
my love to God make warmer.
The love of Christ would I feel,
my own love waken.*

*Great God of shielding, great God of surrounding,
give me of Your holiness and of Your peace.
Give me Your surrounding
and Your peace through all my life.
Peace between me and my God.
Peace between me and my neighbour.
May I tread the path to the gates of glory.
Rule this heart of mine that it be only Yours.
God's path would I travel, my own path refuse.
May I tread the path to the gates of glory.
Amen.*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Thursday, February 29: John 12:9-19

At Hanukkah, Jesus spoke about being a good shepherd (John 10). Hanukkah is when Jews remember how Judah Maccabee drove out the Greeks and purified the temple. Here is a portion of the story:

"Judas Maccabeus and his followers, under the leadership of the Lord, recaptured the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. They tore down the altars which foreigners had set up in the marketplace and destroyed the other places of worship that had been built. They purified the Temple and built a new altar. Then, with new fire started by striking flint, they offered sacrifice for the first time in two years, burned incense, lighted the lamps, and set out the sacred loaves.

"After they had done all this, they lay face down on the ground and prayed that the Lord would never again let such disasters strike them. They begged him to be merciful when he punished them for future sins and not hand them over any more to barbaric, pagan Gentiles. They rededicated the Temple on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Kislev, the same day of the same month on which the Temple had been desecrated by the Gentiles. The happy celebration lasted eight days ...

"Carrying green palm branches and sticks decorated with ivy, they paraded around, singing grateful praises to him who had brought about the purification of his own Temple" (2 Maccabees 10:1-7, also recorded in [1 Maccabees 13:51](#)).

Now, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, people parade around, singing grateful praises. The people remember how Judah Maccabee had driven out the foreigners. They saw in Jesus the spark of a deliverer, too ...

Jesus comes riding on a donkey's colt. That doesn't sound too exciting. But the Jewish people would also remember the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: *"Rejoice, O people of Zion. Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem. Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey - riding on a donkey's colt."*

Zechariah's prophecy goes on (as the people well knew) to talk about the destruction of their enemies (9:15). It concludes with a fantastic vision: *"On that day the Lord their God will rescue his people, just as a shepherd rescues his sheep. They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown. How wonderful and beautiful they will be. The young men will thrive on abundant grain, and the young women will flourish on new wine"* (9:16-17). Could Jesus be bringing this prophecy to life?

Jesus and His followers are bringing Hanukkah (deliverance from the Greeks), the Passover (when the Jews celebrated their deliverance from slavery in Egypt), and Zechariah's Messianic prophecy (about the final deliverance from all enemies) together. Jesus is the true King, the Messiah, the One who will set people free once and for all. All Jewish history is rushing together in this moment, in this place, in this Person.

"Freedom," as Jewish people in Jesus' day understood it, would mean overthrowing Rome. But Jesus is coming with a much more profound, transformative definition of freedom. He is talking about freedom from sin and guilt, freedom from a merely human perspective on the world, and, ultimately, freedom from the power of sin and death itself. Nationalistic freedom may be good, but the spiritual-emotional-physical-social-cultural freedom that comes from being filled and transformed by His Spirit is so much better.

The reality was that deliverance from slavery in Egypt (the Passover) was great, but people fell back into evil patterns, selfish and sinful ways, and soon created a corrupt and unjust society. They would be conquered by the Assyrians. Deliverance from the Greeks/Seleucids was great, but people quickly slid back into evil, sinful, corrupt, and ungodly ways. They fell under the rule of Rome.

Another political/military victory was ***not*** going to deal with the real problems in Israel – and the entire world. The vision of Zechariah would never – could never – come to fruition without radical change.

John's description of Jesus entering Jerusalem is framed by the story of Lazarus. Jesus ***IS*** making radical changes. People are rising from the dead. This is not "business as usual."

The new kingdom of God which Jesus is inaugurating has different rules. We can be forgiven. We can have new hearts and new lives in Jesus. We can literally be reborn through Him.

There is more to life than what we can see, touch, smell, taste, or hear. There is a whole spiritual reality that is just as real. We know it as we struggle with guilt. We know it when we sense beauty in nature. We know it when we feel compassion. We know it when we are forgiven. We know it when we experience unconditional love. We know it when we genuinely meet God.

Jesus is inviting us to make Jesus the King of the seen and the unseen parts of our lives. He can change us, renew us, raise us to new life as profoundly as He did Lazarus.

Will I let Him?

*Hear my voice when I call, O Lord;
 be merciful to me and answer me.
 My heart says of you, 'Seek His face.'
 Your face, Lord I will seek.
 Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away;
 you are my helper and Lord.
 Lord, I have heard your voice calling at a distance.
 Guide my steps to you, Lord, guide my steps to you.
 Lord, I have heard your voice calling at a distance.
 Guard my way to you, Lord, guard my way to you.
 Lord, I have heard your voice calling at a distance.
 Keep my heart for you, Lord, keep my heart for you.
 Softly as the dew-fall of heaven, may the Holy Spirit come upon me to aid me and to raise me,
 to bind my prayer firmly before the throne of the King of life.
 Your will, O God, would I do, my own will bridle;
 Your due, O God, would I give, my own due yield;
 your path, O God, would I travel, my own path refuse.
 All whom I love, into your safekeeping;
 all that I am, into your tender care;
 all that I will be, into your perfect will.
 Amen.*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Friday, March 1: John 12:20-26

Before green bins, for years we composted the organic waste that comes through our kitchen. Coffee grounds, tea bags, browned lettuce, onion skins, orange and banana peels, cauliflower stalks, garlic stubs, moldy strawberries – they all ended up in the compost bin in the backyard. Once a year I dug out the old compost, which has now become rich, black soil. I spread it over the garden.

Much to my surprise, we now have strawberry plants. We never intentionally planted them. But the seeds in those moldy strawberries that I threw into the bin? They were just waiting for the opportunity to burst forth into new plants. That's what seeds do.

Jesus is preparing His disciples for what is to come. He is talking about deep things that we, in hindsight, can understand better than His disciples could. He will die, be cast off, more or less tossed into the rubbish bin. Then He will rise, gloriously, as Something/Someone so much more incredible than we could imagine.

The wheat kernel analogy only scratches the surface of the profundity of Jesus' death and resurrection. His point is helpful. As He gives His life away, He will be a blessing to a huge harvest of people, including you and me. By giving Himself away, He will become more than He ever was before.

Paul picks up this dying/reborn imagery to describe baptism and our new life in Jesus: *"When we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death. For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was."*

"We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him ..."

"When he died, he died once to break the power of sin. But now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God. So you also should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus."

"Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God. Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace"(Romans 6:3-14).

As people who live under the freedom of God's grace, Jesus' challenge to us is that as we give ourselves away – to serve Him and to care for other people. And by giving ourselves away, we will gain more than we ever had before, too. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive. How can I be a blessing today?

*This day is Your gift to me.
I take it, Lord, from Your hand and thank You for the wonder of it.
God, be with me in this Your day, every day and every way, with me and for me in this Your day.
All that I am, Lord, I place into Your hands.
All that I do, Lord, I place into Your hands.
Everything I work for I place into Your hands.
Everything I hope for I place into Your hands.
The troubles that weary me I place into Your hands.
The thoughts that disturb me I place into Your hands.
I place into Your hands, Lord, the choices that I face.
Guard me from choosing the perilous way which ends in heart-pain and secret tears.
You Lord, are rich in counsel.
Show me the way that is plain and safe.
May I feel Your presence at the heart of my desire, and so know it for Your desire for me.
Walking in Your way I shall have success, because my purpose is from you,
and it is Your power which does the good that shall endure.
Amen.*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Saturday, March 2: John 12:27-36

When I began grade 1 (they didn't have kindergarten way back then), I looked at the Grade 12 students and thought, *"I'll never make it. I'll never graduate."* But I did. When I began university, four years for a degree seemed an eternity. But the time came. When Marianne and I got engaged, the wait until the wedding seemed like forever. But the time came. The appointed time comes. It always does.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus had said, *"My time has **not** yet come"*(John 2:4). Later, Jesus would not go up to Jerusalem: *"I'm not going to this festival, because my time has **not** yet come"*(John 7:30).

Now notice John 12:23: *"**Now the time has come** ..." "The time for judging this world has come, when Satan, the ruler of this world, will be cast out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself"*(John 12:31-32). The time has come. But this appointed time – Jesus' appointed time – is going to be brutally painful, excruciatingly difficult, and time-shatteringly, cosmos-shakingly powerful.

John – alone among the gospel writers because He alone was actually there – gives us insight into Jesus' emotions during this season of His life. *"My soul is deeply troubled ..."*(12:27).

How do you process a God whose "soul is deeply troubled"? Remember Jesus may be fully God, but He is also fully human. I find it reassuring that He understands – really understands – the emotions I face when I am facing difficult times in my life. He really does understand. He really can empathize.

Jesus says, *"I could pray, 'Father, save me from this hour.'" But what would that accomplish? He has just told us about the seed that has to "die" and be buried in order to bear fruit. "This is the very reason I came."* Jesus says (12:27). He goes on, *"Father, bring glory to your name"*(12:28). Note how similar this is

to Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: *"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine"* (Matthew 26:39).

With Jesus' prayer, God the Father speaks from heaven. Those who have ears to hear, hear God. Those who assume God doesn't really exist or do anything, think they simply hear thunder.

We have a Saviour who understands. As a fully human person, He has been there, done that. *"Because God's children are human beings – made of flesh and blood – the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying ... Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested"* (Hebrews 2:14-18). That is great news.

Like Jesus, when we face suffering and testing, we can simply pray, *"Father, save me from this hour."* That's OK. It's very human. But dare we pray, *"Father, bring glory to your name"*? Is it possible, just possible, that God can bring glory to His name as we are tested? Is it possible, just possible, that people can be drawn to the lifted up Saviour as we endure our tough times, in His power and in His strength?

"Put your trust in the light," says Jesus, *"then you will become children of the light."* Glory to His name.

*Lord, may this day be a place of peace.
May this day be a place of peace as I do Your will.
May this day be a place of peace as I serve my neighbour.
May this day be a place of peace as I obey You.
May this day be a place of peace as I praise You from dawn to dawn.
Lord, take this day and fill it with Your blessing.
Lord, take this day and fill it with Yourself.
Amen*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community

Sunday, March 3: John 12:37-43

As a geographer, I love God's creation. I have a hard time driving through the Rockies because I'm so distracted by the peaks, glaciers, cols, arêtes, cirques, tarns, truncated spurs, hanging valleys, waterfalls ... you get the idea. I find myself plotting out potential hiking/climbing routes to the summits of various mountains. Yes, I can be a distracted driver, not by a cellphone, but the beauty of God's creation.

But other people blast past, hell-bent to get from Calgary to Vancouver as quickly as possible. All they see is the road.

Imagine if we could have been watching as God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. Wouldn't it have been incredible? Imaging seeing God create galaxies and gophers, continents and caterpillars. I get excited just thinking about the amazing show.

But imagine if most of the audience were oblivious to the incredibleness going on around them. Instead, they were huddled together, carrying on their own conversations critiquing the latest angel-robe fashions, complaining about the seraphim's new music, grumbling about their celestial cellphone plan ... When they did look up they belly-ached about the fact that mountains got in the way of their proposed bypass. The constellations didn't look at all like what they thought they should look like. God needed to get it right – "their" right.

John has been telling us about the Kingdom of God – a new creation where water is turned into wine (John 2), people are healed (John 4), a crippled man is made whole (John 5), miraculous bread feeds people in the desert (John 6), a blind man sees (John 9), a dead man comes back to life (John 9). Isn't that amazing?

Wouldn't it have been incredible to see all of that? But, John tells us, most of the "audience" has been huddled in their own trivial conversations. They missed it altogether. If they did notice, all they could do was complain that God wasn't doing things the way they wanted. God needed to do it right – their "right."

We, people, often just don't get it. When Moses confronted Pharaoh, he did miracle after miracle, followed by plague after plague. Pharaoh didn't get it. When prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah challenged the Israelites about their flagrant sin and worship of foreign gods, they wouldn't – or couldn't – hear them.

Now, as Jesus is giving sign upon sign, performing miracle after miracle, most people are as blind, deaf, and hard-hearted as Pharaoh and the people of Israel in the days of the prophets. Even those who did "get it" were too afraid to do anything about it. They slink back to their old, dull, dreary, hopeless lives, *"for they loved human praise more than the praise of God"* (12:43).

- Can we look up and see God's new creation? Can we look up and see what God is doing in our world? In our own lives?
- Or do we get distracted by all the trivia of life? And if we do look up, do we just complain? Do we just wish God would do things "our" way?

Take time to be thankful. Take time to celebrate. Take some time simply to enjoy the wonders of God ...

*My eyes, my eyes have seen the King.
The vision of His beauty has pierced me deep within.
To whom else can I go?
My heart, my heart desires Him.
He's touched something inside of me.
I'm now reaching out for Him.
And I know I must go.

My God is my Love, my Guard, and my Healing One.
My bright Love is my merciful Lord.
My sweet Love is Christ.
His heart is my delight.
All my love to You, O King of glory.
Amen.*

Celtic Daily Prayer, the Northumbria Community