



## Uncertainty

3/16/2020

Jerod texted me yesterday, "Remember God is still in control, not corona virus."

Indeed! And the very important point is that when we are not in control, and when we are very uncertain about what the next days, weeks, and months will bring; there is still someone who holds the future in His hands. He is the Lamb of God.

He gave a promise, "and behold, I am with you to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) That means we are not alone. And we are with someone who has already charted out the course. (It is like an unfailing GPS that, unlike one of our older ones wanted us to park the car in the river we were driving along.)

The path might go through strange and unfamiliar times, but we know our Friend Jesus knows the way and is able to bring us through. It's like the Bible bookmark that says: "I read the last chapter -- God wins."

There is a picture in the Book of Revelation. In Chapter 5 we hear, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that He can open the scroll and its seven seals." This is a picture of Jesus opening up the glorious future for His Church, that is for each one of His people. He knows the future because He is God, He sees it already, and He is able to bring us safely there. He has conquered, because He is the incarnate Christ, He was born to be one of us and He has mingled together His future and our future. And with that very human body He has conquered, by taking and sharing the dying that was coming our way; and then on the third day bringing eternal life into the human flesh He shares with us. He makes His future mine.

So, yes, I have read the last chapter -- God wins, so I win, and you win.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus Christ, lead us by Your wisdom and power that we may find our courage in Your promises, and be bold in our daily following, not knowing what the day will bring but only that we are walking with our eternal and almighty and merciful Friend. Amen.***

## Salt of the Earth

3/17/2020



An e-mail from a missionary informed us last weekend that, 'The virus is ramping down here, but now is the time when there are opportunities all around to be the salt of the earth.'

That is what Jesus called us, "the salt of the earth."

How can I be that? How can I do the things for my neighbor that Jesus calls me to do? Some thoughts: Keep in contact. Check on family members who are in the vulnerable groups. Keep watch for your neighbor. If you know of someone who needs supplies volunteer to help, pick up, buy, or share. I am actually reminded of a quote from John the Baptist, "Let he who has two rolls of toilet paper share with him who has none." OK, I know, he didn't say exactly that, but you get the idea. Watch over each other, because God has given us to each other to care for each other.

Pick up the phone and bring human contact to those who are isolated and lonely. This is part of what we need as human beings who are created in the image of God. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and we are created in His image. We need community. Without community we do not do well. (Had you heard that when Tom Hanks came down with the virus the nurses in the hospital brought him a volleyball -- just like in the movie "Castaway" that he drew a face on and named it "Wilson"?)

Watching over our neighbor is part of what we call "Vocation." God invites us to share in His work, caring for, protecting, feeding, and providing for others. That is the work of God, as the Psalm says, **"You open Your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing."** (Psalm 145:15-16 -- read the whole psalm.)

Watching over your neighbor also means to be careful with your neighbor's health. I asked the small group gathered for Bible Study today, "did any of you take your temp before heading out to be with other people today?" This is not a thing I have heard in the suggestions and guidelines. And it is not the same as being tested. But checking yourself before being in contact with others is another part of watching over your neighbor. This is a sneaky virus, so check yourself.

AND PRAY! Pray for one another. Pray for those who are ill. Pray for those in at-risk groups. Pray a lot. This is not just because it is a good religious thing to do. And it is not a way of turning over all the care and providing to God. When you pray for your neighbor you are talking with God who actually knows their every single specific need. You are talking with the one who opens His hand and satisfies the desires of every living thing. God constantly answers prayers for one person through another. That is His pattern, involving us in His work, and in the life of God. So, what do you think? Is He able to bring to your mind and help you to notice something specific that your neighbor needs, that you might have missed? Indeed and of course He can -- and does! And then you get to have your hands joined with God's hands.

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and God. We ignore this truth to our spiritual, psychological and emotional harm. So Jonah's experience is important for us.

Jonah finds out in the belly of the fish that he is not as alone or as isolated as it seems, or as he feels. This is profound, and it is repeated time and again in the Bible.

Psalm 46 calls God ***"a very present help in trouble."***

Psalm 27 says ***"He will hide me in His shelter in the day of trouble"***

Psalm 139 says ***"O Lord, You have searched me and known me! ... You discern my thoughts from afar. ... Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, You know it altogether."***

And in Matthew 28 Jesus promises, ***"I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

The reason why Jesus can know our aloneness is because He shared it. The 2nd most extreme place for prayer was by Jonah from the belly of the fish. The most extreme place for prayer was by Jesus on the cross. His time of extreme prayer, beginning in the garden of Gethsemane (praying in great agony) all the way to the final prayer from the cross reached in the words, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me." In those words He carries all our isolation and separation, coming to where we have been so He can bring us back to be with Him -- forever. the reason why He can promise, "I am with you always," because He has conquered. He is risen.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, You know me -- every part, and all the way to my deepest being. Help me to take Your presence seriously, to talk to You in my times of isolation, to talk to You in the deepest parts of my soul; and to hear and hold Your words and promises deep within my soul. Thank You that You are constant as my Friend, and persistent as my Shepherd. Amen.***

## Isolation

3/18/2020



What is the 2nd most extreme location for prayer that we are told about in the Bible?  
Why that question?

We have been asked as much as we can to isolate ourselves at home; and when not at home to maintain a distance of 6 feet from others. It seems hard to do but we try. And doing this can leave us alone.

This is something that many are not used to. With all the social media, with all of the things we (and Google, and Facebook) know about each other, how can we be alone? With all the business, noise, entertainments, and so on how are we ever really alone? And so we are confronted by a kind of quietness that we have become unused to with only our thoughts to keep us company. We feel the isolation.

Once again, what is the 2nd most extreme place for prayer? The most extreme place of course was the cross, but what was the 2nd most extreme? You can read about it in the Bible. After Jonah had run from God and run away from God's call to go to Nineveh, after he boarded the ship to get as far away as he could, after the storm, and after confessing to the sailors that he was at fault, Jonah was thrown into the sea and was swallowed by a "great fish" that God had prepared for that day. Think of the isolation, there within the belly of the fish (3 days and 3 nights).

And "from the belly of the fish" Jonah prayed to God. He was in complete darkness. He had no way of knowing where he was; or knowing which way was home. And he had no way of knowing what the next day or even what the next hour would bring. Does that sound familiar? And yet Jonah addresses his prayer to the Lord, and says, "Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple." (NASB)

This is the prayer of faith (remember, "faith is believing the words and promises of God"). It is the prayer of faith because it takes hold of the words and promises of God; and that is so much more solid than a general feeling of hope. Through the words and promises of God the temple of the Old Testament gives way to the Word of God walking among us, carrying all the promises of God in Himself. It is a transforming thing. The promises of God, and our hope in the goodness of the Lord, do not rise or fall with the situation we are in, or our prospects for the future -- because Jesus is there.

This time of crisis will end. But even when there is no crisis there is aloneness and isolation. We can have a lot of online friends and yet feel very alone. This is not anything new. For many generations people have recognized that you can be in the middle of a crowd and at the same time be very much alone. It is part of the human condition. Other people do not know our thoughts or our deepest feelings. Deep within the soul we are apart from every other human being. G. K. Chesterton observed that there is a place within where there is only you

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His thoughts mingled with your thoughts, and His work happening through your life. (And His life is eternal because He is the eternally living and eternally blessing God -- and this, by the way, is the most amazing part of life.)

### **Our Prayer:**

*Lord Jesus, during this time of crisis and confusion Lead me as my Teacher and let me be Your disciple. Help me see Your many invitations to care for my neighbor, to be made strong by Your strength, and then to be the strength in the lives of the aged, the vulnerable, for those within my care, and for all to whom You lead me. Amen.*

# Hope

3/19/2020



"... and hope does not disappoint ..." (Romans 5:5)

It was on the news today that there may be some treatments available almost immediately. And then it was on the news that there may need to be more testing and more waiting. Hopes rise and it is exhilarating. And then there is a delay and we are back to waiting. The ups and downs in the time of a crisis can be frustrating. So, whatever did the Apostle Paul mean when he said "hope does not disappoint"? It sure seems like hopes disappoint.

First, there is a difference between "hope" and "hope." The one is a feeling within and it draws its hope from looking around; what is our situation? What are our prospects? How soon is help coming? How much can I rely on the government, the doctors, etc? The other connects to something more lasting and constant. God is there. He hears our prayers. He gives His promises. And I know these things how? Because He has won the victory. Everything lasting and eternal comes together in Jesus.

This means my hopes are not just bouncing around inside my own thoughts and feelings; soon to fade away and almost disappear whenever things change for the worse. Honestly, does that not seem to be the way with a whole lot of people in the world? Paul even tossed a thought in that direction when he was writing to the Church in Corinth. ***"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile ... If we have hoped in Christ for this life only we are of all men most to be pitied."*** (1 Corinthians 15:17, 19) He said it in order to show the contrast. There is a hope that does not ride the roller coaster of feelings. It is an anchored hope, connected to something solid.

***"... and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."*** (Romans 5:5 - NASB) This hope does not come from within. It comes from God, who makes promises; and keeps them.

We have a hope, deep "within our hearts". It is brought there by the Holy Spirit, whose entire work is to point us to Jesus and to the promises we have in Jesus -- to bring the words of Jesus in the Bible, and the words of the Bible about Jesus, and plant them within the Christian soul, so that we can find our hope the only place we can have that one kind of hope -- in the One who came into this world to share our human flesh with all the weaknesses we share.

The love of God comes to us through Jesus' words joined together with His living, dying, and rising. Paul starts the chapter (Romans 5) telling how we have peace with God through Jesus Christ. He is the anchor for our hope -- no one else than the Son of God. As long as He is the Christ of the Cross and the Christ of the Empty Tomb I have a hope that is different from any other hope.

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This is why Christians have held on to the one truth, "He is risen," through every century, every wave of persecution, and every illusion of riches that come along in this life. To simply quote Jesus, "**Because I live, you will live also.**" (John 14:19) Jesus is a living anchor. He is eternal, and constant, and persistent in calling and caring for me. He promised.

We need this anchor, not only in the time of the virus. We need Him through every up and down that comes along. We need Him through the days of hope and the days of disappointment. We need Him when life ahead is bursting with possibilities and we need Him when the road is ending and the days are few. Because what He does is walk with us and bring us along and open up all of eternity in front of us.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, in these days when everyone is looking for answers, and solutions, and rescue, be with my soul. Help me to know the true hope, finding in You the only things that transcend the ups and downs of life and life's times of crisis. Guide me through the turmoil of these days. Remind me of Your words and promises, because they are eternal; and You are inviting me to share in eternal things. Amen.***

# Death

3/20/2020



This meditation is deeply personal.

Early this morning a friend in our congregation died; and down in the southern part of our state another friend is nearing the end of this life (both are from cancer). Last night my wife heard news from a former student and friend of hers, that 4 people in her family have died from the virus within a week. It stings. And then we find out (in the news) that more and more young people are falling victim to this virus.

How many of us have refused to look at it, to think about our mortality? And now -- there is no escaping. Whether it is this or something else, it will happen. Bodies break. They grow older and shorter of breath, and if we live long enough they will get all wrinkly until something gives out. But right now, it is here and is all around us like it seldom has been in our lifetimes.

Basically, there are 2 ways to die. Yes, I know, outwardly there are thousands of ways. But deep inside there are only 2 ways. With and without something eternal planted in the soul. That is basic. And it is true. No matter how much we heap up, decorate the body, build the illusion, and fight against what we are; we will still be reduced to dust and the years will roll on to the end.

The Apostle John said in his first letter, ***"Do not love the world or the things in the world. ... For all that is in the world ... is not from the Father .... And the world is passing away along with its desires ..."*** No matter how you chase it, hold on to it, and fight to keep it, finally it is lost. And if there is nothing eternal in you ... so are you.

But the same Apostle John also tells something deeply personal and very real. ***"What was from the beginning*** [he's talking about Jesus, and listen how he talks] ***which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked on and have touched with our hands ..."*** There are only 2 ways to die, and one of them is with something eternal planted in your soul. Jesus came from eternity, bringing words from eternity, and planted them in John's soul. He walked with them and they watched the acts of God, acts of kindness and healing, forgiveness and even humility, acts of God that are also from eternity, and Jesus took those eternal acts and through the eyes and through the experience of John He put those into John's soul. And Jesus touched, broke bread and fed, knelt down and washed the feet, and invited the disciples to touch Him and see that He had risen; and He put the cross and the empty tomb deep within John's soul. By the time Jesus was done John was so filled up with eternal things that the stuff of this world could not compare. And the most eternal of everything was Jesus Himself, within the soul, a Guide and Friend unlike any other.

That's why John talked the way he did; and Paul, and Peter, and on and on down through the

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years, and Herb, and Marcia too. It is the way of dying with the eternal there within the soul. It is so completely different from the other way, that it is absolutely the opposite of the other.

Oh, you won't get it with your own searching along your own spiritual path; and you won't achieve it by getting yourself "centered" within your own self. The only way to find the eternal is in the One who is from eternity, who came to walk with John, and bring the words of eternity to you too. His plan is to hold on to you with His eternal things and keep you when your time comes. And **that** is a true Friend, the One we need more than any other in these days.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, I look around and everything is changing. Nothing lasts. And I look within, and look at myself and I am only temporary too! But You are eternal. You have life that does not fail. You have eternal words with eternal truths. Speak them deep within me. Fill the eyes of my soul with Your cross and Your broken tomb; and so, fill me again with hope and courage for today. And for all the days ahead be with me as my friend. I need a True Friend. Amen.***

## Life

3/21/2020



***"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men."*** ( John 1:4)

God loves life! This is one of the most basic truths, and it runs through every part of our faith. God loves life. He loved creating life: trees, plants and every green thing for us to enjoy; animals, birds, fish and every creeping thing; and mankind, Adam and Eve and every descendant on through the centuries since.

God loves life: and this is personal. He loved creating you, body and soul, blessing you with every breath and heartbeat. And the life He created as He formed you includes your thoughts, hopes, dreams, joys and every other part of your inner life. There are verses in Proverbs that speak of all wisdom gathered together in Jesus: ***"then I was beside Him, like a master workman, and I was daily filled with delight, rejoicing before Him always, rejoicing in His inhabited world and delighting in the children of man."*** (Prov. 8:30-31)

God loves life and delights in you being alive! If He did not -- would there be such wonders in the world around you, and such amazing things that happen deep within your soul? With each child born, when you came to be, God began to open up the wonders of creation to one more being. It is something like being a parent or grandparent, watching the wonder a child experiences discovering each new thing in their lives.

God loves life! And this is a thing to remember when we are in the middle of trouble. When God created mankind, He blessed us. And He is not the one who turned away; we did. Adam and Eve turned from God who loves life, and followed the voice of the devil who brought them death.

So, Jesus came into the world, and the Gospel of John said, ***"In Him was life."*** He came to bring life, to bring back and restore what we had lost. And the Gospel of John continues in chapter 2 with the wedding at Cana and Jesus turning water to wine. God loves life, and it shows in the life and character of Jesus. ***"In Him was life and the life was the light of men."*** (John 1:4) All the way through, from water to wine, to ***"God so loved the world,"*** (John 3:16a) to feeding the 5,000, healing the man born blind, to raising His friend Lazarus, to bringing the one thief on the cross into Paradise, to rising from the dead and inviting Thomas to touch and see, to inviting the disciples to share a meal on the beach. (John 21)  
Jesus brings life, light and joy.

He is the same Jesus; and in the middle of our trouble He is the One who has life. Another part of good news, hope and light is this -- God does His work through His people, His human beings that He has delighted in creating. Doctors, scientists, and medical researchers are not alone in their work. Whether they know it or not, they have God Himself by their side blessing their work (and God's work) of healing and saving life. He is the light of the world.

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As you turn to Jesus in prayer day after day, remember our doctors and nurses in your prayers. Pray that the light of God would shine through them, and that the light of Jesus would shine on them.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, You are the light of the world and You are the light of my life. Shine the light of life on us: through doctors, nurses, researchers and medical researchers. Help them to develop treatments and to bring healing to the many thousands all over the world. Bless their work and speed their successes. And let us bring Your light to our neighbors, by caring and watching over one another. Amen.***

# Worship

3/22/2020



What is worship? How do we worship when so many things are going wrong? Why would we?

Martin Luther wrote, ""What does it mean to have a god? What is God My answer is: A god is whatever a person looks to for all good things and runs to for help in trouble. (Luther's Large Catechism on the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment, "You shall have no other gods.") Did you notice the two parts? "For all good things" and "for help in trouble".

He didn't leave it there, He took it up again in the Small Catechism, this time explaining the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment not to take the name of the Lord in vain. He wrote, "but call upon [God's name] in every trouble, pray, praise and give thanks." Did you notice the two parts again? "call" and "pray"; and then "praise and give thanks."

This is the first part of worship. We worship because: every blessing comes from God and we have had a lot of them through the years. Hymn after hymn sings of the blessings, and Christians gather to sing those praises with great feeling. Century after century the song of praise continues. God has created us, knows us individually and is a constant source, stream and river of blessings. Every breath and heartbeat is a blessing from our Creator. Every blessing is sweetened because it is not just a good thing; it is a good thing from the hand of God. It is personal. There was a youth group meeting that included pizza, and I got to do a brief devotion before we ate. I said, this is not just pizza; this is pizza from God!! And then I think I started to give thanks for every one of the ingredients until they made me stop. (Thus endeth the lesson!) God blesses and loves to bless. And when we needed rescue from our sins God the Father sent His Son Jesus to carry our sins and carry us out of darkness and into light, out from under judgment and into life.

We worship because: we have been through trouble, and through it all we have learned that God is a very present help. (Psalm 46) Troubles in the soul, or problems all around us, He is there and we can turn to Him. I learned this very powerfully one year when I was in high school. Early on Christmas morning my family got the phone call that my grandfather had died. In the middle of the heart-wrenching sadness my older brother said, "I'm going to Church." I went with him. In between the tears, I learned that there was no other place that made as much sense to be there than in God's house. There was no one else who could actually do anything about what had happened. He could. He had. He, Jesus, was born for exactly that moment, and so many other thousands and millions so much like it.

The Second part of worship goes further and is deeper. Worship goes beyond calling out for our needs and thanking for the blessings. Greater by far than what we need and what we get from God -- we worship God for who He is. To learn this part of worship we have to focus on God, learn of Him, read and hear His promises and savor what they mean.

Think about this:

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What is it like to have a God who ...

... created you because He really **does** want to share eternity and every blessing He can create (**"You make known to me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy;"** [Psalm 16:11a] );

... or says, **"I have called you friends"** (John 15);

... or invites one of His disciples to come walking on water with Him;

... or finished His prayers before going out to the garden to be arrested with, **"Father, I want them to be with me"**; (John 17:24)

... or says, **"I am with you to the end of the age"** (Matt. 27:20)

... and **"where 2 or 3 are gathered in My name there am I in the midst of them."**  
(Matt.18:20)

One more: Zephaniah, in the Old Testament, describes [how things will be] "in that day".

And then God describes something that will happen "on that day". **"The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty One Who will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing."** (Zephaniah 3:17) **This** is what our God is like, and this is part of what will happen on the day that Jesus returns. At some point on that day Jesus will break into loud, exultant singing, celebrating that we are with Him.

Worship happens when we see God as who He is and then realize, **"This is who I want to be with! I want to be with, hang around with and run with Jesus for all of forever!"** To know God in that way is a sweetness that trouble cannot take away, and becomes more important than any individual blessing. It is a constant theme that runs through all that life can bring; and helps us to focus each prayer that we offer up. And it brings every part of life into worship and connection with God.

### **Our Prayer:**

**Lord Jesus, I ask You to work in my heart and deepen my worship. Let me look to You for every blessing; and run to You in every trouble. Fill my thoughts with Your promises that I may desire to know You more fully all through this life and then all through the endless time of eternity. Amen.**

# PEACE

3/23/2020



Dolores said to me, "It was like the Lord was right there with us." This is the peace that passes understanding. It is also the very simple thing of hearing the promises of Jesus, **"I am with you always, to the end of the age."** (Matthew 28:20)

But how many in the world do not understand this peace? How many times have we, ourselves, looked around frantically wondering and worrying about what is coming? It is our nature to take our eyes off of the constant and reassuring care that comes from God; and instead chase after other solutions. And then we become frantic. But in the middle of the turmoil and confusion of life Jesus our Savior and Friend is always there. He gives assurance, reassurance and peace.

This assurance and reassurance is uncommon in this world. It is unlike anything else, and different from any other experience. In fact, Jesus Himself told us this: **"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."** (John 14:27)

How can He give such peace? Well, He is the One who has won the victory. Think through all the troubles you have ever lived through. Is there even a one of them that Jesus is not able to deal with? Jesus said, **"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world."** (John 16:33)

Think through the temptations you have faced. Again, with every single one of them Jesus has the strength to conquer. **"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."** (Hebrew 4:15) Is there suffering? Jesus is the One who has endured all things for your sake. Even death! "Christ is risen!" "He is risen indeed!"

That is why the Christian can have peace, no matter what. Because Jesus is living "no matter what," and He is with us "no matter what," and He gives promises that are and will be true "no matter what." If we were to try to attain peace through calming ourselves, through finding security for our soul and safety for our lives, or through all the different kinds of meditation practiced all over the world; we still would not find the extraordinary peace that is there in Jesus.

This peace is not a thing we do. It is a gift that comes from outside ourselves. It comes to us through the work and the words of God. It is established and founded in the cross of Jesus -- so it is a peace that holds even in the most extreme situation. It is confirmed in the opening of the tomb and Easter morning rising of Jesus -- so it cannot be undone as long as He lives. And it is given in the words and promises of Jesus -- so it is peace that reaches as deep into the soul as the Word of God reaches and touches.

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That is what Dolores was talking about. The peace and the strength of the Christian come to the Christian very simply through Jesus' words. Jesus Himself, and Jesus through the working of the Holy Spirit, whispers His promises deep down within our soul. And again, that is exactly what Jesus promised. "I have said these things to you that in Me you may have peace." (John 16:33)

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, thank You for the promises You give. They are my strength, and my peace. Because You have promised to be with me always. You have promised never to leave me or forsake me. And You have promised that whoever believes in You will live even if he dies. I ask You to speak Your promises deep within my soul as often as I am worried or fearful; that I may grow in knowing Your peace. Amen.***

# PATIENCE

3/24/2020



"Lord, how long?"

Patience is one of the traits listed as "fruit of the Spirit." (Galatians 5:22) And, yes it can be an elusive and frustrating thing that is difficult to learn. We joke, "Lord, give me patience. I need it right now!" Patience is a tricky thing, that you cannot achieve by pursuing it. We have to be trained in it, and Jesus is the master teacher and the master in the art of patience.

Psalms 40 is an entertaining study in patience. David starts out, ***"I waited patiently for the Lord; He inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, ... He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. ..."*** Everything sounds completely filled with faith -- until v. 13 ***"Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me!"*** and v. 17 ***"You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God!"*** What happened? Why such a change?

That is the nature of patience, and why it is so closely interwoven with faith. Patience in the Bible is the character of waiting for a promise and very specifically not being allowed to see it ('cause then it would be neither patience nor a matter of faith). God asks us to know that He will act. He is not telling us when or how. But He has been faithful through all those times in the past, in fact through all the centuries as they have slowly unfolded. So we can trust Him. He will do what He has promised at exactly the right time.

I learned a lesson about patience some years ago. I was staying with Bishop David Tswaedi in Soweto. I wanted to buy a gift for my wife at a shopping mall. Bishop Tswaedi dropped me off and was supposed to be back in a couple of hours. But he was delayed. It was 3, then 4, then 5 hours. I was alone in a strange country, no phone, no means of transportation. The mall closed. They had a waiting area for shoppers waiting for a ride. I sat there thinking, "What could possibly have happened? Should I worry? But he said he would return. He has always been faithful. Could something have happened? But he has told me how it is different here. In America you show up on time. But here when cars break down or when trains are not running, he said, "We trust each other that we will get there somehow. Even if we have to walk, we will be there."

Finally, he arrived. The car had broken down. The mechanic did not have the parts and had to travel across town to get them. What's more the mechanic had to borrow a car, and the rental car places had none. But he was there. He had promised.

Now as we wait for problems to be solved and disease to be figured out and cured, we have an opportunity to learn something about patience.

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God has promised. He is faithful, far above any other friend. We can have all kinds of thoughts going through our minds; and all sorts of emotions going on inside of us. What is going to happen? How many ways could things go wrong? Do the doctors, researchers, the President, and others know what they are doing? What if everything falls apart? What if the economy crashes and everyone around me loses their jobs? (And our own special worry, "Where am I going to find toilet paper?")

But He is faithful. He has promised. He has always been trustworthy.

And patience has then become an exercise in faith. Remember how we keep on saying it this way, "Faith is believing the words and promises of God; no matter what." What is your measure of "no matter what" today? That is also the measure of how much God is asking you to trust in Him and believe that He is faithful and He will be there.

Since Jesus is the Author and Perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:2) He is also perfect in patience. From Gethsemane to Calvary Jesus had to wait without seeing, trusting only in the promise, enduring the hours of darkness and praying with absolute faith, until all was done and blessings and joy were restored, and He had redeemed and won us for eternal life.

God measures out the "no matter what" in our lives for a reason. He is building our relationship with Him leading us through times of blessing and times of needing to trust. Time after time He tells us, "Trust in the Lord." "Wait for the Lord." David had learned the lesson. That's what the beginning of Psalm 40 is all about. He knew the times of blessing. But once again it was time to wait. That's what the end of Psalm 40 is about. Patience all over again.

Because, finally, the lesson of patience is knowing who we are trusting and knowing He is faithful. It is what Paul had learned when he wrote this from prison in Rome, ***"but I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day."*** (2 Timothy 1:12)

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, this is a time of waiting and not knowing. But You have promised, and You have been faithful every day and hour of my life. Even when I have been weak in faith You have been with me "to the end of the age." Help me to wait, and know that you will be faithful and You will act. Through the in-between times help me to grow in hearing Your promises and trusting Your constant care. Amen.***

# KINDNESS

3/25/2020



Next after "Patience" in the list of the "fruit of the Spirit" is "kindness". I was wondering whether or not to do a meditation on kindness until this morning when I started hearing the word "kindness" over and over on the radio. It seems to be a thing we need to pay attention to.

Kindness. Paul wrote to the Ephesians **"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."** (Ephesians 4:32) It is a little thing, kindness. An example I heard was, "say 'thank you' to the ones who are working to provide food, and the other necessities of life." There are workers in the grocery stores overwhelmed by the demands. Show kindness. You, yourself are under a lot of stress. Think of how it eases the tension when someone else shows you a small kindness, and act toward your neighbor with kindness.

It is significant that Paul wrote this to the Ephesians. They were in a hostile culture where odd cults were all over the place, and yet Christianity was becoming treated with more and more suspicion. Paul, himself was writing from prison. And he writes to them in order to help bind them together so they could endure. Does that sound familiar. Soon some would be jailed for being Christian, and some would be put to death for the name of Jesus. That is not familiar! And Paul writes of this simple little fruit of the Spirit, "Be kind to one another."

It is surprising how much of an impact kindness can have. Even in worldly settings little acts of kindness received can inspire further acts of kindness passed on to others. There are examples that go by the name of "pay it forward." A customer in a drive-through tells the worker they want to pay for the meals of the people in the next car. A man buys coffee and buys another one for the next veteran who comes in.

But Paul says more. He says, **"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."** "As God in Christ" connects the whole matter to the plan of salvation. It is kindness in Jesus Christ toward us. Paul talks about, **"when the kindness of God our Savior ... appeared, He saved us ... according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit"**. (Titus 3:4-5) Kindness is bound up in the work of salvation in Jesus Christ. And kindness is part of what God is working within us, as the Holy Spirit plants, grows and develops in us everything that is ours through Jesus.

So, show kindness. Within the body of Christ this little fruit of the Spirit binds us together, and it is true that we need each other even in the best of times. Show kindness. To those outside the body of Christ it shines the light and the love of Christ to a sin-darkened world.

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### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, we are in the middle of something where we do not see the ending. Our concerns and worries can make us impatient and lead us to react with stress. Help us to remember the kindness of Your love to us, so we are able to show kindness to each other and to everyone around. Help me to live with Your kindness in my heart that I may serve You as a bright spot in the lives of others, and so may show Your love in a time when Your love is so much needed. Amen.***

## QUIETNESS

3/26/2020



**"When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour."** (Revelation 8:1) That's one of my favorite verses in the Book of Revelation. Very briefly, the breaking of the seals is about Jesus opening up of the future and bringing in the Kingdom of God. With the seventh seal everything is fulfilled.

We are a busy people, filling the time with things to do; filling the silence with things to say. It's hard to restrain ourselves. If there is a gap in action, noise, or entertainment we want to fill it in. We are uneasy with quietness and silence.

When God has acted and spoken, and brought everything to completion; there is nothing left to say and nothing left to do. It is time for quietness and time for silence. It's a beautiful thing, quietness in the presence of God. It is when we recognize that it is time simply to admire and wonder at what He has done. No speaking. No applauding. No intruding with our words and our responses. Simply seeing and hearing and quietly worshiping.

There are times of quietness and stillness scattered through the Bible. In Genesis 15 God gave His promise to Abraham taking him outside and saying, **"look at the heavens and count the stars if you can. So shall your descendants be."** And Abraham believed the Lord. In that brief moment of silence there was simply hearing and believing; nothing more. And then, after that brief moment of quiet in the presence of God everything starts in again.

When the people of Israel were at the shore of the Red Sea and filled with fear, what did Moses say? **"Do not fear! ... The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent."** (Exodus 14:13-14) That experience echoes through the pages of the Old Testament coming to the surface vividly in Psalm 46 with the words, **"Be still and know that I am God."** The entire Psalm 46 is about quietness in the middle of turmoil.

King David says in another psalm **"I do not occupy myself with things too great ... for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul ..."** (Psalm 131:1-2)

Jeremiah, in the middle of the book of Lamentations [the middle of the middle chapter is where the references to Jesus are tucked away] says, **"It is good that one wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. ... Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; ... let him give his cheek to the one who strikes ..."** (Lamentations 3:26-30) Jesus in the wilderness, facing temptation gives His answer from the quietness of faith, "It is written" three times over.

There is a basic quietness to faith, where hearing the Word of God and trusting His promises is enough. And I remember a friend in Southern Illinois, Olinda Fausz. I used to visit her and she told me her favorite stories many times. And Olinda talked about how she loved to come

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to church almost an hour before services started. She said she liked to spend time in God's House simply being there in the quietness. I still think that is the most beautiful example of quietness I have ever heard and known.

When everything is said, and everything is done, and it is time for us to finish with our frantic doing and our business with filling the time with our words -- there is an eternal Word from God to simply be heard, and treasured deep within -- simply hearing and believing, and nothing more.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, teach me quietness, that I may hear Your word and Your promises in the simple stillness of faith. so I may learn to wait for Your time and Your guidance; and know that in the quiet times You are with me and I can be at peace. Amen.***

# WARM BODIES

3/27/2020



Among all the posts that have come through on the internet was one that was about a parent and child remembering the time being locked in "back in 2020". The mom asks, "What do you remember?" The child answers that he remembered being together as a family, having meals together, reading books together, playing board games together, and so on -- and then says it was the best time ever.

It is fascinating to see the posts of parents teaching their children, finding activities for them, cooking together and so on. I come home and there is a racket, from grandkids on the other end of the iPad screen reading a book with their grandmother, and not being able to sit still so all the shuffling and wiggling up close to the microphone is echoing through the house -- and I can't help but think, "This is good. This is how things should be more often." Warm bodies.

I hear someone talking about, "What are we going to do for haircuts?" As a family they will do for each other. Warm bodies.

We are trying to keep in touch with each other in a lot of different ways. Sometimes, a little more often, we are choosing phone calls instead of texting. Warm bodies, even if it is only the voice of a warm body.

I have been out to cemeteries twice this week. People linger. Even if we keep the 6-foot 'social distance', and even if it has started to rain, we want to see each other and speak to each other. Warm bodies.

Several times through the years we have had a choice to make for our Vacation Bible School. Should we use the prerecorded music with the singers on a video screen, or should we do the music ourselves. We watched the children as we tried one way and then the other. With the video they watched, and were quite happy. When we turned off the video they joined in, singing, dancing and doing the motions along with the leaders. Warm bodies.

This is one of the most wonderful parts of our Christian faith. God did not stay up in heaven. He did not send a text. And Christianity is not a set of propositions and theories. Christianity is a "warm body" religion.

This is unique, where God actually comes into our world to become one of us. He laid in a manger, was tempted in the wilderness, hungered and thirsted. Jesus was there in the water with John the Baptist, in the Synagogue with the man with a withered hand, and out in a lonely place with a crowd of 5,000 hungry men plus women and children and fed them. Later that night after He invited Peter to come walking on the water with Him and after Peter looked

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around and began to sink, what did Jesus do? He "reached out His hand and took hold of him". (Matthew 14:31-32) Warm bodies.

Jesus touched the blind man, took the little children in His arms, and invited Thomas to poke a finger into the marks of the nails. On Easter morning and evening Christianity became the ultimate "warm body" religion. The Apostle John, who was leaning up against Jesus at the Lord's Supper (John 13:25), said "what we have seen with our eyes ... and touched with our hands" (1 John 1:1), and then there was the ear of the servant of the high priest, that Jesus healed. (Luke 22:51) Warm bodies.

This was not just God taking a body. He was not untouched by our human condition. Jesus needed to spend time in prayer. He is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses," and was "tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15) And the ultimate -- He knows what it is like to be weighed down by sin and stand before God. And it was not His own, it was mine; so, He knows what it is like to have my particular sins.

When we come to Him, we are coming to a Friend who knows our need, and understands what it is to walk by faith. By being one of us Jesus has turned prayer into a "warm body" experience -- and that is amazing.

So, reach out to one another. Phone and talk. Assure one another that we are together in this. We have been bound together in Jesus and are not alone. And reach out to those who are not part of the body of Christ. Make them less alone in these times.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, thank you for being with me. Thank you for being my brother, my fellow human being. Thank for knowing my weaknesses and for caring. Thank you for knowing what it is to have to walk by faith and not see. And thank you for hearing all my prayers that don't seem very well sorted out at all. Thank you that for all time You will always be that "warm body" God that I can come to. Amen.***

# IS IT JUDGMENT ?

3/28/2020



The question had to be asked, because behind the brave front and under the surface we have a lot of nervousness about this virus. So, "Is it judgment?"

We begin with 2 things:

1) Actually, everything flawed and wrong in this fallen world is judgment. The mosquito bite last summer was judgment, and that is judgment in a very general sense. We all suffer in a fallen world.

2) But be very careful about making specific connections or accusations. That is dangerous. There are some who love to preach judgment and they are pretty bad about this. Remember how the disciples asked Jesus about the man born blind; was it because he sinned or because his parents did? And Jesus told them: "Neither." (John 9:1-3) So be very careful about attributing particular troubles to some "secret sin". None of us has any specific knowledge of that kind. To presume can lead us to hurting others needlessly.

But there is an even worse mistake. We could get preoccupied in thinking about "judgment" and forget about the mercy, grace, and blessings of God. We could start thinking about God as "spiteful," and ourselves as perfectly innocent. That would turn everything upside down. It would blind us to our own faults and we would go along self-justifying and not struggling to grow in the good, the right, and the noble.

But here's the real story of judgment:

It's not our job to justify ourselves. There is someone else who is much better at that. The Old Testament talks about how "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Before any good works, measuring up to any commandments, Abraham was counted as righteous in the eyes of God. The Apostle Paul gives more details. He describes Abraham as trusting "Him who justifies the ungodly."

Somewhere in that whole mix, something happened to judgment. This is what it is. Yesterday we talked about Jesus as the "warm body" God. He is also the "standing under judgment" God. What does that mean?

People talk about "judgment" and about "Judgment Day," and they say that Judgment Day is when sinners will stand before God and be judged for their sins. But in one sense that has already happened.

There was a day when there was a man of sin. It was just one man because he was the only one to be judged. He made himself the "one sinner" gathering into Himself all the sins of a fallen world, and accepting the penalty of every one of them individually, and all of them all heaped together.

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He stood with me. There under the judgment He stood with me.

The other day I was studying a verse in Isaiah 53. It's the one that says, "**surely He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows.**" But I remembered a different translation from back when I was young: "**surely He bore our griefs and carried our infirmities.**" I wondered, and I dug a bit further ... I was surprised. Some of the ancient rabbis looked at the verse and they asked whether the Messiah might even be afflicted with leprosy.

Even though that goes a bit too far, it does grab onto something important. Jesus came to be in this fallen world, to carry a sin-sick world, to share with us the judgment part of this fallen world; and that includes even the infirmity, the dying, and the grave. He stood with me draining the judgment in my place, so that ...

Jesus did everything so that I could stand with Him, in glory, when all the glory of life opens up and eternal blessings are poured out in ways that none of us can even begin to imagine.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, thank You for standing with me: in all the troubles of life; in my times of questioning and wondering; in my days of weakness; in the middle of worry; and when I have wandered far from God. Thank You for standing with me before Your Father, and for inviting me to stand with You in life and glory. Amen.***

## ETERNAL THINGS

3/29/2020



It was Church today. I needed something eternal.

Even though it was different; even though everyone was separated; even though the only connection was through the internet – it was Church. And there was something eternal.

I needed that after a week of looking around and seeing everything changing constantly, and so quickly that it is hard to keep up, and every time you turn around there is another thing coming along. And after a week of looking at all the things that pass along and are gone all too quickly, I needed something eternal.

That is a part of our created nature. We need the eternal. Without the eternal we feel unanchored, drifting, loose and disconnected – and then we thrash around trying to find something to hold on to, something solid.

But there was something eternal today. Isn't that an interesting phrase, "there was something eternal today"? But there was. There was an unchanging word from God, and it has been the same for thousands of years. It told me about an unchanging grace and blessing; an unchanging forgiveness; an unchanging invitation to prayer; and most importantly an unchanging God with mercy for all my needs.

And then the eternal came into my day; into my moments, my hearing, my feelings, and my life. Isn't that an amazing thing to say "the eternal came to me"? There were words of promise, "**Your brother [Lazarus] will rise again.**" There was the shortest verse in the Bible, "**Jesus wept**" and the eternal Son of God shared a very lowly, humble thing with me. And then there was a command, "**Lazarus, come out!**" and the Eternal Christ changed things. He undid the undoing, and brought a bit of eternity into our mortality.

I needed the eternal today because I am not. By myself I am temporary. I will change and (sooner than I want) I will be gone. I needed the eternal to call to me and take something eternal and put it in my soul. A few years back, during the sermon, I asked a question. "If you have the eternal word of God in your soul, what does that make you?" And it was Wade who answered right away, "Eternal." And I thought to myself, "**Yes!**"

But that is what it is to be a Christian, to have the Eternal Son of God taking His eternal Word and speaking it into me; and calling the eternal name of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" over me to claim me to share eternity; and when we can come together again to have the eternally risen body and blood of Jesus bring His eternity into our bodies.

And that is what it is to be Church. The name in the New Testament actually means "those called out." We are called out of everything that is temporary and passing. And we are called together into everything that is eternal.

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And then, time for church was over. The hour was finished. The day moved on. But the eternal had been in my life and in my soul. The Eternal Savior had kept His promise, "where 2 or 3 are gathered in My name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:20) Jesus knows His own and He brings us together in amazing and uncommon ways. And through years and generations He is gathering His people into His great gathering at the end.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, help me to walk through all those things around that are only temporary; and to keep my eyes on what is eternal. You are risen and eternally living. Be the anchor for my soul. By Your words and promises lead me to hear, believe and treasure the things of the soul, the things that are truly spiritual, and the things of God. Amen.***

# GOODNESS

3/30/2020



"Goodness" is 6th in Paul's list of the "fruit of the Spirit," (Galatians 5:22-23) and it is important that it is included in the fruit of the Spirit.

Think of the many examples of goodness that we are seeing all around our nation. People are stepping up to check on their elderly neighbors, calling to see if they need anything. Stores are opening up special Senior Hours. Doctors and nurses are working endless hours caring for the ill; and as they do so they are risking their own life and health. I heard of one doctor who set up a tent in his garage. He was working with the very sick, and he did not want to endanger his family. So, when he comes home, he doesn't come home -- he comes to the tent in the garage. Where did they learn this goodness; this devotion to care for their neighbor?

Again, around the country companies are retooling to make ventilators. People are buying masks for the doctors and nurses. An amazing number of business owners are figuring out how to care for their employees, more concerned with holding together the daily needs of their employees. It is truly an amazing thing to see. Where did this all come from?

Women volunteer to gather the materials and sew masks for others. Teens volunteer to help wherever they are needed. Grandparents take in grandchildren for an extended stay so the parents can work (and we loved it). We pray for each other and call each other. And all over the nation when asked, Churches have right away stopped meeting and adapted to doing everything on line, because we want to protect our neighbor.

There is great goodness. And there are examples of great selfishness, but the many, many examples of goodness are prominent, numerous, and inspiring. Where did this all come from?

Goodness is a fruit of the Spirit. It is a thing that God grows in the human heart. The Holy Spirit does His work deep inside, calling us and reminding us that we are made in the image of God. He calls us to every good and noble thing that is within us. He works even within those who do not believe in God, because every one of these good and noble things is a part of the pattern that we were created in.

But there is more. God must Himself be good if He is going to teach and lead us into goodness. That is a basic truth. So, we could run through some of the other fruit of the Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit is **love** [because God is a loving God, and "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son" (John 3:16)], **joy** [God is the joyful God who rejoices in the creation of mankind and rejoices that you live (Proverbs 8:30-31)], **peace** [He is the God of peace who gives peace as the world cannot give (John 14:27) ], **patience** [patient and not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9)], kindness [many times the Bible speaks of God's kindness to us in Jesus], [and now] goodness . . . "

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As you look around and see the many examples and acts of goodness in these days, realize that you are seeing the hand of God at work. He draws us into and leads in His own work of goodness.

And as you become involved in care for your neighbor, realize that it is God who is at work in you. You may not see how He is doing it, but believe me He is inviting you into His own work. And that is the greatest "you" that you can ever be.

And one more thing. God might begin in your life with things of doing and acting, and all the other outward parts of life. There is more. God knows you deep within your soul and He leads into all the amazing spiritual things that are eternal in Jesus.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, thank you for the goodness I see around me in the many ways we are caring for one another. Lead me into acts of goodness so I may help my neighbor. Form my soul and my inner character that I may grow in goodness within and walk with Jesus. Let me learn of You, that I may more and more see Your goodness, until I see You in the goodness of Your glory. Amen.***

## GOT YOUR 6

*The Other Part of the Full Armor of God*

3/31/2020



"Got your 6." It's a phrase used among those in the military, and after their time of service. Think of the hours of a clock laid flat. 12 o'clock is straight in front of you; 3 o'clock is to your right; and 9 o'clock to your left. "Got your 6" means "I've got your back." And there's where we turn to Paul's description of the full armor of God.

In Ephesians chapter 6 (verses 10-20) Paul tells the Ephesian Christians to put on the full armor of God. You might remember: the "belt of truth," the "breastplate of righteousness," for shoes the "readiness given by the gospel of peace," the "shield of faith," the "helmet of salvation," and the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." And someone wonders, what about the back? Is that because the Roman soldier is supposed to be facing the enemy? But there is something unexpected.

In Greek, unlike in English, all the verbs have numerous different forms, so you can tell if they are singular or plural (and a bunch of other things). Every verb Paul uses in these verses is plural. He is not talking about an individual soldier standing by himself. He is talking about all the Ephesian Christians standing together. So, the first lesson to learn is that we hold together. We need each other, and we need each other especially when we are worn down, tired or discouraged.

But the second lesson is the "other part of the armor." As he described the whole armor of God, he did not forget about the back. The armor that protects the back of the soldier is his fellow soldier. Every soldier who has served in our armed forces can tell you that! That's why the saying is abbreviated and shortened. "Got your 6" is a brief pledge held in common to watch over each other in the middle of danger when each one is vulnerable and needs the other.

What Paul says immediately after he has finished describing "the sword of the Spirit ... the word of God" is this -- **"praying at all times in the Spirit ... making supplication for all the saints, and also for me ..."** (Ephesians 6:18-19) He asks them, "You got my 6? Will you pray for me?"

All around you are people in danger, vulnerable, and struggling with everything happening in our country and around the world. They need you to have their back. Begin with prayer. Talk to God about their needs. Ask God to help you see the needs of your neighbors, friends, the doctors, nurses, workers in the stores, on the roads, maintaining our power, light, heat, and so many more things. God is very good at knowing these things.

As He helps you see and know, then pray, reach out, comfort, encourage, see where you can offer to help. This is the work of the Lord, the best and noblest we can be.

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In fact, this truly is "the Lord's work." The Bible says that Jesus **"is able to save to the uttermost ... since He always lives to make intercession"** for us. (Hebrews 7:25) Jesus prays for you. Right now, Jesus is talking to God the Father about you. He knows every thought, doubt, hope and need; He knows all that is going on around you and all that is happening within you. And He is able to do both the amazing and the unseen things for you in ways that only God can do. Join Him in praying for your neighbor.

### **Our Prayer:**

*(Make your list; add to it, and talk to Jesus about their needs.)*

***Lord Jesus, guide me to see my neighbors' needs. Lead me to see and understand as You do; to know how to pray, how to encourage and comfort, and how to help. And right now, I pray for \_\_\_\_\_.***

***Amen.***

# SPIRITUAL CONNECTION

4/1/2020



And just like that the entire world begins to get an idea of how important it is to have relationships and talk with someone you do not see, who is not visibly right there in the room with you.

Christians have been talking about that for years, we call it prayer.

Right now, all over the world people are experiencing how important the relationship part is in our connections. Otherwise you might be delighted to have a telemarketer call you up. You could talk to them, hang out on the phone, tell them about your friends at school, or your grandchildren. That's not the way it works, is it?

We look for personal connections in our talking, phoning, texting, "Facebooking," "snapchatting," and so on. And if we find out that the social media is "manipulating the algorithms" or the telemarketer is asking tricky questions to string us along we are resentful and feel used. We need the connection to be personal, or it doesn't count.

That's why, as the shelter at home business wears on, it is so important to hear from someone we know. It lifts the isolation if only a little bit. (Something to think about: When this virus is finally over, think about the lonely among us. And if you are in the habit of doing everything online; set aside the device for a while and communicate by voice or face to face. It is healthier deep inside.)

But think also about what we have as Christians -- the spiritual part of life. The Bible gives this promise -- God knows you. He knows you deep inside, **"before there is a word on my tongue ... O Lord, You know it" and You discern my thoughts from afar.**" (Psalm 139:2,4) Jesus said, **"your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."** (Matthew 6:8) Jesus is able to **"sympathize with our weaknesses"** since He was **"tempted as we are, yet without sin."** (Hebrews 4:15) And God promises something that is very personal, **"before they call, I will answer; while they are yet speaking, I will hear."** (Isaiah 65:24)

This is personal. It is God who begins it, God who reaches out to us, God who calls us into a very personal relationship with Him. There is something of the encounter between Nathaniel and Jesus in this. **Nathaniel said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered, "... when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathaniel answered, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"** (John 1:48-49)

So this is prayer. God invites us to come and talk to Him. He knows us. Bring any concern. He knows them already. Know that you are known; and know that you are loved. He is Jesus. Because He knows and cares you are not alone. And this is from Jesus who knows a little

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something about being alone, saying to His disciples, ***"an hour is coming ... when you will be scattered ... and leave Me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me."***

(John 16:32)

So when He promises, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." He knows how important that promise is. So now you have been personally invited by Jesus.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, You have promised to be with me. Even when I am alone You are there, and when I don't really know what to say, You understand. You understand because You know me deep inside, and You have been watching over me and being with me all along. Guide me in my spirit to come with my prayers and unload my burdens and worries with You. Amen.***

# DROPPING BREADCRUMBS

4/2/2020



It is an amazing thing the persistence of Jesus. But we should have expected it. He called Himself the Good Shepherd. And He told stories about the shepherd searching for his sheep. He is persistent, doing all kinds of little things in our lives that we hardly even notice.

So, one day a friend was talking to me. Gub was his nickname. He said, "There was a time when I was young that I didn't want anything to do with Church. I wanted to get out and do my own thing, and when I had to go to church, I wasn't too happy about it. But Pastor always was glad to see me, and greeted me and knew who I was. He didn't ask why I hadn't been there for a while, just was happy to see me." Gub was an elder in the Church when we had that conversation. Looking back on it now I'm thinking "Breadcrumbs."

You know the story. Hansel and Gretel, leaving home going off into the woods, but one of them leaving a trail of breadcrumbs so they can find their way home. For them it didn't work because birds came and ate the breadcrumbs -- but still it forms an image in our minds. "Breadcrumbs."

Jesus has to deal constantly with our wandering off, not paying attention, getting fascinated with anything and everything else. He searches for us, finds us, calls us, and leads us back.

How He has done that in each life would be absolutely the most amazing thing to know. All of the little hints, nudges, reminders and so on. A little word that suddenly grabs our attention, and we don't even know why. A little piece of a Bible verse that we heard years and years ago, suddenly fills our memory. A kindness done by a Christian that we once admired, and hadn't thought about for a long, long time, touches us once again.

"Breadcrumbs" laid down by Jesus, gently nudging and reminding us that we may have forgotten but He has not. Still calling and inviting, **"I want you to be with Me. I want you in My Kingdom. I want you sharing this living forever."** (See John 17:24) And the Good Shepherd calls.

Deep inside we know His voice. And even if there has not been anything dramatic in our spiritual life for a while, we know that voice. Very quietly, very subtly, He is calling. (See 1 Kings 19:11-12) And we know in the call of the Shepherd that it is good to hear and follow.

There are times in life when we need that assurance a lot. This is one of them. He calls deep inside, and then He tells us that we know it is Him calling. **"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow me."** (John 10:27) There is a certain audacity to it; telling us that we know it is Him. But that is the honesty of a relationship that He has been building for many years.

(Continued on back...)

How long has He been laying out these "Breadcrumbs" in our lives, laying out the trails that always lead us back to Him? How long does He do the work of the often unseen, unknown and unappreciated Friend? And still He persists, because He does want us sharing His eternity.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, my friend, thank You for all the ways You have been my truest friend. Thank You for all the nudges, quiet reminders, and little ways that You have reminded me of the truth of You being in my life. Thank You for being persistent, calling me Your friend. Lead me on so one day we can celebrate forever. Amen.***

# SIMPLE THINGS

4/3/2020



Just simple things. Nothing complicated, heroic, or great. Just simple things.

With all the wild things happening all over, when the day is over, we are back to simple things. We sit on the couch. We talk. We aren't going out to movies, or out to eat, or much of anything else. Even for a home-body this is a bit much. But there it is.

And yet, in those very simple things there is something deep and marvelous that has to do with the Kingdom of God. In Genesis it says, ***"In the image of God He created him, male and female He created them."*** Adam and Eve were created to picture the Image of God in their relationship. That is part of the Image of God, since God is Triune, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

All too often we overlook those simple ordinary things. But they are part of God creating the Image of Himself in the very ordinary parts of life. The time we spend, the silent company with one another, the little courtesies and kindnesses done within our marriages, families and friendships – they are a part of God revealing to us who He is within the Trinity, by forming those little things in our lives.

I have heard and read that part of the purpose of the Sabbath was to get the people of God to stop doing (all the busy things we fill our lives with) and at the end of the week get back to the relationships that form the heart and core of our lives. And indeed, that is what God was doing in Genesis 3 when He was walking in the Garden in the cool of the day. He was there to spend time with Adam and Eve, not doing more amazing creation things – just being there with them.

When Adam and Eve had turned away, He then announced the birth of "the Seed of the woman." He would come to us once again to spend time, to dwell among us. (John 1:14) I wonder: how much of the 3 years the disciples spent with Jesus was simply walking along, quietly being there? That is part of the goal, to be there and finally have back all the time with us that Adam and Eve lost. How great a price Jesus was ready to pay to win back time with you.

A little picture for us comes at the end of the Gospel of John – Breakfast on the beach with Jesus. It says, (John 21:9) "When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread." It's just my guess but somehow, I think that Jesus didn't cut corners, but spent the time to prepare and cook the meal. And then there was the meal (vv. 10-13) – and as they ate nothing happened. Just a meal. Just being there together savoring the moments.

*(Continued on back...)*

Isn't it interesting that the time spent when we aren't doing anything special or amazing can be the measure of love and friendship?

### **Our Prayer:**

***Jesus my Friend, thank you for the time, the days, hours and moments of my life, and for being the kind of Friend who savors every moment of my knowing You. Lead me through the confusion of so many of my days that I may come back at the end of each one to that restful time of simply knowing You. Thank You for the promise of endless days of life and blessing. Amen.***

# WORRY & FAITH

4/4/2020

(Part 1)



Faith is simply to believe the words and promises of God. But to start us in learning faith Jesus talks to us about worry.

It's in the Sermon on the Mount. It's where Jesus **said** *"Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek after all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."* (Matthew 6:31-33)

It's a "stay in your lane" type of thing, but not at all like you would expect. It starts out pretty simple with the understanding that God has created and will provide for our daily needs. In Confirmation classes the children memorize "clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all my goods ..." OK, "all my goods" is the older wording but I still like it better than "all I have". But the point is that God has given amazing blessings, and even when life is hard, we are still surrounded by God's love, mercy, and daily blessings. So why should we be anxious? God is there and He knows our needs.

But still we worry. And Jesus knows that we worry. He was born to become one of us and share all the problems, tiredness, hunger, aches, pains -- and the uncertainty of what the next day will bring. That's why He was a man of prayer, up early in the mornings and going off to spend time hearing the words of the Bible and praying to His Father. (See Isaiah 50:4) He was serious about sharing this human existence.

Jesus knows that we worry. That's why He speaks to the worry. If He did not understand, He would not be able to tell us in the way He says it, **"do not be anxious"** and surround that verse with so many beautiful illustrations about the birds of the air and the flowers out in the fields. (Really, you have to read Matthew 6:25-34. It speaks right to the heart.)

I heard someone, many years ago, say that part of the meaning was God saying, "Do not worry. God will do His part. Just do yours." But look closer and you will find something very interesting. In these verses, the parts that God takes on are the humbler and lowlier. He tends to flowers, birds, food and drink. He sustains the physical life.

And what does He invite us to seek and put our attention on? The noble, the spiritual and the eternal. He invites us to focus on faith ("do not be anxious"); the kingdom of God (because He is busy giving the kingdom to us); and "His righteousness". "His righteousness" is nothing else than the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ, a free gift that was earned as Jesus went into Jerusalem, and from there to the Garden of Gethsemane, and from there to the cross, and from there to the empty tomb.

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Jesus is inviting us to focus our mind and soul on every gift of mercy and grace in Jesus, and He can take care of all the other, temporary, passing and smaller things. These are the promises of God. Really. He's got this.

And faith? Faith is simply to believe the words and promises of God.

*(There is more for another day, Worry & Faith: Part 2 ...)*

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, be my Teacher and help me to learn faith. Since I struggle, speak Your promises over and over again, so my soul may hear You inviting and know that You will be with me in everything and bring me into life and victory. Amen.***

# UP TO JERUSALEM . . .

4/5/2020



I saw and heard on television, in New York a procession of doctors heading in to work in a hospital; and in all the apartments overlooking and on the sidewalks around spectators cheering and applauding them. It was absolutely remarkable. And it was right -- right to do and right to recognize them.

I then heard a description saying that these are the soldiers marching into battle. They go to fight a disease, and as they do so they are putting their lives at risk. In fact, some of them will lay down their lives. It touches us because it is the best and the greatest part of our nature. And it touches us because the pattern is one we know. We have seen through the years acts of nobility and sacrifice -- acts that go completely against the urge for self-preservation; and speak instead of the call to help the weak, rescue the helpless, and care for the vulnerable. We recognize that pattern. There are great books built around it; and one series in particular that many in school have read (all 7 books culminating in "The Deathly Hallows" where the hero goes to lay down his life).

We recognize the pattern and in this time of the year our hearts and minds cannot help but hear it calling us once again. It is the man going up to Jerusalem where he knew he would have to suffer. He was marching into battle -- not putting his life "at risk" because it was not a risk. It was a certainty that he would die. And he rode into Jerusalem.

There were the cheering crowds, but it was not about the cheers. There were the healings and the teaching, but it was not about miracles or gathering students. There was a battle to be fought, suffering to endure, dying to be done, sacrifice and atonement to be made, forgiveness to be gained, and death and hell to defeat.

No one who is not on the front lines in the hospitals right now can really understand. Vigilance and carefulness have to be constant. If they are lacking there could be sickness or death. Which brings up the third very striking image -- a group of medical workers who went up on the roof to pray, for themselves, their patients and every doctor and nurse in the hospital floors underneath.

To whom else do we turn in times when we see danger and nobility? To whom else can we turn when the pattern we see all around us reminds us so powerfully of the Lamb of God, who went up to Jerusalem in order to lay down His life for us, ***"who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made Himself nothing taking on the form of a servant ... And ... humbled Himself by becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross ..."*** (Philippians 2:5-11) This is why He was riding into Jerusalem.

The cross of Jesus resets the whole creation, putting the pattern of the cross <sup>(Continued on back...)</sup> into every part of life. It ennobles everything where echoes and images of the cross have become part of the pattern of life. Deep down we know the truth of this, and we admire every example we see that reminds us of the cross, the central image of the love of God. That is part of the meaning of the words, **"at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow"**. (Philippians 2:10)

Today we honor and we pray for doctors, nurses, all medical workers and every other person who carries that image of God.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, as You rode into Jerusalem You were going to win my salvation and set me free. You knew You were going to suffering and death in my place. Help me to see the pattern of Your life in those I see all around who are right now risking everything to save the lives of their neighbors. Bless and protect each doctor, each nurse and all others who are living the pattern of Your love. Amen.***

# WORRY & FAITH

4/6/2020

(Part 2)



## Little Footsteps in Bigger Footsteps

Jesus said, "But if God so clothes the grass of the field ... will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" (Matthew 6:30) Actually, it's even sweeter the way Jesus He said than our English translations.

One day a friend of mine (Pastor Ralph Laufer) said, "Is that a diminutive?" And so, we looked. The Greek word is "**oligopistoi**." Taking the word apart: *pistis* is the Greek word for faith; *oligo* is the word for little; and the ending *oi* means ones. Putting it together it means "little-faith-ones." And yes, it looks like a diminutive; it's a term of endearment! It isn't a scolding word. It's a word with lots and lots of affection.

The next time in Matthew we run into the word is out on the water, after Peter called out to Jesus and said, "Hey! Lord! If it's You command me to come to You on the water!" (my paraphrase) And Jesus said, "Come." and Peter was out there walking on the water; and then looking around and getting afraid; and then beginning to sink; and then Jesus grabbed him by the hand and lifted him up. That's when Jesus said, "**oligopiste (Little-faith-one) why did you doubt?**" (Matthew 14:31) (And then they walked back to the boat together.)

Jesus is the teacher of faith, and faith means "believing the words and promises of God." For just a moment there, Peter was doing exactly that, but it was little steps of faith. Yes, even walking on water was "little steps" of faith.

Jesus is the teacher of faith. Like a basketball coach, or a martial arts teacher, He shows as He teaches. He demonstrates. Jesus had been doing that for the disciples all along -- facing temptation, hours of prayer, trusting His Father when the storm came up, and on and on. He was training them in faith as His "little-faith-ones" and there were a lot more lessons to come. But it all came back to the same thing over and over; believing the words and promises of God.

Jesus would demonstrate faith in His Father's promises all the way to Jerusalem, the Garden, the Cross and the Empty Tomb. In addition to being forgiven, saved and being given eternal life, they would watch the astonishing faith of the Son of God "**who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.**" (Hebrews 12:2)

I heard a scientist tell about examining footprints making a trail through long since dried mud. In some places there were 2 sets, one big, the other small. In other places only the big one. So he looked closer. He examined the places with only one set. As he looked inside them, he found much smaller footprints there within the larger prints. He said, "Like children all over the

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world there was a child following behind and walking in the footprints of their father or mother." I remembered that, because I remembered back when I was very little and there was a big snowstorm. I was following my father out into the back yard, and I didn't want to get snow in my boots. So, I tried to walk in His footprints. I remembered that when I had my own children, and I remember sometimes taking very short steps, so they could walk in my footprints.

Jesus is the great teacher of faith. He called His disciples to follow, and He took some of those small steps. He showed them what it was like to walk in faith as a human being. He was tempted, and by faith held firmly to God's Word. He wept for his friend Lazarus and the sisters Mary and Martha. He was hungry. And He struggled as He prayed in the garden.

As He taught them, Jesus still teaches faith and we are His students and disciples. Time after time the lesson goes back to the same thing, believing the words and promises of God. It may be when we are not sure which path to choose in life. It might be in the middle of a worldwide pandemic. And it will almost certainly be after all this mess right now is done and we have the question, **"Will I continue to follow?"**

There are footprints. They are the footprints of the Son of God, who was born to be one of us. And they are His footprints of faith, step by step believing the words and promises of God. And they are proofs that Jesus has set down, proving that God's words and promises are solid, and they give life, and they are all bound together in Jesus. They are given by Jesus who says, **"Come, follow Me ..."** and who says, **"Because I live, you will live." So then, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus the Author and Perfecter of faith ..."** (Hebrews 12:2)

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, be my teacher. Guide and train me. Let me learn faith from You, that in the middle of all the things happening all around, I may go back, time and time again, to hear Your words. Help me to find rest and peace in the faithfulness of Your promises, that I may endure through my whole life. Strengthen and keep me in faith, that I may see Your glory and live in Your kingdom. Amen.***

## *Something for the BODY; Something for the SOUL*

4/7/2020



It's a beautiful little formula. It reminds us who we are and that there is more to us than our physical needs; and it is something we are feeling pretty sharply right now.

Even if we were able to keep ourselves perfectly and absolutely safe, staying inside for the rest of the year, that is not enough. We need the something for the soul. Today I saw a group of friends sitting out on someone's lawn, lawn chairs way far apart, keeping each other company. The something for the soul was companionship. On the other hand, I know of parents who provide every physical need for their children by working so many hours that there is no time left in their days, and then wonder why their children are not content. The something for the soul is love and we need that.

It is that way with the things of the faith. We bring a baby to church. Water is splashed and words are spoken. Something for the body -- the water that carries a blessing of life and resurrection. And something for the soul -- the word of God (carrying the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) tucked deep within the soul for us to turn to and remember the promises of God.

We come to the Lord's Supper. We will be waiting this Thursday and we will hunger for the time when we can gather at the Table of the Lord. Jesus calls us to receive something for the body and something for the soul. Something for the body -- the actual risen from the dead body of Jesus, and the sin forgiving blood of Jesus, that He joins with our mortal bodies to carry the reality of Easter into our lives and one day bring us to the rising of our bodies into eternal life. And something for the soul -- the words and promises of Jesus when He says, "for the forgiveness of sins" and promises forgiveness, life and salvation. Time after time He feeds us building and forming faith within us.

Christianity is all the way through "something for the body; something for the soul." We cannot be without either. Christianity is **not** "only for the soul." That would be ridiculous. Especially this week, leading up to Easter we know how completely we needed Jesus to be laid in the tomb and rise from the tomb. From the beginning in Bethlehem, Jesus was born because God values your life, and that means your physical, bodily life. He plans to raise this body you live in and make it glorious. And because Jesus took our human flesh, we believe that our neighbor's physical life and needs matter. That is actually why so many of the hospitals around our nation are religious, and so many are named for saints. What Jesus did in the body is the greatest force for caring for our neighbor there has ever been in the history of the world.

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But Christianity is **not** "only for the body" either. That would sell us short. It would fall so far short of what we are made for, to think that food, shelter, money and possessions are all that we need. We were created to know hope, virtue, beauty, goodness and so many other things. We long for the things of the soul, and we know that God created and calls us to walk with Him. There are many, many stories through generation after generation of people holding onto hope in spite of everything, inspired by the grace and mercy of God.

And then there is the story of Mary anointing Jesus with expensive ointment just before He entered Jerusalem. (John 12:1-8) One of the disciples complained. It could have been sold to meet physical needs. But Jesus praised Mary's devotion. Things of the soul lead us through the hard times. And they enrich and give meaning to the blessings in life. We need them.

Something for the body. We live in this world and God gives us to each other and invites us to join Him in caring for others. And something for the soul. We live, within our souls, in the presence of God. That is an eternal relationship, and it is the beginning and heart of who we are. That relationship has its beginning with God. **"O Lord, you have searched me and known me!"** and **"How precious are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand."** (Psalm 139:1, 17-18) And it finds its fulfillment at the end. **"When He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."** (1 John 3:2)

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, as I live in this world help me remember that while I am in this world, I am also walking with You. Thank You for Your work, done in the body to purchase and win me from sin and death. Thank You for the forgiveness You earned at the cost of Your bodily suffering and death. And guide me, deep within the soul, that I may learn Your teachings and walk by faith. Amen.***

## WHEN THE TIME WAS RIGHT

4/8/2020



***"But when the fullness of time had come ..."* said Paul.** (Galatians 4:4)

We are learning lessons about waiting, and how some things are not going to happen until the time of waiting has been completed. There are a lot of things we are not in control of, and we simply wait for the time in-between to slowly pass. We will not get there any faster by being impatient. A little lesson I have learned is -- when I am stuck in a traffic jam, for example -- to look at my watch. I make a mental note and I time how long it actually takes to get through. It is surprising how often it feels like twice as long as it actually is. And then I say to myself, "That wasn't as bad as it seemed."

When the time had fully come, God sent His Son. It had been thousands of years waiting for the first Christmas and for God to come and walk among us. But when the time had fully come there was a census, a journey to Bethlehem, shepherds in the fields, and wise men.

When the time had fully come, Jesus began His ministry. It had been about 30 years since the first Christmas, and the world was waiting for the work of salvation to get underway. Writers and movie makers speculate what had happened in the meantime with the shepherds and the wise men. But when the time had fully come, there was John's preaching and baptism, the temptations, the wedding at Cana and a Sermon up on a mountain -- all seeming to come in a flurry of activity.

When the time had fully come, Jesus came riding into Jerusalem. It had been about 3 years of ministry, and, although those years were filled with teaching and miracles; with proclaiming the Gospel and how salvation was going to happen through His work, it was still years of waiting. The disciples had gotten used to the "normal state of affairs," and when it was time to go up to Jerusalem, they were not ready.

When the time had fully come, it was time to eat the Passover, pray in the Garden, stand before Pilate, suffer, die and rise.

You see, when we are waiting for the time to fully come it all seems to move so very slowly. But when the time has fully come everything happens very, very quickly. All that has been being prepared seems to come in a rush. The disciples were hardly able to realize what was happening before everything changed again. That's how it is when the time has fully come. When the time had fully come it was time to earn salvation, forgive sins, bring the promise, begin the resurrection of all His Christians. In a whirlwind the political and religious forces

gather and are defeated, along with death and the devil. All so very quickly. And the Gospel was fulfilled.

And then it was time for more waiting. Paul spent his youth learning from the Rabbis and great scholars of his day. He did not welcome the changes sweeping through with this new teaching about Jesus. But when the time had fully come, he was on a road to Damascus and had his life completely turned around by Jesus. He then preached Jesus as the Christ. And then came 17 years of quiet study until Barnabas asked him to come to Antioch and teach the new Gentile believers. And then very quickly the time was fulfilled and there were mission journeys to do, all over the Roman world.

We are waiting again for the time to fully come. Events will move slowly, and then suddenly all at once. That's how life is, slow days in-between big changes. Each of those days in-between is given by God. A part of discipleship is to learn how to go through the in-between times keeping on walking as the disciple, because all of the slow in-between days are days to learn from our Teacher. The time will come when we are able to gather again, and we will look back on these days of waiting.

And one more time we are waiting for the time to be fulfilled. On to the end day after day will look very much like any other day. But when the time has fully come, once again everything will come in a rush. The stars will fall, the trumpet will sound and Jesus will return.

We have in-between days, and each one is a day to live as a follower of Jesus, knowing He is with us, and that we are children of God, held in His mercy and being brought by a Good Shepherd to share His life and blessings. ***"You make known to me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy; ..."*** (Psalm 16)

### Our Prayer:

***Lord Jesus, let today be a day of following You, learning of Your grace, Your mercy, and Your providing care. Guide me into Your words and promises, and let me build my life, my hopes, and daily pattern around Your presence in my life. Amen.***

## SCATTERED

4/9/2020



**"... to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad."** (John 11:52)

It is John's comment on some of the events after the raising of Lazarus. But the one word "scattered" is in the middle of our experience right now.

The people of God have been scattered. We try to hold our connection with each other and with our Church. But it happens and has happened all through history. The people of God are scattered.

This is Maundy Thursday. We connect by internet and video links. But we have not gathered as a congregation around the Lord's Supper. We are scattered. There are hardships with being scattered. It is harder to see, but there are good things that God does through times of scattering.

Did you know: What was the first great evangelism program after the Day of Pentecost? Read about it in Acts 8:1-4. It says, a great persecution arose and **"they were all scattered .... Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word."**

Can you imagine a Mission Committee planning this out and presenting it to the Voters' Assembly? It would sound completely insane. They would be removed from their office. And it is a horrible idea if it comes from our planning. Besides, it is exactly the opposite of how any of us would think.

But God knows when to scatter and when to gather. So, we are hearing stories from all over the country where the Gospel is getting into places we would have never expected. God sends out; and He gathers in. He sends us out to live our faith in a world of troubles, and He arranges it so we are living by faith right in front of our neighbors. That is a powerful witness and it is a call from God. I do wonder. How many millions have come to faith from seeing Christians living by faith through so many of the troubles that every human being is touched by? And so, God gathers. Do we call it "sneaky," wonder at the audacity of it, or say God is "making it real."?

This is the reality of human life. There is trouble, but there is Jesus who says, **"Take heart. I have overcome the world."** (John 16:33) There is suffering, but Paul says **"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us."** (Romans 8:18) There is right now a scattering, but Jesus was sent to be the "one man" who would "die for the people". (John 11:50) That was Caiaphas plotting the death of Jesus, not knowing that he was prophesying about salvation and forgiveness of sins **"and**

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***not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.***" (John 11:52)

Jesus knows every one of His own. (John 10:14, 27) Even the ones who do not know Him yet. And His mission is to gather every one of them -- each one called and led by the Good Shepherd, until He brings us all together and we are that Great Multitude that no one could count. (Revelation 7:9)

This is the plan. It is the Commission given to Jesus by His Father. Isaiah 49:6: ***"I will make You as a light to the nations, that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*** Jesus is fully, completely up to the job. So have confidence. He is bringing you through many things, but bringing you into the glory of the kingdom of God. Have confidence and smile at the "scenery" along the way. It will make a great story later.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, let me hear Your promises along the paths of my life. No matter how twisting the path help me know that You are able to lead me and bring me fully into life, glory, and joy. Help me, then, to walk the paths of life with faith and prayer, trusting quietly or calling out in my need, but always turning to You. Amen.***

# WORRY & FAITH

4/10/2020

(Part 3)



## When Everything Falls Apart

It is Good Friday. We have just come home from Church. We are looking forward to Easter.

But that first Good Friday was very different. The disciples were crushed, completely in despair, and afraid they might be next. The women were weeping and getting ready to prepare spices to cover the stench of the decaying body of Jesus. They had forgotten His words that He was going to Jerusalem and would be put to death and on the third day rise. Or they were confronted by all the things that called Jesus' promises a lie, and they didn't know where to turn.

Even worse in their minds, was what had happened to Jesus. They had thought that He was the Christ. Why then had God forsaken him? He said that Himself. He prayed, **"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"** It was "when everything falls apart." That's what they were dealing with.

But this is exactly where faith comes into its own. The measure of faith is taken when it is put to the test. That is part of the definition. Faith is to believe the words and promises of God -- simply believing His words and promises. Not seeing. Not having it proven. Simply believing. It means in the middle of everything to say, "I know that God loves me and that He is faithful."

Faith means (Part 1) to believe the words and promises of God, (Part 2) no matter what. There are times I will ask someone in our congregation, "How's your 'no-matter-what' today?" And they will smile, or sigh. And we will talk. The disciples had more "no-matter-what" than they thought they could ever endure. And they would go through that "no-matter-what" until Sunday.

But they were disciples of Jesus, and Jesus is the Author and Perfecter of faith. He is the one who invented it, began the walk of faith, and teaches every one of His people, from the fall back in the Garden of Eden, to the end of the world. Faith is very specific. And faith has an object. It is to believe the words and promises of God. This is not a cliché, just some nice saying. And it is not an unanchored hope. It has to be bound to something.

The Word of God is the stuff of faith, and it is the stuff of the life of God. The Word of God is part of the fellowship within the Trinity, the communion between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And this is the pattern of life that Jesus knew before He came into the world.

When Jesus took human flesh, He had to walk by faith. No longer seeing in the same way He had to hold on to the words and promises of God. Morning after morning He went to spend time in the Word of God, reading the words, meditating on the promises, and preparing for the

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work of that day. (Isaiah 50:4 and Mark 1:35) But faith has to be tested. Without testing it is not believing without seeing. Matthew 4 tells about the temptations. With each one of them Jesus responded by turning to the Word of God. He said to the first one, **"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."** (Matthew 4:4)

At the cross Jesus brings the words and promises of God all the way to the most forsaken, condemned and darkest place. There, when His Father judged Him and was pouring out wrath and judgment, what did Jesus pray? **"My God, My God ..."** This is the beginning of Psalm 22.

Realize first that Jesus was praying, and was still believing the promises of His relationship with His Father. It is the ultimate persistence of faith, to hold to the promises no matter what -- no matter the pain, looming death, and fearful darkness. **"My God ..."** is a claim of that eternal relationship.

Then, second, realize how Psalm 22 continues. After the description of crucifixion, it continues on. Verse 22 says, **"I will tell of Your name to My brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise You."** Right there in the middle of the suffering of the cross, Jesus claimed and held on to the promise of praising His Father and celebrating with us after everything was done.

Now that is the mastery and perfection of faith; to hold on to the promise even when God hides His face of grace and love and all Jesus saw was wrath, judgment and death.

But that is exactly the point. Jesus went to the most extreme place, to show to us that the promises of God hold true even there. Even in our darkest place we can trust those promises. Because whatever our darkest place is, however far from God that is -- Jesus went farther. He hung there in the darkness of "Why have You forsaken Me?" and He prayed and believed.

That's why Jesus is able to teach faith. He has been there. He knows the patterns of faith. He knows the promises of God and how to hold on to them in spite of everything. He knows how to guide you with the promises of His word. And He knows how to strengthen you in holding on to them.

**"Therefore ... let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."** (Hebrews 12:1-2)

### **Our Prayer:**

**Lord Jesus, teach me faith. I need it a lot! You know Your way around facing troubles, holding on to promises, taking the words of God into Your soul. Remind me of the faithfulness of Your promises. When I am discouraged give me hope. When I forget, be my Shepherd and seek me out. Keep me as Your own all the way into the life that is eternal. Amen.**

# IT WAS THE SABBATH

4/11/2020



It wasn't just any Sabbath. This was THE Sabbath. It was the Sabbath that had never happened, not from the beginning of the world. This was it.

Let me explain:

We read about it in Genesis 2. ***"And on the 7th day God finished His work that He had done, and He rested on the 7th day .... So God blessed the 7th day and made it holy ..."***

But there is more. What was the Sabbath for? From our side there are 3 purposes for the Sabbath: 1) to stop from all the busy-ness, 2) to have time with God, and 3) to hear the words and receive the blessings of God.

We learn what the Sabbath was for from God's side when the Lord came walking in the garden in the cool of the day. He had 1) completed His work, and was there 2) to spend time with Adam and Eve, and He was there 3) to speak His promises and bring His blessings.

But the Sabbath had been broken. Adam and Eve had: 1) ignored the words and blessings of God, breaking His command and defying Him, 2) gone back to work, sewing clothes out of fig leaves, and 3) hid from God refusing to have fellowship with Him. And so, with every Sabbath ever since. The entire human race was rebellious, violent, out of harmony with God, hiding from Him, denying His words and blessings and always ready to blame someone else.

## **Until Jesus.**

He came to restore us to God, so at the end we could live forever with a God who gives endless blessings and life. In order to restore us Jesus had to carry the "In the day that you eat of it you will surely die." It was not His to carry but He came to carry us back to fellowship and we came with a curse. So, Jesus took our sin (my sin) along with the separation. It was a long journey back, carrying us. Adam & Eve ate; Jesus fasted. We hid from God; Jesus presented Himself before His Father covered with our sin and guilt. We threw away the words and blessings of God; Jesus took the word of God for His life and strength, even the parts that judged and condemned.

Everything reached its climax on the cross as Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" He had borne the separation that Adam & Eve did to themselves as they ate and hid.

It was finished. As in Genesis when God finished His work and rested, Jesus finished His work and it was time for the Sabbath. There is still among the Jews the practice of finishing work 3 hours before sundown, to prepare for the Sabbath. "There was darkness over the

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whole land until the ninth hour [after sunrise] ... then Jesus calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!' And ... breathed His last." (Luke 23:44-46)

As Jesus commits His spirit into His Father's hands, He is fulfilling the sabbath. Jesus the Man has finished His work and is setting aside the day for fellowship with His Father. The Sabbath is not just for rest. It is for setting aside our work and spending time with God. It is for fellowship, God sharing His blessings, eternal life, and joy with us.

Jesus was resting. Along with resting, it was time to be with the Father and hear the Father say, "This is My Son, with whom I am well-pleased!"

The time of blessing has begun again. All the blessings of God are given and poured out on Jesus. Of Him the Bible says, **"You have ... crowned Him with glory and honor ... given Him dominion over the works of Your hands, ... put all things under His feet ..."** (Psalm 8:5-6) Like everything else in His ministry Jesus does these things for us. He holds all these blessings in trust for the day when we are glorified. In fact, **"the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God ... the redemption of our bodies."** (Romans 8:19, 23)

The time will come the next day for the revealing. But this Sabbath is a time for the close and loving fellowship of the Father with His Son Jesus. God and Man have come to the day of rest and the day of fellowship and blessing. It is a re-set of everything that was supposed to be in our relationship with God.

### Our Prayer:

***Lord Jesus, thank You for restoring us, all Your people, to the fellowship and blessing You have wanted for us from the beginning. Let me find rest for my soul in You, rest from the turmoil and problems of life, and rest through hearing Your words and knowing Your promises, and rest in knowing that You are faithful and will bring me into endless blessings. Amen.***

# THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING

4/12/2020



"Easter changes everything!" And  
"Easter is the unchanging fact that makes everything new."

When you put those 2 things together it means that the Resurrection of Jesus sweeps away everything else. All kingdoms and powers; all enemies and hindrances to the Kingdom of God. No matter what nation, power, philosophy, movement, or force every one of them will be pushed aside by the power and force of the life that is in Jesus and has come out of the tomb with Him in order to take hold of us and make us eternally living -- with Jesus and transformed to be like Him. The final enemy to be destroyed is death. It will be destroyed, yielding to the Eternal Life that is in Jesus as He pours that Eternal Life into our souls and then into our bodies.

So, Alleluia! Christ Is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

The words, "This changes everything!" are interesting words in the middle of so much change. How many weeks ago were we happily going about our business. We traveled, went to restaurants, met in large groups, worshiped together, and even shook hands. And then changes came, the most radical and extreme I have ever seen in such a short time. Things will change again. Nothing is permanent here. But the changes sweeping through are only variations in the pattern of life and death, sin and its consequences, and the struggle to hold on to something good.

None of the changes in the past months come anywhere close to -- and no change however wonderful or terrible in the months ahead come anywhere close to -- the undoing of death that Jesus has done. Not even dying, the end of this life, comes anywhere close to what Jesus has done.

He has taken hold of death and broken it. And nothing at all can keep on being what it was before.

Jesus begins the change in Himself, there within the tomb returning to life and transforming His body. Then Jesus changes us, beginning deep within the soul. The change in the soul is sudden and complete when the risen Lord Jesus speaks His words into our soul. Think about Mary Magdalene outside the tomb on Easter morning. She was weeping and in despair. But with one word Jesus completely changed everything. (**Jesus said to her "Mary."** - John 10:16) Suddenly she knew that Jesus lives, death is undone, and she is going to live forever with God. And so with a few words to the disciples in Emmaus (Luke 24:30-31), the ten in the

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upper room (Luke 24:36-43), Thomas a week later (John 20:27-28), Paul riding the road into Damascus (Acts 9:3-6), and the list goes on.

And there is more to come. Jesus will one day ***"transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subject all things to Himself."***

(Philippians 3:21) And then Easter will be complete.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! ...

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, there are so many changes in life, and these days are full of confusion. But in You I find eternity, and in Your empty tomb I have something that cannot ever be undone. Help me to hope in everything You have promised, and to celebrate Easter and eternity through everything and anything that happens. Help me to have the refrain within my soul, "Christ is Risen! Alleluia! Amen."***

## THE DAY AFTER

4/13/2020



It's the day after Easter. "Christ Is Still Risen! He is Still Risen Indeed!"

But sometimes it takes a while for a new reality to sink in. We know this. We have gone through changes in life, and the bigger the change the more parts of our thinking have to have time to adapt and re-learn. "I was sad when they said to me, come let's update your computer operating system." (Loose Paraphrase of Psalm 122:1)

The disciples saw Jesus that first Easter later in the day when the two returned from Emmaus. (Luke 24:33-35) As they were telling how Jesus was revealed to them in the breaking of the bread, Jesus Himself stood among them. Listen to the struggle of their minds to grasp the changes of death undone, the tomb broken and the actual resurrection of Jesus.

**"But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit."** (Luke 24:37)

**"And while they still disbelieved for joy ..."** (Luke 24:41)

After eating a piece of fish and telling them it was all told and predicted in Moses and the prophets, **"Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures"**. (Luke 24:45)

It takes us a while, doesn't it?

I heard once, years ago, Oprah describe "confirmation bias." She said people could be boarding a plane and see a large hole in the wing. But because they figure the pilots and mechanics know what they are doing they somehow don't even notice. They see what they expect to see. It is amazing how we can completely miss something, and it can be dangerous. It takes a lot to break us loose from seeing what we expect to see.

Is that why the two on the road to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus? Because they were so convinced it couldn't be. Is that why Mary Magdalene outside the tomb thought Jesus was the gardener and asked where he had put the dead body of Jesus? Because it just does not happen -- a crucified, executed man just doesn't come back to life open the tomb from the inside and head out.

Is that why we are reluctant and hesitate? Because we have become so used to thinking in this-world patterns of the simply physical and material existence; and it is difficult to shift and think as those who are actually in the beginning of eternal life; who are strangers here, pilgrims looking forward to the heavenly city like Abraham is described in Hebrews 11 (verse 10).

There is an assignment I have given confirmation classes through the years. It goes like this: Look forward to the day after Jesus returns, after judgment day. A whole lot happened the day before. And now you are living forever. Make a list of three things you want to do "the day

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after." I have gotten a lot of interesting answers. Some were adventurous. Some were about long separated family members. (The most unique, by the way, was "Jump out of an airplane without a parachute." And then he defended his answer: "You said I was living forever.") ((Note: If you are reading this you know who you are!)) But why this assignment? The purpose was to teach how living in eternal life has a pattern to it that is so completely different from our pattern of life now. It is a struggle to even try to think in such a different way.

So how do we adapt to such a complete change in reality as happened with breaking the tomb, undoing the pattern of sin, and death no longer being the final reality? When you read the last chapters, Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20-21, (Seriously, read those "last chapters") you see disciples struggling to get their minds around something so completely different that they sometimes look more than a little foolish. They were out of their depth. But then so are we, and that's part of what it is like following Jesus.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, I am amazed. I struggle to "get" the full measure of the changes You have done to everything: rising so death is not the end; giving forgiveness so I am Yours; making heaven my own and eternity my future. Help me to live with the joy of forgiveness and the boldness of Easter. Amen.***

*MY FATHER  
AND YOUR FATHER*

4/14/2020



For years this has been my favorite 5 words out of all the Easter events. It is a wonderful gift, a beautiful "Easter Egg" that holds a hidden gem within it.

You see, Jesus could have done the work of salvation simply so that God could reclaim us as His people. And it would have been enough to have our souls redeemed, and our bodies raised -- so that we could live in God's kingdom. We could be His servants, to do His bidding and be obedient through eternity.

But somehow God always finds a way of doing more and giving more. That's where the words "My Father and your Father" come in.

It was Easter morning, outside the tomb, and Jesus had just surprised Mary Magdalene completely out of her socks (or sandals). When she heard Him call her by name, she turned, saw Him, recognized Him and called Him "Rabboni" (my Rabbi / my Teacher). And then Jesus had to peel her off Him. Imagine the emotion going on in her. "Do not cling to Me ..." (John 20:17) And then, here come those words ...

"Go to My brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.'"

Some of those words are expected. Not surprising. "I am ascending ..." "to My Father ..." "...and your God." But the other parts are remarkable, astonishing, maybe even outrageous!

Jesus then says, "My Father and your Father". He actually makes us a part of the family of God, children of God the Father. You could say these words are our adoption papers. We belong because of Jesus dying on the cross and rising on Easter morning. We are invited to say "Father."

Sometimes I tell the story of one of my friends, back in high school days. He was invited to stay for dinner. We were having spaghetti. During the meal the four Willig boys were saying "Mom, this" and "Mom, that." And then my friend slipped into the pattern, asking for some more of something, "Mom, could I have ...?" There was a slight pause, and a smile and he had that something more. It's an interesting thing to look back on. For that little while he was part of the family -- because he was invited to be.

We are invited to pray and say, "Father." But don't ever forget the cost of that invitation. Jesus had to be one of us. He had to invite us by telling us the Gospel of God who "so loved the

world that He gave His only-begotten Son". And He had to bring us home by carrying us in His own flesh on the cross. We are connected as children by being connected to the Son, the Son of God & God the Son.\*

So there is the family intimacy. "The Father knows what you need before you ask Him." (Matthew 6:8) "I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) "I will ask the Father and He will give you another Helper to be with you forever." (John 14:16)

### **Our Prayer:**

***Father, thank You for inviting me back into Your family and into Your love. Your Son Jesus called me and invited me to come back home. And He paid an astonishing price for me. As often as I pray and say "Father" help me to remember how much You have loved me and how Jesus gave Himself for my salvation. Amen***



## JESUS IS ALIVE

4/15/2020

There is so much we mean when we say this. It is so far beyond the platitudes and clichés you hear. "So, and so" lives on (in your heart, in your memory, or something else they will say). But Jesus is alive in a whole different way. He is not "off somewhere as a spirit," and He is not just in your memory or in your heart. Jesus is alive, really, truly, fully alive. He acts, He hears prayers and He answers them. He has His own plans and He is carrying them out.

The disciples encountered the living, alive Jesus and everything in their lives was changed. Mary Magdalene's tears were stopped. The two going to Emmaus learned wisdom and hurried back to Jerusalem to tell. Peter who denied Jesus out of fear boldly stood up to the ruling council. Paul preached the faith he once tried to destroy. This is not because they held a memory in their hearts. It was because Jesus is alive and He showed them His glorified, risen body. They knew He had beat the stuffing out of death.

That meant:

Jesus could keep them through any danger.

Jesus could keep His promises to raise them from the dead.

Jesus could share eternal life with them.

So:

Who should they be afraid of? All those verses that say things like "what can man do to me?" -- they were absolutely true.

They had something no other religious group had -- and it was something people desperately needed.

Jesus is alive. He is still the same Jesus. Still inviting people to live forever. Still giving forgiveness through His own cross, his own suffering, and His own blood. Still carrying out His plan of bringing people from every nation and language into His Kingdom and into His family.

Right now in our lives -- Jesus is alive. He is the living one. Right now, we are confined to our houses most of the time. Jesus is with us. He lives.

There was a conversation down in Springfield Sunday (Liam is our grandson):

Liam: "Can I have my prison gifts now?"

His mother: "Your Easter basket?"

Liam: "My prison gifts"

His mother: "Liam, I hope you never go to prison."

Liam: "I already am in prison."

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Yes Liam, even if you were in prison the Living Lord Jesus would be there with you. Bars can't keep Him away, because He is Jesus.

A bit more on the serious side, this came through the internet from a Pastor friend, John Drosendahl:

*"My praying is powerless. The Answerer, however ..."*

This is because "**Jesus is Alive!**" He holds all the power of God and He has promised to do all things for the blessing of those who know Him, who believe in Him and who know His love shown to us in the cross and in Rising on Easter morning.

Jesus is Alive. He acts in our lives. And often enough He surprises us.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, You are the living Lord. You have eternal life and You hold our future in Your hands. Guide me day after day, steer the path of my life and lead me to the blessings that only You can give. Help me to understand that no other blessings can compare with those I have in You. And no problems are worth comparing with the riches I have in You. Amen.***

## *HIDING INSIDE & VENTURING OUT*

4/16/2020



Do you realize that we are (in a small way) acting out the first Easter?

There were the Disciples hiding inside, and there's us stuck inside. They had some serious things to be afraid of. It wasn't a virus, or any other kind of disease. It was the authorities. If they were caught outside would they be arrested? Would the authorities try a mop up action to eradicate the followers of Jesus? Would they be put in prison or maybe even put to death?

It was a big step to even think about going out. The first ones were the women, heading to the tomb to care for the body of Jesus. They were more likely to be ignored by the authorities, and so they went; and arrived at the tomb; and met the angel; and heard the message that, **"He is not here, but has risen. Remember how He told you, while He was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise."** (Luke 24:6-7)

They came back telling the message, but to the disciples **"these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."** (Luke 24:11)

The next one to venture out was Peter who went to the tomb, saw the linen cloths and **"went home marveling"**. (Luke 24:12)

Fear is a powerful motivator. It kept the disciples inside, behind closed doors. They did not let go of it very easily.

The next we hear about venturing out were two who decided later in the day to leave Jerusalem. It probably seemed like a good idea -- get away from the dangers in Jerusalem. And so, they were walking to Emmaus (about 7 miles away). They could get there shortly before dark, and shelter in place until they could figure out what to do next.

As they went, Jesus came up and wanted to walk with them. (Luke 24:15) He told them the whole meaning of what had happened (while keeping them from recognizing Him). They needed the message. They needed to know why, and what it was all for. It had all been told by the prophets. He asked them, **"Was it not necessary" for the Christ to "suffer these things and enter into His glory?"** (Luke 24:26) And He interpreted the Scriptures

and explained the plan of salvation. In this way Jesus lifted the fear and sadness off of them. And then He revealed Himself as He broke bread.

Hiding inside or venturing out? They raced back to Jerusalem. Who cares about authorities, arrest, prison, or anything else when you have seen the risen Lord?! The authorities couldn't hold Him. Neither could the cross or the tomb. Death itself was powerless against Jesus.

So, they came back to the disciples who were still hiding inside. They shared the news, what happened along the road, and in the house in Emmaus.

And then Jesus came to those "hiding-inside" disciples. It was time to lift their fear off of them -- and then they could venture outside.

Jesus came to them behind closed, locked doors. ***"But they were frightened and thought He must be a ghost."*** (Luke 24:37)

He showed them His hands and His side and He invited them to touch Him. But they still ***"disbelieved for joy"***. (Luke 24:41)

Finally -- it was eating a piece of fish (broiled fish, to be precise) that dispelled the doubts and opened up the joy for them. (Luke 24:42-43)

Sometimes it is the right thing to shelter inside. We wait for the good news. We miss the freedom and long for the worries to be lifted. And when it happens it will feel so good.

In a small way we are experiencing the pattern of confinement and worry; one day to be followed by freedom and joy.

That first Easter was filled with tremendously powerful fear and worry -- followed by a joy and freedom that is absolutely immeasurable. It is a freedom and joy that has spanned almost 2,000 years. And it is a freedom and joy that will span all the years of eternity.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, You lifted the fear and worry from the first disciples. You filled them with a joy that is beyond understanding, as You set them free from sin and death. Lord Jesus, help me to know the freedom I have in You so I can celebrate the joy of Easter every day through all time and eternity. Help me to have that joy through this day, and know that I too walk with the risen, living and victorious Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.***

## HOW DOES JESUS LOOK AT US?

4/17/2020



It's a good question to ask. What is our relationship from Jesus' perspective?

A lot of people outside the Church might figure it is a matter of us needing to be obedient followers, His people, servants of an almighty God. Even within the Church many Christians simply live with the ideas of obedience, repentance, service, worship and more obedience.

So, it is tremendously when we have words and language from Jesus that points to different and much fuller ideas. There are a few wonderful ones.

It was Thursday of Holy Week, getting ready to go to the Garden and be arrested, and Jesus was talking with His disciples. He said, **"No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing: but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you."** (John 15:15) Friends spend time together, and it is not because they have to. They enjoy each other's company. Jesus came to call and to make us His friends. When He was praying before being arrested, He said, **"Father, I want them (those You have given Me) to be with Me ..."** (John 17:24)

What was it like to be with Jesus, in between the miracles and healings? We know that crowds gathered around, and that children were drawn to Jesus. Peter got to walk on water. Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana. And he described the Father's house using the words "music and dancing".

There is another phrase from Jesus -- "My brothers". On the first Easter Jesus told Mary Magdalene **to "go to My brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father ...'"** (John 20:17) But that was not the first time the language and idea "My brothers" had come around.

The most vivid actually is connected with the cross, woven into the 4th word. You might remember, the 4th word is the beginning of Psalm 22, **"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"** In a previous devotion I shared about the later verses from the Psalm, Jesus believing the promises and looking forward to the victory. Verse 22 says, **"In the midst of the congregation I will praise You."**

But notice how Psalm 22:22 starts out! **"I will tell of Your name to My brothers."** There it is! Right in the middle of the hours on the cross Jesus was thinking about us as "My brothers." It isn't language of "lording it over" others. It's family language, where at least in one way, Jesus sees Himself as one of us and sees us as a huge family of brothers. Could it be that God the

(Continued on back...)

Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, has so far stooped down that He in certain ways walks among us as just one of us?

There are other places where the Bible says this. ***"Therefore, He had to be made like His brothers in every respect."*** (Hebrews 2:17) ***"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"*** (John 1:14) ***"When the fullness of time had come God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."*** (Galatians 4:4-5) And Romans 8 talks about God the Father intending that we should be ***"conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn of many brothers."*** (Romans 8:29)

There is a question we sometimes ask and answer in Church. Is Jesus the one we worship, or the one who leads our worship? The answer is "Yes! Because He is both! He is both God and man, our God and Savior, and one of us."

What will it be like to have eternity to be with "God-who-is-one-of-us"? With Jesus who is truly our brother and our friend? Good and sweet. It will be even better than walking with Him all over the holy land and even (cough, Peter, cough) on the sea of Galilee.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, thank You for calling me your friend and brother, and for Your wonderful desire to have me be with You in Your kingdom, doing all the cool things that happen when God is my BFF, and having all of that actually and really be forever. Thank You for paying the price to make that happen. Amen.***

## THE UPWARD CALL

4/18/2020



Christ  
is  
Risen!

There comes a time to leave some things behind. Paul says this in his great chapter on love. **"When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways."** (1 Corinthians 13:11) This does not mean putting things away and doing with less. It means moving on to something more, something greater. When the greater is there and can be had, why stay with the lesser. It's like a man who could have the car of his dreams, or he could have a matchbox model of that car. Does he choose the matchbox? Again, if he has had the matchbox model and then he wins that car in a contest, but the price is turning in the matchbox, does he refuse?

So, God gives us an upward call. There is more. It is greater and more wonderful. And we are invited. The entire New Testament, from the last chapters of the Gospels, on through the book of Acts, the letters of Paul, James, Peter, John, Jude and on to the book of Revelation -- all of it is written within the reality of Easter.

This life is not the end. This world is not all there is. And this body is not all that we are. When Jesus rose from the dead, He at first confused and then reoriented the disciples. He pushed them into a different reality. They were living the entire rest of this life in the presence of the living, risen-from-the-dead God and Savior. God was their friend who was inviting them to be with Him forever. I like the image of "running with Jesus through endless years."

It's an upward call. There are things to leave behind. But when Jesus **says "Come, follow Me ..."** and then He takes off running along with blessings and eternal life, who doesn't want to go along. Paul says, **"forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."** (Philippians 3:13-14)

It's an upward call. There are things to leave behind. Death, alienation from God, conflict within, sin and its guilt (Jesus will bring us there), and a whole bunch more. Paul says, **"I count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him ... that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, ..."** (Philippians 3:8-10)

There are promises that come with the "upward call." Jesus promises blessings (Matthew 5:3-12) John tells us **"when He appears, we shall be like Him ..."** (1 John 3:2) God will celebrate that **"Behold, the dwelling of God is with man. he will dwell with them, and they will be His people, ..."** (Revelation 21:3-4) The Bible says that on Judgment Day Jesus **"will exult over you with loud singing."** (Zephaniah 3:17) And Psalm 16 finishes **with "you make known to me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore."** (Psalm 16:11)

(Continued on back...)

## **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, Help me to remember the greatness of the promises I have in You, so I will press on knowing that there are blessings ahead, and that following You is not giving up joys and settling for less, but setting aside what is less as You give the greatest and best of all blessings and joys. Help me to live that others may see the joy that comes from walking with You and knowing the power of Your resurrection. Amen.***

*IN THE  
HOLY OF HOLIES*

4/19/2020



It is a fascinating theme that runs through the Bible; the idea of witnesses.

God will have His witnesses. He will have His witnesses because the acts of God are not something to be hidden away. They are to be done right out in public.

The theme is built into the Old Testament temple, where the ark of the covenant is placed between 2 Cherubim, one on each side. When God appeared to Abraham, He was accompanied by 2 angels. When Jesus was transfigured on the Mount of Transfiguration there were 2 witnesses, Moses and Elijah, who appeared with Him.

When Jesus stood trial, His accusers were unable to get 2 witnesses to testify because their testimony did not agree. But when Jesus was crucified there were the 2 witnesses, one on the right and one on the left. Those were the thieves, one of whom repented. God **will** have His witnesses.

Even more remarkable are the 2 witnesses in the tomb on Easter morning. John tells us that Mary Magdalene "stooped down to look into the tomb." Just like in the temple, there were 2 angels. They **were "sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the feet."** (John 20:12) God **will have** His witnesses!

This is a remarkable picture!

In the Old Testament the Ark of the Covenant held the 10 Commandments, the Law of God convicting all sin. But that Law of God was covered over by the Cover of the Ark. The Cover became known as the Mercy Seat. Notice: 2 witnesses to the great acts of God, but this time the 2 witnesses are the Law of God and the Mercy of God.

The Mercy Seat was where the blood of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement was sprinkled. That Day of Atonement Sacrifice was a picture of the sprinkled blood of Jesus, the One Great Sacrifice, as His blood covers our sins.

Furthermore:

You might remember how the curtain in the Temple was torn in two at the death of Jesus. (Matthew 27:50-51) That was because the Mercy of God was coming into our world, bursting through all the separation built up between God and man. The Mercy Seat would be among us.

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That Mercy Seat would be seen first by Mary Magdalene. When she stooped down to look into the tomb, she saw fulfilled what the layout and arrangement in the Holy of Holies was pointing to. There in the tomb on Easter morning was the blood of the covenant, the blood of Jesus covering over the sin, death and judgment that the Law of God would pour out on us. And there were the 2 angels, one on each side, being the witnesses to the mercy of God.

By the way, another name for the Ark of the Covenant was "The Testimony." In the Old Testament it was the testimony about God's mighty acts, not only delivering His people through the Red Sea but God's own Testimony about all that He had done from the beginning of the world to bless us. If Jesus is placed between the 2 angels the He Himself becomes the Testimony, the witness by God Himself about all the merciful and saving acts of God.

But there is a wonderful and amazing difference.

The Ark of the Covenant did not get up and move itself. And the Cover, the Mercy Seat was stationary. But what happened on Easter morning with our Mercy Seat? He, Jesus, the Living Mercy Seat, rose from the dead and left the tomb to go and appear to Mary Magdalene, to walk with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, to appear to the disciples in the Upper Room, to show them His hands and His side and to give them His peace.

He is still on the move, because He is a light to the nations, so that as His Father said, ***"that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*** (Isaiah 49:6)

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, You are my Mercy Seat. You are the only place where I can find forgiveness, atonement, and the mercy of God. It is by Your cross and by Your blood that I have a place with God and belong. As Thomas said, "My Lord and my God!" Thank You. Let me walk with You. And let me hear Your invitation to come close and be with God in the Holy of Holies. Let me rejoice to hear Your word and be Your disciple. Amen.***



## FAITHFULNESS

4/20/2020

**"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ..."** (Galatians 5:22)

Day after day continues, time rolls on, and for many the days drag slowly. Solomon lamented, **"The sun rises, and the sun goes down .... The wind blows .... All streams run to the sea .... All things are full of weariness .... What has been is what will be ... and there is nothing new under the sun."** (Ecclesiastes 1:4-9)

Five weeks ago Jared texted me, "Remember, God is still in control, not the corona virus." (That's how our daily devotions started.)

Faithfulness. What does it mean? Faithfulness means "day after day continuing on." Not stopped by obstacles, resistance, or problems that come along. Not distracted, or forgetting, or neglecting the promise or the goal. When the days roll on moving slowly, then faithfulness can become a challenge. When that new thing comes along "staying the course" faithfully can seem frustrating.

The days go on -- and we are anxious. We want to get there. We want to get through these days that have such limitations, and get back to venturing out and enjoying life a little bit more. Faithfulness can be hard.

Thirty-some years ago a friend in Guttenberg, Iowa was talking with me. He asked, "You know how to plow a straight furrow?" Then he explained, "You can't do it by looking at the field right in front of you, or by looking around. You have to get your eyes on a tree, way out there at the end of the field. You look at that tree and ignore all the other stuff. If there are stumps or rocks you go around them but then you get your eyes back on that tree." (Thank you, Ed Walter, for an image I have carried with ever since.) That has a lot to do with faithfulness.

Our God is faithful, perfectly and completely. The reason why faithfulness is a part of the fruit of the Spirit is because faithfulness is part of the image of God that God is forming in us. God the Father will have us transformed into **"the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers."** (Romans 8:29)

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God is faithful. There is a hymn that describes God as "Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light, Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might". The title for the hymn ("Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise") comes from Paul's first letter to Timothy. ***"To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever."*** (1 Timothy 1:17)

God is faithful. He is dedicated to His promises -- never forgetting the goal of bringing us into glory. He continues on, "unresting" and "unhasting." Psalm 90 says, ***"a thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night."*** (Psalm 90:4) Psalm 90 is marked out in the Bible as "A prayer of Moses". That's how long that verse has been part of the Word of God!

God is faithful, unresting, unhasting, unceasing in His dedication to call us into His kingdom and eternal life. Peter explains the Psalm. ***"The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."*** (2 Peter 3:9)

Jesus gave His promise. After going to the cross for my forgiveness; and after rising on Easter to promise that I will rise, He gave the promise. It has to do with His faithfulness, with His patience and persistence. With unresting and unceasing attention to His promise, He will lead and guide me into eternal life so I can be with Him. So, He spoke the promise: ***"And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*** (Matthew 28:20)

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, thank You for Your incredible faithfulness. I am distracted, discouraged, flighty, forgetful, wandering off, and constantly getting tangled in and tripped up by my sin. Through it all You continue persistent, unwavering, and faithful to every promise. And those promises, life, heaven and eternity; being loved by God and being with You -- those promises cost such a price for You to make them mine. Thank You my Savior. Thank You my Friend. Amen.***



## OUTSIDE THE CAMP

4/21/2020

This is a surprisingly beautiful expression of God's love. But it sneaks up on you.

It starts out in the Old Testament with the sacrifices that happened on the Day of Atonement. That was the day when the priest brought a sacrifice into the Holy of Holies. It was to atone for the sins of the nation. The blood was placed on the Mercy Seat. It was bloodshed in the place of every Israelite, a sacrifice of an innocent in place of the guilty. By this point you should be thinking, "That is about Jesus, the innocent spotless Lamb of God offering Himself for the sins of the world."

After the sprinkling of the blood the sacrifice was taken outside the camp to be burned. Because of carrying the sins, the sacrifice was not acceptable among the people of God. It was to be cast out and forsaken.

The Letter to the Hebrews talks about **"the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp."** (Hebrews 13:11) Outside the camp is the place of banishment and forsakenness.

And then it makes this connection, **"So Jesus also suffered outside the gate ..."** (Hebrews 13:12) Jesus did not make His sacrifice in the temple, taking the place of being a clean and holy offering -- although He was. He was perfect in sinlessness. But He went "outside the camp" being made one with all that is unclean. It is the same astonishing theme. The Holy Son of God, stands with me, takes His place with me, identifies with me. That is why He could pray the prayer that belongs to sinners, **"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"** "Outside the camp" -- it isn't the right place for Him, but it is the place He chose to be.

I needed Him to be there, because that was where I was, "outside the camp." That's where we have all been ever since Adam and Eve had to leave the garden. But Jesus comes to us in our separation, so that He can bring us back into communion with God. We have the Son of God going all the way into the furthest darkness of our lives. He takes the guilt, the judgment and the death, receiving from us what He does not deserve. And then He gives us His innocence, His righteousness and His life.

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There is a hymn, "A Canaanite, She Comes to Pray". One of the verses reads:  
"Outside the camp, He came to win,  
My soul for God, And bring again,  
Mankind into Communion,  
Unraveling our twisted faith  
In Satan's lies; Christ's faithful death  
Has healed our separation." (Sung to the tune of "O Little Flock, Fear Not the Foe")

Jesus brings the truth to us once again. We have a loving and merciful God, who, when we had fallen into sin, did not abandon us. He came to bring forgiveness. And He came to put the lie to everything the devil has been peddling. God does not hate us. And He does not take away the joys and blessings of life. **"God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life."** (John 3:16) And Jesus said, **"I came that they might have life and have it abundantly."** (John 10:10)

Jesus is the love of God revealed to us, so that we no longer fear the wrath of God. Instead we are called and warmed by His grace and mercy. We have a Savior who became the Sacrifice; and a Savior who Started our resurrection by rising from the dead Himself.

### **Our Prayer:**

**Lord Jesus, You came to my darkness and brought the light of life. You came to dispel all the lies that led me astray and speak Your life-giving truth into my soul. You came to pray my sinner's prayer and give me Your prayer. You came into my separation and brought me back to God. You came to face down hell and open the gates of heaven. You came into my curse and brought the blessings again. You came to share my death and bring me into Your Easter. How can I thank You, dearest Friend, for all Your grace and mercy? Help me to walk in the countless blessings You give, to rejoice in them and not take them for granted. Amen.**



## *I'M NOT VERY RELIGIOUS, BUT...*

4/22/2020

So began a brief conversation. He had been talking with my wife, and called out "Hey Reverend!" It is interesting how people all over seem to want to start a conversation and head straight to religion and matters of the soul.

I remember a well-known writer years ago saying it is a myth that people don't want to talk about religion. They deeply want to talk about spiritual things. Is there a God? What is the soul? Is there a heaven; life after death; judgment? That writer years ago said that when someone involved him in such a discussion, it seemed like every ear nearby was trying to listen in. Other conversations were muted. People managed to move closer. And often they joined in, fascinated and discussing for a long time. He was a Christian, highly educated and able to say what we believe in a clear and interesting way.

And so, we stood and talked. Not long and not in depth yet, but we talked. During his time working from and staying at home, he has been reading Marcus Aurelius and Seneca, Roman philosophers and Stoics. We did not get into what they believed. That may be next time. I may have to brush up on that. And I remember a High School teacher leading an "experimental" class on philosophy saying about Christianity, "The belief system of one third of humanity should not be rejected out of hand."

It seems almost like we have wandered with Paul into the Areopagus in Athens where the Greek philosophers met to discuss all the "new things." (Acts 17:17-21) What happened back then? Paul noticed all the altars to idols, and began to talk with others about spiritual things. He "reasoned with" them, and then the ears around him started to perk up and want to hear more. And they brought him into their discussion and asked him to tell more.

This is how it happens. So often the conversation starts when we least expect it. This business of being stuck inside because of a virus is one of those times we would not expect to turn into such a time. But -- Christ Is Risen! Jesus is alive and He is doing His work of gathering people into faith and into being His people. Because Jesus is evangelizing and calling souls to faith, expect the unexpected. (I got to say that to someone this last month!) Expect the unexpected. We do not see the openings, but He does. We do not know who is suddenly open to hearing the Gospel but He does. We have an informal motto in our congregation: *"We are not that good but we have a friend who is."*

What did Paul do back then? He began by telling them about God, who made all things, and calls us to come and seek Him. And then he told them about Jesus. He said that God will judge the world by **"a man whom He has appointed, and of this He has given assurance**

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***to all by raising Him from the dead.*** (Acts 17:31) They listened until Paul talked about the resurrection and then -- some mocked and some said Paul should come back some other time. But some believed: Dionysius and a woman name Damaris and others. Paul left with new believers in Jesus. (Acts 17:34)

This is a very strange time, when there is an unexpected interest in spiritual things. It is important for us to see the doors opened in unexpected places and unexpected ways, even when it comes in words like, "I'm not very religious, but ..." We carry within us a word from God that gives life. And the world seems to be noticing right now how it is missing, and how much of a gap there is in the rest of life.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, make me ready. Prepare me for that unexpected time. Help me to see when my neighbor opens up to talk about spiritual things. And give me words and wisdom to tell about You in a way that will call and draw them to want to know more about the mercy, life and joy that is in You. Amen.***



## PROMISES

4/23/2020

Promises provide the landmarks and guideposts for our lives. There is a reason for that. We do not live our lives unconnected from others. We live in a complex set of relationships. And promises are the key pieces, sitting at the center of those relationships.

Promises to be back home. Promises to be faithful. Promises to provide for our family. Promises to set aside the little irritations and seek to see each other in the kindest way. We are able to have homes, families, marriages, and all our relationships because of promises.

God gives promises. He has given those promises from the beginning, starting with the blessing, "**Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it ...**" (Genesis 1:28) Adam and Eve were called into a relationship with God and there were promises. There was also a promise God asked for when He told them not to eat of that one tree. Promises are the key pieces, sitting at the center of our relationships.

Sometimes promises are broken; and then either there is forgiveness or our relationships and our lives are damaged. Jobs are lost and marriages can fall apart. Distrust comes in, and our relationships change from being a blessing to being a curse; and usually it is a curse to both of those in the relationship.

What then would happen when Adam & Eve broke the promise and turned away from God. There was a curse -- ashes to ashes, dust to dust -- and death entered.

But God brought a new promise. The Seed of the woman would come. He would take the curse, carry the "dust-to-dust" in His own flesh, and bring us back into the blessing. (Genesis 3:15) From that point Prophecies, Psalms & Hymns, Sacrifices in the Temple, and the drama of the history of God's people from Abraham on would all be about His coming. "**The virgin will conceive ...**" (Isaiah 7:14) "**But you, Bethlehem, Ephrathah ...**" (Micah 5:2) "**The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all ...**" (Isaiah 53:6) "**God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.**" (Genesis 22:8)

Again, God brought a new promise. The seed of the woman -- He Himself is the promise. He gathers in His existence, in his birth, life, cross and empty tomb, all the promises there could ever be. He restores, exalts, glorifies, forgives, purifies, and transforms all who are connected to Him. Paul said, "**all the promises of God find their 'Yes' in Him. That is why it is through Him that we utter our 'Amen' to God for His glory.**" (2 Corinthians 1:20)

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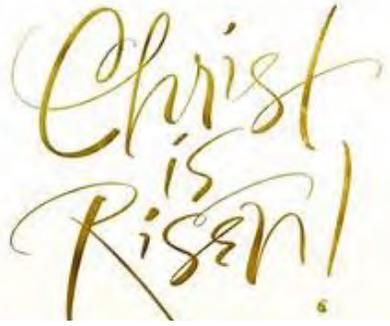
Promises are the key pieces, sitting at the center of our relationships. Because the promises are collected in Jesus, that changes completely the whole character of Christianity. What we have is not a traditional religion. If we did it would all be about us approaching God -- with prayer, repentance, worship and seeking His favor.

What we have instead is a connection with God, built on the promises that God has made to us, brought to us, and "sealed" with the living, breathing Promise of God -- Jesus Himself. All the promises of the Bible are bound together in the living, risen-from-the-dead, Jesus. The promises are just as eternal as Jesus, and He is eternally living. He says to us, **"Until heaven and earth pass away,"** (Matthew 5:18) and that's only the beginning. **"The word of the Lord endures forever."** (1 Peter 1:25) In fact we could add the word forever at the end of each of those promises. **"I will never leave you nor forsake you forever!"** (Hebrews 13:5) and **"behold I am with you to the end of the age, forever!"** (Matthew 28:20) **"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, forever!"** (Psalm 46:1)

There are times in life when we have to hold on to promises. And some of those times it is a long time of holding on to promises. As the days drag on, remember that there is one person who gives promises, and then remembers them and keeps them. It is not only for a few days. He remembers for thousands of years, stands by them century after century, and will continue on keeping promises forever. He has called you His friend.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, help me to hear Your promises. Help me to know that You remember. And help me to build my life around all the amazing promises I have in You. Amen.***



## AS TIME GOES BY

4/24/2020

Day by day time passes by. The pace is constant. 24 hours and it is the next day. 7 days and it is the next week. Life goes on, step by step with the same pace regardless of whether we think it is dragging or moving way too quickly. Events happen. Milestones in life come along. And God has measured out the days and hours.

Graduations, moving on to new schools, building relationships, marriage, children being born, anniversaries, retirement, grandchildren, and life goes on. King Solomon said **"There is a time for every purpose under heaven"**, and made his list. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8) But then he said something else. **"He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, He has put eternity into man's heart."** (Ecclesiastes 3:11) We love the times, the experiences, the things that have to do with the days and years, the flow of the times of our lives. And we desire eternity, to have the good and beautiful things last.

Even the hard times can form memories that we fondly hold on to. The first apartment, the time when money was short and we were so very careful about the budget. How many couples have I heard look back and reminisce? One of the richest men I know, one time was in a mood to remember. He sat there with his wife and talked with us about the hard times when money and food were scarce; and they talked about the old worn out furniture, the meals they shared, and the time they spent together.

These are times and days we will be talking about for a long, long time. We will talk about the days at home, the events we missed, the special things we had to go through to work or to shop, the problems with money and the things we could not find in the stores. Others will talk about school being out, graduations that did not happen, and the setbacks in finding work and making their way in life. Some of us will talk about loved ones we missed, and funerals with only a few.

I have seen the things that come through social media. Things like this: "Since I have been at home for the last month, the dog seems happier than he has ever been. The cat, on the other hand, looks at me like, 'How come you are still in my house? And there is a lot of "pretending to be going crazy" humor being passed around.

But the days go on and it is like my mother used to say, "This too will pass." Days ahead will be different, and we will get back in the pattern of things being new and different. But we were created to desire a balance between change and things that last. It is in our nature to be in a that balance between the two.

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That is why King Solomon comes to his final words on wisdom how he does. In the last chapter of Ecclesiastes, he says, **"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth ..."** (Ecclesiastes 12:1) There is an anchor in the relationship and eternity in belonging to God. Jesus renewed the call of God to know eternity, **"And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."** (Matthew 28:20)

Did you catch that? Jesus used the name of God, "I Am," and made it part of the promise to be with us to the end of the age. In fact, in the word order in the Greek Jesus did something very interesting. He put the words "with you" in the middle of the words "I Am." It actually reads, "I with you Am ..." The promise "with you" is embedded within the name of God. It is who He is. He is the "with us" God.

And that is exactly what we hear at the end of the Bible. The voice from the throne filled with excitement that **"Now the dwelling of God is with Man."** (Revelation 21:3)

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, in the middle of things that come and go, when everything in life will pass, help me to find my anchor in You. I am created to live in the hours that are fleeting, and the days that are so full of change. I need the eternity that is in You. Help me hear Your promise of eternity so deep and lasting that You put the promise within the very name of God. And by Your promise, help me then, to live in this world of change with confidence and peace. Amen.***



## **NO CONDEMNATION**

4/25/2020

**"There is ... now no condemnation ..."** (Romans 8:1)

That is the most amazing news we could hear. No condemnation!

((At the end of this devotion read the entire Chapter 8 of Romans. It will do you good, no matter how many times you have read it before!))

There was a survey. They asked people questions about the pandemic. A lot of people responded that they thought it was judgment from God. Or that God was trying to get our attention, and they were reading their Bible more than they have in a long time. Or that this could be heralding the end of the world.

It's a natural reaction. Suffering comes, tragedies happen, even the latest plague, and we wonder. We look inside. We examine our lives. What have we done with our days? Have we failed to do good and done wrong instead? How have we treated others? What sins have we taken into our souls? And there is enough in each one of us to make us tremble. "Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep for ever ..."  
(Thomas Jefferson)

But in the face of all the fears and worries Paul comes along and says, **"There is therefore now no condemnation ..."** (Romans 8:1) "Therefore" means we should have been paying attention to what Paul was saying before this. In the first 7 chapters of his letter to the Roman he tells about

- forgiveness of sins in Jesus;
- how Jesus became the sacrifice to set us free;
- how in Jesus there is a different kind of righteousness, not the kind with commandments and us doing good works, but the kind where Jesus does righteousness for us; and
- how God has been doing it this way since the beginning.

**"Therefore, now no condemnation ..."** is what God has been preparing and bringing us into for a very long time. In fact, the plan was put in place **"before the ages"** (1 Corinthians 2:7), **"from days of eternity"** (Micah 5:2). Now it has come and no matter what anything around you looks like this is the time of **"therefore now no condemnation"**.

But this is specific and that was only the first part of the verse.

**"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."** (Romans 8:1)

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What does it mean to be one of "those who are in Christ Jesus"? More often we hear verses about Christ being in us. But Paul is turning that around and talking about being "in Christ." In an earlier letter Paul said, **"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. ..."** (2 Corinthians 5:17) In a later letter Paul says that **God "raised us up with Him and seated us in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus ..."** (Ephesians 2:6)

Being "in Christ Jesus" means that Jesus carried us in His body on the tree. Peter says, **"He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness."** (1 Peter 2:24)

To be in Jesus is to be in the shelter from the storm. It is to be kept by Jesus Himself, in the one safe place that holds together even when the entire world is coming apart. When there is chaos and turmoil all around to be "in Christ Jesus" is to have been brought safely through the time of judgment and be set free. To be "in Christ Jesus" means that we are connected with God and cannot be destroyed ever, not in all eternity. That is the shelter He gives to every one of His people. It is like it says in Psalm 46, **"Therefore we will not fear, though the earth gives way, though the mountains fall into the heart of the sea."** (Psalm 46:2) Or Psalm 27 **"For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle; In the secret place of His tent He will hide me ..."** (Psalm 27:5) Or Psalm 121 **"The Lord will protect you from all evil; He will keep your soul."** (Psalm 121:7)

The promises are all bound up "in Christ Jesus." So, all of us who shelter "in Christ" are not just sheltering. We are sheltering in Him with promises that last forever.

### Our Prayer:

**Lord Jesus, You are my shelter from the storms of life; let me find my shelter in You. With You are promises, bold, eternal, enduring, and strong; let me find my strength and courage in You. You are the Savior who took all the condemnation and took it away; lift my worries and let me find my peace and joy in You. And whatever the days ahead may bring let me remember that I am safe in You. Amen.**

*EASTER EVENING –  
JESUS IN WORSHIP*

4/26/2020



There is a question we sometimes ask and answer in our church. It goes like this: "Is Jesus the one we worship, or is He the one who leads our worship?" The answer is: "Yes! He is both. He is the one we worship because He is God. And He is the one who leads our worship because He is one of us." He is Man, born of the virgin Mary, born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law. (Galatians 4:4) He became one of us with flesh and blood, fingers and toes, able to be tempted, and needing to go to His Father in prayer. Jesus regularly went off by Himself to spend long hours in prayer.

And we are used to verses that show us Jesus in worship. Such as when Jesus said, **"I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children, ..."** (Matthew 11:25) And Jesus went up to the temple for the feasts. And He went to the synagogues weekly. He observed the Sabbath. He was a man of worship and prayer.

Part of worship was what happened before the meals. For example, with the feeding of the 5,000 what happened before the meal? Jesus took the 5 loaves and 2 fish and then **"looked up to heaven and said a blessing."** (Matthew 14:19) That word is important. In Greek it is *eulogaysen*. It could be translated "He prayed the blessing." It means to talk to God in worship and to speak God's praises for the blessings we have received from His Fatherly care. It is to bless God because we have been blessed by God. His blessings are active. He gives our daily needs. In fact, He gives us our days, with life and breath, sun and rain, food and drink, house and home, and so many other good things. Our blessing is to speak His praise, to tell of His goodness and to do so with faith, knowing that He is a loving God.

When Jesus spoke the blessing that day before feeding the crowd, what did He say? I read in a commentary this week that no doubt His speaking the blessing before the meal would be special and intimate. What would it be like to be there and hear the Son of God thanking and praising His Father for the daily blessings He had received, and then to include the loaves of bread and the fish in that wonderful thanksgiving? Now that is worship!

We do know something of how it likely started. A traditional Jewish mealtime prayer begins, **"Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe ..."** As a mealtime prayer it then continues with thanks and praise for the blessings received, including the meal. The wording is very old. It goes back at least to King David. Psalm 103 begins, **"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, ..."** (Psalm 103:1-2) and then David goes on to enumerate the blessings. It's a good pattern of worship.

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So, we come to Easter. It is the normal pattern for us to think about Easter and picture the disciples worshipping Jesus. The women returning from the tomb worshiped Him. (Matthew 28:9) Mary Magdalene cried out "**Rabboni**" and apparently clung to Him. (John 20:16) And a week later Thomas said, "**My Lord and my God!**" (John 20:28)

But then Luke tells us how Jesus walked with the two on the road to Emmaus. And as He did so, Jesus explained to them why the Christ had to suffer and enter into His glory. They got to Emmaus and "urged Him strongly" to stay. And then it was time for the meal. "**He took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him.**" (Luke 24:30-31) Later that evening they explained to the disciples back in Jerusalem "**what had happened on the road, and how He was known to them in the breaking of the bread.**" (Luke 24:35)

Notice the pattern? Jesus begins the meal by praying the blessing. It is an act of worship, just like with the feeding of the 5,000, and then with the feeding of the 4,000. But this is Easter! And Jesus is not done with worship, with leading us in the worship of His heavenly Father. He prays the prayers and speaks the praises of God as He receives the blessings of daily bread. (Let me assume here that later on when Jesus shared breakfast with His disciples on the shore that meal also started out with worship and prayer. (John 21:9-13)) He is still one of us. He is still the One who leads our worship. And as He worships His Father, He calls us His "**brothers.**" (Hebrews 2:12)

Looking back:

It's right there in the Psalm of Good Friday. After the word from the cross, "**My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?**" (Psalm 22:1) And after the description of crucifixion (Psalm 22:7-18) there is Jesus looking forward to worship. "**I will tell of Your name to My brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise You: ... From You comes My praise in the Great Congregation; My vows I will perform before those who fear Him.**" (Psalm 22:22-25) When Jesus "**took the bread, prayed the blessing, and broke and gave it to them**" it was the beginning of that hope being fulfilled. He was worshipping, praising His Father and telling of the blessings of God "**to [His] brothers.**"

Looking forward:

I finished the sermon today wondering and expecting that on Judgment Day also Jesus will be leading us in worship. Will that will be part of the whole experience on that day? From the Psalm ("... in the midst of the congregation I will praise You: ... From You comes My praise in the Great Congregation ...") it looks like it is absolutely certain. It will be. On Judgment Day Jesus will lead us in worship. He will still be one of us, the Son of Man, risen from the dead and glorified, and still one of us. What an amazing day that will be!

But that is exactly why He came and was born for us. It was to take us who had wandered far from God, to purchase and win us by His blood, and to bring us back into fellowship with God, where there is glory and praise, celebration and joy for all eternity.

### **Our Prayer:**

**Lord Jesus, lead me in worship, that my heart may be turned to God; that I may learn the pattern of praise for the countless blessings of each day; and that I may look forward with longing to that day when I join my voice to Yours in the songs of eternal life. Amen.**

## *IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS*

4/27/2020



Christ  
is  
Risen!

It's the little things. We know this is true. It's the little things that stick with us. A sound, a smell, an unexpected detail that lingers in our memory. Those are the things that make special memories vivid and keep them in our memories year after year. We know how it feels. Someone says to us, "It's just like it was yesterday. I can still ..." and then those little details are told and shared. We have experienced this. It is part of our history, the story of our lives, and at times it has made us who we are.

If we were sitting together, I could ask you to think back on one of those memories and tell me one of the vivid details. For women it might be the smell of their mother's kitchen or the odor of the flowers on your wedding day. For a guy it might be the feel of the bat striking the ball, or the feel of the basketball as you let it go in that one shot at the end of a game. For me, I can still feel the descent, down from Frisco Pass on my bicycle at close to 60 mph, around the curves, tucking for more speed ... Yes, it is the little things.

As a Pastor I have walked through a cemetery and "heard" and "seen" the memories of those I have cared for. Years ago, toward the end of my time serving a congregation for 18 years, that walk was very slow and had a lot of pauses, remembering a joke, a smile, a story that I had heard dozens of times. It is the little things that fill our lives.

And so, it was with the disciples. That first Easter was filled with the vivid memories. For Peter, "... the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself" -- was a vivid memory from when he and John ran to the tomb. (John 10:7) For the women, "**And they came up and took hold of His feet ...**" -- was a vivid memory from the way back from the tomb when Jesus met them. (Matthew 28:9) For the disciples "**... a piece of broiled fish ...**" -- became a vivid memory from the upper room, when Jesus appeared to them but they had a hard time believing that He was really alive. And at some point, someone told it to Luke, who wrote it down. (Luke 24:42) For seven of them "**... a charcoal fire in place, with fish on it, and bread**" and "**large fish, 153 of them**" -- were vivid memories of a breakfast with Jesus when they went back to try some fishing again. (John 21:9, 11)

These are memories involve senses, feelings, and experiences they lived through. They include:

- seeing what was inside the tomb;
- the exertion of running;
- the feel of holding onto feet;
- the smell and taste of broiled fish;

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- the sight, smell, and warmth of a charcoal fire; and
- counting a very large bunch of slippery fish.

These are vivid details that stuck deep in the minds of the different disciples. And they are the memories of the first Easter that did not fade with the years that passed. They fill out the story of Easter and they are the kind of texture that witnesses to the truth of the empty tomb and the living, glorious body of the risen Jesus, with a victory that is wonderfully true. And they are details that thrill the heart of the Christian, and lead us to say, "Christ is Risen; *He is Risen Indeed!*"

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, You show the truth of Easter through such wonderful details. You invite me to know You and lead me to hope for the day when I will see You, hear You, and reach out and touch You. Guide my spiritual life that I may have the times of worship, and the sweetness of the promises of Your word filling my life and days. Amen.***

Christ  
is  
Risen!

***AND THEN,  
NOTHING HAPPENED***

*(and it was wonderful!)*

4/28/2020

It came at the end of the Gospel of John. Seven of the disciples were sitting around and Peter decided to go fishing. What else should they do? They didn't have any clear plan. So ... fishing.

And they caught nothing. In the morning Jesus was on the shore and told them to cast the net to the right side of the boat, and there was an amazing catch. The story goes on and soon they are on shore; and there was a charcoal fire with fish and bread laid out on it. Jesus said, **"Bring some of the fish that you have caught."** and they did. Jesus said, **"Come and have breakfast."** and they did.

(John 21:1-12)

And nothing happened ...

Nothing.

At all.

Only breakfast.

Do you know how fantastic this is?

Jesus was just there, having breakfast with them. No "Kingdom Business." No Great Commission, plans for evangelizing the world, or amazing miracles. Only breakfast. Jesus was taking time, just being with them. It was time to slow down and enjoy the moments; and that was true both for the disciples and for Jesus. Some bread. Some fish. Enjoying the taste, the warmth of the fire, and the company.

Actually, this ***is*** "Kingdom Business." This is, at its heart, what the kingdom of God is. It's a theme that forms the "bookends" of the Bible, from the 3rd chapter of Genesis to the 2nd last chapter of Revelation.

In Genesis the Lord came walking in the Garden in the cool of the day. There was no more work of creating to be done. God was resting. And He came walking in the Garden to spend time with Adam and Eve. He created them to know God, to walk with God, to have fellowship (spending time together) with God, and to share with them all kinds of blessings (material and spiritual) for all eternity. But they had turned away, followed another voice, listened to other

words and broke the fellowship that God had formed with them. What follows is the Great Quest; God pursuing and finding and wining and bringing us back. It would cost God sending His only-begotten Son; (John 3:16) and it would cost Jesus laying down His life for His friends. (John 15:13)

Finally, in Revelation, there is the voice from the throne; God exulting and saying, **"Now the dwelling of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God."** (Revelation 21:3) Notice how God repeats it three times, "with man ... with them ... with them"! This is God's great desire and quest, to have us with Him and have the fellowship restored. He planned and arranged and has pursued this for thousands of years, going even to the death on the cross to have us with Him.

In between Genesis and Revelation, there is the Gospel of John. That Gospel begins with **"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, ..."** (John 1:14) It ends with "Come and have breakfast." (John 21:12) And nothing happened for a while. Only breakfast. Only Jesus being with them and they with Jesus.

It is quite remarkable that this is how the Gospels finish, breakfast and perhaps a walk along the beach (**"And after saying this He said to [Peter], 'Follow Me.' Peter turned and saw the disciple ... who had been reclining at table close to him ..."** (John 21:19b-20a)).

Think back to Genesis and how the Lord came walking in the Garden to spend time simply being with Adam and Eve. But that time together did not happen. It would take a few thousand years but there on the beach at the end of the Gospels God would finally have time being with us; with no work to be done, only time to spend together and enjoy His people.

There is a simple and quiet sweetness in this. And it helps to form our image of heaven and what it will be like when Jesus returns. That is a part of what it means to know the risen Lord Jesus, and why it is so sweet being a Christian.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, thank You that you call me Your own, and Your friend. Thank You for the promise of an eternity of life. And thank You that the sweetest part of salvation is to have You as my Friend. In my quiet times, and there are a lot of them right now, be with me and guide my soul, that my thoughts may turn to You. Amen.***



## ***GIVING THANKS – WHY THE WORLD THINKS WE'RE WEIRD***

4/29/2020

There is a very different perspective we have about giving thanks to God - different from the rest of the world. It sets us apart and it requires some explanation.

Paul talked about it in one of his earliest letters, and in what might be his last; and the theme is consistent from one to the other. In the early one he said, **"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances ..."** (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) In the later one he said, **"Rejoice in the Lord always; ... do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."** (Philippians 4:4-6)

Does he really mean that we should thank God right in the middle of trouble? Paul wrote this the first time while on a mission journey. But then he wrote the second one while a prisoner in Rome. And if that's not extreme enough he started that second letter telling how he expected to lose his case and be executed. "With thanksgiving"? How does that work.

This is the right time of the year to explain. It's Easter season. We are only a few weeks from Easter. we are still saying in our worship services, "Christ is Risen! *He is Risen Indeed!*"

We are living in the time of the Resurrection. **"Christ the first fruits, then at His coming those who belong to Christ."** (1 Corinthians 15:23) We are living in the age of eternal life. Jesus said, **"Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall He live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die."** (John 11:25-26)

No matter what happens we are not out on our own. We are connected with Jesus and are under His protection. That does not mean we will not face problems, hardship, suffering, even hostility in this world. Jesus said, **"In the world you will have tribulation."** (John 16:33) But it does mean that none of those things can separate us **"from the love of God in Christ Jesus"**. (Romans 8:39)

We are secure, connected with Easter and the risen Lord Jesus. So, we pray and we give thanks. We call out to God in the middle of our problems, and we thank Him that He promised, **"I am with you always, to the end of the age."** (Matthew 28:20) We raise our prayers to God in the middle of sickness or suffering, and we give thanks that Jesus **"bore our griefs and carries our sorrows"**. (Isaiah 53:4) We turn to God in distress, and we thank God that He is **"a well-proven help in trouble."** (Psalm 46:1) One day we will have to face death. We will call

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out to God on that day, and we will thank Him that He promises, ***"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand."*** (John 10:27-28)

It may be difficult to learn, and it may be one of the hardest exercises of faith, but it is a very real part of our life as Christians. We live an eternal Easter. The more difficult the challenge, the more difference it makes that we are connected to Jesus, to His sin-forgiving cross, and to His rising on the Third Day.

The rest of the world may not understand this, but it is part of the blessing of being a Christian. It changes everything in life. It gives a calm and a peace. God is in charge. And you are loved. No matter what may challenge, Jesus is still the Living One. ***"Neither death nor life, nor angels [nor viruses], nor [problems today], nor [the mess that waits tomorrow], nor [worries], nor height nor depth, nor [any way that you can mess up anywhere] in all [of God's good] creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*** (Romans 8:38-39 - kind of)

So, bring the petitions. Bring the call for help. Bring the cry from deep within the soul. And know that God's heart is turned toward you and His ears are open to your prayers. Thanks be to God we have a Savior and Friend, and we can turn to Him and find ***"grace to help in time of need."*** (Hebrews 5:16)

It is indeed like the guy wrote on Facebook this week, "Verzweifle nicht, Seele, Gott troestet, hoert deine Bitte, sieht deine Not. Er wird dir zur richtigen Zeit helfen und dir erhabenen Frieden gewaehren."

## **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, thank You that You will always be with me, always hear my prayer, and so often answer before I even know how to pray or what to pray for. Thank You for the countless joys and blessings You give and that You have my back when the problems are all around. Thank You that death is defeated, that I will not come to my end, and that You hold and keep my soul. Thank You that Your Easter changes everything, and that finally there will be joys at Your right hand forever. Amen.***



## A BIT OF A SURPRISE

4/30/2020

My brother called. He asked me to look for information about a church that one of his former High School students was just assigned to be their pastor. He said "it was a bit of a surprise" when that student went into the ministry. I said, "It was a bit of a surprise for me, too." Silence.

And then we talked some more.

It got me thinking. It got me looking back. "It was a bit of a surprise for me too." I was in high school. I had other things I was interested in doing. I still have some of those interests. But there was a point where everything changed and it was no longer possible to do anything else. I cannot remember the date but I remember the day. Everything since that time fits together and makes sense. But it is true. It was a surprise. It was a surprise for my friends. And it took some time for me getting used to the new path I was on.

I have heard other pastors relate their stories. One tells how: suddenly one verse in the Bible made perfect sense and his future was set. Another told how three phrases from the Nicene Creed suddenly took hold ("God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God"). Another told how he suddenly started believing Jesus' words in the Bible; and he was no longer welcome in his religious group. On and on go the stories. It seems surprises are more of a pattern than we realize.

In the Bible:

- Peter was surprised when Jesus called him, "**Depart from me, Lord, I am a sinful man!**" he said. But Jesus replied, "**Fear not; from now on you will be catching men.**" (Luke 5:8-10)
- Nathaniel was surprised, too. "**How do you know me?**" "**I saw you under the fig tree.**" "**Rabbi, You are the Son of God!**" (John 1:48-49)
- Paul was surprised, "**Who are you, Lord?**" "**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.**" (Acts 9)

We should have expected this. God will surprise and God will do the unexpected. After all, He is the God of Grace; the God of unearned and undeserved love and mercy. Everything in our relationship with God is by Grace. It is the experience of blessings we have no way to expect or get ready for.

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This is God who called Moses from a burning bush, who chose the smallest child in the family to be King David, who shut the mouth of the lion, who walked with the three young men in the middle of the fiery furnace -- And how many other ways did He surprise His people? No one saw any of that coming. And that's how God loves to come to His people; with the unexpected grace.

And then He chose to be born in a stable; call fishermen and a tax collector for disciples; eat with sinners; touch the lepers; and heal on the sabbath.

He did salvation by being arrested, abused, crucified, and killed. Paul celebrates the surprise. He says, "**Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, ...**" (1 Corinthians 1:22-23) and "**the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.**" (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Easter morning comes along, and how many of His followers did Jesus surprise? Mary Magdalene, the Emmaus disciples, the ten in the upper room -- and Thomas a week later.

How many does Jesus surprise today? Countless millions all around the world: suddenly seeing that there is eternal life right there in Jesus' words; or surprised that the truth in Jesus keeps on pursuing and calling them.

But that is exactly what we should have expected of a Living Jesus who is working and acting and calling souls and gathering followers to be His kingdom, His people living forever with Him.

If you look through your life, how many ways has this living Jesus surprised you? How many ways has His hand worked behind the scenes in ways that you slowly became aware of? How many ways has He nudged, called, and reminded you of His words? And how often has that been unexpected?

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, You are the Shepherd and You guide me in ways that I do not expect. But You are Lord and You know how to lead me. Guide me in things that I do not expect, and help me to grow in faith, following You and learning of You -- until that day when You surprise me with Life and Glory that lasts for all eternity. Amen.***

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((And now to tie up a loose end from yesterday. I shared a German devotional thought: "Verzweifle nicht, Seele, Gott troestet, hoert deine Bitte, sieht deine Not. Er wird dir zur richtigen Zeit helfen und dir erhabenen Frieden gewaehren."

The translation is: "Despair not, Soul! Trust God [who] hears your prayer, [and] sees your need. He will at the right time help you and bring you sublime peace."))



## *WHEN AN ATHEIST PRAYS*

5/1/2020

What is this? Why would an atheist pray?

Actually, it happens. There is an old saying, "There are no atheists in foxholes." A man who has had no use for religion finds himself in a life-threatening situation. Everything is falling apart; He does not know if he will get out of it. And suddenly with nowhere else to turn a man calls out to God. I have sat and talked to men with that kind of prayer in their background. They do remember the moment.

What then?

God claims the right to hear anyone who calls out to Him. Psalm 68 calls Him **"Father of the fatherless and protector of widows ..."** (Psalm 68:5) There is no mention of their belief. Only that God claims the right to hear and answer. Psalm 145 has this prayer, **"You open Your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing."** (Psalm 145:16) And Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that God **"makes His sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust."** (Matthew 5:45)

God is the One who gives daily bread, who gives life and breath, and insists on the right to hear the prayer of all His people, of all humanity, of all creation. And He answers and provides. How many accidents have we avoided and wondered? How many terrible things did we not even know we were protected from? And when we are in distress and trouble God insists on the right to hear our prayer and watch over us. So, the un-religious man could talk with me about how God answered his prayer; and could still be celebrating that his prayer was heard.

What then?

God has more to give. So many prayers are offered up for physical needs. They have to do with what I need for "this body and life." (Luther's Small Catechism, explanation of the First Article) Those are good prayers, and God loves to hear them. But there is more.

God has more to give than simply the needs for this body and life. We are more than skin covered collections of chemicals and nerve impulses. We are body and soul, and there is a whole other part of our life. So, God hears and answers our prayers for daily needs. But He invites us into a deeper relationship. Always He has more blessings ready to go. God knows the things of the soul. He knows our need for comfort, hope, and promises brought to us by

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Jesus. He knows our spiritual needs. He knows our need for His promise of salvation in Jesus; for forgiveness earned by His Son; for the promise of eternal life. And He has those blessings all ready to go earned and offered through Jesus rising on Easter.

It would be silly to pray for the bodily needs; receive God's answer; and walk away uninterested so many more gifts and blessings. That's like being at your grandmother's for dinner, and it's really good; but at the end when she brings out her famous pumpkin pie, you say, "Boring!"

Right now, we are in the middle of a time when a lot of people are remembering prayer. we are calling out to God in ways we haven't done for a long time. And God is answering, watching over us, keeping and defending us.

What then?

As we come through this, remember to remember. Remember God who answers prayer and has answers ready for prayers we haven't even prayed yet. (Isaiah 65:24)

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, You are the gift and the answer. When I have called out You have been there, already ready to help. When my prayers were answered, You prepared even more answers. You are a never ending well of blessings, pouring out more blessings than we can even ask for. Help me remember to remember Your blessings and help in my times of need. And help me remember to praise You, my savior and Friend. Amen.***

# IMMANUEL

5/2/2020



There is a cross-over between the Good Shepherd chapter (John 10) and Christmas. And it is important!

We know the name Immanuel from the Christmas story. **"The virgin will conceive and bear a son and will call his name Immanuel."** (Isaiah 7:14) The name Immanuel means "God-with us." or more precisely "With-us God" because the order of the parts matters. Jesus is God, and in certain ways that is not surprising. But that He would be "with us," actually want to be in our world, be one of this skin-covered, sometimes achy, hungry, tired and sore bunch called humanity; and want to hang around with sinners who (alone) can't seem to sort out right and wrong or truth and error, and (together) congeal into a mob of "who-knows-what-they-will-do-next" bunches of out of control sinners. That is amazing!

With-us God! That is what He takes on Himself.

There is a word for it. "Shepherd." Jacob, way back when describes it. **"there I was: day by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes."** (Genesis 31:40) As a young man David learned humility by being out with the sheep day and night. That is how God prepared him to be king.

And so, Jesus came to be among us, to eat with the tax gatherers and sinners; to know the troubles of their soul. and there is a reason why the favorite word for Jesus in the last book of the Bible is "The Lamb."

The first Gospel starts with Jesus being called Immanuel. (Matthew 1:23) And it ends with the promise **"I Am' with you"** (Matthew 28:20) using the Greek translation of the personal name of God "I Am." The story is from Immanuel to Immanuel. From "With-us God" to "I Am' with you."

How is He with us? Let's ask that question of John chapter 10, the Good Shepherd chapter. When we do here are some of the answers:

- **"He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out."** (John 10:3) He knows them each individually, completely and intimately, in fact knows us better than we know ourselves. And He does not send or drive. He leads us, going with us. Part of the leading is that He leads where He has already been: facing temptation, dealing with aloneness, acquainted with sorrows, able to comfort, even having gone through death before us. In every part of life, He knows the way.

(Continued on back...)

- ***"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"*** (John 10:10) Every blessing and joy, every single thing that enriches our life and is a goodness from God, every one of them is from Jesus. He came to bring them. After all He is the one who enriched the wedding at Cana when they had run out of wine (John 2:1-10), and described ***"in the father's house"*** with the words ***"music and dancing"***. (Luke 15:25)
- ***"The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."*** (John 10:11) Even that part of our life that is the worst -- even there He came to be our "Immanuel." He is our "With-us God" even in the times we don't even want to be with ourselves. That's how much the measure of the Shepherd He fits!
- ***"My sheep hear My voice and I know them and they follow Me. I give eternal life to them and they shall never perish and no one shall snatch them out of My hand."*** (John 10:27-28) Jesus has decided to be "With us" for how long? Eternity! So much He welcomes us, so much He desires to have us living and be able to share His life with us, that He pushes the limits and decides that it should never, ever end. That we should never ever end. That is how much He is Immanuel; "With-us God."

Now that is one amazing Shepherd! Good? More than just good! He is the Phenomenal-and-astounding -beyond-all-measure Shepherd!

### Our Prayer:

***Lord Jesus, thank You for being my Shepherd, for knowing me, calling me, leading me through all I have to face in this life, for giving every blessing, for taking my sin and going to death for me, for calling me into Your Easter, for claiming me as Your own and leading me into eternal life. Help me to begin the eternal celebration even now, as I continue the walk through this life and this world. Amen.***

# *THE DEEPEST MYSTERY OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD*

5/3/2020



It is the most amazing part of John 10 (The Good Shepherd Chapter). In fact, verses 17-18 might be the most amazing 2 verses in the whole Gospel of John. I have been studying these 2 verses for years and I am still astonished.

Jesus said, ***"For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from My Father."*** (John 10:17-18)

Those verses start out looking like so many other verses. They tell how God ***"so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son"*** (John 3:16) And Jesus willingly came into this world in order to save us, to carry our sins to the cross and on the third day rise from the dead.

But look closer and there is an astonishing contrast. God the Father loves His Son Jesus. And yet Jesus must go to the cross where He would be forsaken. Jesus would cry out, ***"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"*** And yet in the moment of being forsaken He is loved. God the Father says, ***"This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased,"*** (Matthew 3:17) and in Isaiah ***"Behold My servant!"*** (Isaiah 52:13) Jesus says, ***"the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life ..."*** (John 10:17)

His death was a death under a curse. And it was death under the judgment of the Law. And it was death with forsakenness and a cry of abandonment.

There is the contrast. Two truths in tension, looking like opposites. Two things seem to be as far as possible from each other, and yet they happen together. They are linked in eternity, and can only come together in Jesus. Set them side by side: ***"For this reason the Father loves Me ..."*** & ***"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"***

And not only do they happen side by side. Each one reaches its climax at exactly the same time. God the Father turned away from His Son forsaking Him; and at the same time the Father had never loved His Son so completely and so adoringly. ***"For this reason, the Father loves me, because I lay down My life ..."***

*(Continued on back...)*

When Jesus went to the cross, He was earning forgiveness and salvation for lost humanity, and that is what God the Father most deeply desired. He also went to the judgment of the cross with perfect faith. Jesus went with devotion to His Father, trusting the promises, believing the Father's love. He went with perfect faith, in the face of everything around.

This is the measure of perfect faith; for Jesus to believe the words and promises of God in the face of judgment and death; and to surrender Himself into death trusting those words and promises even while being forsaken. This is faith carried into the most extreme challenge, facing death and separation from His Father and still believing the words and promises. No wonder, **"for this reason the Father loves Me"**.

So, Jesus brought back all the promises of God, bringing them right into our place of separation. He faced the final enemy and died the death of perfect faith. He proved that the promises and blessings of God are there for us, even when we feel forsaken, and even when we have wandered as far away from God as we could go. Jesus the Good Shepherd came to our separation. He brought truth to dispel all the devil's lies, and He did so by taking our place, all so we could have His blessings and know that we are never forsaken.

Jesus said, **"For this reason the Father loves Me,"** and brought the love of God to face down our every problem and doubt. He said, **"because I lay down My life"** and swept away every sin that could separate us from the love of God. He said, "that I may take it up again" and began to unravel even death, so we could even have victory over the final enemy. And He said, **"This charge I have received from My Father"** so we can know that it is an eternal plan.

### Our Prayer:

***Lord Jesus, thank You for Your victory over sin and death, that I can know I am set free to share in Your eternity. And thank You for Your faithful death, holding to the words and promises of God, that by Your victory, my doubts may be defeated, and I may walk with confidence that You are the Way and the Truth and the Life. Amen.***



## *SHEPHERD OR SHEEP* *(The only Shepherd Ever!)*

5/4/2020

The relationship of Shepherd and sheep is one of the great pictures of God's care for us. It runs almost all the way through the Bible. Think of David watching the sheep and then writing Psalm 23, "***The Lord is my Shepherd.***" Psalm 80 starts out "***Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel***" and Psalm 100 celebrates that "***we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.***"

The prophets also talk this way: Isaiah 40:11 says, "***He will tend His flock like a shepherd ...***" and Ezekiel 34 is all about God being the shepherd of His people. "***I, I Myself will search for My sheep and will seek them out. ... and gather them from the countries, and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, ... I will feed them with good pasture ...***" (Ezekiel 34:11-31) There are a lot more verses like this.

All through the Old Testament God claimed the right to care for and watch over His people like a shepherd watches over his sheep. It's a beautiful image. But there are hints of something else.

Sheep are not only cared for. They are also used for sacrifice. This is the other theme about sheep in the Old Testament. The two interweave one another and play off each other. It's kind of like a beautiful symphony, where you hear one theme in the music played over and over with variations. And then a second theme begins to play, just a few notes at first and then clearer and clearer, until it becomes all that the music is about.

So, Abraham goes up the mountain with his son Isaac. And when Isaac asks about the sacrifice, Abraham says, "***the Lord will provide the lamb for the sacrifice.***" (Genesis 22:8) God sends Moses to Egypt, and tells the Israelites, the night before the Exodus they are to sacrifice and eat the Passover Lamb, marking their doors with the blood of the lamb. (Exodus 12:1-23) Later Isaiah prophesies "***like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.***" (Isaiah 53:7) These are the hints and pictures of what was coming.

In the Old Testament God talks as clearly as He can about Himself being the Shepherd and we His sheep. From the Old Testament you hear the theme of the Lamb, but it does not come into clear focus until the New Testament. The story of salvation was waiting for John the Baptist to stand by the Jordan River and point at Jesus and say, "***Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!***" (John 1:29)

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It is fascinating how the Shepherd and Sheep themes blend and interplay. The Shepherd watches over His sheep. And He is going to be with the sheep. But what a way for the Shepherd to be with the sheep! He is Immanuel (God with us). He (the Word) **"became flesh and dwelt among us"**. (John 1:14) And He promises to be with us to the end of the age.

He came to be with us. What Jesus meant by being "with us" is amazing:

- to share our flesh;
- to share our suffering;
- to share our need to walk by faith;
- to share our sin and condemnation;
- and even our death.

But He had no sin. He deserved no condemnation. And had no death in Himself, only life. In order to share our sin, and our death He had to carry ours; to borrow our sin for His cross and to borrow our death for His tomb.

The Shepherd has become one of us. And not only one of us. He became the One standing in our place - **"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"** (John 1:29) "The Shepherd" has become "The Lamb."

Like the theme in a symphony that starts out quietly and grows more and more powerful; the theme of Jesus the Lamb of God becomes the entire song by the end of the New Testament. While Jesus is called "the Lamb" four times in the rest of the New Testament; the book of Revelation calls Jesus "the Lamb" 28 times. What better theme to have as the theme for the song of eternity?

### Our Prayer:

***Lord Jesus, thank You for being my Shepherd and watching over my soul, teaching me the Gospel so I can have salvation in You. Thank You especially for being the only shepherd ever who became the Lamb, so that You could carry my sin and bring Your eternity to me. Amen.***



## *ABSTRACT OR PARTICULAR*

5/5/2020

**"... He calls His own sheep by name ..."** (John 10:3)

We have heard the saying. The thing about Christianity is that it's about God's love. True. **"God is love ..."** says the apostle John (1 John 4:16) and **"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."** (1 John 4:10) But there is more to say, and that is captured by the simple phrase, **"He calls His own sheep by name"**. (John 10:3)

There are a lot of religions and sets of belief that talk about love. And from the philosopher to the crooner singing love ballads, to the fellow in the bar, everyone has an opinion. And we will opine our ideas of love and theories of what it is all about. All of that is about love in the "abstract." You can go on about how love is sacrificing, or sharing, or caring, or being kind even when you do not feel like it.

Many years ago, I read "The Autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi." He had what sounded like a noble idea of love. It was to care about every living thing as deeply as you care about yourself. In theory he talked about love in caring about the animal or even the insect. He complained about Christians falling short of what Jesus taught about love. But he too struggled with putting his ideas of love into practice, even with those closest to him.

In contrast, Jesus said, "He calls His own sheep by name". This is different. It kind of sneaks up on you. This is not the abstract idea of love. It is personal. And it is particular.

In the encounter with Jesus, one person after another in the Bible learned that love was not an abstract, fluffy type of I'm-not-quite-sure-what-it-is kind of thing. It was particular to each one. Peter needed prompting and guiding. Nicodemus needed his scholarly learning challenged. (John 3:1-15) The leper needed Jesus to touch and heal him. (Matthew 8:2-3) The deaf man needed Jesus to put His fingers in his ears and look up to heaven and sigh. (Mark 7:32-35) The woman at the well needed to see herself and then see the Savior. (John 4) Thomas needed Jesus to face down his doubts. (John 20:27-28) The rich young man needed to be told to get rid of his love for possessions. (Matthew 19:16-22) The thief on the cross needed to hear the Savior praying for those who swung the hammer. (Luke 23:32-43)

Martin Luther told how Jesus caught hold of him through the verse in Romans, **"the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe"**, (Romans 3:21-22) and then he ended up hammering a piece of paper to the church door. Four simple words, **"the righteousness of God,"** that it was not God's demand that we be righteous, but instead

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the righteousness of Jesus Christ in our place, taking away our sin and making us righteous in the sight of God. And with that Jesus caught hold of his soul, opened up heaven, gave him the joy of eternal life, and sent him to tell everyone he could find.

Each one is different. Each one is known by Jesus. My favorite illustration about this is Nathaniel, who is stopped in his tracks by the words, **"Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you."** We have absolutely no idea what that meant, whether it was a moment of spiritual insight, spiritual struggle, or just nothing much. But Nathaniel knew. **"Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel."**

I continue to be amazed at the incredible number of ways that Jesus calls us to know Him. How many different verses does He use to catch hold of different men, women and children that He is bringing into His kingdom? Someone once asked, "Couldn't God have just told us, 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.' and left it at that?" Well, not really, because Jesus is in the business of calling His own sheep by name. And there are a whole lot of different sheep. I am pretty sure that a lot of Christians I know have their own very particular story about how, deep inside the soul, the Good Shepherd called you "by name."

He knows us long before we know Him. He knows our beliefs, attitudes, moods, and needs deep within our soul. And He calls us, each one in a particular way. One of the most curious stories I have heard was a fellow who said he came to faith as an atheist. So, I said in my own mind, "Huh?" and waited for him to explain. And then he said he didn't seem to be able to seek out God or find God, much less even want to believe in Him. And then he ran across a verse in the Bible that said exactly that same thing, **"... not that we have loved God but that He loved us ..."** (1 John 4:10) And Jesus took hold of him. "So," he said, "I stopped even trying to be religious and simply believed Jesus." I spent a bit of time trying to trace the path and see how it held together; and then I came to the conclusion that, "Yes, it does make sense, but even more than that -- Jesus is really good at what He does!" "He calls His own sheep by name" and it is amazing!

My own particular hook is a little part of a verse in John 17. **"Father, I want them to be with Me ..."** (John 17:24, a bit of a paraphrase) It hit home one day, realizing that this is a personal thing. Jesus wanted me to be with Him. It wasn't numbers, or kingdom, or anything else. It was personal. It's what Jesus said, **"He calls His own sheep by name."**

### Our Prayer:

**Lord Jesus, thank You that You know each one of us personally, and thank You for calling each of us to be a part of Your kingdom, to see and share Your glory and to live for all eternity. Thank You for being my Shepherd, even now, that each day, and whatever each day brings You call Yourself my Shepherd and call me Your sheep. Guard and keep me so I can be with You and see Your glory. Amen.**



## *GOD LOVES LIFE & LOVES GIVING LIFE*

5/6/2020

The whole theme of the Bible is Jesus coming into the world, bringing life so we can have eternal life and live with God for all eternity. Right from the beginning that was the plan, Jesus bringing life.

In getting ready, God packed the Old Testament full of hints and tips what everything was about. Jesus is the life of the world, and there is life in Him. He is **"the Seed of the woman"** the answer to death and dying. He is the Lamb, the substitute on the mountain (Genesis 22:13), the Passover (Exodus 12), and the suffering Servant (Isaiah 53:6-7).

So, God prepared and finally the time was right. Jesus was born and John begins his Gospel, **"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men."** (John 1:4) Jesus is the life and He would heal the sick and raise the dead. All around the holy land He came to bring life. Jesus explained something about Himself, **"As the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself."** (John 5:26)

That is very distinct. His life is different from our life. We receive our lives because we were conceived and born. Jesus **"has life in Himself."** He is eternally living, and His eternal life is the same as the Father's.

But Jesus came to bring life by being the substitute, standing in our place and receiving the sentence of death. This is the mystery. How is He who has life in Himself supposed to be subject to death? Even after being conceived and taking on a human body, He was still the Eternally Living One. How was it possible for Him to die? And yet Jesus willingly went to share our sentence of death, accepting what did not belong to Him. He came to bring life, and bring us into His life.

Death cannot hold the One who is Life and has life in Himself? It cannot destroy the One who has no sin. It cannot keep the One who can raise the dead with just a few words. The One who said, **"Lazarus, come forth!"** (John 11:43) Or **"Child, arise."** (Luke 8:54) could not be stopped.

We say it all the time. Death is undone. It is broken. Jesus could not be held in the tomb, kept in the grave cloths, or have His body bound by death and decay. **"In Him was life."**

And along comes another wonderful verse. Jesus said, **"As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He will."** (John 5:21) We have comfort. And we have the promise. Jesus gives life to whom He will, and He has chosen to give life to

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us. No weakness or sickness, no wearing down of these bodies from long years, and no accident can stop the Son of God from giving life.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, You are my life and salvation. You hold in Your rising the promise of my life. You hold in Your eternity, all my years to come, and all the blessings of being with You. Keep me in faith and guide me that I may sing Your praise, forever. Amen.***



## ON THE ROAD AGAIN...

5/7/2020

I saw on the news today how sales of RV's are soaring. All over the country people want to be out and "On the road again." (Yes, the story had the song from Willie Nelson playing as the lead in.)

Earlier this week Lois came by the church office. She had something to deliver, we wore our masks, we kept "social distance," and afterward she headed back home. But one of the things she said rings true. "I just had to get out and see people." The song goes, "On the road again ... I just can't wait to get on the road again."

We are not made to "stay in place." It is difficult and it takes effort; and we will seek to do our duty as necessary. But God created time so we could move through events and enjoy things that are new and changing. It is part of our nature.

When God called Abraham, what did He tell him to do? Leave and go to the land I will show you. (Genesis 12:1) When God called the people of Israel out of Egypt what did He do? Had them set up a "tabernacle," a tent church so He could share the journey. And when Jesus was born how did John describe it? **"The Word became flesh and "tabernacled" among us."** (John 1:14) Yes, that is the Greek word, the same one used for the Old Testament tabernacle. God created us to be "on the road again" and Jesus was born so that He could be "on the road" with us, sharing the journey, walking the roads of the holy land with the disciples, being with the people of the land, the sick, the lame, the poor, sharing the journey. Jesus was ready to share the journey, even when the way was dark and filled with suffering. He walked our road all the way to the cross and then from the empty tomb on Easter. And then Jesus was "on the road" with His disciples, the road to Emmaus, the sea shore, and out to the mountain where He ascended.

God created time so we could be "on the road again" and then came into the created world to be on the road with us. In fact, the third line of the song fits the pattern of Jesus with His disciples, "The life I love is makin' music with my friends". That is what Jesus called them to. And He was willing to pay a steep price in order to have them "on the road" with Him for all time, and making music "on the road" forever.

The same word, "tabernacle," comes around again at the end of the Bible. John says, **"And I heard a voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with man. He will tabernacle with them, and they will be His people, and God himself will be with**

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***them as their God.***” (Revelation 21:3) When I first learned that was the word I thought, “That’s odd. Why doesn’t it say ‘temple’? Temple would be more permanent.” But there it is.

The big difference is that a tabernacle is movable. I wonder. Is that intentional?

Well, of course it is! The Bible is God’s Word, and He gets to influence and guide the writing of the writers.

So, does this mean that when we get to the end it will not be the end? Does it mean that our eternal dwelling with God will not be a staying still, a staying in one place forever? At that point I come to the end and limit of what I can know. God does not reveal any of the “What next?” beyond the return of Jesus. But it is intriguing. And some of the prophecies say things like, ***“They shall go out ...”***

God chose the word “tabernacle,” and did so on purpose. It is a pretty strong hint that eternal life is not going to be an endless staying in one place and doing the same thing forever. And why would it be? God created time for us so our life would not be endless sameness, but rather a wonderful passing through hours and moments of experiencing the blessings of God. There are adventures, there is going forward, and it is from glory to glory, “running” with Jesus forever.

I think it really does fit the words:

“On the road again

I just can't wait to get on the road again

The life I love is makin' music with my friends ...”

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, lead me on. You call us to go with You, and know that there will be glory, and joy, and it will be the most amazing adventure ever. Thank You for buying back my eternity, and inviting me to be on the road with You through endless ages. Amen.***



## TRUTH

5/8/2020

We hear the phrases. “My truth”; “your truth”; “truth to power”; and pretty soon truth becomes relative. That is the sad reality about our disagreements and arguments, that truth becomes relative way too quickly and then our disagreements are simply different sides asserting “their truth” at the other. Even more sadly, that is not rare in human history; and once we go down that road it hard to come back. I’ve noticed something. We humans appear to be stubborn.

There is a whole different idea and standard of truth. It has been there all along; and it is still there no matter how often we ignore it. This is the Truth that God has spoken. He has His own ideas, His own opinions, His own sense of what is right and good. And He is not taking sides in our disagreements.

Truth comes in the Word of God. He speaks and it is. It just is. So, God says, “Let there be light;” and there is light. God says, “Let us make man in Our Image;” and we are formed in the image of God. That kind of truth is absolute. It isn’t just unchanging; it causes what it says. The creation has to conform to the words that come out of the mouth of God.

There were challenges to the truth. The devil said, **“You will not surely die ...”** Eve saw that the fruit looked good, and ate. Adam ate and then blamed God, **“The woman You put here ...”** But the Truth that God speaks cannot be set aside. It reasserts itself, **“dust you are and to dust shall you return.”** And we ended up living on the wrong side of truth. When you read or hear the 10 Commandments, realize that they are not just commands; they are Truth spoken by God.

The Jewish people had a saying. **“When Messiah comes, He will write the Law new.”** That was the hope God spoke through Jeremiah, **“... the days are coming ... when I will make a new covenant .... I will put My law within them and I will write it on their hearts. ...”** (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Jesus came into the world. He began to preach. And He started His Sermon on the Mount, **“Blessed are ...”** Nine times over Jesus spoke the Word. (Matthew 5:3-12) **“Blessed are ...”** He says, and the creation has to conform to the words that come out of the mouth of God.

Jesus brings Truth and, in His words, He begins to rewrite the entire creation. Jesus IS the Truth and, in His saving work, he becomes the restart of God’s creation and His kingdom. This Sunday we will hear Jesus’ words, **“I am the Way and the Truth and the Life.”** (John 14:6) Everything comes together in Him.

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When Paul talks about Jesus being obedient “to the point of death even death on a cross” and then says **“Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and ... at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow”**. (Philippians 2:8-11) this is because Jesus IS the Truth. He is the beginning, the foundation, and the restarting of the new creation. He is the pattern for the entire world to come, and God the Father desires that every one of His people should **“be conformed to the image of His Son”**. (Romans 8:29)

The resurrection of Jesus is the truth that changes everything about our existence. Who we are is Christians, connected to the one who defeated death. What our future is, is to share Jesus’ life and His blessings forever. The forming of our soul and inner being is this, **“When He appears, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is.”** (1 John 3:2)

### **Our Prayer:**

**Lord Jesus, call me to know You, and in knowing You to find the Truth that is eternal. Be to me the eternal Truth that dispels my doubts and errors. Be the unchanging Truth that changes everything about me. Be the glorious Truth that I may see Your glory. And lead me more deeply into the Truth of Your Word that I may know You ever more fully. Amen.**



## TRUTH-PART 2 (From Curses to Blessings)

5/9/2020

Jesus makes some pretty huge claims: to be God; the only Savior; and eternal. He makes claims about His words. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away." (Matthew 24:35) And everyone who hears His words and builds on them "will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock." (Matthew 7:24)

Jesus' words are the word of God, and they have power. There are amazing things that happen when He speaks:

- **"I will. Be cleansed."** – and the leper is healed. (Mark 1:41-42)
- **"Come."** – and Peter, invited, steps out of the boat and walks on the water. (Matthew 14:29)
- **"Rise, pick up your bed and go home."** – and the paralyzed man walks. (Mark 2:11)
- **"Peace. Be still"** – and the storm ceased. (Mark 4:39)
- **"Young man, I say to you, 'arise.'"** – and the young man came back to life. (Luke 7:14-15)
- **"Today you will be with Me in paradise."** – and the one thief received eternal life. (Luke 23:43)
- **"Lazarus, come out!"** – and the dead man came out. (John 11:43-44)

Jesus changes things by the power of His word.

But did you ever notice:

The first sermon of the Old Testament starts out: **"... cursed are you ..."** and continues **"I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing .... [and] cursed is the ground because of you .... You are dust and to dust you shall return."** (Genesis 3:14-19)

The first sermon of the New Testament begins, **"Blessed are ..."** (Matthew 5:3-7:27)

The change between curse and blessing is nothing else than Jesus; Jesus born for us, living for us; crucified for us and rising for us.

Jesus' words change things. More important than the miracles, they change our relationship with God. They bring forgiveness.

- Jesus says **"Your sins are forgiven."** – and the paralyzed man has everything changed even before he is healed. (Matthew 9:2)
- Jesus says, **"Father, forgive them, ..."** and **"Why have You forsaken Me."** and **"It is finished."** – and our sins are forgiven. (Luke 23:34; Matthew 27:46; John 19:30)

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- Jesus says, **“Mary.”** – and Mary turns, sees Him and believes. (John 20:16)
- Jesus says, **“Put your finger here and see My hands ...”** – and Thomas says, **“My Lord and my God.”** (John 20:27-28)

Jesus changes us from being cursed and separated from God, to being the beloved children of God and His own friends. And He gives promises: **“You will know the truth and the truth shall set you free.”** (John 8:32) When we have our souls filled with the eternal Word of God, we have eternity within us. And Jesus says, **“Because I live, you will live.”** (John 14:19) His promises are more powerful than any problem, trial, or misfortune that could happen to us. He hears our prayers and is with us every day, **“to the end of the age.”**

### Our Prayer:

***Lord Jesus, fill my soul with Your promises. Fill my mind with Your words. Connect me to You that Your life may fill my life, Your heaven may be my home, Your resurrection may be my great hope, and Your eternity may become my future. Amen.***



## *JESUS' MOTHER* *(Believing the Words and Promises of God)*

5/10/2020

This is mothers' day. And there is a lot to say about the mother of Jesus. Martin Luther called her the best among us. That is not her own doing. It was her Son.

Jesus changes us. He brings the Word of God to us and brings us to faith. And what we see in Mary is the excellent work of Jesus. Let's look at how that happened. (Luke 1:26-55)

When the angel Gabriel came to her and said, **"Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you"**, (Luke 1:28) how did Mary respond? She was greatly troubled at the greeting. (v. 29) That was her confession that she had done nothing to deserve such an honor. Mary proclaims that everything is by the grace of God.

Then Gabriel began to explain. She would conceive, bear a son and call His name Jesus. He would be king, Son of David and Son of the Most High, and would reign forever. (vv. 30-33) How did Mary respond? She confessed that she did not understand, **"How will this be since I am a virgin?"** (v. 34)

Once again Gabriel explained. The Holy Spirit would act, it would be God's doing, and the child would be holy, the Son of God. How did Mary respond? She believed, and she **"spoke the 'Amen.'"** Faith is nothing else than to speak the "Amen" to God's words.

In our confirmation book we have a definition of what it means when we say the "Amen.":

1. We acknowledge the truth. "What has been spoken is God's Word and it is true." Mary acknowledged the truth of the angel's words.
2. We confess the goodness. "It is true for me, and yes, that is good." Mary certainly confessed the goodness of what God was doing.
3. We speak our hope. "I will see God's truth filling all creation." Mary would then wait and hope for the day when she would see all of God's promises fulfilled in her Son. All the promises are fulfilled and will be fulfilled in Jesus. We also hope and wait to see the glorious fulfillment.
4. We worship. "Praise God for His love, His wonderful words, and His mighty acts." Mary responds in worship to God for His mercy, His grace, and His blessings.

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There in Nazareth that day, Jesus did His work of being the Savior. By His coming into the world and by His incarnation within her womb He created faith in Mary. She is the first of the New Testament Church, responding to the presence of Jesus in her life and soul.

And Jesus then teaches and guides her in the song of praise. We call it the Magnificat. Here are some of the passages:

***“My soul magnifies the Lord”***

***“my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”***

***“He who is mighty has done great things for me”***

***“Holy is His name”***

***“His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation.”***

***“He has filled the hungry with good things”***

***“He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy.”***

Mary “Acknowledges,” “Confesses,” “Waits and Hopes”;

And her "Amen" must finish with Worship and Praise.

There were a lot of things to happen. The wonder of Jesus' birth. Shepherds and Wise Men. The prophecies of grief spoken by Simeon. -- In each of these Mary speaks the Amen deep in her heart. Acknowledge, Confess, Wait & Hope, Worship.

Then there was the flight into Egypt, the return, and the time when Jesus was 12 years old and stayed behind in the temple. Again, Mary spoke the "Amen" deep in her soul.

Acknowledge, Confess, Wait & Hope, Worship.

And then there was the arrest, the crucifixion, the tomb, and Jesus rising from the dead. And again, the "Amen" deep, deep in the soul mingled with the grief and resounding in the amazing joy.

Acknowledge, Confess, Wait & Hope, and Worship.

Worship and rejoice without end; worship and rejoice for all eternity. Christ is Risen!

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, let me hold Your words in my soul, acknowledging the truth. Lead me Confessing the goodness of all that You have done. Set my eyes on all that is to come when You return in glory. And through everything that happens, through all the joys and sorrows, let me worship, because You are my Lord, My Savior, My Brother, and my Friend. Amen.***



## A “LUKEWARM” JESUS?

5/11/2020

I just read the quote from C.S. Lewis that says the one thing you cannot say about Jesus is: that He is simply a great moral teacher. Jesus makes claims that are so far reaching that ...

Well, if those claims are not true, if Jesus were not God but only a mere human being, then neither would He be any kind of a moral teacher. A man who claims to be God, and is not, is either out of his mind, or a deceiver. Make of Him what you will, but the one thing He cannot be is the one thing He refuses to be – a mere human being. He will not fit! He is not and can never be “lukewarm.”

Jesus makes claims, and each one of us is confronted with those claims. Reject Him, ignore Him, or worship Him. But Jesus has called the question, “What do you make of Jesus?” It is like He asked His disciples, **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is? ... [and then] But who do you say that I am?”** (Matthew 16:13-16) Through His teaching, through His miracles, and through the questions He guides them to Peter’s response, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”**

Jesus makes claims:

- He is God. There is no in-between, and His claim is straightforward. **“Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am!”** (John 8:58) Those who heard Him knew exactly what Jesus was claiming.
- He is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. On Easter Day Jesus walked with 2 of His followers and **“beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”** (Luke 24:27)
- He is the only Savior. **“No one comes to the Father except through Him.”** (John 14:6) The disciples knew what that meant. It was Peter who said to the Ruling Council **“there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”** (Acts 4:12)
- He is able to forgive sins, raise the dead, and give eternal life. Jesus said to the paralyzed young man, **“My son, your sins are forgiven.”** (Mark 2:5) And Jesus claimed, **“as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He will.”** (John 5:21)

But the most important claim of Jesus is that Jesus claims us. He claims you to be His own, to live in His kingdom in everlasting life and blessing. Again, accept or reject it, but that is His claim and that is how He comes to us. It can be disconcerting when someone steps into the world and sets down the claim that you belong to Him. Worship, or walk away,

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but He will not be anything else or anything less.

- Nicodemus faced that when Jesus looked him in the eye and said, **“You must be born again.”** (John 3:7) Jesus can and does confront.
- The woman at the well told everyone what it felt like, **“Come see a man who told me all that I ever did.”** (John 4:29) Jesus can be intrusive.
- The man born blind responded when Jesus revealed Himself as the Messiah, **“You have seen Him, and it is He who is speaking to you.”** That man said, **“Lord, I believe,”** and he worshiped Him. (John 9:37-38) He brings blessings.
- Jesus laid claim to Mary Magdalene, as He called her name (John 20:16); Thomas, inviting him to put his finger into the nail holes (John 20:27); and Paul with the words, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”** (Acts 9:5) And He can be very personal.

In claiming you, Jesus says that He owns you and wants you to follow Him, **“have life abundantly”** (John 10:10), **“See His glory”** (John 17:24), **“be raised, transformed, glorious, and live forever”**. He makes the claim by carrying your sins on the cross. And again, He makes the claim by speaking His Gospel and filling your soul with His Words.

When the time comes Jesus will claim us by calling us out of the grave, and gathering with us before His Father. The prophecy says, **“He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing.”** (Zephaniah 3:17) There is an amazing sweetness when the claims of Jesus and the victory of Jesus is exactly this; that we are eternally blessed beyond anything that we could ever dream of. And when our being blessed is what prompts and moves God Himself to exult and burst into song; who could have imagined that?

### Our Prayer:

**Lord Jesus, let me rejoice that You have claimed me; that I am not my own to wander on my own; that You have claimed me for eternal life; and with eternal life also joy and blessing. Let me never forget the cost, and by the cost of the cross may I know the full measure of Your grace. Let me sing for joy to be with You, as You will sing for joy to be with me. Amen.**



## My Grandfather's Coal Bin

5/12/2020

When I was little (I think 2 or 3 years old) my grandparents used to heat with coal. My grandfather would shovel the coal into the hopper. When the house needed more heat, the furnace would turn on the auger and pull more coal into the furnace to burn. When my grandparents needed more coal, they would call the coal company and they would come by with a truck and the coal would clatter down the chute into the coal bin in the basement.

The company wanted their customers to keep buying from them, so they would include shiny little tags with their phone number. Those shiny tin tags were the fascinating part, for a 2 or 3 year old. They were about ½ inch by 1 inch, would not hurt the furnace, and, did I mention, they were shiny? The shiny part was important.

I remember one time when my grandparents got a load of coal, my older brother and I were allowed (for just a few moments) to dig out some of those tags and gather a little pile of them. It was fascinating! (For a 2 or 3 year old anyway.)

So ... there was that other time. Later, one day I snuck down to the coal bin. Wow! All that coal, and I could have all the little shiny tags I wanted. I dug through and carefully piled up first one stack, and then another. I had one stack that must have been 3 or 4 inches tall and the other one getting close. And then it got boring, and my mom was calling, so I went upstairs ....

The next part is kind of fuzzy. I do not remember all of it. I remember looking up at my mother and her looking down at me – and in the next instant I was in the bathtub. I was probably covered with coal dust from head to foot, and was probably leaving coal dust footprints behind me!

This is an illustration.

Jesus was the spotless Lamb of God. He was the Holy One, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. There was no fault, or blemish in Him. But He came into our world with a plan to take all the sin of the world on Himself. Even though He was the sinless Son of God, He took my sins and your sins on Himself.

Jesus went to Calvary covered from head to foot with all the sin of the whole human race. He presented Himself before His Father covered with our rebellion, uncleanness, hatred, moral filth, and selfishness. Paul says, "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (2 Corinthians 5:21) What was His

*(Continued on back...)*

Father to do? Sin must be punished. As Jesus presented Himself covered with the sin of the human race; all the judgment and wrath of God was poured out on Him.

The Servant Song in Isaiah 53 says, ***“Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; .... All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”*** (Isaiah 53:4-6)

[At the beginning of this prophecy (Isaiah 52:13) God the Father says, ***“Behold My Servant”***. And near the end (Isaiah 53:11) the Father repeats ***“My Servant”***. In New Testament language the Father says, ***“This is My Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”*** (Matthew 3:17 at Jesus’ baptism, and Matthew 17:5 on the Mount of Transfiguration)]

Through all the judgment Jesus continued in faith. He continued to pray, ***“Father ...”*** and ***“My God ...”*** In this way, through suffering the Judgment with perfect faith, Jesus offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice. The prophet Isaiah says, ***“The Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render His soul as a guilt offering ...”*** (Isaiah 53:10) The offering of the soul is the faith of the soul.

So the offering Jesus made was both perfect in sinlessness, and perfect in faith. And by that offering Jesus has set us free.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, I am amazed that You would come, bringing Your perfect life to redeem me, Your perfect faith to cover my faithlessness, and Your holy and sinless soul to be the ransom for my soul. Help me to see all my sins taken away and carried by You; and to know the freedom and joy that comes to me in Your words and promises. Amen.***



## POWER, STATUS & EQUALITY

5/13/2020

### Power, Status and Equality

There is something odd and unexpected about the way Jesus talked with people, and how He related to them. Over and over it does not fit the pattern you would expect. After all Jesus is God; He is almighty; He is all-knowing and able to see our deepest thoughts; and He claims us as **“the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.”** (Psalm 95:7)

But Jesus moves comfortably through and with the crowds of the humble and poor, welcomes children and sits with Nicodemus the scholar, sits with the woman at the well, and puts mud on the eyes of the blind man. Look through the Gospels and you do not find Him strutting His power or showing off His status. Do you remember the story of Zacchaeus? He wanted to see Jesus, but was short. So, He ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree. Jesus came by, looked up and said, **“Hey Zacchaeus! Come on down. I have to stay at your house today.”** (Luke 19:5) It is comfortable, informal and natural, even as Jesus is calling Zacchaeus to salvation. Even when Jesus was rebuking the Pharisees; He was challenging their entrenched beliefs in order to bring them to know the truth.

There are times when Jesus refused to take authority. Once when someone asked Him to make his brother divide the inheritance, Jesus said, **“Man, who made Me a judge or arbitrator over you?”** (Luke 12:14) At the wedding at Cana when His mother told Him they had run out of wine, Jesus said, **“My hour has not yet come.”** (John 2:4)

But it is not just authority or power. Jesus did not “lord it over” others. He could have. He is Lord. But instead, John describes Him:

- With Nicodemus (John 3:1-17) not lecturing but challenging and explaining.
- With the woman at the well (John 4:1-26) not scolding but talking about water and what she needs.
- With the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11) rescuing, asking where are the accusers, and saying “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”
- With the man born blind (John 9:1-38) Jesus spat on the ground, made mud with the saliva and put it on the man’s eyes. That is (*ahem*) a very down to earth thing.

Time and time again Jesus did the “look you in the eye and tell you what’s in your soul.” But even then Jesus was not “lording it over.” In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus talked about His manner. He said to those looking at and asking about Him, **“Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me,**

(Continued on back...)

***for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.***” (Matthew 11:28-29) “Humble in heart,” He says. Not, “for I am God and you must obey My authority.”

Humble may be the most amazing characteristic of God ever mentioned in the Bible. Humble in heart or (KJV wording) "lowly in heart". It is unexpected, and it does not fit the pattern you would expect of God. But that is the way Jesus comes to call us. It confronts us with the actual character of God, surprising us and making His claims in a vivid way. There is a one-to-one pattern here. But it is not a sudden change in the Bible. You find it in back in the Old Testament, in the description of the "tent of meeting". ***“Thus, the Lord used to speak with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.”*** (Exodus 33:11) Even further back, in Genesis, God came walking in the garden in the cool of the day to spend time with Adam and Eve, calling out to them. At the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus spent time simply having breakfast with the disciples, even cooking the breakfast for them.

There is a “down on our level” pattern to all this. And there is a “one soul to another” pattern to Jesus' words. With all the surprise and unexpectedness, that is part of what draws and attracts Christians so much to Jesus. This is our God who chose to be with us. And this is our God who chooses to bring us into sharing His glory. And this part of the character of Jesus is exactly why I say, “Not only is He God; He is the one I can trust and want to have all the power and authority in the universe and in my life.”

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, my friend – because You have called yourself my friend. You are the friend I can turn to in every need, and You were my friend when I did not deserve You as a friend. You carried me through salvation, out of sin and into Your grace, out of death and into life. And You did that by giving Yourself for me. Help me always to know You as my friend. And help me always to follow You as my Lord and my God. Fill me with Your word that Your holy will may form my soul and guide my life. Amen.***



## QUESTIONS

5/14/2020

It was during my Junior year of High School. Like so many others, that was the time in my life when I began asking questions. I was looking at life, exploring the world, and figuring out what I wanted to believe. And it was about that time the musical came out “Jesus Christ Superstar.” The songs caught on, and they were on the radio a lot. At Church one day a group of us asked the Pastor, “What do you think about it?” He answered, “Well, they’re asking the right questions.”

That was a fantastic answer. The questions they were singing were like this: “Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, who are you, what have you sacrificed? ... Do you think you’re what they say you are?” And, “I don’t know how to love Him ...” We understood that it was good for those who did not know Jesus to ask. Who is Jesus? Was this all planned? And how do we relate to this man who is not like us?

But there was even more. This is how our pastor’s answer hit home: “They’re asking the right questions”? We get to ask questions? This is not just about believing what we have been told? And we started asking.

It is a fascinating thing about the Christian faith. We ask questions and search the Scriptures. And we welcome questions. This is the most fun part of teaching confirmation; when the students start asking questions. Some years they think they are getting us off the lesson plan. But not so. The entire confirmation class is asking and answering, “Who is Jesus, and what has He done for us?” Every question, every curiosity, and even a lot of the questions that come out of doubt – all of them lead us to look at Jesus, and we find amazing things in Him.

Jesus taught His disciples (and everyone else) by prompting their questions. There is a string of events in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus is prompting questions.

- Jesus was out in the boat on the lake with the storm was raging. After the disciples woke Him and He commanded the storm to stop – they asked, “**What kind of man is this, that even the winds and waves obey Him?**” (Matthew 8:27)
- He healed a paralyzed man and the people “**were afraid and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.**” (Matthew 9:8)
- From prison, John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask, “**are You the one who is to come?**” (Matthew 11:3)
- Jesus taught in parables and the disciples puzzled them over and then came to ask, and Jesus taught them about the Kingdom. (Matthew 13)

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- And then Jesus feeds 5,000 (who is this who gives bread like manna from heaven?) (Matthew 14:19-21) and walks on water (who is this who commands the very elements?) (Matthew 14:25-33) and brings the lesson home, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is? ... Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:13-16)

And then there are the teachings of Jesus.

- The Sermon on the Mount teaches about blessing, prayer, forgiveness, and trust in God's provision -- and Jesus taught these things in ways that had never been heard. (Matthew 5-7)
- As Jesus taught, the tax gatherers and sinners gathered around. And He taught about the prodigal Son and how God and His angels celebrate our coming to faith. (Luke 15)

Christianity invites searching. When you begin to search and ask about Jesus, you find out that He is equal to all the questions you have; even the deepest questions. What is life all about? What does it mean to have a soul? What is good and evil?

You learn about God looking at the quiet humility of Jesus and His deep interest in all those around Him. You learn prayer by listening to Jesus' teaching. And we find the purpose and fulfillment of our lives in our relationship with Him.

It is a fascinating thing about the Christian faith. We ask questions and search the Scriptures. And we welcome questions. Was our pastor back then asking questions? Yes, he was, searching the Scriptures and asking questions; learning more about God.

Am I still asking questions? Yes, I am. And I have found it to be true through the years. The more I learn about Jesus, the more the Bible opens up about the deep things of God; about our God who created us; about our Savior who came to be one of us, to win us by His blood for eternal life; and about the Holy Spirit who has worked faith deep inside my soul to bring me to Jesus. As much as I learn, I know there is so much more waiting for God to open it up.

Jesus still continues to fascinate. And I know I will keep learning more and more about Him for my whole life. Even when we see Him face to face, we will still be just getting started.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, lead me to know You, more and more every day. Open up the Scriptures that I may grow in faith, and grow in understanding Your words, Your will, Your love, and Your wisdom. May I grow in my fascination with all that You are, all that You teach and all that You are leading me to, that I may know the wonders of eternity. Amen.***

*NOW WE KNOW WE  
ARE ALL MORTAL . .*

5/15/2020



One of the effects of the global pandemic is this. So many of us have been ignoring the fact that we are mortal. We have been pretending, distracting ourselves, filling every stray moment with entertainments, and again just plain ignoring. But for a whole lot of us, that is gone. We are mortal and there is no denying it. What does this mean for us? There are lessons we should remember from these days. Some of them are sobering. Others are hopeful and joyful.

We should not put all our hopes in the things of this life and this world. There will be disappointments and there will be things we will never have. The Bible has something to say about this. ***“All that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in life – is not from the Father .... And the world is passing away along with its desires, ...”*** (1 John 2:16-17)

Remember the inner life. Jesus called us to know the life of the soul. He talked about time with God, ***“When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*** (Matthew 6:6) He invited all who are weary and burdened to come to Him and said, ***“you will find rest for your souls.”*** (Matthew 11:28-29) The life of the soul is the inner life and it is important to fill that inner life with the good things of God. Things like faith, prayer, love, joy, peace, patience and more. The time we spend in God’s Word, and prayer is an investment in the things that last. The verse above from 1 John finishes, ***“the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”*** (1 John 2:17)

Sooner or later this body will fail, and we will stand in the presence of God. ***“It is appointed to man once to die and then the judgment.”*** (Hebrews 9:27) To many people that idea is frightening. But for the Christian there are all kinds of promises. We are connected to Jesus. And He said, ***“Because I live you also will live.”*** (John 14:19) Paul says, ***“neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, ... not height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** (Romans 8:38-39) Paul tells us about the second greatest hope we have when he says that Jesus ***“will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body”***. (Philippians 3:21) The greatest blessing we will hear from God Himself when we hear God say, ***“Now the dwelling of God is with man.”*** (Revelation 21:3)

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The Bible tells us that we are children of God, adopted into the family of God through what Jesus has done. He has bought us with His own suffering. He has forgiven our

sins and given us His own holiness (2 Corinthians 5:21) And He calls us to follow Him and live with Him forever. Spending time with God in worship matters more than most people realize. How often have we taken it for granted, thinking it will always be there? Worshiping the One who has and gives eternal life; calling on Him in our needs and thanking Him for our blessings; and learning the Gospel of Jesus Christ -- these are the things that open up eternity. King Solomon said, **"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth"**. (Ecclesiastes 12:1) God calls us to gather around Him; to remember the Gospel message, that "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16); and trust Him that there is a **"righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."** (Romans 3:22) Those truths bring our souls into fellowship with God.

This whole business started not long after we heard the words, **"Remember, dust you are and to dust shall you return."** That was Ash Wednesday. Now it is Easter Season. Remember that Jesus Christ is Risen; that He will return; and that He will call us out of "dust" to be transformed and live forever. Remember the life of the Spirit. And remember the life that is there for you in the words and promises of God.

### **Our Prayer:**

**Lord Jesus, call me to the spiritual things. Call me to the things of the soul. And call me to the eternal things of God. Help me remember the things of the inner life, where You call, deep within my soul, to know You as my Savior, to trust in You through all that happens in this life, and at the end to see Your glory forever. Amen.**

*THE "FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT"*  
*SPIRITUAL EXERCISE*

5/16/2020



“This is ‘kindness day’ so you need to think about the kindness of God, and then look for a way to show kindness.” That was a part of a conversation this last week. After the conversation, I promised I would explain it more in today’s meditation.

It began with an experience many years ago. I was with a missionary who was falsely accused, who had to leave the post they had put their heart into. In the middle of their deep sadness we talked. We talked for hours as we journeyed out of the country. What to do? What was God’s purpose? Where to turn and where to focus when everything they had devoted years of their life was taken away. How to find guidance in God’s Word. I shared a spiritual discipline built around the “the fruit of the Spirit” from Galatians 5:22-23.

We start with one simple question:

There is the outer life, everything happening around you in the world, good and bad. And there is the inner life, the life of the soul, and in that inner life there is you and God. Which of them is the more important? The most basic truth in life is that your connection with God is the most important thing in life. It is where everything else comes from.

Second, no matter what is going on in the world all around you, God is still working within your soul. He is still forming and fashioning you, transforming you in His image and forming what the Bible calls “the mind of Christ” within you. That is a guarantee. It is not a maybe. And it is not a “hope so.” The other things will come, and they will happen in God’s good timing. But for right now God the Holy Spirit is forming within you the fruit of the Spirit. You can be sure of that.

This is important for us when things around seem to be going off the rails. The work of the Spirit within you is a constant. It is something to turn to, to focus your inner self and do so in harmony with the Spirit of God. This is important when everything is going your way. It brings you back to those basic things that need to be down deep in the core of who we are.

Since that conversation, I have turned to that spiritual discipline numerous times; sometimes in the middle of massive struggles; other times to keep focused on God’s blessings and the work of the Kingdom of God. I have counseled others using this. It helps in sorting out a lot of things in life.

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Here is the pattern of this discipline. Every day focus on one aspect of “the fruit of the Spirit”. They are: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”. (Galatians 5:22-23) When you focus on those things you know the Holy Spirit is working on and forming in your soul, you cannot miss. Paul said as much, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” (Galatians 5:25)

This is how I have practiced it. Match each day of the month to an aspect of the Fruit of the Spirit:

(1) love, (2) joy, (3) peace, (4) patience, (5) kindness, (6) goodness, (7) faithfulness, (8) gentleness, (9) self-control. Each month there are three full cycles and a few days left over: 1-9; 10-18; 19-27; and the remainder. Or, after the 9<sup>th</sup>, add the digits (sometimes twice). So the conversation, “This is kindness day ...” happened on the 14<sup>th</sup> of the month (1+4=5). May 29<sup>th</sup> will be “joy day” (2+9=11; 1+1=2).

Here are some starter questions:

1. Love day: How does God show His love: to sinners? To the human race? To me? In Christ? And how do I live in the love of Christ?
2. Joy day: What is joy? How is that different from happiness? How did Jesus show joy? How will He show joy at the end? How do I keep the joy I have in Jesus? How do I share it?
3. Peace day: What does the Bible tell me about peace? How can I bring peace to those in my life?
4. Patience day: How has God shown patience toward me? What is God teaching me about patience today?

It has been interesting how many times someone has walked into the office, sat down with me, and said, “It’s patience day!” And then we talk for a while.

Today is faithfulness day, the 16<sup>th</sup>.

God has been faithful. He has remembered His promises. He has answered our prayers. He has sustained us through trials, and given His blessings every day of our life. Think of the hymn, “Great is Thy Faithfulness” (LSB # 809). As the Holy spirit leads me how can I show faithfulness in my life?

Tomorrow is “gentleness day.”

### **Our Prayer:**

*Lord Jesus, work in my heart and soul. Form Your image within me. Help me learn from You the love, joy, peace, and patience. Form my attitudes and lead me in showing kindness, demonstrating goodness, living in faithfulness, and showing gentleness to those around me. By Your Spirit teach me self-control. Where I fall and fail, restore me and renew me in Your will and ways. Amen.*

## TODAY IS GENTLENESS DAY

5/17/2020



Gentleness is eighth in Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit. It is part of the image of God that the Holy Spirit is forming within us. Now it may be a surprise but gentleness has to do with power and might. Weakness is not gentleness and can never be gentleness. But when one who is strong enough to do damage, instead devotes their strength to care for the weak and helpless that is gentleness. It is power and might restrained and focused to do good to the weak and little.

Think about the prophecy about Jesus, **“a bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out”**. (Matthew 12:20; Isaiah 42:3) This is the gentleness of God. He could have poured out wrath, and was entitled to. Where our lives were damaged and filled with sin, He could have simply judged us. Where our spiritual life was almost gone and all we had was a faint memory of God giving some sort of promise, He could have turned away. But instead Jesus brought healing; and instead He brought the promises of God's love and friendship back to us. And Jesus did this through setting aside His infinite power and bringing the gentleness of God to the cross. Even the soldiers in their arrogance and might swinging the hammer and driving the nails – they were in the hands of the almighty God who did an act of unimaginable gentleness, receiving their violence and praying for their salvation. The gentleness of God.

Or think about the picture of the Shepherd, strong to defend his flock. Back to back the two parts of the image form as Isaiah prophesies, **“Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and His arm rules for Him, behold His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him. / He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms; He will carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”** (Isaiah 40:10-11)

Jesus said **“Come to Me all who are weary and burdened .... Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle ... and you will find rest for your souls.”**

(Matthew 11:28-29) His might, coming to us in His gentleness breaks down our walls of unbelief and brings us into the kingdom of God. That is exactly the mystery Paul was talking about when he said **“the weakness of God is stronger than men.”**

(1 Corinthians 1:25)

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And now God sends His people out into the world. The disciples knew they had the power of God backing them up. But they were not sent out to demonstrate power, or

stride through the world doing one miracle after another. (“These are not the doings you are searching for.”) They and we are sent out into a world filled with one after another massive shows of power. The world has enough demonstrations of power. They are easy to find. We are sent to bring something different; It is a different kingdom, a different message from God, and a different kind of power. We are sent with words from God that have **“the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”**. (Romans 1:16)

It is a part of the work of the Spirit to form the “fruit of the Spirit” within us, and so form us into the image of God. Since it is part of the image of God, do not mistake gentleness for weakness or timidity. It is quite the opposite. It is strength that is focused; power that is held back; and might that is put to the purpose of saving, helping, caring for, and defending those that are weak. Think of the tough policeman rushing to the aid of a little baby, protecting and holding him close until he can give him back to his mother. Think of a fireman carrying a frail grandmother out of a burning building, using all of his strength to guard and protect her. These are examples of how the character of gentleness is exhibited in the world. There are many more.

There are a lot of stories we have seen and heard, and we know there is an amazing goodness in them. Every one of them is an image of the almighty, gentle God and Savior we know. God Himself and every part of His character is what the world so desperately needs.

So, this day, think on gentleness. And look for the chance to be gentle. In being gentle you show something of the image and character of God.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, form me as Your disciple, remaking and fashioning who I am. By Your Holy Spirit work deeply in my heart and soul, that more and more I may show the love of God in my attitude and the power of God in acts of kindness and gentleness. I pray and I ask that my life, my words, and my acts may bring praise to You. Forgive me where I have failed. Restore me and lead me, my Savior and Friend. Amen.***



## SELF-CONTROL DAY

5/18/2020

It happened at a Youth Group activity; a bonfire event. I brought along my Bocce Ball set. That is a kind of “lawn bowling” game where you mark out an area, toss a small target ball and take turns rolling the larger balls to try to get the closest (with 2, 4, 6, or 8 players). Scores are tallied, added up and after a number of turns someone wins.

We tried it out, played a game, and then ... One of the young people challenged me. He said, “I have muscle memory that comes from playing basketball, so I think I am going to beat you.” He did. Badly!

We admire the muscle control that our athletes show, watching their achievements and the self-control of amazingly precise movements and achievements. In fact, just this spring there was a 10-part special about Michael Jordan. I remember being amazed by the things he could do as he flew through the air, changing his shot several times as he went, avoiding one, and then another defender. It was astonishing self-control.

But there are other areas; different parts of life where it is equally important to have self-control. In those areas it is over our emotions, thoughts, impulses, desires, and beliefs. This is how we were made. We were created in the image of God, with a rational soul. That means we are not to be guided, like the animals, by instinct and impulses. We are called to rule over our impulses, just as God counseled Cain, “sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” (Genesis 4:7) Cain lost control and was controlled by his sinful urges.

There are numerous urges, feelings, emotions, imaginings and more that rise up from inside, swirling around and mixing within us. It can be a confusing turmoil inside – and haven’t we all been there. Feeling our way through, figuring out for ourselves what is right and wrong can end us up being in an absolute mess. Jeremiah was right. The heart can be “deceitful above all things ... who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9) We need guideposts and landmarks.

The guideposts begin with God and what He has done. That is why the 10 Commandments begin, **“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”** (Exodus 20:2) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began by pronouncing a set of blessings that He brings (Matthew 5:3-11) and then declared that He had come to fulfill the law. (Matthew 5:17) You see, God always begins with what He has done. With the Israelites He

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reminded them of how He set them free through the blood of the lamb; and with us how He has set us free through the blood of the True Lamb. When you read through the letters of Paul and others in the New Testament, it is fascinating just how much of the letters are simply telling about Jesus.

"Self-Control" is a good ending, the last in the list of the "fruit of the Spirit." Endings are important. Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount, saying, **"Everyone then who hears these words of Mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock."** (Matthew 7:24) So He tells us to look back over everything He preached in Matthew, chapters 5, 6, and 7.

"Self-Control" looks back over the rest of the list, and encourages us to seek the things of God as disciples of Jesus. It is very different from a list of don'ts. The fruit of the Spirit is what the Holy Spirit is working in us, forming within us, and guiding us into. We want these things to fill our life.

In one of his last letters Paul wrote, **"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about such things."** (Philippians 4:8)

This is also how Martin Luther ended each of his explanations of the commandments. What are those things of God that the Holy Spirit is calling us into?

### Our Prayer:

**Lord Jesus, fill me with Your Spirit and with Your Word, that I may desire the things of God, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness. You have paid the price to bring me into Your love, Your joy, and Your peace. Lead me as Your disciple that in learning of You I may grow in the all of the fruit of the Spirit. Guide me that I may pursue the things of God, and in learning them may learn of You, until that day when I see You face to face and celebrate all that You will have done in my soul. Amen.**



The Fruits of the Spirit are  
Love, Joy, Peace, Patience,  
Kindness, Goodness,  
Faithfulness, Gentleness,  
and **Self-Control.**



## “...ALL THE DAYS...”

5/19/2020

I noticed this while writing a devotion (April 24) on what Jesus said at the end of Matthew. Usually we hear it like this, **“And, behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”** (Matthew 28:20) But when you look very closely you find “extra promises” tucked in.

Back then we talked about the word order, and how Jesus used the name of God, "I AM." He made the name of God part of the promise to be with us. In fact, in the Greek word order Jesus did something very interesting. He put the words "with you" in the middle of the words "I ... Am." The verse actually reads, "I with you Am ..." The promise "with you" is embedded within the name of God. That's who He is. He is the "with us" God.

There is more. We usually read the word “always”. But it is actually three Greek words there, and they are much more specific. The Greek “pasas tas haymeras” (πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας) means “all the days”. (It's time for me to get excited all over again.)

I love this! It is not simply some undefined “always.” "All the days" means every one of my days, each one of them, with all the variety of things that happen. It means the days that go wonderfully from beginning to end. It means the miserable days when we push through the dreariness and carry some heavy burdens. It means the days of unexpected surprises, and it means the days when we start out and nothing seems to go quite right or fit together, from getting up to sitting down at the end. "All the days" means a lot!

And in the middle of all those days there is the name of God. “I AM” is with us and writes His name over our every moment and breath. Jesus puts His name into every morning and evening. And He says "with you" every noon and nighttime. Our Lord and Savior, the great Immanuel, gives Himself into everything we face "all the days" and His name is there in every blessing of "all the days."

This is our God who writes and speaks His word and does not hesitate to get very specific. He is much more personal about it than to leave it with just "always." Psalm 46 says, **“God will help her when morning dawns.”** (Psalm 46:5) And Psalm 23 says **“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”** (Psalm 23:6) In one of my favorite psalms, David celebrates how God knows him and watches over him no matter where he might be. He saw my unformed substance and all my days were written in His book. And then he says, **“When I awake, I am still with You.”** (Psalm 139:18)

(Continued on back...)

It is tremendously important that Jesus entered into our time-bound existence. He doesn't simply look down and see our hours and moments. He came to and share days and nights. And Jesus set aside specific days to do the work of salvation. Our salvation was marked out in the day of riding into Jerusalem. And then four days later the evening of the Passover in the upper room, the night of prayer, the morning of trial, and the afternoon of the cross.

The victory over death is marked out as the third day. Luke says "**on the first day of the week, at early dawn**". (Luke 24:1) And there will be a specific day when we will rise; the day we stand before Jesus; the day He gathers the whole world together and says before the Father and all creation that we are His.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, until that day when I see You face to face, until the day when You raise my body and call me blessed, until the endless days of glory begin; thank You for Your promise for all the days of the journey. Thank You for the days of being with me, through days of blessing, days of burdens, and days of prayer. Thank You for the many times You called me Your own and reminded me that You put Your name on me. Amen.***



*(After this meditation went out, we received this picture.*

*The caption said:  
"This is a picture of the C. S. Lewis family's wardrobe that inspired the idea of the portal into Narnia."*

*(Notice in the picture where the lion is looking.)*

## IS HE SAFE?

5/20/2020

"Is he quite safe?"

"Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."

That is a part of a conversation C. S. Lewis wrote in his book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. It is written to make a point about God.

Tomorrow is the Day of the Ascension. We celebrate that Jesus ascended into heaven, to sit at the right hand of the throne of God; to take all power and rule all of creation; and to gather His kingdom until He comes to judge the living and the dead. Is He safe?

Ask the disciples who left behind their lives of fishing, gathering taxes, and more, in order to be sent out, scattering all over the ancient world and all but John confirm their witness through a martyr's death. Or Abraham who left his father's house to go to a land God would show him. Or Paul, who was confronted by Jesus, who then sent him far away to the gentiles, to bring the Gospel and suffer for the name of Jesus. Is He safe? I imagine each one would join C. S. Lewis in saying, "Who said anything about safe? ... But He's good."

Jesus is the King. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus is seen in Daniel's vision of **"one like a son of man ... given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples nations, and languages should serve Him"**. (Daniel 7:13-14) All other kingdoms are swept away and His kingdom is everlasting. As the King Jesus has the right to decide that my life will go the way He decides, and not the way I thought it would. Is He safe?

Jesus calls us to follow. He tells us there is a cost. **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me."** (Matthew 16:24) Is He safe? And Jesus said, **"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world."** (John 16:33) Is He safe? Almost two thousand years later (still in our days) in so many places around the world Christians suffer for their faith; for the name of Jesus. And all around the world Christians say, "Who said anything about safe? But He's good!"

*(Continued on back...)*

What did the disciples of John the Baptist hear from Jesus when they came and asked? ***“The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them.”*** (Matthew 11:5) He’s good! Sinners had their sins forgiven. The thief on the cross had heaven opened. Mary Magdalene had her total despair taken away on Easter morning outside the tomb when when Jesus called her by name. He’s good! Lazarus got to be at the feast -- after Jesus interrupted his being dead. Thomas had his doubt and denial dispelled. Paul was turned from a persecutor to a Christian singing and praying and telling about Jesus even in the jail at Philippi. He’s good!

So here we are in the middle of all kinds of things happening. There is a virus. There are problems with jobs and keeping businesses opened. There are controversies and disagreements all around us, among our friends, and conflicts in our own thoughts and feelings. We could be asking “Is it safe?” We have no idea what is coming in the next week, month or year.

But remember what Paul wrote to his friend Timothy, from Rome while under arrest. ***“I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.”*** (2 Timothy 1:12) We know that Jesus our Redeemer is with us, ***“all the days”***. (Matthew 28:20) His promises are all over in the Bible. Our sins are forgiven. We have been set free by Jesus. (John 8:31-36) And We have the righteousness of Christ as a free gift. (Romans 3:21-25) We know how everything will turn out. It's going to be glorious!

I started saying years ago, “The most important thing in any journey is who you are traveling with; all the rest is just scenery.” (That’s what we sometimes called that endless detour that seemed to lead all over the place, and then it was getting late and when would we ever get there? And then I would say how I had a wonderful and beautiful traveling companion; and maybe my wife would smile -- for a while. [Don’t tell her I wrote this.])

Well, boy do we have some "scenery" right now. And when are we going to get there?

But I think back to how these meditations started. Jerod texted me, “Remember God is still in control, not corona virus.”

He still is. And “Who said anything about safe? But He’s good!”

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, in the middle of everything that is happening, and when I am unsure and beginning to worry, or even worse; help me. Remind me of Your constant presence. Remind me that You are Lord of Lords and King of kings, and that You are in control. Strengthen my faith as I struggle to trust. Calm my fears that I may be clear-headed. And help me to see the many daily provisions that come from You. So, dear Savior and Friend help me to grow in faith, in prayer and in the spiritual life. Amen.***



## HELD IN TRUST

5/21/2020

It's an interesting Psalm, partly because it does not seem to ring true; and when that happens in the Bible we might be on our way to an insight.

Psalm 8 says, ***“what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.”*** (Psalm 8:4-5) And now here comes the kicker, ***“You have given him dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.”*** (Psalm 8:6-8)

You might say, “Well, that would be nice. All the beasts of the field? ‘Hey bear, leave that alone,’ and it does? ‘Hey deer, come on over here,’ and it does? ‘Hey fish, jump in the net, OK?’ But you know, I haven’t seen any of that lately.”

You would be correct. That’s why so many interpretations of Psalm 8 say, “this is obviously about Jesus.” Yes, it is, and that is a good beginning. But we should not stop at the beginning. This is Ascension Day and this psalm has a lot to do with the Ascension of Jesus.

Jesus is the Son of Man, and for a while He took a place lower than the heavenly beings. He was born and made Himself part of the flesh, blood, bone and skin collection of human beings – one of us. Paul says, ***“He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking on the form of a servant ...”*** (Philippians 2:5-11) But even as Jesus took on our lowly nature, the world of nature was coming back into harmony with Him. Mark tells about the temptations in the wilderness like this, ***“He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And He was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to Him.”*** (Mark 1:13) Jesus was restoring the original pattern of creation, standing in our place. In His person Jesus restored the proper relationship between mankind and nature. Jesus holds that in trust for us until the day of the resurrection when we are glorified.

Jesus went further. ***“He became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”*** (Philippians 2:8) And as Jesus laid down His life, the natural world responded. Matthew reports, ***“there was darkness for the three hours”***, and ***“the earth shook and the rocks were split.”*** (Matthew 27:45, 51) But then there is the victory. ***“Therefore, God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name.”*** (Philippians 2:9) ***“The whole creation joins in praising Him”***. (Revelation 5:13)

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I haven't even named the verses that talk about wind, waves, water, wine, bread, fish, and a fig tree. All of creation is subject to Jesus. In fact, the whole creation longs to be subject to Him. **"... the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."** (Romans 8:20-22)

But once again this is Ascension Day. We are celebrating that Jesus (our brother) ascended (as our brother) into heaven. He rules all things and God has given Him the name above all names – and He is still our brother.

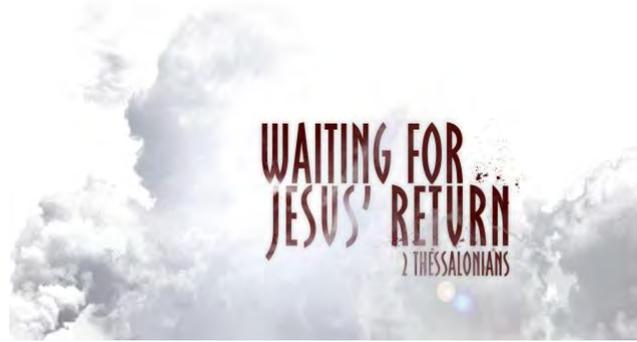
When the Psalm says **"son of man"** (Psalm 8:4) it is calling Jesus your brother. When it says, **"You have put all things under His feet ..."** (Psalm 8:6-8) it is calling you His brother or sister. You see, the victory He won; He won it for you. And Jesus has taken the place of glory, but the glory of Jesus is to make us glorious.

There is a part of the letter to the Hebrews that meditates on Psalm 8. It says He **"was made lower than the angels ... that by the grace of God he might suffer death for everyone."** And then it talks about, **"bringing many sons to glory"** and says, **"That is why He is not ashamed to call them brothers ..."** (Hebrews 2:9-11)

Jesus has dominion over the created world. But He does not hoard dominion for Himself alone. What Jesus holds He holds for you. He holds it in trust until the day when He can bring us all into glory and fully share the glories and blessings with us. The ascension and glory we celebrate today is actually a promise of our future. Like Paul says, we **"groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies"**. (Romans 8:23) The apostle John joins in and says, **"when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."** (1 John 3:2)

### **Our Prayer:**

**Lord Jesus, fill my vision this day with the promises You have given, that one day I will see Your glory and share in the blessings of eternal life. One day You will bring me into the full glory You have prepared, and I will celebrate and sing, and then live forever. Right now, in the middle of following You, help me to live in hope, and trust You for each of the days that come along. Amen.**



## THE GAP BETWEEN

5/22/2020

This is the first day after Ascension Day. The disciples saw Jesus ascend into heaven. They heard the angels explain, **“This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way you saw Him go into heaven.”** (Acts 1:11) Now what?

They had heard Jesus tell them to wait. **“Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”** (Luke 24:49) Wait. Until what?

We are heading into Memorial Day weekend; and there is an old saying, “War is long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror.” All through life there are the in-between times and those times are full of waiting. Day 1 – of the wait in between Jesus’ Ascension and whatever was coming next, and they did not know what it was.

How do you wait? How do you fill the in-between?

Sometimes the in-between stretches on and on.

- Abraham waited until he was one hundred years old for the promise of a son. He did not always stay on track.
- Moses waited forty years, watching sheep for his father-in-law, Jethro, until God spoke to him. In the in-between he got married, had children, and gave up on his belief that he could lead his people the Israelites. When he had finally given up then he was ready.
- David was anointed king. In between anointing and throne was years of hiding, sleeping in caves, and worse.

How did the disciples fill the in-between? Luke tells us they **“were continually in the temple blessing God.”** (Luke 24:53) That’s pretty good! Seeking out the will, words, and promises of God; spending time in prayer, praise and worship is exactly what they needed to do. They were in-between, and they did not know what direction God would send them, or what He had planned for them. The only way to prepare was to spend time with God.

Do you realize there is a far more profound example? There was an in-between, between infancy and twelve years old, and another in-between, between twelve years old and about thirty years old. In that in-between Jesus **“increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.”** (Luke 2:52) Growing up and searching the Scriptures was the pattern for Jesus Himself. And then the in-between continued. No matter how busy things

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became Jesus went out to take in-between time. The Gospels tell us how He went out early in the morning for prayer (Mark 1:35), and after feeding the 5,000 went up on the mountain at the end of the day to pray (Matthew 14:22-23).

Isaiah describes how important the in-between time was for Jesus, ***“Morning by morning ... He awakens My ear to hear as those who are taught.”*** (Isaiah 50:4) Taking in the Word of God, Jesus was prepared to do the will of His Father, the great works of salvation. Again, Isaiah prophesies, ***“The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary.”*** (Isaiah 50:4)

Out of the in-between time Jesus comforted, strengthened the weary, healed the sick, raised the dead, and finally carried the sins of the world to bring us salvation.

Jesus taught His disciples, and by His teaching they spent their in-between time in worship, searching the Scriptures, and prayer. On the tenth day came the day of Pentecost and preaching the Gospel.

And now a whole lot of us have in-between time. How are we doing? How is our waiting? How are we filling the in-between time? We do not know what is coming next. How are we preparing?

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, guide my moment and my days. Lead me into Your word. Help me to be diligent, looking deeply into Your will, and Your promises. Guide me in repentance and faith that I may be focused on the things of life, eternity, and salvation. As You prepared day by day to strengthen the weak and comfort the distressed, send me also to speak Your words of mercy to hearts needing to hear Your comfort. Amen.***



## THE EVERYTHING MAN

5/23/2020

It is two days since we celebrated the Ascension, and we are celebrating that we have a brother, Jesus, who is at the throne of God and ruling heaven for our blessing. It is important - Jesus the human rules. Jesus the God-man has been given all authority and power.

It was Paul who said, **"To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews. to those under the law I became as one under the law ... . To those outside the law I became as one outside the law ... that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some."** (1 Corinthians 9:20-22)

Where did he learn this? Answer: The same place he learned everything else about the Gospel. From Jesus.

Jesus is the Everything Man. You begin to learn this as you watch Jesus calling four fishermen, one tax gatherer, a revolutionary zealot and others. As He begins His ministry you see Nicodemus, a scholar and teacher coming to Him and **"tax gatherers and sinners all ... drawing near."** (Luke 15:1) The pious sisters Mary & Martha follow, as well as Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus freed from demons. (Luke 8:2)

And then the list expands. Lepers, a man born blind, a sinful woman, a rich young man, a teacher of the Law; Jesus moves through every part of society bringing words of comfort, redemption, spiritual life and peace with God. Children are comfortable with Him, and Jesus relates easily. He knows them, and they know there is the mercy and peace from God with Him. And we see in church that they still are comfortable where Jesus is.

There is a saying, "What He did not become, He did not save." It is a quick summary of the Bible's teaching about Jesus, God in the flesh, God with us.

Jesus rejoiced over those coming to faith, was angry with the money changers, loved His disciples, (John 13) was frustrated with the stubbornness around Him, and wept outside Lazarus' tomb. In every situation I encounter He is the Friend who is able to empathize because He knows the problems and joys we experience. All other religions send prayers up to the heavens and hope to be heard. We have a Savior who walked among us and knows, personally.

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There are times in life when we long for, struggle to find, and are lonely without, someone to share with; where we can connect on a personal level. Jesus is the one who knows and sees and understands every part of the human experience -- and is able to **"sympathize with our weaknesses"** because He **"has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin."** (Hebrews 4:15) Even to the uttermost -- Jesus knows what it is like to carry sin, to be separated, and to die with the sins of the world on Him. Because He carried the sins, we get to come to a Savior who already knows, and wanted us to be set free and be with Him forever.

This has been the experience of Christians through the centuries. With every part of our life there is Jesus who understands because He is one of us. In fact, in nation after nation and culture after culture Christians all around the world find the same truth. I have had opportunities to sit, talk, journey and share with Christians in South Africa and Botswana; and Christians from Ethiopia, Korea, and other places. We find that we share this same truth. Jesus understands. He knows the joys and troubles of our souls. He knows because He is one of us. It does not matter how different our lives or our cultures have been. Jesus is the same. He understands. He knows because He is one of us.

And then, because He is one of us he hears our prayers in a different and very distinct way. This is different than any other religion. It is different than how it would happen if God were, like the song said, "just a God who didn't care, who lived a way up there". In every part of life I find that Jesus is close at hand and there is "grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

Jesus is indeed "The Everything Man." He is everything to me, and to countless Christians of every time and every place.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, thank You that I can come to You and find in You a Friend who understands; and have in You a God who hears my prayers with such knowledge of what it is like to pray. Thank You for walking this earth, knowing the days and hours, the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears that I face. Walk with me, Lord. Lead on. Lead on through everything, and on to when I get to see You face to face. Be close by my side now that I may be with You forever. Amen.***



## THE PRAYING GOD

5/24/2020

There are things Jesus does that no other god could do. One of those things is to pray.

None of the "gods" that human beings have thought of and worshiped is involved in praying. Praying means to look to someone else as God; and then to humble yourself and ask someone who is almighty. For Jesus to pray means that He takes the humble place, stands with us, and kneels down as a genuine human being.

Think about it. No other theory of what God might be like has God kneeling down in humility. And someone would ask, "If God prays, who does He pray to?" They would be right to ask that question.

But Jesus does things that God is not "supposed to do." He refuses to stay where God is "supposed to belong." So, there He is ... hanging around the poor, the diseased, the sinners; and there He is teaching things about God that the rabbis had no idea of; and there He is praying.

Early in the morning (Mark 1:35); out in the wilderness for 40 days while being tempted (Luke 4:1); offering up the mealtime prayer for 5 loaves and 2 fish (Mark 6:41); rejoicing at the kingdom being open to little children (Matthew 11:25-26); after feeding the 5,000 when the crowd wanted to make Him king (John 6:15 & Mark 6:46); and before asking the disciples who He is (Mark 9:18); are just some of the places and patterns of Jesus' prayers. As odd as it sounds, Jesus is the praying God.

This is a wonderful and absolutely amazing truth. Jesus does not dabble in prayer. He prays, deeply, from the heart, calling out, pleading for our salvation, agonizing in the struggle, and submitting when His Father said "No." In the upper room Jesus told Peter that Peter's salvation was in danger. **"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail."** (Luke 22:31) In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed with such agony that His sweat became like great drops of blood. (Luke 22:44) The Letter to the Hebrews describes it as, **"Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears"**. (Hebrews 5:7) And after three times asking His Father to take away the cup of suffering, Jesus then went to arrest, trial and the cross.

Jesus prays. To the full measure He prays, knowing the glorious answers and the prayer that seems to meet with silence. Jesus prayed -- as one of us with all that means.

But even as Jesus humbled Himself in obedience **"unto death, even death on a cross"** (Philippians 2:8); with the prayers that came from the cross, **"Father forgive them ..."** and **"My God, ... why have You forsaken Me?"** -- that does not change the fact that He is God. Jesus stilled the storm, healed the sick, sometimes with only a command, and raised Lazarus from the dead (after, by the way, having an intimate, deliberately overheard, conversation with His Father about what they were doing). (John11:41-42) *(Continued on back...)*

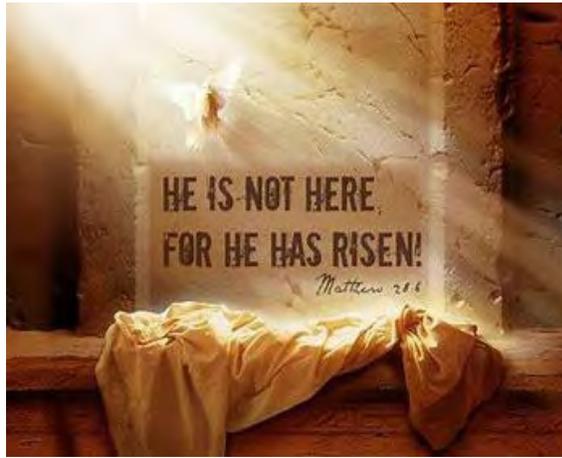
The Athanasian Creed says, "Equal to the Father, according to His Godhead" Why then, in Jesus, do we find God doing such uncharacteristic things for God. The answer is wonderful.

Jesus became one of us so He could know human life and do human things. Those human things still include: He prays and He worships. During His earthly ministry Jesus walked by faith. So, we have an amazing privilege. As Christians we get to pray to the God who doesn't just listen to prayers; He prays like us and joins in praying with us. Who better to bring your prayers to; than The Praying God, the One True God who knows prayer from this side of it?

It is an astonishing step, a thing never imagined in the whole history of human beings crafting and designing religion. But there it is. God has done the unimaginable. Jesus is the Praying God who hears prayers as only a praying God can.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, thank You for being one of us, for being my Brother even as You are my Savior; for hearing my prayer and joining Your prayer together with mine. Lead me in prayer and help me to grow in prayer, trusting Your promises and praying both for my neighbor in his need and for the simple joy of praying, hearing Your words, praying, praising and giving thanks. Amen.***



## THE PERFECT DEATH

5/25/2020

There are all kinds of things happening all around us.

There is the Corona Virus and we have watched the death toll mounting over the past months.

This is Memorial Day. We take time today to think about those who laid down their life for the sake of our freedoms.

We know that anything could happen at any time. Even if it is not from the things we fear right now, we are mortal. Our lives are limited.

It is not a good answer to ignore the fact. Covering up by indulging the flesh leaves us unprepared. Chasing after everything in this world leads to us being surprised by our mortality and facing it with fear and panic. For centuries, for generations people have talked about what is a good death.

We are blessed. As Christians, we have Jesus. He is the only one who came into the world for the expressed purpose of dying. It was His mission, to lay down His life and to take it up again. **"This charge"** He said, **"I have received from My Father."** (John 10:18)

Jesus died the perfect death. Not just a good death; it was the perfect death. Yes, there was fear and trembling. As He prayed in Gethsemane there certainly was fear of the Cross, the separation and forsakenness, and surrendering His soul into death. But Jesus is the Author and Perfecter of faith. He holds on to the words and promises of God. In fact, Jesus simply and stubbornly believes. If His Father has promised that after death there will be an Easter; then that just simply is how it will be.

All of the terrible things that happen do not change the promise. And Jesus faced down every one of them just like out in the wilderness, **"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'"** (Matthew 4:4) The promises were specific;

- **"You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your Holy One see corruption."** (Psalm 16:10)
- **"I will tell of Your name to My brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise You."** (Psalm 22:22)
- And from the great prophecy in Isaiah, **"I will divide Him a portion with the many ... because He poured out His soul to death."** (Isaiah 53:12)

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Jesus held to the promises of His Father believing and trusting, all the way to the cross, surrendering His life and soul into death. Jesus doing that is like the one professor in seminary said to us. "Remember, Jesus going to the cross was also an act of worship."

Stephen, the first martyr followed Jesus. His prayers echo two of Jesus' prayers from the cross. **"Lord, do not hold this sin against them", and "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."** (Acts 7:59-60) Stephen's death also was an act of worship.

So, for us. We have words and promises of God. They are given for us to believe and hold on to in the face of everything that happens. And the promises are clear:

- **"Because I live, you also will live."** (John 14:19)
- **"I will come again and take you to Myself, that where I am you may be also."** (John 14:3)
- Nothing **"will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."** (Romans 8:39)
- He **"will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to Himself."** (Philippians 3:21)

### **Our Prayer:**

**Jesus knows that we need His promises. He gives the promises to bring us to faith and strengthen us in faith. After all He is the Author and Perfecter of faith. As our Shepherd Jesus leads us through the valley of the shadow of death. He has been there. He is able to guide and keep us, because He has faced death and He has won the victory.**

## THE WORD

5/26/2020



We have a "Means of Grace" theology. That is important.

We are now half way between the Day of Ascension and Pentecost. Last Thursday was 40 days after Easter. Jesus appeared to His disciples over those 40 days, showing and proving to them that He truly is Risen! Forty days after Easter Jesus ascended into heaven, telling the disciples to remain in the city until they were clothed with power from on high. It has been 5 days. There are 5 more days until Pentecost. During their waiting, the disciples were "continually in the temple" worshiping and hearing the words of the Old Testament. When they were not in the Temple, they were devoting themselves to prayer and studying the Word of God.

That is the pattern. Guided by the Holy Spirit they were searching out the prophecies about Jesus. It was a time to prepare. The days would come when the Holy Spirit would move them out to tell the Gospel about Jesus. The words of prophecy they were reading would be the words of prophecy they would share. But there is something else happening.

We have a "Means of Grace" theology. There are specific things that God uses to create and strengthen our faith. They are the "Means of Grace" and the tools of the Holy Spirit.

It works like this.

- Just like God said in the beginning **"Let there be light."** and the light had to be; and just like He said, **"Let the earth bring forth ..."** and the earth had to bring forth what He had commanded -- ...
- In the same way when Jesus commanded the storm to cease, it had to happen; and when Jesus said **"Lazarus, come out!"** and the dead man had to be alive and come out of his tomb -- ... (John 11:43-44)
- So it is that when Jesus said **"Your sins are forgiven"** (Mark 2:5) and it had to be true that the sins were forgiven; and when Jesus said, **"Today you will be with Me in paradise"** (Luke 23:43) the thief on the cross had to be in heaven with Jesus that day.

The Word of God is living and active. When God sends out His Word, it does what He has commanded. (Isaiah 55:11) The heart and center of the word of God is the teachings about

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Jesus, about forgiveness through His cross, about victory through Jesus rising from the dead, and how there is salvation in Jesus for all who believe in Him.

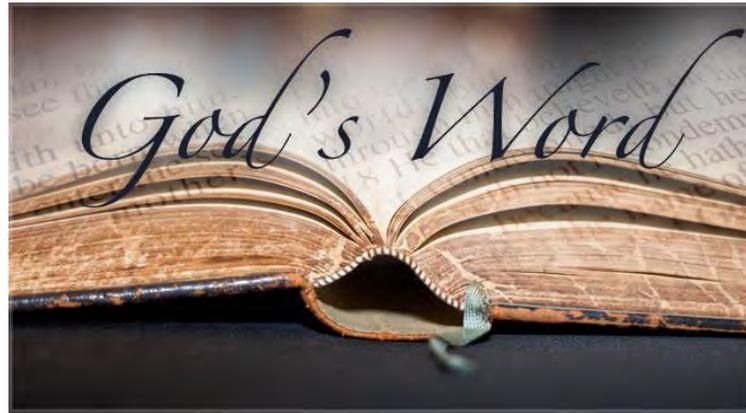
When God speaks His grace-filled, forgiving and life-giving words, we want to be there. We want to hear them. We want to have them spoken over us.

This is especially true because the Word of God is faith-creating. Paul said, "***you have been saved by grace, through faith, and this [the faith] is not of yourselves; it is the gift of God ...***" (Ephesians 2:8)

It is exactly as Peter said, "***Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life ...***" (John 6:68) Since it is exactly as Peter said, let's dive into the Word of God, savor the promises, hear the teaching of salvation, and just simply love walking with Jesus in life.

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, guide me by Your Spirit and lead me into the promises of salvation in You. Teach me to trust and treasure the sweetness of forgiveness and salvation. And by Your Word constantly renew and increase my faith; so that I may trust in You through all the "changes and chances" of life. Amen.***



## THE SIMPLE WORD

5/27/2020

Look inside. Look deep inside and ask a question. In your inner life, as you think through things; or as you decide what it is you want; or as you reflect on the things that you have been through -- how do you do that? How do you think back over your memories or picture what you want to see in the future? The simple answer is "words." That is the stuff of the inner life. It is how you reflect on the world and how you reflect on you.

It should not be a surprise that the life of the soul is so completely bound up in words and the word inside us. After all that is how God created the world, by His Word: **"Let there be light"; "Let the earth bring forth"; Let us make man in Our image"**. (Genesis 1:3, 11, 24)

God spoke His word over Adam and Eve. He blessed them and said, **"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it ..."** (Genesis 1:28) When Adam and Eve fell into sin, what they did was turn away from the Word of God, listening to, **"Has God indeed said ...?"** (Genesis 3:1) When God began to call them back, He did that through speaking the promise about **"the seed of the woman,"** Jesus. (Genesis 3:15) The Gospel of John describes Jesus' birth as, **"The Word became flesh ..."** (John 1:14) Jesus is the living, breathing, walking around sermon of God the Father, a sermon with skin.

It is the simple Word. God has said that "whoever believes in [Jesus] should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) God has said that **"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"**. (1 Timothy 1:15) And God has said, **"The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."** (John 10:11)

It is the simple Word, straightforward, unadorned by clever speech or lofty wisdom. (1 Corinthians 2:1-4) In that simple word God speaks straight to our hearts. He tells us of the Savior and promises forgiveness and life.

Because it is the simple Word, we are called to simply believe it. That is the pattern all the way through history. From Adam and Eve who believed God's promise of **"the Seed of the Woman"**, Jesus; to Abraham who **"believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"** (Romans 4:3, Genesis 15:6); to David who **"also speaks of the blessing"**; to Paul who said, **"by grace you have been saved through faith ..."** (Ephesians 2:8); to Martin Luther who thrilled at salvation **"by faith apart from works of the law."** (Romans 3:28) All of salvation, complete from beginning to end, comes to us through the Word, because God has put all of His blessings in the Word.

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And the Word of God is "self-authenticating." That means, it proves itself to the soul that it takes hold of. It causes faith; actually brings into the soul the belief in God who spoke it.

The Word of God is life-giving, sin-forgiving, faith-creating, life-renewing, faith-restoring, blessing-bringing, and is eternal in its blessings. Jesus said, **"Everyone then who hears these words of Mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall."** (Matthew 7:24-25)

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, fill my soul with Your words. Speak them into my heart day after day, and by Your Spirit sustain my faith each day. Fill my thoughts with the promises You have brought into the world; those promises You have fulfilled in Your own flesh, living, suffering, and rising for me. Hold Your promises before me, bound together with the promise that You will return with eternal life for all Your people. Amen.***



## THE WET WORD

5/28/2020

### The Wet Word

It happened during a Confirmation Class. Students come up with some brilliant insights. Teaching Confirmation is a special treat because young Christians learning about Jesus, about salvation, and about faith can see things from a fresh angle that their teacher never thought of before. And that is thrilling!

Some years ago, in the middle of class one of the students, Sarah, asked, "So can I call Baptism 'The Wet Word'?" I thought to myself, "That's better than all the other words I was going to use. That's really cool!"

"The Wet Word" is a wonderful way of saying it. Right at the center of Baptism is nothing else than the same life-giving, sin-forgiving word of God. The Word is what powers Baptism.

*"Without the Word of God, it is just plain water and no baptism; but with the Word of God it is a Baptism, that is a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a bath of the new birth in the Holy Spirit."* (Baptism Question 3) God wants us always to hear and hold on to and treasure His word. He puts all the treasures of salvation in the Word; everything that Jesus earned for us on the cross.

And yet, there is something special about Baptism. It is physical, and we get to experience the Words and Promises of God in a very distinct way. God pours His Words and Promises over our heads, and soaks us down with something eternal. How cool is that?! And then while He is busy soaking us down with the life-giving, sin-forgiving "Wet Word" -- at the same time He is packing His Word in through our ears all the way down deep into our souls. Something for the body and something for the soul. Why that might even give you the idea that God wants both parts of us saved and living forever -- the spiritual and the physical parts. It should give you that idea; because that is exactly what God has in mind. **"We wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."** (Romans 8:23) And what is that Word of God that He packs into our ears all the way down deep into our souls? It is nothing else than the Name; the name of God Himself. That's how personal it is.

Many years ago, I wandered into my brother's room. He is the talented one, who was working with clay, molding things and getting them fired in a kiln. He was molding chess pieces and had decided to give each pawn its own personality. He was in the middle of talking with one of them, changing its expression, and carrying on, until he decided that it was a little dry for what he was doing and popped it into his mouth to moisten it. Of course, I reacted how I think he

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wanted. **"What are you doing!?"** He answered, **"You have to put something of yourself into your work."**

So, Jesus did. He put something of Himself into His work; was born and became one of us. Did you know that the human body is about 60 % water? Jesus joined our 60 % water human race. And then at the right time He walked that 60 % water human body down to the Jordan River and was baptized by John. John reacted exactly how Jesus knew he would. **"What are you doing!?"** And Jesus said, **"... to fulfill all righteousness."** (Matthew 3:15) He did not need any additional righteousness. His was perfect. But don't you know, "You have to put something of yourself into your work."

Luther called it sanctifying *"all waters to be a blessed flood ... a lavish washing away of sin."* And Paul said it was **"so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."** (2 Corinthians 5:21) My soul redeemed and my body raised, transformed and glorious will be Jesus' own victory that He celebrates on the day when He returns and fulfills the prophecy, **"He will exult over you with loud singing."** (Zephaniah 3:17)

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, thank You for this "wet Word," this thing called Baptism. Thank You that You put Yourself into our human race, to put Your own holiness into us. Thank You for dousing and soaking me with Your Words and Promises, and putting Your name into my ears and into my soul. Remind me day by day of the promises, and how Your promises call and guide me through these days to the day when I will hear You celebrating Your victory in my salvation. Amen.***



## THE TASTY WORD

5/29/2020

There is "The Simple Word" of God, the "Means of Grace" that the Holy Spirit speaks into our souls to bring us to faith (believing the words and promises of God).

There is the "Wet Word," the "Means of Grace" that God pours over us, mixing His own name into the water, so we can have the name of God named over us, along with every word and promise that comes with His name.

And there is the "Tasty Word." In the Lord's Supper Jesus puts His words into the bread and wine. Right there at the center of the Supper are the words of Jesus. They give exactly what they promise, "forgiveness of sins." When Jesus speaks His word, this Supper is the feast of salvation.

The Bible says, "**Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!**" (Psalm 34:8)

And it says, "**On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast ... He will swallow up death forever ...**" (Isaiah 25:6-9)

And we sing, "This is the Feast of victory for our God ..."

This is the Supper of Salvation. When you put it together with Baptism and the Simple Word you find something. God has arranged it so we experience salvation with all our senses. We hear the Word of God. We feel the splash of the water. We see the printed word. We taste the bread and we smell the wine. Every one of the senses are involved.

We are invited to a feast; and the background of the Lord's Supper is a feast. It was the Feast of the Passover with the blood of the lamb marking the doors and the next morning heading out of Egypt. It is a celebration of freedom.

The celebration surrounds us, and the joy fills our soul. Jesus calls us to His Supper, and this meal fills the senses. He feeds us with the bread of heaven and the wine of joy. We are invited. But here is the best part. Together with bread and wine Jesus says, "**Take, eat, this is My Body**" and "**My Blood shed for you for forgiveness.**" He gives us Himself. On the tongue? To eat and drink? Just how close does He want to be?

- Back in the Garden of Eden, God promised that He would send salvation. Sending salvation might be enough for some, but not for God.
- So, God spoke the prophecies. He would not just send salvation; He Himself would bring it into our world. And bringing salvation certainly would be enough for some, but not for God!

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- So, God spoke more promises. He would not just bring salvation; God Himself would be born into our human race. The virgin would conceive and bear a child and would call His name "Immanuel," God-with-us. (Isaiah 7:14) He came so close to us that He became one of us. That certainly should have been enough, but not for God.
- Jesus came to bear our burdens and carry our sorrows. (Isaiah 53:4) He went to the tomb of Lazarus and shared the grief we feel. **"Jesus wept."** (John 11:35) And then Jesus went to carry our sins, take them as His own on the cross, and set us free. He shared the very worst part of us. And that certainly should have been coming close enough to us! But not for God!
- He died! He shared the punishment, the execution, the soul being wrenched away from the body! He shared the judgment and the wrath of God pounding down on sinners. (Mark 15:34) Exactly how close does He want to be to you and to me?

Here comes the sweet part:

How close does Jesus want to be with us? After taking all our sin and death on Himself, Jesus gives us His life!

It was not enough for Jesus to purchase and win us. He has decided to share with us His life, eternal, glorious and full of blessing. Jesus says, **"Because I live you also will live."** (John 14:19) Jesus shares His kingdom, and promises to transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body. (Philippians 3:21) Certainly that is enough! How can there be any more closeness with Jesus?

But there in the Lord's Supper what happens? Jesus takes His own "risen-from-the-dead" body and He puts it on your tongue. He makes you of one body with God who has come into the world. And Jesus takes His "shed-for-you-for-the-forgiveness-of-sins" blood, and He gives it to you to drink; to taste and see that the Lord is good; to swallow forgiveness and have forgiveness become part of your physical being. There in the eating and drinking is the promise, **"When He appears we shall be like Him"**. (1 John 3:2)

It is the "Tasty Word." Jesus puts His word and Himself into this Supper, "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Whoever believes these words has what they say, exactly as they read, namely "forgiveness of sins." (*Small Catechism, Lord's Supper Question 3*)

Indeed this is the Feast of Salvation, the meal that gives, renews, and strengthens faith. With Jesus' words and promises, **"who shall separate us from the love of God? ... neither ... nor ... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our lord."** (Romans 8:35-39)

### Our Prayer:

**Lord Jesus, thank You for this meal, this amazing Supper. You give Yourself! Your body and blood! To feed me; to join Yourself to me; and to carry me into all the blessings You have! How this can be I leave to You. How I can receive such blessings I cannot conceive. But it is Your will to bless, to connect me to You, and to give me an eternity of blessings. Thank You, my Savior and Friend. Let me love You forever; and let me tell of Your love through my life and words. Amen.**



## HE BREATHED ON THEM

5/30/2020

Those words are from Easter Evening, written in the Book of John. **"He breathed on them"** (John 20:22). Usually we pay attention to all the other parts. Jesus rose from the dead and began to show Himself to His disciples: to Mary Magdalene; the Two on the way to Emmaus; to Peter; and then the disciples in the upper room. They were huddled together in fear, the doors were locked, they had heard the stories but were not sure what to believe. And then Jesus was there, right there among them. He said **"Peace be with you"** and showed them His hands and His side. And He sent them to bring forgiveness and the Gospel of salvation to the world.

But there is this one little part. **"And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit ...'"** (John 20:22)

That's a very vivid image this year. We have had to think about masks, social distancing, sheltering at home, and so many things shut down. But, "He (Jesus) breathed on them". When I teach about this in Confirmation Class I always try to remember to bring garlic. Because this is not describing Jesus standing at the other end of the room and going, "Haa" One of my teachers told our class at Seminary how people in the Middle-east like to be so much closer to each other when they talk. It can be uncomfortable for someone from our part of the world. Then he said that when they want to speak a blessing they will get in real close and "bathe you in their breath." As the blessing goes on you will sometime have to inhale, and then you will find out whether or not they like garlic!

When you hear the verse, **"He breathed on them"** do not think of Jesus standing far off. He is being close, giving a blessing and saying, **"Receive the Holy Spirit."** And, by the way, the word for Spirit and the word for breath is the same in Hebrew.

We are in the middle of a time of being so careful of breath, and closeness, and still worried about getting something from someone else's breath. And then we read, Jesus **"breathed on them"**. Exactly!

The scientists tell us there are bits of virus we could "get." It could be dangerous. It could bring death. What Jesus breaths on His disciples is bits of the Word of God. **"Receive the holy Spirit."** **"If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven ..."** (John 20:23) Bits of the

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Word of God, given by the breath and words of Jesus bring life. These are pieces of the God's Eternal Word. They get into the soul and they bring life. They get into the deepest parts of our heart and they change us. When that Word takes hold of us there is a dying and a rising. ***"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."*** (Romans 6:3-4)

And then, with the words and the Spirit of Jesus within them, Jesus prepares them to spread His Gospel. Fifty days later came the gift of the Holy Spirit, giving languages and spreading the Gospel. Everyone who caught it (3,000 that day) was changed. The disciples went out breathing out the breath Jesus had breathed into them, breathing out bits of the eternal Word of God. It continued to spread, person to person all over the world, bringing faith and eternal life everywhere. And it hasn't been stopped yet!

### **Our Prayer:**

***Lord Jesus, breathe Your Word into my soul, and guide me by Your Spirit. I pray, that the verses and promises all over in Your world would work their way all through me, so my thinking, feeling, desires, and attitudes may be changed and formed according to Your will. Give me devotion to You, compassion for my neighbor, patience and grace in times of conflict, faith in Your wisdom and power, and winsomeness in my words. May I always see my neighbor as one loved by You and made in Your image; that I may serve Your kingdom, as You bring together the Great Gathering of souls into eternal life. Amen.***