

Welcome to a Year in the New Testament

By Rev. J. David Israel

I'm so glad you've taken up the challenge to read through the New Testament in a year. This is a journey of faith that will take you places you never expected to go. In the end you will be glad you went. Reading through the Gospels will ground you in the knowledge of all that Christ said and did. The book of The Acts of the Apostles will help you learn what those first believers did as they sought to imitate their Savior. The many letters that follow will give you insight into the struggles and triumphs of the first faith communities. The instructions these letters give to the early churches will inspire your heart as you seek to be as faithful. The concluding book, The Revelation of John, remains the most mysterious book printed and engages the mind with the promises of the future God is creating. Welcome to this journey.

It is my pleasure to provide you with some reflections along the way. I've written these, chapter by chapter, in prayerful hope that they will offer you deeper understanding and insight. More than anything I hope they will spark in you a desire to learn more. This is designed to be read Monday through Friday, taking the weekend off (or to catch up.) I've offered three Psalms to be read each weekend for those who want something more. If you persevere through these as well you will have read the full book of Psalms before year end.

As a side note, I've been reading through the New International Version of the Bible as I've been writing this. I think any version is helpful in its own ways, but I determined to read from just one as I've written. This should allow you a reference point if you get tripped up by some of the words that are used.

I recommend that you purchase your own study Bible or use the online Bibles provided for free at www.bible.com or www.biblegateway.org. Both sites provide many different translation choices and also reference materials to help if you like. To receive these devotions daily by email, visit www.lwinfo.org.

A Guide to Daily Reflection

By Rev. Karen Nothdurft

What? So what? Now what?

“What? So What? And Now What?” is a simple guide to help you reflect upon the scripture each day. “What?” defines the information in the chapter. “**So what?**” helps us discover the meaning of a passage. “**Now what?**” challenges us to consider what we will do in order to apply God’s word in our lives.

Read the daily scripture asking “**What?**” What is happening in this chapter? What people are in the story? What information is found in this scripture passage? What troubles arise?

Then look back over the reading asking “**So what?**” So what does this mean? So what is the point of this passage? So what questions does this scripture raise?

Review the chapter once more asking “**Now what?**” Now what am I to do? Now that I have encountered this truth, what action will I take? Now, what will I change in my life in order to live according to the Spirit of Christ?

Keep a notebook of your findings, reflections and questions. You may wish to jot down a prayer, a song or a word that you want to lift up to God.

MARCH 4

A LOVER OF GOD

Luke 1

As with each book of the Bible, there is a difference of opinion on authorship. Every expert agrees that the author of Luke and the author of The Acts of the Apostles (5th book of the New Testament) is one and the same person. However, there are some disagreements about who this Luke fellow was. Many believe that he was a physician who traveled with Paul on many of his journeys. He's mentioned by Paul in Colossians, 2nd Timothy, and Philemon. Luke would surely know the stories of Jesus and be able to relate them in an accurate way. However, in the book of Acts, the author disagrees with Paul's writings about the order of things. You would think that someone who had traveled with Paul and who sought to give an orderly account would have gotten Paul's adventures correct. Since he didn't, scholars are skeptical. For me, it's just not a big deal who wrote it.

The other issue that some scholars disagree on is who this Theophilus guy is. There are many different thoughts on this and each of them has some merit. I think the arguments become less important as you pick the name apart. The books of Luke and Acts appear to have been written to someone who already believed in Jesus and wanted to know more about what it takes to be a follower of Christ. Luke seems to be trying to show the reader how to live a Christian life, once you've decided to try to do so. Theophilus is from two Greek words; Theos meaning God and Philos meaning Love. The books of Luke/Acts is apparently written for all "Lovers of God" and not just one person. As you read these books, consider reading them as one who loves God and seeks to grow deeper in love.

MARCH 5

THE PROMISE OF JESUS

Luke 2

It unfolds like a police report. “When did it happen?” In the days of Caesar Augustus, while Quirinius was governor of Syria. “Who was involved?” Well pretty much everyone, but specifically a couple named Mary and Joseph. They are engaged and, though she is expecting, they’re not yet married. “Where did this take place?” It all started in Nazareth, up Galilee way. However the important events unfolded when they traveled south to Bethlehem, a little town in Judea.

“Now tell me what happened, Luke, in your own words.” Joseph seemed to have forgotten to book a room ahead of time so Mary gave birth to a son in the barn out back. She wrapped Him up all warm and tight and put Him in the manger as no crib was available. “That doesn’t sound like anything worth reporting.” No there’s more, this caused quite a stir among the shepherds. They showed up in droves and started talking about choirs of angels and how this kid would become the Savior of the people. The parents took a cue from that and named Him Jesus (Yeshua in Hebrew) which translates, God Saves. Not only that, when they went up to Jerusalem two people known to frequent the temple also claimed this Child is the Savior. The two didn’t know each other and none of them seemed to know any shepherds. “Sounds like a conspiracy is forming. I’m going to have to keep a close eye on this kid as He grows older.”

Keep a close eye on what happens in the rest of the story and you decide if Jesus fulfills what was promised at His birth.

MARCH 6

GAINING THE LORD'S FAVOR

Luke 3

My father wasn't a religious man. He didn't go to church except for the rare holiday and then it was only to appease my mom. When I accepted my call to ministry and shared that with my dad, he thought I was nuts. I was leaving a lucrative job for three years of seminary and a lifetime of limited income. He saw no sense in that. Over time he came around a bit. When we would talk he would be interested in what I was doing, but not in the question "why are you doing this?" I was fine with that. Dad had come to terms with my profession, at least from the perspective that I was providing for my family. To him, that was all that really mattered.

When Jesus kneels to pray and hears the voice of His Father tell Him He is proud of Him, I get a little tender in my heart. I can see what a motivating moment that must have been. This is the beginning of Jesus' ministry, nothing has happened yet. He hasn't healed or taught. He hasn't had those run-ins with the Pharisees or been challenged by the skeptics. He really hasn't accomplished anything except submitting Himself to be baptized into a future ministry. For what Jesus is about to do, His Father in Heaven is proud.

Our accomplishments don't win us favor with the Lord. Those things we do, say, think, believe; they're all good things. They're important to our maturity as followers of Jesus Christ. They aren't what makes the Father in heaven proud of us. The decision to live out our baptism is what makes the Father proud. In our response to our baptism we hear, "You are my child, whom I love, with you I am well pleased."

MARCH 7

FULFILLING JESUS' PROCLAMATION

Luke 4

We live between the “now” and “not yet.” Jesus proclaims that the scripture from Isaiah has been fulfilled. Good News to the poor, freedom to prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, the oppressed are relieved of their burden and all debts are forgiven (that’s the meaning of “the year of the Lord’s favor.”) So far I see the Good News part, but the rest hasn’t quite yet been fulfilled, has it? The Good News I see is the Good News of salvation, but there are still plenty of poor, so I’m not quite sure what’s “good” for them. How can Jesus say He’s been anointed to fulfill a promise God made around 500 BC when I don’t see it completed in 2019 AD?

This is where our knowledge that we live in the “now” and “not yet” is helpful. If you take this passage out of Luke and demand proof that it’s all done, you’re demanding the “not yet” to happen on your terms. What we know is the Bible must be read as a whole. The Book of Revelation, the final book of the Bible, speaks of an end time when God will finally recreate Earth, such that all reflect the image and glory of the Lord the way Jesus did 2000 years ago. That’s the “not yet” part of our understanding. God’s desire is that everyone will come to that faith and trust in His Saving Grace that is the Good News Jesus tells us he must preach in verse 43. The Good News for all of us is that God is very patient. He gives us our whole lives to try to get it right.

The “now” is where we come in. Jesus’ life on Earth is meant to be the model for our Christian lives. The questions for our lives should focus on living out the things that Jesus said were fulfilled on that day in Nazareth (verses 16-21). Sharing the Good News in how we address the hopes and hurts of the poor, those who are hurting, those who are imprisoned (whether justly or not), those who are oppressed by systems of governance and economics; this is how we are to live our lives. How does your life reflect the fulfillment of Jesus’ proclamation?

MARCH 8

BEING BLIND TO FAMILIARITY

Luke 5

I don't know if it's true in real life, but I see it all the time on TV shows. A doctor is faced with treating a family member. The chief of medicine makes them back off because they are too close to the patient to offer proper care. A TV detective is investigating the murder of a loved one. The chief of police makes them back off because they are too close to the deceased to make an objective investigation. It seems that being too close is not always ideal.

When we're too close we may ignore some details in favor of others. We may not see the obvious because we are chasing the obscure. Or, possibly, we are so captivated by what we already know that we ignore new witnesses, evidence, data, or symptoms.

As I was reading this scripture I came across a portion of it that was very familiar to me. The conclusion of this chapter deals with old wine and new wineskins. I've preached on those verses before, probably used those dozens of times in my sermons. However, something was different this time. As I was reading I was tempted to skip through what was familiar since it was the end of the reading. Instead I disciplined myself to read the whole thing through like I was seeing it for the first time. When I did, I found that the final verse (39) "And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'" I'm not sure I remember ever reading that verse. It jumped out at me like a surprise ending to an old familiar story. It doesn't change the meaning of the passage, if anything it emphasizes it. It does remind me that when I read the Bible with casual familiarity, there is probably a lot that I'm missing.

Why not read this chapter again today? See if you missed anything the first time through.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 28-30

MARCH 11

CHOOSING THE TWELVE

Luke 6

Jesus spends a whole night in prayer before choosing the people He will mentor for the task of spreading the Good News after He is taken from them. As I look at the list of people He chose, I suspect much of that prayer was arguing with God about the list He was presented. The guys Jesus chose were not exactly the cream of the crop on anyone's list.

There was Peter, Andrew, James and John. Four rough talking, tough living fishermen. Jesus probably pointed out that it would take a baptism per day for a month just to wash the fish smell off them. There was Philip, the youngest and least likely to make a decision for himself. Bartholomew was the one Greek in the group. Why do I need a Greek in a Jewish movement? Matthew, the former tax collector, probably cheated most of the others at some point in his career. Have you seen what happens when you get a tax collector alone with four fishermen he's cheated? There's Thomas, I doubt he'll ever get it. Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot both come from groups who seek the violent overthrow of the Roman occupation; how do I explain the "Prince of Peace" title to them? You have James Bar Alphaeus and Judas Bar James (Bar means "son of") and that makes three Jimmy's in one group. Is that even legal? I bet Jesus said, "If you put me together with this group, one of them is going to get me killed!"

As I look at the twelve Jesus called I begin to realize, if He can use them, maybe He can make something good out of me... and you too!

MARCH 12

A SIN IS A SIN IS A SIN

Luke 7

Remember that trick question you used to ask as a child? “Which weighs more; a pound of feathers or a pound of lead?” Of course, you know the answer, a pound is a pound is a pound, no matter what it’s made of. That makes sense to you and me. When things are put on a scale we demand that the scales are accurate, fairly balanced. When we go to the butcher shop and ask for a pound of New York strip steak, we expect to get our 16 ounces. No more, no less. If the steak on the scale weighs 17 ounces we would expect to pay a little more and if it weighs 15 ounces we would expect to pay a little less. That’s how a fair market works.

When Jesus goes to lunch at the home of Simon the Pharisee, we get a glimpse into the scale God uses to weigh our sins. Apparently a sin is a sin is a sin, no matter what it’s made of. A woman enters the Pharisee’s home (By the way, how’d she get in? If you want to do a little deeper research, this would be worth your study) and proceeds to weep over her sinful life. The tears are so abundant that they fall on Christ’s feet and she washes them. The woman is a sinner we’re told, which translates to “prostitute” for our purpose. When the Pharisee offers a self-righteous protest, Jesus shares the weight and measure of sin.

The Pharisee was probably guilty of such sins as greed and pride. Minor in our eyes, right? The woman was a prostitute who made her money with men of no honor. In a time where there were few medical treatments, she probably was guilty of passing along disease as well. Put the sins of the Pharisee on one side of the scale and the sins of the woman on the other. Which has the greater weight? A sin is a sin is a sin in the eyes of the Lord. They weigh the same. At this point a scripture passage on judging others ought to be coming to mind for you.

MARCH 13

YOU ARE MORE THAN A READER

Luke 8

Sometimes we believe things because we haven't taken time to fully understand them. DaVinci, for instance, paints the Last Supper with Jesus and the twelve apostles. We assume that those were the only ones present at the meal. Jesus wanders from place to place and speaks to His disciples and we assume the twelve were the only ones. When they would camp out on the countryside between towns we assume it was a bunch of guys gathering around campfires, telling stories, and lying about exploits (except for Jesus, of course, He couldn't lie.)

However, the opening of this chapter reminds us that our vision of Jesus' following is far too small and based upon a lack of research. Mary, Joanna, Susannah, and many others were along with the contingent. Some went along the whole way. Jesus' mother, Mary, and her other children appear in the conversation from time to time. They probably were followers along the way. Others followed only when Jesus was nearby. There's nothing suggesting that the 5,000 He fed followed Him from Galilee to Jerusalem. I think it's safe to say there were far more than the twelve at any given time, and it was a coed following.

It suggests for me that we are intended to be more than merely readers of this story. There were more than just the twelve, but these were men and women who went unnamed and served various purposes such as financial and food preparation and caring for the sick and providing for the poor. Nowhere in the scripture does it talk about Jesus organizing those activities, but the suggestion in His teaching was that they were taking place. Someone had the task of organizing each ministry. Since they go unnamed and unheralded, I take it to mean that we are all called to serve Christ, with or without recognition. We all get to enter into the story. Christ gets the glory and it is His Name that gets lifted up in praise, but we all have a place of ministry in Christ's contingent.

MARCH 14

KNOW YOUR CALLING

Luke 9

“I’ve got my mind made up!” “I’ve set my heart on this and I’ll not stop until I’m done.” “I’m not a quitter. I’ll see this through.” Think of a time when these words escaped your lips or were fixed in your mind. When I moved to Jackson I was quite confident that I would run a marathon before I turned fifty. When fifty came and health issues and training slip ups prevented it, I determined that I would run a marathon while I was fifty. Six years later, my heart is still set on the goal of running a marathon so I’ve decided I’ll complete the 26.2 mile race while I am in my fifties. Do you have a goal that you are doggedly pursuing, others don’t quite understand, and seems ever so elusive?

Verse 51 seems to be rather innocuous at first. It would be easy to ignore it and pass it by without a second thought. However, this verse is the turning point in the book of Luke. In this verse Jesus “sets His face to go to Jerusalem.” The rest of the book of Luke is pointing us toward what happens in Jerusalem. Jesus will face His toughest tests, be severely beaten and brutalized and hung on a cross to die. I think it’s safe to say that to “set His face” did not mean He was looking forward to what was to come.

Jesus decides at this moment to go through with the calling His Father in Heaven has given Him. He grits His teeth, stands up straight, and mentally takes firm hold of what is ahead of Him. His countenance changed and His sense of urgent determination was clear to all who came near Him. To have this kind of resolve one must be in prayer with the Father to feel the power of His presence driving you forward. What calling has the Father given you? How are you setting your face toward that call? (And you DO have a call!)

MARCH 15

OFFERING HEALING TO OTHERS

Luke 10

As Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem (see Luke 9) He becomes more and more instructive toward His closest followers. The seventy who go out to preach are celebrated for their deeds, yet cautioned to be clear about the meaning of those deeds. He tells them they are blessed for what they've seen and heard. This has deeper implications because soon they will need to be the witnesses who share it with others, like they did when Jesus sent them out in pairs. He gives the Good Samaritan example within the hearing of His followers. They know they've done these kind of good deeds and therefore are on the right track toward eternal life. Finally, in the story of Martha and Mary they learn that paying attention to the Word of Christ is far more important than the busyness with which people often occupy themselves.

These instructions are important for all who are seeking to be discipled in the way of Christ. Jesus sends seventy, He doesn't tell them to sit in the pew and wait for a visitor to sit next to them. He encourages them to share their faith with others by what they say and do, not what they say or do. It's not an either/or choice as many would have it today. He tells them to take the risk that others will reject them and to offer care to those who have already been rejected (like the Samaritans). He lets them know that looking like you're busy in the presence of Christ is not laudable. Paying attention to His Word so you can take it out to others is the goal for all those who seek to know and love Christ.

Many of us have the misperception that Christ's words were meant only as a salve to heal our broken places. This is true, but only in part. Christ's words were meant to move broken people out into the world filled with brokenness, offering that healing to others.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 31-33

MARCH 18

FOLLOWING THE LAW OF GOD'S GRACE

Luke 11

“Woe to you,” Jesus says. I’m not sure I want to be on the receiving end of one of Jesus’ “woes.” I’d far rather have Jesus saying “blessed are you.” When Jesus pronounces blessing He is offering happiness, contentment and good fortune that are from, and point you toward, heaven. When He offers woe it is sorrow and distress that is meant to cause alarm. Woe is not heaven related but is the source of distance from heavenly reward. I’d far rather be blessed by Jesus than be on the receiving end of one of His woes.

It may be important to us to look at His woes and ask ourselves if we’re standing on the right side of the blessed/woe fence. We often look at the Pharisees and the “experts in the law” of the New Testament and see them as a group of people found in a moment of time with whom Jesus did verbal battle. They are not only people from a particular time in history. I believe Jesus intended these stories as archetypes. An archetype is a symbol used in literature where the original is reflected in the lives of the reader. Jesus intends for us to hear the woes and ask if we ourselves participate in them in any way.

The first woe complains that a Pharisee makes an offering of 10% without seeking justice for the poor; both are required. Which do you do? The second woe complains about the sin of vanity, especially religious vanity. In what ways is your public faith worn like costume jewelry? The third complains that Pharisees set up sinners for failure rather than seeking to offer grace and life. How does your faith lead others to emptiness? The fourth, fifth, and sixth are pointed toward the religious legalists who worship the rules and regulations of humans and have forsaken the simplicity of loving God and loving neighbor. What personal/religious rules make it hard for you to love the sinners God loves so dearly?

Tough teachings today. It’s far easier to follow the rules of men than the law of God’s Grace.

MARCH 19

OUR ETERNAL STATUS

Luke 12

Perhaps you've heard a quote that goes something like this... "One hundred years from now, it won't matter what car I drove, what kind of house I lived in, how much I had in my bank account, nor what my clothes looked like, but, the world may be a little better because I was important in the life of a child." I think Jesus was saying close to the same thing in this chapter. Chapter 12 can be summed up in the first half of verse 22. "Do not worry about your life..."

Jesus teaches many different things in this chapter, all of which relate to an eternal focus. We are not to be concerned with those who can rob us of life. Our concern should be with our eternal status. We shouldn't focus on our clothing or other vain attempts; God values us because of who He is, not because of how we dress/live/drive/work. Our focus on comfort and notoriety in this life has very little bearing on the things of God. All the worrying we do over our current status in life is virtually meaningless and not of eternal value. However, we are cautioned to take careful note of what we do to increase our eternal value. It is true that all we need to do to gain entrance into eternal glory is to trust Christ as our Lord and Savior. However, proof of that trust is when we live an "eternally bound" life and not one that is so firmly fixed on the things of this earth. Jesus points out that just because you can repeat what the Lord requires of you doesn't matter a whole lot. Repeating it in your words and deeds means everything.

MARCH 20

LIVE OUT THE WAY OF CHRIST

Luke 13

There is an interesting play between the parables in verses 18-21 and what Jesus says in verses 22-30. It's almost as if they are conflicting statements. At first Jesus is saying that His Kingdom is going to grow and flourish. In the mustard seed illustration, the smallest of seeds grows to a tree large enough for nesting. Then yeast, needed for leavening the bread, is mixed into a very large amount of flour. In mixing it throughout, it will cause all the dough to rise. In these metaphors Jesus is prophetically announcing that His Kingdom will spread and mix into all the world.

In the second group of verses Jesus seemingly shuts the door on the earthly kingdom. It's as if He's saying the kingdom of Earth will grow far and wide and everyone will be included, but the Kingdom of Heaven has a very narrow opening. That's kind of tough to hear and consider. After all, if I am on board in this life, what would exclude me from the next life? This is a tricky question to answer and there are three basic responses. The first would be those who are more fundamental in their beliefs and adhere to a strict, orthodox set of rules. They would say, "You just aren't really saved." The issue, of course, is that the Pharisees were saying exactly that and Jesus refuted their orthodoxy which was based upon rules and practices. The other extreme would be the Universalists who maintain that Jesus' salvation was for everyone and nothing is necessary to earn or achieve it. That doesn't sound like a very narrow door, so that can't be right.

A third option is rather gray, but it makes the most sense. Jesus teaches us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. He commissions us to spread the Word of God far and wide. He commands us to love God and love our neighbor in both word and deed. Are you earnestly seeking after that? Are you seeking God's forgiveness when you fail, dusting yourself off and getting back into the game? Live out the way of Christ and let God's grace do the rest.

MARCH 21

ARE YOU WORTH YOUR SALT?

Luke 14

In Jesus' day, salt was an important mineral to add to the diet. Not only did it add flavor, but salt causes the body to retain water. When you live in an arid land, keeping water in your body is important. Salt would be added to water to kill some of the pollutants within it as well. It was so valuable that many of the soldiers would be paid a daily ration of salt. It was called "salt work" from which we derive the word "salary." In Greece, salt was often traded for slaves. When the deal turned out not to be so good for the new slave owner, the slave was said to "not be worth his salt."

The salt in that day was not as refined as the salt we have on our table today. In its most crude form it was mixed with a lot of other minerals, rocks really, and didn't have the depth of flavor. Salt with many other minerals would absorb the moisture from the air and take on the flavor of those wet minerals. It lost its saltiness.

In this chapter Jesus talks about acting with humility. Then He speaks of inviting the humble members of society into your house, to eat with you (a practice of honoring others.) From there He goes on to say that there is a great cost to being His disciples. These are hard words to hear, Christ telling us to hate our family. He includes in that list, to hate our very life. It goes with the theme of humility. He's telling us to love Him, His teachings, His way of living more than we love all others, including ourselves. If we live that life we will be glorified in the end.

If we don't, we're like salt that has lost its saltiness. You're not even worth a pile of (and this is the closest Jesus comes to cursing) manure.

MARCH 22

THE SEARCHER IS THE LORD

Luke 15

Two of the more familiar scripture passages are found in this chapter of Luke. The lost sheep and the prodigal son have stood the test of time and have become a part of our modern day lexicon. We often describe a person who struggles with life and its challenges as a “lost sheep” or a “prodigal.” If not for the scriptures the word “prodigal” probably wouldn’t have survived the test of time; we just don’t use it in any other context.

The third parable in this chapter is less commonly used, the lost coin, but it helps us refocus our attention to where it belongs. With sheep and prodigals we put our focus upon the ones who are lost. “That poor little lamb” or “that squandering rascal of a son” might be on our mind. However, the coin is not so animated. It’s an inanimate object that was misplaced. With the sheep or the prodigal we might find ourselves focused upon the object of the search as we ourselves have been lost; physically and spiritually. The coin shifts our focus from that which is lost to the one who is doing the searching. All three stories are about the searcher and not what is lost.

With our focus on the searcher, verse 7 becomes the thesis for the three stories. Luke 15:7 states “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” (NIV) The stories are about God. The searcher is the Lord. You and I are the ones who are being found. Once found, we join in the search. In the end, there’s always a party when one is found.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 34-36

MARCH 25

IS CHEATING A VIRTUE?

Luke 16

I've always found the leading parable in this chapter to be a little disturbing. The manager cheats his master and gets praised for it. We spend countless hours teaching our children not to cheat. "Cheating won't get you anywhere," we tell them. In schools we know that cheating can get us somewhere; suspended, expelled, or set back a year from too many "F's". How is it that cheating is raised to such a level of value? It's not. We read this parable from the angle of those who put such a high value on money. Verse 15 tells us more about the Lord's angle, "What people value highly is detestable in God's sight." God puts no value on money. There is the old fable that tells us that in heaven the streets are paved with gold. That isn't meant to suggest that the most valuable streets in all the universe are in heaven, yet we tend to think of it in that way. It means that in heaven, the gold we highly value isn't worth the dust on a dirt trail. Jesus is telling us to act as shrewdly as the people who put their focus on money. They use their money in ways that are important to their position. We should do the same. We should use our money in ways that are important to our position as children of the Most High God, who puts no value on money and puts all value on using money to gain friends. Not to buy them off, but to show mercy and compassion. The end result being found in verse 9 "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

MARCH 26

THE CAUSE FOR STUMBLING

Luke 17

I've been a member of several fraternities, service clubs, and various groups. They all have rules. To join you have to meet various requirements. Entrance fees, agreement to sets of principles, prerequisite standards are all part of these clubs. To remain a member there may be other requirements. Attendance, annual dues, service hours and other tasks of membership are common to maintaining membership.

Local churches and denominations are human organizations that have a tendency to create rules, whether written or not. To be a member you must say this and do that. This isn't in itself a bad thing. We humans need rules and structure to prevent us from following a path that is inconsistent with our purpose. At Living Word we seek to make disciples who live out their faith through Worship, Learn, Serve and Celebrate. Everything we propose to undertake should be consistent with that purpose and anything we are currently doing that isn't part of it should cease to be supported. The structure that is formed to support the purpose is important to the church, the human creation.

Jesus isn't forming a human structure, though He does call humans to structure themselves around the faith. Jesus presents verses 1-3 from a negative perspective - "woe to anyone through whom [stumbling blocks] come." From a positive perspective, could it be a responsibility of membership in the Kingdom of God to remove stumbling blocks? Our human structures should not only seek to NOT cause others to stumble, we should actively remove anything from our structures that prevent others from entering God's Kingdom.

MARCH 27

MEASURING FAITH

Luke 18

How do you measure faith? Have you grown in your faith over the years? Do you trust Christ more to lead you in the paths of righteousness? How do you measure that? This chapter offers several measures of faith. You can't look at the inside of a person's heart, only the individual can know what is within... and God because He is "the Father who knows all hearts..." (Romans 8:27, NLT) How do you measure it for yourself?

Persistence in seeking justice; verses 1-8.

Humility; verses 9-14.

A child-like openness to Christ; verses 15-17.

A heart for generosity not greed; verses 18-30.

A mind in search of deeper meaning; verses 31-34.

The vulnerability to allow Christ to fix our brokenness; verses 35-43.

Are you growing in some measure of these things? Continue in prayer and study, serving one another, and searching the scriptures with friends on your journey of faith. Someone once said we tend to accomplish what we measure. This chapter would be a good measuring stick for your faith growth.

MARCH 28

THE BEGINNING TO AN ETERNAL REIGN

Luke 19

As we approach Easter, it's appropriate that Jesus approaches Jerusalem in our reading. In Luke's version of the Palm Sunday story there are no palms and no donkeys. Those are found in Matthew's telling of the story. What we do read of is a colt and people spreading their cloaks (coats) along the roadway. Both are significant, and though they differ in detail from Matthew's account, share the same meaning.

The decision of Jesus to ride into town on a colt/donkey meant He was coming in peace. Only a fool rides into battle on a colt or a donkey. Jesus wasn't looking for a fight, either with the Romans or the religious leaders of Jerusalem. However, He was bringing change and, generally speaking, that brings a fight. To the Romans He was bringing a change in their understanding of power. This "King" rides into Jerusalem not wanting to fight but instead to bring peace. To the religious leaders He represents a new understanding of access to God's grace; not based upon sacrifices and contributions, but based upon God's open arms of grace and forgiveness. As it turns out, Romans and religious rulers would rather fight than switch.

As to the cloaks and palms; they were spread along the road as a symbol of respect for the coming King. Not only would it be unseemly for a King's feet to touch the ground that peasants walk upon, but it would be the same for the animal upon which He rode. Generally, Jesus was not one for the pomp and circumstance, but this once He allows followers to hail Him as King.

As Easter approaches, this King will suffer and die. You and I both know that doesn't signal an end to the reign of a King but the beginning to an eternal reign. That new beginning requires change for both you and me. How are you preparing yourself for the reign of the Eternal King?

MARCH 29

BE BOLD WITH YOUR FAITH

Luke 20

In the movie “Men in Black,” the lead character, J, asks his mentor, K, why they don’t tell the world that there are aliens living among them. J says, “Why the big secret? People are smart. They can handle it.” To which K responds, “A person is smart. People are dumb, panicky dangerous animals and you know it.” I think the teachers of the Law and the chief priests new this as well.

This chapter and the ones that follow all take place in one week of Jesus’ life; His last week. This is what Christians call “Holy Week.” In Jesus’ time this was the celebration of the Passover, their holiest of days, and people would come from miles around, sometimes walking for days or even weeks, to be in Jerusalem on the day of Passover. The population of Jerusalem would have swelled to four or five times its normal size. Tensions would have been high as the Roman occupying force would be fearful of a riot. Normal services such as food resources, water, and even the limited sewer system they had would be stretched to the breaking point. Add to this the religious fervor of a high holy day and you have a powder keg of a mob in the works.

Clearly, Jesus was popular with this crowd and He uses the fear of this crowd by the religious leaders to allow Him to get away with some pretty tough teachings. These are the things that have to be said but can only be said in private, or in countryside where He was saying these same things before. They can only be said in public in the seat of the religious leader’s power if the right environment exists. Jesus never stirs up a riot but He uses the fear of it to allow His voice to be heard without retribution... at least for now.

It brings up interesting questions about mob mentality and personal responsibility. Jesus doesn’t teach anything different than He had all along. Are you as bold about your faith at work and home and among friends as you are when you are in the safety of the mob at church?

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 37-39

APRIL 1

ARE WE THERE YET?

Luke 21

“Are we there yet?”

“No.”

“Are we there yet?”

“No.”

“Are we there yet?”

“No.”

“When will we get there?”

“We’ll get there when we get there! Now stop asking and quit pinching your little brother!”

Before we had GPS and were able to pinpoint an arrival time more accurately, and before we had electronic devices to distract us along the trip, we often had to hear that refrain from children. It still happens today but at least our answers are clearer. The signs that point to when we will arrive are far easier to read than previous generations. Yet the patience of a child only has so many minutes in it before the question arises, “Are we there yet?”

It’s the question that’s been asked by each generation about Jesus’ return. Some will remember the concerns about the 2nd coming when 1999 turned to 2000. By the way, it happened when 999 turned to 1000. I’ll wager it will happen when 2999 turns to 3000. Just wait and see.

In this passage, Jesus gives some broad, general signs about when this will happen. Wars and rumors of wars. Signs in the sun and moon and stars. All these apocalyptic signs and every time one of them happens someone will tell you that it’s a sign He’s about to come again. They’ve been predicting it for 2000 years now and no one has yet to be correct. In other places in the Gospels we find out why no one has been correct: “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

APRIL 1

(Mark 13:32) We're not supposed to know! Instead we're supposed to always prepare ourselves for the advent of the second coming.

Verse 36 tells us to always be prepared for the second coming. This isn't some "doomsday preppers" instruction. This is instruction to always guard our hearts against the things that distract us from Christ. In that way we'll be ready whether He comes to us in this life, or we go to Him when this life is complete.

APRIL 2

GOD IS IN CONTROL?

Luke 22

One of the more popular theological statements that's thrown around a lot is "God is in Control." As a teacher of theology (from the pulpit every week) I want to make sure we carefully qualify what we mean. Let me illustrate. From about the middle of the book of Luke Jesus has predicted His death. He even gave us the location; Jerusalem. By the end of book He tells us that it will happen on this particular trip to Jerusalem; so He has given us a time frame. It's evident that the human side of Jesus had communicated deeply with the divine side (why else would He wander off to pray on a regular basis?) and discerned this to be the time and the place. I'd feel safe in saying that God is in control of how it is playing out so far.

As Jesus teaches in the Temple He provides ample opportunity to be arrested for the crime of heresy or blasphemy. This is punishable by death under the Jewish law of the day. We've discussed in previous entries why the leaders chose not to arrest Him in such a public way. So what's left? A betrayal. The question comes now, if God is in control, was Judas chosen for this task? If so, he is a hero of the faith. After all, without Judas' faithfulness to the call of God on his life to betray Christ there is no crucifixion, no salvation for your sins and no resurrection to eternal life. If God is in control I'm in favor of whatever process is necessary to canonize Judas to become Saint Judas.

However, there's a flaw in that statement that we too easily cast about. God is in control of the life of Jesus because He constantly aligns Himself with the will of God, "...yet not my will, but yours be done." (v.42) However, Judas chooses to align himself with the will of Satan. (v.3) Judas had a choice. God would have delivered him from the temptation to be-

APRIL 2

tray had he only sought out God rather than Satan. God wasn't in control of Judas' will.

God's not in control of your will, except when you decide to allow it. Jesus has to pray long and deep at Gethsemane. We are told He prayed so much that His sweat poured off Him like the blood of an open wound. To align yourself with the will of God is not near as easy as that of Satan, and it is your choice to make. God is in control, when you decide to live that way. What choice will you make?

APRIL 3

AND WHAT OF BARABBAS?

Luke 23

Buried in a tomb, rather than left on the cross. Usually the bodies hung on the cross for days to show Rome's power and ruthless treatment of those who would oppose their presence. Over time, decay and the pecking of birds would cause the body to fall to the ground where packs of wild dogs would drag it off for their use... a grisly but natural circle of life event. How did He get here? How quickly this all took place.

One moment Jesus is praying in Gethsemane and the next He is being tried before the High Priests (the religious leadership), then Pilate (the Roman leader) and then Herod (the Jewish civil leader) and then back to Pilate. He's innocent, Pilate, the outsider, can see that clearly but the mob would be whipped into a frenzy and demand to see the blood of one of their own. Jesus is whipped and then led off to be crucified, too weak to carry His own cross, another has that dubious privilege. He hangs there, a criminal to the right and to the left. How fortunate for the one thief who seeks grace in his moment of death. When He surrenders His Spirit heavenward, a dissenter among the religious leadership seeks Pilate's permission for the body to allow a proper burial. In a moment of weakness, or perhaps Pilate owed Joseph of Arimathea a favor, he allows the body a different fate than that of the criminals hanging beside Christ.

This is the story of the death of Christ. In the middle of this story we find the salvation of another. Barabbas was a criminal guilty of insurrection, which would have brought the wrath of the Roman leadership. He was also guilty of the most heinous of crimes, murder. This would have brought the wrath of the religious and civil leadership. His sentence was likely the cross as well, but his trial was probably handled in a more equitable way and there was no mob demanding his crucifixion. Here in the middle of this story,

APRIL 3

the most heinous of criminals is granted pardon and Christ takes his place on the cross.

Barabbas has a small and passing mention in the Bible but yet he is a metaphor for our understanding of the cross. Jesus is the substitute for Barabbas. Jesus pays the price, Barabbas goes free. Jesus is your substitute as well. Perhaps you didn't commit murder, but the commands of God to love your neighbor are too stringent for you to be completely innocent. You're guilty, but by Christ's death you are made innocent once again. You're free from your imprisonment of guilt, all that's left is to "go and sin no more."

APRIL 4

A UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTABLE RESURRECTION

Luke 24

I struggle with theologies that claim one particular perspective over another when that perspective is demographic. In the last fifty years or so theologies have arisen that are feminist, womanist, African American, South American, etc. I recall in my seminary reading how one noted theologian remarked to a younger scholar, who was seeking to write a demographically based theology. The elder scholar noted that if the theology he wrote was not universally applicable than it wasn't an acceptable theology. As I look at the theologies of those 50 years, what I see as helpful is when they correct the male centered, white European theology most of us grew up with. After all, ours is not a universally applicable theology either.

Among the important scripture texts for the feminist theologian are the verses found at the opening of this chapter. In all four Gospels, women are the first to witness the empty tomb, and in three they were the first to hear of the resurrected Christ. Jesus regarded women with equality. In Jesus' day it would be inappropriate for women to be taught as disciples or to follow along with an itinerant preacher, but Jesus counted women as His followers and welcomed them into His inner circle. No serious scholar today argues that Mary Magdalene didn't get equal treatment by Christ, even if she didn't get equal treatment by the Gospel writers.

In that way, the male dominated theology that raises men above women needs the challenge of feminism. Only a few short years ago issues around racial bias caused an eruption of social discontent in Ferguson, MO. African American theologians need to constantly remind us of the importance of equality of the races. South American theologians who are fighting against the mistreatment of indigenous people need to be heard. None of these theologies should promote

APRIL 4

their cause over the others, but they stand as important corrections. Jesus gives us grounds for correcting our 2000 year old errors when He chooses to honor women as the first to be resurrection witnesses. Does your belief about Christ include the rights and equal treatment of all minorities? If not, it's certainly not universal and therefore not acceptable.

APRIL 5

A NEW LIGHT

John 1

There was one particular church member who was fairly unpleasant to be around. One day she ended up in the hospital and I went to visit. She was not conscious so I had a brief conversation with her husband, said a prayer and went on my way. The next day I went to her room. She was out of bed brushing the hair of the elderly woman in the next bed. She introduced me as her pastor and proceeded to treat her elder friend as a queen. I later learned that she spent most days in the nursing home doing the same for the female residents. Truly I saw her in a new light. I knew who she was before, but I didn't really know her.

We know from our reading of the book of Luke that Jesus was John the Baptist's cousin. I have no doubt that they knew each other, probably grew up together, at least on holidays. So why does John say in verses 31 and 33 that he didn't know Him? John gives us the answer. At one point in an encounter with his cousin, John sees Jesus in a new light. John witnessed the presence of God's Spirit descend upon Jesus and light on Him like a dove. This revelation to John convinced him that everything he thought he knew about his younger cousin was less than the full picture. In seeing this, he came to know Christ the Savior within his cousin Jesus.

You've read Matthew, Mark and Luke now. Congratulations, that's 68 chapters and three full months completed. By this time you think you know Jesus. After all, Matthew, Mark and Luke are parallel stories with many similarities. However, you don't know the fullness of Christ until you read John. The book of John (not written by John the Baptist) presents Jesus in a completely different light. Some of the stories parallel the other three books, but for the most part this is a different account of Christ. As you read through John allow

APRIL 5

yourself to see Christ in a new light. Not one that discounts the other three books but rather brings fullness to your understanding of Christ's mission of salvation.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 40-42

APRIL 8

EVERYONE LOVES A WEDDING... RECEPTION

John 2

Everyone loves a wedding. Who am I kidding? There are several people who love a wedding; the bride, the mother of the bride, a few in attendance. Not everyone loves a wedding, but everyone loves a reception. Who doesn't love a party? OK, there are a few that don't, but stick with me here. Jesus gets invited to the reception and that's a novel idea alone. I've performed many a wedding where the couple is all like, "I'm glad Jesus is here at our wedding," but when the reception comes around they party like they never met the guy. However, it's a little difficult to convince a couple that they need to act with some form of decorum when Jesus produces 120 gallons of fine wine after everyone is already drunk.

The point to the changing of water to wine was to be a "sign" to the people who Jesus of Nazareth is; the Christ. You'll notice in John that "sign" is the preferred term to "miracle." A miracle tends to become the focus whereas a sign points the way. It's linguistically nitpicky, but it is an important difference in the Gospel of John. What Jesus did as far as healings and miraculous acts like changing water into wine are insignificant to this Gospel, except that they point to the nature of Christ.

None of us drives down the road, sees a sign and pulls over to study the sign and its material makeup. We don't focus on the structure unless we happen to be in the business of erecting signs. What we see is the direction it points, the distance yet to go, the services offered at the next exit. That's the point to Jesus' signs. John's use of the term would suggest that not only is changing water to wine a sign of who Christ is, but the same is true in the story of the turning over of the tables in the Temple. When we see these signs we are not supposed to focus on the sign but on where it leads us in response to the One performing the sign act.

APRIL 8

Signs of Christ are all around you even today. Take time to find one each day this weekend. You may want to write it down to remind yourself later that you had seen it.

APRIL 9

REBIRTH... FROM ABOVE

John 3

The interchange between Jesus and Nicodemus has fascinated both the scholarly theologian and the interested layperson for quite a long time. John 3:16 has become the most often quoted faith statement of all Christendom. It tells us that God's love has no boundaries. Christ's sacrifice is done willingly for the sake of a sacred relationship between you and the divine.

Other verses have captured attention as well. There are linguistic issues that keep scholars buzzing. John 3:3 talks about being "born again" or "born from above" depending on which translation you use. At issue is the Greek word "anothen" which can be translated "above" or "again" and still be accurate. So which did Jesus mean? Some point to Nicodemus' response and decide that Jesus meant "again." Others point to Jesus' follow up and the fact that most considered the residence of the Spirit to be directionally up. Therefore, Jesus meant "above." My response is both. Because it appears to be a play on words I think Jesus intentionally wanted us to consider a rebirth that originates from above.

John doesn't give us a story about Jesus' birth. So we turn to either Matthew or Luke's version of His birth and find that Jesus was born from above... the first time. The Spirit of God fathers the Christ child. Because of the circumstances of Jesus' birth, He is able to have a different relationship with God and with all of humanity than your birth has allowed. Jesus comes out of the womb loving God and loving His neighbor with a perfection we don't possess. Our birth is too earthy for that kind of love. In order to be able to love God and love our neighbor we must go through a transformational process, not unlike being reborn, that changes our hearts from our earthly bound selves to heavenly bound

APRIL 9

spirits. We must allow the Spirit of God to make in us a transformation toward love.

I suspect Jesus understood that for some the rebirth from above would come in a moment. However, He also knew that for some of us it would take a lifetime of effort. As life circumstances come at us, it's far too easy to seek to go back to the pretransformed, more earthbound self and hate our neighbor for at least a moment. That's what God's grace is for; to forgive us for our transgressions just as we seek to forgive those who transgress against us.

Seek to be born again, from above. Allow the Spirit of the Lord to transform your heart from an earthbound to heavenward.

APRIL 10

FOOD AND WATER

John 4

This is a wonderful chapter about faith and belief. Like a meal of bread and water, it is very basic, yet filling. The woman at the well is a beloved story for many reasons. Jesus crosses cultural boundaries of race to show the love of God. It was considered inappropriate to speak to a strange woman without her husband's permission. He crosses the boundary of gender to offer grace to a woman whose life, to that point, had been difficult. All of this conversation takes place over a drink of water. It's an engaging banter through which the woman moves from skeptic to believer to evangelist. The story concludes with her leaving to tell the town about her encounter with the One she has come to believe in. Many drink from the well of living water she shares.

The disciples had left to find food. They shopped in the same town that knew nothing about Christ until a woman from town shared with them. You should note that no one came to faith while the disciples were shopping. They were distracted by their task of bread buying while Christ was providing living water. The Bible is silent on the issue and yet it shouts out at me. A woman of questionable character is able to bring many people to Christ after a 5-minute encounter with the Lord. The disciples have been to Jerusalem and back with Jesus and didn't say a thing about Him as they went about their busy tasks.

When the disciples return with a meal for their leader, the woman returns to the town full from her encounter. As they offer food to Christ we learn that what really fills you is to do the will of God in your life. Jesus hasn't missed the opportunity to push the metaphor but the disciples, as usual, are clueless to the meaning. So it raises questions for us: are we too busy to share our faith? Is there any amount of bias or bigotry that gets in the way of our faith sharing? Tough questions that should cause us some prayerful introspection.

APRIL 11

SPAGHETTI

John 5

There are some passages in the Bible that are written like spaghetti. They are so hard to untangle. By the time I have read verses 19-47 I am so twisted up I'm not sure which noodle is which. I only know my brain noodle is quite tangled. So here are a few thoughts as you try to untangle what you've read. First, try reading it from another translation. NIV, NRSV and many others are "transliterations". That means the authors tried to take the Greek words, give each a corresponding English word and then put them in a similar order while maintaining American English phraseology. The Message, CEV, CEB and others are paraphrases. They take the Greek, seek to translate it concept for concept, and offer it up in a more modern English way. If you can't grasp one, try another.

Further, you probably struggled with the several concepts Jesus is sharing. I counted thirteen distinct theological concepts Jesus was saying about Himself, His nature, and His ministry. Try to only grasp one today. I'll share one below. Scholars put a whole lifetime into trying to figure this all out. Don't try to grasp it all at once.

In verses 19-20 Jesus offers us an important thought on what we are all called to do. It's a subtle shift in our thinking about what is vital to the calling God has placed upon your life. Many people approach God and say, "God, I'm doing this for you... please bless it." Jesus says that He doesn't act independently from the Father. Instead He sees what the Father is blessing and seeks to do likewise. Today pray the prayer in a different way, "Father, help me to see what You are blessing and then to do likewise."

APRIL 12

HOW DO YOU FEED 3,000,000?

John 6

How do you feed 5,000? (And by the way, it was 5,000 men PLUS the women and children.) It's the question that was posed to Philip. Once again, as always seems to be the case with each of us, Philip looks in his wallet and comes up short. Yet the question is still out there. Andrew has an answer, but it falls short as well. He points to one young boy and offers up 5 small barley loaves and a couple of fish. It's a start. Maybe it's just the start Christ needed.

What if I asked you, how do you feed 3,000,000 people? The financial consideration would be staggering. I can't begin to feed that many. You can't begin to feed that many. At least that is Philip's opening line to a monumental problem. However, Jesus didn't ask "What barriers do we have to feeding the 5,000?" Jesus asks for creative solutions. Andrew's solution is small, but at least he hasn't thrown up an objection.

Several years ago the people at LaCroix United Methodist asked the question, "How can we help alleviate world hunger?" That's a huge question and the dollars involved are enough to cause you to stumble out of the gate. They persevered in spite of the obstacles. It wasn't easy and they didn't do it all at once. They did it over time and whenever a problem arose, they didn't throw up their hands in surrender. They invited Andrew to help solve the problem... that is, their neighbor St. Andrew Lutheran Church. Later they added New McKendree United Methodist Church to aide in the solution.

In December, 2014, having worked at it for 8 years, LaCroix (and friends) bought and packed their 3,000,000th meal through the Feed My Starving Children ministry. It all happened because they had heard a physical challenge that would take a spiritual response. They had to spiritually feast

APRIL 12

on the sacrifice of Christ to be able to overcome such obstacles.

What overwhelming task is Jesus calling you to which will require a deep spiritual response?

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 43-45

APRIL 15

WAIT YOUR TURN

John 7

Patience is a virtue, but not the most treasured one. Unless we are on the receiving end, then we like patience on the part of the other people. Offering it... not so much. It's a conditioning thing; we're so used to the computer booting right up, the internet website loading right away, and the food to be fast and with fries. It's also a selfish thing; we feel anyone or anything that causes us to wait it disrespectful of our time and importance. Quite honestly, it's with impatience that I read through this chapter of John.

In John 7 we don't find any great quotable lines. Nothing for a bumper sticker or a quip to show our friends that we're far more versed in the Bible than they. Try telling someone "My time has not yet come" and see the confused look on their face. Nope, John 7 is all about setting up things for future chapters. It's a literary transition and seems to slow things down.

The irony that I find in this is that Jesus' brothers are impatient as well. Perhaps that's why I feel it so deeply. "Come on Jesus, go do a miracle in Jerusalem. We want to see You do the things You say You can." It's a sibling rivalry thing that comes out here. I suspect that they would be with Him the whole way. If He tries and fails, like all good brothers, they would point and laugh for the rest of their lives. If anyone tried to harm Jesus for His false claims, they would step in and protect Him from the crowd... like all good brothers. Like you and me, they had to wait for the next sign. If it's a miracle you want, that's a couple of chapters away. If you want to witness Christ in action in a way you can talk about and imitate in your own life, that's just around the next bend in our Journey. For today, consider the virtue of patience. You've been taught about it from your youth. You've been told to wait your turn. Your turn will come so enjoy this pause in the journey as an opportunity to reflect on what you've read thus far.

APRIL 16

DROPPING ROCKS

John 8

There's so much happening in this chapter but it's hard to get past the intrigue in the first story. It's a story people of faith refer to often and for good reason; it's an issue of passing judgment. If we dwell on it a moment, we find it's fraught with intrigue.

What we know is that a woman is caught in the act of adultery (probably a known prostitute). We know the Pharisees brought her to Jesus with the expectation that they might trap Him (v.6). The first question of intrigue, if this was premeditated, was how did they know just where to find a prostitute at just that right moment? Hmmmm. The second question follows quickly behind... where's the guy? If she was caught in the act there was a male participant. His guilt brings the same sentence of stoning. Where is he?

Jesus appears indifferent. He kneels down and begins to play in the dirt. It says He was writing. What did He write? One guess would be He was writing various sins that were common place in that day. You know, like lust, greed, and stuff that's common place today. They must have seen their own guilt in what He wrote because when He challenged them with that famous line "Let he who is without sin, cast the first stone," they dropped their rocks and went home.

What follows is worthy of your consideration. Jesus asks, "Where are your accusers?" Other translations just say, "Where are they?" The word translated to "accuser" or "they" is a word that means Satan. Satan is the one who stands before God and accuses us of being unworthy of God's grace. Jesus was calling the Pharisees "Satan." He then asks, "Doesn't anyone condemn you?" Now the prosecutors have been elevated to the job of judge and jury and they failed to succeed sending her to her execution. Jesus doesn't participate in accusing or condemning either and she escapes her fate by way of Christ's Grace. Love 1, Satan 0. Watch those temptations to judge or you'll be aligned with Satan.

APRIL 17

NOSE BLIND

John 9

In order to sell a product advertisers will often invent a term or idea and convince us it is our need or problem. The terms and ideas are usually very clever so that they easily stick with us. Years ago the purveyors of deodorant invented the concept of B.O. or body odor. Not that it didn't exist, but by coupling the term B.O. with negative images we became convinced that it was a problem that needed a solution. Lo and behold, they had the solution... deodorant. Today there is an advertisement for a deodorizing spray that claims that you have become so accustomed to the odors in your house that you are "nose-blind." This means that you don't notice the cat, dog, fried fish odor in your house but your guests do and that's a problem. Deodorizing spray to the rescue. I like that phrase, "noseblind," with this chapter of John. In this story a man was born blind from birth. The assumption was that someone had sinned, because in that day the belief was pervasive that illness and injury were a direct result of your sinfulness and God was doling out the punishment. When this man is healed by Jesus he is questioned by the religious elite. No one has ever healed a man blind from birth.

At issue is the Pharisees refused to believe God could work through a peasant woodworker from Galilee. Only the most religious of perfect pedigree would be called upon by God to do such unprecedented healings. Even though more than once in their scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) did it promise that God was going to do a new thing (Isaiah 43:19) and that God would establish a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31). Yet, they couldn't imagine it would happen this way. They were arrogant. You might say they turned up their nose at the former blind man and his Healer. I'd call that "noseblind".

APRIL 17

When was the last time you rejected a new movement by the people of God because you couldn't imagine God would move in a new direction? What new way is God seeking to move you? What pride has caused you to go noseblind to new possibilities?

APRIL 18

WHERE EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR NAME

John 10

In his book “How to Win Friends and Influence People”, Dale Carnegie maintains that the sweetest sound a person ever hears is the sound of their own name. It is an encouragement to us to remember a person’s name and use it often. I wish I could master that skill. I struggle to remember my own children’s names from time to time. When I perform a wedding I put a small sticky note on each page of my worship book so I don’t forget the names of the bride and groom. In the middle of a meeting with people I’ve worked with for years I’ll forget someone’s name. I’m awful at it. I’ll remember everything you’ve ever told me about yourself; birthplace, workplace, how many children... but not their names. I don’t know why, but I suspect it’s a humility tool God is putting to good use on me.

Jesus, however, knows each of us by name. The Good Shepherd knows you by name. He knows you in the crowd and in the privacy of your own heart. He knows your every detail and cares deeply for you. He leads you in the right direction and protects you from harm. If you get lost, He will leave the others to search you out; calling out your name as He scours the wilderness you are lost in, seeking to bring you back to the love and protection of His fold.

I’d love to know everyone’s name. The truth is, I know your name but can’t always call it to mind, it’s like searching for a piece of paper on a very messy desk. I know it’s there, but I just can’t seem to put a finger on it. The Good News for us is Jesus knows your name. Don’t allow the frailty of a human like me get in the way of the call of the all-loving Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

How often do you allow the actions or missteps of other people to cause you to walk away from Christ and His Church?

APRIL 19

LIVING AND DYING FOR THE GOSPEL

John 11

Imagine the world from Lazarus' perspective. Whatever illness you had was bad enough that you suffered for many days. We know this because it would have taken a messenger a while to find Christ to tell Him that His dear friend was gravely ill. At some point in your illness you lost consciousness and then succumbed to death. And then... then what? Nothing, heaven, limbo, purgatory? Who knows? I whole heartedly believe that the cosmic rules about death changed when Jesus died. He told a thief who hung on a cross beside Him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." I believe Jesus has established that upon our death we immediately proceed to the heavenly realm. I just don't know what it was like for people who died before then. So who knows what Lazarus experienced? He knows.

Suddenly there's light and a voice of an old friend calls to you, "Lazarus, come out." Shedding your burial clothes, pushing aside the fragrant spices that had covered your body to keep the smell down, and stretching weakened legs that had grown stiff from days in bed and days in the grave, you walk toward the light and the voice. And life begins anew.

Could there ever be a stronger witness for Christ than a man who had experienced death and then came back to share? It would be uncomfortable at first. Imagine the stares. You go back to your daily routine, whatever that was, and as people pass by they would stare, like you were wearing a third eye on your head they would stare. How would you react? Invite a conversation? Go back to your work? What would that be like?

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APRIL 19

For each of us, we face the sting of death with fear and uneasiness. Lazarus would surely welcome it. Been there, done that and now he had every confidence in the word of his Savior, Jesus Christ. I think he was the first man who could, with confidence, live as one prepared to die. As it says in Mark 8:35, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the Gospel will save it.” Are you as prepared as Lazarus to boldly lose your life for Jesus and for the sake of the Gospel?

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 46-48

APRIL 22

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

John 12

My father, who passed away a few years ago, had twin sisters. Whenever I see either one of those sisters they always say, “You look just like John.” I loved my dad and I’m proud to hear them say that, however I don’t see it. I look at pictures of Dad and I just don’t see that strong of a resemblance. I’m a lot like Dad though. The good and the bad. I have the work ethic that spills over into being a workaholic. I also have that temper that I have to work hard and pray a lot to keep in check. But we’re also very different. Dad never professed faith and he was very much an introvert. That wouldn’t describe me. Dad also loved to fish and golf, I like to fish but it’s been a long time since I last played golf. So, I’m kind of like dad, and then again, not completely like dad. This chapter is another one in the book of John that becomes hard to read. The words are like a tangle of Christmas lights that you know will be beautiful if you can just fight your way through the knot. Within this twist of words there are many things to discern so let me focus on just one. Beginning at verse 44 Jesus makes it clear that when you’ve seen the Son, you’ve seen the Father. There is no distinguishing between the two. Jesus will do and say what the Father sent Him to do and say and He can do no other. He will go to the cross because that is why the Father sent Him and they are of one mind, spirit and will. Unlike my father and myself, there is no difference between this son and this father.

One of those minor irritations I have is on the occasion that someone will be describing their belief and say, “I believe in God and Jesus and all.” Jesus is clear in what He says here. Jesus is God. The Father is God. We’ll learn later in this book that the Holy Spirit is God. God is all three and there is no difference between them. It would be more accurate to say, “I believe in the God I see in Jesus Christ.” Is that a statement with which you feel comfortable? Can you proclaim that with confidence? Can you see the similarities between the Father and the Son?

APRIL 23

TEMPTED

John 13

The Bible doesn't record how Judas became a part of Jesus' first twelve. We don't know the interaction or conversation. In John's Gospel the names of the twelve are never listed. The only reference to twelve being chosen, with Judas among them, is in John 6:71. Yet, Matthew, Mark and Luke fill in that blank by giving us a list with Judas among them. So he was with Jesus from the beginning.

I'm not sure at which point Jesus figured out Judas would be the betrayer. I tend to believe that Jesus chose twelve who each could have been tipped over the edge. Peter was one who had a temper. Simon the Zealot was from a group of people who had vowed the violent overthrow of Rome. Thomas had constant doubts. Judas was from a group who were known assassins. Matthew was a former tax collector who had surrendered a very lucrative position with strong ties to Rome. Surely pockets lined with blood money would have been a temptation for him. We don't know a lot about them, but it would seem that anyone of them could have been the betrayer.

By all accounts anyone of them could have done it. Yet, by all appearances, every one of them was a committed follower of Jesus. What turns a follower away from Christ? For Judas, it seems that as Jesus spoke more and more about His death, Judas became uneasy. He was ready for action, they were in Jerusalem, and the throng of supporters was all they needed to accomplish a bloody coup. If he could just tip Jesus' hand by enabling the arrest, the fight would finally get started. That would be a more noble approach to understanding Judas' betrayal. From a lesser noble perspective, those thirty pieces of silver would make an attractive sum. Some accounts suggest that was a half a year's wages. As you do your taxes this year divide your adjusted gross income by two and think about what you'd be willing to do for that sum of money?

APRIL 23

What are the things that tempt you to leave the faith? Let's not be so dramatic. What are the things that tempt you to skip reading your Bible? What are the temptations that prevent you from Sunday worship? You're four months into a new habit of reading these reflections. What are the details of your life that have tempted you to call it quits? Judas didn't set out on a three year journey with Jesus knowing he would betray Him one day. It just happened one small temptation at a time.

APRIL 24

IN THE NAME OF CHRIST

John 14

Here's a dangerous verse for Christians in the 21st century: "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." The verse before it is similar. It's one that we trip over when we pray for healing of a very sick loved one and yet they pass. It's the verse that causes us to stumble in our faith when we fervently pray for a broken relationship and it completely dissolves. It's the verse that slaps us in the face when we pray and pray and pray and Jesus fails to come through.

It's also the verse that is cannon fodder for those who have either left the faith or observed fruitless prayer on our behalf. They point to a verse such as this and use it as proof that Jesus' claims were meaningless and not at all divine. We are rarely prepared for a response, especially if we are grieving a loss or the realization that a divine "no" was the answer to our prayers. So let's challenge this verse a bit...

You pray that someone would not die. Jesus died, every person in history has died. You pray that a friend won't betray you or a spouse won't turn their back. All of Jesus' disciples turned their back and one sold Him out. Yet you and I want to hold on to such verses as this and find meaning, so where do we go? How about going back to the verse? There is one important line you can't ignore; "In my name." This is the language of ancient royalty. The King's appointed troops ride up to a house and say "In the name of the King, open that door." If they use that phrase to misrepresent the King, they are in the wrong. If they use that phrase to accomplish the King's will, they are in the right. With that in mind, how do we use the Name of Christ in prayer?

If everyone dies, it must be the will of God that they die with their face toward heaven and Christ in their heart leading them forward. It's never wrong to ask God for a miracle,

APRIL 24

Jesus brought Lazarus out of the grave to be with his sisters once again. Perhaps it's equally important to ask Christ to enter into the life of the dying one and usher them to their heavenly home. If they are not a person of faith, ask Christ to give you the Spirit of Truth to speak the right words so they might receive Christ.

As for a broken relationship, Christ would prefer that all are reconciled around His love, but He won't force someone's heart to turn toward you. He will help you to turn your heart to love the person even more and to act in a way that reconciles.

Prayer in the Name of Christ is about turning your will toward God and seeking to be empowered to live faithfully. Today, rephrase the Lord's Prayer to say "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, in my heart and in the heart of the one I love."

APRIL 25

JOY

John 15

Why does Jesus teach us all that He does? Why not just show up, take on the challenge of the cross, take our sins to the grave, and be done with it? This may sound heretical at first so bear with me. The Father's goal in sending us Jesus Christ is NOT our salvation. The Father's goal is our joy. To get to joy there must be salvation. Read that one again if you're not sure what I said.

Now think with me on this and as you do reread verses 9-17. Verse 11 tells us that Jesus teaches us all this so we may have joy. I would define joy as the experience of living the human life to its fullest; the way God created us to live. We know that we are supposed to love one another as commanded in verse 17. We also know that the greatest example of love is the sacrifice of our hopes and needs and wants and desires and possibly even our lives, for the sake of another person. That's a tough way to live our lives. To reorient our hearts such that they point outward at the fulfillment of love through sacrifice takes a lot of hard work and dedication. We are taught from an early age that life is about all that we acquire and accumulate. This orientation toward consumption (taking in and using for ourselves) is both damaging to the human soul and difficult to change. How can we get started?

First we attach ourselves to Christ, the vine. We feed off His Word, our scriptures, daily. It brings us life. That shouldn't be too hard for us to do because, though it is very healthy, it is still consumption; taking in. However, then we are appointed to bear fruit. This means that we are supposed to become productive citizens in the Kingdom of God. Hold your place in John 15 but flip over the pages to Galatians 5:22-23. Here is a description of the produce of citizens in God's Kingdom. This is not what we get to take in, but

APRIL 25

rather what we hand out freely and sacrificially. We don't charge a fee, there is no price. This is what we give away. If we'll begin to seek to offer the free fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control our hearts will begin to be oriented toward loving one another the way Christ loves us, in a sacrificial way. The irony of course is that there is a reward that we take in when we live in this way. We will feel a depth of joy in life that only comes through sacrifice. That's the life God created us to experience. In the end, it's not about our salvation. Salvation is a means to an end. It's about being authentically human; the way God made us. So the command is to love, the appointment is to bear fruit, salvation is a necessary component, but the end result God desires for your heart is joy. And by the way, there are no short-cuts.

APRIL 26

THE WORST IS NEVER THE LAST

John 16

There are many times in our lives that we need a reminder that things are never as bad as they seem even when things are at their worst. Preacher and teacher Frederick Buechner once said of the cross and resurrection, “The worst thing is never the last thing.” Isn’t that what Christ is preparing the disciples for? He’s going away and then He’ll be back. However, no one’s ever done that before. (Except maybe Lazarus and he had Jesus to make it happen. What about when Jesus is gone?)

When it happens, when He leaves, they still don’t get that it’s temporary. He’s coming back. He prepared you for it. The worst thing won’t be the last thing. However, they’ve never really seen it before. They don’t have the benefit of history like we do. They haven’t read the book of John... they were living it in real time. How could they know for sure? Other than Jesus said so.

What about us? When we lose a loved one, when we get a difficult diagnosis, when things turn bad at work, a relationship goes south, a child wanders off, a teenager wanders off, do we trust that the worst is not the last? Do we hear Christ speaking to our hearts and know that His grace is sufficient for us? If you’re experiencing the worst right now, take a moment to rest in the knowledge that evil, pain and suffering never have the last word for those who trust in Christ. If you’re not down, tuck those words away in your heart for a later moment. Bad times will come. Those who love the Lord are not immune. Trust in the Lord now and hide these words in your heart for a later time. The worst thing is never the last thing for the follower of Christ.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 49-51

APRIL 29

PRAYER FOR A FRIEND

John 17

“Pray for me.” I hear it all the time. “Pray for my father.” “Pray for my husband, wife, sister, brother, uncle, cousin...” “Pray for me.” And I do. I figure it’s my job. Not because I’m a pastor. It’s my job because I’m a follower of Jesus Christ. As a follower in the way of life He presented, I’m called to pray for others. To share with God my care, to plead their case, to listen for His will in case I’m called upon to act. It’s the example Jesus sets for us. He prays for us. He intercedes on our behalf and asks the Father to protect us from evil while we are in this world. Jesus’ desire is for us to be safe, healthy, and have a life of fruitful joy so that when our life on earth is through we’ll dwell in the room He goes to prepare for us. I believe that Christ still intercedes for us. Even though I know that we have direct prayerful access to the Father, it’s good to know that Christ also calls our name out even to this day so the Father is always aware of our needs.

So pray for a friend today. Casting Crowns wrote a song that gives us an example of what that prayer might sound like: Lord, I lift my friend to You, I’ve done all that I know to do. I lift my friend to You. Complicated circumstances have clouded his view Lord, I lift my friend up to You. I fear that I won’t have the words that he needs to hear. I pray for Your wisdom, oh God, and a heart that’s sincere, Lord, I lift my friend up to You.

Though this particular song is about a friend who is going the wrong way in life, still those opening lines might apply to most circumstances. Pray for a friend today.

APRIL 30

DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?

John 18

One of the more renowned acts of martyrdom in modern day America is that of Cassie Bernall. A high school student at Columbine High School in the Denver area, Cassie was quite open with her faith. That fateful day in April 1999, two fellow students rampaged the high school with gunfire and explosives. As she was hiding in one of the rooms, Eric Harris burst in. Upon seeing her in prayer he asked her, "Do you believe in God?" Her final words were a simple, "Yes."

Though the accounts of the actual exchange between Cassie and her killer are in dispute, her faith is not. Cassie would not deny the God she loved. Peter, however, doesn't seem so brave. He isn't threatened, there are no swords pointed at him. Peter is asked three times if he is one of the disciples and three times he denies it. Perhaps he was thinking, "Live to fight another day," or perhaps he felt afraid for his life. Whatever he was thinking, when offered the opportunity to proclaim his faith, he fails.

None of us knows today how we would react under circumstances such as Cassie with a gun pointed at her or Peter surrounded by the same angry mob that had just arrested Christ. We would hope we wouldn't fail but how strong is our faith? Opportunities arise every day for us to proclaim our faith and not hide it. Do we take advantage of those chances to witness for Christ or do we meekly remain quiet? Do we pray before a meal no matter where we happen to be or who we are with? Do we say no to that next drink that moves us from social drinker to dangerous driver? Do we walk away from that Powerball jackpot when it hits that high number? Is failure to proclaim Christ in small ways the same as denial?

MAY 1

SIT AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

John 19

This is the last of four accounts of the crucifixion of Christ. It may be the most brutal in detail. Flogged, crown of thorns, purple robe for humiliation, slapped, betrayed by the leaders of His kind, forced to carry His own implement of demise, nails through forearms and ankles (archaeologists have found this to be more accurate and painful), hanging there naked, slowly bleeding until the loss of blood causes an unquenchable thirst, wine vinegar for drink, and a last breath. Then a spear through the side, just for good measure. It is finished.

You cannot rush past this chapter to shield your eyes from the pain and shame of it all. You cannot skip past though it brings horror to the eyes and sorrow to the heart. Jesus of Nazareth was a living breathing human being and was no different than you and me, at least in His earthly qualities. He felt pain, He felt embarrassment and shame, He felt every emotion that goes into the capital punishment of the condemned. And He experienced the loneliness of breathing His last breath, even when surrounded by those He loved. Don't rush past this chapter looking for a happy Easter.

Pause at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother, Mary, and with Mary Magdalene, and Mary the wife of Clopas. The "disciple whom He loved" was there as well. Because of how this book is written, we have come to understand that this unnamed disciple was John, the author of the book. I suspect it was written this way to offer dual meaning. It allows you and I to kneel at the foot of the cross and claim for ourselves that we are "the disciple whom He loved." So sit there for a while today. This awful death was the greatest act of love Christ could offer you.

MAY 2

PEACE BE WITH YOU

John 20

Verses 19 and 26 quote Jesus as saying “Peace be with you,” as He greets His followers. The word for “peace” He would have used is the Hebrew word “Shalom.” It was more than a greeting of calm and serenity; it was meant to say, “May you experience God’s completeness in your life.” Christ is resurrected, the perfection of faith has come to life, and completeness is achievable. What a wonderful greeting to receive from the One you had given up for dead.

What does that completeness look like, though? It doesn’t get any easier for the disciples going forward. The remaining eleven (Judas, the betrayer of Christ, has committed suicide.) will face tough days ahead. Most of what we know is from legend more than historically proven fact, but by those accounts Peter is crucified upside down, Andrew proclaims Christ in the area of Russia and is crucified, Thomas will preach in India and be speared to death, Philip preaches in north Africa and Asia Minor and is tortured to death, Matthew is stabbed in Ethiopia, Bartholomew traveled with Thomas and is rumored to have been martyred, James the lesser is stoned to death, Simon the Zealot is martyred in Persia, James is beheaded. This does not seem like any kind of peace that I would favor.

Yet they all chose this way of life and faced death boldly. Perhaps they were able to do so because they had a sense of peace. The substance of that peace was not a serenity of life circumstances but rather a serenity in the midst of life circumstances. They had the confidence that it didn’t matter what else was going on in the world, they had won salvation through the gift of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. That was all the peace they needed to undertake the mission of launching the greatest spread of faith in the history of humanity. Due to their efforts Christ is now known in all

MAY 2

corners of the Earth. Even with lives cut short, they lived and died in peace. Can you imagine a peace such as that? It's offered if you would like to accept.

MAY 3

FEED MY SHEEP

John 21

We come to the end of not only one of the four Gospels, but to the end of the fourth. We've read about Jesus and His exploits, teachings, and commands. I hope your understanding of what Jesus did and didn't say has been strengthened. I also hope your trust in the One who died on the cross and was resurrected to bring you new life has deepened. Trust and understanding is what you would hope to get from the four Gospels.

Now your reading will be that of the response of the disciples, new ones as well as the ones who we have come to know. The book of the Acts of the Apostles will begin with Christ, but it will quickly shift to the activities of the disciples. At focus, initially, will be the activities of Peter. Peter was such an intriguing character throughout the four Gospels. He rarely understood what Jesus had taught, was always jockeying for position, and didn't mind getting into a fight when given the chance. Still, Jesus drew him closer and closer as time went on. Perhaps Jesus knew Peter would understand after the resurrection. Perhaps Jesus also knew what was needed was a man of tough external character and deep love for the Savior, but also a man who had failed and been given a second chance, like Peter.

Verses 15-19 record Jesus asking Peter three times to "feed my sheep." This echoes the three times Peter denies Christ in chapter 18. He failed, but now is given a second chance. Peter now is not only witness to the cross and the resurrection but the first to really and truly understand what it is to be forgiven. The resurrected Christ whom Peter once denied is now offering him the chance to get back in the mission and ministry of being a disciple of Christ. "Feed my sheep" by offering them the same grace you have received. That same grace is yours today, as well as the responsibility

MAY 3

to move toward others with a message of forgiveness, reconciliation, and mission for feeding the hungry souls of the world.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 52-54

