

January 1 Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus,
called, chosen, to be an apostle,
set apart for the gospel of God,
promised through the prophets
written in the holy scriptures.

It is about God's Son.
Humanity and Holiness
He was born a descendent of David.
He was declared to be the Son of God
in power through the Holy Spirit
by being resurrected from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Through him we have received grace and apostleship
to lead people of all nations to faith, for the sake of his name,
including yourselves who are called to belong to Christ.

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

* How are you called to lead to faith those who do not now know of Jesus?
Paul writes, "including yourselves." What does that call mean to you?

* Ponder Christ's humanity. Stand in awe of Christ's holiness. Meditate on these things.

* Remember your own call in your baptism. How is your call rooted in Christ's death and resurrection? Through whom and through what experiences has God called you to discipleship?

Gracious God, thank you for the call through Jesus' death and resurrection to lead people through your holy scriptures to know Christ and to know him more deeply. May we remember our callings and receive with thanksgiving your blessings of grace and peace. Amen.

January 2 Romans 1:8-15

First: I thank God through Jesus Christ
for all of you because your faith is proclaimed
throughout the world.

God, whom I serve by announcing the Gospel,
knows I pray for you without ceasing.

*For whom do you pray? For whom do you thank God?

I long to see you, to share a spiritual blessing to strengthen you,
so that we will be mutually encouraged,
you by my faith and I by yours.

*Whom do you long to see? How do you help each other in faith?

Many times I had planned to visit you, but something always came up.

*What was Paul planning to do? How were his plans interrupted?

*What do you plan to do? What "comes up" instead?

I have an obligation to all peoples: educated and uneducated,
citizen and stranger, insiders and outsiders.

*Among whom are you called to serve?

*To whom might you be called to minister who is outside your "sphere of influence"?

I am eager to proclaim the Gospel also to you who are in Rome.

*What can't you wait to get up in the morning to do?

O God of eagerness, fill us with joy, courage, and perseverance for your ministry beyond our own narrow boundaries. Center our selves, our words, our teaching, and our proclamation on Christ. Fulfill our longings to be with those whom you have given us to love and put into our care. In Christ Jesus, Amen.

January 3

Romans 1:16-17

The heart of salvation:
I am not ashamed of the gospel.
I have complete confidence.

It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.
God's power to save all who believe,
The saving power of God.

To the Jews first and also Gentiles
first those in this faith and all beyond.

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.
The gospel reveals how God rights wrong.
It is through faith from beginning to end.

As it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."
Scripture says, "The person who is put right with God through faith shall live."

* Justified through faith. Whatever translation, no matter how many ways or times we say it, this verse is key. What does this mean? What does this mean for you? What does this mean for ministry?

O Saving God, we give thanks for Jesus Christ in whom humankind is put right with you and with one another. Let us not be ashamed but filled with confidence, from beginning to end. Justified by grace through faith, fill us with new life for mission and ministry. Amen.

January 4

Romans 1:18-32

The wrath of God is revealed against ungodliness. Through wickedness the truth is suppressed. They see God and God's eternal power and divine nature through what God has created. They are without excuse. But in knowing God, human beings did not bestow honor or give thanks. Senseless and futile thinkers, claiming to be wise, but really foolish, they worshiped their own idols. Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Even the women pervert the natural use of their sex by unnatural acts. In the same way, men give up sexual relations with women and burn with passion for each other.

Therefore, we became ensnarled in all kinds of
wickedness, covetousness, and evil.

* By grace with God's insight, what do you want to hide that you now see? Envy, murder, strife? Deceit, craftiness, gossip? Slander, hatred of God, insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness? Evil, rebellion, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness? What do you see in yourself?

* How deeply are we enmeshed in evil? How do human beings not only practice ungodliness but applaud it?

O God of holiness and righteousness, may we trust you enough to really see the evil in which we participate. We do deserve judgment. Let us know that fully and yet not stay mired in evil but trust your power of salvation even more. With eyes wide open, give us the strength and compassion to minister among real human beings and to face systemic evil with the power of the Christ who died that all might live. Amen.

January 5

Romans 2: 1-11

Therefore, you have no excuse,
whoever you are, when you judge others;
for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself,
because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

* Have you noticed that the very thing that irritates us about another's sin may be that which we secretly do, are tempted to do, or are afraid we will do?

* Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?

* Do you despise the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience?
Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

By your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself.
God will repay according to each one's deeds.
To those who by patiently doing good seek for glory, honor and immortality,
God will give eternal life;

There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil
but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good,
the Jew and also the Greek

God shows no partiality.

God of judgment, judge me also. Open my heart that I may see my sin more clearly than I imagine I see the sin of others, including both those I love and those I despise. In the death and resurrection of Christ, lead me to repentance, free me from self-seeking, and empower me for love. Amen

January 6

Romans 2: 12-16

All who have sinned apart from the law
will also perish apart from the law,
and all who have sinned under the law
will be judged by the law.

It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight,
but the doers of the law who will be justified.
When Gentiles, who do not possess the law,
instinctively do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves.

They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts,
to which their own conscience also bears witness.
Their conflicting thoughts will accuse or excuse them
on the day when God through Christ will judge the secret thoughts of all.

* What is the role of conscience?

* How do we relate to and live among "Gentiles"...people outside *our* church?

* How does this passage help explain the dilemma Christians experience when people who are not Christian do good (better?) works?

O Good and Gracious God, thank you for including all people in your caring concern. Keep us from so quickly judging ourselves righteous and our neighbor unrighteous. You know our secret thoughts. Fill us with new life which comes from Christ alone that we may not be merely hearers of the Word, but doers. In Jesus name and for his sake we pray. Amen.

January 7 Romans 2:17-29

If you call yourself a religious person and boast in your relationship to God,
if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind,
a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children,
having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth,
you who teach others, will you not teach yourself?

* The passage goes on. Hard questions. Harder consequences. While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You who detest idols, you who boast in keeping the law, do you not dishonor God? And in the end, because of us, those who have not yet come to faith speak evil of God.

A person is not a Jew who is one outwardly,
nor is true circumcision something external and physical.

Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly,
and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—
it is spiritual and not literal.

Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

*Oh, we say we do not trust in the law and surely not in the mark of circumcision. Well, then, what rituals, what marks of the faith have...or could....become merely outward signs? Where is your heart?

God of all honesty, reveal to us what is so clearly revealed to you: who we really are and what our actions show forth. Free us from self-justifying entanglement in the law. Turn us from needing to seek praise from people, that we may teach and preach and serve and lead with you alone as our guide. Set our hearts and minds on you alone, Christ Jesus. Amen.

January 8 Romans 3: 1-8

So, then, if it is true that people of faith cannot be distinguished through marks and rituals of their beliefs (yesterday's reading),

What advantage is there to being a religious person?

Paul says:

Much,
in every way,
because the people of God are entrusted with the message of God.

Ah, but now watch the mental contortions (with answers below):

Questions and Answers from the Text:

* If we are unfaithful, will our unfaithfulness negate the faithfulness of God?
No, God is true (even though every person is a liar).

* What if our doing wrong serves to show up more clearly God's doing right?
Should we say that God is unjust to punish us?
By no means! If God were unjust, God could not judge the world.

* If our falsehood makes God's truthfulness stand out more clearly, why are we still being condemned as sinners?
Hmm....there doesn't seem to be an answer for that in the text.

* So why not do evil so that good may come?
Good question, at least a common question. Some people do insult us by saying that's what we say. They will be condemned.

Patient, truthful God, keep us from being entangled in our questioning of you. You alone are both righteous and merciful. May our questions lead not to excuses but to deeper understanding. Let our thanksgiving be that which frees us to reach out with your unbounded love. In your name we pray. Amen.

January 9 **Romans 3:9-20**

Both Jews and Gentiles are under the power of sin.
There is no one who is righteous, not even one.
There is no one who has understanding.
There is no one who seeks God.

All have turned away from God.
Together, they have become worthless.
There is no one who shows kindness.
There is not even one.

They use their tongues to deceive.
Their speech is filled with bitterness.
Their feet are swift to shed blood.
Ruin and misery are in their paths.

They have not known the path of peace.
They have no fear of God.
The law speaks to those who are under the law
so that every mouth may be silenced
and the whole world may be held accountable to God.
“No human being will be justified in God’s sight” (Ps. 143:2)
by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

* How does knowing that no one is righteous both make us despair and also move us away from judgment of people by background or circumstance?

* How does having no fear of God keep us under the power of sin and away from the path of peace?

God of mercy, we know that we are all under the law. We stand silent, unable to justify ourselves in your sight. Hold us accountable. Use your law to bring us the full knowledge of our sin that we might fully know our need for Christ Jesus’ cross and resurrection, in Christ’s name alone we pray. Amen.

January 10 **Romans 3:21-26**

Apart from the law, God’s justice has been brought to light.
The law and the prophets both bear witness to it.
This is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ
for all who believe.
God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ.

There is no distinction, since all have sinned
and fall short of the glory of God;
they are now justified by grace as a gift,
through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
whom God put forth as sacrifice of atonement by his blood
effective through faith.

God did this to demonstrate justice, because in divine forbearance
God had passed over the sins previously committed.
It was to prove that God is righteous
and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

* What does the image of God’s saving action in Christ, as a “sacrifice of atonement,” mean to you?

* How does knowing that in “divine forbearance” God has “passed over” our sins provide an image and an energy for merciful ministry?

* What is the relationship of justification to justice in our ministry among those who are oppressed?

Thank you, God of grace and mercy, for your immeasurable love in Christ Jesus who through his death on the cross has given us life and salvation. By the Spirit, fill us with faith which empowers us for ministries of reconciliation, justice, and life-giving love. Amen.

January 11

Romans 3:27-31

What then becomes of boasting?
It is excluded.

By what law is it excluded? By that of works?
No, but by the law of faith.

A person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Is God the God of Jews only?

Is God not the God of Gentiles also?

Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one.

God will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith
and the uncircumcised through the same faith.

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?

By no means!

On the contrary, we uphold the law.

* Consider one of your Christian practices (praying, reading Scripture, regular giving, working for justice), and ponder how, as good as that is, God excludes our boasting, and includes those people who do not do the practice. Surely we understand that. But do we really?

* Consider: The Law serves as curb, to curtail sin and wrongdoing. The Law shows us our sin, puts it to death on the cross that we might rise with Christ, and in faith by the power of the Spirit, be reconciled to God and to one another. Law and Gospel!

* Consider how the Law, then, becomes friend and guide, as through faith we are empowered for ministries of reconciliation.

*God of all righteousness, through the law, may we see our need for mercy.
God of the cross and resurrection, ground us in your grace.
God of new life, may we serve in your world through faith alone. Amen,*

January 12

Romans 4:1-8

If justified by works, then Abraham has something to boast about
but not before God.

What does Scripture say?

“Abraham believed God, and because of this faith
God accepted him as righteous.” (Genesis 15:6)

To anyone who works, wages are not counted as a gift
but as something due.

But to those without any work to their credit,
who trust God who justifies the ungodly,
such faith is counted as righteousness.

David speaks of blessedness of those whom

God looks upon as righteous apart from works:

“Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

Blessed are those for whom the Lord lays no guilt to their account
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” (Psalm 32:1-2)

* Do you trust God in the wage-earning and in the credit-counting? What does it mean to you that we cannot boast in our works? How do you experience God’s blessing in your daily life both in and apart from your work?

Righteous God, we confess that we do boast (or at least we want to feel good) about what we have done. Not that we have not worked hard and done good things, but we lay before you our need to be justified by such work, the self-righteousness that too easily turns us into judges of others. Our very self-deception exposes us. You alone forgive sin. You alone provide faith. Fill us with this faith that we may trust you alone. Enliven this faith that we might be energized for service. In Christ we pray. Amen.

January 13

Romans 4:9-12

This blessedness, this happiness, was it pronounced only
on those who had been circumcised?
No, indeed, the joy of this great blessing
of a right relationship with God belonged
also to those who were not circumcised.
Abraham believed God
and because of his faith, God accepted him as righteous.
When did this take place? Was it before or after he was circumcised?
It was before, not after.

Circumcision was a sign.
Circumcision was a seal.
A seal of righteousness through faith.

Abraham was circumcised to become also the ancestor
of all who believe without being circumcised,
to live the same life of faith that Abraham lived
before he was circumcised.

* Paul asks: was faith given before or after Abraham was circumcised? If faith is a gift and the ritual a sign and seal, how do we today view our rituals of marking God's gift of faith?

* When today we baptize in the name of the Triune God, is not this entrance into Christ's body, the church, also a sending forth to pronounce God's righteousness to all?

God of Abraham and Sarah, God of the prophets and apostles, God of the disciples and descendants of those blessed with the gift of faith through the centuries, give us, too, this faith, and include us, too, in your signs and seals of righteousness. Mark us to be your messengers in the world, in Christ. Amen.

January 14

Romans 4:13-15

When and why did God promise Abraham and his descendants that the world would belong to him? (Genesis 17:4-6; 22:17-18)

The promise that Abraham would inherit the world did not come to him
or to his descendants through the law,
but through the righteousness of faith.

If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs,
faith is null and the promise is void.

The law brings wrath, but where there is no law,
neither is there violation.

* Imagine what it would be like in your life if all your blessings had to come by keeping God's law. Imagine your life without God's gift of faith.

* Imagine your teaching, proclamation, leadership, care-giving, and worship were it based on what people had to do to receive God's promises. Imagine mission and ministry without God's gift of faith.

God of unconditional love and covenant faithfulness, we cannot imagine our calling to be your people in mission apart from your bringing us to faith in Christ Jesus. May our ministry be based on your promises alone. Call forth faith among the people you have called us to serve. In Christ's love, Amen.

January 15 **Romans 4:16-25**

All depends on faith so that the promise may rest on grace
and be guaranteed to all Abraham's descendants,
not just to those who adhere to the law,
but also to those who share the faith of Abraham,
for he is the ancestor of all of us, of many nations. (Gen. 17:5)

God gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.
Hoping against hope, Abraham believed that he would become
"the father of many nations," according to what was said to him.
He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body,
which was as good as dead and also Sarah's barrenness.

No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God,
but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God.
He was fully convinced that God was able to do what God had promised.
Faith was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6) and also for us.
God raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,
who was handed over to death for our sins
and raised for our justification.

* Faith! It all depends on faith, not on clinging to the law. Paul says this again
and again. Just how hard is it to totally grasp that and to cling to faith alone?

* Ponder Judaism, Christianity and Islam, three great faiths that trace Abraham
as their ancestor. How well do people of these three faiths understand one
another? Dialog with one another? What might we all do to increase
understanding and cooperation in this pluralistic world?

*God of grace, may we hope against hope in the face of what seems impossible
so that your love for all might be shared among all nations through words of
understanding and works of justice. May our ministries be faith-filled and
life-giving, in the name of Jesus, the risen Christ we pray. Amen.*

January 16 **Romans 5:1-5**

Therefore...

* After many days of devotions in which we have been drowned by the law,
we can breathe again... inspired anew by the great Reformation Mantra:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith,
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand;
and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings,
knowing that suffering produces endurance,
and endurance produces character,
and character produces hope,
and hope does not disappoint us,
because God's love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

* Justification and faith? Yes, that we've heard many times.
Justification and peace? What does that mean?
Justification in which we stand? Boast? In our Hope of sharing God's glory?

* But to "boast in our sufferings" could be misused.
So how and why and when (or not) does suffering produce endurance,
which produces character, which produces hope?

*Hope, by the love of God though the outpouring of the Spirit will not
disappoint us. In you, O God, we hope! Amen.*

January 17 Romans 5:6-11

While we were helpless,
at the right time
Christ died for the ungodly.

* How weak, how helpless have you been? At the right time in history Christ came. Have there been situations in your life when Christ's death for the ungodly was the "right time"?

Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—
though for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

God has shown us how much we are loved by God.
While we were still sinners Christ died for us.
Now that we have been justified by Jesus' blood,
we will be saved through Christ from the wrath of God.

* How much we are loved by God! While we were still...
While we are still sinners, Christ's death is for us.
What does being saved from the wrath of God mean to you?

If while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through Jesus' death,
much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by Jesus' life.
Much more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
through whom we have received reconciliation.

* "Much more surely!" How much reconciliation have you seen and experienced through Jesus the Christ? Living fully in the new life in Christ, how much more ministry of reconciliation is Christ ready to give through us?

We thank and praise you, reconciling God, for salvation, for deliverance from the wrath of God, for new life, for our communal calling to ministries of reconciliation in our families, in our churches, in our world. In the name of Christ who died for us all. Amen.

January 18 Romans 5:12-14

Sin came into the world through the Adam, the first human beings.
Death came through sin.
Death spread to all,
because all have sinned.

Sin was in the world before the law.
but sin was not counted before there was a law to break.
Death ruled over all, from Adam to Moses.
Adam is a type of the one who was to come.

* It is not just each person's sin that harms and kills, but systemic sin, the corrosive effects of oppressive systems, communal violence and lasting hatreds. How do you see death ruling in our own lives and in the entire history of humankind?

* "Sin came through one." How do we think about "original sin"? What about those who are "without" this law of Moses? If death ruled (exercised dominion) between the time of the earliest humans and when the law was given through Moses, is not sin the human condition for all?

* In this all-encompassing passage we see just a hint of Christ's coming. Why is it crucial in our ministries in the world that we see and present Jesus Christ's death and resurrection as reconciling all sin, even the most outrageous? How does this help people receive salvation in Christ?

Great God of all, we live in the hope, the promise, the assurance of our new reconciled life in Christ. In that assurance open our eyes to the true depth of the consequences of the sinfulness of human kind. Move us beyond the assurance of our own forgiveness to courageous work for justice in the face of systemic sin. Amen.

January 19

Romans 5:15-17

God's free gift is not like the sin of the Adam.
Many people died because of the first sin.
But God's grace is so much greater.
It is God's free gift to so many people
through the grace of the one person, Jesus Christ.

And there's a difference between God's gift and the first sin.
After the first sin came the judgment "Guilty."
After so many sins comes the undeserved gift of "Not guilty."

Through the first sin, death began to rule.
All who receive God's abundant grace
will freely rule in life through Christ.

* So, what's the difference between sin and grace?
All the difference in the world.
What's the difference in your world?

* How does sin still spread and consume and bring death? How does God's free gift of grace in Jesus Christ bring life in and through you and your faith community? How might it?

O God of new life, fill us with the power of your Spirit that grace might grow, and the rule of sin and death might diminish. We thank and praise you for Jesus Christ, the one in whom there is life and life abundant! Amen.

January 20

Romans 5:18-21

Just as one person's sin condemns all,
so Jesus' act of righteous brings justification and life for all.
Just as by one person's disobedience many were made sinners,
so by Jesus' obedience the many will be made righteous.

Where law intruded.
sin multiplied.
Where sin increased.
grace abounded all the more.

Just as sin ruled through death,
so grace rules by justification
leading us to eternal life
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

* Paul goes on, emphasizing his point in as many ways as possible. What, then, is his point? That if we had fewer laws we would have fewer law-breakers? Surely not. But how do you see this reasoning at work in the world?

* How does awareness of – understanding of – God's law, increase your awareness of the profound and pervasive way that human sinfulness infects every human encounter with God, with each other and with the earth itself?

* As that sinful infection leads to death, so surely God's grace and mercy and love now permeate these relationships with life forever. Think of one specific instance of God's mercy multiplying. Take quiet time to give thanks.

No matter how many times we have heard it, gracious God, your justification by grace in Jesus Christ is hard to comprehend. Increase our understanding. Increase our faith. Empower the spark of eternal life in us even now. Challenge us that our ministries of liberating life might overflow into all the world. In Jesus we pray. Amen.

January 21

Romans 6:1-11

Should we continue to sin so that God's grace may abound?
By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?

We who were baptized into Christ Jesus
were baptized into his death.
We have been buried with him by baptism into death
so that just as Christ was raised from the dead,
so we too might walk in newness of life.

* How foolish, you say, that we keep sinning so God can keep forgiving! But how do you see that happening every single day?

* Why do we baptize? Why was Jesus baptized? Just as through Jesus' baptism he was plunged into his ministry which led to the cross and resurrection, ponder how in our baptism we are joined to Christ's death and new life.

If we have been united with Christ in a death like his,
we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.
Our old self was crucified so that we might no longer be enslaved to sin.
We are freed from sin.
If we have died with Christ, we believe we will also live with him.
We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again;
death no longer has dominion over him.
The death he died, he died to sin, once for all;
the life he lives, he lives to God.

You are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

* What does it mean for you that you were crucified with Christ and freed from enslavement to sin? Dead to sin and alive to God?

Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, may we cling to your cross and rise with you each day to new life for mission and ministry. Amen.

January 22

Romans 6:12-19

Sin must no longer rule.
Do not present any part of yourselves as instruments of wickedness,
but rather present yourselves to God
as people who have been brought from death to life,
and present yourselves to God as instruments of righteousness.
Sin will have no dominion over you,
since you are not under the law but under grace.

* What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? Don't you know that when you surrender yourselves as slaves to obey someone, you are slaves of the master you obey, either sin, or righteousness?

Thanks be to God that you have become obedient
from the heart to that which you have been taught
and that you, having been set free from sin,
have become slaves of righteousness.
Just as you once presented yourselves as
slaves to impurity for greater and greater iniquity,
now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

* What is the reason you want to refrain from sin? If you ask that question in the general public, what do you think people will say?

* Slavery is a strong term. How are we enslaved to sin, both individually, and collectively through oppressive systems?

* What does it mean to present ourselves as "slaves" to righteousness for sanctification?

O Ruler of the Universe, free us from being ruled by wickedness and from wanting to be. Thanks be to you, O God, for liberating us for a righteous relationship with you and with people whom we have been called to lead and to serve and with the world itself. In Jesus Name, Amen.

January 23

Romans 6:20-23

When slaves of sin, you were free from the control of righteousness.
And what was the advantage of that? Nothing but shame and death.

But now you are free from the commands of God
and bound to the service of God.
Your gain, your advantage, is sanctification, holiness,
life fully dedicated to Christ.

* The key component of sanctification for Paul is being freed to live a holy life in Christ. What are you “freed from” and what are you “freed for”?

* What does sanctification, the life “bound to the service of God” look like? Reflect on some stories of human life in the service of God that you have witnessed. What do those stories reflect back to you now for your own life?

The wages of sin is death,
but the free gift of God is eternal life
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

* Romans 2:23 may be one of the most popular billboard sign and bumper sticker Bible verses of all time. What do you think it says to people who have seen only this one verse of Scripture? Having delved into Romans what does this verse say to you?

Sanctifying God, make us also holy. Each day free us again from the entanglements of sin that you might bring to life in us your very holiness. And in Christ's holiness, call us again, call us anew to your service in ministry and mission. Amen.

January 24

Romans 7:1-6

Do you not know, brothers and sisters
that the law binds only in this lifetime?

A married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives.
If he dies she is discharged from the law concerning her husband.
Accordingly, she is an adulteress if she lives with another man
while her husband is alive.
But if her husband dies, she is free from the law.
If she marries another man, she is not an adulteress.

In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law
through the body of Christ
so that you may belong to the one who has been raised from the dead
and bear fruit, not for death but for God.
Now we are dead to that which held us captive.
We are slaves not under the old written code
but in the new life in the Spirit.

* How has this analogy, of comparing a woman belonging to her husband to no longer belonging to the law but to Christ, been used to assert that wives belong to their husbands? How does belonging to Christ actually set women *and* men (Paul addressed both brothers and sisters) free from oppressive systems of human ownership to enter into mutual relationships of love and commitment?

* Paul says he is speaking to “those who know the law.” In teaching people about the profound nature of “being dead to that which held us captive” to live in the life of the Spirit, what images and analogies might we use today?

Set us free, Christ Jesus, so that we no longer put ourselves or one another under codes of oppression and death, but claim life in the Spirit to bear fruit for you. Amen.

January 25

Romans 7:7-13

What should we say?
That the law itself is sinful?
By no means!

Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known what sinfulness is.
I would not have known what it is to covet
if the law had not said, "Do not covet."
Sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment,
produced in me all kinds of covetousness.

Apart from the law, sin lies dead.
With the commandment, sin sprang to life, and I died.
Sin, seizing an opportunity, deceived me and killed me.

So the law is holy,
and the commandment is holy and just and good.
Did what is good bring death to me? By no means.
It was sin working death in me through what is good
in order that sin might be shown to be sin.

*A central use of the law is that sin not only shows us our sin but puts it to death on the cross. How is it that when sin springs to life, the commandments kill me and I die? Why is that necessary, given the deceptive nature of sin?

* "Do not covet" is the commandment used in this passage. Paul might have used a different commandment. Why this one?

God of righteousness, we dare to thank you for your law and for the commandments which shine a spotlight on our sin and the systemic sin of all humankind that we might see the deceptiveness of sin and our own susceptibility and culpability. Let us see even more clearly the brightness of the babe in the manger and the risen Christ. Amen.

January 26

Romans 7:14-25

I do not understand my own actions.
I do not do what I want.
I do everything I hate.

If I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good,
But it is no longer I that do it, but the sin that dwells within me.
I know that nothing good dwells within me.

I can will what is right,
but I cannot do it.

I do not do the good I want,
but the evil I do not want is what I do.

If I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it,
but sin that dwells within me,
So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good,
evil lies close at hand.

* How is the old excuse "The devil made me do it" different from "It is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me"?

* Do I, can I, "delight in the law of God inside myself"? Do I feel "another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to sin"?

* Who will rescue me from this body of death?

So then with my mind I am a slave to the law of God,
But with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Thanks be to you God who through Jesus Christ, our Lord has and is continually rescuing me and all Christians from our slavery to sin so that we may live in a new right relationship with you and with one another. Amen.

January 27
Romans 8:1-11

Therefore
There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
The law of the Spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death.
God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.
God sent God's own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to deal with sin.

Those who live according to the flesh
set their minds on the things of the flesh,
but those who live according to the Spirit
set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit,
since the Spirit of God dwells in you.
Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.
But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin,
the Spirit is life because of righteousness.
The one who raised Jesus from the dead
will give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit within you.

* "Flesh" has many sordid connotations. What does Paul mean by, "flesh"?

* "Flesh" and "Spirit" does not mean body vs. spirit. Christ *came* in the body in wholeness with the spirit. Consider this contrast: *To set the mind on the flesh is death but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*

* What is your hope and trust in knowing that the one who raised Christ from the dead also gives life to your mortal body now and for all eternity?

Risen Lord Jesus, we thank you for taking on flesh that we might no longer be trapped in the sin which corrupts and corrodes but be filled with your own Spirit which brings life to our bodies. Help us use this new life to share this Good News near and far and to be engaged in life-giving ministries throughout the earth. Amen.

January 28
Romans 8:12-17

Brothers and sisters,
we are not obligated to live according to the flesh.
If you live according to the flesh, you will die;
If by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.
All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.
You did receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,
but you have received a spirit of adoption.

We cry "Abba!"
It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit
that we are children of God.
If children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ
if we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

* Many congregations refer to themselves as a "family," but "family" is not prominent among the dozens of images of the church in the New Testament. What images of kinship do we have in this text? What radical, counter-cultural relationships is God creating?

* How are the people one leads also their brothers and sisters? How are the children of parents also their sisters and brothers?

* To adopt a child is to commit oneself to a lifetime relationship of love and care. What does it mean to you to be adopted by God?

* What images do you have of being an heir? A "joint" heir? And what does it mean to also be an heir of his suffering for the sake of the world?

Abba, parenting-God, we thank you for the Spirit which bears witness in and through us. May we be your faithful adopted children and heirs of your promise and mission, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

January 29

Romans 8:18-25

The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing
with the glory about to be revealed to us.
For the creation waits with eager longing
for the revealing of the children of God.
The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will
but by the will of the one who subjected it
in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay
and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;
and not only the creation, but we ourselves,
who have been the first fruits of the Spirit,
groan inwardly while we wait for the adoption,
the redemption of our bodies.

In hope we were saved.
Now hope that is seen is not hope.
For who hopes for what is not seen?
But if we hope for what we do not see,
we wait for it with patience.

* Picture creation groaning in labor pains. What is the bondage to decay from which it will be set free? What is our role in this anticipation?

* Have you ever been in labor? We already have been given the first fruits of the Spirit, and now we wait, in the groans of labor, for adoption. What does that mean in you?

* What is your hope? Your deep hope in Christ?

God of all hope, in the midst of the world's suffering, shape our anticipatory leadership that we may be midwives of the future, caregivers of creation, as the body of Christ bringing forth fruits of the Spirit. Amen.

January 30

Romans 8:26-30

The Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.
God who searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that in all things God works for the good
among those who love God,
and are called according to God's purpose.

* How have you heard this one verse taken out of context in an attempt to give a too-quick answer to those who suffer? In the full context of Romans how do you understand this verse? What deep comfort is here?

Those whom God knew from the start, God set apart
to be shaped in the image of the Son
so Christ would be the first of many beloved children –
Those whom God predestined God also called;
those whom God called God also justified;
those whom God justified God also glorified.

“predestined” “called” “justified” “glorified”

* What does it mean to be “predestined”? To be “justified”? Christians for centuries have divided themselves over the use of those terms. How do you understand being chosen by God? What does being made right with God mean to you? What these words mean for you in your call to discipleship?

God who calls all people to yourself, open our arms that we might share the good news that is beyond our comprehension that you have made the world right with yourself. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ may we find salvation and hope, patience and purpose to love you, and serve you, and glorify your most holy name. Amen.

January 31

Romans 8:31-39

What then are we to say about these things?
If God is for us, who is against us?
Will the God who gave all of us Jesus Christ
 not also give us everything else?
Who will bring anything against God's chosen people?
God justifies. Who is to condemn?
Christ Jesus died and was raised.
 who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us.
Who then will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine,
 or nakedness, or peril or sword?

As it is written, "for your sake we are being killed all day long;
 we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered." (Ps. 44:22)
No, in all these things we are more than conquerors
 through Christ who loved us.

**Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
Nor things present, nor things to come,
Nor powers, nor 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.**

*What then can we say, O God? Thank you! On this very day when we worry
about so many things, when we grieve, when we suffer, when we ache for the
oppressed, we place ourselves in your loving care, and there we will stay
forever. Amen.*

February 1 **Romans 9:1-5**

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying;
my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit.
How great is my sorrow, how endless the pain in my heart.

I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ
for the sake of my own people, my kindred.

They are Israelites.
To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants,
the giving of the law; the worship, and the promises.

From them comes the Messiah, who is over all,
God blessed forever. Amen.

* Can you imagine anyone saying, “I could wish that I were cut off from Christ” for the sake of someone who does not recognize Jesus as Savior? For whom have you anguished over their disbelief?

* The very people who passed on the faith now do not see God’s merciful fulfillment of the promise among them. What people in your own life does that bring to mind?

* We *could* wish we ourselves were cut off from Christ for their sake; rather, what *could* we do with the energy of that anguish and that deep care for them?

Anguishing God, you know our sorrow over people who do not know Christ, including those who have fallen away from their faith. Increase our concern so that you can deepen our care. Bless them. Give us the wisdom we need to minister evangelically in the name Jesus, the Messiah. Amen.

February 2 **Romans 9:6-18**

It is not as though the word of God had failed.
It’s just that –
not all Israelites truly belong to Israel,
and not all Abraham’s children are his true descendants.
It is not the children of the flesh that are children of God,
but the children of the promise are counted as true descendants.

What then are we to say?
Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!
God said to Moses,
“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

So it depends not on human will or work
but on God who shows mercy.

Scripture said to Pharaoh, “I have raised you up to show my power in you,
so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.” (Ex. 9:16)
God has mercy on or hardens the heart of whomever God chooses.

* Consider (vs. 9-13): The surprising birth of Abraham and Sarah’s son Isaac; God choosing Rebecca’s oldest son, Esau, to serve his younger brother, Jacob, God throughout history works out promises in unexpected ways. What do you think about that? How might this be good news in our world?

God of the centuries, history is your history. Call, compassion and mercy come from you alone. Use us for your purposes that your name may be proclaimed and your will done in our generation. In Christ, the Word, we pray. Amen.

February 3

Romans 9:19-26

You will say to me, “Why then does God still find fault?
Who can resist God’s will?
But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God?

* Who are *you* to argue with God?

A clay pot does not ask the one who made it,
“Why have you made me like this?”
Has not the potter the right to make two pots from the same lump of clay,
one for special occasions, and another for ordinary use?

* Are we not also clay pots? What do we say to our maker?

What if God has endured with much patience the objects of God’s wrath?
What if God did so to make known God’s glory
for the objects of God’s mercy,
including us whom God has called,
not from the Jews only,
but also from the Gentiles?

Hosea: “Those who were not my people I will call my people.
Those not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’
Those in every place who were called ‘not my people’
shall be called children of the living God.” (Hos. 1:10; 2:23)

* In every place where people are dismissed as nobody, what is *God* doing?

We do not know who we are, God. Really, we dare know nothing except that you who is a God of judgment is also a God of profound and unimaginable mercy. Shape us, mold us, breathe into us the breath of life that we who are called your “people” may live out this amazing re-creation in love for all. In Christ, who was dismissed for dead but who is alive we pray. Amen.

February 4

Romans 9:27-32

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, “Though the number of children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved; for the Lord will execute a sentence on the earth quickly and decisively. Isaiah predicted, “If the Lord of hosts had not left survivors to us, we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gomorrah.” (Is 10:22)

Gentiles who did not strive for righteousness attained it through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling the law. Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone.

See: I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble,
a rock that will make them fall,
and whoever trust in it will not be put to shame.

* What is this cornerstone for Zion? Read Isaiah 28 about the “foundation stone,” precious and sure. What kind of foundation is this where honesty will be the plumb line and justice its measurement?

* What does it mean for our lives, personally and communally, to strive for righteousness based on faith?

All wise God, we do stumble. Thank you for the foundation rock of Jesus Christ. May our faith be sure, wise and consistent, especially during the most trying of times. Amen.

February 5

Romans 10:1-10

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

* Who is "them?" For whom is Paul aching? For whom do you ache?

They have zeal but it is not enlightened.
Ignorant of righteousness from God, seeking to establish their own,
they have not submitted to God's righteousness.

* How do we try to establish our own "righteousness"? Who, within the congregation as well as in the community, needs ongoing Christian education to continue to learn of God's grace in Christ?

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness
for everyone who believes.

Moses wrote that whoever obeys the commands of the Law will live.
But what does scripture say about being put right with God through faith?
*Are we to ask who gets into heaven and who doesn't?

No, God's message is near you, on your lips and in your heart.
That is the message of faith that we preach.
If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart
that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.
One believes with the heart and so is justified,
and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

* Paul is not simply against the Law but is yearning for those who think they are justified by the law. For the sake of mission, how can we teach salvation in Christ in a way that people are freed from the bondage of being under condemnation and under self-justification?

*We yearn, O God, for those who are burdened by trying to justify themselves.
We confess that we, too, continually slip back into trying to establish our own
righteousness. Teach us. Save us. Free us. Open our hearts and shape our
words to confess you alone, Christ Jesus. Amen.*

February 6

Romans 10:11-17

Scripture says that no one who believes in Christ will be put to shame.
There is no distinction between Jew and Greek;
the same Lord is lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.
Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?
And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?
And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!
But not all have obeyed the good news.

Isaiah says, "Lord who has believed our message?" (Is. 53:1)

Faith comes from what is heard, and
what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

* This is all about mission. Are you willing to be sent? Sent again? Sent further?

* Are you prepared to proclaim? To speak the Good News in daily encounters?

* Do you minister as though there really were no distinction between Jew and Greek? Do you minister inclusively among all peoples?

*Generous God, we call on your name. Sharpen our ears to hear your Word.
Grow our skills to proclaim your grace. Increase our zeal to reach out to all.
In Christ we pray. Amen.*

February 7 **Romans 10:18-21**

But I ask, have they not heard?
Indeed they have.

Psalm 19:4 “[Heavens’] voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.”

Again, I ask, did Israel not understand?

Deuteronomy 32:21 “They made me jealous with what is no god, provoked me with their idols. So I will make them jealous with what is no people, provoke them with a foolish nation.”

Of Israel God said:

Isaiah 65:1-2 “I was ready to answer my people’s prayers, but they did not pray. I was ready for them to find me, but they did not ever try,” and, “I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices.”

* Think about what Paul said about God: “I have been found by those who did not seek me. I was ready for them to find me, but they did not ever try. All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”

* What is mission for those who have never heard? What is mission for those who have? Do you find yourself impatient, even resentful of those who have heard but are no longer worshipping, or who have drifted away from church?

* What is our own idolatry? Rebellion? How do we provoke God?

God of steadfast love, we do test your patience. And we are contrary and disobedient. For this we ask forgiveness. Forgive us, too, for forgetting those who have left the church. For the sake of mission, we ask for your reconciling grace and outreaching arms of love. In Christ, Amen.

February 8 **Romans 11:1-12**

I ask, then, has God rejected God’s own people? By no means!

*Paul is writing as a descendent of Abraham, an Israelite, an insider of the faith and he reminds us of Elijah, a prophet protected by God in a time when the faith was being persecuted. (vs. 1b-4) What does that mean for us?

At the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.
But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works,
otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking.
The elect obtained it but the rest were hardened.

“God gave them a sluggish spirit, eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear, down to the very day.” (Is. 29:10)

*Paul quotes David from the Psalms saying to let people stumble, their eyes be darkened and their backs be forever bent (v. 9-10). How harsh are these words?

So, I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means!
But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles.
Now if their stumbling means riches for the world,
and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles,
how much more will their full inclusion mean?

* How hard it is to understand people turning their back on God! Are we not tempted to say, “Their loss; our gain”? To what does Paul call us?

Steadfast God, thank you for continuing to reach out to an ever larger circle of people to include in your grace. Keep us, too, from a sluggish spirit, from having eyes that refuse to see and ears that will not hear. Use us as instruments of your far-reaching grace in Christ. Amen.

February 9 **Romans 11:13-24**

I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. If their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!

If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, the branches also are holy. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps God will not spare you.

Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness toward you, provided you continue in God’s kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

* Paul in writing to the Gentiles through this extended analogy warns them not to become proud of their own new place on God’s “tree.” In this, a different time, a different configuration of Christianity, what do you see as dangers? How might we stand in awe of both God’s severity and God’s kindness? How does this call us to mission?

God of the olive tree, root us deeply in you alone; that your branches, both natural and grafted, might bear much fruit. In Christ, Amen.

February 10 **Romans 11:25-36**

So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters,
I want you to understand this mystery:
a hardening has come upon part of Israel
until the full number of Gentiles has come in.

And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,
“Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob...
and this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins.” (Is. 59:20-21)

As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake;
but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors.

The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

* What does this mean? What does this mean for mission?

Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy
because of their disobedience,
so they have now been disobedient in order that,
by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy.

God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that God may be merciful to all.

* What does this mean? What does this mean for mission?

*Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of you, O God!
How unsearchable are your judgments and how inscrutable your ways.
We cannot know your mind, O Lord; we cannot be your counselor.
There is no gift we could give you to receive such a gift as yours in return.
From you and through you and to you are all things. To you be the glory
forever. Amen.*

February 11 **Romans 12:1-2**

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,
by the mercies of God
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good
and acceptable
and perfect.

* In this, one of the three great “Body of Christ” chapters in the Epistles (along with I Corinthians 14 and Ephesians 4), we, who have been joined with Christ in his body through his sacrificial death and resurrection, are invited to present our bodies, our entire selves, as a living sacrifice to God. What does this mean for your life? How does such living become a spiritual worship?

* What does not being “conformed” to the world mean in terms of our having other gods that we fear, love and trust above all things? Each day the Spirit through Christ renews and transforms us. How, on this day, will you discern what is good, and acceptable, and perfect?

Merciful God, renew and transform us that we, living as part of the body of Christ in the world, might not only discern your will, but do it, for the sake of our neighbors, those near and those around the world. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

February 12 **Romans 12:3-8**

By the grace given to me I say to everyone among you
not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think,
but to think with sober judgment,
each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body we have many members,
and not all the members have the same function,
so we, who are many, are one body in Christ,
and individually we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:
prophecy, in proportion to faith;
ministry, in ministering;
the teacher, in teaching;
the exhorter, in exhortation;
the giver, in generosity;
the leader, in diligence;
the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

* Visualize the faith community of which you are a part. Picture the gifts of the members in motion. How do you see the Body of Christ in ministry?

* Think about the entire body of Christ, globally and historically. Even though these members of the body seem far apart in time or place, unable to know or touch one another, consider how we are members one of another. What is your picture of the body of Christ?

We who are many are one body in Christ. We find this hard to picture in the complexity and conflict of our life together. Creator God, give us eyes to appreciate the diversity among us. Redeeming God, make us one, forgiving and reconciling us. Spirit of new hope, fill this body, your body, with energizing life to be in mission. Amen.

February 13 **Romans 12:9-15**

Let love be genuine;
hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints;
extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you;
bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice,
weep with those who weep.

* As the body of Christ, the church, and filled with the Spirit, how are we now liberated to love one another? And how does this body of faith love those in need? How might we rejoice with those who weep beyond this faith community in the world all week long?

* Think about, write down, give thanks for specific times when you have witnessed someone extending hospitality, people outdoing one another in showing honor, a whole community contributing to the needs of the saints in parts of the church in need.

Christ Jesus, we are your body at work in the world. Bind us together in love that we might indeed weep and rejoice, contribute and care, and in so doing strengthen the church itself while we are engaged in mission and ministry. Spirit of the Living God, give us zeal so that we serve with compassion and courage. Amen.

February 14 **Romans 12:16-21**

Live in harmony with one another;
do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;
do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
Beloved, never avenge yourselves,
but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written,
“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (Deut. 33:35)

No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this
you will heap burning coals on their heads.” (Prov. 25:21-22)

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

* Yesterday’s text focused on the ministry of the body of Christ honoring, loving, serving and rejoicing. In this part of Romans 12 we hear how we are to respond to evil and relate to one’s enemies. Think of specific times when you have experienced someone or a whole community refusing to repay evil for evil, but choosing a different response.

* When have you been overcome or almost overcome with evil? Recall the feelings. How did God or how might God now give you wisdom and peace, through the body of Christ, so that God might overcome evil with good?

God of justice and mercy, take our haughtiness, our vengeance, and our animosity and transform them through the death and resurrection of Jesus into new, daring acts of sacrificial love and reconciliation. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

February 15

Romans 13:1-7

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities;
for there is no authority except from God,
and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.
Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed,
and those who resist will incur judgment.

Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.
Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good,
and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good.
But if you do wrong you should be afraid.

Authority does not bare the sword in vain!
Authority is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.
One must be subject not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.
For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servant.

Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due,
revenue to whom revenue is due,
respect to whom respect is due,
honor to whom honor is due.

* How do you interpret, "There is no authority except from God"?

* So, in what frame of mind do you pay taxes? Who or what are we respecting when we pay revenues?

* We are to respect governing authorities. But what if the authority is unjust? At its heart, what is civil disobedience? How does one change systems that are unjust to the oppressed?

O God of governments, you have authored the earth and given authority to human beings. May we always seek your righteousness. Give us the wisdom, concern and energy in our participatory democracy. Guide the nations of the world and all in authority. In your most holy name we pray. Amen.

February 16

Romans 13:8-14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another.
The one who loves another has fulfilled the law.
The commandments are summed up in this word,
"Love your neighbor as yourself."
Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love is the fulfilling of the law.

You know what time it is...the moment for you to wake from sleep.
for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

The night is far gone; the day is near.
Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.
Let us live honorably as in the day,
Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in immorality or indecency,
quarreling and jealousy.
Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ,
and do not pay attention to your sinful nature and satisfying its desires.

* How is "love your neighbor as yourself" the fulfilling of: "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder, not steal, not covet?"

* What does the image of Christ's death and resurrection being "the night is gone; the light has come" mean for our own lives? How are we freed from not simply seeking to gratify our own dishonorable desires? From quarreling and jealousy? What does "the night is gone; the light has come" mean in our calling to love the neighbor?

O God of immeasurable love, we thank and praise your name for the love we have received in Christ Jesus. Fill us with your Spirit and free us from darkness to love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.

February 17 **Romans 14:1-6**

Welcome those who are weak in faith,
but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.

Those who eat must not despise those who abstain,
and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat;
for God has welcomed them.

Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?

It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall.
They will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.
Some judge one day to be better than another,
while others judge all days to be alike.

Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.
Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord.
Those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God.
Those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord, and give thanks to God.

* Who is weak in faith? Who is strong in faith? Who are we to judge another's faith or another's faith practices? What faith practices threaten to divide congregations or church bodies today? How do we welcome one another without judgment?

* How can adherence to a faith practice impede honoring God? How do we honor and give thanks to God through our practices?

Welcoming God, may we truly welcome one another without judgment, and may we grow in faith. We give thanks to you for this new life we have together in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

February 18 **Romans 14:7-12**

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.
If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord;
so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

For to this end Christ died and lived again,
so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

* How has God set us free in Christ's cross and resurrection for our dying and for our living?

Why do you judge and despise your brother or sister?
We all will stand before the judgment seat of God.
It is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God." (Is. 45:23)
Each of us will be accountable to God.

* Our freedom for salvation is in Christ Jesus. Living in this freedom, we still judge and despise one another. Why? If not for our salvation, for what are we accountable to God?

* What is the power of the cross to change the ways we live with one another?

God of the living and of the dying, may we so trust you that our lives are transformed by the power of your Holy Spirit to giving, not judging, loving not despising. May we bow before you alone, O God, and give praise to you all the day long. In Christ, our Living Lord. Amen.

February 19

Romans 14:13-23

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another,
but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block
or hindrance in the way of another.

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus
that nothing is unclean in itself;
but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

If your brother or sister is injured by what you eat,
you are no longer walking in love.
Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.
Do not let your good be spoken of as evil.
The kingdom of God is not food and drink
but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The one who serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval.
Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.
Do not for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.
Everything is indeed clean,
but it is wrong to make others fall by what you eat;
it is good not to do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble.
The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God.

* In your own background what things marked a person “not a very good Christian”? How did that affect the community?

* In what ways do we put stumbling blocks to faith in front of people by what we do or do not do? If you find yourself asking if you should be doing something, should you be doing it? What is life above reproach?

* In Christ we have freedom from old purity laws. But how are we now called by God to acts of faith, even to refraining from things that might offend a brother or sister, so that the body of Christ might be built up?

Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. O God, you alone make us holy; in you alone we place our trust. You alone are judge. Give us such love for our brothers and sisters that what we do, or refrain from doing, draws them to Jesus Christ and to life together in the church. In Christ we pray, Amen.

February 20

Romans 15:1-6

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak.
We should not just please ourselves.

*How do we help people carry their burdens, and not just when it is convenient, or to serve our own ends, or to make us feel good?

Each of us must please our neighbors, for their good,
for the good purpose of building them up.

For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written,
“The insults which are hurled at you have fallen on me.” (Psalm 69:9)

That which was written in former days is for our instruction,
so that by steadfastness and encouragement of the scriptures
we might have hope.

* Who among your family, friends, and faith community is having a difficult time? What is your call to ministry to help them be strengthened in their faith?

* Recall an insult that was hurled at you, perhaps recently, or one that is still burning from long ago. Focus on Christ. Know that those insults, and those which we hurl at others, have fallen on Christ. How can you let them go?

* How is your study of scripture going? How does it instruct, encourage and give you hope? How might it?

O God of steadfastness and encouragement, grant us your grace to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together we may, with one voice, glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

February 21 **Romans 15:7-13**

Welcome one another, therefore,
just as Christ has welcomed you,
for the glory of God.

Christ has become a servant of Israel
on behalf of the truth of God,
in order that God might confirm the promises to our ancestors
and in order that the Gentiles might praise God for God's mercy.

As scripture says:

"I will praise you among the Gentiles." (2 Samuel 22:50; Psalm 18:49)

"Rejoice, Gentiles, with God's people." (Deuteronomy 32:43)

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all peoples praise God." (Psalm 117:1)

"The root of Jesse shall come;
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles,
in him the Gentiles have hope." (Isaiah 11:10)

* Whom might you serve? For whom might you pray? To whom might you tell about God's mercy in Christ Jesus? Whom might you welcome as Christ has welcomed you?

May the Risen One, the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

February 22 **Romans 15:14-21**

I feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters,
that you are full of goodness,
filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

* About whom are you confident that they have grown in knowledge so that *they* are now able to teach others in the community of faith?

Nevertheless, I have written you boldly as a reminder,
because of God's grace to me
to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles,
in the priestly service of the Gospel of God,
so that the offerings of the Gentiles might be acceptable,
sanctified by the Holy Spirit.
In Christ Jesus I have reason to boast of my work for God
for I will not speak of anything except what
Christ has accomplished through me
to lead the Gentiles to obey God, by word and deed, by the power of signs
and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God,
so that from Jerusalem as far around as Illyricum
I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ.

* About what do you speak boldly? Where is your zeal? What is your mission? Where is your mission beyond where people are already believers in Christ in their own church?

I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news,
not where Christ has already been named,
so that I do not build on someone else's foundation.

We pray Paul's words from Isaiah 52:15: "Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand." May it be true, and may it be true through us, Christ Jesus. Amen.

February 23

Romans 15:22-33

I have often been hindered in coming to you. Now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. I hope to see you and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. At present I am going to Jerusalem in ministry to the saints; Macedonia and Achaia have shared their resources with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, for if these Gentiles have shared spiritual blessings, they ought to be of service in material things. When I have delivered what has been collected, I will set out for Spain by way of you. And I know, when I come, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

* With what faith communities, near or far, is your faith community connected? How do you strengthen one another?

* Whom do you long to visit? How are you a living Epistle among the churches, sharing blessings with one another, caring for those in need, expanding the Gospel?

Paul writes, I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God. May we, and all who minister in Christ's name, be kept safe. May our ministry to others be acceptable and helpful to them. By God's will may we come to others with joy and be refreshed in their company. May the God of peace be with us all. Amen.

February 24

Romans 16:1-16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as God's people should, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well.

* Give thanks for the powerful servanthood of thousands of diaconal ministers throughout history and throughout the world today. How might you find out more about them? How might you be of help to them?

Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house.

* Who has risked his or her neck for you? For which daring faith communities do you give thanks?

* Fill in your own names along with some of those Paul greets:

Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, _____, who was my first convert.
Greet Mary, _____, who worked very hard among you.
Greet Andronicus and Junia, _____, my relatives, who suffered with me.
Greet Ampliatus, _____, my beloved in the Lord.
Greet Urbanus and my beloved Stachys, _____, our co-workers in Christ.
Greet Rufus, _____, chosen in the Lord;
and his mother, _____, a mother to me also.
Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them, _____, _____, _____, _____.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. Amen.

February 25 **Romans 16:17-20**

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those
who cause dissensions and offenses in opposition
to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them.
Such people do not serve our Lord Christ,
but their own appetites,
and by smooth talk and flattery
they deceive innocent people.

So, I want you to be wise to what is good,
and heedless to that kind of flattering evil.
And God, our source of peace,
will soon crush Satan under your feet.
The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

* Who within your faith community causes offenses and dissensions
(including yourself)? How do you all “keep an eye” on each other? Helpfully?
Not so helpfully?

* Who among us has not been tempted to serve our “own appetites” rather
than Christ? What are those appetites?

* How is flattery helpful? How is it not? How do we use “smooth talk and
flattery” to deceive? Who within your faith community is the most innocent
and vulnerable?

* How is God making you both good and heedless? To what end?

* We could misuse the promise of the power that God “crushes Satan” under
our feet, but how might God be doing exactly that in our ministries of peace-
making and justice-building?

*In the midst of all of these realities—and more—may the grace of our Lord
Jesus Christ be with us and all churches everywhere. Amen.*

February 26 **Romans 16:21-25**

*The ministry of the faith extends far beyond our own locale.
People who are familiar to the church at Rome send their greetings of
encouragements with Paul. Fill in the names of people in your faith
community who send greetings to other churches as you together share the
Gospel across the globe:

Timothy, _____, _____, my co-workers greet you.
Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, _____, _____, my relatives, greet you.

I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord
Gaius, host to me and the whole church, greets you.
Erastus, the city treasurer,
our brother Quartus, _____, _____, _____ greet you.

* How has God been able to strengthen you through the proclamation of the
Gospel of Jesus Christ? Who are the people from whom you are separated
whose greetings encourage you to continue your ministry?

* How is God’s revelation still a mystery in our age? How might the prophetic
writings be made known even more fully to those who are still outsiders?

* What does “obedience of faith” mean? What does having a wise God mean
to you?

*Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my Gospel and the
proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that
was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic
writings is made known to all the Gentiles according to the command of the
eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God,
through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever. Amen.*

February 27 **1 Corinthians 1:1-9**

From Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus
and from our brother Sosthenes—

To the church of God that is in Corinth,
to all who are called to be God's holy people,
together with all people everywhere
who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to God because of the grace
God has given you in Christ Jesus.
In union with Christ you have become rich
in all things, including speech and knowledge.

The message of Christ has become so firmly established in you.
that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift
as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.
God will keep you firm to the end
so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.
God can be trusted, the God who called you
to fellowship with Jesus Christ, our Lord.

* How does the church in your place give thanks for all people everywhere
who worship Jesus Christ?

* What difference does it make that Christ is "our Lord and theirs"?

* Do you believe God can be trusted to keep your faith community "firm" to
the end? When is it hard to believe that?

*Lord Jesus Christ, as we wait for your coming again, keep us growing in
knowledge and speech, that we may not only be blessed, but be a blessing to
Christians everywhere. Keep us firm in our faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

February 28 **1 Corinthians 1:10-17**

By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ
I appeal to you to agree in what you say,
so there will be no divisions among you.
Be completely united, with only one thought and one purpose.
I've heard there are quarrels among you.

Each of you says something different.
"I follow Paul" "I follow Apollos" "I follow Peter"; "I follow Christ."
Christ has been divided into groups!

Did Paul die for you on the cross? Were you baptized as Paul's disciples?
I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius
So that none can say that you were baptized in my name.
(Oh yes, I baptized two others, but I can't remember
if I baptized anybody else.)

Christ sent me to tell the Good News, and not with eloquent wisdom,
in order to make sure Christ's death on the cross
is not robbed of its power.

- * There aren't divisions among you, are there? What is their root cause?
- * How do some people become unduly attached to a certain leader?
- * How is Christ's death on the cross "robbed of its power" among us?

*Christ of the cross and resurrection, these are hard questions and hard times
when we divide ourselves from one another. Forgive us. Redeem us.
Transform us. Unite us. Amen.*

If there is no February 29 this year, read this passage with March 1.

February 29

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

The message about the cross is nonsense to those who are being lost
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

- * Where is the one who is wise?
Where is the scribe?
Where is the debater of this age?
Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

Since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom,
God decided, through the foolishness of the proclamation,
to save those who believe.

Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,
but we proclaim Christ crucified,
a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

But for those who are being called, both Jews and Gentiles,
this message is Christ, who is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,
and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

*What is the wisdom of God that we are called to proclaim? How is God's
weakness on the cross stronger than human strength?

*God of wisdom, enter our foolish hearts that we who make nonsense our goal,
may know and trust you. Forgive us, direct us, teach us that we who are weak
in our own misunderstandings, our own version of the truth, our own
misguided pursuits may be made wise and strong by the power of Christ's
cross alone. Amen.*

March 1

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters;
not many of you were wise by human standards,
not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise;
God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;
God chose what is low and despised in the world,
to invalidate what the world thinks is important,
so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

* Consider your own baptismal call. How do you sometimes minimize your
own gifts? Your own background? How is God ready to call and use you no
matter human standards?

* Reflect on stories of Christian faith and life you have witnessed or about
which you have heard. Ponder when Christ's love became known through
those whom the world saw as weak and lowly and even despised.

*O God, you are the source of our lives in Christ Jesus, who became for us
wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. We
thank and bless your holy name. Amen.*

Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

March 2

1 Corinthians 2:1-8

When I came to you, brothers and sisters,
I did not proclaim the mystery of God in lofty words or wisdom.
I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ,
and him crucified.

I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.
My speech and proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom,
but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power
so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom
but on the power of God.

Yet among the mature we speak wisdom,
though it is not a wisdom of this age.
We speak God's wisdom, sacred and hidden,
which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

None of the rulers of this age understood this;
if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

* We strive to speak clearly and plausibly. That's helpful. How do we do that while also depending upon God's Spirit rather than our own words?

* How are we called to speak using different words and phrases appropriate to different people to whom we speak? That's useful. Even so, how do we speak God's wisdom which is distinguishable from the world's measure of wisdom?

God of all wisdom, fill us with the power of your Holy Spirit that we, knowing our own weaknesses, may speak your truth, distinct from the world's knowledge, to each person. May we know nothing except Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead, in whose name we pray. Amen.

March 3

1 Corinthians 2:9-16

It is written,
"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love the Lord"-- (Isaiah 64:4)
these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit;
for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

What person knows what is human
except the Spirit of humanity in that person?
In the same way, no one knows all about God except God.
We have received not the spirit of the world,
but the Spirit that is from God,
so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

We do not speak in human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit.
as we explain spiritual truths to those who have the Spirit.
The unspiritual cannot understand the gifts of God;
they are foolishness to them.
Those who are spiritual discern all things,
and are subject to no one else's scrutiny.

"For who has known the mind of the Lord
so as to instruct God?" (Isaiah 40:13)
But we have the mind of Christ.

* We cannot comprehend God at work in us and through us in the world. What does that mean to you and for your ministry among God's gifted people?

* How has "the mind of Christ" surprised, humbled and empowered you?

O Living Spirit, who searches even the depths of God, open our hearts and minds to know you as we are able, to love you beyond all reason, and to receive your gifts that we might serve you for the sake of the world. In Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

March 4

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Brothers and sisters, I fed you with milk, not solid food,
for you were not ready for solid food.
Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh.
For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you,
are you not behaving according to human inclinations?

* When is the time to feed people on milk rather than solid food? How do you do that? But Paul's assessment is that the Corinthians *should* now be further along in their Christian faith. How do you help a community mature?

When one says, "I belong to Paul," and another "I belong to Apollos,"
are you not merely human? What is Apollos? What is Paul?
Servants through whom you came to believe.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.
The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose,
and each will receive wages according to the labor of each.
We are God's servants, working together.
You are God's field. God's building.

* What factions, perhaps according to various present and past leaders, have you seen in Christian communities? Have we not sometimes been part of such divisions? How have you seen God giving growth, in the midst of, perhaps in spite of, divisions?

God of human community, may we who have graciously been called to be part of your church, mature in faith that we may not judge one another merely on human inclinations, but depend on you alone for growth, as individuals, and as a faith community. In Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

March 5

1 Corinthians 3:10-15

According to the grace of God given to me,
like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation,
and someone else is building on it.
Each builder must choose with care how to build on it.

No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid;
that foundation is Jesus Christ.

If anyone builds on the foundation
with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—
the work of the builder will become visible,
for the day will disclose it.

It will be revealed with fire; the fire will test
what sort of work each has done.

If what is built survives, the builder will receive a reward.
If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss;
the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

* What does it mean to you that in your work in the church you are building on a foundation someone else has laid?

* What does it mean to you that the builder "will be saved, but only as through fire?"

* What do gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw represent to you?

Jesus Christ, you are our sure foundation. May each of us build with care and with wisdom. Jesus Christ, you are our sure foundation! Make us mindful of those who have built before us. And may we build, aware of those who will build on our work. In your name and for your sake we pray. Amen.

March 6

1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Do you not know that you are God's temple
and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person.
God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Do not deceive yourselves.
If you think that you are wise in this age,
you should become fools so that you may become wise.

The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.
It is written, "God catches the wise in their craftiness" (Job 5:13)
"The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile" (Ps.94:11)

Let no one boast about human leaders.
For all things are yours,
whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas,
or the world or life or death or the present or the future—
all belong to you, and you belong to Christ,
and Christ belongs to God.

* Are you able to see yourself as God's temple? What does that mean for your life and for the lives of others with whom you relate? How can we not destroy one another? Who keeps you grounded, astute and wise?

* How can we more clearly care about being faithful disciples without relying upon connections with certain leaders? What stands in the way of claiming our full and constant connection with Christ?

Lord, keep us from boasting, from self-deception, from destructive living. Transform our lives daily that we might truly know that we belong to Christ and to each other in totally new ways. In his name we pray, Amen.

March 7

1 Corinthians 4:1-7

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ
and stewards of God's mysteries.
It is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.
I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself.
But I am not thereby acquitted. The Lord judges me.

Do not pronounce judgment before the time the Lord comes,
who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness
and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

* When are you tempted to judge yourself? When and through what actions do you judge others? When were you judged by human measure? How does this block God's mission?

May none of you be puffed up in favor of one against another.

* For who sees anything different in you?

* What do you have that you did not receive?

* And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

God of all truth, may we be stewards of your mysteries in being servants of Christ. We confess that more often than we would want to admit, we have judged people and succumbed to the judgment of others. Judge us only in the cross of Christ that we might receive new life as the gift which is our call to ministry. By the power of your Spirit may we be trustworthy. In Christ we pray. Amen.

March 8

1 Corinthians 4:8-13

Already you have all that you want!
I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all,
as though sentenced to death,
because we have become a spectacle to the world,
to angels and to mortals.
We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ.
We are weak, but you are strong.
You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.

We are hungry and thirsty,
we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless,
and we grow weary from the work of our own hands.

When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure;
when slandered, we speak kindly.
We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things.

* What is Paul doing here? Is he full of self-pity? Anger? Self-doubt? Does he write in self-defense? In admonition? In strength and confidence?

* How and when do you feel what he says is true also about you? Why would you say any of this? Why not? To whom? Or not?

Christ, you have called us to lives of discipleship and sacrifice and leadership. Give us clarity of purpose. Comfort us, challenge us, and guide us, and those to whom we speak and among whom we serve. Shape us in your cruciform image. Amen.

March 9

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

I am writing this not to make you ashamed,
but to admonish you as my beloved children.
You may have ten thousand guardians in Christ, but not many fathers.
In Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.
I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me.

I sent you Timothy to remind you of my ways in Christ
as I teach them everywhere in every church.
Some of you, thinking I am not coming, have become arrogant.
I will come soon, if the Lord wills.

The kingdom of God depends not on talk, but on power.
What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick,
or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

* What do you think is Paul's intent in writing so strongly and so directly to the Corinthian church? Why, and under what circumstances would some say, "Be an imitator of me?"

* What happens when we become arrogant?

* How do we admonish one another in the faith? What sticks are used? How does one accomplish the same thing with a spirit of powerful gentleness?

O God, you create communities of faith by the power of the Spirit. Guide us who are leaders in person and leaders from a distance. Keep us all from arrogance and shape us all in the image of the powerful, gentle Jesus. Amen.

March 10

1 Corinthians 5:1-8

It has been reported to me that there is sexual immorality among you,
and the kind that is not found even among pagans;
for a man is living with his father's wife.
And you are arrogant!

* Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would
have been removed from among you?

Though absent in body, I am present in spirit;
and as if present I have pronounced judgment
in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing.
When you meet together and my spirit is present with the power of Jesus,
you are to hand this man over to Satan for his body to be destroyed
so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

Your boasting is not a good thing.

* Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?

Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch,
as you really are unleavened.
Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.

*Christ Jesus, may we therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast,
the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and
truth. Amen.*

March 11

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons—
not at all meaning the immoral of this world,
or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters,
since you would then need to go out of the world.

I am writing to you not to associate with anyone
who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral
or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber.
Do not even eat with such a one.

* What have we to do with judging those outside?

* Is it not those who are inside that you are to judge?
“Drive out the wicked person from among you.” (Deut. 17:7)

* What in the world do we make of these admonitions? What in the **church** do
we make of these admonitions?

* If we take this literally, who is left in the church? How might this help us not
be too quick to judge those outside the church, thinking that we are holy and
they are not? However, how do these difficult words help us call each other to
lives of Christian living and service?

*Christ Jesus, you have called us to Christian community through your own
suffering and death on a cross. May we take one another as brothers and
sisters in the faith seriously. As resurrection people, may we call each other to
holy living and to lives of service and witness both within the church and
beyond. By the power of your Spirit, give us wisdom. Amen.*

March 12

1 Corinthians 6:1-8

When any of you has a grievance against another,
do you dare to take it to court,
instead of taking it before the saints?

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?
And if the world is to be judged by you,
are you incompetent to try trivial cases?

If you have ordinary cases, do you appoint as judges
those who have no standing in the church?
I say this to your shame.

Can it be that there is no one among you
wise enough to decide between one believer and another?
In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat.
Why not rather be wronged and defrauded?
But you yourselves wrong and defraud—and believers at that.

- * Today, how do faith communities decide disputes
within the church? How could procedures be improved?
- * Today, in a culture quick to sue,
how might our faith inform our attitudes and actions?
- * When should we go to court?

*God of righteousness and mercy, give us wisdom and courage to address
wrongs, settle disputes, and work for justice. In Christ we pray. Amen.*

March 13

1 Corinthians 6:9-20

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?
Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes,
sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will
inherit the kingdom of God. This is what some of you used to be.
You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified
in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial.
but I will not be dominated by anything.
Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,
and God will destroy both one and the other.
The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord,
and the Lord for the body.
God raised the Lord and will also raise us by God’s power.

- * Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?
Should I therefore take the members of Christ
and make them members of a prostitute? Never!
Anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication!
- * Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you,
which you have from God, and that you are not your own?
You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.
- * Note that Paul does not say we are justified by keeping from wrongdoing,
but *because* we have been washed, justified and sanctified our bodies belong
to Christ. Now that Christ is risen, and because we live in the Spirit, how do
you regard your body? How do you honor or dishonor other people’s bodies?

*Christ Jesus, we thank you that you have made us members of your own body.
Fill us with the Spirit to regard our bodies as yours, as God’s temple. Keep us
aware of each other in the body of Christ that we might strengthen one
another for holy living. Amen.*

March 14

1 Corinthians 7:1-7

It is well for a man not to touch a woman.
But because of sexual immorality each man should have his own wife
and each woman her own husband.
The husband should give his wife her conjugal rights,
and likewise the wife to her husband.
The wife does not have authority over her own body,
but the husband does;
likewise the husband does not have authority over his body,
but the wife does.

Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time,
to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again
so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.
This I say by way of concession, not of command.

I wish you were all like I am. But each has a particular gift from God.

* Through the ages how has patriarchal sexism placed women's bodies in the control of men? What has this done to women? To men? To the society and to the church?

* How in this passage are husbands and wives to serve one another with their bodies, not by command but by love? How can faith communities support such faithfulness?

Faithful God, who has created women and men for love and mutual service, give all husbands and wives, all persons in faithful relationships, understanding and ways to communicate their needs, and willingness to sacrifice, that they may grow in prayer, commitment and sustained faithfulness. In Christ Jesus who binds us all to himself. Amen.

March 15

1 Corinthians 7:8-16

To the unmarried and widows I say it is well to remain unmarried as I am.
But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry,
for it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

The wife should not separate from her husband
(or if she does, remain unmarried or be reconciled).
The husband should not divorce his wife.

If any believer has an unbelieving wife, he should not divorce her.
If any woman has an unbelieving husband, she should not divorce him.
For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife,
and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband.
Otherwise your children would be unclean,
but as it is, they are holy.

But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so.

Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband.
Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.

* In Paul's day, how do these guidelines for Christian living, (They are guidelines, not words about justification), provide for both women and men (a rare equality for that day)? How is Paul showing concern for both "believers" and "unbelievers"?

* In our day, what are the issues, your concerns, and your advice for living as unmarried or married people? How do we live in relationship as people of many faiths?

*God of love and faithfulness, give each one your love and care and gifts of grace for living out vocations of personhood and relationship. May we be bound to Christ for *it is to peace that God has called us.* Amen.*

March 16

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Let each of you lead the life to which God has called you.
This is my rule in all the churches.
Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing,
but obeying the commandments of God is everything.

Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it.
Even if you can gain your freedom,
make use of your present condition now more than ever.
Whoever was called in the Lord as a slave
is a freed person belonging to the Lord,
just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ.
You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters.
In whatever condition you were called, there remain with God.

- * What are the marks of being a Christian and what are not?
- * For centuries this passage has been used to justify slavery. What does it really say?
- * Whatever our condition or status in life, how are we free from human masters to “remain with God”? What is our call to keep from becoming enslaved to others?

O God, in whom alone is freedom through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, may your people everywhere be free from enslavement and may people in their freedom know the call to be servants of Christ. Amen.

March 17

1 Corinthians 7:25-31

Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord,
but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.

- * When Paul gives his opinion as one who is trustworthy, how do we regard these pieces of advice in these chapters? How are we to advise people today, as God’s trustworthy servants?

In view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are.
Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free.
Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.
If you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin.
Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life,
and I would spare you that.

- * What is the impending crisis? How does circumstantial advice need to be taken in context? Think about the many ways in which these verses have been taken out of context. What truth resides for us?

Brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short;
from now on let even those who have wives be as though they had none,
and those who mourn as though they were not mourning,
and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing,
and those who buy as though they had no possessions,
and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.

O God, the present form of this world is passing away. These two thousand years later, may we continue to live fully and also “as though not.” Keep our eyes focused on the Christ. Give us not only perspective but transformed purpose. Amen.

March 18

1 Corinthians 7:32-40

I want you to be free from anxieties.
The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord;
but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world and his wife.
The unmarried woman are anxious about the affairs of the Lord,
so that they may be holy in body and spirit
but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world
and her husband.

I say this for your benefit, not to put restraint upon you,
but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

The one who marries does well;
and the one who refrains from marriage will do better.
A wife is bound as long as her husband lives.
But if he dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord.
In my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is.
And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

* Paul makes his personal case for celibacy. How has the church through the centuries used this argument to refuse the priesthood and church leadership to people?

* How is celibacy a gift? How is it something that cannot be imposed?

* What truth resides in these verses for us? What problems do you see here?

God of love and community, bless those who live in marriages, as well as those called to celibacy and singleness. Bring justice to those who live in situations of oppression, and care for those in sorrow and pain. Keep us safe in the arms of our loving God. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

March 19

1 Corinthians 8:1-6

Concerning food sacrificed to idols:
Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.
Anyone who claims to know something does not yet,
but anyone who loves God is known by God.
Hence as to eating food offered to idols,
we know that no idol in the world really exists,
and that there is no God but one.

Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth,
yet for us there is one God, the Father,
from whom are all things and for whom we exist,
and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things
and through whom we exist.

* In every age, people claim to know all sorts of things about gods that they have thought up for themselves. What idols have crept into your own knowledge and life?

* But anyone who loves God is known by God. What does it mean for you to be known by God from whom are all things and for whom we exist?

God of all knowledge, we confess that we puff ourselves up with our own ideas of that which we consider worthy to be feared, loved and trusted above all things. Know us, God, and love us so that we, through the power of the Spirit in Jesus Christ, might fear, love and trust in you alone in order to build up others with love. Amen.

March 20

1 Corinthians 8:7-13

Some have become so accustomed to idols,
their conscience, being weak, is defiled.
Food will not bring us close to God.
We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow
become a stumbling block to the weak.
So if others see you eating in the temple of an idol,
might they be encouraged to eat food sacrificed to idols?

So by your knowledge those weak believers
for whom Christ died are destroyed.
When you thus sin against members of your family
and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.
Therefore if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat,
so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

* This passage, of course, is about food being offered to idols. Today, in your own setting, whom do you know who is struggling? Because of addictions? Beliefs? Life patterns? (And what are our own struggles? What are our own issues with food?)

* How do we use the freedom we have in Christ, perhaps without even thinking about it, to cause another person to stumble in their faith and life?

* What is the good news here? What is our calling for the sake of others, locally and globally?

God of all knowledge and truth, we become accustomed to our own idols. Forgive us. Free us. Give us insight and care so that we are not a stumbling block to others in their faith, but a source of your own love and encouragement in Christ Jesus. Amen.

March 21

1 Corinthians 9:1-12a

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?
Are you not my work in the Lord? You are the seal of my apostleship.

Do we not have the right to our food and drink?
Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife?
Who pays the expenses of doing military service?
Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit?
Who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk?
Do I say this on human authority?
Does not the law also say the same?

It is written in the Law of Moses that you should not muzzle an ox
while it is treading out the grain.
Is it for oxen that God is concerned?
Or is it not entirely for our sake?

Whoever plows should plow in hope and
whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share of the crop.

If we have sown spiritual good among you,
is it too much if we reap your material benefits?
If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more?

* How do you answer these questions? How do you ask them?

O God, you are concerned for our sake. We who are dependent on you alone pray that you care for us and our earthly needs. May we serve in the freedom of the cross and may our work in your vineyard be blessed in Christ Jesus. Amen.

March 22

1 Corinthians 9:12b-18

Nevertheless, we have not used this right, but endure anything
rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.
The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel
should receive their living by the gospel.

But I have made no use of any of these rights,
nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case.
Indeed I would rather die than that.
If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting,
for an obligation is laid on me,
and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel.

If I do this of my own will I have a reward;
if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission.
What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation
I may make the gospel free of charge,
so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

* Herein is the dilemma: If our reward is nothing but the gospel itself, what
does it mean that those who proclaim the gospel should also receive their
living by the gospel?

* How are we called to be advocates for ourselves and for others who make
their living through service in the church? What is fairness, justice, grace and
mercy in this regard?

*Good and gracious God, who attends to our needs, may we not put an obstacle
in the way of the Gospel and may we also extend your care to those who serve
on behalf of the church by using fair and just and responsible practices. May
we all be committed to care for the poor of the earth. In Christ, Amen.*

March 23

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Though I am free with respect to all,
I have made myself a slave to all so that I might win more of them.
To the Jews, I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.
To those under the law I became as one under the law
so that I might win them.
To those outside the law I became as one outside the law
so that I might win them.
To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak.
I have become all things to all people,
that I might by all means save some.
I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

* How do we, without losing our authenticity, “become as” to relate to other
people in order to share the Gospel in ways that they might understand?

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete,
but only one receives the prize?
Run in such a way that you may win the prize.
Athletes exercise self-control in all things;
they do it to receive a perishable wreath,
but we an imperishable one.
I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air;
I punish my body and enslave it,
so that after proclaiming to others
I myself should not be disqualified.

* What does this say to you about energetic perseverance in mission and
ministry?

*God, give us zeal, train us well, and infuse us with empathy and creativity for
mission. Amen.*

March 24

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Do not be unaware, brothers and sisters,
that our ancestors were all under a cloud,
and all passed through the sea,
were baptized into Moses in the cloud and sea,
and all drank from the spiritual rock that followed them.
The rock was Christ.

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them,
and they were struck down in the wilderness.
Do not become idolaters as some of them did.
We must not put Christ to the test,
as some of them did and were destroyed.
Do not complain as some of them did.
These things serve as an example.

If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.
No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone.
God is faithful and will not let you be tested beyond your strength,
but with the testing will also provide the way out
so that you may be able to endure it.

* Lest we take the final words of this passage without also hearing the warnings, what examples do you have of God's people becoming idolaters? How have you at times fallen into such a trap?

* When have you been over confident in your own strength?

* How has God provided "the way out" for you? Given you endurance?

Holy God who guides us, too, through the wilderness, keep us from false hope, from complaint, from mindless self-dependence. You do not test us for your own amusement, nor are you capricious. May we take you seriously, depend upon you completely, and be comforted from the belief that your strength is sufficient. In Christ we pray, Amen.

March 25

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.
I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.

The cup of blessing that we bless,
Is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?
The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?
Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body,
for we all partake of the one bread.

What do I imply then?
That food sacrificed to idols is anything,
or that an idol is anything?
No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice,
they sacrifice to demons and not to God.

I do not want you to be partners with demons.
You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons.
You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.
Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy?
Are we stronger than God?

* When we are joined with Christ and with one another in Christ at the Lord's table, how does that both challenge and strengthen us to be centered in Christ alone?

* What does it mean for us to worship idols? How do we "partner with demons"? In so doing, how are we tempted to believe we are stronger than God?

Christ Jesus, in whom we are joined with our brothers and sisters in faith as one body, strengthen us in our faith that we may strengthen one another for our lives of mission and ministry. Keep us from idols. Amen.

March 26

1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

All things are lawful but not all things are beneficial.
Not all things build up.
Do not seek your own advantage,
but that of the other.

Eat whatever is sold in the meat market
without raising any question on the ground of conscience.
For “the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s.” (Ps. 24.1)

If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go,
eat whatever is set before you without raising any question
on the ground of conscience.
But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,”
then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you,
and for the sake of conscience—
I mean the other’s conscience, not your own.

* Why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else’s
conscience?

* If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that
for which I give thanks?

*Whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, may we do everything for the
glory of God. May we give no offense to others, or to the church of God, but
try to please everyone in everything we do, not seeking our own advantage,
but that of many, so that they may be saved. May we be imitators of Christ
Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

March 27

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

I commend you because you remember me in everything
and maintain the traditions just as I handed them to you.
I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man,
and the husband is the head of his wife,
and God is the head of Christ.

Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head
disgraces his head.
But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled
disgraces her head.

Man was not made from woman, but woman from man.
Neither was man created for the sake of woman,
but woman for the sake of man.

Nevertheless, in the Lord, woman is not independent of man
nor man independent of woman.

Just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman;
but all things come from God. Judge for yourselves:
is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled?
Does not nature itself teach that if a man wears long hair,
it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?
If anyone is disposed to be contentious—
we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

* Tradition! How has this one passage been used through the centuries, and
even today, to further and maintain male dominance? What effects has it had
in the church?

* Tradition! How should we deal with traditions, such as long or short hair,
hats or no hats? What is at stake?

* Nevertheless! How do we remember the core, that “all things come from
God” and that women and men are not independent of one another?

*God of traditions and of relationships, may we center our individuality and
our community in you alone. Free us through the death and resurrection of
Christ for renewed, Spirit-led relationships of shared power and partnership.
Amen.*

March 28

1 Corinthians 11:17-25

Now in the following instructions
I do not commend you, because when you come together
it is not for the better but for the worse.
To begin with, when you come together as a church,
I hear that there are divisions among you;
and to some extent I believe it.

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper.
For when the time comes to eat,
each of you goes ahead with your own supper,
and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.
What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in?
Do you show contempt for the church of God
and humiliate those who have nothing?
What should I say to you?
I do not commend you!

* How do we show contempt for the church of God when we neglect the hungry, have divisions among us and care only for our own needs? How do we betray Christ?

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest and let these gifts to us be blest. Amen.

March 29

1 Corinthians 11:26-34

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,
You proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord
in an unworthy manner
will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.
Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the wine.
All who eat and drink without discerning the body,
eat and drink judgment against themselves.
For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.
But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged.
When we are judged by the Lord we are disciplined
so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

* What does "to discern the body" mean in relation to yesterday's devotion verses?

*What does partaking in "an unworthy manner" mean? What does it mean to "examine yourselves"? Most important, what does this mean in relation to others?

So then, my brothers and sisters,
when you come together to eat,
wait for one another.
If you are hungry, eat at home.

What a gift you have given, Lord Jesus, in giving us your body on the cross and giving us your body and blood each time we partake of holy communion. May we receive this Eucharistic gift with thanksgiving and with humility and with care for all. Amen.

March 30

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Concerning spiritual gifts, I do not want you to be uninformed.
No one speaking by the Spirit of God can ever say,
“Let Jesus be cursed!”
And no one can say “Jesus is Lord”
except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
different abilities and ways of serving,
but the same Lord is served.

The Spirit’s presence is shown in each person
for the common good.

To one the Spirit gives the gift of wisdom;
to another the gift of knowledge,
to another faith, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,
to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy,
to another discernment of spirits,
to another various kinds of tongues,
to another interpretation to explain what was said.

All these come alive by the same Spirit,
who gives each one a different gift.

* “By the same Spirit” permeates these verses. How do you see the Spirit at work in the lives of each person? What gifts surprise you? Humble you?

* Singling out people’s gift as though service were a competitive sport is not the objective. How do you see--how can you imagine--each person’s gift for the common good?

*O God of our common service, let your Spirit fill us so that we might say,
“Jesus Christ is Lord” and serve your church for the sake of the world each
with our own gifts. Amen.*

March 31

1 Corinthians 12:12-19

For just as the body is one and has many members, all the members,
though many, are one body; so it is with Christ.
For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—
Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and made to drink of one Spirit.
Indeed the body does not consist of one member, but of many.

If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand,
I do not belong to the body,”
that would not make it any less a part of the body;

And if the ear would say,
“Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,”
that would not make it any less a part of the body.

If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?

If the whole body were hearing where would the sense of smell be?

God arranged each member of the body as God chose.

There are many members, yet one body.

* If all were a single member, where would the body be?

* If we are baptized into one body, how can one human enslave another?

* Paul is emphatic. All belong. How have congregations, in earlier and present times, excluded people because of race, ethnicity, economic class, and more?

* When have you felt “Because I am not....I do not belong to the body.” Who reached out to you (or not)? Who called you back (or not) to know you were part of the body?

*God of all, forgive us when we neglect to cherish each member of Christ’s
body as a member of our own body, baptized in Christ. As we begin again to
be surprised and humbled by other’s gifts, may we drink of the one Spirit, and
be the body of Christ serving in the world that you have and are creating us to
be. Amen.*

April 1

1 Corinthians 12:20-26

As it is, there are many members, yet one body.
The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you,"
nor the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

* Think how often one Christian says to another, in words, or actions, or with simply a look, "I have no need of you." How does Christ continue to remember the body when we disrespect, avoid, or dismiss one another?

The members of the body that seem
to be weaker are indispensable,
and those members of the body
that we think less honorable
we clothe with greater honor,
and our less respectable members
are treated with greater respect;
God has so arranged the body
giving greater honor to the lesser,
that there may be no division within the body,
that the members may have the same care for one another.
If one member suffers, all suffer together;
if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

* Respect, honor! Think about a time when you have seen a faith community treat a member the world rejects with honor and respect. Are we not called always to do so?

* Remember times when one member of the body suffered and all suffered together. Are we also able to all rejoice when one member is honored?

How can we thank you, gracious God, for making us the body of Christ? No matter how difficult it is to be your church, may we believe that each person is indispensable. In the midst of division, help us to cherish each other in wisdom and love in Christ. Amen.

April 2

1 Corinthians 12:27-31

Now you are the body of Christ
and individually members of it.
God has appointed in the church
first apostles, second prophets, third teachers;
then deeds of power, then gifts of healing,
forms of assistance, forms of leadership,
various kinds of tongues.

* First, second, third? How have hierarchical structures been harmful? How can the church use and honor various needed gifts? How can office and role clarity be helpful in living together in a congregation?

Are all apostles? Are all prophets?
Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?
Do all possess gifts of healing?
Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?
But strive for the greater gifts.
And I will show you a still more excellent way.

* How are a whole range of gifts needed by the laity for their ministries in daily life? How can the church call forth and uphold the ministries of all the baptized?

* In the church, how can we create safe, trustworthy, hospitable, healthy places for us to be different together? How can we create such places in the world for nations to be different together?

God who creates people and gifts in such diversity, show us the more excellent way. Call forth in all the baptized gifts for ministries in daily life. As the body of Christ, may we respect each other's individuality and roles. And, together, fill us with the Spirit, to equip and encourage one another in mutuality and love. In Christ we pray, Amen.

April 3

1 Corinthians 13:1-7

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels,
but do not have love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
If I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but do not have love, I am nothing.
If I give away all my possessions,
and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,
but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
It does not rejoice in wrongdoing,
but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.

* Ponder your gifts, even great gifts, of proclamation, understanding, faith, sacrifice. How do we, at least at times, use them, but forget to love people through them?

* Ponder how God's love for us can shake us out of rudeness and envy, boastfulness and resentment. How does the Spirit transform service into love?

O God who loves beyond all love, may we know, and feel, and experience the love you have for us in Christ Jesus, that we may love you with heart and mind, and serve with joy and hope, faith and endurance. May we embody Christ's love as we live as the body of Christ. Amen.

April 4

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Love never ends.
As for prophecies, they will come to an end;
as for tongues, they will cease;
as for knowledge, it will come to an end.
For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part,
but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child I reasoned like a child.
When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly,
but then we will see face to face.
Now I know only in part; then I will know fully,
even as I have been fully known.
And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
and the greatest of these is love.

* How is Paul trying to help us see what we cannot yet possibly see, that knowing God face to face is beyond our present comprehension?

* But for now we have faith, hope and love. How has love "been the greatest" in your own life and ministry, even as imperfect as it yet is here and now?

God who knows us beyond our own understanding, give us this hope and faith and love. So fill us with your own love that we will abide in Christ and cherish your people. Amen.

April 5

1 Corinthians 14:1-12

Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, especially prophesy.
Those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God,
for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit.
On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people
for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation
Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves,
but those who prophesy build up the church

Brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues,
how will I benefit you unless I speak to you in some revelation
or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?
It is the same with lifeless instruments such as the flute or the harp.
If they do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is being played?
If in a tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible,
how will anyone know what is being said?

If I do not know the meaning of a sound,
I will be a foreigner to the speaker
and the speaker a foreigner to me.

So with yourselves, since you are eager for spiritual gifts,
strive to excel in them for building up the church.

- * How can we help brothers and sisters in Christ not only discern their spiritual gifts but also use them to build up the body of Christ, the church?
- * When are we lifeless instruments with no sound? When do we utter speech that people do not really understand?
- * How can we help people understand the meaning of our words—and understand theirs--so that we are not foreigners to one another?

God of prophecy and tongues, God of all knowledge and revelation, make us instruments of your Word so that people will know and understand your will and your grace. In Christ, Amen.

April 6

1 Corinthians 14:13-25

Anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret.
If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive.
What should I do then?
I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with my mind also.
I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with my mind also.
Otherwise, if you say a blessing with the spirit, how can anyone
in the position of an outsider say the “Amen” to your thanksgiving?

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you;
but in church I would rather speak five words with my mind
in order to instruct others also,
than ten thousand words in a tongue.
Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking,
but in thinking be adults.

If the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues,
and outsiders or unbelievers enter,
will they not say that you are out of your mind?
But if all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider
who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all.
After the secrets of the unbeliever’s heart are disclosed,
that person will bow down before God and worship God,
declaring, “God is really among you.”

- * What do you think Paul means by “prophecy” in this chapter?
- * How can we help people fully use their minds to pray, praise and instruct?
- * How can we as a church increase our concern for “outsiders” and “unbelievers” so that we might listen carefully, proclaim, instruct, and help them open their hearts to God?

O God, you have given us the power of speech. May we use it to proclaim your Word. Increase our love for those who yet stand outside the church and help us help them know you and your love. In Christ Jesus. Amen.

April 7

1 Corinthians 14: 26-40

What should be done then, my friends?
When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson,
a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.
Let all things be done for building up.

If anyone speaks in a tongue,
let there be only two or three at most,
each in turn; and let one interpret.
If there is no one to interpret,
let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God.
If a revelation is made by someone else sitting nearby,
let the first be silent.
The spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets,
for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

(As in all churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches.
They are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law says.
If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home.
For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.)

My friend, be eager to prophesy,
and do not forbid speaking in tongues;
But all things should be done decently and in order.

* How can striving for decency, order, and peace be helpful? How might it look different in various contexts?

* How have those words in parentheses that women should be silent been picked out and used to keep women from fully using their gifts and leadership in churches?

* What might it mean to “take turns” speaking and being silent in our teaching and learning from one another today in a faith community?

God who continues to create and recreate the church, may our life together use the gifts of all in concert with one another to build up the body of Christ. Amen.

April 8

1 Corinthians 15: 1-11

I remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you which you in turn received, in which you also stand, and are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. I handed on to you of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day.

* Of *first* importance: How is the death and resurrection central to everything we do in our life together in the church?

He appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.
He appeared to James and to all the apostles.
Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.
I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God.
But by the grace of God I am what I am, and God’s grace toward me has not been in vain.

On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them— though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

* How are you, by the grace of God, what you are?
* What does it mean for us today to be “witnesses” of the resurrection?
* How are we called, each one of us, to “hand on” the Gospel?

God of forgiveness and love, you have called each of us to be messengers of your Gospel, witnesses for Christ. Whatever our story, you call us to mission. Give us humility and zeal, strength and courage. Ground us in your grace in Christ Jesus. Amen.

April 9

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead,
how can some of you say
there is no resurrection of the dead?
If there is no resurrection of the dead,
then Christ has not been raised;
and if Christ has not been raised,
then our proclamation has been in vain,
and your faith has been in vain.
We are even found to be misrepresenting God.

If the dead are not raised,
then Christ has not been raised.
If Christ has not been raised,
your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.
Then those also who have died in Christ have perished.
If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,
we are of all people most to be pitied.

* What in the world are we doing if we proclaim Christ and do not talk about the resurrection of the dead? After an era of “heaven-only” preaching, we now rightly preach new life in Christ *now* with emphases on social justice and care for the earth and more. How can we continue these crucial emphases *and* talk about life after death?

* Surely our faith and our proclamation are not in vain! However, how is Christ’s resurrection key to all that we believe, and hope, and say? If not Christ and him crucified and risen, then what in the world *are* we saying?

O God who raised Jesus the Christ from the dead, we thank you that we do not still live in our sins but in the sure hope of the resurrection from the dead. O Holy Spirit, fill us with this resurrection life to proclaim the Gospel, to work for justice and to care for the earth. In Christ, the living One, our Savior, Amen.

April 10

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

In fact Christ has been raised from the dead,
the first fruits of those who have died.
Since death came through a human being,
the resurrection of the dead
has also come through a human being.
As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

* How do we speak about sin and death coming through the first human? How do we speak about the resurrection coming through the Human One, Christ Jesus?

Each in order: Christ the first fruits,
then at his coming those who belong to Christ.
Then comes the end,
when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father
after he has destroyed every ruler and authority and power.
For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet.

The last enemy to be destroyed is death
so that God may be all in all.

* How do we tell people that death has been destroyed? How do we live differently knowing that Christ has destroyed the power of all human authority and rule?

Living Lord Jesus, strengthen us with the assurance that the power of death has been destroyed. All things are now subject to you, who bore the weight of human suffering and humiliation. By the power of the Spirit, transform our lives for powerful servanthood. Amen.

April 11

1 Corinthians 15:30-41

Why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour?
I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters,
as my boasting of you—a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”
Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.” [Is 22:13]
Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more;
for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

* If the dead are not raised, why do we risk and sacrifice for the sake of the mission of Christ? If the dead are not raised, why do we live for Christ?

Someone will ask, “How are the dead raised?
With what kind of body do they come?”
Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.
You do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed,
perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.
God gives it a body, to each kind of seed its own body.

Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings,
another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.
There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon,
and another of the stars: indeed star differs from star in glory.

* Even amid this two-thousand-year-old understanding of biology and astronomy, what core meaning do you take from Paul’s words, about God’s creating and redeeming activity?

Creating, Redeeming and Life-Giving God, we give you thanks for the resurrection of the dead. May we this day once again die with Christ and be raised to new life for the sake of sharing your Gospel. Amen.

April 12

1 Corinthians 15:42-50

So it is with the resurrection of the dead.
What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.
It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory.
It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.
It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.
If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.

The first man was from earth, a man of dust;
the second man is from heaven.
As was the man of dust,
so are those who are of the dust;
and as is the man of heaven,
so are those who are of heaven.
Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust,
we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this:
flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,
nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

* With all our attempts to make things imperishable and our lives ever young, what does it mean to you to realize that we come from dust?

* In an age of consumer dependence on planned obsolescence, what does it mean to you that in Christ Jesus we shall inherit the imperishable?

O God who creates all that exists, bury our sinful selves with Christ, that we may be raised to new life and to be with you forever. In Christ, our Risen Lord. Amen.

April 13

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

Listen, I will tell you a mystery!

We will not all die, but we will all be changed,
in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable,
and we will be changed.

When this perishable body puts on imperishability,
and this mortal body puts on immortality,
then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:
“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death is your sting?” [Hosea 13:14]

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.
But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable,
always excelling in the work of the Lord,
because you know that in the Lord
your labor is not in vain.

* Paul believed that Christ would come again before some Christians living then would die. How have more recent attempts to predict Christ’s coming again been received?

* Hear the words of Handel’s *Messiah*: “The trumpets will sound...” In the midst of the excruciating pain of loss through death, what does Christ’s victory mean to you?

* How is the sure hope of the resurrection making you steadfast, immovable? Beloved, on the darkest days, know the excellence of your labor is not in vain!

Christ of the cross, we cry out with you, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” And we cry out in joy: “Death, where is your victory?” We hope in you. Amen.

April 14

1 Corinthians 16:1-11

Concerning the collection for the saints:
you should follow the directions
I gave to the churches of Galatia.

On the first day of every week,
each of you is to put aside and save
whatever extra you earn,
so that collections need not be taken when I come.
When I arrive I will send any whom you approve with letters
to take your gift to Jerusalem. If advisable, I may go also.

* How is the approach of “accompaniment” in churches, supporting one another globally, rooted in the New Testament Epistles?

I will visit you after passing through Macedonia,
and perhaps stay with you or even spend the winter,
so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go.
I do not want to see you not just in passing,
for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.

* How does the ministry of visitation and sustained care help the church grow in faith?

I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost,
for a wide door for effective work has opened to me,
and there are many adversaries.
If Timothy comes, see that he has nothing to fear among you,
for he is doing the work of the Lord just as I am.
Let no one despise him. Send him on his way in peace.
I am expecting him with the brothers.

* How have adversarial experiences hindered your own ministry?

God, you accompany us as we travel to one another, as we minister among one another, and as we send each other forth to new mission. Grant us grace and peace in Christ. Amen.

April 15

1 Corinthians 16:13-24

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.
Let all that you do be done in love.

You know that members of the household of Stephanas
were the first converts in Achaia,
and they have devoted themselves
to the service of the saints.

I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people,
and of everyone who works and toils with them.

I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus,
because they have made up for your absence;
they refreshed my spirit as well as yours.
So give recognition to such persons.

The churches of Asia send greetings.
Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house,
greet you warmly in the Lord.
All the brothers and sisters send greetings.
Greet one another with a holy kiss.

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.
Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord.
Our Lord, come!

* How might we increase the ways we tangibly keep in touch with sisters and brothers in the faith, with other congregations, and church bodies here and globally?

* Think of ways to recognize and serve those people in the congregation who “refresh the spirit” and “serve the saints” within the church.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with us all. And may our love be with all in Christ. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

April 16

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

To the Church of God that is in Corinth,
including the saints throughout Achaia:
grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Blessed be the God of mercies and of all consolation
who consoles us in our affliction,
so that we will be able to console those
who are in any affliction with the consolation
with which we are consoled by God.
Just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us,
so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.

* How can it be that "If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation?"

* How can it be that "If we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering?"

Our hope for you is unshaken;
for we know that as you share in our sufferings,
so also you share in our consolation.
In Asia we were so utterly, unbearable crushed
that we despaired of life itself.
We felt we had received the sentence of death
so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.
God who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us;
on God we have set our hope that we will be rescued again,
as you also join in blessing us by your prayers.

God of all consolation: in the midst of peril and suffering, we pray for all those in danger, for all who despair, and especially those in fear for their very lives. And we give thanks for all who have received blessings and consolation and endurance, in Christ. Amen.

April 17
2 Corinthians 1:12-22

Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience:
we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity,
not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God –
and all the more toward you.

For we write you nothing other than
what you can read and also understand;
I hope you will understand until the end—
as you have already understood us in part—
that on the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast
even as you are our boast.

* How is it that in Christ we “boast” of one another? Why?

Since I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first;
I wanted to visit you on my way back from Macedonia.
Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this?
Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards,
ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time?
As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been “Yes and No.”
For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you,
was not “Yes and No”; but in him it is always “Yes.”
In Christ every one of God's promises is a “Yes.”

* When do you vacillate? In your plans? In your faith? How does God's “Yes” ground you?

O God, you have established us, anointed us and put your seal on us, giving us the Spirit in our hearts. For this reason, it is through Christ that we say the “Amen,” to the glory of God.

April 18
2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4

I call on God as witness against me:
it was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth.
I do not mean to imply that we lord it over your faith;
rather, we are workers with you for your joy,
because you stand firm in the faith.
So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit.
For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad
but the one whom I have pained?
And I wrote as I did, so that when I came,
I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice;
for I am confident about all of you,
that my joy would be the joy of all of you.

For I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart
and with many tears, not to cause you pain,
but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

* In the midst of your faith community now, what pain do you experience? In what ways are you concerned that you may cause pain when you want the community to have joy?

* In trying to build up the faith of the community, how do you both spare people pain and also speak the truth in love? How do you love with confidence and consistency?

Lord God, who suffers with us: we do experience distress and anguish and shed many tears in the midst of Christian community. May we so rest in your abundant love in Christ Jesus that we may abundantly love one another. Amen.

April 19

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

If anyone has caused pain, that one has caused it not to me,
but to some extent – not to exaggerate it – to all of you.
This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person;
so now instead you should forgive and console that one,
so that no one may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.
I urge you to reaffirm your love.

I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know
whether you are obedient in everything.
Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive.
What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything,
has been for your sake in the presence of Christ.
And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan;
for we are not ignorant of Satan's designs.

- * How have you experienced the power of forgiveness in a congregation?
- * Who, even now, needs forgiveness and consolation?
- * Could it be that Satan works hardest where Christian community flourishes?
How can the presence of Christ "outwit" demonic designs?

*Spirit of consolation, strengthen our community so that we can both
acknowledge how the actions of one can hurt everyone, and wisely love one
another in the midst of conflict. In Christ, Amen.*

April 20

2 Corinthians 2: 12-17

When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ,
a door was opened for me in the Lord;
but my mind could not rest because
I did not find my brother Titus there.
So I went on to Macedonia.
But thanks be to God, who in Christ
always leads us in triumphal procession...

- * In the context of this passage, what is a "triumphal procession"?

...and through us spreads the fragrance
that comes from knowing Christ.
We are the aroma of Christ to God
among those who are being saved
and among those who are perishing;
to one a fragrance from death to death,
to the other from life to life.
Who is sufficient for these things?

- * Consider memorable aromas in your life. How are we aromas of Christ?

We are not peddlers of God's word like so many;
but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity,
as persons sent from God and standing in God's presence.

- * When have you felt like a mere peddler of God's word? How are we not?

*God of truth, and covenant faithfulness, give us the power of the Holy Spirit
that we might be persons of sincerity, sent from you, standing in your
presence, with passion to seek direction for up-building the church and
sharing Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

April 21 **2 Corinthians 3:1-6**

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?
Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation
to you or from you, do we?
You are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.
And you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us,
written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God,
not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.
Not that we are competent of ourselves; our competence is from God,
who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant,
not of letter, but of spirit;
For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

* “Letter” is used in two intriguing ways here. How are we called to minister
not by the letter of the law but in the Holy Spirit who gives life through the
new covenant?

* When we are doubtful of our own competence (or should be), how does
knowing our competence is from God give us confidence to minister in Christ?

* Take time to think about how others have “written on our hearts,” a letter of
Christ. Whether prepared by ourselves, or together in Christian community,
how are such letters of ministry open and read by anyone and everyone?

*We thank you, Christ Jesus, for calling us to minister in your name, and for
commending us to those among whom we minister and giving us competence
from God. Amen.*

April 22 **2 Corinthians 3:7-11**

If the ministry of death,
chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory
so that the people of Israel could not gaze on Moses’ face,
because of the glory of his face,
a glory now set aside,
how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?

If there was glory in the ministry of condemnation,
much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory!
Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory
because of the greater glory.
For if what was set aside came through glory,
much more has the permanent come in glory!

* How are the “letters” of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:29-35) both
glorious and a ministry of death?

* If the people of Israel could not look at Moses’ face because of the glory
there, how does one view the cross of Jesus Christ?

* How is the “ministry of condemnation” both necessary and also “set aside”?
How is the “ministry of justification” through Jesus Christ a greater and
permanent glory?

* How, then, do we minister?

*God of the covenant, we praise and bless you for your holy Law. We glorify
you for the gift of justification through Christ’s cross. May our lives and our
ministry glorify your holy name. In Christ, Amen.*

April 23

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:6

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness,
not like Moses, who put a veil over his face.
In hearing the old covenant, that same veil is there,
since only in Christ is it set aside.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.
And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord,
as being reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image,
from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry,
we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides;
we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word;
but by the open statement of the truth, we commend ourselves
to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.
We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord,
and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.
For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness,"
who has shone in our hearts to
give the light of the knowledge
of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

* How and when is the gospel veiled today?

* Reflect on the images of ministry in this text: freedom, mirror, truth,
slavery/servanthood, light.

Gracious, merciful God, we struggle with the words, "that the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." By the power of your Spirit, may our ministries unveil the gospel of truth that all may see you in Jesus the Christ. Amen.

April 24

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

We have this treasure in clay jars,
so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power
belongs to God and does not come from us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not driven to despair;
persecuted, but not forsaken;
struck down, but not destroyed;
always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,
so that the life of Jesus may also be visible in our bodies.

For while we live, we are always being
given up to death for Jesus' sake,
so that the life of Jesus may be
made visible in our mortal flesh.
So death is at work in us, but life in you.

* We are earthen vessels. How do you perceive this treasure, this life in Jesus Christ, this work of mission and ministry as God's powerful work in and through you?

* Surely we did not experience the dangers Paul did; however suffering for the sake of the Gospel is not a competitive sport. What words would you use to describe your trials in ministry? Oppression, persecution, affliction are not to be justified. How does justification through grace strengthen you so that you are not crushed or destroyed?

God, you are our only strength and courage. May all that we do and all that happens to us be put to death in Jesus the Christ so that in his resurrection those whom we are privileged to serve may experience new life. In his name we pray. Amen.

April 25

2 Corinthians 4:13-18

The scripture says, “I spoke because I believed.” (Psalm 116:10)
In the same spirit of faith we also speak because we believe.
We know that God, who raised the Lord Jesus to life,
will also raise us up with Jesus,
and will bring us with you into Christ’s presence.

Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace,
as it extends to more and more people,
may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart.
Even though our outer nature is wasting away,
our inner nature is being renewed day by day.
This slight momentary affliction is preparing us
for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.
We look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen.
What can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

* So we do not lose heart. How can the faith community encourage one another when one is afflicted, one is weak, so that they—we—can focus on what cannot be now seen, on what is being renewed, on what is eternal?

* Do you speak because you believe?

O God, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. Amen

April 26

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,
we have a building from God,
a house not made with hands, eternal in heaven.
In this tent we groan, longing to be clothed
with our heavenly dwelling--
When we have taken it off we will not be found naked.
We groan under our burden,
because we wish not to be unclothed, but to be further clothed,
so what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.
God has prepared us for this very thing,
and given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

* When have you groaned, or sat with someone groaning, because the earthly tent is being destroyed?

* How can “not being unclothed,” but further clothed help us think about our eternal life in Christ – now and to come?

We walk by faith, not by sight.
Yes, we do have confidence.
We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.
Whether we are at home or away, we aim to please the Lord.
We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,
so each may receive recompense for what has been done
in the body, whether good or evil.

* Wherein lies your confidence? So, how do you live now?

O God, we make our home in you, now and when you finally call us home. Clothe us in Christ’s righteousness. We walk by faith! Amen.

April 27

2 Corinthians 5:11-17

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others;
but we ourselves are well known to God,
and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences.
We are not commending ourselves to you again,
but giving you an opportunity to boast about us,
so that you may be able to answer those
who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart.

If we are beside ourselves, it is for God;
if we are in our right mind, it is for you.
The love of Christ urges us on,
because we are convinced that one has died for all;
therefore all have died.
Christ died for all, so that those who live,
might live no longer for themselves,
but for him who died and was raised for them.

From now on, **therefore**, we regard no one from a human point of view;
even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view.
So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation,
everything old has passed away.
See, everything has become new!

* Do you sometimes wrestle inwardly, (or outwardly, as Paul does here) about how others receive you and your work? How would you describe how you are convinced, persuaded, urged on, for the sake of mission?

* How does Christ's death for you and for all empower us to live not for ourselves but for Christ who died and was raised for all?

*Christ Jesus, who rose from the dead that all might have life, we live our lives in the "therefore." Transform us in heart, mind and body that by the power of your Spirit, **therefore**, we might persuade others the old has passed away and the new has come! Amen.*

April 28

2 Corinthians 5:18-21

All this is from God who reconciled us to Godself through Christ
and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;
in Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself,
not counting their trespasses against them,
and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

* The ministry of reconciliation! What a powerful gift. What a daunting challenge. Think about the many needs for reconciliation in the world, in homes, in the congregation, within and among nations. Envision God's reconciling the world to Godself and us to one another.

So we are ambassadors for Christ,
since God is making this appeal through us.
We entreat you on behalf of Christ,
be reconciled to God.

For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin,
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

* We all will "appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (5:10). How do these words speak to that? How do we become the righteousness of God through the one who knew no sin?

* How do you see yourself as an ambassador for Christ? How does God make an appeal to the world through you?

Reconciling God, may we be your ambassadors. Give us vision, wisdom, zeal and understanding that we may indeed be ministers of reconciliation in the world in Christ Jesus. Amen.

April 29

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

As we work together with Christ, we urge you also
not to accept the grace of God in vain.
See now is the acceptable time;
see, now is the day of salvation.
We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way,
so that no fault may be found with our ministry.

As servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way:
through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities,
beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger,
by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit,
genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God;
with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left;
in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute.

* What do you hear in Paul's lists about what he has gone through for the sake of mission and ministry? How do you relate, both to the list of sufferings endured and to the list of love expressed?

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;
as unknown, and yet are well known.
as dying, and see -- we are alive;
as punished, and yet not killed;
as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;
as poor, yet making many rich;
as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you.
There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours.
Open your hearts wide also.

As we minister in your name, Christ Jesus, give us the faith, courage and boldness of Spirit to serve with zeal in such confidence. Amen.

April 30

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Do not be mismatched with unbelievers.

* There are so many ways this verse has been used -- misused -- to keep Christians from interrelating with those outside their faith. In the context of Paul's trying to convince the Corinthians to accept his ministry, what might his questions mean to them? To us?

What partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness?
What fellowship is there between light and darkness?
What agreement does Christ have with Beliar?
What does a believer share with an unbeliever?
What agreement has the temple of God with idols?

For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,
"I will live in them and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.
Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them,
and touch nothing unclean;
then I will welcome you, and I will be your father
and you shall be my sons and daughters."
(Lev 26:12; Ezek 37:27; Isa 52:11; 2 Sam. 7:14)

Since we have these promises, as your beloved, Almighty God, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect In Christ's holiness we pray. Amen.

May 1

2 Corinthians 7:2-13a

Make room in your hearts for us;
we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one,
we have taken advantage of no one.

* Paul continues with making his case. Why? Why do we?

I do not say this to condemn you; you are in our hearts,
to die together and to live together.
I often boast about you; I have great pride in you;
I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our affliction.
When we came to Macedonia our bodies had no rest,
but we were afflicted in every way—disputes without and fears within.

Even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it
(though I did regret it, for I see that I grieved you, but only briefly).
Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved,
but because your grief led to repentance;
for you felt a godly grief,
so that you were not harmed in any way by us.
For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation
and brings not regret, but worldly grief produces death.

* Reflect on a congregational situation that this passage brings to mind. What were (are) the complexities? The eagerness for people to clear themselves? The grief? The indignation? The repentance?

Although I wrote to you, it was not on account
of the one who did the wrong,
nor on account of the one who was wronged,
but in order that your zeal for us
might be made known to you before God. In this we find comfort.

God who creates community, we confess the ways in which we have harmed one another. We know that we both die together and live together. In the midst of the most grievous situations, free us by the cross to repent and give us new life in Christ Jesus. Amen.

May 2

2 Corinthians 7:13b-8:7

We rejoiced at the joy of Titus because his mind was set at rest by you.
For I have been somewhat boastful about you to him.
Our boasting to Titus has proved true.
And his heart goes out to you because he remembers your obedience
and how you welcomed him with fear and trembling.
I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.

We want you to know, brothers and sisters,
about the grace of God granted to the churches of Macedonia;
during a time of severe ordeal of affliction,
their abundant joy and their extreme poverty
have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.
They voluntarily gave according to their means,
and even beyond their means,
begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry.
They gave themselves first to the Lord,
and, by the will of God, to us,
so we might urge Titus that as he has already made a beginning,
he should complete this generous undertaking among you.
Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge,
in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you –
so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

* How do we encourage faith communities to be all that they can be in living generously? How can faith communities inspire one another?

* How does one leader prepare the way for another, entrusting the people and the leader to God?

Generous God, creator and steward, we thank you for faith communities across the world who, in the midst of their poverty, have given for the sake of others. May we grow in such faith and generosity. In Christ Jesus, Amen.

May 3

2 Corinthians 8:8-15

I do not say this as a command,
but am testing the genuineness of your love
against the earnestness of others.
For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor,
so that by his poverty you might become rich.

* If giving is not a competition, how does Christ's giving himself for us
ground all of our giving?

It is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something
but even to desire to do something –
now finish doing it.

If the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable
according to what one has –
not according to what one does not have.

I do not mean there should be relief for others and pressure on you,
but it is a matter of balance between
your present abundance and their need.

* How could one interpret vs. 15, "The one who had much did not have too
much and the one who had little did not have too little" (Ex.16:18)?

*Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sakes became poor, you showed through the
cross your generous love for us. Empower us through your resurrection to do
what we say we want to do, to give ourselves for those in need. Amen.*

May 4

2 Corinthians 8:16-24

Thanks be to God who put in the heart of Titus
the same eagerness for you that I myself have.
He not only accepted our appeal, but, more eager than ever,
he is going to you of his own accord.

With him we are sending the brother who is famous
among all the churches for his proclaiming the good news
who has been appointed by the churches to travel with us
while we are administering this generous undertaking
for the glory of the Lord and to show our goodwill.
No one should blame us about this gift we are administering,
for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord's sight,
but also in the sight of others.

As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker in your service;
as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches,
the glory of Christ.

Therefore openly before the churches,
show them the proof of your love
and of our reason for boasting about you.

* We want to know more about the situation in Corinth. What is the eagerness
and the complexity there and then? And now?

* How do we share partners and send messengers in the ministry of
accompaniment we have with one another as churches today?

*Lord of the churches, you bind us as one and you commission us to walk with,
pray for, serve, love, give, support and send messengers to one another. Open
our hearts to receive one another in your name. Amen.*

May 5

2 Corinthians 9:1-7

It is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry of the saints. I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated – to say nothing of you – in this undertaking. So I urged the brothers to go ahead to you to arrange in advance this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

* Extortion? Humiliation? Is giving and keep our promises so hard? How do we earnestly prepare one another, stir up each other's zeal and hold one another accountable in the challenge?

The point is this:
the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly,
and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.
Each of you must give as you have made up your mind,
not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Lord, give us generous hearts. Amen.

May 6

2 Corinthians 9:8-15

God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance so that by having enough you may share abundantly in **every** good work. "God scatters abroad, God gives to the poor, God's righteousness endures forever." (Ps. 112:9)
The one who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

The furnishing of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

* It has been said we give to the glory of God. Here the emphasis is on the needs of people. How is this a helpful way to think about being thankful to God?

Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that has been given to you.

* Does God test? We are not able to be obedient, are we? How is our ministry of giving generously a mark and a sign of the genuineness of our confession of the gospel? How does this build relationships?

Thanks be to God for God's indescribable gift! Amen.

May 7

2 Corinthians 10:1-11

I appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ –
I who am humble when face to face with you
and bold toward you when I am away!

When I am present I need not show boldness by daring to oppose those
who think we are acting according to human standards.
We live as human beings but we do not wage war
according to human standards;
for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human,
but they have divine power to destroy strongholds.
We destroy arguments, and every proud obstacle
raised up against the knowledge of God,
and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.

If you are confident that you belong to Christ,
remind yourself that just as you belong to Christ, so also do we.
Even if I boast too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for
building you up and not for tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it.
I do not want to seem like I am trying to frighten you with my letters.
People say, “His letters are weighty and strong,
but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible.”
Let them understand that what we say by letter when absent,
we will also do when present.

* Paul uses the metaphor of war (Note that Paul advocates *going* to war to convince people of Christianity) to challenge the obstacles to God’s knowledge. How sharp is your mind and your speech in speaking boldly and intelligently for Christ? And how do you do this with the gentleness of Christ?

* What do you make of Paul’s reference to people’s comments about his own speech? What about your own varied gifts and skills in communication? Is there a consistency in what you say “when present” and “when absent”?

O God, fill us with your divine Spirit to ambassadors for Christ. Amen.

May 8

2 Corinthians 10:12-18

We do not dare compare ourselves with some who commend themselves.
But when they measure and compare themselves by one another,
they do not show good sense.
We, however, will not boast beyond limits, but will keep within the field
that God has assigned to us, to reach out even as far as you.
We were not overstepping our limits when we reached you;
we were the first to come to you with the good news of Christ.
We do not boast beyond limits, that is, in the labors of others;
but our hope is that, as your faith increases,
our outreach among you may be greatly enlarged,
so that we may proclaim the good news in lands beyond you,
without boasting of work already done in someone else’s area.

* We cannot compare present day expansion of the church with New Testament times; however, the issue of overstepping boundaries and laboring in someone else’s territory continues. How do we respect the work of another faith community? When another infringes on our labors, what can we do? What should we not do? How might we support one another rather than compete?

*How do you see faith increasing within your faith community? How might you proclaim the good news in ever new and meaningful ways?

We do not seek commendation beyond your own, dear Lord. Even then, we know that it is by grace that you call us to labor so that the Gospel might be extended. Save us from senseless comparisons and competitive measurements. We seek your wisdom in sharing the ministry to which Christ calls us. “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” Amen.

May 9

2 Corinthians 11:1-11

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness.

Do bear with me!

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised
to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

But I am afraid, as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning,
your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed
or if you received a different spirit from the one you received,
or a different gospel from the one you accepted,
you submit to it readily enough.

I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles.

I may be untrained in speech, but not in knowledge;
certainly we have made this evident to you.

Did I commit a sin by humbling myself so that you might be exalted,
because I proclaimed God's good news to you free of charge?
I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you.
When I was with you and in need I did not burden anyone,
for my needs were supplied by the friends who came from Macedonia.
I refrained and will continue to refrain from burdening you in any way.
As the truth of Christ is in me,
this boast of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia.
And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

* What do we do when we fear that the people of faith we love are being
persuaded by a "super apostle" who is leading them astray?

* The images of church as "virgin" for Christ and Eve as source of sin were
(and are) often misused to define women. In context, what is the real concern
Paul has for this community's faith in the gospel?

*Think of meanings today of "robbing other churches" to support one.

*Christ Jesus, we grow to love the people among whom we are called to teach
and preach. Give us wisdom to know when to act humbly and when to speak
boldly, and how to lead in the face of challenge. Amen.*

May 10

2 Corinthians 11:12-21a

I continue to deny an opportunity to those "super-apostles"
who want to be recognized as our equals in what they boast about.
Such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers,
disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

And no wonder!

Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.
So it is not strange that Satan's ministers also disguise themselves
as ministers of righteousness.

Their end will match their deeds.

I repeat, let no one think that I am a fool;
but if you do, then accept me as a fool,
so that I may boast a little too.

What I am saying in regard to this boastful confidence,
I am saying not with the Lord's authority, but as a fool.
Since many boast according to human standards, I will also boast.
Being so wise yourselves, you seem to gladly put up with fools!
For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you,
or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you,
or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face.
To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

* When have you seen people disguising themselves as ministers of
righteousness and doing the work of Satan? (We, too, or course, can become
ministers of Satan.)

* With much sarcasm, Paul says he speaks not with the Lord's authority, but
as a fool. What do you think he means by that? When do you speak that way?

* What are some of your deep concerns about people being taken advantage
of, being made slaves, being preyed upon?

*O God, who calls us to minister faithfully, we care terribly about people being
led astray. Give us your wisdom and your care that we may speak and act
boldly to up build people in their faith. In Christ, Amen*

May 11

2 Corinthians 11:21b-33

Whatever anyone dares to boast of,
(I am still speaking like a fool)

I also dare to boast of that.

Are they Hebrews? **So am I.**

Are they descendants of Abraham? **So am I.**

Are they ministers of Christ? (I talk like a madman)

I am a better one:

with far greater labors, far more imprisonments,
with countless floggings, and often near death.

Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and day I was adrift at sea;
on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, bandits,
danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles,
danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea,
danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship,
through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty,
often without food, cold and naked,

And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure
because of my anxiety for all the churches.

Who is weak, and I am not weak?

If I must boast, I will boast in things that show my weakness.

The governor guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me,
but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall,
and escaped from his hands.

* We would be foolish to try to match our sufferings with Paul's...or with any other servant of Christ. But perhaps we can relate to the daily pressure and anxiety for the Church. Take time to reflect on your own sufferings and anxieties. Pray about them and for one another.

If we must boast, let us boast in things that show our weakness, O God. When we suffer for the sake of the Gospel, may we lay all at the feet of Christ's cross. When we need to prove ourselves, when we start to seek approval, may we be turned around so that we seek to be known and justified by your grace alone. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

May 12

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it,
but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago
was caught up in the third heaven—

whether in the body or out of the body I do not know;
God knows.

And I know that such a person—

whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—
was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told,
that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

On behalf of such a one I will boast,

but on my own behalf I will not boast,
except of my weaknesses.

But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth.
I refrain, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen or heard
from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.

To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh,
a messenger of Satan to torment me.

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,
but God said to me,

“My grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness.”

Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions
and calamities for the sake of Christ;
for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

* What do you think about Paul's revelations? How do his experiences speak to you?

God, Creator of the heavens and the earth, join us to the cross of Christ that, by the power of your Spirit, we may surely know that your grace is sufficient for us so that we might be strong in our own weaknesses. In Christ, Amen.

May 13

2 Corinthians 12:11-18

I have been a fool! You forced me to it.
Indeed you should have been the ones commending me,
for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles,
even though I am nothing.

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you
with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works.
Here I am ready to come to you a third time.
And I will not burden you.
I will most gladly spend and be spent for you.
If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

Let it be assumed that I did not burden you.
Nevertheless (you say) since I was crafty,
I took you in by deceit.
Did I take advantage of you through any of those I sent to you?
I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him.
Titus did not take advantage of you, did he?
Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit?
Did we not take the same steps?

* We need to go inside the situation at Corinth (should we be so able) to understand the human dynamics. In our own situations, what words and actions have caused accusations of deceit and being taken advantage of?

* When do we, or should we, or should we not, burden one another?
Think of someone or some people who have “spent” their love on you.

Forgive us, Lord, for the wrongs we commit, for assuming we are worse off than other faith communities, for misjudging and misguiding. May we so rest in your love that we may love one another, even and particularly when it is so hard to do. In Christ, Amen.

May 14

2 Corinthians 12:19-21

Have you been thinking that we have been defending ourselves before you?
We are speaking in Christ before God.
Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up.

* What builds up the body of Christ? What role do leaders play? What roles do others in the community play? What is the role of the whole community?

I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish,
and that you may find me not as you wish;
I fear that there may perhaps be quarreling, jealousy, anger,
selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.
I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you,
and that I may have to mourn over many who previously sinned
and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality,
and licentiousness that they have practiced.

* What have you discovered that tears down the body of Christ?

* Perhaps we should not be surprised at the multitude of ways we sin, but we often are. Over what do you mourn? How do we—ought we—call one another to repentance?

God, we humbly acknowledge the sin among us. We come to you in Christ. Call us to repentance that by the power of the Spirit we might turn from that which tears down people's lives and tears apart the body of Christ. Transform us, in Christ. Amen.

May 15

2 Corinthians 13:1-4

This is the third time I am coming to you.
“Any charge must be sustained by
the evidence of two or three witnesses.”
(Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15)

I warned those who sinned previously and all the others,
and I warn them now while absent, as I did on my second visit,
that if I come again I will not be lenient—
since you desire proof that Christ is speaking in me.

Christ is not weak in dealing with you,
but is powerful in you.
He was crucified in weakness,
but lives by the power of God.
For we are weak in Christ,
but in dealing with you
we will live with him
by the power of God.

* Reflect on how Christ became weak for our sakes. Can you even imagine
how difficult that was? Reflect on the power of the resurrection and the
difference that makes.

* How are we both weak in Christ, and powerful in Christ? How does that
shape our ministry? How does that shape leadership?

*Christ crucified, in our weakness we depend upon you for strength. When we
feel we no longer have the energy, the stamina, the courage, to do your work,
fill us with your new life. Encourage, enliven and empower us for strong
servanthood. Amen.*

May 16

2 Corinthians 13:5-13

Examine yourselves to see
whether you are living in the faith.
Test yourselves.

* Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?

I hope you will find out that we have not failed.
We pray to God that you may not do anything wrong.
Not that we may appear to have met the test,
but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.
We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.
For we rejoice when we are weak and you are strong.
This is what we pray for, that you become perfect.

I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come,
I may not have to be severe in using the authority
that the Lord has given me for building up and not tearing down.

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell.
Put things in order,
listen to my appeal,
agree with one another,
live in peace;
And the God of love and peace will be with you.
Greet one another with a holy kiss.
All the saints greet you.

*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion
of the Holy Spirit be with all of us. Amen.*

May 17

Galatians 1:1-10

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities,

but through Jesus Christ and God the Father,
who raised him from the dead—
and all the members of the God’s family who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

* Who sent *you*? By whose authority do you minister where you are?

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,
who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age,
according to the will of our God and Father
to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen

* What greeting about sin and evil and grace and Jesus’ death and resurrection might you want to give or send to someone today? How? Will you?

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one
who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—
Not that there is another gospel but there are some who are confusing you
and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

If anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received,
let that one be accursed! Am I now seeking human approval
or God’s approval? Am I trying to please people?

If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

*As you serve, how do you discern your motives? How do you remind one another of the gospel?

Oh God, we thank you for human community in Christ. May we meet and greet one another always in your grace, living in the peace of Christ. May we not desert the call to the Gospel but remain servants of Christ. Amen.

May 18

Galatians 1:11s-24

I want you to know, brothers and sisters,
that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin.
I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it,
but received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born
and called me through grace, was pleased to reveal the Son to me,
so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles,

I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James, the Lord’s brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the region of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said,

“The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.” They glorified God because of me.

* What is your “call” story? Have you told it recently?

* Paul, who persecuted from the outside, now includes himself in the “us” of Christian community. Have you, or someone you know, been both “outside” and “inside” the faith community of Christ?

We give glory to you, O God, for the transformation of the Apostle Paul. By the power of the Holy Spirit, transform us also—daily—that we with zeal might not persecute and oppress, but proclaim and confess the one Jesus Christ, in whom we have been joined as one. Amen

May 19

Galatians 2:1-10

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem
with Barnabas taking Titus along with me.
I laid before them
(though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders)
the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles,
in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain.

But because of false believers, secretly brought in,
who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus,
so that they might enslave us—
we did not submit to them even for a moment,
so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you.

The God who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised
also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles.
James and Cephas and John, acknowledged pillars,
gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship,
agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

* What mistrust have you experienced among acknowledged “pillars” in the church? When have you failed to trust another’s office or role? How do we extend the hand of fellowship to each other?

They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor,
which was actually what I was eager to do.

* “Remember the poor” is a haunting and challenging phrase. How do we do that compassionately, liturgically, spiritually, physically, graciously, prophetically, courageously, politically, communally?

May we not run in vain, O God. May your Spirit guide us in mission. Forgive our undermining of one another’s ministries. Give us vision and wisdom for collaborative ministry, locally, regionally, churchwide, globally, and ecumenically. And, most of all, may we in bold, caring action remember the poor. In Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

May 20

Galatians 2:11-14

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face,
because he stood self-condemned;
for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles.
But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate
for fear of the circumcision faction.
And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy,
so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said,
“If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew,
how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

* What is going on in Antioch? What is the hypocrisy there? What are the factions about which Paul speaks?

* “It’s full of hypocrites” is a common rationale for people not joining—or why they leave—the church. And of course it is! How does hypocrisy lead people astray and away? How do you react to it – in others, and in yourself?

* “He kept him separate for fear of...” How do factions separate, isolate, and alienate?

* If we do not live like Christians, how can we effectively witness to the Gospel?

God of truth, may we live with integrity in consistency with the truth of the gospel. Guard us, we who are so prone to point out the hypocrisy of others, from our own hypocrisy. Convert us, transform us, and shape us as communities of faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.

May 21 **Galatians 2:15-21**

We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law
but through faith in Jesus Christ.
And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus
so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law.

But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we have been found to be sinners,
is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!
But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down,
then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor.
Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.
I have been crucified with Christ;
and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.
The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God
who loved me and gave himself for me.

I do not nullify the grace of God;
for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

* Christ, a servant of sin? Christ, dying for nothing? Consider carefully these strong words concerning how each day we continue to try to justify ourselves.

* Consider carefully these powerfully liberating words, “I died to the law so that I might live to God.” What might that really mean for servant leadership in the world?

* “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” How do these words both free me from my self-destructive, self-justifying personhood, and, at the same time give my identity and my life a fullness I could never have imagined without Christ?

We live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us. Amen.

May 22 **Galatians 3:1-9**

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?
It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!
The only thing I want to learn from you is this:
Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law
or by believing what you heard?
Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit,
are you now ending with the flesh?
Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing.

* Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,”
(Gen. 15:6)
so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham.
The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith,
announced the good news to Abraham, saying
“All the peoples shall be blessed in you.”
(Gen. 12:3; 18:18, 22:18)

Abraham believed and was blessed, so all who believe are blessed as he was.

* What are the ramifications of being joined to Abraham and the Hebrew people through belief in God’s gracious activity, unconditional love and covenant faithfulness?

God of mercy and love, we are too often foolish in not believing what is right in front of us. You have called us to faith through the Holy Spirit. Join us with all your faithful people that you may continue to work miracles among and through us. In Christ, Amen.

May 23

Galatians 3:10-22

All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written,
“Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey
all the things written in the book of the law.” (Deut. 27:36)
It is evident that no one is justified before God by the law;
for “The one who is righteousness will live by faith.” (Hab. 2:4)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,
for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”— (Deut. 21:23)
in order that in Christ Jesus
the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles,
so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life:
once a person’s will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it.
The promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring, not offsprings,
that is to one person, who is Christ.
The law which came 430 years later, does not annul a covenant
previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.
For if the inheritance comes from the law,
it no longer comes from the promise;
but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

* Why then the law?
It was added because of transgressions,
until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made.

* Is the law then opposed to the promises of God?
Certainly not! If a law had been given that could make alive,
then righteousness would indeed come through the law.

*God of righteousness, we know that through scripture all things have been
imprisoned under the power of sin. We thank you and praise your holy name
that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ has been given to those
who believe, and that the one who is righteous will live by faith. In Christ we
pray. Amen.*

May 24

Galatians 3:23-29

Until faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law.
The law was our disciplinarian until Christ came,
so that we might be justified by faith.
But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian,
for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

* Imprisoned, guarded! Feel what it is like to be under a disciplinarian. Now—
once in time and each day today--feel what it is like to be made right with God
and each other.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ
have clothed yourselves with Christ.

* Picture being clothed in Christ. How does that change your appearance, your
actions, your relationships, your sense of identity? How do you remember
your baptism?

**There is no longer Jew or Greek,
There is no longer slave or free,
There is no longer male and female;
For all of you are one in Christ Jesus.**

* How does this powerful Gal. 3:28 passage change everything? In a world of
injustice, burdened by racism, classism, sexism, militarism, and fear of the
other, what can you do to actualize our all being one?

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring,
heirs according to the promise.

* When we all belong, how does that change the way we live together in
Christ as heirs according to the promise?

*Justified by faith, Christ Jesus, help us to fully realize that we are one.
Embolden us to take down the walls of suspicion and division. Empower us for
partnerships of equality. Clothe us with your very self that we may see you in
each other. Amen.*

May 25 **Galatians 4:1-11**

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors,
are no better than slaves, though they are owners of the property;
they remain under guardians until the date set by the father.
So with us; while we were minors,
we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world.

* How quickly Paul falls back to the cultural mindset of slaves and non-slaves.
What *is* his point? How does this metaphor both help and hinder?

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent God's Son,
born of a woman, born under the law,
in order to redeem those who were under the law,
so that we might receive adoption as children.
And because you are children, God sent the Spirit of the Son
into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"
So, you are no longer a slave but a child,
and if a child, also an heir, through God.

Formerly, when you did not know God,
you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods.

- * How can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits?
- * How can you want to be enslaved again?
- * What special days, months, seasons and years of other spirits do we observe?

I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

When the fullness of time came, Abba, you sent your Son to be born of a woman to redeem us who were under the law. We thank you for our adoption. Hold us close to you in Christ Jesus. Amen.

May 26 **Galatians 4:12-20**

Friends, I beg you, become as I am,
for I also have become as you are.
You have done me no wrong.

You know that it was because of a physical infirmity
that I first announced the gospel to you;
though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or reject me,
but received me as you would Christ Jesus.

What has become of the good will you felt?
You would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.
Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Those other people show deep interest in you,
but their intentions are not good.
All they want is to separate you from me.
My dear children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth
until Christ is formed in you,
I wish I were present with you now
so that I could take a different attitude toward you.
I am so worried about you.

- * What has changed in the relationship? How do changes in ministry relationships affect you and whole congregations? What causes you to worry?

God of wholeness and health, minister through our physical disabilities. Care for our congregations in the midst of pain, conflict, and temptation to waver from the Gospel. Separate us not, but help us receive each other as Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

May 27

Galatians 4:21-5:1

* Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law,
will you not listen to the law?

Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman, the other by a free woman.
The allegory: Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, in slavery with her children.
The other woman is Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother.

You, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac.
What does Scripture say? “Drive out the slave and her child;
the child of the slave will not share the inheritance
with the child of the free woman.” (Gen. 21:10)
Friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.

* How does this allegory make the point about living no longer under legalism
but through the promise? How have the images of this allegory been misused
to set Jew and Christian against Arab and Muslim?

For freedom Christ has set us free.
Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

*God of freedom through the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus,
may we live according to the promise of new life and reconciliation and peace.
Forgive us our eagerness, when we place ourselves again under legalistic and
self-righteous judgment, to cast into the wilderness those not in our circle.
May we not submit to the yoke of legalistic, judgmental, exclusionary slavery.
May we, living by the promise, beyond allegory, enslave no one else,
economically, politically, or in any other way. In Christ, Amen.*

May 28

Galatians 5:2-12

Listen! I, Paul, tell every man who lets himself be circumcised
that he is obliged to obey the entire law.
You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ;
you have fallen away from grace.
For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.
In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything;
the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

* If for Christians today circumcision is no longer a defining rite, what other
ritual marks have people tried to use to determine if a person is a “true”
Christian or not?

* Why is it important to teach that keeping one law does not justify us? How
does understanding that in order to be justified by being “right” or “good” we
would have to keep the entire law to help us more fully appreciate our need for
grace through Christ?

You were doing so well! Who made you stop obeying the truth?
A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough.
Whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty.
But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I still preach circumcision?
In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.
I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves.

* “A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough” is used in many ways. How
is it used in this text?
* What is the “offense of the cross”? If we preach and practice other ways to
placate and please God, how do we lessen the radical, tragic, wonderful death
of Christ for us?

*Christ Jesus, may your cross alone center our faith working through love.
Amen.*

May 29

Galatians 5:13-15

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;
only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,
but through love become slaves to one another.

For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment,
“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

If, however, you bite and devour one another,
take care that you are not consumed by one another.

- * What does it mean for you that you have been called to freedom?
From what are we free? For what are we free?
- * What is freedom other than becoming slaves to one another? Since we have been freed from slavery to the law, how do we live, share Christ, work for justice and peace as freed slaves, powerful servants? Free in Christ and now slaves to each other! What does that mean and not mean?
- * So what are your self-indulgences that might enslave you once again?
- * How do we bite and devour each other? How does that consume us all?

God of mercy and grace, may we who have been freed from the demands of the law through Jesus' cross and resurrection be positively consumed by your love that so we do not consume one another in our own prejudices and greed. Free us for consistent, caring servanthood in Christ. Amen

May 30

Galatians 5:16-26

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.
What the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit,
and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh;
these are opposed to each other to prevent you from doing what you want.
If you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

The works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing...and things like these.

Those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

There is no law against such things.

* If we are not justified by works, why the warning about not inheriting the kingdom? “Under the law” is key. How does doing only “what we want” (the *works* of the flesh) keep us from loving relationships with one another? How does the fruit (*singular*—of the *one* Spirit of God) lead us beyond ourselves, beyond being justified by the law, to loving, peace-filled relationships?

* Ponder each of the lists.

May we always remember that we who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another, but love one another as you have loved us. Amen.

May 31

Galatians 6:1-6

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression,
you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one
in a spirit of gentleness.

* Recall a time when someone restored you in a spirit of gentleness.
Recall a time when you needed to call someone else back from
transgression.

Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.
Bear one another's burdens,
and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

* Recall a time when you were tempted.
Give thanks for a time when you, or others, bore another's burden.

If those who are nothing think they are something,
they deceive themselves.
All must test their own work;
then that work, rather than their neighbor's work,
will become a cause for pride.

* Recall a time when you deceived yourself.
Recall a time when you judged your neighbor's work rather than your own.

For all must carry their own loads.
Those who are taught the word
must share in all good things with their teacher.

*We who are nothing, who deceive ourselves in judging, fill us with the Spirit
that we may be restored and in the spirit of Christ's gentleness help restore all
creation. Amen.*

June 1 **Galatians 6:7-10**

Do not deceive yourselves; no one makes a fool of God,
for you reap whatever you sow.
If you plant in the field of your natural desires,
from it you will gather the harvest of death;
if you plant in the field of the Spirit,
from the Spirit you will gather the harvest of eternal life.

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right,
for we will reap at harvest time,
if we do not give up.

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all,
and especially for those of the family of faith.

* Since no one makes a fool of God, what is it that you are planting?

* What opportunities do we continue to have to work for the good of all? How might our working to up-build the family of faith also sow seeds of the spirit in the world?

O God, we do grow weary, yet not weary of you. Work in us every good deed that through our labor we together in Christ might reap your harvest. May we not grow weary in well-doing! In Christ, Amen.

June 2 **Galatians 6:11-18**

See what large letters I make
when I am writing in my own hand!

Those who want to make a good showing try to compel you to be circumcised
so they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.
May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,
by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.
Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything;
but a new creation is everything!
As for those who will follow this rule—
peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

From now on, let no one make trouble for me;
for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.

* How does trying to compel someone else to follow a certain practice or ritual avoid the cross of Christ?

* Circumcision and uncircumcision are central issues for Paul in writing to the Galatians. Why? What is a “new creation”? For the Gentiles? For the “Israel of God”?

* How might we carry the marks of Jesus? What would they be?

*We bless one another:
May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.*

June 3

Ephesians 1:1-10

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus;
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

* To whom have you written (phone, e-mail, text, card) to encourage in faith?

God chose us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ.
This was God's pleasure and purpose, freely given to us in the Beloved.
Let us praise God for grace, for the free gift in Jesus Christ!

In Christ we have redemption through his blood.
We are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven.
How great is the grace of God, lavished on us.
With all wisdom and insight
God made known to us the mystery of God's own will
set forth in Christ
as a plan for the fullness of time,
to gather up all things in heaven and on earth.

* Here is the core of the Gospel. What does it mean to you that:
You have been chosen, adopted because God wanted to?
You have been redeemed, forgiven, set free through Christ?
You know the mystery of God's own will and plan for you?
And for all things in the fullness of time?

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as God chose us in Christ, before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before God in love. Amen

June 4

Ephesians 1:11-14

In Christ, we have also obtained an inheritance,
having been destined according to the purpose of the one
who accomplished all things according to divine counsel and will,
so that we, who were first to set our hope on Christ,
might live for the praise of God's glory.
When you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation,
and had believed in him,
you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;
this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption
as God's own people
to the praise of God's glory.

* What does it mean in your life that you have been promised an inheritance from God? What is that, really? How do you share and hand on this promise? (Or is it just for you, because you were destined to receive it?)

* Christ accomplished all things according to the purpose and plan of God. What are some of the dilemmas that arise when trying to discern God's will? How does having all those decisions centered in Christ change the discernment?

* How does your daily life look when, placing your hope in Christ, you give the glory to God?

* We have been marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. How does it feel to be marked? Sealed? Just how does the Holy Spirit work in your life?

Questions, questions! And, yet our hope in you, O God, is greater still. We praise you for gathering us into your grace, for marking us in holy baptism, and for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Fill us with your grace to love and to live for others. In Christ, Amen.

June 5

Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus
and your love toward all the saints.
I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.
I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you a spirit of wisdom
and revelation as you come to know him,
so, with the eyes of your heart enlightened,
you may know the hope to which God has called you,
what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints,
and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power
for us who believe, according to the working of God's great power.

God put this power to work in Christ by raising him from the dead
and seating him at God's right hand in the heavenly places,
far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,
and above every name that is named,
not only in this age but also in the age to come.

God has put all things under Christ's feet
and made him head over all things for the church,
which is his body, the fullness of God who fills all in all.

* When have you seen and felt the power of God at work through Christ's resurrection?

* What does it mean that Christ is above all rule, authority, power and dominion, and head "over all things for the church"?

O God, who has given us Christ Jesus, we pray in his name for wisdom and hope that we who are Christ's body, the church, might live in the power of his resurrection alone. Amen.

June 6

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived,
following the course of the world, following the ruler of the power of the air,
the spirit that controls those who disobey.
All of us once lived in the passions, following our desires,
and we were children of wrath, like everyone else.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of great love,
loved us, even when we were dead in sin through our trespasses,
made us alive together with Christ
—by grace you have been saved—
and raised us up with Christ
and seated us in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,
so that in ages to come God might show immeasurable riches of grace in
kindness toward us in Christ.

For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—
not the result of works, so that no one may boast.
For we are what God made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works,
which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

* When do you experience being dead through sin, and being children of wrath?

* What does it mean for you that we have been made alive *together* in Christ?

* What are the open possibilities since we have been created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before hand to be *our way of life*?

Write upon our hearts: "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." In Christ we have our very being. Amen.

June 7

Ephesians 2:11-18

Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”

—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—
remember that you were at that time without Christ,
being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel
and strangers to the covenants of promise.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off
have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

- * What differences, created by human beings, divide us today?
- * In what ways have we been aliens of community or strangers to the promise?

For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one,
and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.
Christ has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances,
that he might create one new humanity, in place of the two,
thus making peace, and reconciling both groups to God in one body,
through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.
Christ came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off
and peace to those who were near.

- * In church conflict, what walls have divided us? How does hostility grow?
- * How does the power of the cross reconcile both groups to God and to one another? How have you seen that? Felt it? How might the Spirit bring reconciliation, even now?

We, too, O Lord, were far off and have been brought near. Help us to remember this, when we start to estrange others, creating hostility. Forgive us. Show us again Christ's cross and resurrection that we might surely know the peace you bring both to those who were far off and to those who are near. In his name we pray, Amen.

June 8

Ephesians 2:18-22

Through Christ both of us, Jews and Gentiles,
are able in the one Spirit to come into the presence of God.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens,
but you are citizens with the saints
and also members of the household of God,
built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone.

In Christ the whole structure is joined together
and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;
in whom you also are built together spiritually
into a dwelling place for God.

- * Consider all of the images of the church in this passage!
- * The church is people, global and historical. How has your faith community experienced being no longer strangers and aliens? Citizens with the saints?
- * The church is people, not just a building. But in this passage how are the people likened to being a building? How are we built together spiritually to be a dwelling place for God?

We praise your name, holy God, that through the power of the Spirit we are able, together, to come into your presence. Ground us, build us, form us into a people with doors wide open so that none need be outside. In Christ, Amen.

June 9

Ephesians 3:1-13

I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.
Surely you have heard of the commission of God's grace given me for you,
and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation.
In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind
as it has been revealed to apostles and prophets by the Spirit.
The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body,
and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

I became a servant of the Gospel by God's grace given by God's power.
Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given me
to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and
to make everyone see the plan of the mystery hidden for the ages
in God who created all things:
so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety
might now be made known to rulers and authorities in heavenly places.
In accord with the eternal purpose,
God carried this out in Christ Jesus our Lord,
in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith.

I pray therefore: Do not lose heart over my sufferings for you;
they are your glory.

* Paul has been a prisoner, both literally and for Christ. He tells the Ephesians, Gentiles, his sufferings are for them. How do we interpret our own sufferings?

* How have you—by God's power—become a servant of the Gospel? What boldness and confidence has been given to you? For what purpose?

God of mystery, you have made known to us your revelation. May we who now have access to you in Jesus Christ be your disciples, your prophets, your leaders that all might know your marvelous grace. In Christ, Amen.

June 10

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before God, from whom every family
in heaven and on earth takes its name.

* In the words of Paul pray with and for individuals and communities *you* know:

I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God.

* What words might you use to pray a similar prayer, but in language common to the person with whom you are praying?

Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

June 11

Ephesians 4:1-10

I, therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,
one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of all, who is above all
and through all and in all.

Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.
Therefore it is said,

"When he ascended on high, he made captivity itself a captive;
he gave gifts to his people" (Ps. 68:18)
(When it says, "He ascended," what does that mean
but that he had also descended into the lowest depths of the earth?
He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens,
so that he might fill all things.)

* What is the measure of Christ's gift? If through Jesus' birth, death, resurrection and ascension he filled all things, is not this "measure" full for each and for all?

* What does it mean in your life that captivity itself is now captive?

* Read again "One body, one Spirit..." Let your mind expand. What does—what might—that mean for our faith, life, worship, and work together in Christ?

May we, Christ Jesus, lead lives centered in and shaped by you. Spirit of Gentleness, fill us with humility and patience that we may bear with one another in love and maintain unity in the bond of peace. Amen.

June 12

Ephesians 4:11-14

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...

* To equip the saints for the work of ministry! Did you notice that the list of roles is not ranked and it is not closed? How do ministerial offices relate to one another? What is needed?

* What difference does it—might it—make that whatever offices and roles the church has, the purpose of these leadership ministries is to equip the baptized for their ministries in the world?

* When each and every one of the *laos*, the people of God, are equipped and fully engaged in their ministries in daily life all week long, how does that build up the body of Christ? How do we—might we—strengthen this body through word and sacrament, teaching and learning?

...until all of us come to the unity of the faith
and of the knowledge of the Son of God,
to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.

* When have you experienced Christians being tossed and blown about? How did that come about? What happened? How do we grow to maturity in faith and to full stature in Christ?

May we, Christ Jesus, be your body in the world, growing in knowledge, strengthened in ability to be fully engaged in mission and ministry, calling each other to mutual accountability for belief and action, led by wise leaders, confident in the unity you alone give. In your name we pray, Amen.

June 13

Ephesians 4:15-16

Speaking the truth in love,
we must grow up in every way
into him who is the head, into Christ,
from whom the whole body, joined and knit together
by every ligament with which is it equipped,
as each part is working properly,
promotes the body's growth
in building itself up in love.

* How does speaking the truth in love help Christ's body, the church, grow up?

* What is church growth? What does it mean to grow up into Christ, the head of the body? How many different ways might a faith community be growing? How might your faith community grow in knowledge? In mercy? In outreach? In service? In ecumenical relationships? In ____? In ____?

* When the body is broken, ripped apart, torn down, how do you weep with Christ? Where have you seen the body of Christ being knit together? How does our being joined together in love, even in the midst of great conflict, help us equip one another for Christ's mission in the world?

* What does it mean for the body of Christ to be working properly? What difference does it make that Christ is the head of the body? How is it that through engaging in God's mission, Christ builds the church?

Christ Jesus, the head of the church, through your great love, knit us together again. Recreate us by the power of the resurrection for cooperation and collaboration. May we grow by your grace. In your name we pray, Amen.

June 14

Ephesians 4:17-24

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord:
you must no longer live as the Gentiles live,
in the futility of their minds.

They are darkened in their understanding,
alienated from God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart.
They have lost sensitivity and abandoned themselves to licentiousness,
greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

* What is it to live in futility? Darkened understanding? Greedy practice?

That is not the way you learned in Christ!
For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him,
as truth is in Jesus.

You were taught to put away your former way of life,
your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts,
and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,
and to clothe yourselves with the new self,
created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

* What is it like to be renewed in spirit? Clothed with a new self? Living in the likeness of God?

Create us anew, righteous and holy God. Turn us from ways of life that delude and corrupt. Clothe us with Christ that we might live in your likeness not only for our own appearance, but so that people may see you through our service. In Christ, Amen.

June 15

Ephesians 4:25-32

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors,
for we are members of one another.
Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,
and do not make room for the devil.

Thieves must give up stealing;
rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands,
so as to have something to share with the needy.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths,
but only what is useful for building up, as there is need,
so that your words may give grace to those who hear.
Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God,
with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger
and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,
and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another,
as God in Christ has forgiven you.

- * Select one sentence from the rich words above. Savor it. Let it become part of you.
- * Pick another one, for later in the day. How might it change your living?

Holy Spirit, mark us anew this day with the seal of Christ. By your power, sanctify our lives by freeing us from our own falsehood, anger and evil. Fill us with yourself so that we might speak helpful words and build up the church with grace and tenderhearted kindness. May we live together in the forgiveness which comes through Christ Jesus alone. Amen.

June 16

Ephesians 5:1-14

Be imitators of God, as beloved children,
and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us,
a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Fornication, impurity or greed must not even be mentioned among you.
Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk;
but instead let there be thanksgiving.
No fornicator, impure or greedy person (that is, an idolater)
has inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

- * How does not being part of God's kingdom hinge on being an idolater? How is living in love dependent upon being one with Christ who sacrificed himself for us?

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things,
the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient.
Don't be associated with them.
Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.
Live as children of light—
for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.

Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.
Take no part in unfruitful works of darkness; instead expose them.
Everything exposed by the light becomes visible.
And everything that becomes visible is light.

- * What role do we have in exposing darkness? In illuminating truth?

We pray with Paul, "Wake up sleeper, and rise from death, and Christ will shine on you." Amen.

June 17

Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,
making the most of the time, because the days are evil.
Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

* Be careful! Make the most of the time! What does that mean? (Surely not a stressed-out, 24/7 existence!)

* What are the evils of our day in relation to time? How might the Spirit be calling us from foolishness to wisdom in seeking to understand the will of the Lord?

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery;
but be filled with the Spirit,
as you sing psalms and hymns
and spiritual songs among yourselves,
singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts,
giving thanks to God at all times and for everything
in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

* When we sing, what does it feel like to be filled with the Spirit? When we make music together, how does the melody of the psalms and the hymns draw our hearts to the Lord?

* When have you felt an almost intoxicating joy in giving thanks to God for everything?

Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God all creatures here below. Praise God above you heavenly host. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

June 18

Ephesians 5:25-33

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.
Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.
The husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.
Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church,
and gave himself for her to make her holy by cleansing her
with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church without
spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind –
yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.
In the same way husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies.
He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body,
but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church,
because we are members of his body.

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24)
This is a great mystery I am applying to Christ and the church.
Each of you should love his wife as himself and a wife should respect her husband.

* How has the comparison of Christ as head of the church to husbands led some men to lord it over their wives? How has this admonition led some wives into submission or abuse? How have church leaders often fostered such unhealthy relationships?

* How has this changed? And not changed? How does referring to the church as “her” contribute to the continuation of the submissive role of women?

* What might we glean from this text today about Christ’s great love for all people that could contribute to our mutual love and respect for one another?

Christ Jesus, we thank you for your great love for the church. May we who are members of your body, love ourselves as you love us, and love one another as you care for and nurture us. And may we feel so cared for by your great love that we turn outward beyond our own families to love and nurture the world. Amen.

June 19

Ephesians 6:1-9

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.
“Honor your father and mother”(Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16) --
This is the first commandment with a promise:
“so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”
And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger,
But bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling,
in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ;
not only while being watched, and in order to please them,
but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.

Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord, not to men and women,
knowing that whatever good we do,
we will receive the same again from the Lord,
whether we are slaves or free.

And masters, do the same to them.
Stop threatening them,
for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven,
and with God there is no partiality.

* Within the social structure of that day, how are these words radical? How would, “Fathers, don’t provoke your children to anger,” and, “Masters, stop threatening [slaves]” be heard?
* How have these words been used through the centuries and yet today to justify patriarchy and slavery?
* How does being a slave of Christ...all of us...change the relationships we have with one another? What do the words, “with God there is no partiality” really mean? What new possibilities for inclusivity and justice do they open up for us? How do you, or might you, participate in freedom-seeking ministry?

Lord God, may we do your will from our hearts. May we see each other only through Christ. Give us the courage to do not only our duty, but that which liberates people from whatever oppressive systems they find themselves in today. In Christ we pray. Amen.

June 20

Ephesians 6:10-17

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God’s power.
Put on the whole armor of God,
so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.
Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,
but against rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of this present darkness,
against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God,
so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day,
and having done everything, to stand firm.
Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist,
and put on the breastplate of righteousness.
Put on shoes that will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.

With these, take the shield of faith
to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.
Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit,
which is the word of God.

* Even though the struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but cosmic forces of evil, ponder the ways Christians have used this passage to justify warfare against peoples and nations.

* What is the power of the Lord? And for what are we called to use it? Visualize yourself in a belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shoes for peace, shield of faith, headgear of faith and, with tools of the Spirit, the word of God? What do you look like in the mirror? To others? In ministry?

Lord of power and truth, clothe us with the Spirit that we may stand firm in the face of evil. We repent of times we have gone to battle assuming our enemies were yours. We ask for wisdom to know your truth and to walk in your ways of justice and peace. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

June 21

Ephesians 6:18-23

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.
Keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.
Pray also for me, so a message may be given to me
to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,
for which I am an ambassador in chains.
Pray that I declare it boldly, as I must speak.

- * Do you know who is praying for you? Perhaps someone you don't even know? Whom might you *ask* to pray for you? For what should they pray?
- * Are there people you tell, "I'm praying for you," and then you don't? What prayer discipline could assist you?
- * Peter and John, when ordered not to teach in the name of Jesus, said, "we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4: 20) What about you?

So you may know how I am and what I am doing,
dear brother and faithful minister, Tychicus, will tell you everything.
I send him to let you know how we are and to encourage your hearts.

- * The whole community, far and near, needs to know how each is doing. How might we keep in touch more? How might we encourage one another's hearts?

May peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

June 22

Philippians 1:1-11

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi,
with the bishops and deacons:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you,
constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you,
because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.
I am confident the one who began a good work among you
will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.
You hold me in your heart for all of you share in God's grace with me,
both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

God is my witness, how I long for all of you
with the compassion of Christ Jesus.
This is my prayer: that your love may overflow more and more
with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best,
so that in the day of Jesus Christ you may be pure and blameless,
having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through
Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

- * Whom do you long to see? Whom do you hold in your heart with the compassion of Jesus Christ? For whom do you thank God? How might you let them know this?
- * What harvest of righteousness is God producing in faith communities you know?
- * How do Christians help one another have the insight to determine what is best to do, how to make decisions, how to share the gospel? How might we be bold enough to speak often about the fruits of the faith?

May grace and peace be with us all in Jesus Christ that we might constantly pray for one another, that you, oh God, who began a good work among us, will bring it to completion in Christ. Amen.

June 23

Philippians 1:12-18

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me
has actually helped to spread the gospel,
so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard
and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ.
Most brothers and sisters, having been made confident by my imprisonment,
dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

* Are you in prison? Do you know someone in prison? Whichever state, how
are we made bold and fearless through Jesus Christ to speak and live the word
of God?

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill.
These proclaim Christ out of love,
knowing that I have been put here for defense of the Gospel;
others out of selfish ambition,
intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment.
What does it matter?
Just this: that Christ is proclaimed in every way, out of false motives or true;
and in that I rejoice.

* Ah, the complexities of human motivation. When have you been envious,
selfishly ambitious (perhaps without even fully realizing it)? Have there been
times when we have actually intended to increase another's suffering? Surely
not, we say. But, perhaps, even a little?

* What does it matter?

*God, who knows the human heart, free us from ourselves. Forgive us. Increase
love and goodwill within us, in every circumstance. May Christ Jesus
continue to be proclaimed through, in spite of, or in the midst of our mixed
motivations. In Christ alone we rejoice. Amen.*

June 24

Philippians 1:19-26

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers
and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ
this will turn out for my deliverance.
It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame,
but by speaking boldly, Christ will be exalted in my body,
whether by life or by death.

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.
If I continue to live, that means fruitful labor for me;
I do not know which I prefer.
I am hard pressed between the two:
my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better;
but to remain alive is more necessary for you.

I know that I will remain and continue with all of you
for your progress and joy in faith,
so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus
when I come to you again.

* For what might we pray so that our work will turn out for “deliverance”?
Could it be that our lives are more important to people than we might realize?

* Have you, or someone you know, been torn between wishing to be fully with
Christ and living a longer life? Have you been torn between staying and
leaving a calling? To whom might you turn to help discern God's will for your
life? For your work?

*God of discernment, you know when we are hard pressed. Deliver your
servants who are in bondage or any kind of danger. May we seek your
guidance through wise people in the community of Christ as we question your
will for our lives of service. In Christ we pray. Amen.*

June 25

Philippians 1:27-30

Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,
so that whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you,
I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit,
striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel,
and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.
For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation.
This is God's doing.

- * Who are our opponents in the faith? What does it take to stand firm?
- * How do we live life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ?

God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ,
but of suffering for him as well—
since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had
and hear that I still have.

- * Without sinking into self-sacrifice—Christ's sacrifice is already complete—how are we privileged to suffer for Christ and for the sake of suffering humankind?

Whether we are present with one another, or absent, join us as one in Christ for mutual encouragement and accountability that we might stand fast in the faith. We give you thanks for the privilege of believing and serving and struggling in your name and for your sake, Jesus. Amen.

June 26

Philippians 2:1-4

If there is any encouragement in Christ,
any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit,
any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete:
be of the same mind, having the same love,
being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

Let each of you look not to your own interests,
but to the interests of others.

- * Not in *order to be* loved by God, but because we are unconditionally loved by God in Christ, we, by the power of the Spirit, can be of the same love, having the same mind. When have you seen that “mind of Christ” in someone? Or “being in full accord and of one mind” in the Christian community?

- * Each of us may have our own fears, habits, particular versions of sin that draw us back to acting out of selfish ambition or conceit. What are they? How does being joined to Christ free us to act humbly, and to regard others in the image of Christ?

- * How have you experienced encouragement in Christ? Consolation? Sympathy and compassion? Sharing in the Spirit? How is our joy completed? How is it shared?

God of mercy and love, forgive us, free us, and fill us so that we live in Christ and through Christ for one another. Amen.

June 27 **Philippians 2:5-11**

* Read this “mind of Christ” passage and make it your own:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

Being found in human form, he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the death,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

May this mind be in us so that we might be joined to the cross and resurrection of Christ. May every knee bend and every tongue confess that Jesus is Christ is Lord. Amen.

June 28 **Philippians 2:12-18**

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me,
not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence,
work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;
for it is God who is at work in you,
enabling you both to will and work for God’s good pleasure.

* “Work out your own salvation” taken out of context could sound like works righteousness; but coming right after the “mind of Christ” passage, what might it mean for how Christ can live in our lives? How does “God is at work in you” both encourage and challenge?

Do all things without murmuring and arguing
so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God
without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation,
in which you shine like stars in the world.

By your holding fast to the word of life I can be proud of you
on the day of Christ, showing that I did not labor in vain.
But even if I am being poured out like a libation
over the sacrifice and offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you—
and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

* Does the labor of your ministry sometimes seem in vain? Do you feel like you are being “poured out” and left empty? For what do you pray?

May we and the people among whom we serve hold fast to our faith in you, faithful God. Shape our lives in Christ that we might will and work for you alone. Amen.

June 29

Philippians 2:19-30

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon,
so that I may be cheered by news of you.
I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.
All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ,
but Timothy's worth you know,
how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.
I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon.

Still, I think it necessary to send Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need;
he has been longing for all of you,
and distressed because you heard that he was ill.
He was so ill he nearly died.
But God had mercy on him, but not only on him, but on me also
so I would not have one sorrow after another.
I am eager to send him that you may rejoice and I may be less anxious.

Welcome him in the Lord with all joy and honor such people,
because he came close to death for the work of Christ,
risking his life for the service you could not give me.

* What basic differences are there between those who serve for their own interests and those who are genuinely concerned for the community of Christ?

* Whom do you know who has been put at risk for the work of Christ? (Yourself?)

* How might we send messengers and ministers to one another?

God of community, we give you thanks for those who have been sent to us. May we welcome them in the Lord. And may we also send forth faithful servants for service in Christ. It is through your love that we long to see one another. May we see Christ in each other. Amen.

June 30

Philippians 3:1-11

My brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord.
To write some things to you is not troublesome,
and for you it is a safeguard.

Beware of the dogs, of evil workers, of those who mutilate the flesh!
It is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God
and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—
even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.
If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:
I was circumcised on the eighth day, an Israelite, of the tribe of Benjamin,
a Hebrew, a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of the church,
and righteous under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I regard as loss because of Christ.
I regard everything as loss
because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ my Lord.
For his sake I suffered the loss of all things and regard them as rubbish,
in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him,
not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law
but the righteousness from God that comes through faith in Christ.

All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection,
to share in his sufferings, and become like him in the face of death,
in the hope that I might be raised from death to life.

* What—your knowledge, your accomplishments, your position, your role—is rubbish in your life?

* How does faith in Christ surpass everything else in value?

May we know you alone, Christ Jesus. We place ourselves and our hope in you. Keep us from false security. Having been joined to your death through baptism, may we continue to live by the power of your resurrection forever. Amen.

July 1 Philippians 3:12-21

Not that I have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own,
because Christ Jesus has made me his own.
Beloved, forgetting what lies behind and straining towards what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ.
Let those of us who are mature be of the same mind.
And you who think differently, God will make this clear to you.
Let us hold fast to what we have attained.

* Picture how we both “hold fast” and “press on” in our life in Christ.

Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ;
I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.
Their end is destruction; their god is the belly;
their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things

But our citizenship is in heaven;
from there we expect a Savior, the Lord Jesus.
He will transform the body of our humiliation
that it may be conformed to the body of his glory
by the power that enables him to make all things subject to himself.

* What does it mean to live as an enemy of the cross of Christ? How do you see this in the world? When and how do we also live as an enemy of the cross?

* What does it mean to you that your citizenship is in heaven? How might this either keep you isolated from or motivated toward being a citizen here?

* Rather than seeing our physical bodies as “humiliating,” how is Paul challenging us to see the risen Christ as a promise to heal the humiliation of our sins – the ways we sin, and the ways we are sinned against?

God of grace and mercy, in Jesus Christ we have already received the gift, the prize, of life with you forever. We, too, shed tears over those, including ourselves, who turn from the cross. Conform us to Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

July 2 Philippians 4:1-7

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for,
my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.
Yes, and I ask you also, my beloved companion, help these women,
for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel,
together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers,
whose names are in the book of life.

* When people, yet today, resist the role of women serving in the church, how might Euodia and Syntyche be helpful reminders of how women have been co-workers in the work of the Gospel since the empty tomb?

* How does having the mind of Christ (Philippians 2) shape us all to be companions in the work of Christ?

Rejoice in the Lord always;
Again I will say, Rejoice.
Let your gentleness be known to everyone.
The Lord is near.
Do not worry about anything,
but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving,
let your requests be made known to God.

*May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts
and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

July 3

Philippians 4:8-14

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing,
whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence,
and if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived
your concern for me, which you had no opportunity to show.
Not that I am referring to being in need;
for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.
I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.
In any and in all circumstances I have learned the secret
of being well-fed and of going hungry,
of having plenty and of being in need.

* How have the words, “be content with whatever you have” been thrown *at* people? How can we live true, honorably and content when we have plenty and when we have little?

* How does living in the care and concern of the church empower us to live caringly and concerned about brothers and sisters in Christ around the world?

I can do all things through God who strengthens me.
In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

Jesus Christ, in whose name we live and serve, may we keep on doing the things that we have learned and received and heard and seen, and may the peace of God be with us all. Amen

July 4

Philippians 4:15-23

In the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia,
you were the only church who shared with me in giving and receiving.
Even when I was in Thessalonica,
you sent me help for my needs more than once.

Not that I seek the gift, but the profit that accumulates to your account.
I have been paid in full and have more than enough;
I am fully satisfied,
now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent,
a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.
My God will fully satisfy every need of yours
according to God’s riches in glory in Christ Jesus.
To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen

* What is the relationship between offerings and need? How does our being united in Christ, who knew poverty, and who through his death and resurrection gives us all we need, free us to give liberally? And also to receive?

* How is Christian freedom to be distinguished from national freedom? How are we called in Christ to share and to care for the needs of the whole world?

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus.
The friends who are with me greet you.
All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor’s household.

God of grace and mercy, we pray for friends, for all households, for all nations: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

July 5 **Colossians 1:1-8**

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
and Timothy our brother.
To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

In our prayers for you we always thank God,
the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus
and of the love you have for all the saints,
because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

You have heard of this hope before in the word of truth, the gospel.
Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world,
so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves
from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.

You learned this from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant.
He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf
and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

* From whom did you first learn the word of truth, the gospel? Among whom
are you learning it now? What new fruit is it bearing in your life?

* Faithful servant, whom are you teaching now? What additional possibilities
are there for your faith community to grow and truly comprehend the grace of
God in order to bear fruit in the world?

*Christ Jesus, we give you thanks that you call us to be teachers and learners in
the faith community and beyond. Increase our love and increase our
knowledge, so that we might be inquisitive learners and wise teachers,
ministering on your behalf. Amen.*

July 6 **Colossians 1:9-13**

We have not ceased praying for you
and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will
in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,
so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to God,
as you bear fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God.

May you be made strong with the strength
that comes from Christ's glorious power,
and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience,
while joyfully giving thanks to God,
who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

God has rescued us from the power of darkness
and transferred us into the kingdom of God's beloved Son,
in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

* What is the connection between having spiritual wisdom and understanding,
and being filled with the knowledge of God's will? And how does living a life
of faith lead one to hunger for ongoing growth in the knowledge of God?

* Ponder the images of God's work in Christ for us: "rescue from the power of
darkness," "sharing in the inheritance of the saints in light," "redemption, the
forgiveness of sins." What do these mean to you in the particularities of your
daily life?

*May we grow strong to be prepared to endure everything, whether suffering or
success, darkness or light, barren or fruit-bearing seasons with patience,
joyfully giving thanks to you, O God, in whom, through Jesus Christ, we have
redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Amen.*

July 7 Colossians 1:15-23

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.
In Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers,
all things have been created through him and for him.

Christ is before all things and in him all things hold together.
Christ is the head of the body, the church;
he is the beginning, the first born from the dead.
In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
and through him God reconciled all things to God's own self
whether on earth, or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of Christ's cross.

You who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,
Christ has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death
in order to present you holy and blameless before him,
provided you continue securely established and steadfast in faith,
without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel you heard,
which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.

I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

* What are the core components of the Christian faith here concerning incarnation, cross and resurrection, reconciliation, the church? How would you talk about them?

* What are the ways we experience and participate in estrangement in our lives, our church, our world? What difference does faith in Christ's reconciliation make? And how does the fact that Christ's reconciliation includes all people shape our service?

O God, we give you thanks for Christ becoming incarnate among us, reconciling us through his death and resurrection, and becoming the head of the church. Keep us steadfast in the faith and in our ministries of reconciliation in the world. In Christ we pray. Amen.

July 8 Colossians 1:24-29

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake,
and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking
in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church.
I became its servant according to God's commission,
given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,
the mystery hidden for ages that has now been revealed to the saints.

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles
are the riches of the glory of this mystery,
which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.
We proclaim Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom,
so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

For this I toil and struggle with all the energy
that Christ powerfully inspires in me.

* We, too, are commissioned to make the word of God fully known. We cannot add anything to Christ's cross; but how does our ministry in the church "complete" his work?

* In your sharing the faith, whether through preaching or teaching or witness, how are you making known the "mystery" of the gospel? How are you helping people mature in their faith?

* "How great among the Gentiles..." indicates that the gospel is already at work beyond one's own faith community. What might that phrase mean to people in your church?

O mysterious God, in the midst of our toil, give us the inspiration and the energy to powerfully reach out with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a mystery too great for us to comprehend, and yet revealed to us, to all the saints, to all the world. Amen.

July 9 Colossians 2:1-6

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you,
and for all those in Laodicea,
for all who have not seen me face to face.
I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love,
so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding
and the knowledge of God's mystery, Christ himself,
in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

* In a world in which riches define people and shape their pursuits, what would you consider to be the "riches of assured understanding" of Christ himself?

* How does being united in love with those who struggle with and encourage us in the faith help unlock the mystery of the hidden treasure of wisdom and knowledge of God?

I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments.
Although I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit,
and I rejoice to see your morale,
and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

* What plausible arguments against faith in Jesus Christ are presented to us?

*Pray this blessing on someone; have someone also bless you:
As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your life in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. Amen.*

July 10 Colossians 2:8-15

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit,
according to human tradition and to elemental spirits of the universe,
and not according to Christ.

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,
and you have come to fullness in him,
who is the head of every ruler and authority.

You were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision of Christ:
when you were buried with Christ in baptism,
you were also raised with him through faith
in the power of God who raised him from the dead.

When you were dead in trespasses and uncircumcision of your flesh,
God made you alive together with him,
when God forgave us all our trespasses,
erasing the record that stood against us with legal demands.

He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.
He disarmed the rulers and authorities
and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in the cross.

* What does each of these concepts of Christ's work mean for you?
Captive in empty deceit; having fullness of God in Christ
Buried with Christ in baptism; raised with him through faith
Dead in trespasses; alive together in Christ
Unforgiven trespasses; legal demands erased
Dominating rulers and authorities; triumphed over by the cross

Christ Jesus, may we daily remember our baptism, your cross and our new life. Amen.

July 11

Colossians 2:16-23

Do not let anyone condemn you
in matters of food, drink or festival observations.
They are only a shadow of what is to come,
but the substance belongs to Christ.
Do not let anyone disqualify you,
insisting on self-abasement or angel worship, dwelling on visions,
puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking.
Hold fast to the head, from whom the whole body,
nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews,
grows with a growth that is from God.

* If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”? Although first century religious observations and regulations were quite different from ours today, how does our imposing certain practices or disqualifying someone on the basis of “Christian” regulations hinder growth in Christ and give a false witness to the world?

All these regulations refer to things that perish with use;
they are simply human commands and teachings.
They have the appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety,
humility, and severe treatment of the body,
but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

Merciful, loving God, you have joined us to Christ, the only head of the body, who holds us together as the church. Loose our insistence on those things which deter us from the substance of faith, which alone keeps us from self-indulgence. Grow us together in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

July 12

Colossians 3:1-11

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above,
where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.
Set your minds on things that are above,
not on things that are on earth,
for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.
When Christ who is your life is revealed,
then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death whatever in you is earthly:
fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed (which is idolatry).
On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.
These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.
Get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language from your mouth.
Do not lie to one another;
see that you have stripped off the old self with its practices
and have clothed yourself with the new self,
which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

* Lest (from yesterday’s text) we think it doesn’t matter how we live as Christians, read carefully this list. God’s wrath is real. How, through such actions, do we severely hurt others and damage the Creator’s image of human life together?

* Imagine taking off, shedding, throwing out the clothing of anger and greed. What else should go? Imagine putting on the new clothing, a new self, which is Christ. How does it fit? When we are all clothed with Christ, how do we look to one another? How are we renewed to live?

In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew,
circumcised and uncircumcised,
barbarian, Scythian, slave and free:
but Christ is all and in all!

Creator, Liberator and New Life-Giving God, may we each day be buried and raised to new life with Christ in our baptisms. Reveal him anew to us; set our minds on him. Clothe us with Christ, that he may live in, through and among us. In him we pray. Amen.

July 13

Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,
clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, meekness, and patience.
Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another,
forgive each other;
just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.
Above all, clothe yourselves with love,
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
to which indeed you were called in the one body.
And be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly;
teach and admonish one another in all wisdom;
with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

* Just as we were told what not to wear (yesterday's text: anger, greed, etc.), now we are given new clothes. Envision someone you know who wears (on the inside as well as the outside) compassion, kindness, patience, meekness. What do they look like?

* Imagine a community, clothed in love, which "binds everything together in perfect harmony." We need to beware of wish dreams; however, at least once in a while, where have you seen and felt such love?

* Through teaching, admonition, gratitude and the peace of Christ, how are we strengthened to forgive?

In whatever we do, in word or deed, may we do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen.

July 14

Colossians 3:18-4:1

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.
Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.
Children, obey your parents in everything,
for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.

Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything,
not only while being watched in order to please them,
but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it,
as done for the Lord and not for your masters,
since you know that from the Lord
you will receive the inheritance as your reward;
you serve the Lord Christ.

The wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done
and there is no partiality.

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly,
for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

* What do all of the above admonitions have in common? For everyone?

* Through the centuries, and yet today, how have some of these verses been taken out of context in order to justify unjust systems and abusive behavior? What do you say to that? What does the church need to say?

* While these admonitions speak to people *within* their given first century societal roles, how do they speak to us both within our roles today, and also as we change roles and relationships throughout life?

May we willingly serve you, Christ Jesus, in whatever roles we have and tasks we do. May you live between and among us in all of our relationships. May we work dutifully and fairly, and also justly, courageously, always in the love with which you clothe us. Amen.

July 15 **Colossians 4:2-6**

Devote yourselves to prayer,
keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.
At the same time pray for us
that God will open a door for the word
that we may declare the mystery of Christ,
for which I am in prison
so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.

Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders,
making the most of the time.
Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt,
so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

* Paul's perspective is from prison; he prays that God will open a door—for the Word. From where do you pray—what situation, what condition? For what do you pray so that you may reveal the word clearly and declare the mystery of Christ?

* "Keep alert." Each of us has our own particular struggle with keeping alert, whether in worship, in private devotions, in _____. What is yours?

* How do we conduct ourselves toward outsiders? How can we be more gracious, authentic, interested in people we don't know? How can we listen more astutely so that we might wisely be able to converse with people as we share the grace of God?

Spirit of the Living God, we pray that you might be fully present in us so that we might be fully present with you and that our prayers might be filled with thanksgiving. Give us passion for the Word and for those who do not yet know it, that we might speak with clarity and grace in the name of Christ. Amen.

July 16 **Colossians 4:7-18**

Tychicus, beloved brother, faithful minister, fellow servant in the Lord,
will tell you all the news about me and encourage your hearts.
He comes with Onesimus, faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.

Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark, Barnabas' cousin.
You have received instructions from him—if he comes, welcome him.
Jesus, called Justus, greets you. They have been a comfort to me.

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you.
He always wrestles in prayer on your behalf so that you may stand mature,
fully assured in everything God wills.
He has worked hard for you and those in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Luke the beloved physician, and Demas greet you.
Greet the brothers and sisters in Laodicea
and Nympha and the church in her house.

When you have read this letter, have it read in the church of the Laodiceans;
and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.
Tell Archippus, "Complete the task you have received in the Lord."

* Think about such people in your own life. Pray for them. Send them words of greeting, instruction and appreciation. With whom might you connect for their growth in faith?

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains.
Grace be with you.

Gracious God, live in and among us, strengthening us for your service in Christ. Amen.

July 17

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you,
and mention you in our prayers,
constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith
and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We know, brothers and sisters beloved by God,
that God has chosen you, because our message of the gospel
came to you not in word only,
but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction;
just as you know what kind of persons
we proved to be among you for your sake.

- * Remember, specifically, one work of faith you have seen in a faith community: an example of a labor of love, an instance of steadfastness of hope. Give thanks.
- * We use words. We teach and proclaim the Word, the message of the gospel. How do you see, hear, feel, the power and conviction of the Holy Spirit moving among the people? What full conviction and power have you seen arising from the people?
- * Just what kind of person do you need to be among the people of God among whom you serve....for *their* sake?

God of grace and peace, we give thanks for the faith communities of which we have been a part and for all communities who center their lives in Jesus around the world. Move among us by the power of the Holy Spirit to increase works of faith, labors of love and steadfastness of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

July 18

1 Thessalonians 1:6-10

You became imitators of us and of the Lord,
for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy
inspired by the Holy Spirit,
so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

The word of the Lord has sounded forth from you
not only in Macedonian and in Achaia,
but in every place your faith in God has become known,
so that we have no need to speak about it.

- * We are not saved by being good examples; however, through the cross and resurrection, how does God shape us to be imitators of Christ and thereby imitators of and examples for other people?
 - * When have you seen and heard the word of the Lord sounding forth from people as they become engaged in mission? What does it sound like? When have you seen people witness for Christ beyond what you might have thought they could do? How do we then continue to learn from each other how to witness and be engaged in mission?
- The people of those regions report about us
what kind of welcome we had among you,
and how you turned to God from idols,
to serve a living and true God,
and to wait for God's Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—
Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.
- * From what idols are people called to turn in our age? How do we proclaim a living and true God in the midst of idolatry?
 - * What is the wrath to come? How do we wait? How does Christ's resurrection change everything in how we live, how we wait, and how we serve now?

God who calls us to mission, shape us in the image of Christ, so that we might welcome, serve, and witness. Turn us from idols to you, the living God. In Christ, Amen.

July 19

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

You know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, we had courage in our God to declare to you the Gospel of God in spite of great opposition.

Our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but, rather, just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, we speak not to please people, but to please God who tests our hearts.

As you know, and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

* These verses are like a love story. Like all love stories, what self-defense do you see? What appeals? What greater purpose? What endearments? How do you see God at work?

God of love, who gently, tenderly, cares for us all, give us courage to declare your gospel, motives which please you, and genuine love for people so that, by the power of your Spirit, we might share the gospel of Jesus Christ and our very selves. In Christ we pray, Amen.

July 20

1 Thessalonians 2:9-16

You remember our labor; we worked night and day, so we might not burden you while we proclaimed the gospel of God. You and God are witnesses to our pure, upright, and blameless conduct toward you believers.

We dealt with you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into God's kingdom and glory. We constantly give thanks to God that when you received the word of God, you accepted it not as a human word, but as what it really is, God's word.

You became imitators of the church of God in Christ Jesus in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of the sins they have been committing. And now God's anger has at last come down on them.

* What do you hear in these words about passionate mission work? Upright conduct? Working late? Urging and encouraging? Thanksgiving for people receiving the Word?

* How has this passage been misused over the centuries to scapegoat Jewish people?

* What is the core message of this passage for people who are suffering because of their beliefs?

* How does being imitators of Christ and of one another in Christ lead to one church being strengthened by another in our imitation of—resemblance to—each other?

O God, you have called us to your word, to our work, to suffering, and to thanksgiving. In Christ, whose image shapes our own. Amen.

July 21

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

As for us, brothers and sisters,
when, for a short time, we were made orphans
by being separated from you—
in person, not in heart—
we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face.

* What connotation does “being orphaned” have for you? Reflect on a relationship of the heart—perhaps a dear friend in Christ, or a Christian community—that is so strong that even when you are apart you feel no separation. What further metaphors might you use to speak of separation from those you love and of your eagerness to see one another?

We wanted to come to you –
certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—
but Satan blocked our way.

* Paul briefly differentiates himself from Silvanus and Timothy (“we” “us”). Why might he want to speak precisely for himself? When might it be helpful to differentiate oneself from a group when speaking or writing? What might he have meant by “Satan blocked our way”? What forces might block our way, keeping us separated from other parts of the church?

What is our hope or joy or crown or boasting
before our Lord Jesus at his coming?
Is it not you?
Yes, you are our glory and joy!

* In Christ Jesus, who is your joy? Your hope? About whom might you boast?

God, what can separate us from your love, in Christ Jesus? We are convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power or height, or depth, nor anything else in all Creation. Amen.

July 22

1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Therefore when we could bear it no longer,
we decided to be left alone in Athens;
we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God
in proclaiming the gospel of Christ,
to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith,
so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions.

Indeed, you know that this is what we are destined for.
In fact, when we were with you,
we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution;
so it turned out, as you know.

When I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith;
I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you
and that our labor had been in vain.

* When and about whom have you been worried in regards to their young or fragile faith? What were (are) the temptations that they faced? Have there been times when you could bear it no longer, but needed to find out how they were? What did you do?

* We cannot fully comprehend the persecution that Paul and his companions faced. Perhaps we have not known persecution for the sake of the gospel at all. But, as you are able, from your own experience, how do persecution, temptations, and suffering, shake people and their faith?

Christ Jesus, you have faced and known the Tempter. Keep close to you those who are young in faith or struggling to believe or to believe again. And may we know that our labor in you is not in vain but that you will bring us and those among whom we have shared the Gospel to full communion with you forever. Amen.

July 23

I Thessalonians 3:6-13

Timothy has just now come to us from you,
and has brought us the good news of your faith and love.
He told us that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—
just as we long to see you.
For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution
we have been encouraged about you through your faith.
We now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord.

* For whom might you pray: “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?”

Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face
and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

* How do you begin and end your gatherings in the faith community? Council meetings? Committees? Choir? Work projects? Mission work? Adapt the following verses (11-13) for use next time you meet. Or, using these words as a pattern, compose your own, based on your communal experiences, the feeling you have toward one another, and your joint calling in Christ. And right now, thinking about people you might quietly bless, use these words as your devotional prayer today:

Now may our God and Father and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.
May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another
and for all, just as we abound in love for you.
May God so strengthen your hearts in holiness
that you may be blameless before God
at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Amen

July 24

1 Thessalonians 4: 1-8

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus
that as you learned from us how you ought to live and please God
(as in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more.
For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

This is the will of God, your sanctification:
that you abstain from fornication;
that each of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor,
not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;
that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter
because the Lord is an avenger in all these things,
just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.
God did not call us to impurity but in holiness.
Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God,
who also gives the Holy Spirit to you.

* God calls, not to be, “holier than thou” but *in* God’s holiness. How does living in *God’s* holiness make a difference in growing in sanctification, by the power of the Holy Spirit?

* Four times we are read it: “you learned from us,” the “instructions we gave you,” “each of you know,” “just as we have already told you.” Rather than heavy-handed absolutes, how does reminding people to be what they already are in Christ encourage people to live in holy and honorable ways? How do we need that, too?

* What does it mean to you to abstain from fornication? To view your own body with holiness and honor? To exercise self-control?

* Who are our brothers and sisters? What are the broad manifestations of sexual exploitation? Is not one’s spouse also a brother or sister in Christ? Is not global sex trafficking also our concern? How does the claim of being “consenting adults” not only impact private lives but have consequences for the whole congregation?

God of love, fill us with your Holy Spirit that we might be what we already are in Christ. Amen.

July 25

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters,
you do not need to have anyone write to you,
for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another;
and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters
throughout Macedonia.

But we urge you, beloved,
to do so more and more,
to aspire to live quietly,
to mind your own affairs,
and to work with your hands, as we directed you,
so that you may behave properly toward outsiders
and be dependent on no one.

* So, which is it? Are we to encourage reliance on each other or self-sufficiency? How do we encourage people to claim their abilities and use them fully as well as to use their gifts to care for others? How is interdependence different from dependency?

* When nurturing a Christian community still in formation, teaching them how to love one another in Christ and how to live in relation to “outsiders” is important work. How do we nurture faith communities, whether new missions, or old, well-established congregations in education and hospitality?

* What does it mean to aspire to live quietly and mind your own affairs? When would that be a helpful word? When would that impede outreach?

Loving God, who has taught us to love others, may we do so more and more. Thank you for such love. Increase our awareness of our own growth areas and of the needs of others. Continue to grow us up into Christ in whom we live and move and have our being. Amen.

July 26

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters,
about those who have died,
so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again,
through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.
We declare to you by the word of the Lord that we who are alive,
who are left until the coming of the Lord,
will by no means precede those who have died.

The Lord, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call
and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven,
and the dead in Christ will rise first.
Then we who are alive, who are left,
will be caught up in the clouds together with them
to meet the Lord in the air;
and so we will be with the Lord forever.

Therefore encourage one another with these words.

* How do we encourage one another that we will be with Christ forever, together with all those for whom Christ died?

* How have these words, as well as those from “The Revelation of John” been used by some leaders to misguide people through human predictions about the last times? How do we live trusting in the knowledge and wisdom of God alone?

God who was, and is, and is to come, hold us close in Christ, that in this living hope, we may lead lives of care and commitment, mission and ministry. In Christ, Amen.

July 27

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters,
you do not need to have anything written to you.
You yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord
will come like a thief in the night.
When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction
will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman,
and there will be no escape.

But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief;
for you are all children of the light and children of the day.
Let us not fall asleep as others do, but keep awake and be sober;
and put on the breastplate of faith and love,
and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation
through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us,
so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.
Therefore encourage one another and build up each other,
as indeed you are doing.

* Two thousand years later, we know the end times did not come as soon as these New Testament Christians thought they would. So, how do we hear these words? What images do you have? A thief in the night? Labor pains? When there is peace and security?

* We live in the “already” and “not yet” of the reign of God. How do we live as children of the day, keeping sober and awake to the present realities and the coming of the Lord?

God of mercy, you have not destined us for wrath, but for salvation in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead for us all. May we indeed encourage one another, and build one another up in the Lord. We, and all the faithful who went before, await your coming in Christ, Amen.

July 28

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

* What do you see in these verses—each phrase—about wise leadership in community?

We appeal to you, brothers and sisters,
to respect those who labor among you and have charge of you
in the Lord and admonish you;
esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Be at peace among yourselves.
We urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers,
encourage the faint hearted,
help the weak, be patient with all of them.

See that none of you repays evil for evil,
but always seek to do good to one another and to all.
Rejoice always, pray without ceasing,
give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Do not quench the Spirit.
Do not despise the words of prophets,
but test everything; hold fast to what is good;
abstain from every form of evil.

Read this blessing to the Thessalonians, make it your own, and read it to others:

May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful; God will do this. Beloved, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen

July 29

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
to the church of the Thessalonians
in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters,
as is right,
because your faith is growing abundantly
and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing.

Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God
for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions
and the afflictions that you are enduring.

* This epistle, as so many others, begins with greeting, blessing and thanksgiving. Are these just words? What do you see here? What about the way we greet one another (using our various modes of communication)?

* The writers *must* give thanks! *Always!* When have you seen someone or some faith community's faith growing abundantly? How do you thank God—and encourage them?

* How does God grow a community so that they increasingly love one another in steadfast ways? In times of affliction and otherwise? What are you doing specifically to help your faith community intentionally carry out acts of love among themselves and beyond their community? What would increase their faith? Their love?

God of love, grow us into becoming more and more the brothers and sisters in Christ you have created, redeemed and empowered us to be. No matter what comes, may we trust you and love each other. In Christ, Amen.

July 30

2 Thessalonians 1:5-12

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God,
and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God,
for which you are also suffering.
It is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you
and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us,
when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven
with his mighty angels in flaming fire,
inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God
and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

* We have a just God. God does and will reveal Godself. What would it be like to have a God who was not holy or just? What do you believe about God's judgment?

These will suffer punishment of eternal destruction,
separated from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious might,
when Christ comes on that day to receive glory from all his people
and honor from all who believe.

You, too, will be among them because you have believed
the message that we told you.

* Believing matters. Faith is substantive. In writing about eternal destruction, how is being separated from the presence of Christ key? Can you imagine being separated from God forever? What have you been told? What do you believe?

To this end we pray the prayer for the church of Thessalonica:

God, make us worthy of your call and fulfill by your power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified through us and we in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

July 31

2 Thessalonians 2:1-4

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ
and our being gathered together to him,
we beg you brothers and sisters,
not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed,
either by spirit or by word or by letter,
as though we said that the day of the Lord is already here.

* Can you imagine what it was for first century Christians, for whom Christ's death, resurrection, and the start of their new churches had all happened in a relatively short period of time? What would shape their expectation of Christ's coming again?

* What does the appeal to not be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed mean to you?

* How might *our* words be heard differently than we intend, arousing anxiety?

Let no one deceive you in any way;
that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first
and the lawless one is revealed,
the one destined for destruction.

He opposes every so-called god or object of worship and exalts himself
so that he takes his seat in the temple of God,
declaring himself to be God.

* What contrasts do you see between "The lawless one," and the righteous God who through the cross and resurrection destroyed the powers of evil?

Holy and Righteous God, may we not be deceived, either in following those who would claim to know when Christ will come again, or by anyone or any thing that would presume to take the seat of God. In Christ alone we trust, hope, and pray. Amen.

August 1

2 Thessalonians 2:5-12

Do you not remember that I told you these things
when I was still with you?

You know what is restraining him,
so that he may be revealed when his time comes.

The mystery of lawlessness is already at work,
but only until the one who now restrains it is removed.

Then the lawless one will be revealed,
whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth,
annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming.

The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan,
who uses all power, signs, lying wonders,
and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing,
because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion,
leading them to believe what is false,
so that all who have not believed the truth
but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.

- * To what do you think “but only until the one who now restrains it” refers?
- * How do wicked deceptions operate for those who “refuse to love the truth”?
- * What powerful delusions lead us, too, to believe what is false?

Almighty God, righteous, holy judge, we cannot comprehend your condemnation. May we fear only you, so that we do not fall prey to the lawless one, Satan, and all sorts of wicked deceptions. Draw us close to Christ whose very breath will destroy all evil. Keep us from false delusions so that we firmly believe the truth of salvation through Christ's cross and resurrection, in whose name we pray. Amen.

August 2

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters
beloved by the Lord,

because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation
through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.
For this purpose God called you through our proclamation of the good news,
so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.
So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions
that you were taught by us either by word of mouth or by letter.

Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread
rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you,
and that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people;
for not all have faith.

* For whom do you pray that their mission work might be fruitful? What
might churches in different parts of the world learn from one another about
spreading the word of the Lord?

* How might holding fast to that which we were taught ground us for reaching
out to more people with ever new challenges?

God is faithful and will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one.
We have confidence in the Lord concerning you,
that you are doing and will go on doing the things that we command.

*May our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father, who loved us and through
grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort all our hearts and
strengthen us in every good work and word. May the Lord direct our hearts to
the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. Amen.*

August 3

2 Thessalonians 3:6-17

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
keep away from believers who are living in idleness.

You know how you ought to imitate us;

we were not idle when we were with you,

and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it.

With toil and labor, we worked night and day,

that we might not burden any of you,

not because we did not have that right, but to give you an example.

Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.

We hear that some of you are living in idleness,

mere busybodies, not doing any work.

Such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ

to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter;

have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed.

Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

* Pick out some phrases in these verses that resonate with your attitude
towards personal and communal work. Have a conversation with a companion
or small group, e.g. staff, council, about these phrases. What do they mean?
And not mean?

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.

*May the Lord of peace give us peace at all times in all ways. The grace of our
Lord Jesus Christ be with all of us. Amen.*

August 4

1 Timothy 1:1-7

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God

and of Christ Jesus our hope,

to Timothy, my loyal child in the faith:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia,

to remain in Ephesus, so that you may instruct certain people

not to teach any different doctrine,

and not to occupy themselves with myths

and endless genealogies that promote speculation

rather than the divine training that is known by faith.

The aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart,

a good conscience, and sincere faith.

Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk,

desiring to be teachers of the law,

without understanding either what they are saying

or the things about which they make assertions.

* In each age people may deviate in different directions from the doctrine of
being saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. What are some myths and
speculations in this age? Both outside the church and within?

* Who are good, faithful, teachers in the faith for whom you give thanks?

* What are you doing to raise up and equip teachers in your congregation?

* What continuing education does each of us need so that we do not teach
without understanding the things about which we teach?

*Wise and caring God, teach us so that we may teach with knowledge, loving
hearts and sincere faith. May we continue to search the depths of your
scriptures, and mature in sound doctrine so that we might understand you
more fully. Together in Christ we pray Amen.*

August 5

1 Timothy 1:8-13a

Now we know that the law is good,
if one uses it legitimately.

This means understanding that the law is laid down
not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient,
for the unholy and profane,
for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers,
fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers,
and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching
that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God,
which God entrusted to me.

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord,
who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful
and appointed me to God's service,
even though I was formerly a blasphemer,
a persecutor, and a man of violence.

* How do we use the law legitimately (an interesting phrase)? And why is the law given not for the innocent, when no one is innocent? What is its purpose?

* What echoes of the Ten Commandments do you hear in the list of lawlessness and disobedience? What is the power of the Gospel, through sound teaching, to transform lives?

* We know that it is God who judges us faithful in Christ Jesus and calls us to service. What has been the power of God in your life?

Lord, conform our lives to Christ. Turn us again from unholy and profane living. We thank you for our callings, rooted in the forgiveness of sins. May your law curb unrighteousness, and turn people to the good news of the Gospel of Christ. Amen.

August 6

1 Timothy 1:13b-20

But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,
and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me
with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.
The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance,
that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—
of whom I am the foremost.

For that very reason I received mercy so that in me
Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience,
making me an example to those who would come
to believe in him for eternal life.
To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible,
the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen

I am giving you these instructions, Timothy, my child,
in accordance with the prophecies made earlier about you,
so that by following them you may fight the good fight,
having faith and a good conscience.

By rejecting conscience, some people have suffered shipwreck in the faith;
among them Hymenaeus and Alexander,
whom I have turned over to Satan, so they learn not to blaspheme.

* On this day of remembrance of the bombing of Hiroshima, what sins have we committed, what acts of ignorant disbelief, what shipwrecks of faith?

* What mercy, what grace in Jesus Christ have you witnessed? How is God shaping you in patience and good conscience?

Immortal, invisible, wise God, to you be the glory, for you alone are God. May we remember our baptisms so that we might cling to what is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. In Christ we pray. Amen.

August 7

1 Timothy 2:1-7

First of all, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions
and thanksgivings be made for everyone,
for kings and all who are in high positions,
so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in godliness and dignity.

This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior.
who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.
For there is one God; there is one mediator between God and humankind,
Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all.

I was appointed a herald and an apostle
(I am telling the truth, I am not lying),
a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

* First of all, for whom this day might you offer prayers of intercession?
Prayers of supplication? Prayers of thanksgiving? For whom might you pray
who are in high positions that all people might lead a quiet and peaceable life
in godliness and dignity?

* God desires everyone to be saved. What, therefore, is your mission, this day,
and each day? How is your ministry apostolic?

*God our Savior, you desire everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge
of the truth. We believe that there is one mediator who gave himself for all. In
you we trust. Strengthen our belief that we might be teachers of the faith in
Christ Jesus. Amen.*

August 8

1 Timothy 2:8-15

I desire that in every place the men should pray,
lifting up holy hands without anger or argument;
also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently
in suitable clothing, not with hair braided,
or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes,
but with good works, as is proper for women
who profess reverence for God.

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission.
I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man;
she is to keep silent.
For Adam was formed first, then Eve;
and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived
and became a transgressor.
Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they
continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

* This passage has been so often used to exclude women from fully serving
Christ and the Church. What do we do with it? Why were these “instructions”
given? How are they culturally specific to the first century?

* What does Genesis say about the nature of sin and deception concerning
men and women? For women and men, how are anger and argument a
hindrance to communal prayer? How might women and men profess reverence
for God and love for the community through good works?

* Given the power of the use of this passage to defend oppression of women,
what liberating justice still needs to be sought and achieved in and through the
churches?

*Holy and loving God, we remain silent before You. All have sinned, and in
Christ alone, all have been saved. Transform our relationships, equip us for
partnership in ministry and through the power of your Spirit empower us to
exercise authority with justice. Amen*

August 9

1 Timothy 3:1-7

The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop
desires a noble task.

Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once,
temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher,
not a drunkard, not violent but gentle,
not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money.

He must manage his own household well,
keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way—
for if someone does not know how to manage his own household,
how can he take care of God's church?

He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit
and fall into condemnation of the devil.

He must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he not fall into disgrace
and the snare of the devil.

* The specific instructions continue. What judicatory leaders would be
excluded from office through these regulations? However, what characteristics
of good leadership do you see at the core of these instructions?

* What do you think are the roles and responsibilities of judicatory leaders
today? How does one's person affect one's office? How does one's leadership
within the church relate to one's call in the broader ecumenical, inter-faith and
public world? And should not "he" for bishop now be "he or she"?

*Holy and loving God, creator, redeemer and sustainer of the church, rise up
among us wise, ethical, respectful, gentle and honest leaders. Give them gifts
for teaching, preaching, administration, and all other gifts necessary for their
callings in Christ. Amen.*

August 10

1 Timothy 3:8-16

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued,
not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money;
they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.
Let them first be tested;
then, if they proved themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons.

Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate,
faithful in all things.
Let deacons be married only once,
and let them manage their children and their households well;
for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves
and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

* The list of those instructed continues. To what sins are we prone? What does
being "double-tongued" sound like? What does being greedy look like? What
does being slandered feel like?

*How are the instructions for bishops, deacons and women similar? How does
our being faithful in all things also increase our boldness in faith, ministry and
mission?

I write these instructions, so that if I am delayed in coming,
you know how one ought to behave in the household of God,
which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

*God, shape us into faithful servants, for the mystery of our religion is great:
Christ was revealed in the flesh, vindicated in the spirit, seen by angels,
proclaimed among the Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, and taken
up in glory. In him we pray. Amen.*

August 11

1 Timothy 4:1-10

The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith.
Deceitful spirits, teachings of demons, and the hypocrisy of liars
forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods,
which God created to be received with thanksgiving.
Everything created by God is good, sanctified by God's word and prayer;
nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving.

Be a good servant, nourished on the words of faith and sound teaching
you have followed;
put these faithful teachings before the brothers and sisters.
Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales.
Train yourself in godliness, for while physical training has some value,
godliness is valuable in every way in the present life and in the life to come.

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance.
We toil and struggle because we have our hope set on the living God,
who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

* What reasons for renouncing the faith are prominent today? What
hypocritical demands deceive one into rejecting those very gifts created and
sanctified by God?

* How do we train ourselves in godliness? What disciplines help keep us fit in
the midst of struggles of faith and life?

*Living God, we set our hope on you alone. Keep us from the subtle as well as
blatant ways that we renounce our faith. Keep us firmly believing in the one
who is the savior of all people, Christ Jesus, in whom we pray. Amen.*

August 12

1 Timothy 4:11-16

These are the things you must insist on and teach.
Let no one despise his or her youth, but set the believers
an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.
Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture,
to exhorting and to teaching.

* Did (does) anyone see you as too young to have the authority to read, teach
and proclaim the Gospel? How do we exercise not only official authority, but
also personal authority? How can we help young people claim their own
voices for discipleship?

Do not neglect the gift that is in you,
which was given to you through prophecy
with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.

Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them,
so that all may see your progress.
Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching;
continue in these things, for in doing this
you will save both yourself and your hearers.

* How can we help people claim their own gifts and use them?

* What central gift given you through baptism and perhaps through the laying
on of hands in rites of consecration or ordination might you still be neglecting?

* Of course we do not save ourselves, so what do these final verses mean?
How are you paying close attention to what the Spirit is doing through you?

*God of all stages of life, may we not despise our age. Give us a full measure of
the Spirit that we might claim the gifts you have given and upon which the
faith community depends that we, together with all your saints, might faithfully
serve Jesus Christ. Amen.*

August 13

1 Timothy 5:1-8

Do not speak harshly to an older man,
but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers,
to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters--
with absolute purity.

Honor widows who are really widows.
If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should be dutiful to family,
for this is pleasing in God's sight.
The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God
and continues in supplications and prayers night and day;
but the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.
Give these commands as well, so that they may be above reproach.

Whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members,
has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

* It's all about respect and relationships! What can we learn today about
showing respect across generations? How are our relationships transformed in
Christ?

* The writer brings his own views to his instruction concerning widows. How
might they cloud his perceptions? [But] How might his words to live above
reproach apply to all of us?

* How do we, in this time and culture, provide for family members and
relatives? What are the challenges? What are the possibilities? How is it a
matter of faith?

*God of relationships, shape us into caring, respectful and responsible people.
Conform our lives to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who
transforms lives and gives us the strength and love we need for service. Amen.*

August 14

1 Timothy 5:9-16

Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old,
has been married only once and has a reputation for good deeds,
a woman who brought up her children well, has shown hospitality,
washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted
and devoted herself to doing good.

Refuse to put younger widows on the list; when their sensual desires
alienate them from Christ, they want to marry,
and incur anger for having violated their first pledge.
They learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house
and are gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say.

I would have younger widows marry, bear children and manage households,
to give the adversary no occasion to revile us. Some already turn to Satan.
If a believing woman has relatives who are really widows, let her assist them;
let the church not be burdened so it can assist those who are real widows.

* So, who are real widows and who are not? Is it age? Sensuality?

* How have the words of "gossips," "busybodies," "gadding about" been used
negatively as stereotypes about women in general?

* What other divisions of women into "good" woman and "bad" woman have
you noticed in Scripture? Barren and childbearing? Harlot and virgin? Others?
What effect has this had in society dividing women from women?

* Think about the words, "Let the church not be burdened so it can...."

*God of mercy and care, teach us to care. God, who created woman and man in
your image, open our eyes to the needs of all, that your church may be the
healing body of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

August 15

1 Timothy 5:17-25

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor,
especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for scripture says,
“You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,” and
“The laborer deserves to be paid.”

Never accept any accusation against an elder except on evidence of two or
three witnesses.

Rebuke those who persist in sin in the presence of all,
so that the rest also may stand in fear.
In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and the elect angels,
I warn you to keep these instructions without prejudice,
doing nothing on the basis of partiality.

Do not ordain anyone hastily, and do not participate in sins of others;
keep yourself pure.

No longer drink only water, but take a little wine
for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.
The sins of some are conspicuous and precede them to judgment,
while the sins of others follow them there.
So also good works are conspicuous; and even when not,
they cannot remain hidden.

* Select one or two of the sayings, “The laborer deserves...,” “Do not
ordain...,” “Take a little wine...,” and consider how it is helpful in context.
How might it be misused out of context?

* What do you think about the words about keeping instructions without
prejudice? About conspicuous (and not) sins and good works?

*God who has called us to life in community, may we be so grounded in Christ,
that we care for one another, for leaders, and for a faithful life. Grow us in the
power of the Spirit, even beyond instructions until we reach the full stature of
Christ, in whom we pray. Amen.*

August 16

1 Timothy 6:1-2a

Let all who are under the yoke of slavery
regard their masters as worthy of all honor,
so that no one will speak evil of the name of God
and of the teaching.

Those who have believing masters
must not be disrespectful to them
on the ground that they are members of the church;
rather they must serve them all the more,
since those who benefit by their service
are believers and beloved.

* How has the central point of these verses, that the church, its members, its
teaching and its God not be regarded negatively, been obscured by misuse of
this passage to justify unquestioning servitude?

* Slavery had a different context in the ancient world. Slaves were not
invisible, but seen, and not as 3/5 of a person, but as vital members of the
household and the community. What do you think about that?

* Slavery in any system is slavery! Just as the “yoke of slavery” was woven
into the pattern of society, what unjust, oppressive practices and institutions
remain today? What are you doing about it?

* How can one have two masters: God and a human being who owns you?

*O God, may we respect those with whom we work and to whom we are
accountable. May we hold in high regard your holy name, the teachings of the
church and all its members. May we even more claim your liberating power
in Christ Jesus that gives us courage to take down walls of injustice and
oppression, that all might be free. Amen.*

August 17

1 Timothy 6:2b-10

Teach and urge these duties.
Whoever teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words
of our Lord Jesus Christ and the godly teaching,
is conceited, understanding nothing,
and has a morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words.
From these come envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions,
and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of truth,
imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

There is great gain in godliness, combined with contentment.
We brought nothing into the world,
so that we can take nothing out of it;
if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.
Those who want to be rich fall into temptation
and are trapped by senseless and harmful desires
that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,
In their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith
and pierced themselves with many pains.

* Sharp words. Piercing insights. Take one at a time, in context, and ponder
its meaning for yourself. What traps do you encounter? What contentment do
you experience? What entanglements have you felt? What is the Gospel word
for you? For those you care about?

*God, you know our faith and our faithlessness. Forgive us, free us, fill us with
the power of your Spirit that we may believe, trust, and live, connected to
Christ Jesus. Amen*

August 18

1 Timothy 6:11-16

As for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness,
godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.
Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life,
to which you were called and for which you made
the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

In the presence of God who gives life to all things,
and of Christ Jesus, who made the good confession before Pilate,
I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame
until the day when our Lord Jesus will appear,
which he will bring about at the right time.

He is the blessed and only Sovereign, King of kings
and Lord of lords. He alone has immortality and dwells in
unapproachable light whom no one ever has or can see.
To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

* What are you shunning? And what are you pursuing? Throughout this day,
what knowledge and what hope will empower your work and your encounters
with others?

* What does it mean for you to take hold of eternal life? How does that shape
your calling to witness, ministry, and mission?

*King of kings, and Lord of lords, you alone are immortal. You who dwell in
unapproachable light and whom no one has or can see, we give you honor and
praise and glorify your holy name. In Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

August 19

1 Timothy 6:17-21

As for those who in the present age are rich,
command them not be to haughty,
or to set their hopes on the uncertainly of riches,
but rather on God who richly provides us with everything
for our enjoyment.

They are to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share,
thus storing up the treasure of a good foundation for the future,
so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

* What phrases here provide wisdom for one's relationship with what God has provided? Pray about them. Talk about them. How do they provide both security and freedom?

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you.
Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions
of what is falsely called knowledge.
By professing it, some have missed the mark as regards the faith.
Grace be with you.

* How will we guard the knowledge and wisdom that has been entrusted to us? What profane chatter clutters our own minds? How, through professing the faith, does it become more truly ours?

God of grace and mercy, you have provided us with immeasurable riches in our Lord Jesus Christ. May we set our hope on you, our solid foundation and our certain future. May we enjoy your gifts and share your treasure. In Christ, Amen.

August 20

2 Timothy 1:1-7

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
for the sake of the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus,
to Timothy, my beloved child:
Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God—
whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—
when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.
Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.
I am reminded of your sincere faith,
a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois
and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.

For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God
that is within you through the laying on of my hands;
for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice,
but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

* Whom do you remember in your prayers today? Whom do you long to see, that you may be filled with joy? Through whose faith did the Holy Spirit kindle your own?

* Since God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, how is God growing in you a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline? What does that look like in your life?

May we and those among whom we have ministered in faith, remember our baptisms, and receive again this day grace, mercy and peace from you, the Triune God, in whom we were baptized in Christ Jesus. Amen.

August 21

2 Timothy 1:8-14

Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me as his prisoner,
but join with me in suffering for the gospel,
relying on the power of God, who saved us
and called us to a holy calling, not according to our works
but according to God's own purpose and grace.

This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,
but is now revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus,
who abolished death
and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher,
and for this reason I suffer as I do.
But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust.
And I am sure he can guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me,
in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.
Guard the good treasure entrusted to you,
with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

* Have you ever been ashamed of the gospel? How, even in a subtle way,
might you be?

* In whom or in what have you placed your trust? God entrusts us with the
Gospel; we place our trust in God to guard that trust. Which comes first?

* In our own holy callings, how might we, too, lose our grip on the sound
teachings we have received? How is God holding you fast and growing the
faith within you?

*We trust you, Christ Jesus, for you have abolished death and brought life and
immortality to light. Strengthen our faith, deepen our trust, and care for us in
our suffering. Amen.*

August 22

2 Timothy 1:15-2:7

You are aware that all who are in Asia have turned away from me.
May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus,
because he often refreshed me and was not afraid of my chain.
In Rome he eagerly searched for me and found me—may the Lord
grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day.

You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.
What you have heard from me through many witnesses
entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.
Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs;
the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer.
An athlete is not crowned without competing according to the rules.
The farmer who does the work ought to have the first share of the crops.

* "Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all
things." How do you understand what is being said here? What metaphors
would you use?

* Over whom do you ache because they have turned away from the teachings
of the faith? For whom do you give thanks because of their faithful teaching
and service?

Grant us mercy, oh Lord, and keep us strong in grace in Christ Jesus. Amen.

August 23

2 Timothy 2:8-13

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead,
a descendant of David—that is my gospel,
for which I suffer hardship,
even to the point of being chained like a criminal.
But the word of God is not chained.

* What is your Gospel? What is core to your belief, that belief upon which you rest all of your decisions, suffer hardship, witness and serve?

* What are you enduring so that others might also obtain salvation?

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect
so that they may also obtain the salvation
that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him.
If we endure, we will also reign with him.
If we deny him, he will also deny us.
If we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself.

Jesus Christ, you have died for us that we might live with you. Center us on your cross and resurrection that we might remain steadfast in faith and strong in service. Whatever bondages we face, may we boldly shout, “The word of God is not chained!” Amen.

August 24

2 Timothy 2:14-19

Remind them of this, and warn them before God
that they are to avoid wrangling over words,
which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by God,
a worker who has no need to be ashamed,
rightly explaining the word of truth.

Avoid profane chatter,
for it will lead people into more and more impiety,
and their talk will spread like gangrene.

* How in the midst of conflict, “wrangling over words,” are those who are observing the conflict hurt?

* What, in your estimation, is “profane chatter?” How have you seen it spread like gangrene?

Hymenaeus and Philetus have swerved from the truth
by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place.
They are upsetting the faith of some.

But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this inscription:
“The Lord knows those who belong to God,” and
“Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness.”

* There is a time to speak up and to point out teachings that have swerved from the truth. How and when to you do that? With whom should you consult? What is the firm foundation God provides?

God of all truth, may we discern your truth, that our teachings may not hurt those growing in faith but build up the body of Christ. We pray in your most holy name. Amen

August 25

2 Timothy 2:20-26

In a large house there are utensils not only of gold and silver
but also of wood and clay,
some for special use, some for ordinary.
All who cleanse themselves of the things I have mentioned
will become special utensils, dedicated and useful to the owner,
ready for every good work.

* What type of utensil are you: ordinary or special? What is the point here?
What does it mean that you have been cleansed and dedicated for God's work?

Shun youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace,
along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.
Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies;
you know that they breed quarrels.
The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone,
an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness.

* How do you know the difference between important debate and senseless controversies? How is God maturing you? Who are your role models who are not quarrelsome, but kind? Who has shown you how to be a patient teacher, correcting opponents with gentleness?

God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth,
and that they may escape from the snare of the devil,
having been held captive by the devil to do the devil's will.

* Which of Satan's snares prevent others, and ourselves, from knowing the truth?

God, cleanse and dedicate us for your use. Grow us. Guide us. Give us the courage and wisdom to teach with patience and perseverance. In Christ, we pray. Amen

August 26

2 Timothy 3:1-9

You must understand this,
that in the last days distressing times will come.
People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant,
abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman,
implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good,
treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit,
lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,
holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power.

Avoid them!
Among them are those who make their way
into households and captivate silly women,
overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires,
who are always being instructed and
can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

As Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses,
so these people, of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith,
also oppose the truth.
But they will not make much progress, because,
as in the case of those two men,
their folly will become plain to everyone.

* In these last days—in every age—people, including ourselves, are distressed—and distress the world—with that list of abuses. How is it that people, overwhelmed by their sins, can be continually instructed, but never come to the knowledge of the truth?

* What if the folly does not become plain to everyone? What if it progresses?

May we not be lovers of pleasure but lovers of you, O God, from whom all joy and pleasure come. Guard us from corrupt minds and counterfeit faith so that we may find our truth in you, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

August 27

2 Timothy 3:10-17

You have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life,
my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness,
my persecutions, and my suffering the things that happened to me
in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured!
Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.

All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.
Wicked people and imposters will go from bad to worse,
deceiving others and being deceived.
As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed,
knowing from whom you learned it,
and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings
that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching,
for correction, and for training in righteousness,
so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient,
equipped for every good work.

* Persecutions are part of the Christian life! How do we pray and study
Scripture in preparation for times when we will need endurance? To be
equipped for the good work of seeking justice?

* Scripture is inspired by God who is authoritative and faithful as we
encounter Jesus Christ, the Word of God. How is this different using “inspired
by God” to prove an inerrant view of the Bible?

*Righteous God, keep us from being deceived and from deceiving. May we
continue faithfully in what we have been taught about your grace so that in
our teaching and in our ongoing learning the Scriptures we may be equipped
for every good work in our ministries in daily life. We pray in the name of
Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

August 28

2 Timothy 4:1-5

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus,
who is to judge the living and the dead,
and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you:
proclaim the message;
be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable;
convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine,
but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves
teachers to suit their own desires,
and turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.

As for you, always be sober, endure suffering,
do the work of an evangelist,
carry out your ministry fully.

* Hear these words and prayerfully consider what you are urged to do:
Proclaim the message! Be persistent no matter the situation or the time!
Convince! Rebuke and encourage! Teach with utmost patience!

* For what do people have itching ears in our times? What teachers do we seek
to suit our own desires, thereby wandering down false paths?

* We are called to be evangelists. What does that mean in your ministry,
whether that be officially on behalf of the church or informally through daily
encounters?

*O God, judge of the living and of the dead, strengthen us to endure suffering
that we may carry out fully our ministries as evangelists of Jesus Christ, in
whose name we pray. Amen*

August 29

2 Timothy 4:6-15

As for me, the time of my departure has come,
I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.
From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness,
which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day,
and not only me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas,
in love with this present world, has deserted me
and gone to Thessalonica;
Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.
Only Luke is with me.
Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry.

I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus.
When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas,
also the books, and above all the parchments.

Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm;
the Lord will pay him back for his deeds.
You also must beware of him,
for he strongly opposed our message.

* How do you make decisions about where to go and with whom to work?
What decisions are you making now? How can the Spirit guide you?

* Recall partners in ministry in whom you have placed your trust. When did you feel deceived? Abandoned? Who are companions through the years for whom you give thanks?

O God, in whom alone we can place our trust, give us faithful partners for ministry of the Gospel. And make us faithful, trustworthy partners for those whom you have given us. Together may we serve you and live your Gospel in and for the sake of the world. In Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

August 30

2 Timothy 4:16-22

At my defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me.
May it not be counted against them!
But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength,
so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed
and all the Gentiles might hear it.

So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.
The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack
and save me for God's heavenly kingdom.
To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Greet Prisca and Aquilla, and the household of Onesiphorus.
Erastus remained in Corinth;
I left Trophimus ill in Miletus.
Do your best to come before winter.
Eubulus sends greetings to you, as to Pudens and Linus
and Claudia and all the brothers and sisters.

* When have you felt deserted? On whom did you count that neglected to give you support? In what surprising, grace-filled ways did God give your strength—even save you—to continue in your proclamation of the Gospel?

* Take time to list those people who right now need your attention and support. What specific concerns do they have? Beyond your own concern and care, with whom might you connect them?

Thanks be to you, O God, that you have placed each of us in the midst of a Christian community. Connect us in Christ Jesus. Increase our care for one another. Amen.

The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.

August 31

Titus 1:1-9

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ,
for the sake of the faith of God's elect
and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness,
in hope of eternal life that God, who never lies,
promised before the ages began.

God revealed God's word through proclamation
with which I have been entrusted by command of God our Savior,

to Titus, my loyal child in the faith we share:
Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

I left you behind in Crete to put in order what remained to be done,
and to appoint elders in every town, as I directed you:
someone who is blameless, married only once,
whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious.

A bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless, not arrogant
or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain.
He must be hospitable, a lover of goodness,
prudent, upright, devout, self-controlled.
He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in teaching,
so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine
and to refute those who contradict it.

* What characteristics of an elder (e.g. church council member) would you look for?

* That a bishop would be male has been assumed for centuries. Male or female, what are the responsibilities of a judicatory leader and for whom would you look to fill this office?

God, who had called the church into being and called leaders to be good stewards of Christ's church, may we live trustworthily, teach faithfully, and lead responsibly in the name of Christ, our Savior. Amen.

September 1

Titus 1:10-16

There are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers,
especially those of the circumcision; they must be silenced,
for they are upsetting whole families
by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach.

It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said,
“Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.”
That testimony is true.

Rebuke them sharply, so they may become sound in faith,
not paying attention to Jewish myths
or to commandments of those who reject the truth.

To the pure all things are pure,
but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure.
Their minds and consciences are corrupted.
They profess to know God, but they deny God by their actions.
They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

* Rebuke them sharply. They must be silenced! Are there rebellious people, unbelieving and corrupt, within religious communities today who must be stopped? How does one decide that? How would one stop them?

* How do you think about “to the pure all things are pure” and “to the corrupt nothing is pure?”

True and righteous God, guard us from disobedience. Keep us from our own unbelief. Keep the church in your care that it may be protected from deception and corruption. Shape us by Christ's cross. Amen.

September 2

Titus 2:1-8

As for you, teach what is consistent with sound doctrine.
Tell the older men to be temperate, serious, prudent,
and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance.

Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behavior,
not to be slanderers or slaves to drink;
they are to teach what is good,
so that they may encourage the young women
to love their husbands, to love their children,
to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household,
kind, being submissive to their husbands,
so that the word of God may not be discredited.

Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled.
Show yourself in all respects a model of good works,
and in your teaching show integrity, gravity,
and sound speech that cannot be censured;
then any opponent will be put to shame,
having nothing evil to say of us.

* With a word for both genders and each age group, the writer is concerned about this young faith community living with credibility. In our contemporary culture, what instructions should be the same? Different? How might your faith community covenant together to live with “credibility,” not hampering others’ *credo*, belief in Christ Jesus?

*Turning from third to second person, the writer urges Titus to be a model of integrity and good works. How do you see your life as giving opponents “nothing evil” to say about the Christian faith?

God of mercy, we know that we are saved not by our good works, but through your grace alone. Shape us as your people around the cross and resurrection of Christ Jesus. May the Spirit sanctify us so that through our words, actions, and our very lives we might witness to your love. In Christ, Amen.

September 3

Titus 2:9-15

Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters
and to give back, not to pilfer,
but to show complete and perfect fidelity,
so that in everything they may be an ornament
to the doctrine of God our Savior.

* This passage for centuries was used only to justify slavery. If one does *not* use it in that way but applies it to all of us, what might it say to you about your living faithfully? And what does that have to do with the doctrine of God our Savior?

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,
training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions,
and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives,
while we wait for the blessed hope and manifestation of Jesus Christ
who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity
and purify a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority.
Let no one look down on you.

* What is the great mission call in these words? What is the vocational call?

We wait for the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior. How can we thank you, God, for your redemption in Jesus Christ? Give us the zeal to share this good news with those in our local community and those around the world who do not yet know salvation in Christ Jesus. We pray for them. Amen

September 4

Titus 3:1-8a

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient,
ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one;
to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone,
We were once foolish, disobedient, led astray,
slaves to various passions and pleasures,
passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.

* From the lack of gentleness and courtesy, to malice and despicable hatred – how does sin not only lead us astray but cut us off from God and from one another?

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,
he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness we had done,
but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth
and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

This Spirit was poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,
so that, having been justified by his grace,
we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.
The saying is sure.

* When, in the midst of despicable sin, have you experienced the utter amazement of God's mercy? How is the truth that we are saved not by our righteousness but through the coming of Christ the core of your faith and life?

* What can you say about the work of the Holy Spirit through the waters of rebirth in your own life? What can you say about it to others who may still be seeking God's mercy?

Thank you, merciful God, for our justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The saying IS sure. Amen.

September 5

Titus 3:8b-15

Insist on these things, so that those who believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works;
these things are excellent and profitable to everyone.
Avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions,
and quarrels about the law,
for they are unprofitable and worthless.

After a first and second admonition,
have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions,
since you know that person is
perverted and sinful, being self-condemned.

* Have nothing to do with such people? How do we know how long to admonish? When to avoid and when to engage?

When I send Artemas to you, or Tychicus,
try to come to me at Nicopolis,
for I have decided to spend the winter there.
Make every effort to send Zenas the lawyer
and Apollos on their way,
and see that they lack nothing.

Let people learn to devote themselves
to good works to meet urgent needs,
so that they may not be unproductive.

* In what ways can we tend the faith community, build it up in good works, and help it be productive? What specific urgent needs does your faith community need to attend? What about urgent needs of brothers and sisters in the faith in another part of the world?

Pray with and for a faith community dear to your heart: All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with all of you. Amen.

September 6

Philemon 1-7

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker,
to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier,
and to the church in your house.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I remember you in my prayers,
I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints
and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.

I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective
when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.
I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love,
because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

*How do we hear such a long, flattering greeting? When has someone called you to put your faith into effect, into action? How did you receive that call?

*From whom have you received much joy and encouragement? Whom do you remember in your prayers? What further act of faith might you call forth from them? How could you do that?

Thank you, loving and gracious God, for the refreshment in faith you have brought us in beloved sisters and brothers in Christ. Increase our faith. Open our hearts and homes and lives to callings we may not yet know. In Christ, Amen.

September 7 Philemon 8-16

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ
to command you to do your duty,
yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—
and I, Paul, do this as an old man,
and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus,
whose father I have become during my imprisonment.
Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.
I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.

I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me
in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel;
but I preferred to do nothing without your consent,
in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while,
so that you might have him back forever,
no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—
especially to me but how much more to you,
both in the flesh and in the Lord.

* “I am sending him, my own heart, back to you.” What does that mean to you
in your relationships and in your calling?

* “No longer a slave...” What separations do you see here? What is going on?
What separations exist in our own culture? In our own lives? How do we
receive someone back as a beloved sister or brother?

*O God, who in Christ Jesus appeals to us beyond duty, beyond owing and
owning, liberate us in love, redeem our relationships, creating new ways to
receive one another, and to serve one another. In Christ, our brother, we pray.
Amen*

September 8 Philemon 17-25

So if you consider me your partner,
welcome him as you would welcome me.
If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything,
charge it to my account.

I, Paul am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it.
I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.
Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord!
Refresh my heart in Christ.
Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you,
knowing that you will do even more than I say.

One thing more—prepare a guest room for me,
for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,
and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

* On what basis does Paul make his appeal? How does his boldness and his
confidence create opportunity for Philemon to have a completely new
relationship with his slave?

* Paul asks Philemon to prepare a guest room. How does our new relationship
in Christ create space to receive one another no longer as burden but as guest
and gift?

* How does becoming brothers and sisters in Christ carry us across barriers of
station, class, gender, race, ethnicity, and any barriers we might create?

*Gracious God, open our congregations to receive one another in totally new
ways. Open our hearts to the stranger and to the estranged. Change our minds
and move us to change societal structures. May the grace of the Lord Jesus
Christ be with our spirit. Amen.*

September 9 Hebrews 1:1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors
in many and various ways by the prophets,
but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son,
whom God appointed heir of all things,
through whom God also created the worlds.

The Son is the reflection of God's glory
and the exact imprint of God's very being,
and God sustains all things by God's own powerful word.

When the Son had made purification for sin,
he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,
having become as much superior to angels as the name he inherited
is more excellent than theirs.

* The God who created the worlds has spoken to us by God's own Son. How does this both humble us in awe, and strengthen us who through Christ are now also heirs? What does that mean for your life of praise? What does that mean for your life of service?

* The Son, Jesus the Christ, who is not yet named, is the reflection of God's glory and the imprint of God's very being. How do you image the Christ?

* The One who made purification for sin now sits at the right hand of Majesty on high. How is Christ in your life both human and glorified—"superior to angels"?

Long ago, O God, you spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days you have spoken to us by the Son. May we begin each day with matins of praise, centered on your Word, grounded in prayer in Christ Jesus. Amen.

September 10 Hebrews 1:5-9

To which of the angels did God ever say,
"You are my Son; today I have begotten you"?
Or again,
"I will be his Father and he will be my Son"?
And again, when God brings the first born into the world, God says,
"Let all God's angels worship him."

Of the angels God says,
"God makes the angels winds,
and the servants flames of fire."
But of the Son God says,
"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."

* If some people need to have the case made for them that Jesus is not just another prophet or a good man or one of the angels, how does the writer to the Hebrews do that? How is Christ viewed by people you encounter? What do they need to hear about this Jesus?

* What is central about this anointed one having loved righteousness and hated wickedness? What do we learn about the nature of God?

God of righteousness, whose only begotten Son is worshipped by angels, we, too, bow before you and praise your most holy name. May we be filled with gladness and dwell in your presence now and throughout eternity. In Christ Jesus, we pray. Amen.

September 11 Hebrews 1:10-14

“In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like clothing;
like a cloak you will roll them up,
and like clothing they will be changed.

But you are the same, and your years will never end.”

But to which of the angels has God ever said,
“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”?
Are not all angels spirits in the divine service,
sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

* Have we not at times forgotten the range of God’s realm? The length of God’s time? The ultimate depth of God’s creative work? Take some of your time to contemplate that God alone founded the earth, created the heavens and eternity itself.

* Pursue the metaphor that God’s work, the heavens and the earth, will wear out like clothing. How might we misuse this, taking it out of context, to justify our own destructive actions and lack of care for the environment? What central meaning does this metaphor have in this text?

* And what about angels? How are they to serve for the sake of our salvation?

O God, whose years are without end and whose work is beyond our comprehension, we give you thanks for your creative care. May we, like your angels, serve you and all those whom you have created, in the name of the Christ in whom we have salvation. Amen.

September 12 Hebrews 2:1-4

Therefore we must pay greater attention
to what we have heard,
so that we do not drift away from it.

If the message declared through the angels was valid,
and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty,
how can we escape
if we neglect so great a salvation?

It was declared at first through the Lord,
and it was attested to us by those who heard him,
while God added testimony by signs and wonders
and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit
distributed according to God’s own will.

* Therefore! Since the all-powerful, eternal God spoke to our ancestors and since the angels themselves were sent to serve for the sake of our salvation, why in the world would we not pay attention? In what ways do we, too, drift away from the message?

* It is not like passing up a bargain at a store’s post-season sale; to neglect so great a salvation is to attempt to by-pass God’s own self. Where would we go? To whom or to what would we turn?

Great God, we have transgressed your law and disobeyed your will. We do deserve a just penalty. And yet, you shower us with salvation. Open our hearts by the power of your Spirit to receive your salvation anew, to share it, proclaim it, declare it. In Christ, Amen.

September 13

Hebrews 2:5-9

God did not subject the coming world to angels,
But someone has testified somewhere,
“What are human beings that you are mindful of them or
mortals, that you care for them?”
You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honor,
subjecting all things under their feet.”

* Have you ever said, “Someone said somewhere”? Well, look up Psalm 8.
What does it say? What does it mean for our call to care for the earth and all of
humankind? How is that different from presuming we are to rule everything
for our own benefit?

In subjecting all things to them,
God left nothing outside their control.
As it is, we do not yet see everything is subjected to them,
but we do see Jesus,
who for a little while was made lower than the angels,
now crowned with glory and honor
because of the suffering of death,
so that by the grace of God
he might taste death for everyone.

* How do we see and how do we not see things subjected to humankind? What
powers do human beings have?

* In this midst of issues of power, rule, and subjugation, why is “seeing Jesus”
so important? How is his suffering related to subjugation? What does it mean
to you, and for mission, that Jesus “tasted death for everyone”?

*God of the universe, who has placed the care for the world in our hands, keep
us centered in Christ and his suffering, death and resurrection. Mindful of us,
give us the mind of Christ—humility. Amen.*

September 14

Hebrews 2:10-13

It is fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist,
in bringing many children to glory,
should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

* If seeking perfection has been a goal of humankind through the ages, how is
the pioneer of our salvation, Jesus Christ, being perfected through sufferings
very different? How does this include and incorporate all human beings in all
kinds of suffering?

The one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father.
For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,
“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”

And again,
“I will put my trust in him.”

And again,
“Here am I and the children whom God has given me.”

* Why does not only being brothers and sisters in the faith with one another,
but brothers and sisters of Christ Jesus, completely change our relationship
with God?

* What is the relationship between shame and trust? When have you felt
shame? When have you shamed another person? Or been ashamed of them? If
Jesus is not ashamed of us, how does that give us a foundation and a freedom
to trust God and, in that trust, to build trusting relationships with family and
friends and congregations?

*Oh God, in whom all things exist, we give you thanks that our glory is in the
suffering Savior, Jesus the Christ. Turn our lives from seeking solace or
validation anywhere else. We present ourselves, and our families to you, gifts
of grace. Make us holy, for we trust in you, in Christ. Amen.*

September 15 Hebrews 2:14-18

Therefore, since the children share flesh and blood,
he himself likewise shared the same things,
so that through death he might destroy the one
who has the power of death, that is, the devil,
and free those who all their lives were held in slavery
by the fear of death.

It is clear that he did not come to help angels,
but the descendants of Abraham.

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect,
so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God,
to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.

Because he himself was tested by what he suffered,
he is able to help those who are being tested.

* In your daily life, and over the course of your lifetime, ponder how Jesus shares in who you are and what you feel and do. Are there times that you feel distant from Jesus? What does it mean to you that he became like you—and all human beings—in every respect?

* What is it about death that you might fear? How can fear of death enslave someone? In your own life, how does Christ's resurrection free you from fear?

* Who is this high priest in the service of God, whose sacrifice can atone for sin?

Christ Jesus, you were tested beyond what we can know. Even though we cannot fathom your sufferings, help us in our own suffering so that we may not be tested beyond our strength. And by the power of your Spirit, join us to the sufferings of others that we may have the courage to work for justice to alleviate pain in the world. In your name we pray. Amen.

September 16 Hebrews 3:1-6

Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling,
consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession,
was faithful to the one who appointed him,
just as Moses also “was faithful in all God's house.”

Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses,
just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself.
(Every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.)

Moses was faithful in all God's house, as a servant,
to testify to the things that would be spoken later.
Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son,
and we are God's house if we hold firm the confidence
and the pride that belong to hope.

* Why take so long to mention Jesus by name? How have all of the words thus far prepared the Hebrews to see who Jesus really was? How, in our own outreach ministry, do we—might we—present Jesus?

* We *are* God's house! How? Servants in the house, like Moses? The people God “built”? Who then is Christ? How does this image relate to your congregation? (All metaphors have their possibilities and limitations.)

Faithful God, creating, building God, we give you thanks for the pillars of faith gone before. Construct us into a people who live and work and serve in the world (not just in our own building). May we open the doors wide to those who yet are far off and open our hearts to your ongoing work among and through us. In Christ we pray. Amen.

September 17

Hebrews 3:7-13

As the Holy Spirit says,

“Today, if you hear God’s voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
as on the day of testing in the wilderness,
where your ancestors put me to the test,
although they had seen my works for forty years.

Therefore I was angry with that generation,
and I said, ‘They always go astray in their hearts,
and they have not known my ways,’
as in my anger I swore, “They will not enter my rest.””

Take care, brothers and sisters,
that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart
that turns away from the living God.
Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,”
so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

- * What does it mean to put God to the test? In what ways do we do that?
- * Again and again we have experienced God’s covenant faithfulness and unconditional love. Then why, in the world (whatever our wilderness may be), do we go astray?
- * How awesome and awful to have an unbelieving heart. How is sin deceitful? How does it harden one’s heart? Why would we turn away from the God in whom is life?

We pray, O God, that our hearts may not be hardened by sin. May we not put you to the test. Once more we ask that you not be angry with us. In your mercy, find us when we go astray. Keep us from self-deception and from being deceitful. Each and every day may we exhort one another in the name of Jesus, the Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

September 18

Hebrews 3:14-19

We have become partners of Christ,
if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

As it is said,
“Today, if you hear God’s voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious?
Was it not all those who left Egypt
under the leadership of Moses?
But with whom was God angry forty years?
Was it not those who sinned,
whose bodies fell in the wilderness?
And to whom did God swear that they would not enter God’s rest,
if not to those who were disobedient?

So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

- * What is the nature of your own disbelief?
- * There has been no generation that has completely held fast to the faith. Why then, do you suppose, does God continue to be faithful to the covenant when we are not? Why does God continue to offer unconditional love to us who are rebellious? How do you respond to such a God?

God, in your mercy, you have joined us to Jesus Christ through his incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection. What a joy to be partners with him and with one another though the work of the Holy Spirit. May we, all of us, hold our confidence firm and hold one another close to Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

September 19

Hebrews 4:1-7

Therefore, while the promise of entering God's rest is still open,
let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it.
The good news came to us just as to them;
but the message they heard did not benefit them,
because they were not united by faith with those who listened.

We who have believed enter that rest just as God has said,
"As in my anger I swore,
"They shall not enter my rest,""
though his works were finished at the foundation of the world.

In one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows
"And God rested on the seventh day from all God's works."
And again in this place it says,
"They shall not enter my rest."

Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it,
and those who formerly received the good news
failed to enter because of disobedience,
God sets a certain day called "today,"
saying through David much later,
"Today if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts."

* How does the writer to the Hebrews combine creation and the children of Israel wandering in the desert with the present open opportunity to turn to Christ?

* What are the various meanings of "rest" here? What is the open invitation "today"?

Creator God, you have guided your people through the wilderness and you guide and seek after your people yet today. May we not harden our hearts, but respond to your grace and unconditional love in Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

September 20

Hebrews 4:8-13

If Joshua had given them rest,
God would not speak later about another day.
So then, there still remains for the people of God
a Sabbath rest like God's resting on the seventh day.
Let us then make every effort to enter that rest so that no one fail,
as they did, because of lack of faith.

Indeed, the word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow;
it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Before God no creature is hidden,
but all are naked and laid bare
to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

* In our effort to stress God's unconditional love, how do we sometimes avoid the need to talk about the piercing nature of the word of God? How is letting the Word do its judging work actually helpful?

* How do you feel knowing that none of your secrets are hidden from God?

* Knowing that it is God who makes every effort so that people are not excluded when they lack faith, to what persistent action does that call us in our ministry among people who live in all sorts of tenuous relationships with God?

Living Word of God, you know our every thought and action. Pierce our hearts too, so that, having experienced the turmoil of judgment, we might truly know our need for rest in you alone. And give us the wisdom and strength and courage and love to be agents of your Word, making every effort to reach others in their need for you. In Christ, Amen.

September 21

Hebrews 4:14-16

Since we have a great high priest
who has passed through the heavens,
Jesus, the Son of God,
let us hold fast to our confession.

For we do not have a high priest
who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but we have one who in every respect has been tested
as we are, yet without sin.

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness,
so that we may receive mercy
and find grace to help in time of need.

* Why is it significant that Jesus is presented as the Son of God, and as a great high priest? What did this say to the receivers of the letter? What does it say to you?

* What does it say to you and to your ministry that this high priest is not one who cannot sympathize with weakness?

* How does Jesus, having solidarity with the weak, leave no one outside God's mercy? How does this relationship give strength to the weak?

* During your life, in what great time of need have you found yourself? What is your time of need now? How have you—or might you—approach the throne of grace with boldness?

God of grace and mercy, may we hold fast to our confession. We know that you, Christ Jesus, have been tested, beyond what we can understand. Therefore, give us boldness to seek your help in our need. And increase our own ability for empathy and sympathy that we might hear the cries of those in need and respond with your mercy and care. In Christ. Amen.

September 22

Hebrews 5:1-6

Every high priest chosen from among mortals
is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf,
to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward,
since he himself is subject to weakness.

He must offer sacrifice for his own sins
as well as for those of the people.

One does not presume to take this honor,
but takes it only when called by God, as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest,
but was appointed by the one who said to him,
“You are my Son, today I have begotten you”;
and, also in another place,
“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

* Can you imagine what it would mean if priests and ministers today had to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people and for their own sins? What freedom and power for servanthood does Christ, the sacrificial lamb, provide for our ministry?

* Christ is the sacrifice for all sins, but Christ did not call himself. Contemplate the call of Christ. Contemplate your own calling. How does our call in Christ keep us from seeking honor? How is your calling still being revealed? How is it constant?

We, too, are subject to weakness, O God. May we find our strength in Christ Jesus alone. May we be so united in him that we deal gently with people, yes, through our common humanity, but, most importantly, through our mutually being joined together in his cross and resurrection. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

September 23 Hebrews 5:7-10

In the days of his flesh on earth
Jesus offered up prayers and supplications,
with loud cries and tears
to the one who was able to save him from death,
and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Although he was a Son,
he learned obedience through what he suffered;
and having been made perfect,
he became the source of eternal salvation
for all who obey him,
having been designated by God a high priest
according to the order of Melchizedek.

(Mt. 26:36-46; Mk. 14:32-42; Lk.22:39-46)

- * Think of all the times that we hear in Scripture that Jesus prayed. In what way do you hear his prayer in Gethsemane? His crying out on the cross?
- * Jesus was not saved from death, but his cries were heard. What do you think about Jesus' cry on the cross asking why God had abandoned him? What was Christ's reverent submission?
- * "Obedience" is used twice here. What does obedience mean to you? How might you think of Christ's following God's will and complete faith as obedience?
- * The Hebrews can relate to having a high priest. What transition is needed for them to see Jesus as the ultimate high priest with no further sacrifice needed? What is needed for you to really believe no other sacrifice is necessary for your salvation?

Christ Jesus, you put on flesh for us, suffered and died for our salvation. Take our cries of suffering and enfold them in yours that in your loving arms we may trust your care for us now and throughout eternity. Amen.

September 24 Hebrews 5:11-14

About all of this we have much to say that is hard to explain,
since you have become dull in understanding.
For although by this time you ought to be teachers,
you need someone to teach you again
the basic elements of the oracles of God.

You need milk, not solid food;
for everyone who lives on milk,
being still an infant,
is unskilled in the word of righteousness.

But solid food is for the mature,
for those whose faculties have been trained by practice
to distinguish good from evil.

- * When people are baptized as infants, there faith is a gift of God through the water and the word in the company of the congregation. What is the "milk" on which infants and those young in the faith are nourished?
- * This passage, of course, is urging adults to be adults, no longer dependent. And yet, how do adults and long-time Christians also, at times, need once again to be taught the basics? What teachers in the faith do you still have? What teaching do you need now?
- * What solid food is needed in order that maturing Christians might become teachers of the faith, skilled in the word of righteousness, trained by practice?

Wise God, when we become dull in our understanding, teach us once again. Fill our minds with curiosity, stimulate our thinking to probe the depths of your word, build our skills to practice the faith, and teach us to teach others so that your church may grow toward maturity of faith. In the name of Christ, the teacher, we pray. Amen.

September 25 Hebrews 6:1-8

Therefore let us go on toward perfection,
leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ,
and not laying again the foundation:
repentance from dead works and faith toward God,
instruction about baptism, laying on of hands,
resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.
And we will do this, if God permits.

It is impossible to restore again to repentance
those who have once been enlightened,
and have tasted the heavenly gift, and shared in the Holy Spirit,
and have tasted the goodness of the word of God
and the powers of the age to come,
and have fallen away, since on their own
they are crucifying again the Son of God
and holding him up to contempt.

Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly,
and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated,
received a blessing from God.
But if it produces thorns and thistles,
it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed;
its end is to be burned over.

* How do we teach for sustainable faith? If it seems impossible to restore to repentance those who have fallen away, how do we teach? How do we minister? How do we pray?

God, who creates the good ground, the falling rain, the useful crop, bless your people that all who have tasted the goodness of the word of God may remain in Christ. Amen.

September 26 Hebrews 6:9-20

Even though we speak in this way, beloved,
we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation.

* “Even though!” When we hear—or speak—the harsh words of God’s righteousness, wherein does our confidence lie? What are the things that belong to salvation?

God is not unjust; God will not overlook your work and the love you showed for God’s sake in serving the saints as you still do.
We want each one of you to show the same diligence
so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end,
so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators
of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

When God made a promise to Abraham,
because God had no one greater to swear by,
God swore by God’s own self: “Surely I will bless and multiply you.”
Thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise.
Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves.
An oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute.
When God desired to show the unchangeable character of God’s purpose,
God guaranteed it by an oath, so that through two unchangeable things
we who have taken refuge might seize the hope set before us.

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul,
a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain,
where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf,
has entered, having become a high priest forever
according to the order of Melchizedek. (Gen. 14; Ps. 110:4)

* If the two unchangeable things are God’s promise and the oath that confirms it, how do we take refuge and seize the hope that is set before us?

Faithful, merciful God of our salvation, by the power of the Holy Spirit may we grow in diligence, that we realize the full assurance of hope in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

September 27

Hebrews 7:1-10

King Melchizedek (“king of righteousness”) of Salem, (“king of peace”) high priest of God met Abraham returning from defeating the kings and blessed him. Abraham apportioned one-tenth of everything. Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, resembling the son of God, Melchizedek remains a priest forever.

See how great he is! Even Abraham gave him one tenth of the spoils. The high priests of the tribe of Levi collect tithes from the people, their kindred, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man, not of their ancestry, collected tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises.

It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In one case tithes are received by those who are mortal; in the other, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

* How is this mysterious character, Melchizedek, whose ancestors are not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, someone like Christ? Beyond genealogy, beyond being linked to Abraham, what is God doing, and how is God doing it?

O God, who has neither beginning nor ending, you have given us new life in Christ Jesus, whose resurrection from the dead gives us life without end. May we not only live in your promises but share them with all. In Christ we pray. Amen.

September 28

Hebrews 7:11-17

Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood-- what further need would there have been for a priest arising from the order of Melchizedek rather than the order of Aaron? When there is a change in priesthood, there is a change in the law as well.

Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, one who became a priest not through a legal requirement of physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. It is attested of him, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”

* What if, today, we needed to live by the law and that law was determined through a particular priesthood? How would our lives, our ministry and our hope of salvation be different?

* How are the readers carefully readied to see the difference in how Jesus came to be our great high priest?

* Who is this Christ who became a priest not through a legal requirement of physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life? How do you present this Jesus to others?

We give thanks, O God, for Jesus Christ, our great high priest, who is our saving Lord not through the requirement of physical descent or tribe or tradition, but through your grace alone. May the one who lived an indestructible life fill our lives with saving grace and meaning and hope and service. In him, Amen.

September 29 Hebrews 7:18-23

There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment
because it was weak and ineffectual (for the law made nothing perfect).
There is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope,
through which we approach God.

This was confirmed with an oath; other priests did not take oaths.
This one became a priest with an oath because of the one who said to him,
“The Lord has sworn and will not have a change of mind,
‘You are a priest forever.’”
Accordingly Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

Furthermore, the former priests were many in number,
because they were prevented by death from continuing in office;
but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.
Consequently he is able for all time to save those
who approach God through him,
since he always lives to make intercession for them.

* If the law, particularly as received in the commandments, was a gift from the
God of covenant faithfulness, how did it become weak and ineffectual? How is
the law viewed today by various Christian communities, by society in
general—by you?

* This Jesus, this better hope, this guarantor of a better covenant, is not
disconnected from the law. What is the connection? How do we help people
make the distinction and the connection?

* What does it mean for the life of the church that Christ lives eternally? How
is our priesthood, whether as ordained clergy or as part of the priesthood of all
believers, centered in Christ’s priesthood?

*Eternal God, who has brought salvation not through our own keeping of the
law, but through Christ himself, shape our lives in his life. Hear our
intercessions through the one who unceasingly makes intercession for us,
Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

September 30 Hebrews 7:26-28

It was fitting that we should have such a high priest,
holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners,
and exalted above the heavens.

Unlike the other high priests, he has no need
to offer sacrifices day after day,
first for his own sins,
and then for those of the people;
this he did once for all when he offered himself.

For the law appoints as high priests
those who are subject to weakness,
but the word of the oath,
which came later than the law,
appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

* What would it be like to have our salvation depend upon simply another
human being? How is it very different to have a priest—a high priest—who is
without sin?

* How can “once for all” be heard? How can the completion and certainty of
that statement sustain us? How can the mission implication of that statement
challenge us?

* Who is this Jesus Christ for you? Both very human and yet sinless! How is
he both separate from us and connected to us? How does his being holy,
blameless and undefiled give us, and all people, the assurance that no sin is
outside the realm of being forgiven?

*We thank you, O God, for sending us your Son who, in having been made
perfect forever, through his suffering and death and rising from the grave has
completed our salvation. We continue to sin. You continue to forgive. In Christ
Jesus, shape our lives for service. Amen.*

October 1 **Hebrews 8:1-6**

The main point we are saying is this:
We have such a high priest, one who is seated
at the right hand of the throne of Majesty in the heavens,
a minister in the sanctuary
and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up.

Every high priest offers gifts and sacrifices;
hence it is necessary to have something to offer.
If Jesus were on earth, he would not be a priest at all
since they offer gifts according to the law.
They offer worship in a sanctuary
that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one.
When he was about to set up the tent, Moses was warned,
“Make everything according to the pattern
that was shown you on the mountain.”

But Jesus has obtained a more excellent ministry,
and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant,
which has been enacted through better promises.

* How is Jesus a mediator of a better covenant? What are these better promises?

* If Jesus were a priest only according to the law, how might your ministry be different? How is Jesus’ ministry priestly? How is his being a priest, offering himself as the sacrifice, central to his ministry and to ours?

We give you thanks, almighty God, who sits on the throne of heaven, that we have Christ as our high priest. May his sacrifice on the cross and our baptism into Christ, empower us as the priesthood of all believers to minister boldly and courageously in his name. Amen.

October 2 **Hebrews 8:7-13**

If the first covenant had been faultless,
there would have been no need to look for a second one.
God finds fault with the people when God says:
“The days are surely coming, says the Lord,
when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah;
not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors,
on the day when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of the land of Egypt.
They did not continue in my covenant,
and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord.

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my laws in their minds,
and write them on their hearts,
and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

They shall not teach one another to say to each other,
‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.
I will be merciful toward their iniquities,
and I will remember their sins no more.” (Jer. 31:31-34)
In speaking of “a new covenant,” God has made the first one obsolete.
And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.

* How is living under the law of the old covenant now obsolete in your life?
How is the new covenant written in your mind and on your heart?

Covenant God, you have been merciful. In Christ Jesus, you do not remember our sins. How can we thank you that you have said that you are our God and we are your people? Give us courage to live this new life. Amen.

October 3 **Hebrews 9:1-5**

Even the first covenant had regulations for worship
and an earthly sanctuary.
A tent was constructed, the first one,
in which were the lampstand, the table, and the bread of the Presence;
this is called the Holy Place.

Behind the second curtain was a tent called the Holy of Holies.
In it stood the golden altar of incense
and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold,
in which there were a golden urn holding the manna,
and Aaron's rod that budded,
and the tablets of the covenant;
above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.

Of these things we cannot speak now in detail.

* We *cannot* see in detail these things. How do you picture the worship place of the Hebrew people? What do you think their worship life was like?

* How do you picture your own worship setting? What are the significant symbols? What is the furniture? Who enters? Who stands where and why? How does your worship space shape how you see God?

* How do people who come into your place of worship for the first time see it? Have you asked them? How do we explain the symbolic meanings? How do we help them, (and ourselves), stand in awe of the holiness of God and also draw near in confidence of Christ's welcome?

Holy God, we dare not enter your presence, and yet you bid us come. In Christ Jesus, present with us in Word and Sacrament, we experience your holiness, your mercy, your new covenant. Make us your holy people, that we may share your love with the world. In Christ we pray. Amen.

October 4 **Hebrews 9:6-10**

Such preparation having been made,
the priests go continually into the first tent
to carry out their ritual duties;
but only the high priest goes into the second,
and he but once a year,
and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself
and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people.

By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary
has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing.
This is a symbol of the present time,
during which gifts and sacrifices are offered
that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper,
but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms,
regulations for the body imposed until the time comes
to set things right.

* When would be the time to set things right? What is needed to really set things right?

* How do we view the varieties of sin (intentional and unintentional) differently (even so-called "venial" and "mortal" sins) when we know that Christ died for all sinners and for all possible sins, sins of omission as well as sins of commission?

* How do we approach people in mission who may feel a worship center is too holy for them to enter?

God, who alone we worship, cleanse us from all sin. Keep us from the worship of false gods. Guide us to your holy presence and fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit that we may open the doors of your sanctuaries wide for all to enter. Keep us close to Christ who has set things right for all time. In his name we pray. Amen.

October 5 **Hebrews 9:11-14**

When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come,
then through the greater perfect tent
(not made with hands, that is, not of this creation),
he entered once for all into the Holy Place,
not with the blood of goats and calves,
but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

If the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer,
sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified,
how much more will the blood of Christ,
who through the eternal Spirit
offered himself without blemish to God,
purify our conscience from dead works
to worship the living God!

* What kinds of sacrifices do we offer today to false gods? Sacrifice of others?
Self-sacrifice? How much more does the death and resurrection of Christ
transform us from dead works to the worship of the living God?

* Since Christ's sacrifice is once and for all and eternal, how does that shape
our individual lives and our lives in faith communities?

* This extensive comparison with priesthood, and the Holy of Holies, and
sacrifice was necessary, even essential, to relate to the Hebrew people. How
do we share the distinctiveness of Christ through images and metaphors and
examples that relate to people's lives today?

*Christ Jesus, you have become our high priest through becoming the sacrifice
for our sins. Purify our consciences. Make us alive to the power of the Spirit.
Work through us so that many may be freed from death for life with you.
Amen.*

October 6 **Hebrews 9:15-22**

Christ is the mediator of a new covenant so that those who are called
may receive the promised eternal inheritance.
This is in effect because there has been a death that sets people free
from the wrongs they did while the first covenant was in effect.

In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the one who made it has died.
A will is not in effect as long as the one who made it is alive.
Hence the first covenant went into effect only with blood.
When every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses
in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats,
with water and scarlet wool and hyssop,
and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people, saying,
“This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you.”

In the same way he sprinkled the tent and all the worship vessels with blood.
Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood,
and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

* How do the words from Hebrews 9:20 resonate with Exodus 24:8? How do
we hear them now at the Eucharistic table? (Matthew 26: 27-28; Mark 14:23-
25; Luke 22:20)

* At the time of a death, or at a funeral, or the reading of a will, people offer
all sorts of explanations, e.g. “God wanted another angel in heaven,” “All
things work together for good.” How are such words often more hurtful than
helpful? What can we say about Christ's death that will truly set people free?

*Christ Jesus, we have been joined with you in your death and resurrection.
May we who are privileged to gather at your altar now, be transformed by the
power of your spirit to indeed be the body of Christ in the world. Amen.*

October 7 **Hebrews 9:23-28**

The things that were sketches of the heavenly things
had to be purified with rites,
but the heavenly things themselves require better sacrifices.
For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands,
a mere copy of the true one, but entered into heaven itself,
now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

Nor was it to offer himself again and again,
as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year
with blood that is not his own;
for then he would have had to suffer again and again
since the creation of the world.

But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age
to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.
Just as it is appointed for mortals to die once,
and after that the judgment,
so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many,
will appear a second time, not to deal with sin,
but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

* Why is it that we sin again and again? How do human sins not only add up,
but multiply to create such complex knots of systemic sin?

* What comfort is it to you that Christ's sacrifice was once and for all?

* How do you imagine Christ's second coming? What difference does it make
that Christ comes not to have to deal with sin again, but for all who are eagerly
waiting for him?

*Christ Jesus, you are not simply a facsimile, but our real Lord and Savior. We
thank God that our sin has been removed. Use us to testify to your saving work
that all might live in the freeing good news that sin has lost its power. In
Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

October 8 **Hebrews 10:1-10**

Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come
and not the true form of these realities,
it can never, by the sacrifices continually offered year after year,
make perfect those who approach.

* If sacrifices to the law would have sufficed, would they not have ceased
being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer
have any consciousness of sin?

But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year.
It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.
Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,
"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body you have prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.
Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God'
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me)."

When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure
in sacrifices and offering, burnt offerings, and sin offerings
(these are offered according to the law), then he added,
"See, I have come to do your will."
He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.

* What about the law has been abolished? Since sin offerings are no longer
necessary, how does our new life in Christ change our relationship to the law?

*We give you thanks to you, O God, that it is by your will that we have been
sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. In his
name we pray. Amen.*

October 9 **Hebrews 10:11-18**

Every priest stands day after day at his service,
offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.
But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins,
“he sat down at the right hand of God,”
and since then has been waiting
“until his enemies would be made a footstool at his feet.” (Ps. 110:1)
By his single offering he has perfected for all time
those who are sanctified.

* What is the potential for life for Christians and the church since we need not make sacrifices over and over? Why, then, do we often merely “stand there day after day”?

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,
“This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds,”
and also adds,
“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” (Jer. 31:33-34)
Where there is forgiveness of these,
there is no longer any offering for sin.

* What is the power of forgiveness in your life and in the life of the church?

*O God, you have put your laws in our hearts and written them on our minds.
You remember our sins no more. Cleanse us and make us holy so that our new
life in Christ may be a testimony to the work of the Spirit. In Christ we pray.
Amen.*

October 10 **Hebrews 10:19-25**

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary
by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way
that he opened for us through the curtain (his flesh)
and since we have a great priest over the house of God,
let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith,
with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience
and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,
for the One who has promised is faithful.

Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,
not neglecting to meet together; as is the habit of some,
but encouraging one another,
and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

* How can we, as brothers and sisters in the faith, strengthen one another when the faith of one is wavering? How can we be faithful to one another?

* Think of some ways that you can provoke one another! How, by the power of the Spirit, do we call forth love and good deeds from one another? How can we provoke one another to works of justice and peace-making?

* When one is absent from the church, all are diminished. How can we, as people called to be part of a congregation, not neglect one another, but encourage each other in faithfulness and full participation?

*May we who have been baptized approach you, O Most Holy God, with full
assurance of faith. Wash us clean; keep us in the new and living way in Christ.
Bind us together so that in our worship, work, and witness we grow in love
and service in Christ, Amen.*

October 11 **Hebrews 10:26- 31**

If we willfully persist in sin
after having received the knowledge of the truth,
there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,
but a fearful prospect of judgment,
and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

* How can Christ's sacrifice for sin no longer remain? What are the ramifications of willfully persisting in sin?

Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy
"on the testimony of two of three witnesses." (Deut. 17:6)

* How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved
by those who have spurned the Son of God,
profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified,
and outraged the Spirit of grace?

For we know the one who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay."
And again, "The Lord will judge the people." (Deut. 32:35-36)

* "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," may be a quote used too often about God.
Or, do you think it is not used enough? What does it mean? To the world? To the church? To you?

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Lord, preserve us. Amen.

October 12 **Hebrews 10:32-39**

Recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened,
you endured a hard struggle with sufferings,
sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution,
and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

* When have you endured a hard struggle? What have you suffered? When were you a partner with someone who was being abused and persecuted?

You had compassion for those who were in prison,
and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions,
knowing that you possessed something better and more lasting.

* When, by one means or another, were your possessions plundered? When did you have compassion for those who were in prison?

Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours;
it brings a great reward.

You need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God,
you may receive what was promised.

For yet "in a very little while, the one who is coming
will come and will not delay;
but my righteous one will live by faith.

My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back." (Hab. 2:3-4)
But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost,
but among those who have faith and so are saved.

* Confidence. Endurance. When did you shrink back from your faith? By what power and with whose help have you regained confidence and endurance?

May we not shrink back, O God, from the faith which you have grown in us by the power of your Spirit. May we not abandon our faith, but endure. May we have the confidence to hold fast no matter what the struggle or the loss. May we have compassion and strength to stand by those in need that all may endure in Christ Jesus. Amen.

October 13

Hebrews 11:1-3

Now faith is the assurance
of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.

* How is “hope” as assurance of God keeping God’s promises different from the “I hope” of everyday conversation?

* What is “faith” for a Christian? Is it a doctrine? Is it a feeling? Is it living? Is it static? Is it a verb, in so far as the nature of our believing changes as we grow and develop? How is it “assurance”?

* How can we hold as a conviction that which we have not seen? How is faith the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen?

Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.

By faith we understand
that the worlds were prepared
by the word of God,
so that what is seen was made
from things that are not visible.

* How is faith the key to our understanding the unfathomable nature of the Creator of the universe? How does faith free us from having to defend the particular way and time that God creates?

* What is the Word of God? How is it central to our faith in Jesus Christ as well as in our Creator God?

God of the universe, your Word is sure. Your promises are true. May we who have been approved and set free in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus continue to grow in faith, assured of your unconditional love. In Christ we pray, Amen.

October 14

Hebrews 11:4-7

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous, God giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks.

* Read the Genesis 3:4-10 account, (or the more full account, 3:1-16) of Abel’s sacrifice. What are the complexities of that story? How is it used here in Hebrews?

By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and “he was not found, because God had taken him.” It was attested before he was taken away that “he had pleased God.”

* Read Genesis 5:21-24 (or all of chapter 5). Enoch “walked with God” or “spent his life in fellowship with God.” How is that important in this Hebrews text?

Without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach God must believe that God exists and that God rewards those who seek God.

By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this, he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

* Read Genesis 6:13-22 (or all of Genesis 6-8). How is this significant for faith?

O God, we do believe that you exist. We count it an honor that we may approach you. Strengthen us when our faith is weak that we may seek you without end. In Christ, Amen.

October 15 **Hebrews 11:8-16**

By faith Abraham obeyed and set out, not knowing where he was going.
By faith he stayed in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land,
living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him in the promise.
He looked forward to the city whose architect and builder is God.
By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was old,
and Sarah herself was barren,
because he considered the One faithful who had promised.
Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead,
descendents were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and innumerable
as grains of sand by the seashore.”

All of these died in faith without having received the promises,
but from a distance they saw and greeted them.
They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth,
for people who speak in this way make it clear
that they are seeking a homeland.
If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind,
they would have had opportunity to return.
But as it is, they desire a better country, a heavenly one.
Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God;
indeed, God has prepared a city for them.

* How is the story of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12-25:11) foundational to the faith of Jewish and Christian people? How is Abraham remembered in Hebrews?

* What difference does it make in our life story to have faith built on the promises of God?

O God, who is not ashamed to call yourself our God, we treasure being your people. May we base our lives on the foundations of your promises. Give us the courage to follow your call. We walk by faith. In Christ, Amen.

October 16 **Hebrews 11:17-22**

By faith Abraham, when put to the test,
offered up Isaac.
He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son,
of whom he had been told,
“It is through Isaac that the descendants shall be named for you.”
He considered the fact that God is able even
to raise someone from the dead—
and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

* Read Genesis 22:1-14. How do you comprehend this unimaginable command of God?

* How do you comprehend the unimaginable act of God in giving the Son, Jesus Christ, to live and die for us? What place does the Good News of the dead being raised have in your life?

By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau.
By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph,
“bowing in worship over the top of his staff.”
By faith Joseph, at the end of his life,
made mention of the exodus of the Israelites
and gave instructions about his burial.

* Read Genesis 27:27-40; Genesis 47:31; Gen. 48 and 50:24-25. In these familiar stories, what are the foundations of faith for the Hebrew Christians and for us?

By faith, you led your people through incredible times and blessed them. Bless us, too, God, that we may trust you in the midst of journeys of faith. May we return again and again to Christ's great love for us that we may venture in his name. Amen.

October 17 Hebrews 11:23-31

By faith Moses was hidden by his parents after his birth
because they saw that the child was beautiful;
and were not afraid of the king's edict.
By faith Moses, when grown, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter,
choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God
than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.
He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth
than the treasures of Egypt; he was looking ahead to the reward.
By faith he left Egypt unafraid of the king's anger;
he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible.
By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood,
so that the destroyer of the first born
would not touch the first born of Israel.
By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land,
but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they drowned.
By faith the walls of Jericho fell after seven days.
By faith Rahab did not perish with those who were disobedient,
because she had received the spies in peace.

* Read Exodus 2:1-5:13 and 12:1-15:21 (or all of Ex. 2-16) with "by faith" in front of each section. How does this shape the story? What parts of the Exodus account would you lift up as related to your faith in God's faithfulness? Your faith in Christ?

* Read Joshua 6:12-21 (or all of the Book of Joshua). Read Joshua 6:22-25 (also Joshua 2:1-21). What do you see in these stories that makes you ponder what faith is all about?

Throughout salvation history, O God, you again and again help your people in the midst of danger, challenged them on their journey and called them to renewed relationship with you. Help us, challenge us, and call us as we, by the power of the Spirit, grow in faith in Christ, Amen.

October 18 Hebrews 11:32-40

What more should I say?
Time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah,
of David and Samuel and the prophets—
who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice,
obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire,
escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness,
became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.
Women received their dead by resurrection.
Others were tortured, refusing to accept release
in order to obtain a better resurrection.
Others suffered mocking and flogging, even chains and imprisonment.
They were stoned to death, sawn in two and killed by the sword;
they went about in skins of sheep and goats,
destitute, persecuted, tormented—
of whom the world was not worthy.
They wandered in deserts and mountains,
and in caves and holes in the ground.
Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith,
did not receive what was promised,
since God had provided something better so that they would not,
apart from us, be made perfect.

* Why is this passage significant for the Hebrews and for us in linking the people of the first covenant with the new covenant?

* Consider the faithful who suffered unimaginable things in the 2000 years since the birth of the church. Who suffers yet today? How are we joined together in the suffering of Christ and in the promise?

What more can we say, God of our forbears? Your promises are sure. Our lives are secure in your hands. Keep us, in the midst of our own sufferings, close to Christ. Amen.

October 19

Hebrews 12:1-6

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
let us also lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely,
and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,
looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,
who for the sake of joy that was set before him endured the cross,
disregarding its shame,
and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners,
so that you may not grow weary or lose heart,
In your struggle against sin
you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

You have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—
“My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by God;
for the Lord disciplines those whom God loves,
and chastises every child whom God accepts.” (Prov. 3: 11-12)

* Hebrews 12:5-6, along with Job and Proverbs, often have been quoted to justify abusive punishment of children. How is, “I’m doing this for your own good,” a misuse of this passage? How else have you heard it misused? What can this say about God’s deep love and concern for us? And about discipline?

* When verses 5-6 are read together with 3-4, how do they shed light on one another? How do the promises of 5-6 sustain us when we are tempted to lose heart in struggle?

Verses 1-2 are worth committing to memory. Pray them: Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin that clings too closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Amen.

October 20

Hebrews 12: 7-13

Endure trials for the sake of discipline.
God is treating you as children;
for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?
If you do not have the discipline in which all children share,
then you are illegitimate and not God’s children.
Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us,
and we respected them.
Should we not be even more willing to be subject
to the Father of spirits and live?
They disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them,
but God disciplines us for our good, to share God’s holiness.
Now discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time,
but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness
to those who have been trained by it.

* Here discipline is used in the best possible light. Recall your own discipline as a child. What painful memories do you have? What peaceful fruit has come from it?

* In what ways has your growth in discipleship included healthy disciplines?

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,
and make straight paths for your feet,
so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but healed.

* Use these two verses to physically adopt a posture of prayer and praise that is appropriate to your own body. These verses are worth committing to memory, too.

Strengthen my weak knees, O God. Lift my drooping hands. Heal what is lame. Make straight paths for my feet. Each day shape my life around Christ Jesus, my Lord. Amen.

October 21

Hebrews 12:14-24

Pursue peace with everyone,
and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.
See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God;
that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble.
See to it that no one becomes like Esau, immoral and godless,
who sold his birthright for a single meal.
Later, wanting to inherit the blessing, he was rejected,
for he found no chance to repent,
even though he sought the blessing with tears.

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire,
darkness, gloom, a tempest, the sound of a trumpet,
a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken.
(For they could not endure the order that was given:
“If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.”)
So terrifying was that sight that Moses said, I tremble with fear.”)

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God,
the heavenly Jerusalem and to innumerable angels in joyful gathering,
and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,
and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous
and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood
that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

* Ponder the phrase, “He found no chance to repent though he sought the blessing with tears.” Reflect on the story of Esau. Reflect on your own.

* Contrast the two scenes of fear and joy. Picture your own reality of relationship with God. Focus on Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. What do you see?

We seek your blessing, most Holy God. May we pursue peace with everyone so that no one fails to obtain the grace of God. In the name of Christ, the Mediator. Amen.

October 22

Hebrews 12:25-29

See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking;
for if they did not escape when they refused the one
who warned them on earth,
how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!

At that time God’s voice shook the earth;
but now God has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth
but also the heavens.”

This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—
that is, created things—
so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,
let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship
with reverence and awe;
for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

* “Our God is a consuming fire.” By themselves, those words fill us with fear. How are they read in context? How *do* we approach God with reverence and awe?

* What is an acceptable worship? How might we come to worship in confidence without taking God for granted?

* What things have shaken your own world? What forces continue to shake our shared earth? In the face of these forces, what does it mean to you to have an unshakable God?

Most powerful God, you have not refused us, your created ones. By the power of your Holy Spirit may we never refuse you. We give thanks that we have received in Christ Jesus a kingdom that cannot be shaken. We await your coming with awe. In the name of the Risen Christ we pray. Amen.

October 23

Hebrews 13: 1-6

Let mutual love continue.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Remember those who are in prison,
as though you were in prison with them;
those who are being tortured,
as though you yourselves were being tortured.

* What stranger have you welcomed? Did you see God's angel in the encounter? Who has welcomed you? How is God continuing to create mutual love among you?

* How does remembering those in prison, as though we were in prison, change the way we think about imprisonment? (Some of us reading this today are in prison.) Likewise in what way does thinking about torture from the perspective of those being tortured call forth our empathy and our action?

Let marriage be held in honor by all,
and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled;
for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

Keep your lives free from the love of money,
and be content with what you have; for God has said,
"I will never leave you or forsake you." (Josh. 1:5)
You can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper;
I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" (Ps. 118:6)

* How does opportunity and lack of considering the consequences lead us into unfaithfulness? How can we honor our own and others' marriages?

* What are your fears in relation to money? Your fears about security? How can confidence in God's unfailing presence and help lead to contentment?

We live in your love, caring and faithful God. May we grow in our love for each other, unafraid, confident and empathetic. In Christ Jesus. Amen.

October 24

Hebrews 13:7-16

Remember your leaders,
those who spoke the word of God to you;
consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith
Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever.
Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings;
for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace,
not by obeying regulations about food, which have had no benefit.
The priests in the Jewish worship place have no right to sacrifice on our altar.
The bodies of those sacrificed animals were burned outside the camp.

Jesus also suffered outside the city gate
in order to sanctify the people by his own blood.
Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.
For here we have no lasting city,
but we are looking for the city that is to come.
Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God,
the fruit of lips that confess God's name.
Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have,
for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

* We are called to go outside the camp. What is our mission there? Christ is already on the other side of any walls we might erect.

* How does being saved from all sin and oppression and bondage through the sacrifice of Christ alone, free us to sacrificially share what we have? What would that be?

Since Christ suffered outside the city gate, lead us out into the world, confident in the faith we are called to speak and live. Give us hearts strengthened by grace to care for any and all we meet there. In the name of Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen.

October 25

Hebrews 13:17-25

Obey your leaders and submit to them,
for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account.
Let them do this with joy and not with sighing,
which would be harmful to you.

* Are we hesitant to use the words, “obey” and “submit” in relation to leadership? What words would you use? What is the call to leadership to “watch over souls” and to “give an account”?

* Have we not heard someone (perhaps ourselves), give a sigh of exasperation, or fatigue, or dismissal in thinking or speaking about those they are called to love and to lead? Pray for a joyful spirit in the midst of challenging service.

Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience,
desiring to act honorably in all things.
I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you very soon.

Now may the God of peace, who bought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do God's will, working among us that which is pleasing in God's sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation,
for I have written to you briefly.
I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been set free;
and if he comes in time, he will be with me when I see you.
Greet all your leaders and all the saints.
Those from Italy send your greetings.
Grace be with all of you.

October 26

James 1:1-8

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind,
consider it nothing but joy,
because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance;
and let endurance have its full effect,
so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

* When in the very midst of trials, how in the world can you—and why in the world would you—consider it nothing but joy? What kinds of endurance have trials produced in you? How has this contributed to your maturity?

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God,
who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly,
and it will be given you.
Ask in faith, never doubting,
for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea,
driven and tossed by the wind;
for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way,
must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

* Surely we doubt. However, ongoing doubt does shake us and confuse us in being of two minds. Image yourself like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. What other images do you have of doubt?

* Have you asked for wisdom lately? What wisdom do you need?

Generous and ungrudging God, give us wisdom. Wash away our doubt. Steady us in the wind. Keep us close to Christ who is our wisdom, our rock, and in whose name we pray. Amen.

October 27

James 1:9-16

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up,
and the rich in being brought low,
because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field.
The sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field;
its flower falls, and its beauty perishes.
It is the same way with the rich:
in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

* How can one boast in being brought low? What does that mean? What does that mean in your life? Think of examples of those who give thanks to God for being raised up.

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation.
Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life
that the Lord has promised to those who love him.
No one, when tempted, should say,
“I am being tempted by God”;
for God cannot be tempted by evil and God tempts no one.

One is tempted by one's own desire,
being lured and enticed by it;
then, when that desire has conceived,
it gives birth to sin, and that sin,
when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.
Do not be deceived, my beloved.

* Because God cannot be tempted by evil, how can God be a strength to us in the midst of temptation? Where and when have our own desires enticed us? To what have they led us?

God, we know you tempt no one. Forgive us our self-justification in blaming you for our own sin. Rescue us from deceiving ourselves. Root us in Christ whose beauty never perishes. Conceive, birth and grow in us love and mercy and service in Christ. Amen.

October 28

James 1:17-21

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above,
coming down from the God of light,
with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.
In fulfillment of God's own purpose
God gave us birth by the word of truth,
so that we would become a kind of first fruits of God's creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved:
let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;
for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.
Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank wickedness,
and welcome with meekness the implanted word
that has the power to save your souls.

* Since it is by pure grace that we have life by the word of truth in Jesus Christ, how does this generosity transform your own life? How is your life a fruit-bearing life? And how do these images affect the way you think of your discipleship and the work you do?

* Ponder God as the source of all light. What shadows are there in your life? What variations due to change? What deep darkness? Reflect on God's light in these places.

* Do you wear your anger on the outside or on the inside? What does your particular form of anger produce? In contrast, what power does the implanted word of God in Christ have in you and through you?

God of truth, light and righteousness, may we be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. Give us your wisdom to carry out your mission of salvation in Christ. Amen.

October 29

James 1:22-27

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only.
If any are hearers of the word and not doers,
they are like those who look at themselves and, on going away,
immediately forget what they were like.
But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty,
and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—
they will be blessed in their doing.

* Go to a mirror. Look at yourself and see there a child of God, a forgiven person, a disciple of Christ. Remember your baptism. As you go through the day, can you remember the Christ-person you saw there? As a freed person, to what actions will you be called? Look in the mirror again this night, and give thanks.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues
but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.
Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this:
to care for orphans and widows in their distress,
and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

* Just what would it mean to bridle your tongue? And yet we are called to speak and act. In a particular situation, how do we know the difference? What criteria do you use?

* How do you keep yourself from the stains of the world? And, at the same time, how do you involve yourself in the world in works of mercy and acts of justice? Specifically?

God, you have revealed yourself to us in Jesus Christ. May we be steeped in your Word. Encourage us, embolden us, empower us to be doers of the Word, in Christ. Amen.

October 30

James 2:1-7

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?
If a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into our assembly, and if a person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters,

* Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that God has promised to those who love God?

But you have dishonored the poor.

* Is it not the rich who oppress you?
Is it not they who drag you into court?

They are the ones who speak evil of that good name which has been given to you.

* What are some of the acts of favoritism, even subtle favoritism, in which we engage? What are the belief systems undergirding those actions? Do we really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? What is the power of such belief to change our attitudes and actions?

God whose unconditional love in Christ Jesus goes beyond all bias and prejudice, open our hearts to embrace all of your created ones. Make room in our sanctuaries, in our homes, and in our lives for Christ Jesus in the personhood of those whom we might exclude. In his name we pray. Amen.

October 31

James 2:8-13

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law
according to the scripture,
“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
But if you show partiality, you commit sin
and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point
has become accountable for all of it.
For the one who said, “You shall not commit adultery,”
also said, “You shall not murder.”
If you do not commit adultery but if you murder,
you have become a transgressor of the law.

* And what if you have not committed murder but have committed adultery?
Or what if you have not killed but have hurt some one? Or what if you have
not stolen, but have not helped your neighbors protect their property?
How is showing partiality sinful?

* We as sinful human beings often make comparisons in our favor so as to
excuse ourselves and judge our neighbor. When have you done this recently?
How are the words “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has
become accountable for all of it” actually helpful?

So speak and so act as those who are
to be judged by the law of liberty.
Judgment will be without mercy
to anyone who has shown no mercy;
mercy triumphs over judgment.

* What is the law of liberty? How does being free from God’s judgment
through the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus liberate us to love our neighbor
beyond mere measurement of sins? How has mercy triumphed over judgment?
How is this the heart of being a reforming and transforming church?

Christ Jesus, free us to love our neighbors all over the world. Amen.

November 1 **James 2:14-17**

What good is it, my brothers and sisters,
if you say you have faith but do not have works?
Can faith save you?

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,
and one of you says to them,
“Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,”
and yet you do not supply their bodily needs,
what is the good of that?

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

* We believe and profess that we are justified by grace alone through faith, not by our works. How is this passage from James, though sounding the opposite, not contradictory?

* How can faith be dead? Just as faith and works cannot be separated, how are these verses inseparable? What does faith without works look like? What do works without faith look like?

* Picture a brother or sister hearing the words, “Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,” without their having food and clothing and housing. Such a picture is all too common in this world. Perhaps that has been you. What does that feel like? What kind of a Gospel is one hearing? Picture Jesus: What did he say? What did he do?

Holy God, you have given us the gift of faith to believe in Christ Jesus. We thank you for all the saints who have loved the world. Give us the gift of loving hearts that by our works people will see our faith and see Christ. Amen.

November 2 **James 2:18-26**

Someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.”
Show me your faith apart from your works,
and I by my works, will show you my faith.

You believe that God is one; you do well.
Even the demons believe—and shudder.
Do you want to be shown, you senseless person,
that faith apart from works is barren?
Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works
when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?
You see that faith was active along with his works,
and faith was brought to completion by the works.
Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says,
“Abraham believed God,
and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,”
and he was called the friend of God.

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.
Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works
when she welcomed the messengers
and sent them out by another road?
Just as the body without the spirit is dead,
so faith without works is also dead.

* We read again of Abraham and Rehab. (Hebrews 11) How are their stories used differently here in regard to faith? How are the uses complementary rather than contradictory? How is faith at the core?

* Think of stories from your own life and that of your faith community that exemplify that, just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead. Talk with each other about, “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works, will show you my faith.”

Strengthen our faith, faithful God. Increase our works, acting God. In Christ. Amen.

November 3

James 3:1-5a

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters,
for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

* Are you among those who need more teachers in your faith community?
Why, then the words that not many should become teachers? What is the great
responsibility of teachers of the faith? How are you in your congregation and
we as a church body calling forth, equipping and supporting teachers?

All of us make many mistakes.
Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect,
able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.
If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us,
we guide their whole bodies.

Or look at ships:
though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them,
yet they are guided by a very small rudder
wherever the will of the pilot directs.

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

* Picture a bridle on a horse and a rudder on a ship and their power to check
and guide. What other images come to mind that make the same point?

* What other parts of your body might you have chosen in considering what
guides your actions? James points to the tongue. What power does it have?

*You alone are perfect. You alone are wise, O God. Teach us. Guide us. May
we who have been made part of Christ's body, receive thankfully our call to
share the Good News, accept conscientiously our responsibilities as teachers
of the faith, and take seriously the power of our words. In Christ, Amen.*

November 4

James 3:5b-12

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!
The tongue is a fire.
The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity;
it stains the whole body,
sets on fire the cycle of nature,
and is itself set on fire by hell.

Every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature,
can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,
but no one can tame the tongue—
a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

With it we bless the Lord and with it we curse
those who are made in the likeness of God.
From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.
My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening
both fresh and brackish water?
Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs?
No more can salt water yield fresh.

* When have you experienced the tongue as a restless evil, full of deadly
poison? Have you experienced (given or received) a tongue lashing? Bullying?
Bearing false witness? What else? How has that stained the whole body?

* How can we with the same mouth both bless and curse? What is the deep
fear or hatred or self-deception or self-aggrandizement? Why is it hard to tame
the tongue? What are some things faith communities can do to change?

*You spoke and the world was created. Your Word became flesh in Jesus the
Christ. Your Spirit inspires us to pray, praise, and speak words that uplift and
comfort. May we who are members of the body of Christ, not stain this body
with evil and idle talk. May our words be a blessing. In Christ, Amen.*

November 5

James 3:13-18

* Who is wise and understanding among you?

Show by your good life that your works are done
with gentleness and wisdom.

But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts,
do not be boastful and false to the truth.

Such wisdom does not come down from above,
but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.
Where there is envy and selfish ambition,
there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

* What is the connection of envy and selfish ambition with disorder and wickedness? How have you seen this manifest in the Christian community?

But the wisdom from above is pure, then peaceable, gentle,
willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits,
without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

* When have you seen people full of mercy, willing to yield, free from partiality and hypocrisy? By the power of God's love, how do we help a Christian community grow into being a caring place where understanding flourishes?

A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Peaceable, gentle God, give us the Spirit of wisdom that our hearts may be merciful and our lives yield good fruits. May we as a caring community, by sowing peace, produce a harvest of righteousness and give witness to your love in the world. In Christ, Amen.

November 6

James 4:1-6

* Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?
Do they not come from cravings that are at war within you?

You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder.

You covet something and cannot obtain it;
so you engage in disputes and conflict.

You do not have because you do not ask.

You ask and do not receive, because your motives are wrong;
you ask for things to use for your own pleasures.

Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world
is enmity with God?

Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world
becomes an enemy of God.

* Do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that God has made to dwell in us?" What does that mean to you?

* Just what kind of adultery is this? When God calls us to fear, love and trust in no other gods, why is it bad for us that we adulterate that relationship?

* How has "being a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" been misinterpreted to keep Christians away from our call to be deeply engaged in the world for the sake of justice ministry? How does being in a right relationship with God turn us around, away from conflicts that consume, towards service that liberates?

God, you give all the more grace. You oppose the proud and give grace to the humble. Keep us in your grace for Christ's sake, Amen.

November 7

James 4:7-12

Submit yourselves therefore to God.
Resist the devil, and the devil will flee from you.
Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.
Cleanse your hands, you sinners,
and purify your hearts, you double-minded.
Lament and mourn and weep.
Let your laughter be turned into mourning
and your joy into dejection.

* What gloomy words are these! But, at a deep level, where we *are* embroiled in sin and impurity and in a double-minded, messy life, to what do these words call us? How are dejection and mourning a part of confession and conversion?

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and God will exalt you.

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters.
Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another,
speaks evil against the law and judges the law;
but if you judge the law,
you are not a doer of the law but a judge.
There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy.

* So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?

Righteous God, who gave the Law for our righteousness and right relationships with you and with our neighbor, we confess that we have spoken evil against one another; we have used your law to play God by thinking we are the almighty judge. Save us from destruction. In the cross of Christ, may we lament and mourn and weep, and in his resurrection alone may we be exalted that we may become humble doers of your word. Amen.

November 8

James 4:13-17

Come now, you who say,
“Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town
and spend a year there doing business and making money.”
You do not even know what tomorrow will bring.

* What is your life?

* What is the role of making plans in your life? Do you carefully make long-range plans? Do you build in contingency plans? Do you avoid planning altogether, preferring to take each day as it comes? How do we, who do not know what tomorrow will bring, use our God-given wisdom responsibly and yet keep from thinking we have complete control over our lives?

You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.
Instead you ought to say,
“If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.”

* Is it your custom to add, “Lord willing,” either silently or out loud when speaking about seeing someone again, or telling someone you are going to do this or that? How might you add “If the Lord wishes” to your own prayers, daily plans and desires?

As it is, you boast in your arrogance;
all such boasting is evil.
Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do
and fails to do it, commits sin.

* How is boasting in our works the problem rather than *doing* good works? How is boasting evil and in what ways are you and I arrogant?

May we, timeless and all-knowing God, not only seek your wisdom so that we know the right thing to do, but also do it. In Christ's love. Amen.

November 9

James 5:1-6

Come now, you rich people,
weep and wail for miseries that are coming to you.
Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten.
Your gold and silver have rusted,
and their rust will be evidence against you,
and it will eat your flesh like fire.
You have laid up treasure for the last days.

Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields,
which you kept back by fraud, cry out,
and the cries of the harvesters
have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

* Martin Luther wrote in his explanation to the seventh commandment in his *Large Catechism*: “Beware how you deal with the poor of whom there are many now. If, when you meet the poor who must live from hand to mouth, you arrogantly turn them away whom you ought to give aid, they will go away wretched and dejected, and because they have no one else, they will cry to heaven. Such people’s cries will be no joking matter.”

* Who is being exploited today? To what are you being called?

You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure;
you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.
You have condemned and murdered the righteous one,
who does not resist you.

* In the midst of rotting riches, how do we condemn and murder again the righteous one? How do you hear, “who does not resist you?” To what are you being called? What bold, courageous action is needed? Now!

Source of life, may we receive your gifts with thanksgiving and live with generosity. You have given us Christ Jesus. May we in him alone place our hearts and our trust. Amen.

November 10

James 5:7-12

Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.
The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth,
being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.
You also must be patient.

Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.
Beloved, do not grumble against one another,
so that you may not be judged.
See, the Judge is standing at the doors!

As an example of suffering and patience, beloved,
take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.
Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance.
You have heard of the endurance of Job,
and you have seen the purpose of the Lord,
how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Above all, my beloved, do not swear,
either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath,
but let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no,
so that you may not fall under condemnation.

* How often James says, “My beloved.” Are these words of judgment, or warning, or encouragement? What do you say to your beloved?

* How is patience the same as or different from endurance? How do we wait for the final coming of the Lord? How do we live in the meantime?

* Why, really, do people swear? How do we speak so that our “Yes” is yes and our “No” is no in firm faith and patient leadership?

We wait for your coming, Jesus. May we be patient in suffering and steadfast in endurance. May we reach out with Good News to all whom you call beloved. Amen.

November 11

James 5:13-20

- * Are any among you suffering? They should pray.
Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.
Are any among you sick?

They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them,
anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

The prayer of faith will save the sick,
and the Lord will raise them up;
and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

Therefore confess your sins to one another,
and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.
The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.
Elijah was a human being like us,
and prayed fervently that it might not rain,
and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.
Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain
and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth
and is brought back by another,
you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering
will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

- * Who among you is wandering from the truth of the Gospel? How do we pray
for such a one? How do we reach out? And how might we confess our sins to
one another? How might we as brothers and sisters in Christ pray constantly
for one another's faith?

*We give thanks, faithful God, for brothers and sisters in Christ. Keep us
fervent in prayer and in works of mission and ministry, especially for and
among those who suffer. Amen.*

November 12

1 Peter 1:1-9

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the Dispersion
in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia
who have been chosen and destined by God the Father
and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ
and to be sprinkled with his blood.
May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
By God's great mercy we have been given a new birth into a living hope
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading,
kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God
through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you rejoice,
even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,
so that the genuineness of your faith,
more precious than gold, though perishable and tested by fire,
may be found to result in praise and glory and honor
when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Although you have not seen him, you love him;
and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him
and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,
for you are receiving the outcome of your faith,
the salvation of your souls.

- * Can you imagine the joy and encouragement when one is "dispersed," in
exile, part of a struggling young congregation, or in suffering of any kind to
hear these words? How would you—do you—express the core of your faith
and the joy in Christ Jesus? How do you support struggling communities?

*Blessed God, may peace and joy be ours in abundance through Jesus Christ.
And give us the strength and wisdom to support one another. Amen.*

November 13

1 Peter 1:10-16

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours, made careful search and inquiry.
They tried to find out when the time would be and how it would come, the time to which Christ's spirit within them was pointing, testifying in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the glory that would follow.
It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven— things into which angels long to look!

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves. Set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.
Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desire that you formerly had in ignorance.
Instead, as the one who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written,
“You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

* What is *our* prophetic witness and how does it serve not only people today but also those who will live in future generations? What is our witness?

* Why are we who are called to be disciples of Christ called to a life of discipline? What does a holy life look like? What does it look like to others?

Timeless God, the prophets could not know when Jesus was to come. Neither can we know when he will come again. But we, like they, live in your revealed grace by the power of your spirit. Keep our minds on Christ, ready for actions of holy justice. Amen.

November 14

1 Peter 1:17-21

If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

* What does it mean to live in reverent fear?

* How is it that we are ransomed from futile ways? What futile ways?

* What does it mean to trust—really trust—God? How has being baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ enabled us to set our faith and hope on God?

God of mercy, we confess that we often do seek ransom and rescue through perishable things such as silver and gold. We give you thanks for the precious blood of Jesus the Christ who was destined before the foundation of the world to be the savior of all. Amen.

November 15

1 Peter 1:22-25

Now that you have purified your souls
by your obedience to the truth
so that you have genuine mutual love,
love one another deeply from the heart.

* Why do many people stereotype Christians as thinking of themselves as morally superior? How is that image very different from obedience to the truth being about deep, genuine mutual love from the heart?

You have been born anew,
not of perishable but imperishable seed,
through the living and enduring word of God.
For “All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers, and the flower falls,
but the word of the Lord endures forever.” (Isa. 40:6-8)

That word is the good news that was announced to you.

* Consider the image of being born anew of imperishable seed. How does being nurtured by the word of God grow a Christian? How has it grown you?

* Consider the image of wilting grass and withering flowers. No growing thing lasts forever. What does it mean to you that the word of the Lord, and those who believe in the word, endure forever?

Eternal and Everlasting God, may the seed of your word take root in our hearts that in all ways we may grow in Christ. We thank you that by the power of your Spirit we have been born anew. May we share this good news of Jesus Christ and love one another with a deep, genuine, enduring love. Amen.

November 16

1 Peter 2:1-8

Rid yourselves of all malice, all guile, insincerity, envy, and slander.
Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk,
so that by it you may grow into salvation—
if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Come to Christ, a living stone, rejected by mortals,
yet chosen and precious in God’s sight.
Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house,
to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices
acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone, chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” (Isa. 28:16)

To you who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,
“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner,” (Ps. 118:22)

And

“A stone that makes them stumble
and a rock that makes them fall” (Isa. 8:14-15)

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

* How are the faithful in your congregation growing while they serve in daily life, being *living* stones, a holy priesthood?

* Picture Christ as the chosen cornerstone, upon which God continues to build the church. How is God laying stone upon stone in your church? How is Christ also a stumbling block? How do we also stumble over “as they were destined to do”?

Nurture us on the pure milk of your word, that we may grow in your grace; we have tasted and seen that you, Lord, are good. Build us into a spiritual house in Christ. Amen.

November 17

1 Peter 2:9-12

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, God's own people,
in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God
who called you out of darkness into God's own marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people,
Once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

* So what does it mean to be a chosen people? How is being chosen by God as a global church to proclaim the mighty acts of God different from thinking of one's country as a chosen nation with special privilege in the world?

* What would it be like to not be a people of God and to be a people without mercy? In contrast, what is it like to be the recipients of God's mercy as a people? Read the book of Hosea.

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles
to abstain from the desires of the flesh
that wage war against the soul.

Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles,
so that, although they malign you as evildoers,
they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God
when God comes to judge.

* From what are we alienated and exiled? What wages war in our souls? What courage does it take to conduct oneself honorably when being maligned?

May we be your witness, God of mercy. May we be your people for the sake of the world. Lighten our darkness. In Christ, we pray. Amen.

November 18

1 Peter 2:13-20

For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution,
whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors,
as sent by him to punish those who do wrong
and to praise those who do right.
For it is God's will that by doing right
you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.

As servants of God, live as free people,
yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.
Honor everyone. Love the family of believers.
Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference,
not only those who are kind and gentle, but also those who are harsh.
It is a credit to you if, being aware of God,
you endure pain while suffering unjustly.
If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that?
But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it,
you have God's approval.

* In the context of being free from sin and servants of God alone, how are we called to live in relationship with others, including governments?

* How do we differentiate between enduring suffering, even unjust suffering, and working for justice, particularly on behalf of others who are oppressed? When does living as a servant of God call us to civil disobedience?

* Why do we sometimes use our freedom as a pretext for evil? How do we fall back into enslaving people? How does Christ's suffering free us for the courageous work of freeing all those who are enslaved and for the long, hard work of changing oppressive systems?

Because Christ suffered for us, may we fear, love and trust in you alone, O God, and live with love and honor and courage. In his name we pray. Amen.

November 19

1 Peter 2:21-25

For to this you have been called
because Christ also suffered for you,
leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.
“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” (Isa. 53:9)
When he was abused, he did not return abuse;
when he suffered, he did not threaten;
but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

* How do you view Christ’s acceptance of abuse and suffering without self-protection or retaliation? How has this “example” been used *at* people to tell them to stay in abusive relationships and simply endure unjust suffering?

* What is our calling? How do we follow in Christ’s steps? How do we entrust ourselves solely to the one who judges justly? To what is this calling you now?

Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,
so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness;
by his wounds you have been healed.
You were going astray like sheep,
but now you have returned to the shepherd
and guardian of your souls.

* We will not be free from sinning, nor from wandering away from God. But, Christ has born our sins in his body on the cross. What healing has this brought to your life? What does being free from sins mean to you? How will you use this freedom?

Christ Jesus, free us from deceit, including self-deception, that we might live righteously. You have led us. Lead us still, for by your wounds we have been healed. Amen.

November 20

1 Peter 3:1-7

Wives, in the same way [as slaves are to accept their masters],
accept the authority of your husbands,
so that, even if some of them do not obey the word,
they may be won over without a word by their wives’ conduct,
when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.
Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair,
and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing;
rather let your adornment be the inner self
with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit,
which is precious in God’s sight.

In this way long ago the holy women who hoped in God
used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands.
Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord.
You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good
and never let fears alarm you.
Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives
in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex,
since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life—
so that nothing may hinder your prayers.

* What problems and what promise do you find in this text for contemporary use? On one hand, what negation, suppression, oppression, and abuse of women has been justified by quoting this text? On the other hand, what insights about inner lasting beauty and witness might apply to all Christians? Which emphasis has historically dominated?

* What does “in the same way” mean? How might the address to husbands and to wives reference the preceding section about Christ’s own suffering?

* The five words, “woman as the weaker sex” have been disproportionately quoted. How do you teach this text for human relationships today?

May nothing hinder our prayers, gracious God. Join our lives to Christ Amen.

November 21

1 Peter 3:8-12

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, love for one another,
a tender heart, and a humble mind.

Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse;
but on the contrary, repay with a blessing.

It is for this that you were called—
that you might inherit a blessing.

For “Those who desire life and desire to see good days,
let them keep their tongues from evil
and their lips from speaking deceit;
let them turn away from evil and do good;
let them seek peace and pursue it.

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and God’s ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” (Ps. 34:12-16)

* After all of the instructions, some very specific to New Testament times, how is this “Finally” comprehensive for all times and all relationships? When have you experienced unity of spirit, love for one another, tenderheartedness and humility in the Christian community? How, by God’s grace, do you help foster it?

* How have you been tempted to repay evil for evil, abuse for abuse? What is your calling to be a blessing as well as to receive one?

O God, you open your eyes and ears to us. We know you hear our prayer. We know you see our needs and our deeds. May we speak your truth as we witness to Christ. Amen.

November 22

1 Peter 3:13-17

* Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?

Even if you do suffer for doing what is right,
you are blessed.

Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,
but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.

* We *are* sometimes harmed, and do suffer for doing what is just and right. How can we keep from being intimidated?

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you
an accounting for the hope that is in you;
yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

* Why do people “demand” a “defense?” What is it that they fear? How can understanding that help us give a strong answer—witness—with respect for them, and with gentle strength? What are some of the many ways you can speak of the hope you have in Christ?

Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned,
those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ
may be put to shame.

It is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will,
than to suffer for doing evil.

* What is the distinction here? Surely not between suffering and not suffering. How, in seeking God’s will for our lives of discipleship, do we deal with suffering? Throughout chapters 2 and 3 the center is Christ’s suffering.

O God, you know the hearts of all people. Give us courage, humility and wisdom that we may be ready to speak boldly about the hope that lies within us, working your will in the world. In the name of our suffering Savior, Amen.

November 23

1 Peter 3:18-22

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all,
the righteous for the unrighteous,
in order to bring you to God.

Christ was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,
in which also he went and preached to the imprisoned spirits.
These were the spirits of those who had not obeyed
when God waited patiently during the days of Noah,
during the building of the ark.

The few people in the boat—eight in all—were saved through water,
which was a symbol pointing to baptism, which now saves you.

It is not the washing off of bodily dirt,
but an appeal made to God for a good conscience.
It saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,
who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God,
ruling over all angels and heavenly authorities and powers.

* How are all the instructions for how we live in relationship with each other
(the first part of chapter 3) not helpful without Christ's death and resurrection?

* Why is Christ being put to death as the Righteous One important for us to
make meaning out of his suffering? How does that bring you to God each day?

* Ponder the waters of the flood and God's saving action. Ponder your own
baptism and God's saving action. Ponder God's ultimate universal power.

*God, ruler of the heavens and the earth, we stand in awe. We wonder as you
waited patiently. We rest in the promise of our baptism into Christ's death and
resurrection. And we give you thanks for Christ Jesus, our Savior. Amen.*

November 24

1 Peter 4:1-6

Since Christ suffered in the flesh,
strengthen yourselves also with the same intention
(for whoever suffers in the flesh physically has finished with sin).
So the rest of your earthly life you live no longer by human desires
but by the will of God.

* What does a life transformed through Christ's suffering look like? What
does it mean to you to live by the will of God?

You have already spent enough time doing what the Gentiles like to do,
living in licentiousness, lust, drunkenness,
revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.
They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses
of reckless living, and so they insult you and God.

* When have you experienced, in subtle or blatant ways, people making fun of
or insulting you and God because you do not live as they do?

But they will have to give an accounting to God
who stands ready to judge the living and the dead.
This is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead,
to those who had been judged in their physical life,
so that, even though they had been judged in the flesh
they might live in the spirit as God does.

* What do you make of the idea that the gospel is preached even to the dead?

*Holy God, you judge the living and the dead. May we be freed from addictions
to lives of excess and idolatry. Strengthen us to seek your will for lives of
service. In Christ, we pray. Amen.*

November 25

1 Peter 4:7-11

The end of all things is near;
therefore be serious and discipline yourselves
for the sake of your prayers.
Above all, maintain constant love for one another,
for love covers a multitude of sins.

Be hospitable to one another without complaining.
Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God,
serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.
Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God.
Whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies,
so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.

To God belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

* Although the end time did not turn out to be as near as the first-century Christians thought, that expectation shaped their world view and daily life. How does it shape yours?

* Although earlier in the chapter we read that we were “finished with sin,” here it is implied that we continue to struggle. How does love cover a multitude of sins without that becoming an excuse? What is the power of love?

* Take some time to contemplate privilege of our being stewards of the grace of God, to serve one another with whatever gifts we have, to speak as speaking the very words of God, and to serve with the strength God supplies.

*We give you thanks, gracious God, for your word, your strength, your gifts.
May we love one another with constancy and consistency, showing hospitality
as though we were welcoming Christ. In the power of your love may we serve
one another always. Amen.*

November 26

1 Peter 4:12-19

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal
that is taking place among you to test you,
as though something strange were happening to you.
But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings,
so that you may also be glad and shout for joy
when Christ's glory is revealed.

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed,
because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God,
is resting upon you.

* When have you been surprised at the fiery ordeals that break out around you and among you? How in the world can we rejoice? How is Christ being revealed in the midst of it?

But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief,
a criminal, or even a mischief maker.
Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace,
but glorify God because you bear Christ's name.
The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God;

* If it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

* And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinners?” (Prov. 11:31)

Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will
entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.

*Protector God, in the midst of fiery ordeals, we entrust ourselves to your care
alone, so that in the midst of suffering we may see the face of Christ. We
cannot comprehend your righteous judgment and your merciful love. We
commit all people to your care. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.*

November 27

1 Peter 5:1-7

As an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ,
as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed,
I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God,
exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly,
as God would have you do it—
not for sordid gain but eagerly.
Do not lord it over those in your charge,
but be examples to the flock.
And when the chief shepherd appears,
you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.

* How do these words shape your concept of leadership? What are some problems in our own motivation and attitude? In authoritarianism? (Only Christ is Lord.) What positive images of tending the flock describe you?

In the same way, you who are younger
must accept the authority of the elders.
And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility
in your dealings with one another, for
“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” (Prov. 3:34)

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God,
so that God may exalt you in due time.
Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you.

* What strengths do you see in humility? How do we clothe ourselves with humility in genuine, consistent caring?

* Leadership, including collaborative leadership, can produce anxiety. As difficult as it may be at times, how do you know that God cares for you as a leader? To whom do you go to be assured of God’s consistent care?

We cast our cares on you, Good Shepherd. May we tend your flock. Amen.

November 28

1 Peter 5:8-14

Discipline yourselves, keep alert.
Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around,
looking for someone to devour.
Resist him, steadfast in your faith,
for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world
are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

* If the devil is “prowling around,” looking for someone to devour, how do we resist? Knowing that Christians have suffered for their faith over the centuries, what kind of suffering do we face today? How is our suffering connected in Christ to all suffering?

After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace,
who has called you to eternal glory in Christ,
will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.
To God be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Through Silvanus, whom I consider a faithful brother,
I have written this short letter to encourage you
and to testify that this is the true grace of God.
Stand fast in it.
Our sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you,
sends you greetings; and as does my son Mark.
Greet one another with a kiss of love.
Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

* We have two blessings in these verses. God’s power remains and Christ’s peace is constant. How have you experienced God restoring, supporting, strengthening and establishing Christians and congregations? How do we encourage one another, constant in love, and support each other in Christ?

May the God of all grace, who has called us in Christ, give us peace. Amen.

November 29

2 Peter 1:1-11

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,
to those who have received a faith as precious as ours
through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:
May grace and peace be yours in abundance
in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Christ's divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness,
through the knowledge of the one
who called us by God's glory and goodness.
Thus God has given us his precious and very great promises,
so that through them you may escape from the corruption
that is in the world because of lust,
and may become participants in the divine nature.

For this very reason, you must make every effort
to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge,
and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance,
and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection,
and affection with love.

* For if these things are yours, they keep you from becoming ineffective and
unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. How?

Anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind,
and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins.

* Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call
and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. How is our call
affirmed? What if we do stumble? What does it mean in your life to have been
and to be cleansed?

*We give you thanks, gracious God, that entry into the eternal kingdom of our
Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for us. In his name, we
pray. Amen.*

November 30

2 Peter 1:12-15

I intend to keep on reminding you of these things,
though you know them already
and are established in the truth that has come to you.

I think it right, as long as I am in this body,
to refresh your memory,
since I know that my death will come soon,
as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me.

I will make every effort so that after my departure
you may be able at any time to recall these things.

* "Keep in mind that Jesus Christ has died for us and is risen from the dead.
He is our living lord; he is joy for all ages." Why do we remind people of
things they already know? What does it mean to be already established in a
truth? In what ways do we manage to forget? Why do we need to be called
back again and again to the heart of our faith, that God has loved us
unconditionally in Jesus Christ?

* First-century Christians believed Christ would come again soon. What is
your calling while you wait for his coming? Perhaps even more pertinent for
21st century Christians is the question, "What is our calling while we wait for
our own deaths?" whether they be imminent, or years away.

* How do we educate new, young Christians in the faith? How is lifelong
leaning an ongoing refreshing of our memory? What are the forces and ideas
that would pull us away from the truth of our faith?

*God of grace, you have given us precious promises and we have seen faith
growing among us in your congregations. Increase our passion for ongoing
education that we may hold fast to the truth of your Gospel. In Christ we pray.
Amen.*

December 1

2 Peter 1:16-21

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you
the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,
but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.
For he received honor and glory from God the Father
when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying,
“This is my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”
We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven,
while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.
You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp
shining in a dark place, until the day dawns,
and the morning star rises in your hearts.

First of all you must understand this,
that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation,
because no prophecy ever came by human will,
but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God.

* How do we discern the truth of our teaching? How do we help individuals
and faith communities sort out the messages they hear from various
information sources?

* What is the significance of the Transfiguration in the middle of Jesus’
ministry and of the voice from heaven? How is the Word continually
confirmed in *our* midst? Are we attentive, really attentive to the Word, as a
lamp shining in a dark place?

* How do you understand biblical inspiration and interpretation?

*God of truth, may we be attentive to your Word and speak your Truth in
Christ. Amen.*

December 2

2 Peter 2:1-3

False prophets arose among the people,
just as there will be false teachers among you,
who will secretly bring in destructive opinions.
They will even deny the Master who bought them—
bringing swift destruction on themselves.
Even so, many will follow their licentious ways,
and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned.

In their deep greed they will exploit you with deceptive words.
Their condemnation, pronounced against them long ago,
has not been idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

* How might we read these words and think about ancient times, about New
Testament times (the people to whom this letter was addressed), about many
times throughout the history of the church, and about our present time? When
have false prophets arisen?

* How do false prophets operate? What are their motivations? How are their
opinions destructive? When might we, too, be in danger of becoming false
prophets?

* Why do people follow false prophets? And how is the way of truth
maligned?

* Picture this poignant image: “...their condemnation, pronounced on them
long ago has not been idle.” Ponder the tragedy that their destruction “is not
asleep.” What does that mean to you? What does that mean for the church?
How, then, do we minister and lead?

*Righteous and gracious God, save us from our own greed. In our ministry and
in our leadership, may we not exploit those who are growing in faith. By the
power of your Spirit, give us wisdom for the difficult task of guiding your
Church. In the name and for the sake of our Master, Jesus, the Christ, who
bought us with his blood. Amen.*

December 3

2 Peter 2:4-10a

God did not spare the angels when they sinned,
but cast them into hell and committed them
to chains of deepest darkness
to be kept until the judgment.

God did not spare the ancient world,
even though God saved Noah, a herald of righteousness,
and seven other people,
but brought the flood on the world of godless people.

God condemned to extinction the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah,
making them an example of what is coming to the ungodly.
God rescued Lot, a righteous man, living among them day after day,
and tormented as he saw and heard their evil actions.

And so the Lord knows how to rescue godly people from their trials
and how to keep the unrighteous under punishment
until the day of judgment—
especially those who indulge their flesh in depraved lust,
and who despise authority.

* One cannot separate the God of the first testament from the God of the New Testament. How is God's righteousness consistent?

* What is the warning here? What is the good news here?

* When do you wonder about the lawlessness and wickedness you see around you (and in which we sometimes participate)? What is your prayer? What are your actions?

Righteous and holy God, we become discouraged, anxious and angry living in a world that does not outgrow its propensity for evil. We see no end to it all. We worry and we are afraid. May we take comfort knowing that you know how to rescue us from these trials and that in Christ Jesus you have. Give us peace; also give us courage. Amen.

December 4

2 Peter 2:10b-16

Bold and willful, they [false prophets] are not afraid
to slander the glorious ones, whereas angels,
though greater in might and power, do not bring against them
a slanderous judgment from the Lord.

These people, however, are like irrational animals,
mere creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed.
They slander what they do not understand
and when those creatures are destroyed, they also will be destroyed,
suffering the penalty for doing wrong.

They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime.
They are blots and blemishes, reeling in their dissipation
while they feast with you.
They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin.
They entice unsteady souls.
They have hearts trained in greed.
Accursed children!

They have left the straight road and have gone astray,
following the road of Balaam son of Bosor,
who loved the wages of doing wrong,
but was rebuked for his own transgression;
a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice
and restrained the prophet's madness. (Num. 22:4-35)

* These descriptions are horrific. We have been taught that judgment belongs to the Lord alone. Why, then, describe people this way? What is their danger to a faith community?

* Read the story from Numbers. What do you see there?

Righteous and Holy God, the human capacity for hearts trained in greed, and for slandering what we do not understand is enormous. Steady our souls in Christ. Amen.

December 5

2 Peter 2:17-22

These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm;
for them the deepest darkness has been reserved.
They speak bombastic nonsense, and with licentious desires of the flesh
they entice people who have just escaped from those who live in error.
They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption;
for people are slaves to whatever masters them.

If after they have escaped the defilements of the world
through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
they are again entangled in them and overpowered,
the last state has become worse for them than the first.

It would have been better for them
never to have known the way of righteousness
than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment
that was passed on to them.

It has happened to them according to the true proverb,
“The dog turns back to its own vomit,” (Prov. 26:11)
and “The sow is washed only to wallow in the mud.”

* Consider the images: waterless springs, bombastic nonsense, entanglements,
slaves of corruption. What corruption and temptation have you seen and
experienced recently?

* What false promises of freedom circulate in your world? Who or what are
our masters?

* What could it mean that one would be better off never to have known the
way of righteousness than to have turned away from it? What hope is there?

*Blessed, Holy God, you give springs of living water. In the death and
resurrection of Jesus Christ we have true and lasting freedom. May we
continue in the faith and speak your truth in the world. In Christ, Amen.*

December 6

2 Peter 3:1-7

Beloved, this is the second letter I am writing to you.
In them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention
by reminding you of the words
spoken in the past by the holy prophets,
and the commandment of the Lord and Savior
spoken through your apostles.

First of all you must understand this,
that in the last days scoffers will come
scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying,
“Where is the promise of his coming?
For ever since our ancestors died,
all things continue as they were
from the beginning of creation!”

They deliberately ignore this fact,
that by the word of God heavens existed long ago
and an earth was formed out of water,
and by means of water,
through which the world of that time
was deluged with water and perished.
But by the same word the present heavens
and earth have been reserved for fire,
being kept until the day of judgment
and destruction of the godless.

* Do we understand the consistency of God’s intentions from the beginning of
creation until now? What do we say when scoffers challenge us?

* Recall the many ways in which water is significant in the creation and
salvation accounts. How has water been significant in your life? How have the
waters of baptism shaped your life in Christ each day?

*May we remember, Holy God, that your Word existed long ago. And may we
constantly remind each other through learning and through ritual that your
Word was made flesh in Jesus the Christ so that our intentions might be rooted
in your promises. In Christ, Amen.*

December 7

2 Peter 3:8-13

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved,
that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years,
and a thousand years are like one day.

The Lord is not slow about promises,
as some think of slowness, but is patient with you,
not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

The day of the Lord will come like a thief,
and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise,
and the elements will be dissolved with fire,
and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

* What sort of person ought you to be, in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?

On the day of God the heavens will burn up and be destroyed,
and the heavenly bodies will be melted by the heat.

* Contemplate acts of destruction human beings have perpetrated. In God's patience, about what should all of us repent?

* How is your sense of time part of God's time? How does that shape your daily life?

In accordance with God's promise,
we wait for new heavens and a new earth,
where righteousness is at home.

We wait, timeless God, and while we wait we work for justice and mutual understanding and peace on the earth. Living in the new life in Christ, may we help create places where righteousness is at home, until that time when we live with you forever. In Christ, Amen.

December 8

2 Peter 3:14-18

Therefore, beloved, while you wait for these things,
strive to be found by Christ at peace,
without spot or blemish.

* How do you wait? Waiting in a line at the store or waiting for a friend is different than waiting on the Lord. Or, is it? How do you wait for Christ's coming, at the end time, or at the time of your own death? Does it depend upon how imminent you think that is?

* How do you live your life in the meantime? What does it mean to be without spot of blemish (We know we continue to sin.)? Will you be found at peace by Christ, within, and among your brothers and sisters in Christ?

Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.
So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you
according to the wisdom given him,
speaking of this as he does in all his letters.
There are some things in them hard to understand,
which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction,
as they do the other scriptures.

You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned,
beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless
and lose your own stability.

* What parts of these letters do people twist to their (our) own destruction?

* Surely there are times when we have been carried away with "the error of the lawless" and lose our stability. What wisdom do we still need to acquire?

May we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

December 9

1 John 1:1-4

We declare to you what was from the beginning,
what we have heard,
what we have seen with our own eyes,
what we have looked at
and touched with our hands,
concerning the word of life.

This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it,
and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father
and was revealed to us—
we declare to you what we have seen and heard
so that you also may have fellowship with us;
and truly our fellowship is with the Father
and with God's Son Jesus Christ.

We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

* The good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is a story told from one generation to the next. How did you first hear? Were you very young? A teenager? In your middle or older years? Recall who, through the Spirit, helped shape your faith and form your life in Christ. Who recalled the story for you at times of doubt or distress?

* We have not actually looked Jesus in the eyes nor touched him; however, what have you heard and seen with your own eyes and touched with your own hands concerning the Word of life?

* Why do you declare it to others? Or do we as often as we might? How does our caringly sharing the story grow the fellowship of faith?

We give you thanks, Christ Jesus, that we have eternal life with you through your incarnation, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection. By the power of the Holy Spirit, fill us with new life in you that we might make sure others, far and near, also hear and see and feel your love. Amen.

December 10

1 John 1:5-10

This is the message we have heard from Christ and proclaim to you,
that God is light and in God there is no darkness at all.

If we say that we have fellowship with Christ
while we are walking in darkness,
we lie and do not do what is true;
but if we walk in the light as God is in the light,
we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin.

* God is light! What is "darkness" to you? Fears, lies, deception? How do we *walk in* darkness and what does that do to us and to our relationships?

* Image being in the light as God is in the light. How have you experienced that? What can you now see? Image the cleansing that Christ brings in life.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,
and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins, the one who is faithful and just
will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar,
And God's word is not in us.

* We begin confession with, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." When have you been deceived? When have you deceived yourself? Others? How have you tried to deceive God?

* How does the assurance that we have forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus, encourage us—liberate us—to confess our sins?

May we walk in your light, holy God. We have sinned and have at times preferred the darkness. Open our eyes that we may see you. We confess our sins, those we know, and those that we hide even from ourselves. Forgive us that we might live in the light of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

December 11

1 John 2:1-7

My little children, I am writing these things to you
so that you may not sin.
But if anyone does sin,
we have an advocate with God, Jesus Christ the righteous;
and Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins,
and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

By this we may be sure that we know Christ,
if we obey God's commandments.
Whoever says, "I have come to know Christ,"
but does not obey his commandments,
is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist;
but whoever obeys Christ's word, truly in this person
the love of God has reached perfection.

By this we may be sure that we are in Christ:
Whoever says, "I abide in Christ," ought to walk just as he walked.
Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment,
but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning;
the old commandment is the word that you have heard.

* "Beloved." "Little children." What do these signs of endearment say to you?

* How does this key passage that Christ is our advocate, the atoning sacrifice for our sins and the sins of the whole world shape our ministry and mission globally and locally?

* How does the love of God reach its perfection? What is the connection between abiding in Christ and walking as Christ walked?

Merciful God, you have given us an advocate in Christ Jesus, for surely we do sin. Blessed Holy Spirit, you have led us to know Christ. May we abide in Christ and walk as he walked. In his name we pray. Amen.

December 12

1 John 2:8-14

I am writing you a new commandment that is true in Christ and in you,
because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.
Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister,
is still in the darkness.

Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light,
and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling.
But whoever hates another believer is in darkness,
walks in darkness, and does not know the way to go,
because the darkness has brought on blindness.

* What are some dark places in your faith community? How does living with Christ, the Light, among you, change darkness into light?

I am writing to you little children,
because your sins are forgiven on account of Christ's name.
I am writing to you, fathers, because you know the One
who is from the beginning.
I am writing to you, young people,
because you have conquered the evil one.
I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.
I write to you fathers,
because you know the One who is from the beginning
I write to you, young people,
because you are strong
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

* Why the repetition? To whom could you write (by whatever form of communication) in your congregation? What would you say to those who have moved on from your congregation, or who have simply left?

God, you bind us together in a new relationship because our sins are forgiven on account of Christ. Keep us one, even as you lead us more clearly into the light. In Christ, Amen.

December 13

1 John 2:15-20

Do not love the world or the things in the world.
The love of God is not in those who love the world;
for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh,
the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—
comes not from God but from the world.

And the world and its desire are passing away,
but those who do the will of God live forever.

Children, it is the last hour!
As you have heard that antichrist is coming,
so now many antichrists have come.

From this we know that it is the last hour.
They went out from us, but they did not belong to us;
for if they had belonged to us,
they would have remained with us.
But by going out they made it plain
that none of them belongs to us.
But you have been anointed by the Holy One,
and all of you have knowledge.

* What does it mean that we should not love the world? We are, of course,
also called to love the world. What is the difference? Who are our gods? What
is our mission?

* How have people through the centuries been quick to label someone whom
they do not like as the antichrist? Christ is not simply spiritual, or a spiritual
idea. Why do people try to deny the true incarnate identity of Christ?

*God of all creation, we realize that the world is passing away, and yet it—and
we—are still here. Forgive us our disbelief. May we who have been anointed
as ambassadors of your love and stewards of your earth do your will. Amen.*

December 14

1 John 2:21-27

I write to you not because you do not know the truth,
but because you know it,
and you know that no lie comes from the truth.
Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?
This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.

No one who denies the Son has the Father;
Everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also.
Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you.
If what you heard from the beginning abides in you,
then you will abide in the Son and in the Father.
And this is what God has promised us, eternal life.

I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you.
As for you, the anointing that you received from God abides in you,
and so you do not need anyone to teach you.
As God's anointing teaches you about all things,
and is true and is not a lie,
and just as it has taught you, abide in Christ.

* No lie comes from the truth. What are some ways that you have seen people
misinterpreting or misusing the teachings of the faith? How have we done so?

* What does it mean to abide? When we, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
abide in the Father and the Son, what does that mean for our lives?

* Teaching is an awesome responsibility. Who are the teachers among you?
How does your faith community call forth and prepare people to teach? How
do you sustain them?

*God of truth, keep us in the truth. Teach us, guide us, nurture us. We believe
that Christ came in the flesh, truly human, truly God. We thank you for the gift
of calling to speak and teach and minister in the name of Christ Jesus. Keep us
faithful in him. Amen.*

December 15

1 John 2:28-3:3

Little children, abide in Christ,
so that when he is revealed we may have confidence
and not be put to shame before him at this coming.
If you know that Christ is righteous,
you may be sure that everyone who does right
has been born of him.

See what love God has given us,
that we should be called children of God;
and that is what we are.

The reason the world does not know us
is that it did not know God.

Beloved, we are God's children now;
what we will be has not yet been revealed.

What we do know is this:

When Jesus is revealed, we will be like him,
for we will see him as he is.
All who have this hope in Christ will purify themselves,
just as he is pure.

* What does it mean, really mean to you, to be called a child of God? To be born of Christ? To be called to live pure lives because Christ is pure? Sinners, though we are, what do you, as a Christian, look like to the world?

* If we do not know what we will be like when we are with Christ forever, how does that shape our lives now? Our ministry? Our care for the world, even if the "world does not know God?"

Jesus Christ, we wait for the time when we meet you face to face. And yet you have been revealed already in the incarnation. May we who have been born of you, who were born of a human mother, abide in you, that the world may see you through our lives. Amen.

December 16

1 John 3:4-10

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness.
You know that Christ was revealed to take away sins,
and in him there is no sin.

No one who abides in Christ sins;
no one who sins has either seen him or known him.
Little children, let no one deceive you.

Everyone who does what is right is righteous,
just as Christ is righteous.

Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil;
for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.

The Son of God was revealed for this purpose,
to destroy the works of the devil.

Those who have been born of God do not sin
because God's seed abides in them;

They cannot sin, because they have been born of God.

The children of God and the children of the devil
are revealed in this way:
all who do not do what is right are not from God,
nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

* In Christ there is no sin; we are in Christ, and yet we still sin. How do you deal with the fact that you still sin? Is this of the devil? Are we not from God? What difference does it make—now—that the devil has been defeated?

* If we try to distinguish ourselves as Christian from others by thinking it is only Christians who do what is right and love others, what problems arise?

We thank you righteous and merciful God, that you revealed Jesus Christ to the world. We confess our sin, trusting that we no longer belong to sin, but to you. Loose the world from the power of sin that we might love and care for each other. In Christ, Amen.

December 17

1 John 3:11-17

This is the message you have heard from the beginning,
that we should love one another.

We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one
and murdered his brother. (Gen. 4:8)

* Why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Did he think so? Do we think that about our deeds?

Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters,
that the world hates you.

We know that we have passed from death to life
because we love one another.

Whoever does not love abides in death.

* Are we saved by our much loving? Or is it rather that when we abide in Christ we have his love living in and through us? When do we slip back into abiding in death-like ways?

All who hate a brother or sister are murderers,
and you know that murderers
do not have eternal life abiding in them.

We know love by this, that Christ laid down his life for us—
and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

* How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods
and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

* How easy it is to attempt to justify ourselves by saying we have never committed murder! But who among us has not hated someone? How do we kill each other "nicely" each day? What are the fruits of hatred?

Christ Jesus, in laying down your life for us, you have given us new life to share and freedom to care. Give us insight; give us courage to understand the world's need and seek justice. In your name we pray. Amen.

December 18

1 John 3:18-24

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech,
but in truth and action.

By this we will know that we are from the truth
and will reassure our hearts before God
whenever our hearts condemn us;
for God is greater than our hearts,
and God knows everything.

Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us,
we have boldness before God;
and we receive from him whatever we ask,
because we obey God's commandment
and do what pleases God.

This is God's commandment,
that we should believe in the name of God's son Jesus Christ
and love one another, just as God has commanded us.

All who obey God's commandment abide in God,
and God abides in them.

By this we know that God abides in us,
by the Spirit that God has given us.

* Here we have the core of Christian faith and life. What does it mean to you and to your faith community that we are called to love in truth and *action*?

* Since God is greater than our hearts, why do we continue to berate ourselves? Since God knows everything, and forgives in Christ Jesus, why do we hang on to past hurts? How might you be more bold before God? What might God be calling you to do?

God, who is love, may we love, not simply in word or speech but in truth and action. By the power of the spirit, may the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ abide in us. May we together abide in him. Amen.

December 19

1 John 4:1-12

Beloved, do not believe every spirit; test them to see if they are from God.
Many false prophets have gone out in to the world.
Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,
and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.
This is the spirit of the antichrist that you have heard is coming
and now is in the world.
Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them;
for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.
They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world,
and the world listens to them.
We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us,
and whoever is not from God does not listen to us.
From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

* What are some “spirits” to which we should not listen?

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God:
Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.
God’s love was revealed among us in this way:
God sent God’s only Son into the world
so that we might live through him.
In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us
and sent God’s Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.
Beloved, since God loved us so much,
we also ought to love one another.
No one has ever seen God; if we love one another,
God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us.

God of love, may we love one another as you have loved us in Christ. Amen.

December 20

1 John 4:13-21

By this we know that we abide in God and God in us,
because God has given us the Spirit.
We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son
as the Savior of the world.
God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God,
and they abide in God.
So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them.
Love has been perfected among us in this:
that we may have boldness on the day of judgment,
because as Christ is, so are we in this world.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear;
for fear has to do with punishment,
and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.
We love because God first loved us.

Those who say, “I love God”
and hate their brothers and sisters are liars
for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen,
cannot love God whom they have not seen.
The commandment we have from God is this:
those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

* How does fear prevent us from loving? Whom or what do you fear?

* How hard it is to love all our brothers and sisters. How is God perfecting
God’s own love in us so that we can love in relationships where we hate?

*Spirit of the living, loving God, increase our trust so that we may confess that
Jesus is our Redeemer. Abide in us so that we may boldly love all peoples of
the world, especially those who are the hardest for us to love. In Christ. Amen.*

December 21

1 John 5:1-5

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God,
and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.
By this we know that we love the children of God,
when we love God and obey God's commandments.

For the love of God is this, that we obey God's commandments.
And God's commandments are not burdensome,
for whatever is born of God
conquers the world.

And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.
Who is it that conquers the world
but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

* In what way are God's commandments not burdensome? Think through the commandments (Ex. 20). Ponder just one or two, and consider how God's love—God's love of us and our love of God—can lift burdens.

* After all the passages about love, why are we now to think about *conquering* the world? What does “conquer” in this context mean? When did the church throughout history, “conquer for Christ” in ways that oppressed peoples? In a positive way, how does our faith conquer the world, releasing us from fear and hatred and greed?

Parenting God, strengthen our faith in Christ Jesus so that we may live according to your commandments. Forgive our sin, liberate us in love so that we may care for your world, not as burden, but as gift. Shape our lives for mission which draws people to you and to one another in your great love in Christ Jesus. Amen.

December 22

1 John 5:6-17

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ.
The Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.
Three testify: the Spirit, the water and blood, and these three agree.
If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater;
the testimony of God is that God has testified to the Son.
Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts.
Those who do not believe in God have made God a liar.
This is the testimony: God gave us eternal life in God's Son.
Whoever has the Son has life;
whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

I write these things to you who believe
in the name of the Son of God
so that you may know that you have eternal life.

This is the boldness we have in Christ, that if we ask anything
according to God's will, God hears us.
If we know that God hears us,
we know we have obtained the requests.
If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a moral sin,
you will ask, and God will give life to such a one.
There is sin that is mortal: I do not say that you should pray about that.
All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal.

* How is believing in the Son the core of the Gospel? How do the Spirit, the water and the blood testify? How does Christ give life to your life?

* For centuries people have worried about what is a mortal sin. This passage does not say. How should we pray for life for those caught in their sins?

As we await the celebration of your birth, Jesus Christ, may we place our hearts in your hands. Prepare us to share this greatest of all gifts with everyone. In your name, Amen

December 23

1 John 5:18-21

We know that those who are born of God do not sin,
but the one who was born of God protects them,
and the evil one does not touch them.

We know that we are God's children,
and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one.

* Of course we sin. So how can we say that we do not? And how can we say that the evil one does not touch Christians? What is the point of this passage? How is it true in Christ?

* The world for 21st century Christians is very different than the New Testament world. What are the powers under which the world still groans? How can we be life-giving prophets and servants today?

We know that the Son of God has come
and has given us understanding
so that we may know God who is true;
and we are in God who is true,
in God's Son Jesus Christ.
Christ is the true God and eternal life.

Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

* How is idolatry the central sin in every age? Who or what are our gods? Who or what do we fear, love and trust above all things?

You have come, Christ Jesus, and you come again to the world as we move from Advent into Christmas. Increase our understanding, increase our faith, increase our love. Amen.

December 24

2 John 1-6

From the Elder
To the dear lady and to her children
whom I truly love
and not only I but also all who know the truth
because the truth remains with us and will be with us forever.

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us
from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son,
in truth and love.

I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth.
Just as we have been commanded by God.
But now, dear lady, I ask you,
not as though I was writing you a new commandment,
but one we have had from the beginning,
let us love one another.

And this is love, that we walk according to the commandments;
this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—
you must walk in it.

* On this Christmas Eve, we ponder Mary giving birth to Jesus. Just as John writes to the dear lady and her children, with whom do you want to share the truth of the love of God in Christ?

* Let us love one another! Let us walk in love. In the midst of whatever this day holds for you, how will you walk in love?

O God of Love, we give thanks for your coming among us in truth and love. May your grace, mercy and peace indeed be among us this night and always, in Christ Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem we pray. Amen.

December 25

2 John 7-13

Many deceivers have gone out into the world,
those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come into the flesh;
any such person is a deceiver and the antichrist!

Be on your guard so that you do not lose what we have worked for,
but may receive a full reward.

Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ,
but goes beyond it, does not have God;
whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone
who comes to you and does not bring this teaching.

Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink.
Instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face.
So that our joy may be complete.

The children of your dear sister send you their greetings.

* John calls those who do not confess Christ not only deceivers but the antichrist. And he warns these early Christians not to receive or welcome anyone who does not bring the teachings of Christ, lest they participate in their evil deeds. On this day of all days, we Christians want to practice hospitality. What might be John's warning to us today?

* In the early church seeing those far away who shared the faith was a rare and treasured thing. In this Christmas season, from whom have you heard? With whom will you talk? Whom (perhaps a stranger) might you welcome into your home?

O God, who has come into the flesh, may we not be deceived by idolatrous hopes or treasures of untruth. But rather, gather us around you closely and extend our arms to greet and to gather in love those for whom you were born, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

December 26

3 John 1-10

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul. I was overjoyed when some of your friends arrived and told me how faithful you are to the truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

Beloved, you are so faithful in whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you. They have testified of your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God. They set out on their trip in the service of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. Therefore we ought to support them so they may become co-workers.

I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing in spreading false charges against us. He refuses to welcome the friends and even prevents those who do so and drives them out of the church.

* To whom have you written lately (by any means of communication)? Over what do you rejoice? What concerns you? How are you connecting Christians in the faith?

* How do we sort out the truth, live out this truth in love, accept strangers as friends, and build up a faith community?

Christ, our living Lord, may you alone be the connection and the communication among all who love you. Give us the strength, love, courage and constancy to be wise leaders among your people. Amen.

December 27

3 John 11-15

Do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good.
Whoever does good is from God;
 whoever does evil has not seen God.

We, and everyone, have testified favorably about Demetrius,
 and so has truth itself.
You know that our testimony is true.

I have much to write to you,
 but I would rather not write with pen and ink;
 instead I hope to see you soon,
 and we will talk together face to face.

Peace to you.
The friends send you their greetings.
 Greet the friends there,
 each by name.

* Who, do you suppose, is Demetrius? What is his story? What might be the complexities in that story? And what are the complexities of stories within your own faith community right now?

* What is good? And what is truth? To what truth are you called to testify?

God, from whom all good comes, surround us with your truth that our writing and our speaking face to face might be grounded in you alone. We pray for peace, for those close to us and for the whole world. In Christ, Amen.

December 28

Jude 1-4

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James,
 to those who are called,
 who are beloved in God the Father
 and kept safe for Jesus Christ:

May mercy, and peace, and love be yours in abundance.

Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you
 about the salvation we share,
I find it necessary to write and appeal to you
 to contend for the faith.

Certain intruders have stolen in among you,
 people whom long ago the Scriptures predicted
 the condemnation they have received.
 people who pervert the grace of God into licentiousness
 and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

* Intruders! It would be so easy to quickly label people as “intruders” in our faith community. But, who among us (including even ourselves) does not in some way “pervert the grace of God”?

* Jesus Christ is our *only* Master and Lord. Ponder that. How do we cherish the gift of being called, beloved and kept safe for Jesus Christ?

We thank you, gracious God, for the mercy, peace and love which you have given us in such abundance. May we not be apathetic or complacent, but ready to speak forthrightly about the faith that was entrusted to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

December 29

Jude 5-12a

I remind you, though you are fully informed,
that the Lord who once for all saved a people out of the land of Egypt
afterward destroyed those who did not believe.
And the angels who did not keep their own position,
but left their proper dwelling
God has kept in eternal chains and deepest darkness
for the judgment of the great Day.

In the same way these dreamers defile the flesh,
reject authority and slander the glorious ones.
But when the archangel Michael contended with the devil
and disputed about the body of Moses,
he did not dare to bring a condemnation of slander against him
but said ‘The Lord rebuke you!’

These people slander whatever they do not understand
and they are destroyed by things that, like irrational animals,
they know by instinct.

Woe to them! They go the way of Cain,
and abandon themselves to Balaam’s error for the sake of gain
and perish in Korah’s rebellion.

These are blemishes on their love-feasts,
while they feast with you without fear, feeding only themselves.

* Jude warns against the “blemishes on love-feasts,” defiling the flesh, rejecting authority, slandering, destroying, following Cain’s way (Genesis 4:3-8) abandoning themselves to “Balaam’s error” (Number 22:1-35), and perishing in “Korah’s rebellion (Numbers 16:11-35).” What are our blemishes?

God of history and of history’s rebellious, defiling people, we, too, as a faith community, stand under your judgment. May we not only guard against slandering, shameless people in our midst, but place ourselves at your feet of mercy, in the name of Christ the Redeemer. Amen.

December 30

Jude 12b-19

They are waterless clouds carried along by the winds;
autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted;
wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame;
wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness
has been reserved forever.

* Ponder waterless clouds, trees twice dead, wild waves, and wandering stars. Really picture such images, such situations, such a people. Feel the depth of anguish.

It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied: “The Lord is coming with ten thousands of God’s holy ones, to execute judgment on all, to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness they have committed and of all the harsh things ungodly sinners have spoken against God.” (Gen. 5:18, 21-24)

There are grumblers and malcontents,
indulgent in their own lusts;
bombastic in speech,
flattering people to their own advantage.

But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; for they said to you, “In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts.” (2 Peter 3:3)
It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions.

* Are you at times distressed, depressed, by the grumblers, malcontents, scoffers and those who cause divisions? What strength is God giving your faith community?

God of judgment, convict us, too, of our grumbling, discontent and ungodliness that the Spirit might open our hearts once again to your mercy and love. Build us together into the Body of Christ in whom we pray. Amen.

December 31

Jude 20-25

But, you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith;
pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God;
look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ
that leads to eternal life.

Have mercy on those who are wavering;
save others by snatching them out of the fire;
and have mercy on still others with fear,
hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.

Now to the one who is able to keep you from falling,
and to make you stand without blemish
in the presence of God's glory with rejoicing,
to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord,
be glory, majesty, power, and authority,
before all time and now and forever. Amen.

* How can a faith community help those who are wavering in faith and whose lives are filled with fear? How do you build yourselves up in the faith? Who helps you pray? Who could help you remember the love and mercy of God?

* Where do you stand on this last day of the year? God is able to keep us from falling. No matter the circumstances of the past twelve months, how has God done that this year?

God of all time, we praise your glory and we rejoice in your steadfast love. To you, God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, now and forever. Amen.