

The Journey

GOD'S WORD FOR DAILY LIVING



JANUARY – APRIL 2024



Bible Reading Fellowship

**Eternal God,
Your word is always a light for our way;
Open our eyes and enlighten our spirit that we
may understand your truth in all its power and
holiness.**

**Give us courage to allow it to transform our lives
and enable us to grow more and more into the
image of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.**

Amen

The Journey is a daily Bible reading program which covers the Bible every five years. Each month addresses a book of the Bible or a Scripture theme.

Each day's reading consists of a 10-15 verse Bible passage followed by clear, helpful commentary. A reflection and discussion question and applicable prayer are also included. The passage of Scripture should be read just before studying *The Journey* commentary.

The following features make *The Journey* unique:

1. Commentary on Scripture to aid in better understanding the passage (as distinguished from devotional material based upon Scripture)
2. Presented in a relational way (i.e., what does this say about how God wants me to live?)
3. Easily adapted to group study (the "Reflection and Discussion" questions at the end of each lesson can be used for group discussion)
4. Special readings for Advent and Lent

We sincerely hope that you will find this resource a valuable companion on your "journey" through productive Bible reading for many years to come.

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The Bible Reading Fellowship was founded in Winter Park, Florida in 1971 as a non-profit, non-denominational ministry, with the primary purpose of bringing people into a greater knowledge of God through systematic reading of the Bible. BRF encourages and facilitates Bible reading for Christian growth by creating, publishing, and distributing Bible commentaries and related materials including *The Journey* and *Good News Daily*.

The Bible Reading Fellowship is committed to the Church's classic teaching that the Bible is the inspired word of God and contains all things necessary for salvation.

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*he Bible Reading Fellowship is deeply grateful to all who have so generously contributed to this issue of The Journey, especially the writers: **Shirley R. MacNaughton** (John: Chapters 1-9), and (in the order listed) **Robert B. Hall, Donald M. Hultstrand, William H. Folwell, Alan Avery, Jonathan Coffey, Jr., Mildred Green, Ellis Brust, Stuart Jones, Mark Pearson, Kathryn L. Stirk, John Rasmus, Terry Sweeney, Martha Honaker, Jeannie C. Olbrych, Mary Michael, and Nancy S. Ferguson** (A Journey through the Bible). The Sabbath Times for 2024 are taken from the writings of Samuel M. Shoemaker.*



John

Chapters 1-9

Monday, January 1

Read: John 20:30-31

Introduction

As with the synoptic gospels and all of Paul's letters, so the Gospel of John was written for a purpose. John defines his purpose in writing: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:30-31).

The other gospels had already been written. Matthew, Mark, and Luke took the historical facts of Jesus' life and told them in such a way that their readers could understand not only the events and the teachings but also their comprehensions and convictions about the meaning of those events. To that extent those three gospels were neither biographies nor books of history, but books of theology written to create belief and to confirm the writers' inspired belief in Jesus of Nazareth as the son of God and as the Savior who brought life. In all probability, John had read and knew the synoptic gospels. He, like Matthew and Mark and Luke, tries to impart to his readers not only the facts of Jesus' life but the meaning of those facts.

Moreover, John takes it all one step further. He presents the facts of Jesus' life and in a cosmic way, in a way beyond time and space, interprets them for us. As John Marsh has written, "The Fourth Gospel records not primarily what the crowd of eyewitnesses saw and heard of the Jesus of History, but what the disciples saw of the glory of the Word of God (1:14); what they apprehended, as believers, when Jesus was risen from the dead (2:22). The Fourth Gospel is less a witness to history than an Apostolic witness to that which is beyond history, but which is nevertheless the meaning

of the ‘Jesus of history’, and therefore the meaning of all history.” John was not writing to convert unbelievers but to reinforce and enlarge the faith of those who already believed. Understanding John’s purpose in writing, and hoping to reinforce and enlarge our own faith, we will find this gospel to be of enormous value to us as we live a Christian life.

R&D What answers do I give to the question “Who is Jesus?” What questions do I have about him that I can bring to my reading of John’s gospel? (Write them down. Look for answers!)

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, that John and others have given us a record of Jesus’ life and its meaning to guide us in how we are to live.

Tuesday, January 2

Read: John 1:1-5, 9-14

The Word

An old axiom, “Actions speak louder than words and also speak fewer lies,” endures because it points to a common human failing. Often our words and our actions do not match. Often there is little correlation between what we say and what we do. My clergy husband considers as one of his highest compliments the phrase often used in describing him, “What you see and hear is what you get.” How important is integrity between word and action!

In Scripture, however, the Word of God is more than mere speech; God’s word is never something separated from God’s person and action. “In the beginning God created... And God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light” (Genesis 1:1, 3). In Jewish thought the Word of God was an active force or power going forth in fulfillment of His will and having results. The “Word” is not mere speech but dynamic force indistinguishable from the Person.

Using this Hebrew image of God as Word, John proclaims Jesus as God’s Word, Jesus as God. John makes an immediate claim about the divinity of Jesus. Jesus was not a created being but present from the beginning. Indeed, he was the very agent of creation.

Jesus existed from all eternity. Arthur Gossip describes Jesus as the “Word” in this way: “Peer into the dim past as far as

you may, you will never come upon God alone. Always, from the beginning less beginning, there has been God. And always there has been Another with him, who is to God what a (person's) word and thoughts are to (that person); through whom God acts; and by whom he expresses himself."

The Word speaks to all men and women urging each individual to come into a personal, intimate relationship with God. As all life is a gift from God so also, through Jesus the Word, the possibility of knowing God is a gift from God. Those who have welcomed Jesus Christ into their lives, live in the knowledge of God.

R&D Where can I see God's action in my life drawing me into relationship with Him? How has He spoken to me?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You are more compassionate and loving than we can comprehend, and we desperately need You every minute of every day.

Wednesday, January 3

Read: John 1:14-18

The Skin-On God

An old story details the plight of little Nancy. Little Nancy had developed an increasing fear of thunderstorms. When a storm came, the ensuing flashes of lightning and peals of thunder sent her tumbling from her bed in a headlong flight to the safe haven of her parents' room. Once there she pleaded to spend the rest of the night in the safety of their bed. Seeking to reassure their little daughter but also to help her overcome her fears, her parents walked with her back to her room with soothing words of reassurance. "Remember, Nancy, that God loves you and is here with you." Nancy, however, had the last word. Looking into her mother's face, she replied, "I know that God loves me and that He is here *but* I need somebody with skin on." You and I, too, have needed someone with skin on in order to know the reality of God. We have been given the great gift of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. At the very least, this great gift means three things to us.

(1) We are never alone and there is nothing that we can experience that Jesus does not know and understand. There is no

depth of sorrow or joy, no turmoil of soul, no rejection that we must experience alone. Jesus has felt it all in his own life and he will walk beside us.

(2) We can know what God is like by looking at Jesus. It is only in Jesus that we see God's perfection, and only in him that we see a flawless likeness of the Father. We know that the Father is generous, compassionate, loving, and forgiving because we see these traits in Jesus. As Jesus behaved, so we see what the Father is like.

(3) Through Jesus, anything and everything is ours for the taking. "All things come of thee, O Lord" (1 Chronicles 24:14). A personal relationship with God is ours through Jesus. That relationship is the key to all the bounty in God's storehouse of blessings, resources to meet any need that arises in our lives. It is sometimes hard to learn that none of the important things in life can be earned. It is even harder, sometimes, for some to learn that all are available to us through responsive hearts and minds which can hear and react to God's offer in Christ Jesus.

R&D Am I able to accept the Christian claim that God became a human being and lived on this earth? What impact does that truth have on my life?

Prayer: Blessed Father, You did it all in Jesus Christ. It's our turn to follow the path You have set for us.

Thursday, January 4

Read: John 1:6-8, 15, 19-34

The Baptizer

My education began many years ago in a one room schoolhouse in rural Minnesota. One of the essential tools for the teacher of that era was a long, slender wooden rod which was called a pointer. It was used by the teacher or the student in recital to point out important bits of information on the blackboard or maps or charts which were a part of the lesson. The pointer was a tool used to point to something special.

John the Baptist was just such a pointer in the hands of God, used by God to prepare for and to highlight the beginning of

the ministry of Jesus. “There appeared a man named John. He was sent from God... he came to bear witness to the light” (vv.6-8, 33).

One commentator described the first chapter of John as a “tale about John the Baptist and Jesus,” but it is much more profound than that for the gospel writer. Highlighting the intertwining relationship between the Baptist and Jesus at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry was extremely important. Rivalry between the disciples of John and those of Jesus grew during the ministry of each man. Many years after the death of both Jesus and John, when Paul preached in Ephesus, he found disciples of the Baptist. Here, early in his gospel, John the evangelist speaks of the proper relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus.

John was an awesome and unique figure. In a time when the prophetic voice was silent and the religious leaders of the day huddled around the temple in Jerusalem and worried more about the *status quo* than people’s relationship with God, John appeared out of the desert, dressed in clothing reminiscent of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8) and preaching to all people of the need for repentance. His message targeted not only the individual for his wrongdoing but also the nation of Israel for its failure to fulfill its responsibilities as the people of God (Matthew 3:7-10).

John caught the interest of the religious establishment. Emissaries were sent out from Jerusalem to discover his purpose in preaching. When questioned, John’s mind was clear about the purpose of his call and mission (Luke 3:2-3). He saw his role as the pointer to the coming Messiah. He saw himself as the one sent to prepare the nation for the Messiah, like those who prepared the roads for a visit of a king or conqueror. He understood that his role was to be a witness. He recognized the baptism he offered was preparatory and temporary, one to be replaced by a permanent baptism of the Spirit.

Kinsman of Jesus (Luke 1:36), John has not known him to be the Messiah but recognizes him as the person for whom he is waiting when Jesus comes to be baptized. John points to Jesus as “the Son of God,” the chosen “son” of God.

R&D *What is there in my Christian life which points to my relationship with Jesus Christ? Do the things I do and the words I say help prepare others to know him?*

Prayer: *Lord, may we put into action the call upon us as disciples of Christ to prepare the way for him to reach those around us who do not know him.*

Friday, January 5

Read: John 1:34-51

Searchers/Finders (1)

The poet Robert Herrick wrote, “Attempt the end, and never stand to doubt; Nothing’s so hard, but search will find it out.” John draws a picture for us of people who were searching for a surer and deeper knowledge of God. The Baptist had been called by God to issue the divine summons to Israel to draw nearer to Him. God’s promise to John the Baptist was that he would see the chosen Messiah who would come after him. When that promise was fulfilled, John immediately pointed to Jesus as that Messiah who was to come. The consequence of the Baptist’s witness was that some who like himself were searchers, left him and followed Jesus.

These searchers, Andrew, another disciple (possibly John the apostle), Simon Peter, Philip, and Nathanael came to Jesus. They came bringing a searching heart and an incomplete and inadequate understanding of God. Some were searching for a deliverer and heard the Baptist’s description of Jesus as the “Lamb of God” (v.29, 35) and as “the Son of God” (v.34), the Messiah. Some were searching for knowledge, and they saw Jesus as “Rabbi” (v.38). Some searched for confidence and security and saw in Jesus the fulfillment of the Old Testament (v.45). Some searched for intervention in their own life and the life of the nation and saw Jesus as the new “King of Israel” (v.49).

The first disciples came to Jesus, and they followed him because of the witness of others but primarily because they possessed a searching heart. They knew intuitively a truth of life which St.

Augustine later put into words, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, and the heart of man is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.”

How searching is my heart? How open are my ears to hear the call of God in my life? What is there that I need from Him? Is it a deliverer from sin and self? Is it knowledge of and about Him? Is it confidence and security or trust?

R&D *What action can I take today to imitate the example of these first disciples and follow Jews?*

Prayer: *Lord God, we are always searching for something in this life. May our searching always be focused toward You.*

Saturday, January 6

Read: John 1:35-51

Searchers/Finders (2)

An anonymous saying assures, “Whoever walks towards God one cubit, God runs towards him twain.” Like a coin, our knowing God has two sides. God needs and desires an open, searching heart from us, but He is also and always the seeking, searching God. In the marvelously reassuring parables of the lost, Jesus describes a God who will never rest until He has found each “coin,” gathered to Himself each “sheep,” searched out each “son” (Luke 15).

Jesus responds to the overture of some of the first disciples with the invitation, “Come and see” (v.39). Others he invites with a simple directness, “Follow me” (v.43). He understands them as individual persons, accepts them as they are and still challenges them to become more (vv.42, 47). He discerns and accepts the faith that they bring and promises them more faith (vv.50-51). How can Jesus say and do such things? Jesus claims to be the meeting place, the contact point, between God and man.

In a former time, the patriarch Jacob experienced such a contact point with God. As he fled in fear for his life from his angry brother Esau, Jacob stopped at Bethel to rest. In a dream he saw a ladder come down from heaven and angels ascending and descending upon it revealing God’s presence and promise of protection for him (Genesis 28). Recalling that vivid Old Testament

image, C. K. Barrett writes, “John ... sees in Jesus, the Son of man ... an eternal contact between heaven and earth, God and man, and uses the ladder and the ascending and descending angels to express his conception. The Son of Man is both in heaven and on earth (3:13); he descends to give life to the world (6:27, 53); he ascends again to his glory (6:62); but this ascent and glorification are by way of the Cross (3:14).”

Jesus is the point of contact with God for you and me. In him, our search ceases and we become finders. We find and are found as we answer the same calls which the first disciples answered. “Come and see!” “Follow me!” His promise is “You shall see greater things than these” (v.50).

R&D What difference does it make in my life that I have answered the call of Jesus Christ? What “greater things” have I seen because he is the center of my life?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Christ, for coming into my life and setting me on the road to wholeness.

Sunday, January 7

Sabbath Time

And he said to them, “Follow me.” Matthew 4:19a

I saw that to give my life to God without reservations meant *four things*: a break with all conscious sin; adequate time for God every morning to read, pray, and listen; lifework chosen solely on the basis of God’s will; giving away to others what God gave to me.

Monday, January 8

Read: John 2:11, 20:30, 31

Deed or Doer?

There is a hauntingly beautiful and meditative renewal hymn which begins with the words, “Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus.” John tells us that the miracles which Jesus performed were designed to do precisely that, to open the eyes of those who were present and enable them to see Jesus, to see who Jesus was.

John describes the miracles as “signs” (2:11), and he lists seven miracles or signs in his gospel. Like a road sign which is not

important in itself except that it points to a destination, John's gospel sees these signs as not important in themselves except as they pointed beyond themselves to identify Jesus. A sign was given to lead the observer's attention away from the deed to the doer, and the significance was found not in what was *done* but rather in *who was doing the deed*. R. Tasker speaks for the many commentators when he writes, "None of the miracles of Jesus were kind actions to alleviate human distress and *nothing more*. They were, as this gospel invariably calls them, *signs* displaying the glory of Jesus and the wonder of His redeeming love." Consider what we "see" about Jesus in the seven signs in John's gospel:

- (1) He turns water into wine (2:1-11)
- (2) He heals an official's son (4:46-54)
- (3) He heals a lame man (5:2-9)
- (4) He feeds 5,000 people (6:4-13)
- (5) He walks on water (6:16-21)
- (6) He heals a man born blind (9:1-7)
- (7) He raises Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44)

John's purpose for describing these miracles in his gospel is clear, that his readers (we) might find faith and life in and through Jesus (20:30-31). C. K. Barrett writes, "The intention of the signs is that men should believe" ... believe then and believe now.

John left a record of what Jesus said and did, and he interpreted those events for us. The renewal song encourages us to a life-changing response; "We want to see Jesus. To reach out and touch him and say that we love him."

R&D *Where in my own life have I seen "signs" of Jesus Christ? How have I responded to such evidence of his power and presence?*

Prayer: *For the world, seeing is believing; for the Christian, Lord, believing is seeing.*

Tuesday, January 9

Read: John 2:1-11

First Sign—The Difference

John describes the first miracle of Jesus in our passage for today. The setting and the dynamics of the story are such that, at

the end of the description, one feels the urge to shout out, “What a difference Jesus makes!” The setting for the miracle is a wedding feast. Among the Jews, hospitality at any time was not only a duty but a privilege (Genesis 18:2-3; Leviticus 19:33-34). Eastern weddings were a particularly joyous occasion, lasting seven days and a time of great hospitality for all one’s friends and relatives and townspeople, with processions and festivities and great feasting.

Jesus’ mother (never named in John’s gospel) attended just such a wedding, as did Jesus and his disciples. During the festivities, a breach of hospitality occurred. There was not enough wine! Mary (Jesus’ mother) either as friend of the bride or groom or in a more official role, brought the problem to Jesus. Jesus responded in an unexpected and hitherto unimaginable manner by turning water into wine... and not just wine, but the “best” wine.

Bultmann suggests that the “water stands for everything that is a substitute for the revelation (of God), everything by which man thinks he can live and yet which fails him when put to the test.” Jesus thus claims that not water (false hopes and promises) but wine (the true revelation of God) is required. And he is that revelation. Barrett writes, “John meant to show the supersession of Judaism in the glory of Jesus... Jesus as the fulfiller of Judaism.”

Jesus makes a difference in life. His presence at a wedding made a difference to a bride and groom. His actions made a difference to those who watched him and were open to see and understand who he was. He also makes a difference to us, a qualitative difference as we avail ourselves of the offer of his presence in our lives.

R&D What is there in my life that has failed me when it has been put to the test? How has Jesus made a difference in those times?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I pray that all may know the difference you make in the life of those who accept you as Lord and Savior.

Read: John 2:12-25

A New Temple

It is not uncommon for things that are inherently good to be abused. The family which is meant to provide an environment for the nurture and development of each individual can become dysfunctional when someone uses the family group primarily to meet his or her own needs. Government which is to be for the common good of the people can be diverted for the good of the few or the good of the governing. Christianity can be manipulated and perverted by the church leader who imposes their version of the Christian faith on vulnerable and susceptible followers. That which was established for good can be used for evil purposes. Just such perversion of the temple had taken place. The temple which was meant to be a place of worship had been turned into a money-making center of political power for the religious authorities.

John describes the cleansing of the temple by Jesus as occurring early in his ministry. The other gospels place it very late, after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48). Scholarship is divided as to whether these were two similar events or different accounts of one event placed in a different time context for the author's purpose.

Jerusalem was the political and religious center of Palestine, and the temple was the heart of that city for the Jews. First built during the reign of Solomon and originally housing the Ark of the Covenant holding the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, it had been destroyed and rebuilt twice. For a thousand years it had represented the meeting place of God and man. The ancient sacrificial system which was built upon the ritual sacrifices of animals and birds and the offering of crops was carried out at the temple. At Passover, which commemorated the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, it was required that every male within twenty miles travel to Jerusalem for the festival. Jesus walked into this established bastion of religious power and challenged its very existence.

Jesus accused the religious authorities of desecrating and perverting the purposes of the temple. He offered a new temple to the Jews, a new meeting place for God and people. John Marsh writes, “The disciples came to see that the real temple of God, the real place where he dwelt was not in the Jewish temple made with hands, but in the body of their Lord. His body, his flesh, was the place where God dwelt. The Father was in him, and he in the Father” (10:38; 14:10-11).

R&D What is there in my own spiritual life which has lost the purpose for which it was intended?

Prayer: Cleanse us, Lord God, that the Holy Spirit may reign in the temple of our heart.

Thursday, January 11

Read: John 3:1-12

Nicodemus

Enter a religious man! Here comes a Pharisee, one of the elites who, by his choice of life style and life focus, separates himself from other people to concentrate on God and God’s will for His people as understood in the Jewish law.

Enter an important man. Here comes a devout Pharisee, one of the Sanhedrin (7:45-52). He is a part of that council of seventy Pharisees and Sadducees who, with the High Priest, control the temple worship and who have developed a working relationship with the ruling Roman government.

Enter a seeking man. Here comes a man who has seen evidence of the power of God in an itinerant Jewish preacher. He comes seeking to be taught with the title “Rabbi” upon his lips.

Enter a cautious man. Here comes a man who seeks the cover of night to protect his reputation and his status even as he engages Jesus and seeks truth.

Enter a limited man constrained by the boundaries of his religion and the evidence of his own eyes. Here comes a man who knows the law. “He has all the insight, but also all the limitations which the Old Testament has when isolated from the New” (John

Marsh). He has seen signs, but he has not seen the kingdom of God (Luke 11:20).

Enter Nicodemus, a man who is all of the above. Nicodemus comes, perhaps hoping for a religious discussion which will support his own understanding of God. He comes, perhaps hoping for reassurance and reinforcement from Jesus that his life of good works and obedience to the law is enough to earn him a place in the kingdom of God. If so, he receives neither. Instead, Jesus takes Nicodemus to a whole new level of understanding about his relationship with God. Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about being born “anew.” Nicodemus understands Jesus to be speaking about something impossible. Jesus explains how the impossible becomes possible through knowing him.

“Anew” can mean “a second time” or “from above.” Nicodemus thinks of a second physical birth; Jesus speaks of a birth from above, a birth of the Spirit. Further, Jesus teaches that this new birth is not something that is earned but is a gift of the Spirit. Nicodemus’ moral achievements are not enough. No matter how good his life, clean his thoughts, or kind his actions, he is not able to enter into God’s kingdom. Entrance into relationship with God comes from God’s own actions within Nicodemus.

Like Nicodemus, our goodness is not sufficient. Relationship with God is His gift and is not earned by our behavior. We, too, enter into relationship with God through His action within us. We know Him through acknowledging and gratefully accepting His gift.

R&D What does the experience of Nicodemus with Jesus say to me about my own relationship with God?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I pray for those who may have intellectually have accepted you but have not experienced the fullness of your presence within them through the Holy Spirit.

Read: John 3:13-21

The Gift of Life

In this reflective and retrospective passage on the work of Jesus Christ, John focuses on this most precious possession, life. He speaks not of our physical life but of our spiritual life, a spiritual life which lasts into eternity, an unending life which goes on forever.

John grounds his narrative in an old image from the history of the Jews. When the Israelites wandered in the wilderness during the Exodus, they were visited by a plague of serpents and many were bitten and died (Numbers 21:4-9). They understood this plague as a punishment from God for their rebellious ways. In response to their pleading, and acting under God's direction, Moses made a bronze serpent, placed it on a high standard that might be lifted up in their midst, so that the Israelites who were bitten might look upon the bronze serpent and live.

The early church described the crucifixion and ascension of Jesus as a "lifting up." A person was able to look at those events and, through believing that they were the work of God, receive eternal life. "As in the old Jewish interpretation the uplifted serpent drew the hearts of Israel to God for their salvation, so the uplifted Jesus drew men to himself and so gathered to God those who were his children" (Barrett).

The gift of life which comes through Jesus is more than a life of quantity, more than a life of foreverness. It is also a life which has a special quality. It is a life free from the fear of judgment, a life whose wrong doings have already been forgiven. It is a life lived in light rather than darkness. As Jesus Christ is the light which reveals God so he is the light that reveals good and evil. Freely choosing to believe in Christ, the Christian lives an eternal life, a life which exemplifies Christ in word and deed and, imperfectly but faithfully, in the way life is lived.

R&D God leaves me free to choose to accept Christ or reject him. How does my life reveal the choice that I have made?

Prayer: *Help us, Lord God, to see beyond the sights and sounds of everyday life to encounter Your glory that shines around us all day long if we just have the eyes to see it.*

Saturday, January 13

Read: John 3:22-36

Jealousy or Joy

Rodney Dangerfield once quipped, “My wife’s jealousy is getting ridiculous. The other day she looked at my calendar and wanted to know who May was.” Often jealousy is portrayed as something laughable, but it is more aptly described as something dangerous. Jealousy is risky in relationships and destructive to the individual.

The evangelist now describes a period of parallel ministries for Jesus and John the Baptist. In the inevitable choice which people made between these two now well-known religious figures, the Baptist’s ministry was losing followers and his disciples were hurt and unhappy and confused by the desertion. As people turned from John to Jesus, they watched the decline in numbers and loyalty to the Baptist and it bred jealousy. “Here he is, baptizing, and crowds are flocking to him” (v.26). They were jealous and they expected John to feel the same.

In a serenity born of the certainty of his own call, John the Baptist responded by assuring his disciples that his ministry was circumscribed by God and that he could do only what God had called him to do (v.27). Then, using an image later used by Jesus (Mark 2:19), the Baptist described his own work once more. Jesus is the “bridegroom.” John is the friend of the bridegroom and the service which he performs as the groomsman fills him with joy.

John the Baptist found joy in serving God in just the way that God had called him to serve. Seeing the ministry of Jesus which he had prophetically foretold and for which he had “prepared the way,” John found great joy in the surpassing achievement of his friend.

R&D *What is my response when someone I have mentored or assisted surpasses me, succeeds in doing what I do better than I can, achieves more than I do? How do I deal with my feelings?*

Prayer: *I remind myself, Lord, that humility is not thinking less about myself; it is thinking about myself less.*

Sunday, January 14

Sabbath Time

“To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness; because we have rebelled against him.” Daniel 9:9

A sense of guilt is healthy when there are factors in one's life that cause guilt; it is a thermometer that gives the moral temperature. A sense of guilt is a sense of responsibility, of true attachment to life. Psychiatrists claim that there is a better prognosis for a patient whose sense of guilt may be exaggerated and out of focus, than for one with none at all, who throws the whole responsibility for the situation upon other people. But an intolerable situation is created where a person cannot share this sense of guilt with another, and find the answer to it. There is no answer in airily telling them to “forget it.” What they need are three things: understanding, which lets them talk it all out; realism, which helps them to see the moral factors involved; and forgiveness, which God alone can give.

Monday, January 15

Read: John 3:31-36

Trust

Trust is one of the most treasured and limited commodities in today's society. The vacillations of politicians and civic leaders have made us cynical about what people say. The prevailing profit motive widespread in our society has made us wary about what people do. Hidden agendas are commonplace and sometimes even motives of friends may be suspect. Suspicion and mistrust are the allies of closed minds which miss new truths. The tendency to mistrust played a part in the lives of the people in Palestine two thousand years ago. Jesus taught, and “yet no one receives his testimony” (v.32, see also v.11).

In another reflective meditation, John speaks of the need for trust and of the rewards found in God. Basic to an understanding of the person of Jesus is the need for trust in God. Once trust in God is a part of one's life then attributes of the nature of Jesus are revealed.

(1) His heavenly origins are seen (v.31).

(2) He is recognized as speaking about spiritual things as a first-hand witness, about things "he has seen and heard" (v.32).

(3) His words are heard as the authoritative words of God; he speaks as God would speak (v.34).

(4) He and the Father are known to live in a relationship of love (v.35).

(5) He is accepted as the one who brings the gift of eternal life to those who believe (v.36).

(6) He is acknowledged as possessing an unmeasured gift of the Spirit (v.34).

Where the prophets received a measured gift of the Spirit, that which Jesus possesses is unmeasured, limitless. "The Father does not bestow the Spirit upon Jesus except in its fullness, as a constant endowment" (*Interpreter's Bible*). It is such an understanding of Jesus which Paul described as "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8). As the possessor of unmeasured spirit, he is also giver of the same Spirit (John 14:16). The Spirit is offered, the blessings are available, the choice is ours (v.36).

R&D Where in my life do I find evidence of the unlimited, unmeasured gifts of God?

Prayer: Lord God, may Your people all know and exercise the gifts of the Holy Spirit You freely give to those who are ready to receive them.

Tuesday, January 16

Read: John 4:1-26

Living Water

As you drive from east to west across the vast state of Texas, the change in vegetation is striking. Green hills filled with a variety of trees and populated with many different kinds of animals give way to semi-arid cactus and brush. The change, of course, is

caused by the amount of annual rainfall. Water gives life. A television commercial begins, “Almost everything you do is affected by water. The higher the quality of water, the higher the quality of life.” How essential is water? A fact sheet from the International Sports Medicine Institute gives us an answer: “We can go without food for two months or more, but without water we can only survive a few days.”

In the dry land of Palestine water is the single most precious material commodity. In an encounter by Jacob’s well, Jesus says, “I give living water, water which quenches your thirst forever, water which saturates you, rehydrates you and gives you life, not just for today, not just for tomorrow but forever.” There is water in Jacob’s well which quenches physical thirst and sustains physical life but the water which Jesus gives is better by far because it quenches spiritual thirst and gives eternal life.

In this memorable story, John reminds us that the Living Water which Jesus gives is water which is superior to all other water; it transcends and transforms all that went before. Barrett writes that this narrative continues a theme common in John’s gospel, which is that Judaism and the Old Testament find their fulfillment in Jesus. Neither the water in Jacob’s well nor the waters of purification (2:6), or even the water used in a religious rite (3:5) has the renewing, life giving power of the Living Water of Christ.

R&D Today, pause and write a prayer which specifically asks to drink of the Living Water of Christ.

Prayer: Into our dry and barren lives, Lord Jesus, only you can provide the Living Water that gives us life, and life eternal with you.

Wednesday, January 17

Read: John 4:1-26

A Deeper Need

Among the many marvelous human stories in Scripture is this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. It has been suggested that this chapter could provide material for a splendid one act play. John draws the characters with strokes that are sharp and clear. The unlikely setting at Jacob’s well is the territory

of Samaria. The setting is unlikely because the Jews traveled not through but rather around Samaria, for they considered it hostile and alien territory. The Samaritans were a mixed race of Jew and Gentiles which had grown out of the Assyrian captivity of the northern tribes in 726 BC. This racial impurity was the basis for some centuries-old hatred and enmity that existed between Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus is shown here as a person who disdains both social barriers and ethnic boundaries, paying little attention to traditional social-sexual restrictions. First, he chooses to go through Samaria, thereby risking contact with its people. Further, while Jewish men did not speak to women in public at this time, Jesus chooses to speak to the woman at the well. He immediately understands the Samaritan woman's deepest need. He also recognizes the troubled nature of the woman's past.

John draws an unforgettable portrait of the Samaritan woman. We see an ostracized, lonely woman who comes to the well not during the ordinary times for drawing water of early morning and late evening but at a time when no one else would be there (vv.6b-7). She is a woman who is well aware of traditional ethnic rivalries and social-sexual prohibitions (v.9). She is a woman who lives on the level of her own experiences in the physical world (vv.11-12) and who is unable at first even to enter into conversation with Jesus about spiritual matters. She is unable to understand Jesus' words but is willing to grasp at anything that would make her life easier (v.15). She is a woman who retreats from Jesus' knowledge of her life as a turtle retreats into its shell when touched. She throws up a smoke screen by attempting to focus on religious externals and to deflect Jesus' piercing personal comments. She tries to discuss a popular theological issue of the time (vv.19, 25). This is the Samaritan woman that we see as she arrived at Jacob's well.

Jesus knew personally the need for water to quench physical thirst. He saw the woman's need for the same physical water as she came to the well with her water jar. However, Jesus was always keenly aware of people's deeper needs. He saw also the real need of

the Samaritan woman and it was to that need that he directed his attention.

R&D *What does Jesus offer that I need in my life?*

Prayer: *Lord God, You know us too well to try to hide our secret needs from You. You are more ready to help us than we are to ask. Open our hearts, Lord, to Your wonderful love.*

Thursday, January 18

Read: John 4:1-30, 39-42

Water for Me Alone?

The Samaritan woman who left Jacob's well was essentially a different woman than she had been when she arrived. The psalmist, a man aware of the depth of his inner need, centuries earlier penned the words, "As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?" (Psalm 42:1-2). It is this inner need, this inner thirst, which Jesus awakened in the Samaritan woman and that he quenched for her. It is the same thirst that he seeks to provoke in each one of us. He wants us to feel dry-mouthed, dehydrated, thirsty in every pore, panting for the "living water" which he desires to give to us. And his gift is such, his plenteousness is such, that the living water will overflow from us to others. Glorified, Jesus offers the living water through the Holy Spirit to each one of us.

When his disciples returned from the Samaritan village, bringing food to eat, Jesus spoke of another kind of food. The food which nourished him was the food of doing God's will. Doing God's will was his sustenance. His work was to share with everyone the good news of God's love and God's offer of salvation to all people. Jesus challenges his disciples to share in his work (4:34-37).

As this very poignant narrative draws to a close, it becomes apparent that the living water, the Spirit of Christ within us, immediately finds work for us to do. John's picture of the response of the Samaritan woman in her own village challenges us to bear witness by our own words and deeds to Jesus Christ and the living water which he gives. "To bear witness is the task of a disciple. The

woman joins with John the Baptist as witness, and in fact precedes the apostles” (G. W. Barrett).

R&D *As I consider my own witness for Christ, what is it that hinders me in sharing him with others? What helps me in my witness?*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, what you most want us to be able to do is to share with others how you came into our lives, what difference that has made and is making day by day. May we be willing to share that story.*

Friday, January 19

Read: John 4:43-54

The Second Sign

The car races along the highway, sounding its horn and barely slowing down for stop signs. Inside the car, parents, with wildly beating hearts, hold a tiny one-year-old girl, usually rambunctious and active, but now strangely quiet and lethargic from a large number of potent allergy pills. She had, by sheer ingenuity, reached them from the highest shelf in the kitchen and eaten them with relish. Finding her with telltale signs on her face and realizing what has happened, the parents flee desperately to the hospital emergency room. They will do anything to save the life of the child. They place their faith in a merciful Lord and Savior and in the doctors and nurses he has provided. They seek life!

“Sir, come down before my child dies” (v.49). A government official, probably Gentile, has a son who is close to dying. He, too, will do anything to save the life of his child. He has heard of a Jewish rabbi who has done miraculous things and who is in reach some twenty miles away. His son is too ill to move, so as quickly as possible he races from Capernaum to Cana and seeks out Jesus to ask him to come and heal his son. He places his faith in an itinerant preacher of whom he has only heard, but his need is desperate. He seeks life!

In the second miracle recorded in this gospel, John recounts a dramatic incident involving life and faith. Jesus gives life to one who is at the point of death. The two great climatic themes of the gospel which are *life* and *faith* are sounded again.

Jesus' first words are discouraging; but in the face of persistent need, he responds. "You may go. Your son will live" (v.50). The official is asked to believe in Jesus' word without any outward sign, and the official trusts in his word. The official believes before the healing, he believes before any proof and is *obedient*. He goes as he is told. Without obedience and trust there can be no real faith. His trust vindicated by his recovered son, the official moves on to fuller faith (v.58). First, he believes in the word of Jesus, and then he believes in Jesus as the Savior.

R&D *Am I in need of miracles to reinforce my faith in Jesus? What ways do I ask him to prove himself to me?*

Prayer: *"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."*

Saturday, January 20

Read: John 5:1-18

The Third Sign

Our two-year-old grandson has learned to say "thank you" when he receives a gift or a bit of food or when something is done for him. At an early age, he is developing a very important attitude, an appreciation for what other people do for him. C. N. Strait said, "Attitudes sour in the life that is closed to thankfulness. Soon selfish attitudes take over, closing life to better things." It is just such a man whose life is closed to better things that is seen in this incident.

Jesus has returned to Jerusalem for one of the great Jewish Festivals. As he walks by the gate where the sheep are driven into the temple for sacrifice, he passes by the ancient pool of Bethesda. At times the water of this pool became disturbed by the movement of underground springs and in such a state were thought to have curative powers for the first person to enter the water. Each day the pool would be surrounded by the ill and disabled of Jerusalem who hoped to be the one to be cured.

One man has been there for thirty-eight years, and, in some manner, he catches the attention of Jesus. In the ensuing conversation the disabled man confesses his desire to be well and his faith in the restorative power of the pool. He blames his many years of

disability and his inability to get into the pool at the proper time on the fact that he has no family or friends to help him enter the pool. Compassionately, Jesus heals the man.

Our expectation concerning the man's response is that he will be thankful, that he will even be open to faith in Jesus. Those expectations are met with disappointment. Now healed and able to walk for the first time in thirty-eight years, the healed man finds himself in trouble with the religious authorities for carrying his mat on the Sabbath day. Far from thankfully proclaiming his healing, instead self-protectively, he places the blame for the breaking of the rules on Jesus. Further, when later he discovers the identity of his healer, he informs the authorities that his healer is Jesus. Whatever religious convictions the healed man possessed, his allegiance stays with the old order. Choosing safety over thanksgiving and new and "better things," he remains healed but not restored and aligns himself with the Jewish religious authorities and the temple, even against Jesus.

R&D *In what ways have I failed to show complete loyalty to Christ?*

Prayer: *Gracious God, when we give our lives to You there may be parts that we block off from You and keep selfishly to ourselves. Break down those walls, Lord, that we may be fully Yours.*

Sunday, January 21

Sabbath Time

Know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. Ephesians 3:19

God's part in conversion begins in the untiring love that he has toward each of us, which is never satisfied till we are consciously and fully his children and his servants. He sends the dissatisfaction we feel with ourselves that makes us want to be different. He puts into our lives the circumstances to which we are not equal, the life in another that makes us envy its radiant power, the conviction of sin which will not let us rest. He drives the wedge of conflict so deeply into our minds that we cannot bear to remain "divided and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy." He has put a faculty of God-consciousness into each soul, and he is never satisfied until we develop this as far as possible.

Read: John 5:18-30

Like Father, Like Son

Those who live in a loving relationship like my husband and I have with our children tend to grow like each other. One son wrote, “I learned to love the subtle art of persuasion and helping people from watching my father’s ministry as a child.” Jesus devotes himself to the Father’s work. “Whatever the Father does, the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does” (vv.19b-20).” Jesus is what he is only in humble obedience to and complete dependence upon the Father. He has no independent status; he even has no independent will or judgment. “He does only what he sees the Father do. ... Simply *because his one aim is to be obedient*, men may see in him the character and activity of God himself” (G. W. Barrett).

John’s gospel stresses the unity of the Father and the Son. This teaching from Jesus grows out of the miracle of the healing of the lame man. Because the Father has entrusted to the Son both the giving of life and the authority to judge men and women, life and judgment are found in a person’s response to Jesus. Life is found in acceptance of him and condemnation is found in rejection of him. The Son will do more than heal diseases (vv.1-9), he will also give life to the dead (vv.25-26), a power which formerly was the prerogative of the Father alone (2 Kings 5:7; Ezekiel 37:13). The judgment at the last days also is given to the Son (v.22). The Christian believer never fears judgment because he already has the gift of eternal life.

R&D *How does the character of my love and obedience enable my life so that I may be seen to be a believer in Jesus Christ?*

Prayer: *Help us to remember, Blessed Lord, that the most valuable contribution we can make to the future is the time we spend with our family.*

Read: John 5:31-47

Needed: Witnesses

American society today has been described as having a litigious bent. Courtroom dramas hold a fascination for us, whether they are real life situations reported in the newspaper or imaginary stories seen on television. Children sue for divorce from their parents. Civil rights cases abound. Our cities regularly report on the myriads of criminal trials. With a critical eye, we watch the parade of witnesses testify as to what they have seen and what they know by their own personal experience and presence. Our judicial system is based on the use of witnesses.

Jesus is involved in intense and critical confrontation with the Jews. Many of his teachings are seen as undermining and subverting the religion of the Jews. The religious leaders constantly challenge him to prove that his teachings are true and that his claims about himself are authentic. They ask for outside witnesses who will corroborate Jesus' claims. "Our Lord's... claim is that there are valid witnesses who support his claim to deity. The word witness is a key word in John's gospel; it is used forty-seven times. Jesus did bear witness to himself, but he knew they would not accept it; so he called in ... other witnesses" (Warren Wiersby).

The Jewish law required two or three witness to establish the truth. Jesus has more than enough. There is the witness of God Himself (vv.32, 37-38), of John the Baptist (vv.33-35), of the miracles which Jesus has performed (v.36) and there is the witness of the Old Testament Scriptures (vv.39-40).

The authorities cannot hear such witnesses. They are caught up in an erroneous focus on the outward praise of the world and a substitution of ritual and law for a love of God. Their ears are deafened to hear God's voice and their eyes are blinded to the clues which point to Jesus. William Temple wrote, "There is nothing so pathetic as devotion gone astray. And we are in that state whenever our devotion does not lead us to Christ himself... not the Christ of our fancy but the true Christ."

R&D *Who has been a witness to me about the truth of Jesus Christ?*

Prayer: *For those of us who study Scripture regularly, Your Word written is a wonderful witness to Your Word, who is the Son of God.*

Wednesday, January 24

Read: John 6:1-15

The Fourth Sign

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels, a fact that suggests something of the importance with which the early church viewed this event. John's account is perhaps the best loved for it is the most intimate. It mentions Philip and Andrew by name. It alone provides the detail about the little boy who gave his lunch so that the multitude could be fed.

In describing this event, the other three evangelists speak of the welcome and the compassion of Jesus for the following crowds, crowds that would not leave him even after he had withdrawn to these lonely hills to be alone with his disciples. Only John fleshes out the scene with an explanation of why the people followed Jesus to such a lonely, isolated place. It is John who shares with us more intimately about how Jesus reveals who he is and what his mission is: "And a multitude followed him, because they saw the signs which he did on those who were diseased" (6:2).

One of the unique things about the Gospel of John is the way the author uses the miracles of Jesus. He points to the underlying significance of the miracles by calling them "signs" (vv.2, 14, 26). The miracles are seen as manifestations of the power of God, which bring salvation to those who believe. In this sense, the miracle itself, met by faith, discloses the glory of God.

There are seven signs in John. Each contains some significant revelation, some momentous uncovering of who Jesus really is. After the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus claimed to be bread, heavenly bread, bread that came down from heaven and which, eaten, taken into oneself, gave spiritual life eternally. In this miracle, Jesus identifies himself as the Bread of Life.

R&D In the past, what has been my response to the feeding of the 5,000? What is my reaction as I read it today?

Prayer: *We are grateful, Lord God, for manifestations of Your presence with us even when they are not as dramatic as the feeding of the 5,000!*

Thursday, January 25

Read: John 6:16-21

The Fifth Sign

William Wordsworth speaks poetically of the “ebb and flow” of life that we all experience. Life has movement. Life is not always the same. The disciples of Jesus found this to be true in their own lives. One moment they were excited, expectant, and made feverish with anticipation by the multitude’s acclaim and acceptance of their Master. The next moment, sent away from the scene of the feeding of the 5,000 by Jesus, they are struggling with the power of the sea in fear for their lives. The disciples’ powerlessness is the setting for the fifth miracle in John.

The Sea of Galilee was noted for its frequent storms. Located 682 feet below sea level and in a deep valley surrounded by hills, the winds often swept down between the narrow valleys and whipped the usually calm surface of the lake into turbulent and dangerously rough waves. The disciples, obeying Jesus’ command to return to Capernaum (Mark 6:45), found themselves in the midst of high winds and waves suddenly struggling to survive. Then, just as suddenly, Jesus was with them, walking on the water.

As we look at the miracles in John seeking to discover the nature of Jesus, this event highlights two characteristics for us. It describes for us a Jesus with tremendous powers at his command, power over the elements of nature. “They saw Jesus walking on the sea... Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land...” (vv.19-21).

This event also pictures a compassionate friend whose power and presence are available in times of fear and distress. No life is free from periods of fear. A routine visit to the doctor results in a call with the news that the x-rays contain suspicious data. A family relationship degenerates to the breaking point. A husband and wife desiring a child find the wanted pregnancy difficult or impossible to produce. In the period of anxiety and fearful uncertainty we find ourselves struggling in the sea amid the powerful storm.

However, as believers we can share the experience of the disciples. In the heaviest storms of life, we can find Jesus offering to be our powerful friend. He is the one who can remove our fear and can deliver us safely to our destination wherever that may be. “It is I; do not be afraid” (v.20).

R&D As I serve a Lord of power who also calls me friend, what feelings do I have about him? How has he been with me in the storms of my life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to feel your loving arms around us whenever we need them.

Friday, January 26

Read: John 6:14-15, 22-34

Motives and Values

With five loaves and two fish, Jesus feeds 5,000 people. The people involved do not doubt that they have been involved in a miracle. They see Jesus’ miraculous power. They attribute that power to God, and they want to put that power into action to serve their own ends. They want Jesus to become a political king to oppose their Roman rulers. They have felt spiritual power, but it is political and economic power that they seek. Jesus again rejects the idea of political kingship as he had rejected it before during the Temptations in the wilderness (Matthew 4:7-10).

Aware of their true motive in following him, Jesus tries to shift the attention of the people from their preoccupation with the physical to the spiritual. He urges his listeners to have a different set of values, to seek and work for spiritual things rather than worldly things (see also Matthew 6:19-21). His special relationship with God enables him to give “food” which lasts to eternal life. He claims that God certifies what he says and does is authentic (v.27).

“Work” strikes a responsive chord in the people. They are ready to do their part in earning God’s blessing. They reason that new requirements from God can always be added to the myriad of laws already followed. How do we earn spiritual food, they ask? Jesus answers, “It is not by *works* (plural) but by a single *work*.”

“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (v.29).

In response to their request for a further miracle such as Moses had performed in the wilderness, Jesus reminds the people that Moses did not give them bread but that it was God who supplied the bread. Even now, it is God who supplies the bread, the spiritual food that gives life. And ... *it is all a gift*. The one necessary work is to believe in Jesus whom God has sent. God’s blessings cannot be earned; they can only be received as a gift. They are received by belief, by faith.

R&D *What is the basis that underlies my own values? What motives do I have for seeking the presence of Christ in my life?*

Prayer: *Lord, our faith is perhaps most strengthened by remembering all You have done for us in the past and are doing right now.*

Saturday, January 27

Read: John 6:35-51

The First Self-Portrait

Bread, the staff of life, has lost its basic importance in our affluent society. We dread trips to the grocery store because there are so many choices to make. We have so much that we cannot choose. But for most of the citizens of the world, bread or its equivalent is still the mainstay of the diet.

Aware of the necessity of bread, Jesus identifies himself as that basic necessity. To all who will listen, common person and leader of synagogue alike, Jesus proclaims, “I am the bread of life ... I am the living bread which came down from heaven” (vv.35, 48, 51). Jesus uses the enacted parable of the feeding of the 5,000 as the vehicle for teaching about himself.

Jesus, as “the Bread of Life” is the first of the “I am” passages found in John. As John’s gospel has seven signs that reveal who Jesus is, so also in John there are seven self-declarations of Jesus, each of which is descriptive of the work that he does. These are the so-called “I Am” statements that are not included in the other gospels. Each is a statement about the person of Christ coupled with a consequent promise of what he offers to the believer. Each

passage is introduced by the words “I am.” William Temple called them the parables of the Lord’s person. Almost all commentators agree that these “I AM” statements by Jesus convey his claim to be divine, to be the Son of God.

The broad significance of the “I am” statements is found in the deep well of early Jewish history in the old and precious story of Moses. In the Old Testament’s marvelous description of the call of Moses in the wilderness (Exodus 3) Moses encounters God and God identifies himself to Moses. When Moses needs reassurance about who this strange and mysterious and powerful person is, God replies, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). From this meeting came the Israelite name for God, YHWH, Yahweh (Jehovah).

R&D As you think about the outrageous claims Jesus made about himself, how do you respond to them? How has Jesus ever been “bread” to you?

Prayer: Blessed Jesus, you are the staple of our lives; you are truly the Bread of Life.

Sunday, January 28

Sabbath Time

And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind. Acts 2:2a

The fact is, we have lost what once we had: the early Church had it, ours has not. We are not quite conscious of it, not wishing to face so drastic a need, and being already inured to a comfortable, conventional brand of religion which we take to be the real thing. And, the place to start is with the reintroduction of Christianity into Christendom—that is, the reconversion of the Church to Jesus, and the renewal by his Holy Spirit of the kind of power it had in the early days, and has had from time to time since, when his wind blew once more upon its embers and fanned them into flame.

Read: John 6:35-65

The Eucharistic Image

There is a clear progression of thought in the image of Jesus as the “Bread of Life.” (1) Using the “I AM” figure, Jesus proclaims that he is the bread of life who feeds spiritual hunger and quenches spiritual thirst. To eat and drink of Jesus Christ is to believe that Jesus is the one whom God has sent, that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. “He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who *believes* in me shall never thirst” (6:35).

(2) Those who believe in Jesus as the Son of God thus accept the spiritual food that Jesus offers and participate in his eternal life and resurrection. “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life” (6:47).

(3) The gift of the spiritual food offered by Jesus with its blessing of eternal life and resurrection at the last day is free to those who take the step of belief, but it has a cost. The cost is paid by Jesus. “The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (6:51). As food and drink are offered and accepted, so also is Christ’s sacrifice offered to believers and accepted by them. As those are assimilated by the body, so is this sacrifice assimilated by the soul, and nourish and sustain spiritual life.

(4) Finally, believing in Jesus as the Son of God, and thus fed by him, we become one with him. “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (6:56).

For me as a Christian, to come to Holy Communion and to receive the body and blood of Christ is one of the greatest privileges I possess. It becomes both the renewal of my spirit and challenge to my life. As we meet at the altar, Christ becomes ever more real to me as the enabler of my life. He also challenges me to be that person I was created to be. I am also compelled to see other people and their needs. I am encouraged to look for the tasks he has set for me to do. Someone said, “You can starve to death with loaves of bread piled around you. To be nourished by bread you must take it into yourself and let it do its work. The same is true

for the bread of life. We must allow Jesus to enter our lives and do his work.”

R&D *What is my understanding of Holy Communion? What place does it have in my life?*

Prayer: *We are grateful, Blessed Christ, for the privilege of sharing in the Lord's Supper in our worship services, drawing us closer to you in such a personal way.*

Tuesday, January 30

Read: John 6:66-71

What Really Satisfies?

When in this “I Am” image, Jesus says, “I am bread,” He promises to sustain and satisfy life. He is the source of the nutrients and the elements that sustain and promote growth. He satisfies in a way that nothing else can. He promises that anyone who comes to him will never go hungry again. “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst (6:35).”

In a very real way, life without relationship with Jesus Christ is a life in which we can't get real satisfaction. It is a hungry life, a dissatisfied life. Think of all of the vaguely unhappy, dissatisfied, complaining people that you know. Is Jesus Christ the Bread of Life for them? Think of all of the selfish, grasping, materialistic people that you know. Is Jesus Christ the Bread of Life for them? Think of all of the self-satisfied people you know who are smugly content with what they have done and with what they have accomplished. Is Jesus Christ the Bread of Life for them? Oscar Wilde said, “In this world there are only two tragedies. The one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.” When one considers the world of material things alone, that has the ring of truth about it. But in the world of the Spirit, there is only one tragedy: rejecting the Bread of Life that completely and wholly satisfies.

By the end of Jesus' self-revealing teaching as the Bread of Life, we read the result of his revolutionary claims (vv.66-69). Only the truly faithful remained. “Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you

also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord to whom shall we go?’”

R&D *Where can you and I find the answer to our spiritual hunger? How do we go about being fed?*

Prayer: *Bread of Life, fill our hungry souls.*

Wednesday, January 31

Read: John 7:1-52

Charlatan or Christ

Many of Jesus’ claims are met with disbelief. Some disbelief arises out of familiarity. His brothers thought that they knew him so well. They saw his miracles. They knew that these things had happened but could not accept what he said about himself. They tried to push him into greater self-revelation (vv.1-7).

Some disbelief arises out of an alleged intellectual and religious superiority. The religious establishment knew the Scripture and they knew the law. With their too literal interpretations that closed their minds, they would not accept the revelation of new truth from Jesus (vv.14-24). They saw him as a charlatan, a fake who used religion and people for his own ego and acclaim and position. Their disbelief was strengthened by a hidden self-preservation. They also feared a civil disturbance and the Roman reprisals which any such disturbance would bring. Their opposition to Jesus hardened and became increasingly overt (vv.1, 13, 32, 45).

Some disbelief arises out of old prejudices. It was known that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee. Galilee was seen as a provincial and ignorant place, not a place from which important leaders came. It certainly was not the prophesied place from which the Messiah would come (vv.41-52).

Some were honestly confused because their expectations of the Messiah differed so greatly from the Messiah as revealed in Jesus. The commonness of his known origin confused them (v.27). Some others saw his goodness and his unselfishness but saw him only as a good man (v.12a), perhaps even that special prophet from God (v.40). And there was Nicodemus who had listened to Jesus

by night (3:lff) and dared to stand up in the Council of which he was a member and ask for a hearing for Jesus (vv.50-51).

Amid all this confusion and these conflicting claims, there were also those who, seeing his miracles (v.31) and hearing his message of living water, were sure that Jesus must be the Messiah (vv.37-41).

R&D There is still a welter of claims and counterclaims about Jesus and the teaching of Christianity today. How do I sort out what I believe? What do I use for reliable resources?

Prayer: Lord God, may those who have doubts about Christ see his light shining through us, his disciples, and thereby find the way.

Thursday, February 1

John 7:37-39

Living Water

The Feast of Tabernacles was a fall harvest festival and the most joyful of the Jewish feasts. It remembered the nomadic life of Israel during the time of their wandering in the wilderness. As a part of that celebration, on each of the seven days of the feast a full pitcher of water was carried in procession to the temple. This commemorated the water from the rock, water that was given in a time of need to the children of Israel (Numbers 20:1-13). It was during this time of festival that Jesus made his offer of living water.

One summer in early July, I visited in Fort Worth with our five-year-old grandson as he was preparing for a T-ball game. As he and his mother collected the multitude of equipment that he would need, his mother added a bottle of water with the words, "Don't forget this. It is the most important of all." In the humidity and nearly 100-degree temperatures, her words rang true. To keep that little healthy body working properly, the one real essential in that pile of equipment was the water bottle.

As Christians, we gather a large assortment of equipment around us. We find a community and a study group in which to grow. We practice a prayer life in our aloneness. We faithfully attend worship services. All are extremely helpful as we journey on our pilgrimage to God. But there is only one essential piece of

equipment for the Christian. It is to be found as we drink in Jesus through his Holy Spirit. Glorified, Jesus offers the living water through the Holy Spirit to each of us (vv.37b-38). It is the Holy Spirit who creates within us the thirst for Jesus Christ in our lives, makes us aware of our need for him, and gives us the faith to accept him as our Savior. As we drink of Jesus, we are also, through the Holy Spirit, to offer the water of life to others.

R&D What does it mean to me that Jesus offers to me Living Water from which to drink?

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, that we may be so filled with your Living Water that it overflows to the benefit of those around us.

Friday, February 2

Read: John 8:1-11

Entrapment

The thesaurus defines “predicament” as a difficult, embarrassing situation and it offers such synonyms as “hot water” or “being in a corner.” It was precisely the hope of putting Jesus into a situation where nothing that he did would be right that motivated the Pharisees as they “brought a woman caught committing adultery” to Jesus. They brought the woman not that she could be judged but that Jesus could be entrapped. They wanted Jesus to set himself against Moses. Jesus was perceived by the people as a person of love, compassion, and kindness. A harsh judgment in this situation would have caused many to draw back from him. However, to ignore the action of the woman who had directly transgressed one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:14) would have placed him in a position of disrespect for the law of Moses.

Jesus’ position became even more complicated because the punishment for adultery was death by stoning or strangling (seldom carried out). However, the Roman governor alone held the power to invoke capital punishment. The hope of the scribes and Pharisees was to provoke Jesus into transgressing the Law of Moses by ignoring it and, then, to bring an official charge against him (8:6). Their ultimate aim was to destroy his influence with the people.

The cleverness of the Pharisees, however, backfired again. Jesus did render a judgment, “The one among you who is faultless shall throw the first stone” (v.7). He also bent down and wrote on the ground. We do not know what he wrote but can only speculate. Whatever Jesus wrote, his words and his actions brought the incident to a close.

R&D Jesus’ enemies were willing to use any means to discredit him, even the misery and shame of another person. How do I deal with my feelings of enmity toward other people? What am I willing to do to achieve my purposes?

Prayer: Lord Christ, you always had the right words. May the Holy Spirit guide us also to the right words when we are confronted because of our love for and obedience to you.

Saturday, February 3

Read: John 8:12

“I AM” Light

In the little book, *Children’s Letters to God*, we read this gem: “Dear God. We read Thomas Edison made light. But in Sun. School they said you did it. So I bet he stoled your idea. Sincerely, Donna.”

In the Scriptures light symbolizes the presence of God. After the Exodus from Egypt, as the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, they were guided in the night by a pillar of fire. The light of the fire revealed to them and reassured them of the guiding and protecting presence of God. Both the Psalms and Isaiah testify to the Israelites’ knowledge of God as light. “Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment” (Psalm 104:1-2). “The Lord will be your everlasting light” (Isaiah 60:19). In his “I AM” image, Jesus uses this age-old understanding of God (vv.12; 9:5). Jesus is light!

We have noted that the great feast days have played a prominent part as settings for significant pronouncements by Jesus. So it is with his identifying image of light. Jesus is in Jerusalem. The occasion is the Feast of Tabernacles (September-October), that celebration that remembered the wanderings of the children of Israel in the wilderness and celebrated God’s guidance and protection of

them. The Feast of Tabernacles remembered the pillar of fire that gave light during the darkness of the wilderness wanderings.

Listen to William Barclay describe the Jews' commemoration of that presence of God: "On the evening of the first day of the Festival there was a ceremony called The Illumination of the Temple. It took place in the Court of the Women in the temple (The treasury, v.20, was in the Court of Women). The court was surrounded with deep galleries, built to hold the spectators. In the center of the court four great candelabra were prepared. When the dark came the four great candelabra were lit and it was said that they sent such a blaze of light throughout Jerusalem that every courtyard in the city was lit up with their brilliance." It is thought that this same ceremony also was carried out each day of the festival. It is in such a context that Jesus says, "I am the light of the world."

R&D *Can you identify those things that you know to be the "Light of your Life?"*

Prayer: *Shine the light of your love into the hearts of the faithful, Lord Jesus, that it may brighten our lives this day and the days ahead.*

Sunday, February 4

Sabbath Time

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? 1 Corinthians 6:19a

Until something happens to us and in us, it will not happen *through* us.

Monday, February 5

Read: John 8:12-30

Light Testifies

The intrinsic characteristic of light is that it shines. It illumines. It reveals. One of the basic properties of light is that it bears witness to itself. The proclamation of Jesus that he is "light," which the Pharisees completely understand, once again draws him into controversy with them. The Pharisees insist that Jesus cannot say such things about himself and that such testimony can be heard only if he has another witness to corroborate that what he is saying

is true (v.13). Jesus declares that because he knows his origin and his ultimate destination (v.14), he has no need of other witnesses. If he does need another witness, he does indeed have one, the one who sent him is his witness (v.18). Light bears witness to itself.

Some years ago, we traveled to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. There are miles and miles of interconnecting, huge underground caves with thousands of stalactites and stalagmites. All the main paths used by tourists are carefully and brightly lit with modern day electricity. The caverns are a truly awesome sight. At one point, the guide asked if we would like to experience total darkness. Receiving our assent, he asked us to join hands for safety, and cautioning us to stay completely motionless, he turned out the light. For a brief moment all was dark. It was a strange and eerie feeling, which as the total darkness continued, began to turn to a feeling of severe helplessness, and for some, near panic.

Jesus claims to be the “light!” With those intrinsic “shining” and “revealing” qualities of light evident in his being, he orients people to God and reveals to them who and what he is; and, thus, who and what God is like (vv.25-29). “When you have lifted up (upon the cross) the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me (oneness with God)” (v.28).

R&D As Jesus sheds his light into my life, what does he enable me to see about God? About myself?

Prayer: Enter the dark corners of my life, Lord Jesus, and free me to be fully yours.

Tuesday, February 6

Read: John 8:31-59

Fatherhood

In an intricately woven conversation, John explores the relationship between Jesus and some “Jews who had believed in him” (v.31), centering on the origin of Jesus, “Who do you claim to be?” (v.53). There were those who believed in Jesus for a time. They had begun their journey to the light but their belief failed. They may

have assented to many teachings of Jesus but were unable to accept the implications of what he said of their own lives (v.31).

For many, the requirements of belief in Jesus were too difficult and they, as we do when the cost is too great, fell back on the old supports of the past. They decided to rely on what was already familiar, comfortable, and undemanding, those very things that often blinded them to the truth about themselves. What had been dependable in the past? We have Abraham as our father is their answer. They tied their confidence and their assurance about the future to their heritage as the children of Abraham.

Jesus confronts these persons who “had believed in him” (v.31) and tries to enlarge their understanding. The law sets you up as slaves to sin (vv.34-36), a bondage from which you cannot free yourself. It is only in the Son that freedom is found. Further, what is it that makes a person a child of Abraham? Is it not in following Abraham’s example (vv.39-40)? But this you do not do! Neither Abraham nor God is your father (vv.41-42). You are not authentic Israelites. In very strong words, Jesus continues: Your actions show you to be the children of another father, the devil (vv.43-47). You dishonor me but my Father honors me for I do as he desires. Even Abraham rejoices in me (vv.48-56). “Before Abraham was, I am” (v.58). Before Abraham was born, I already existed.

Plainly and bluntly, Jesus claimed that freedom from sin is found only in him. He claimed to be not only the true son of Abraham but of God. Children show by their actions whose offspring they are, he said. Cut to the core by these stinging words, the Jews responded with violence as they “took up stones to throw at him” (v.59).

R&D How does the Fatherhood of God have an impact on my life? How do my actions show that God is my Father?

Prayer: Move us out of our comfort zones, Lord God, that we may be of service to You.

Read: John 9:1-7

The Sixth Sign

John now describes another of the rare miracle happenings in John's gospel. You remember that John uses miracles to remind us to look for a deeper meaning. Again, there is more here than the obvious "making whole" of a blind man.

Jesus made a great claim, "I am the light of the world," a messianic claim. He then explained that claim to his disciples and to the Jews (chapter eight). Here he dives directly into that claim. One of the marks of the Messiah was that he would open the eyes of the blind. Isaiah prophesied, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped" (Isaiah 35:5). Robin Nixon comments, "Here (in the healing of the blind man) Jesus is shown in action demonstrating the truth of his claim that he is the Messiah and the light of the world."

Two other facets of the character of Jesus emerge from this miracle. First, Jesus has the power to give physical sight. This is more than the restoration of lost powers as in the healing of the lame man by the pool of Bethesda (5:2). This man is blind from birth and has never been able to see. This is a new gift given by Jesus, the gift of seeing for the first time. The giving of new physical power was within the province and power of Jesus.

The second facet of the character of Jesus revealed in the miracle, and the core reason for the healing, was that the "works of God may be manifest in him" (v.3). The healing was meant to convey the truth that Jesus alone can give genuine spiritual sight. As this man had been born physically blind and was gifted with new sight, so all people are born *spiritually* blind and through Jesus who is the "light" can be gifted with spiritual sight. Jesus gives us vision that allows us to see and know God.

William Temple wrote, "The man blind from birth is every man. For it is part of the sin of the world that by nature we are blind, until our eyes are opened by Christ, the Light of the world."

R&D *As I think about my spiritual journey, when did I first see and recognize the "light of Christ" in my life?*

Prayer: *Open the eyes of the people of the world, Lord God, that they may see Jesus.*

Thursday, February 8

Read: John 9:1-41

Spiritual Blindness

It is difficult for many of us who have been brought up in Christian homes and have experienced the reflected light of Christ in family and friends truly to understand total spiritual darkness. Perhaps it is in the religious establishment of Jesus' own day that we catch a glimpse of what it is like. Jesus gives us the clue, "You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father also" (8:19, 47, 55). Wrapped in and dependent on their religious traditions, most of the Pharisees were not able to see that Jesus was from God, that he was the "I AM" God. They were spiritually blind.

The Pharisees were men who studied the law, devoted themselves to the service of God. Their name meant "separated" or "separatist," that person who tried to keep himself separate from sin and sinners. Why couldn't they accept this new revelation of Himself from God?

Alan Watts suggests one possibility for their blindness for us, "You can only know God through an open mind just as you can only see the sky through an open window. You will not see the sky if you have covered the glass with blue paint." The common trait among the Pharisees was that their minds were closed. They thought that they knew God, but they had closed the window and they had painted it with their limited understanding of God. Instead of seeing the beautiful sky, all they saw was the blue paint.

R&D Where do I sense areas of my own spiritual life where my mind is closed to new truth and growth?

Prayer: *Open the windows of our heart, Lord Jesus, to let your light shine brightly into our lives.*

Read: John 9:1-17

Steps to Faith (1)

Leaving the temple, Jesus and his disciples pass by the man who was born blind. The narrative begins with a philosophical question. The disciples, influenced by the thinking of the day, want to know, “Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Jesus chooses not to be sidetracked by the abstract question. Rather he points to the presence of God in the situation by assuring that no matter what the conditions of life may be, God is there and will show Himself in the situation. Jesus then makes a mask of mud to cover the eyes of the blind man and sends him away to wash in the pool of Siloam. There the miracle occurs. The blind man who has never seen, sees!

When the healed man is asked by his friends about how such a miracle has happened, he recounts his meeting with Jesus, and he gives credit where credit is due to “the man called Jesus.” It is step one during spiritual change in his process of faith. He has an awareness of Jesus that he did not have before.

There are others who are very interested in this miracle. The blind man, now healed, is brought before the religious authorities. He listens to a discussion as to the source of Jesus’ power and, when pressed for his own opinion, he answers, “He is a prophet.” His answer says, Jesus is more than a man; he is a man from God. It is step two in the process of spiritual change in his process of faith. He is aware of the special goodness of God in Jesus. The authorities discount what he says; they discount him as a liar.

Imagine yourself into this scene at this point. Something very good and fine has entered your life. It is greeted, however, with distrust by your friends and it brings you conflict and trouble. How would you feel? What would you tend to think and do?

R&D When did I first become aware of Jesus? Who helped me understand that he was a man from God?

Prayer: *Growth in our relationship with you, Lord Jesus, is indeed a process. May we be growing in the love and knowledge of you all the days of our lives.*

Saturday, February 10

Read: John 9:18-38

Steps to Faith (2)

Brought before the authorities a second time, now to be intimidated and pressured to change his story, the healed man is firm in his opinion that Jesus has a power that comes from God. “Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man *born* blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” It is step three in the process of faith. Not only aware of the special goodness of Jesus, he has an awareness of the source of Jesus’ power.

Note the process and the progression in his thought and understanding of Jesus. To his friends, he says Jesus is just a man. To the authorities, he says that Jesus is more than just a man, Jesus is a man used by God as a prophet. And again to the authorities, as his awareness increases, he witnesses that Jesus is more than a prophet, he is a man from God and filled with God’s power.

There is a wonderful phrase in the wedding song from “Fiddler on the Roof” which rejoices, “miracle of miracles.” The man born blind receives a miracle when he receives his physical sight, but he receives a “miracle of miracles” as he receives his spiritual sight. Jesus comes to him a second time, searches him out and reveals himself to him, and the healed man recognizes Jesus as God. “Do you believe in the Son of man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you.” He said, “Lord, I believe;” and he worshiped him. It is step four in the process of faith. The healed man is aware of Jesus as the divine son of God.

Like the man born blind, there is for each of us a process or a “journey” toward faith. Perhaps the most significant thing about this event is the fact that Jesus came a second time. He came to give the man not just physical but spiritual sight. He does the same for us. When our sight grows dim and our faith grows weak, he

comes repeatedly and offers himself to us. Open to the process, willing to make our spiritual journey, we do not remain the same today as we were yesterday. Jesus changes us as he enters a fuller and ever more complete relationship with us.

R&D *What is my understanding of the power of Jesus as he lived 2,000 years ago? as he lives now?*

Prayer: *At each stage of our growth in you, Lord Jesus, we yearn for the next touch.*

Sunday, February 11

Sabbath Time

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. John 1:12

The great question, then is: Shall we remain content with our present spiritual powerlessness, which (writ large) means the spiritual powerlessness of the Church; or shall we let a divine discontent come into our hearts, shall we pray and wrestle till we are blessed and changed, shall we ask God to take us over completely, and, in spite of all our known weakness and inexperience, to use us in human lives and situations? He has the power to give us if we will take it. Shall we ask for it—and take the consequences?

Monday, February 12

Read: John 9:39-41

Whose Illumination?

Again, John's gospel raises the issue of judgment and the accountability each of us has for our own response. "To receive Jesus is to receive the light of the world; to reject him is to reject the light, to close one's eyes and to become blind" (Barrett). For the religious establishment of Jesus' time, "When the true light shines, they refuse to see it because they regard their own illumination as sufficient."

Let us imagine what it is like to be spiritually blind. We would live with no sense of any power outside ourselves to help us. We would live with no thought of any source of power in life beyond this physical world. We would live with no one to turn to beyond family or friends in the great tests of life. If they could or

would not face them with us, as often they cannot, we would face the crises alone.

An old prayer speaks of “all sorts and conditions of men.” There are also all sorts and conditions of life. There are circumstances in life that we cannot escape. The list is long and varied and individualized. It might include a diagnosis of terminal illness for oneself or a loved one or the enduring of major physical or mental disability. It might include the exposure of some wrongdoing that can no longer be hidden or the pain of an unwanted divorce or the tragedy of rejection by one’s child. It might include the trauma of our decisions that vitally affect the lives of others or the guilt over failure in relationship that causes another person to suffer terrible consequences. It is inevitable that some of these conditions will enter our lives.

There is someone, however, who makes the difference between hope and despair, weakness and power, fear and courage in the way that we live life. There is someone who can take our dark night of the soul and illumine it with his light. There is one, and only one, who can be a part of any circumstance of life. There is one who offers us spiritual life, who offers to reveal, no, more than that, to *be* the presence of God within us. There is Jesus who is the “Light.”

R&D *Write a prayer of gratitude for the “illumination” which Jesus brings into your life.*

Prayer: *Thank you, Christ Jesus, that you are with us in the midst of all the challenges of life, loving us and wanting the best for us in all situations.*



A Journey through the Bible

Tuesday, February 13

Introduction

As our Lenten study and well beyond, we will, over the next 66 lessons, be looking at each book of the Bible. We felt that it might be helpful for our readers to have an opportunity to go through the Bible, one book at a time, studying one passage in each book. Not only should this be useful in getting the Bible into perspective, but it will expose us to books we seldom have occasion to notice (such as Lamentations and Obadiah).

We used quite a number of writers for this study, asking them only to cover four or five studies each. As to each book they were to cover, they were asked to find the passage of Scripture in that book that was most meaningful to them, and to write on it. Thus, the passages we will be looking at are the ones the writers considered to be the most important ones in the Bible.

We also relaxed somewhat our expectation that the writers would be supplying *commentary* on Scripture (that is, helping us to understand the passage by giving us the consensus of how scholars have interpreted the passage down through the years). Writers were, instead, to tell us what the passage means to them and why they believe it to be important. The result is that we have not only a great variety of books to study over the next 66 days, but a wide variety of approaches to Scripture.

It is our hope that you will find this Journey through the Bible a most pleasant adventure.

R&D *What is your favorite passage in the Bible, and why?*

Prayer: *Guide us, Lord God, through this adventure into the whole of the Bible that we may appreciate the fullness of it, the messages You*

have for us in it, and a revelation of how You have been with mankind from the first, providing the way for us to have to unity with You.

Wednesday, February 14

Read: Genesis 17:1-11, 19-20

The Old Covenant

Genesis is the first book of the Bible, narrating the history of Israel from the Creation to the death of Joseph.

Our theme today is genesis, beginning, the origin of things. The book of Genesis has more than fifty familiar stories, and one finds it difficult to know where to begin. We have chosen the encounter between God and the patriarch Abraham (Abram). The name Abram is taken to mean “exalted Father” and Abraham “father of a multitude.”

Genesis 17 marks the beginning of Jewish history. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob begin the genealogy, the family history of a people. All that goes before is an attempt to describe how they came to this point, why things are as they are.

The Old Testament or covenant may be summed up in God’s words, “If you will be my people, I will be your God.” It is a relationship freely entered into, one which has obligations on both sides. On the human side is the requirement of faithfulness and obedience. God’s side of the bargain is to care for His children, multiply them, give them a homeland, and support them against adversity. It is the beginning of monotheism, the belief in one God. It is the beginning of God’s family, the family to which you and I belong, a family in which there is room for such things as growth, forgiveness when we err, and a sense of the Father’s purpose for our lives.

R&D *What is your personal covenant with God the Father?*

Prayer: *You have a purpose and a plan for each of us, Lord. As You led Abraham, we look to You to lead us.*

Thursday, February 15

Read: Exodus 12:3-13

The Lord's Passover

Exodus, which means "going out," is the second book of the Bible and contains the most thorough description we have of the Mosaic constitution. It tells of Moses leading the Israelites from captivity in Egypt.

The Lord has power and the Lord is righteous. When God sent Moses to Pharaoh to ask permission for the people of Israel to leave the country, He backed that request with authority and power. "Let my people go" was not an idle suggestion but the will of the Lord. And many plagues were visited on the nation of Egypt when its ruler refused to heed the Lord's request.

The Lord is righteous. The good were not to be afflicted with the bad. All that was necessary to escape the Lord's judgment upon Egypt was to obey His will. The Israelites were instructed to sacrifice a lamb to the Lord and to sprinkle its blood upon their doorposts. Seeing this evidence of obedience, the angel of death would pass over.

God still provides a way to escape His righteous judgment, and that way is Jesus Christ. When we break bread in the Holy Communion we say, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." As we make Jesus' sacrifice of his life on the cross our own sacrifice, so we avert the judgment that would otherwise be upon us, and we find ourselves strengthened to go forth and live the life that our heavenly Father has prepared for us.

R&D *How do you make Jesus' sacrifice your sacrifice?*

Prayer: *It is in obedience to Your will for us, Lord God, that we show ourselves to be followers of Christ.*

Friday, February 16

Read: Leviticus 8:1-9

Levitical Priesthood

Leviticus, the third book of the Bible, consists of ritual laws. Its name comes from the tribe of Levi, to which the hereditary priests belonged.

The Levitical laws outline a systematic approach to God through sacrifice. It was the plan of God for His people at a certain

stage of their religious development. No detail was too small, no practice left to the imagination. Everything was spelled out, the offense, the satisfaction for that sin that restored a person to God's good graces. And there was no sacrifice without the shedding of blood.

To perform these animal and bird sacrifices and to instruct the people in the proper procedure, priests were set aside from other folk. The descendants of Jacob's son Levi were chosen by God and consecrated by Moses to be the priests. Provision was made for the rules by which they lived, the clothing they wore, their family lives and the duties they performed. Nothing was left to chance. See Exodus 25-27 for the details of the Wilderness Tabernacle where all of this was to take place.

There is no longer blood sacrifice practiced in the Judeo-Christian world. Jesus shed his blood upon the cross for us, and that fact makes animal sacrifice unnecessary. But we still need priests to speak to God for the people and to the people on behalf of God. The priest re-presents Christ's sacrifice, and the inestimable merits of that saving act are invoked on behalf of sinners of today. But the modern priest is not in conflict with the idea of the priesthood of all believers. Anyone can come to the throne of God, praying in Jesus' name and invoking the Holy Spirit.

R&D In what sense do you regard yourself as a priest, a successor of the sons of Levi?

Prayer: God never intended for ministry to be left in the hands of the clergy; all Christ's people are called to ministry.

Saturday, February 17

Read: Numbers 11:16-17

The Commissioning

The fourth book of the Bible, Numbers, is so named because it contains two numberings of the people described in it. It covers the experiences of the Hebrews from their second year in the wilderness to their arrival at the border of the Promised Land.

Moses was a great leader, inspired and called forth by God. He was both a religious leader, interpreting God's will to the peo-

ple, and a civil leader, rendering judgments on all sorts of matters, some of them trivial. This sort of mixture of church and state was to go on for some time in the history of Israel, continuing until the office of king was separated from that of prophet. In modern times, the will of God is interpreted by the Church; civil government is by law a “non-prophet” institution. Be that as it may, in Bible times Moses found the burden of the people too much for him, and he complained to God. And the Lord told Moses to choose out seventy leaders, men who were acknowledged to have the gift of leadership and who were of good reputation among the people. And when Moses had done so, God’s power came down and He put His spirit, the same spirit that empowered and guided Moses, upon the seventy, so that they could bear the burden of the people with Moses.

The selection process and the ordination of these civil leaders to be judges and counselors in Israel was part and parcel of a system in which the civil realm and the religious realm were closely related to each other. Would that the politicians of today who so freely invoke God’s blessings upon their constituents, had that blessing to give.

R&D In what way may modern officeholders convey God’s blessings and guidance to the electorate?

Prayer: We pray for our elected leaders, Lord, that they may be guided by You in their decisions and actions.

Sunday, February 18

Sabbath Time

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9

The happiest people that I know are the people who never pretend to be more than they are, who make great spiritual claims for their faith but never for themselves, who keep strict and short accounts with God by admitting to Him every time they have gone off the path. This does not take a long time, it becomes a habitual attitude. But it prevents the accumulation of small or great wrongs which finally become so great we cannot carry them.

Read: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Monotheism

Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Bible. The name means “second law” and refers to the repetition by Moses of God’s commandments. It consists almost entirely of addresses delivered by Moses.

Our text today speaks of the great foundation of all Judeo-Christian theology. There are not many gods, there is one God. “This is the first and great commandment, and the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Verse four is the *Shema*, the credo that every good Jew says daily. He is to teach these words to his children and to bring them up in conversation. He is to write them on his doorposts. Even hotel rooms today in Israel have “Mezzuzahs,” small containers fixed to the door frame in which are slips of paper with the Shema inscribed. It is the custom to touch the Mezzuzah on going out in order to encourage religiously sound conversation wherever one may go.

There is an old Latin tag, “*lex orandi, lex credendi*,” which is to say, “as a person prays, so he believes.” It is important what we say and what we believe. Our actions reflect this belief. It was important for the children of Israel as they moved into areas where people had other gods. And it is important for us, when we are exposed to skillful pressure, not to give our allegiance to things which the Lord God has forbidden. Moses is at pains in the book of Deuteronomy to instruct His people in the correct beliefs. The Church today can do no less.

R&D *What “reminders” can help you better remember the teachings of the Christian faith?*

Prayer: *Daily Bible study, Lord, is a huge blessing to us in helping us to remember—in all aspects of life—how You want us to live.*

Tuesday, February 20

Read: Joshua 24:14-15

Serve the Lord

Joshua, the sixth book of the Bible, is named for Moses' successor, who led the Israelites into Canaan. It contains the only systematic account of the Hebrew conquest of the land.

These were Joshua's words as his life was coming to a close. It is supposed that the choice between allegiance to false gods (idolatry) and the true God was clearer in Joshua's time. Yet the test is the same now as it was then; the true God makes us free and gives us life. When we make gods of lust, of drugs, or hunger-for-power, of egocentricity, or of "things," we serve that which is powerless to do anything for us; all those things can do is to suck our life away little by little just as a parasite devours its host. Fear is the inevitable result of putting our trust in an untrustworthy "god." Joshua understood that it is inevitable that people will latch onto a god, and so the crucial matter in his time, as in every age, is the kind of commitment we decide to make—false gods or the true God. Do we want death or do we want life?

Our Lord Jesus Christ spoke clearly of the problem of idolatry when he said, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). Is it any wonder that the first of the Ten Commandments deals with our total loyalty to the true God?

R&D What forms of idolatry are prevalent in our time? What idols do you still have?

Prayer: Lord, there are so many distractions in our lives. Help us to keep our focus on Jesus.

Wednesday, February 21

Read: Judges 16:4-31

Samson and Delilah

The seventh book of the Bible, Judges, is so named because it deals with the activities of a number of "judges" of Israel, people who served

as leaders of the people during the period between their entry into Canaan and the establishment of the monarchy.

Before there were kings in the land the Judges ruled Israel. They were granted this leadership on the basis of strength: strength of body and strength of character. Perhaps the most famous of these Judges was Samson. He was noted for his unusual strength which he used to battle the Philistines, the traditional foes of the Israelites. He had lived by the Nazirite vow from the time of his childhood. This vow meant that he would drink no wine or strong drink and that he would avoid unclean food. Also, he would never cut his hair.

The valorous deeds of Samson were known throughout the land. Why then did such an admired person let himself fall into the clutches of Delilah, who was a secret agent for the Philistines? Perhaps this part of the biography could have been expurgated from the Bible. But, no, the revelation of Holy Scriptures is always such that it tells the whole story, warts and all. Among other things, this makes the Bible so believable. There is no whitewashing. If the Bible is going to tell of a person's virtues, it is also going to tell of the person's sins. Theologically this is vital. The Holy Scriptures contain the divine historical drama of redemption. The redemption of God is always needed wherever human beings appear. It was true of Pharaoh and it was also true of Moses. It was true of Saul and it was also true of David. Why should Samson be any different?

We learn that no one's personal strength is adequate. If humanity could have been perfected by people "trying harder" there would have been no need for Christ to come to save us. This is not a negative teaching about humanity. It is sheer realism. We are made for a higher glory than to become as Samson was for a while, famous or successful in worldly terms. The glory for which we were made is not less than to be forgiven and to be set free, to be a new kind of creature living in glad surrender to a loving Savior.

R&D "*Redemption*" means to be set free at the cost of the redeemer. Recall the redemptive ways of God throughout the Bible.

Prayer: *Lord, it may be painful, but it is easy to remember Your redemptive actions in my life, and I am eternally grateful.*

Thursday, February 22

Read: Ruth 1:1-18

Family

Ruth, the eighth book of the Bible, is an historical narrative about a family of Bethlehem who had been forced to migrate to Moab and the Moabite daughter-in-law who became an ancestor of King David.

The Book of Ruth illustrates the deep regard for the family in the Scriptures. Family life, accompanied by high moral standards, is one of the clear revelations of the Bible to be honored by all succeeding generations including our own.

Ruth, recently widowed, accompanies her mother-in-law, Naomi, from Moab to Bethlehem. Family ties were even stronger than nationality. Her poverty might, in some eyes, have given her the excuse to sell herself to prostitution or some casual relationship. She, instead, gleaned in Boaz's fields for a living. Boaz fell in love with her and they were married. Thus, by family descendency, Ruth became the great-grandmother of David from whose line came the holy family: Mary, Joseph, and Jesus Christ, our Lord!

This descendency extends to us. Thus, we have the divinely ordained institution of marriage of man and woman, Christian nurturing in the family, and everyone's Holy Family, the Church. All of this may seem obvious to us. However, it is not that obvious to the unspiritual world where these wonders of God are ignored, bringing about moral chaos and despair. The Book of Ruth teaches us that these spiritual treasures must be reclaimed in each generation. There are things which are true forever.

R&D How is the divinely ordained institution of the family being threatened in our time? Where can one person begin to rescue this institution?

Prayer: *Thank You, Heavenly Father, for both my natural family and my church family. I am greatly blessed by each of them.*

Read: 1 Samuel 15:24-29, 16:1-13

Vocation

The ninth book of the Bible, 1 Samuel, records events leading toward the establishment of the kingdom of Israel and subsequent events during the reign of Saul, the first king.

There are no more vivid personalities in the Old Testament than Saul and David. The characterizations are so intricately, yet clearly, drawn out that even Shakespeare could not have portrayed them with deeper fascination. What makes them even more fascinating is that they are historic figures and that they serve to illuminate the divine revelation.

Saul's original motivation after he was anointed as the first king of Israel was to offer himself as a servant of the Lord and of the people of Israel. No one could have been more courageous or self-giving. But as time went on, sheer ambition took over. He coveted high position for its own sake. The rising popularity of his young friend, David, now became a threat to his status, and jealousy allied itself with ambition.

Once more the Bible proves that it is a book for all the ages. How tragically familiar it is to discover that an earlier ideal for serving God and His people becomes self-serving instead. The importance of God and His purposes is replaced by self-importance. How ironic it is that as soon as one becomes protective of such ephemeral (and truly trivial) goals the immediate result is a sense of personal insecurity.

David's character comes out more appealingly in the end, but he too suffers from the sin of ambition. Perhaps the great difference is that when he strays from God's will (i.e., he sins) he knows it, becomes deeply repentant and is restored to a pathway of high purpose. No human leadership is perfect, but it will still be a part of God's plan as long as a personal relationship with God is maintained that elicits true repentance and renewed spiritual direction.

R&D *How do we learn to handle our vocation (the call of God) in relationship to the many worldly goals that are held up as matters of importance?*

Prayer: *Help us always to acknowledge, Lord God, that our real successes in life are the result of our relationship with You and not our own ability.*

Saturday, February 24

Read: 2 Samuel 18:31-33

Father and Son

2 Samuel, the tenth book of the Bible, concerns the reign of David, who became king of Judah and, later, of all Israel.

This brief passage is filled with all the dynamics of any love-hate relationship. What spirit young Absalom must have had! What anguish must David have felt. And who knows what other emotions must have been at play in this story of a father and son.

David's son Absalom actually led a conspiracy and rebellion against him. This was no minor family squabble, it was a major campaign! It even included the added drama of Absalom killing his own brother Ammon in order to accomplish his objective. David also realized that his own life could well be taken at the hands of his son's soldiers, and that he must send troops to battle his son. All this must certainly have caused him a great deal of suffering. Nevertheless, when David sent his army out against Absalom, his instructions were, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom" (18:5).

Subsequently, in the course of the battle, Absalom was immobilized by accident (18:9). In spite of David's instructions to "treat him gently," Joab, commander of David's army, killed Absalom. When the message reached David that his rebellious son was dead, and that he and his people were now safe, David wept and cried out those classic words of a father's love, "O my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

This story has always touched me deeply. I'm a father, I am a son, and I know what it feels like to be rebellious! When I see

myself rebelling against God—not against a father like David (who was no saint!) but against God—something deep inside reminds me that God *did* die for me in His own son Jesus. I know that I am forgiven even before I repent, and I respond with the psalmist, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me” (Psalm 139:6). It is this very inner knowing of God’s compassion and grace that restores my hope and renews my desire to serve God faithfully. If David had such love for Absalom, how much greater is God’s love for us all, saint and sinner alike, you and me!

R&D *In what ways do you identify with David? with Absalom?*

Prayer: *Father God, Your love for us is overwhelming. May we never forget what You have done for us through Your Son Jesus.*

Sunday, February 25

Sabbath Time

And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 1 John 5:14

I *know* that people, situations, my own spirit, are definitely affected by prayer. This must not be the tense prayer which is projected self-will; it must be the open prayer that catches the will and grace of God, as dry fields catch rain in summer. We need much receptive passivity; we need to receive and rest and stretch and relax and consider and decide in the love of God. Prayer is for the revealing and release of God’s will, not for its improvement or alteration.

Monday, February 26

Read: 1 Kings 8:27-30

Temple Dedication

The eleventh book of the Bible, 1 Kings, tells of the death of King David, the reign of Solomon, the division of the kingdom after Solomon’s death, and part of the history of the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Its “hero” is the prophet Elijah.

It has been my privilege to have worshiped in all kinds of settings, from prison chapels to beautiful Gothic cathedrals, from open fields to makeshift churches. I remember vividly one such experience in Honduras. There must have been about 100 people—

nursing mothers, little children, men—all crowded into a tiny corrugated roof shelter for our celebration of Holy Communion. There was considerable movement as many were left standing, while the benches that served as pews were crammed full. Unaccompanied, the singing was nonetheless absolutely inspired! As the service progressed there was an overwhelming awareness that “God does indeed dwell upon earth.”

In the midst of Solomon’s prayer dedicating the temple to God, he raises the great question, “Will God indeed dwell on the earth?” Awesome to contemplate, Solomon nevertheless expresses that deep longing and hope that as God had promised, so God would do: “My name shall be there.” In the tradition of the Israelites, where God’s name was there indeed was God. It must have been a moving moment for the people to see their temple dedicated; and in the years to come to see the temple as a standing reminder of God’s presence and of the covenant they shared with God. We also know that the temple was destroyed. Thus shall it ever be. Buildings come and go. Even the most substantial will not last forever.

“Will God indeed dwell on the earth?” In the ultimate and unique way of God, “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us,” Jesus, God incarnate, is the eternal “temple” of God. So now, as I enjoy the varieties of worship experience in the settings provided, it matters not so much what the facility is. I am thankful for the beautiful forms of art and architecture that serve to remind me of God’s presence in all creation. I am also grateful that through baptism, in that special sacramental way provided by Jesus, God also dwells in me and I in God.

R&D In what places do you look to see God? to see Jesus? In what ways does your church building symbolize God’s presence?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, for beautiful places to worship, whatever they are and wherever they may be, because You are there with us.

Read: 2 Kings 5:8-14

Naaman

2 Kings, the twelfth book of the Bible, continues the narrative begun in 1 Kings of the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It contains a number of stories about Elisha, the successor to Elijah.

I've had the awesome thrill of standing near enough to one of our huge space shuttle liftoffs not only to hear the incredible roar of the mighty engines, but also to feel the ground tremble beneath my feet. A truly amazing accomplishment of science and technology. At the same time, I have marveled at the awesome power of a hurricane, the unique beauty of the snowflake, and the glorious panorama of a clear night sky. Psalm 8 comes to mind; "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! ... When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers ... what is man that thou art mindful of him? ... Thou hast made him a little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor."

What, you might well ask, does all this have to do with the healing of Naaman's leprosy? The commander of the great Syrian army had the humiliating disease feared and loathed by all. He had accomplished much with his powerful military strength. But now, struck low by leprosy, he was powerless. If the disease was to be cured by God, surely some great act of courage would be expected of him, perhaps even something heroic. Instead, he was given the simplest of all measures, "Go, wash seven times in the Jordan." This was an affront to so great a figure! And yet it was only when he performed the simple washing that his leprosy was cured.

Just as Naaman accomplished great things with his army, so too we in our generation have achieved enormous goals, made phenomenal strides into the secrets of the universe and in understanding the human psyche. But let us not be blinded by the allure of greatness and success. God still seeks our wholeness, our holiness, peace and lasting joy. As much as we might wish to rely on our own accomplishments, or to do even greater things to assure us of God's acceptance, God asks no more than our obedience. It

is by our obedience that we show our trust in His love and mercy. In that is our health and salvation.

R&D *In what ways have your expectations of God turned out to be different from what actually happened?*

Prayer: *Pride, Lord, is the greatest of all sins because it causes us to look to ourselves instead of looking to You.*

Wednesday, February 28

Read: 1 Chronicles 15:25–16:3

Return of the Ark

1 Chronicles, the thirteenth book of the Bible, and 2 Chronicles recapitulate previous books, but concentrate on events in the Southern Kingdom (Judah), developments related to temple worship and genealogies.

I am a lifelong Anglican. All my life I have been nurtured by our beautiful liturgies. And like many others I have taken pride in the way we have always done things “decently and in order.” The themes which follow the church year provide a well-rounded view of our salvation story. There is a restful quiet about the “early service” and the midweek services. The principal Sunday services with their choirs, acolytes, banners, and processions glorify God in music, color, and pageantry.

Of course there have been many innovations over the years which have changed the look and feel of our worship. Coming largely as a result of the various renewal movements, they have introduced an element of enthusiasm not generally associated with traditional liturgical worship. They include the use of guitars and tambourines, handclapping and the raising of arms in praise. The exchange of the peace is now a common practice. To all of this, reactions are often mixed, sometimes supportive, and other times critical.

That seems to be what happened when David danced before the ark while returning it “home.” He was overcome with joy, and spontaneously expressed his enthusiasm in what to Michal was an inappropriate way. And because of that we are told she despised him! While “despise” may not be the appropriate word to describe

our reactions, there is always the temptation to respond as Michal did whenever we come into experiences that are foreign to us, especially in worship.

This episode in the life of David raises a question for us. In light of the profound message of the gospel, what really is important about corporate worship? Does it really matter so much that some people raise their arms in praise and others don't; that some enjoy the music of a "folk" or "contemporary" service while others prefer more traditional music? Is it so much a matter of "doing it right," or is it a matter of uniting us in God's love? It is true that when we grasp the significance of God's presence—not in an ark, but in our lives—it brings forth an enthusiastic response, however that response may manifest itself. To have danced before the ark in praise and thanks surely must have been pleasing to God, more so than the attitude which despised him who danced!

R&D What is my response when observing others at worship, especially those whose expressions are different from mine?

Prayer: Blessed Lord, our personal spirituality differs from one another. May that not cause our love for You to interfere with our worship of You in any way.

Thursday, February 29

Read: 2 Chronicles 36:15-16

Unheeded Prophet

2 Chronicles, the fourteenth book of the Bible, continues the material in 1 Chronicles.

The writer of Second Chronicles focuses on the political arena of the divided monarchy, Israel and Judah; yet his major concerns are religious.

Despite some good done in the reigns of David, Solomon, and Hezekiah and the reform under Josiah, the apostate nation of Judah was doomed. The Chronicle's warning is like a spear into the heart, intended for his own time and for the future: "The Lord... sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion for his people... but they kept mocking the messengers

of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, till the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, till there was no remedy.”

God still sends messengers and prophets, but how well do we heed them? While on vacation in the Florida Keys, I became fascinated with the coconut palms. Their gentle branches belie the slightest breath of air. Against fierce winds their fronds bend, like green waves touching the sands below. Only hurricane forces can bring destruction.

Every day our newspapers tell us of tragedies in our own nation and around the world that could so easily have been averted if a prophet or messenger had been heeded. The messenger may have been a maintenance man who questioned the hum of an airplane engine or a foreign relations expert who foresaw ethnic conflict in a country far away.

Can anyone know whose sin is greater, those who seek to impose their will on others or the blindness of all those who failed to heed the warning signals? Thus, tragedies result. God’s wrath rises against us, not for lack of compassion, but for the sins of all. Palm branches still dance gracefully in the sea breezes while we search the ashes of a plane crash or a bombed-out city and face once again the agony of unheeded prophets.

R&D How well do we heed God’s messengers in our midst? What stifles our hearing?

Prayer: Dear Lord, please forgive our overconfidence in ourselves that blinds us from Your warning and guiding messages.

Friday, March 1

Read: Ezra 5:2; 9:8-10

A Faithful Remnant

Ezra, the fifteenth book of the Bible, is closely linked with Nehemiah and with 1 and 2 Chronicles. It is named for the priest Ezra, who is its chief figure.

The Book of Ezra, a supplement to Chronicles, was written to tell how some who had been exiled in Babylon returned from captivity and labored in restoring religion at a rebuilt temple. The exiles returned to a wasted homeland, a temple in ruins and a de-

fenseless Jerusalem. Believing God had shown favor upon them, “to leave them as a remnant,” they began restorations at the temple “that our God may brighten our eyes” (9:8).

The masses do not rebuild temples. Neither do the prophets alone. It would require a remnant of the faithful working together with their prophets. Opposition in the community caused delay until the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, joined forces: “and (the people) began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem, and with them were the prophets of God, helping them.”

I once believed the clergy held the keys to rebuilding “the house of God.” When instituted as rector of a rural Virginia parish, I was given the keys of the church as symbol of my leadership. I set about the task of rebuilding the kingdom for the people of the parish. Having carefully planned a new all-inclusive educational program, I canceled the men’s “discussion” class. To my dismay no men came. Later I learned why.

In this rural Virginia setting the vast acreage of grass surrounding the Rectory was cut by the men of the church. I cautiously approached the tractor and bushhog, ridden by the senior warden. The tractor stopped. His weathered brown skin enhanced the stern eyes that greeted me. I looked up and mustered a commanding voice, “When are you men coming back to Church School?” Silence. He responded, “When you’re done with canceling *our* class, we’ll be back.” He put the tractor in gear and continued on. No one had explained this to me before. It is the people (*laos*) who rebuild the temple, with the clergy helping out, not the other way around.

R&D How do you understand yourself as one of God’s faithful remnant, challenged to restore “the house of God?” How can you join forces with the clergy for the building up of the community?

Prayer: Help us to understand, Lord, that all Your people are called to ministry—laypeople as well as clergy—and that we are to work together for the common good.

Read: Nehemiah 1:4-10

Taking Prayer Seriously

The sixteenth book of the Bible, Nehemiah, continues the history reported in the previous books. The political leader for whom it is named shares with Ezra credit for the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the revival of Judaism following the Babylonian exile.

The Book of Nehemiah continues the history of the exiles' return, the restoration of religion in Judah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The social and religious reforms instituted by Nehemiah reflect the vigor of his religious life: dependence on God and frequent prayers to Him. His spiritual life stands as an example for all. He prays "day and night for the people of Israel ... whom God hast redeemed by thy great power and by thy strong hand."

The spiritual vitality of a people is directly linked to that of its leaders—clergy and lay. After two decades as a rector, I finally began to challenge the vestry to be spiritual leaders rather than just the church's board of directors. But first I had to take my own prayer life seriously, even to the point of asking others to pray for me and accept accountability to them for my prayer life. Thus, I began to act out reliance on God through prayer.

The rector of a dynamic parish in Virginia tells this story. He made a public promise to pray by name for anyone who asked him. He dutifully recorded their names and prayed daily ... until vacation. When he realized the broken promise he confessed his sin to the Lord and promised to tell each person privately. Then he heard the Lord's voice: "public promise, public confession—on the next Sunday." One problem; that Sunday happened to be the day a national TV station was to air a live broadcast of their service, which would now include the rector's public confession. But, because he had taken his prayer life seriously, there was no backing out. The real issue was not the virtue of his prayers, but the power of God to redeem and restore His people.

R&D When have you taken your prayer life seriously enough to hear the Lord's voice and respond?

Prayer: *Speak to me, Voice of God, that my will may be Your will and my way Your way.*

Sunday, March 3

Sabbath Time

“Therefore, do not be anxious.” Matthew 6:31a

One day when I was trying to help someone who was worrying, I put down: “Specific for Worry: (1) Take three minutes in which to face all the facts of your situation; (2) Take another three minutes to accept them as facts, remembering that ‘the truth shall make you free’; (3) Remind yourself, in spoken words, that God is able to bring victory to you instead of defeat, and put faith in the place of worry; (4) Let Him do this for you now, and then ask Him what He wants you to do next.”

Monday, March 4

Read: Esther 7:1-10

A God of Justice

Esther, the seventeenth book of the Bible, is in a form that has been called an historical novel. It is named for a Jewish woman who became queen of Persia.

Although lacking in religious tone and language, the Book of Esther reflects Jewish life during the post-exilic era when the Jews were subject to foreign rule and persecution. Told as a folk tale, the story describes the struggle between villain and hero. However, the real hero is the Jewish people as they attempt to survive against overwhelming odds in a Gentile world.

When the tables between the villain and hero are overturned, through the grace of Queen Esther’s intervention, the villain’s plot of a Jewish massacre is discovered. He perishes on the very gallows he prepared for the hero. Those who have never suffered persecution will have difficulty drawing spiritual comfort from this story. Those who have suffered some form of oppression will appreciate the story’s poetic justice. Some will see a foreshadowing of Jesus’ identification with the persecuted and the oppressed. Sexual harassment has become a national concern. Women who have been victims of male sexual aggression can see in the Book of Esther an account of divine justice that gives hope. Yet, justice comes with

a price. Jesus' blood was spilled to set things right. Few of us will have a Queen Esther to intervene.

Those who speak out against sexual harassment are not always vindicated. We can take comfort in the conviction that when people persevere against overwhelming odds they can find strength in a God who demands justice for His people.

R&D How does the knowledge that our God is a God of justice help you to face situations of injustice?

Prayer: Lord, we live in a sinful world and there will always be persecution of one kind or another. Thank You that You stand against such persecution, but also that we can find forgiveness in You when we are the guilty ones.

Tuesday, March 5

Read: Job 42:1-6

Innocent Suffering

Job, the eighteenth book of the Bible, is the first of five poetical books. Many believe that it is an inspired poem based on actual occurrences. Its central theme is why a righteous person has to suffer.

The painful struggle of humanity to come to terms with innocent suffering is at the heart of the book of Job. No century can equal ours in its practice of violent affliction of the innocent. So the struggle for meaning goes on, informed by the revelation of this great book.

The ancient wisdom of Job's people taught that if one behaves (that is, lives according to covenant), one will prosper. And likewise, if one suffers, one has misbehaved, broken covenant.

The voice of Job forces us to realize that this simple maxim does not do justice to the mystery of life. Sometimes the innocent suffer, and suffer mightily. Job attempts to reconcile his experience of suffering to the ancient wisdom, but is unsuccessful. Finally, in this reading, he "comes clear" as the Quakers say.

His clarity comes when he recognizes that the mystery of God and life cannot be forced into synthetic maxims and human arrangements. In the beginning and in the end we find Mystery. "Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things

too wonderful for me, that which I did not know” (v.3). In an age that seeks to understand and therefore control all things, it is important for people of faith to affirm Mystery, God beyond our grasp, above our control, and in dust and ashes to repent of our pride.

R&D *Can I bear witness to Mystery (what I don't know) as well as to what I do know of God?*

Prayer: *Holy God, You allow uncertainty in life so that we may find certainty in Your Son Jesus.*

Wednesday, March 6

Read: Psalm 119:1-5

Law of the Lord

Psalms is the nineteenth book of the Bible. It is a treasury of prayer, praise, and adoration.

The American mind is accustomed to the “sound-bite” and has come to believe that “the shorter the better.” In that context the longest of psalms is unlikely to receive the attention it so richly deserves. Mitchell Dahood in his commentary says, “This great ‘Psalm of the Law,’ the longest psalm in the Psalter, is the literary composition of a psalmist whose earnest desire is to make God’s law the governing principle of his conduct.” Dahood also says, “By torah (law) the psalmist wishes us to understand law in its widest sense ... including all divine revelation as the guide of life.”

To “walk in the law of the Lord” (v.1) is a vivid biblical image of the life of faith. It was while walking toward Emmaus that the disciples had the Scriptures opened to them by the Risen Jesus (Luke 24:27). And the purpose of the Sacred Scriptures is none other than to reveal the way of God among God’s people, that their lives might be betrothed to Him in fidelity and hope. So the torah is then for the psalmist, as mentioned before, a general term referring to the posture and profile of the living God as seen in divine revelation.

It is not enough for us to “see” what is revealed, though that is certainly important. We are also called to “walk in His ways” (v.3), which is to say, fashion our behavior in such a way that it

meets and marries the God Who is revealed. Belief and behavior then for the psalmist are not different realities, but two sides of a common coin, the life of faith.

So may our lives become the primary means by which Christ is proclaimed to be “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). As our behavior embodies this “way,” we will find the psalmist’s prayer fulfilled in our time.

R&D *What are some of the “ways” we walk in today that are at odds with the “law of the Lord?”*

Prayer: *Your way, Lord God, is always the only way for those of us who say we follow You.*

Thursday, March 7

Read: Proverbs 1:1-7

Wisdom

The twentieth book of the Bible, Proverbs, is considered wisdom literature, containing maxims and wise sayings.

Wisdom is the goal of the writer of Proverbs, while moral discipline is the method and process. And wisdom is not in this regard the acquisition of information, but the choice to “fear the Lord” (v.7).

We live in an information age, and many of us feel like we are drowning in data. Every day brings more means of communication, more words, more data to our doorsteps. It was St. Anselm of Canterbury who is reported to have said, “I do not understand so that I may believe, rather I believe so that I may understand.” These words can be for us a lifesaver as we go under in the sea of words that is our information age.

The writer of Proverbs beckons us to see that a reverential relationship with the One who is the living Word (John 1:1) is the beginning of the wisdom we seek through our unlimited acquisition of information. It will be the anchor of this reverential relationship which will secure us in our lives, and will thus equip us to discern truth from deceit among the manifold words that come our way. Once we are anchored in that primary relationship

of reverential regard, we can undertake the discipline that can yield moral behavior.

In short, putting first things first, and using appropriate means to seek them, will yield a life of faith and joy and peace.

R&D *To what extent can “knowing” acquired in the information age lead us toward or away from the integrity and integration of the Proverbs?*

Prayer: *It is only as we grow closer to You, Lord God, that we can discern Your will within the many words that reach our ears every day.*

Friday, March 8

Read: Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

Timing

Ecclesiastes, the twenty-first book of the Bible, considers life with deep skepticism and pessimism but concludes with the admonition to remember the Creator and keep His commandments.

This is a great hymn in honor of the rhythm and harmony of creation. We live in a rootless and arrhythmic time. Cardiologists tell us that arrhythmia is a flaw in the heart, its inability to beat in proper time. Likewise, the arrhythmia of our culture is a pathogenic symptom of our sin. The writer of Ecclesiastes invokes the importance of timing as a crucial element in the life of faith. We are reminded that “to everything there is a season” and the implication is that we as people of faith are called to honor and respect these rhythms and seasons.

We carry cycles and rhythms in our bodies (breathing, sexual cycles, aging, etc.) and the creation carries seasons, tides, and days/nights as expressions of God’s own timing. The prominence of stars and moon and sun as means for timing in the creation narrative (Genesis 1:4) is quite significant.

The message of the Teacher is that we are to adapt ourselves to the Godly rhythms of life, not vice versa. The root of sin is the desire of humanity to control, contort, and realign these rhythms for our own ends.

R&D *The Amish people have rejected electricity and automobiles as disrupters of community rhythm. What, if anything, have we rejected as a source of disruption and arrhythmia in our lives?*

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, we want to move in the heartbeat of Your love and not in our own selfish ways; help us to get in step with You.*

Saturday, March 9

Read: Song of Song 2:10-15

A Love Poem

The Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon, is the twenty-second book of the Bible. It is a poem of human love.

Long referred to as the Song of Songs, that is to say, “the greatest of all songs,” this is a series of love poems traditionally attributed to Solomon because of his literary talents. However, most scholars agree that he was not the author of this collection.

It has often been found surprising that a book that makes no mention of God and whose language is so temporal should be included in the sacred writings. If, indeed, the Old Testament were but the collected literature of a nation, there would be nothing extraordinary about its inclusion since love poems are an integral part of the literary history of any civilization, and this compilation is an exceptionally beautiful example. However, theologians responsible for editing and evaluating literature accumulated for the edification of Yahweh’s people deliberated long and hard before finally decreeing, albeit with some hesitation, to include this book in Jewish Scriptures. This was eventually agreed upon due to the allegorical potential of the love between God and His Israel as seen in the poems. Similarly, to the Christian the interpretation is that of the love between Christ and his Church.

I particularly like this passage from the second poem because of its lyrical description of nature and the coming of spring, pictured in the imagery of the blossoming vines, the voice of the turtle dove, and even the appearance of the little foxes bent upon plundering the vineyards. We must be grateful that the Bible preserves this little book of literary gems in the traditional Scriptures of Jews and Christians.

R&D *A well-loved hymn speaks of Christ's love for his Church: "With his own blood he bought her and for her life he died." How does the typical church member respond to such love?*

Prayer: *Help us, Lord God, not to cheapen the meaning of the word "love" by using it casually to refer to relatively meaningless things. It is too important a word.*

Sunday, March 10

Sabbath Time

And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." Mark 5:34

What use in finding out what is the matter with a sick man, if you have no cure to offer him? What use to analyze and take apart and then try to put together again the pieces of a man's inner life, if you can give him no new principle on which to go forward, no new dynamic by which to live and keep above his former needs? A highly intelligent businessman asked me once, "When do you feel you have a right to ask another person to accept your belief?" And I said, "Only when that other person has begun to see that my faith may hold the answer to his problems."

Monday, March 11

Read: Isaiah 40:9-11

Security and Purpose

Isaiah is the twenty-third book of the Bible. It is the first of five prophetic books considered as major works because of their length. Authorship of the book is thought to be divided between the writer of the first 39 chapters and the writer of chapters 40-66, with some scholars believing that chapters 55-66 are of yet additional authorship.

The second part of the book of Isaiah, which we know as Second Isaiah, contains the message of a great prophet/poet. This was written for the Jewish community in exile in Babylon, homesick and discouraged, many miles from their homeland from which they had been expelled. This prophet sought tirelessly to help these despondent, displaced persons see their present situation as a redeeming, perhaps healing, discipline visited by Yahweh upon the people He loved. Not all were able to view it as such, for in their minds, Yahweh had failed them, and they were left with

the disturbing belief that the gods of Babylon were more powerful than He.

This was clearly a time of need of encouragement and assurance, which is what Second Isaiah offered them. This chapter is one of the most significant in the Old Testament because of its unequivocal delineation of the concept of monotheism which had been implied since the time of Moses but only now explicitly set forth beyond any question or doubt.

The encouraging message of this opening poem is that of the Omnipotent, the King of Kings, the Lord of all who is yet the tender Shepherd who carries the lambs in His arms, feeds His flock, and tends the weak. Through all trials and tribulations, hardships and sufferings in this transitory life, God alone is the everlasting, trustworthy Constant.

R&D *How would you explain to an inquirer what is meant by “God alone is the everlasting, trustworthy Constant?”*

Prayer: *Our faith, Lord, is based upon trust in You, and that trust is built upon our knowledge of Your love and care for us each day of our lives.*

Tuesday, March 12

Read: Jeremiah 31:1-6

Yahweh Speaks

The twenty-fourth book of the Bible, Jeremiah, is named for the prophet who lived during a particularly difficult time in the history of the Jewish people. In the midst of power struggles descending upon them from every side, Jeremiah evidences a sensitive and deeply feeling man who deplores his nation's sinful tendencies and oncoming doom.

Jeremiah is one of the best-known figures in the Old Testament. In a candid and unreserved manner, he bares to us the very depths of his heart in personal and intimate revelations of inner turmoil, doubt, anger, and questioning concerning the mystery of life and the unanswerable problem of human sorrow.

A man of many contradictions, he successively signals moods of anger and despair, hope and faith. Not recognized as a noteworthy figure of his time, Jeremiah was nevertheless one of the

preeminent persons of Old Testament history. He is seen by many scholars less as a prophet and teacher of religious truths than as a great human personality in whom is epitomized the quickened mind of man, often fearful, frequently doubting, yet always dedicated to a higher Power who alone gives meaning to human life.

In his forthright and frank writing, we see this great man with all his human frailties—impatience, irritation, hopelessness—and all his contradictory qualities—patience, forbearance, determination. So thoroughly human is the paradoxical character of this man that it is easy to identify with him. His answered and unanswered questions become our very own, and in him we find the mirror of ourselves in our eternal search for the Infinite.

The most beautiful of his writings are found in Chapter 30 (v.22) and Chapter 31 (vv.1-6) which describe the new Covenant that God will make with His people.

R&D How do we in our days of questioning and doubt manage to hold fast to faith?

Prayer: We human beings are flawed in our thinking and our actions, Lord. The answers to our many questions are only in You. Help us to look beyond our immediate concerns and to put our trust in You.

Wednesday, March 13

Read: Lamentations 3:19-33

Faith amid Disaster

Lamentations, the twenty-fifth book of the Bible, consists of five poems.

It is significant that in earlier Bible translations Lamentations is referred to as The Lamentations of Jeremiah, according to the tradition that the prophet was the author. Correspondingly, it was placed immediately after the book of Jeremiah in the Septuagint and continued to hold that place in various Christian versions that followed.

The five chapters of this short book, each consisting of a separate poem dealing with a central theme of the destruction of Jerusalem and its resulting devastation, seem at first glance to add little to the religious content of the Old Testament beyond providing a vivid picture of the disaster. However, further study reveals a

striking expression of how Israel's faith, tested by national catastrophe, was the vehicle of future hope as the theme progresses from grief to a recollection of God's love.

The liturgical use of these hymns in the Jewish worship during the Exile shows how the prophetic understanding of national guilt and renewal, God's judgment and mercy, helped the people of Israel to move from despair into hope. Through these hymns, they learned to recognize God's purpose despite engulfing chaos, ruin, and destruction, and to envision a better day to come.

In the midst of the grief and desolation expressed in this little book, the recognition of God's overriding love comes as a breath of fresh air.

R&D Think of a "dark night of the soul" experience. Where did you turn? Where did you find help and reassurance?

Prayer: In times of despair, Lord, our hope is in You. Bring us to our knees in prayer, yielding ourselves to Your guidance. Show us the light of Your presence in such trying times.

Thursday, March 14

Read: Ezekiel 3:1-7

The Sweet Word of God

Ezekiel is the twenty-sixth book of the Bible. It is named for a priest, mystic, and writer who wrote with fervor and passion concerning the needs of his people in a time of social crisis.

Ezekiel is commissioned as a prophet with the command to consume the Word of God. As this Word tells us in Deuteronomy 8:3 (and later in Matthew 4:4), the only real food we eat is the Word of God. Ezekiel is sent to his own people with the words of "lament and mourning and woe" (2:10) and yet he describes the taste of the scroll as "sweet as honey in my mouth" (v.3). Ezekiel is a model for Christians today of the tension we often experience between obeying the Word of God in our lives and also calling others into holiness, especially when the words may not always be popular. In my life I have found that the Word of God always becomes sweet as honey, even those words of lament, mourning, and woe. As I consume the Word of God more and more in my

life, I find that the temptation to ignore those “difficult” passages in favor of more palatable words is overcome by a deep desire to let the Word of God shape me, rather than my trying to shape it.

There is a great temptation to read the Bible as a cafeteria menu, taking a little of only those things that we like, but to do so is to miss the commissioning that comes from consuming the full Word of God. The scroll Ezekiel consumed was filled with words on both sides (2.10). It was saturated with the Word of God. Undoubtedly there were parts of the scroll which Ezekiel might have declined, but he was not offered one side or the other, or even parts of the scroll. He himself had to consume the full Word he was to deliver to his own people. Had he turned down the full Word of God, his message would have been less than God desired it to be. His message may have been one of judgment without mercy, or it may have been one of mercy without judgment. Either way it would have been less than God intended it to be, and the result would have been less than God desired for the chosen people.

For the prophet, as for us, digesting the full Word of God requires faith in God to make the message sweet to our taste, even if it has parts we might be inclined to ignore. The Word of God is one meal we can consume in its totality without fear of getting too much.

R&D Consider some of those passages of Scripture you find less than “sweet as honey.” Meditate on these, pray for insight into your struggle with them, read what others have written about them, ask the Lord to make the whole of Scripture the Bread for your life.

Prayer: We Christians need discipline, Lord, even though we may resist it; but, if we are to grow in You, we need to know how You want us to change, as displeasing as that may be.

Friday, March 15

Read: Daniel 3:1-30

Temptations and Opportunities

Daniel, the twenty-seventh book of the Bible, narrates the trials and triumphs of Daniel as a captive in Babylon. It is the last of the five

major prophetic works and contains prophetic descriptions and visions.

King Nebuchadnezzar was not unlike many of the kings of the ancient world, establishing a deity of his own creation for the people to worship. Often this image was actually of the monarch, but in all cases the purpose was the same: to regulate the worship life of the people, so that the people could better be controlled.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were faithful Jews who had earned a place of leadership in Babylon despite the fact that they were captive slaves in the empire. Their positions made their civil disobedience particularly visible. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had a greater responsibility to God and to the community of believers. To give even the appearance that they were not faithful to the First Commandment would be disobedience to God and a stumbling block to their fellow Jews. Leadership carries with it a greater responsibility along with greater recognition. The king's decree was not a small matter; it challenged the core beliefs of an entire nation of captive Jews, and those in positions of influence had a twofold responsibility, to God and to His people and to stand firm in opposition to the decree. In the end, these three faithful Jews were rescued by the Lord and respected by the king and given even greater ability to be witnesses for the Lord. They were truly leaders.

In our lives there are daily temptations and opportunities. Temptations abound for Christians to worship the gods of human creation in big and small ways. Likewise, opportunities abound for us to stand firm on the foundational principles of Christian living, being witnesses to the authenticity of our faith in Jesus Christ. The world respects those who stand firm with the convictions of their faith, and while the respect of the world is not something for which we should strive, it will nonetheless win us greater opportunities to be witnesses of the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who still rescues His faithful and whose Son is the salvation of the world.

R&D Discuss with another Christian the temptations you face to bow to the gods of human creation. Discuss the ways you have been a faith-

ful witness of Christianity in the face of such temptations. How has God rescued you from the “fery furnace” of secular conformity and given you greater opportunities to be a leader in the Christian community?

Prayer: *Opportunities present themselves every day for us to show our loyalty to You, Lord God. Help us not to miss these opportunities.*

Saturday, March 16

Read: Hosea 11:1-4

A Father’s Touch

Hosea is the twenty-eighth book of the Bible and the first of the group considered to be the “Minor Prophets” because their books are relatively brief. Hosea lived in the Northern Kingdom and was a contemporary of Amos.

Hosea uses much imagery from family life to illustrate the passionate nature of God’s deep love for His people. Like all fathers, God desires to give to His children the best in life, but we do not always accept the gifts as offered. The natural inquisitiveness of children does at times lead to danger, or worse, disaster. Israel’s rebellion led to many disasters about which God tried, again and again, to warn them. Hosea uses these powerful family images to remind God’s children of His Fatherly love for them, a love that recognizes sin and rebellion, but always opens forgiving arms of welcome to the repentant child. God’s care even extends to those moments when His healing grace is given, although it is not recognized or even acknowledged. Hosea reminds them that the present suffering was never God’s desire but was the result of their disobedience.

One of the joys I have known as a father is the way parenting teaches me about God’s love for us. The intense love I have known for our children from the time they were in their mother’s womb teaches me much about God’s love. Children are challenging; vulnerable, yet strong; intense, yet playful; bold, yet desiring protection. Such is our relationship with our Heavenly Father. Hosea reminds me that our willingness to obey God is something that is often learned only through the bumps, bruises, and disasters

of life. When the pain comes, no more lecture, sermon, or reprimand is necessary. Instead, the open arms of forgiveness become the learning tool. And the reciprocal embrace is all the acknowledgment necessary to say that the lesson has been learned.

R&D *In what ways is God calling you into a closer relationship with Him? How are you responding as a rebellious child? What ways have you experienced God's protective mercy? Are you willing to return to His loving arms and learn the lesson of obedience?*

Prayer: *Our time here on earth is a training ground for eternity, Lord. Help us to learn all that You have to teach us.*

Sunday, March 17

Sabbath Time

"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." Matthew 18:6

We cannot estop our constant influence over people—every day there goes on the silent, unheralded impact of one person upon another—sometimes for good, sometimes for evil. It takes place in uncountable measure wherever human relationships exist. We are making life happier, stronger, finer, more worthwhile by what we are and by what we do and by what we say—or we are making it sadder, weaker, meaner. It is not only the wicked people who drag the level down, but the drifters, the casual, the careless, the unthinking, the ineffectual.

Monday, March 18

Read: Joel 2:21-29

Enthusiastic Christians

Joel, the twenty-ninth book of the Bible, consists of only three chapters. The writer is a man of moral insight and force. The text is poetic in nature.

Joel's grand and glorious vision of restoration of God's people is timeless. Certainly, it was good news to those who first heard the words, but it is good news to all who have read it throughout the ages. This passage speaks of all of creation receiving the promise of restoration, a promise Paul refers to in Romans 8:19:

“The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.”

Jesus tells us that we are the “salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13), which means that part of our role in God’s plan of salvation is one of preservation and restoration. Our preserving role is that of guardianship of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are to preserve the Truth which we proclaim. As Jesus said in Matthew 5, “What good is salt if it has lost its saltiness?” What purpose does the Church have if it has lost the Truth it is to proclaim? Our restoring role is that of witness of the Truth. We are all witnesses of Jesus Christ to the world of nonbelievers; it is only a matter of what kind of witnesses we are to them. We are called and empowered by God to fulfill the Great Commission. It is in doing this primary work of the Church that we will help restore all creation.

This preserving and restoring role is a gift from the Creator who “pours out His Spirit” on all of His servants. We cannot fulfill our role apart from God’s empowering us to do so. We must have the Spirit of God empowering our lives to be the “salt of the earth” if we hope to preserve and proclaim the Truth and participate in God’s plan of restoration. What a joyful responsibility we are given by the Lord of all creation!

One of my favorite words in the English language is “enthusiastic.” I am also a rather enthusiastic person. The word literally means “to have the Spirit of God within you.” This is a wonderful description of the work of God in our lives. What a great attitude for Christians to have in the world today. We can be enthusiastic about our role in the restoration of God’s whole creation because the Spirit is in us doing greater things than we can “ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20). Our work of preservation and restoration goes far beyond matters of ecology and stewardship of the earth’s resources. We are called, by God, to participate in the restoration of all creation for the glory of the Father, in the Name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let’s do it enthusiastically!

R&D Consider the many ways we are witnesses of Jesus Christ. In what ways have you been a faithful witness to a nonbeliever? In what

ways can you be more “enthusiastic” about your role in the kingdom of God as a preserver of Truth and a restorer of creation?

Prayer: Through the Holy Spirit, we are given the opportunity to know and practice the gifts that You, Lord God, would bestow on us for ministry to one another and to those around us. Make us aware of these and responsive to them.

Tuesday, March 19

Read: Amos 2:10-11; 3:1-2; 5:12, 18, 21-24; 7:1-8

Breaking Covenant

The thirtieth book of the Bible is Amos, considered to have been the first of the prophetic books to have been written. Amos speaks to the time of the reign of King Jeroboam II (786-746 BC) in the Northern Kingdom. Israel, despite threats from surrounding powers, had become prosperous, leading to complacency and moral laxity.

Amos believed God had provided a model of righteousness when in His justness and mercy He saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and then provided them a Covenant to live by. Thus, a thousand years later, when Amos saw rich Israelites exploiting their poor brethren, he denounced this unrighteous conduct as a violation of the Covenant. He also saw their conduct as idolatrous. They had created a god whom they thought could be appeased by temple sacrifices and thus would ignore their immoral conduct. As God's chosen people, they eagerly awaited the “Day of the Lord,” but Amos warned them to prepare to meet a Lord who despised their conduct and only had punishment in store for their sins.

No doubt Amos was criticized for turning to revelations given by God in a nomadic economy a millennium earlier. They wanted a god who could address the problems of a modern Israel with its agricultural and mercantile economy. And so they changed gods to fit the times; they created a god out of pagan ideas.

Do you sense that history is repeating itself today? Are you hearing that the God of the old and new covenants is outdated and, for example, addressed a patriarchal society that no longer exists? Are you hearing that righteousness is determined by the circumstances surrounding any given situation and not by the God

Amos described—one who measures deviations from His absolute laws with a plumb line? Unfortunately, there are those today who want to change God just as there were those who wanted to do so in the time of Amos.

R&D How would you defend or disagree with the proposition that righteousness is not even possible unless it is anchored in the God of Scripture?

Prayer: Lord, in so many ways, our days are not much different from the times of which Amos speaks. We need spiritual renewal desperately to bring us back to You.

Wednesday, March 20

Read: Obadiah 10-12

Denunciation

Obadiah is the thirty-first book of the Bible and the shortest of the prophetic books. The book, probably written in the first half of the fifth century BC, is in poetic form.

The prophecy of Obadiah is a bitter denunciation of Edom, a neighboring country to Israel. Some years earlier, Babylonia had conquered Jerusalem (587 BC), and Edom had not only stood aside but had even prevented Israelites from escaping. Obadiah blames Edom's pride for these treacherous actions and he says God will be merciless and vengeful in His punishment. It is unfortunate but no surprise that some Christians throughout the ages have been wary about accepting the Old Testament because of such depictions of the nature of God.

Certainly, Obadiah did not have the benefit of knowing God through Jesus Christ. But doesn't he point to concepts we dare not ignore? Almost all the Old Testament prophets preached that God created a world in which sin—especially that of pride—leads to disorder. Obadiah emphasizes that God's judgment will include calamitous results when individuals or nations look to themselves and not to God for guidance. Obadiah even shows God not taking into account the circumstances that might explain the animosity that always existed between Edom and Israel. We recall that Esau was the oldest son of Isaac and as such was the rightful heir to be

the father of Israel. But Jacob gained this inheritance through deceit, and poor Esau was shunted aside to be the father of Edom. Thus, these two nations were born out of a situation that bred distrust and hatred. But Obadiah doesn't seem to think God is concerned with these extenuating circumstances. The God of Obadiah expects His people to ask His help to overcome whatever obstacles impede submission to Him. Think of how St. Paul overcame his inherited obstacles—with God's help.

R&D “Fire and brimstone” preaching seems to be unfashionable and not heard much anymore. What argument can you make that the motivation to obey God should include more emphasis upon the fearful results of disobedience?

Prayer: We can become like spoiled children, Lord, if we are not reminded of our willful ways. We don't welcome punishment and we are grateful for forgiveness; yet, let us not forget that there is a limit to Your patience—and that, in the long run, You are looking out for our greater good.

Thursday, March 21

Read: Jonah 1:1-3, 12, 15, 17; 2:10; 3:3-5, 10; 4:1-3

Salvation

Jonah, the thirty-second book of the Bible, is in the form of a story, considered by many to be a parable or allegory.

Certainly, the author's main point in writing the book of Jonah was that God's offer of salvation was not limited by any ethnic or national boundaries, but that everyone in the world is invited to repent and enter into His kingdom. We also see God's justice and mercy as He deals with Jonah's alternative willingness and reluctance to warn the people of Nineveh to repent. God punishes Jonah by having him thrown into a stormy sea but then rescues him with the help of a great fish. In the end, Jonah delivers the warning and—to his dismay—the city is saved.

An interesting aspect of the story is God's choice of Jonah to deliver the warning message. It might be compared to sending a fox into a farmyard to teach the chickens the art of self-defense. Jonah was a Jew and typical of many of his countrymen

who thought God's salvation was confined to them—certainly not available to outsiders, especially the long-hated Assyrians in Nineveh. But God's messenger saved the Ninevites despite the inner conflicts of the messenger.

R&D Jesus wants us to deliver his saving message to the ends of the earth. Isn't it possible the message would succeed in this purpose despite whatever doubts we have about ourselves as messengers? What do you suggest might be done in your own local church to enhance getting the message at least as far as the surrounding community?

Prayer: You've equipped us, Lord Jesus, by our relationship with you, to carry the message of your love wherever we go. Give us the courage to do so.

Friday, March 22

Read: Micah 2:1-3; 6:3-8

Worshipful Action

Micah is the thirty-third book of the Bible. The prophet Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah in Judah, the Southern Kingdom, during the reign of King Hezekiah, and prophesied of God's judgment to come for the nation's sins.

In these selected verses we learn first that pride and covetousness have been the source of wickedness in Israel's society, and God's punishment will follow. When God tells the people of His past saving acts on their behalf, He is implicitly saying also that their ancestors had responded by agreeing to a covenant to obey His laws. The people react by speculating whether greater sacrifices in the temple would mollify God. Micah concludes this exchange with one of the theological gems in all of Scripture: that God wants obedience to Him expressed by their walking humbly with God and being just and merciful toward their neighbors.

The temple services were not motivating the people to understand and obey God's will. We should ask ourselves whether our churches today help shape a conduct in us that is pleasing to God. If recent surveys are correct, the typical Christian attends church services on Sundays but thereafter does not act in ways that differentiate him or her from anybody else. Thus, God's will

is not being expressed adequately in proposed solutions to current problems. If Micah could speak to us today, he might not have to change the message he delivered 2,700 years ago.

R&D Archbishop William Temple stated: *“It is often said that conduct is extremely important and worship helps it. The truth is that worship is extremely important and conduct tests it.”* In what ways does your participation in your local church help you to discern God’s will for you with respect to trying to correct the moral disarray in the surrounding community?

Prayer: *Some Christian worship services are ended with the words, “The worship is over, now the service begins.” Help us to take that message seriously, Lord, as we go forth from worship to serve You in the world around us.*

Saturday, March 23

Read: Nahum 3:1-13

Presumption

Nahum, the thirty-fourth book of the Bible, probably covers the period 650-612 BC and may have been written just prior to the fall of Nineveh to a coalition of her enemies.

Nahum is not an easy book, to say the least! While many books of the Bible express hope that some people, at least, will repent of their sins and return to the Lord, the prophecy of Nahum focuses solely on punishment for those who refuse to repent.

God is, indeed, merciful, but too much emphasis on God’s mercy can lead to presumption. Don’t we hear statements to that effect in society and in the Church today? “I don’t believe in a God who punishes. I believe that God loves us all and will not punish anyone,” or, “I don’t have to repent now. I can do it whenever I want.”

How wrong these assertions are! A century previously, under the preaching of Jonah, the people of Nineveh repented of their sin. Within a few generations, however, they returned to their sinful ways. Having been the recipients of His loving mercy, now the unrepentant Nineveh would experience God’s righteous punishment. Nahum lists some of their sins: bloodshed (v.1); debauch-

eries (v.4); occultism (v.4). Far from being acceptable behaviors or “alternative lifestyles,” these are utterly against the will of the Lord.

Those refusing to repent cling to rationalizations. God, speaking through Nahum, reminds the Ninevites that He accepts none of these. They claimed that nothing would happen to them because they were so strong. God reminded them that while Thebes was strong and was protected by strong allies (vv.8-9) she went into exile.

God will not excuse behavior or attitudes that He declares to be wrong. It is possible, having tasted the mercies of the Lord, to harden our hearts before Him. What the book of Nahum tells us is this: forsake your sin and walk in the Lord’s ways while there is yet time.

R&D *Have you been presuming on the mercy of God?*

Prayer: *Forgive us, Lord God; for we so often fall short of Your will for our lives.*

Sunday, March 24

Sabbath Time

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance. Hebrews 11:8

Faith is like a bicycle: it only stands upright when it is in motion—the minute it stops moving, it flops on its side.

Monday, March 25

Read: Habakkuk 3:3-19

Track Record

The thirty-fifth book of the Bible is Habakkuk. The prophet was apparently a native of Judah and probably lived in Jerusalem.

A friend once told me about his trip to the racetrack. Knowing nothing about betting on the races, I asked him why he bet on particular horses. I was told, “Because they have great track records.”

In our passage for today, Habakkuk tells his listeners that, in spite of the troubles they’re going through, God will help them. Habakkuk does not base this on some theoretical belief but on what God had done in the past. God worked plagues in Egypt

(v.5), He led His people forth from Egyptian bondage, He divided the Red Sea and the Jordan (vv.8, 15), and so on.

Therefore, the prophet's cry of victory (v.18) was not based on wishful thinking or emotional delusion. In spite of the troubles they were in (v.17), God would rescue them because that's what He's like.

That's why it is important for us to write down the times when God works a miracle, grants a healing, sends a blessing, or answers a prayer. When we are going through tough times, we can recollect what God had already done for us, take heart, and expect Him to act again. After all, God has a track record!

R&D With what miracles, healings, blessings or answered prayers has God blessed you?

Prayer: Dear Loving God, You bless us in more ways than we can name, and we are grateful.

Tuesday, March 26

Read: Zephaniah 3:11-20

Remnant

Zephaniah is the thirty-sixth book of the Bible. The author was probably active during the period of King Josiah of Judah, who reigned from 640 to 609 BC.

While prophesying against the spiritual corruption of Judah, Zephaniah looked beyond the day when God's people would be punished to a day when the remnant would be greatly blessed. The first part of this book addresses those who stubbornly refuse to turn from their evil ways and return to the Lord. The verses we are studying today list just some of the many ways God will bless the remnant—that small minority of people who remain steadfast and faithful (vv.12-3).

Just listen to what God promises! First, there would be what we might call an “outward” restoration: the remnant of believing people will be returned from the exile into which the Jews would soon enter (v.20), there would be restoration of the people as a community, including the weakest in society (v.19), there would be security from their enemies (vv.15, 19), there would be free-

dom from disasters (v.18). Secondly, there would be an “inward” restoration of their relationship with God: God would remove His judgments against them (v.15), God would not just tolerate His people but actually rejoice and exult over them (v.17), and He would so work deep within them that their sense of shame would be removed and rejoicing would well up (v.19).

There are these words from the *Book of Common Prayer* Holy Communion service, “all other benefits of His passion,” and the words, “innumerable benefits procured unto us...” These speak of blessings that are for our lifetime on earth, not just for later on in heaven. Yes, there may be some change of attitude and behavior necessary on our part so we will be able to receive them; yes, there may be some time elapsed before these blessings happen; and yes, the blessings may come in a different way than we had expected, but God wishes to bless us, not just later in heaven, but here and now on earth (v.20).

R&D *What are some of those “innumerable blessings procured unto us?”*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, that You bless us in so many ways.*

Wednesday, March 27

Read: Haggai 1:1-11

Priorities

Haggai, the thirty-seventh book of the Bible, is concerned with the rebuilding of the temple as the center of worship in Jerusalem.

After the exile in Babylon (586-539 BC), the Jews set about to rebuild Jerusalem. In their desire to build themselves elaborate homes and to prosper financially, they neglected to rebuild the temple (v.2). This may make sense to us. After all, God can be worshiped anywhere, and rebuilding one’s home and the economy are important. But it was not what God wanted. The prophet Haggai tells them that this is why their efforts at prospering are not accomplishing very much. They sow many seeds but do not reap a big harvest; they eat and drink but are still hungry and thirsty; and so on (v.6). God is withholding these things not to be mean to them

but to force them to think through their attitude and behaviors and start obeying the Lord in all things.

Sometimes we need to ask if the problems we experience come from being out of the Lord's will. This is not to say that each problem we experience is caused by our sin. But some are! For example, sometimes (though not always) migraines or high blood pressure come from bitterness toward someone. Sometimes we miss a blessing because we do not seek the Lord's direction. Once again, this is not because God is mean. Rather, God places a blessing in a certain place and wants us to meet Him at that place. If through ignorance, laziness, or willfulness we do not go to the appointed place of meeting, we will miss out.

If things are not going well it may be Satan at work to harass a Christian believer; it may be that God's timing is such that the appointed time for blessing is not yet. Or it may be that, like the Jews to whom Haggai was prophesying, we are attending to our own desires and not to the will of the Lord. For that reason, when I am sick, when prayers do not seem to be answered, and often at other times, I take time to examine my attitude and behaviors to see if I need to repent.

R&D Do you regularly examine your "life and conduct by the rule of God's commandments" (as the Prayer Book exhorts you to), or do you do your own thing?

Prayer: Call us up short, Lord, when we are focusing on ourselves to such an extent as to miss the blessings You have for us.

Thursday, March 28

Read: Zechariah 9:9-10

Roller Coaster

Zechariah is the thirty-eighth book of the Bible. It stressed the importance of temple worship and looks toward a Messianic kingdom with an ideal ruler.

The prophet foretold of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We celebrate that public entry with our festival on Palm Sunday. We sing the favorite hymn "Ride on, ride on in majesty."

We wave the palm branches. We hear the Passion narrative. It is the beginning of Holy Week.

A spiritual roller coaster awaits us as we follow the path the disciples took with Jesus from the triumphant entry to the Resurrection. Yet so many of us experience only the high points of Holy Week. We see the joy of Palm Sunday and the glory of Easter. Where are we during the subdued Maundy Thursday stripping of the altar and the setting of the Watch? Where are we during the Three Hours on Good Friday?

Yes, I know you have a job. But most of us have personal time we can take off from work. Prayerfully consider using one of your personal days to experience the full roller coaster ride of Holy Week. Palm Sunday proclaims Him as King of the nations who will make peace and rule from sea to sea.

If we have put Jesus as the head of our lives, surely we can do more than just wave a palm branch on Sunday. Ride on in majesty through the entire week!

R&D *How have you observed Holy Week?*

Prayer: *Special times of the church year give us the opportunity to be especially mindful of all you have done for us, Lord Jesus. May we avail ourselves of these opportunities to grow in our relationship with you.*

Friday, March 29

Read: Malachi 3:16-18

Fear of the Lord

Malachi, the thirty-ninth book of the Bible, is the last book of the Old Testament and the last of the minor prophetic works. The book deals with a period of great anxiety (perhaps between 458 and 432 BC) when the people have returned from exile to be afflicted with drought and destructive locusts, weak religious life, and dim spiritual vision.

The fear of the Lord is not the anxiety of anticipated pain or loss. The fear of the Lord is the respect, the awe of our humble humanness before the majesty of our Creator and Redeemer.

Are we who fear the Lord speaking to one another? We gather as a group in church to worship the Lord. Do we make an opportunity to share with each other what is really going on in our

lives? There's hardly time to say hello, let alone to go into depth about our week while we pass from the service to the fellowship hall.

The small group, cell group, Bible study is where we who fear the Lord can gather and speak to one another, openly and honestly. It is in the fellowship of other believers that the prophet says our names are written for the Lord. In the public worship service, we can remain anonymous. In the privacy of our home we can commune directly with the Lord, yet no other human is there to keep us accountable. It is in the circle of God-fearers that we are held to our word and to God's word. God shows us through the patience, wisdom, and the love of others how He deals in righteousness with the person who serves Him.

R&D *In what ways are you held accountable to your covenant with the Lord?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, for the availability of small groups for prayer, Bible study, and accountability that are so often available to us in our churches and our communities.*

Saturday, March 30

Read: Matthew 28:18-20

Disciples

Matthew, the first book of the New Testament and the fortieth book of the Bible, may have been composed as early as 80 AD. It is the first of the Gospels, meaning "good news," that has been brought to us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Its focus is to show the Jewish people that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

With all the wonderful parables and miracles in the Gospel of Matthew, why did I choose the passage most used for evangelism? Am I about to embark on a meditation about sharing the gospel? Yes and no!

The phrase that has stuck my heart is "go therefore and make disciples." Jesus has shown us how to make disciples. Jesus taught and healed in the presence of his followers. Jesus ate with his followers. Jesus met with his followers. Jesus sent his disciples

out to do a job. Jesus debriefed the disciples upon their return. The pattern is that Jesus spent time with those whom he called.

Jesus tells us to go therefore and make disciples. With work, family, and church how will I find the time to make a disciple? The small group seems to be the answer to making disciples. Your group might be a dinner club, a ski group, a bowling team—it doesn't have to be a Bible study because wherever two or three are gathered Jesus can be shared.

The way we live, the way we treat those with whom we deal on a daily basis, is the way we form disciples for Christ. Who do we "live" with? Our co-workers, our family, our friends are all members of our small group. Are we sharing the joy of Jesus with each of them? Are we making disciples where we have the most influence? Remember, Jesus is with us until the end of the age.

R&D *What are you doing to make disciples for Christ?*

Prayer: *We are to grow in the knowledge and love of you, Lord Jesus, all or our lives. We can do that best within the company of other Christians whom we are discipling or who are discipling us.*

Sunday, March 31

Sabbath Time

"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."
Mark 9:35b

Real humility, as I see it, is just one thing: it is depending on God, not on ourselves. It isn't inferiority, nor shyness, nor running away, nor everlastingly calling attention to how useless one is (this is really just pride backfiring); humility is depending on God.

Monday, April 1

Read: Mark 12:28b-31

Love?

Mark is the second Gospel and the forty-first book of the Bible. It is the shortest Gospel, containing only 16 chapters, apparently written for Gentiles outside of Palestine, in a simple and direct manner.

The commandments given to Moses are easy to follow. Ten rules that are black and white directions for a right relationship with God and people. No other god but Yahweh, no graven imag-

es, keep holy the Sabbath, honor your mother and father, don't lie, don't steal, etc. Pretty basic, very straightforward.

The summary of the law, on the other hand, is comparatively vague. Love your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. What does that mean? What is love? Is love the feeling advertised by lacy Valentines? All my heart? All my soul? All my strength? Give me back the standard Ten Commandments—no other god but Yahweh, no graven images, keep holy the Sabbath.

I want to keep God at a ceremonial distance. It's safe. Jesus wants me to give up control and give everything to him. I don't want to. Then the second commandment is to love my neighbor as myself. I have to examine how much I love myself. Do I love myself? The stone tablet that says honor my parents, don't lie, don't steal, don't commit adultery is easy to follow, but love? Love is such a vague term.

R&D What, to you, is the essence of the word "love"—from God's point of view?

Prayer: What could a loving God expect from us, with His Holy Spirit within us, but the same kind of love He has for us? Lord, may we love in this manner.

Tuesday, April 2

Read: Luke 1:26-38

Yes

Luke is the forty-second book of the Bible, and the third Gospel. Probably written between 80 and 90 AD, its author also wrote Acts. It is considered the most beautifully written of the Gospels and one of the most beloved books in the Bible.

The love of God is relentless. God is always waiting for just the right moment to break through into our lives and show us that He loves us. And here is the story of the ultimate sign of that love. The moment had come, the fullness of time. And the Word becomes flesh through the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.

And Mary says "yes" to that love of God, despite the difficulty of her position. Despite the shame and embarrassment that

such a pregnancy will cause (it is even a scandal among some to this day), Mary embraces the promise of God. The loving human response to God's incredible love is always obedience. We see this in Jesus. We see it today in Mary's yes. She gives herself over to the will of God and commits herself and her situation totally to Him.

One evening after completing a prayer workshop (I was a permanent deacon at the time) a woman called me over and asked me a question, "Why, aren't you a priest?" I tried to explain it all to her, but she didn't seem to accept any of my explanations. After further conversation, I admitted to her that the thought had not only crossed my mind, but that I intended someday to pursue a call which I felt I did have. She then asked, "Why not now?" I assured her that now was not a convenient time, and furthermore I couldn't afford it. But then she said, "But if it's God's will, why would you want to delay it even one moment?" Why indeed? Eighteen months later I was in seminary, and my dear friend, that "angel" of God even provided for my financial needs while I was in seminary.

R&D In what ways has God called you in the past, and how has He provided for you in accomplishing that task?

Prayer: Lord God, I shudder to think about Mary saying "No." May I never say "No" when You call upon me for things of so little significance compared to what You were asking of Mary.

Wednesday, April 3

Read: John 15:11-17

Joy

John, the forty-third book of the Bible, is also a Gospel, but is significantly different in nature from the other three (and thus, not considered synoptic—i.e., having similar viewpoint and arrangement). The Gospel of John looks at things from a more spiritual point of view and was apparently written for adult members of the new churches to confirm and strengthen them in the faith.

We do not choose God. He has chosen us. In this passage Jesus indicates that there are several things to which we are called.

We are chosen for joy, for love, to be his friends, to be his ambassadors, to bear fruit and to be children of God.

“I have come that your joy may be full.” Jesus intends that we be filled with joy! That the tribulations of this life which we shall certainly face shall not defeat us. That we can triumph despite the circumstances of life. As Jesus says in the next chapter of John’s gospel (16:33), “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” We were made and fashioned to be joyful.

And Jesus also indicates that we are to be people of love: “God so loved the world that he sent his Son.” And Jesus laid down his life for us that our lives might be raised up with his. And so he tells us to love one another, not just as brothers and sisters, but in sacrificial, Spirit-possessed ways.

He has laid down his life for his friends, and he calls us friends. Not unworthy servants, but friends. And friends are those who stand side by side together in common effort or mission. We are Christ’s friends when we are on mission with him, spreading the gospel and reaching out to all the beloved of God.

And so we become the very presence of Jesus in a world desperate for God’s presence. Ambassadors, those sent out to bring with them a message from the Lord. To paraphrase the words of William Temple, those sent to preach the gospel and to occasionally use words.

And finally, to bear fruit. Fruit which comes from the Spirit of *God* active and alive within us, not just hung on by our will so that we look good to others. Fruit which is planted and nourished by the very breath of *God*. “Born not of the will of the flesh nor the will of man, but of God.”

R&D In what ways have you responded to the call of Jesus so that your joy might be complete?

Prayer: Make us fruit-bearers from the orchard of your love, Lord Jesus.

Read: Acts 1:5-8

Witness

The Acts of the Apostles, commonly known as Acts, is the forty-fourth book of the Bible and is an extension of the Gospel of Luke. Acts has been called the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit” because it tells of the coming of the Spirit and how the early followers of Jesus lived, worked, and worshiped under the guidance of the Spirit.

“You shall be my witnesses.” Jesus lived with the disciples. Jesus gave up his life on the Cross. Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus was soon to depart and to return to his Father in heaven. And he commissioned his friends to be his witnesses.

What does it mean to be a witness? First, a witness is one who has an experience that is real. The evidence must be firsthand. It cannot be hearsay or made up. It must be an actual encounter with the facts of the case. Second, a witness responds to events (deeds) not just words. It was for the disciples a response to what Jesus did that carried the most weight, not to what he said. He was a great teacher. He had wonderful things to say. And what he said was important, but it was what he did that was the source of their witness. As Peter puts it later in the book of Acts (2:22), “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst.” And Peter goes on to witness to Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection (2:23-36). It is the recounting of real events and real actions that make a person a witness. And if we are to be witnesses, we need to have a real experience of the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives. We cannot witness to something that we have never experienced. We cannot witness to something we do not know. For these men and women Jesus was the Way, the Truth, and the Life. They knew it. They had experienced it for themselves, and they witnessed to it. It cannot be any different for those who would be his witnesses today. If you have not settled this issue in your life, invite Jesus into your heart, into your life, so that you may indeed be his witness.

R&D *In what ways has Jesus personally touched your life so that you can witness to him? Recall an experience in which you knew that God was speaking to you through the witness of another.*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Christ, for your presence in my life. May I have increasing opportunities to share with others what you mean to me.*

Friday, April 5

Read: Romans 8:31-39

Advocate

Paul's Epistle to the Romans is the forty-fifth book of the Bible. It contains the most systematic statement of Paul's beliefs. It is one of four documents (along with the two letters to the Corinthians and the one to the Galatians) which sum up what he regarded as the essentials of the faith.

What beautiful and haunting words these are. Paul looks upon the actions of God and he proclaims that God loves us so much that He sent His Son to die for us, and now His Son is our very advocate in heaven. Our hope is guaranteed! God loves us so much that He is absolutely relentless. He refuses to abandon us to sin and death. He will not be deterred in His overwhelming desire to love us.

Jesus is not primarily our judge. He is the great lover of all humanity. He died that we might have life. He was raised so that we might know we are redeemed. And he pleads for us. Never tiring in his loving pursuit of his people. No affliction, no hardship, no disaster, no calamity can ever separate us from that love. And not only can they not separate us from his love; indeed, through them, we can be conquerors through him who loves us. No, even more than conquerors. Tribulation can indeed lead to the very victory of Jesus Christ. Amazing!

And then Paul writes, "For I am sure that neither death nor life... nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." It may be obvious how death might separate us from God, but how does life separate us from God? Look at the world around us. We live in an affluent

nation and yet our very affluence separates us from God. Our society has the best of everything, and yet at its very heart it is in the throes of spiritual death. Jesus is the answer to that separation from God caused by life. And Paul's message to us is, if we are living in Christ, nothing can separate us from him. If we are not living in Christ, we are already separated from him and life is not in us. Who or what can separate us from the love of Christ? Only we can, only our own wills.

R&D What tribulations in your life have helped to lead you into his love and have made you more than a conqueror through Jesus Christ?

Prayer: What more can we ask, Lord Jesus, when you have given us everything?

Saturday, April 6

Read: 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

“Buttered Up”

The First Epistle to the Corinthians is the forty-sixth book of the Bible and was believed to have been written by Paul at or near Ephesus, probably between 54 and 57 AD.

A teacher of mine once noted that Paul generally started his epistles with a greeting, followed by what he called a “butter them up” paragraph. Paul wanted to set the tone of fellowship and communion with his readers. I've noticed that guest preachers and speakers use this same approach. They often fondly recall some past experience with the congregation or the assembly, then they thank the host/hostess for the opportunity to speak and be with the assembly. Their opening remarks are an effort to set a comfortable, warm tone so everyone can sit back and feel good.

The striking aspect of being “battered up” by Paul is that he wants us to feel good and at awe about the faith God has sealed us with by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul recalls how God through Christ has visited us and left us with some special gifts: God's grace through Christ is indescribable; the Holy Spirit blesses each community with the spiritual gifts necessary to do God's work; the Lord sustains us to our very last breath; God is forever

faithful; and if this were not enough, He's placed us in an eternal relationship with Jesus.

When I take the time to read slowly this paragraph word by word, I'm left with a sense of peace by the joyful truth that God has saved us, God equips us to do His work and He includes us as part of His eternal family. I don't particularly feel "battered up" by Paul; all I know is that I feel eager and ready to sit back and hear the rest of the message.

R&D What are the feelings you have when you consider what God has done for you? What action does that stir up within you?

Prayer: Thank You, Holy God, for Your servant Paul, for all he has to teach us and all he did to serve You in his hugely productive lifetime.

Sunday, April 7

Sabbath Time

But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." Matthew 14:27

The twelfth chapter of St. Luke contains a perfect category of the things to fear, and the things not to fear. We are not to fear death or being killed, we are not to fear being called on the carpet for our faith, we are not to fear that our bodily wants will not be supplied, and we are not to fear for the future, either our own or that of God's cause in the world. But we are to fear the everlasting consequences of the kind of life we live, we are to fear blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and we are to fear meanness about money and possessions.

Monday, April 8

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Transformation

The Second Epistle to the Corinthians is the forty-seventh book of the Bible. It was written over a period of time from various places in Macedonia and contains the first piece of autobiography in the early Christian Church, giving details about Paul not found elsewhere.

Transformation is a long process. Becoming something different from what we are can take a lifetime. Struggle, try, plan, and plot as hard as we may, we continue to slip, fall, and seem never

to be where we want to be. The problem is our pride wants to be in control of the when, how, and where of the transformation. We forget that God is in control and desires more than we do that we become what He would hope for us. Transformation happens when we allow God to do the work through *us*.

I understand God to specialize in making things new. Whether it is a newborn baby or resurrecting the dead, God seems to always be around making and remaking us. He just seems to need to keep His hands busy. We need to step out of the way and let Him take the broken, chipped, and worn pieces of our lives and transform them into something new. The shell (my body) may look the same (even though the gray is starting to sprout and the wrinkles are becoming more obvious), but somehow life seems different. Paul calls that “becoming a new creation,” which is to be in Christ.

To “be in Christ” means that “Christ is in us.” It means that we’re not merely improved, reformed, or altered in any external way, no matter how good that may be. Becoming a new creation means the change has been radical; it goes to the root of who we are, what we believe and how we see and act in the world around us. The old has passed away ... the new has come.

R&D Make two lists: things that you want God to help you change, and ways you’ve begun to be a new creation. Thank God for the latter and ask for help for the former. Then share the list with one other person.

Prayer: Lord, Your changes are so much better than the ones we try to make for ourselves. Help us to do a better job of turning our lives over to You.

Tuesday, April 9

Read: Galatians 6:14-16

Externals

The Epistle to the Galatians is the forty-eighth book of the Bible. Paul wrote it to the church or churches in Galatia following reports that some of the members were attempting to “Judaize” Christianity (im-

pose unnecessary Jewish practices) and also were questioning Paul's authority.

Paul continues to introduce the idea of newness through Christ, just as he did in 2 Corinthians. He is aware of the pitfalls in placing too much emphasis on external trappings such as whether someone has been circumcised or not. Such things are not as important as how the inner person has changed. We may all fall into the trap of using some external litmus test to decide whether or not someone may be saved or is worthy to be in fellowship with us or our church, neighborhood, office, school.

There are two interrelated points about this passage that are important for us not to forget. The first is that we're confronted with the enticements of this world to think, look, and act differently from the teaching of God. We live by and large in a world that declares the shallow externals of life to be supreme. This is not true. The second point is, any of us can momentarily slip and make judgments based on external things if we're not careful. It's okay to look good, and to want things. The trap is when these things hurt our relationships with one another and God.

Beware of an overemphasis on acting, looking, and thinking a certain way without a concern for the inward condition of the heart. Just doing good, looking good, and thinking good thoughts without some desire to glorify God leads us to a shallow and spiritually empty walk with God. Paul had to die to himself and to his desires before he could begin to really appreciate the world around him. It's no different for us.

R&D Which worldly "external" would you grieve for the most? What would take its place?

Prayer: There is nothing in this world, Lord, that can measure up to Your glory and the opportunities You place before us. Wake us up to Your call on our lives.

Read: Ephesians 6:12-18

Weapons

The Epistle to the Ephesians is the forty-ninth book of the Bible and may have been a sort of “circular letter” to a number of churches. In this book Paul’s concept of the ideal Church and the practical conclusions he draws from that concept are expounded.

It seems to me that the stronger our relationship with Jesus becomes, the harder Satan tries to turn us away from Jesus. The Lord knows what it’s like to be tempted by Satan, and he knows Satan is defeated. Satan has no lasting power over God’s people and Satan knows it. He’s like a wounded, dying animal that’s cornered and continues to fight to the last breath. Defeated, nonetheless he’s dangerous.

God in His wisdom has given us weapons against the enemy. Weapons like truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit, and prayer to protect us and help us in our daily battles against temptation that would try to corrupt our relationship with Jesus and one another. Even the strongest defense system cannot match the power God provides for our protection.

Most foot soldiers know their weapons inside and out, to the point where they can assemble and disassemble them blindfolded. The soldier has read the manual and been instructed by more mature, seasoned teachers. He/she has spent untold hours learning how to use the weapons. God has given us His Word (our manual), a 2,000-year witness of martyrs and saints we call the Church, and a constant line of communication: prayer. We’re not only equipped and trained but given a 24-hour open line to ask, seek, and receive. God equips us and leads us in the battle, which He has won. As hard as life can be, never forget we’ve won. Through Christ the victory is ours.

R&D Which spiritual weapon(s) do you recall using in the last month? How have you used prayer to help you in the spiritual battles you face?

Prayer: Thank You, Father God, for Your protecting love. May we never forget all that You provide us through Your fatherly love.

Read: Philippians 2:1-11

Christ: Our Example

The Epistle to the Philippians is the fiftieth book of the Bible and is one of a series of letters sent by Paul from prison. Though written at a time when he was facing martyrdom, it is almost wholly an expression of joy.

My greatest challenge in college was Chemistry. No matter how hard I studied, the information seemed to slip from my grasp when I tried to apply it. Worried, fearful of failure, and frustrated with myself, I called home weeping and threatening to quit. After a few such phone calls, I received a letter from my father. Sustaining a serious injury to his right hand as a young man, he learned to write with his left hand and graduated from college as a Chemistry major. My father's letter simply said, "If I could do it with one hand, you can do it with two. But pass or fail, I love you." I taped the letter to my door, dug in my heels and passed Chemistry by one point! An example had been set and grace had been given.

In Paul's letter to those he loved in Philippi, Paul sets the example of Christ before them. At the center of his challenge to them he writes, "Let the same mind be in you which is in Christ Jesus" (v.5). He expands this challenge by writing about Christ's humility (vv.3-4), Christ's obedience (v.8) and Christ the servant (v.7). He holds up the examples of other servants of Christ: Timothy (2:22ff) and Epaphroditus (2:25ff), and his own life, as "a servant of Christ" (1:1) in Chapter 3.

Paul's challenge is set in the context of God's grace. Evident throughout is Paul's love for the Philippians but, in verse 6, Paul reminds them that God's grace and love will prevail and go ahead of them in their work. "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

R&D How can we make these words of Paul's a personal encouragement in our lives?

Prayer: *Give us the gift of encouraging one another, Lord. It is truly a gift that keeps on giving.*

Friday, April 12

Read: Colossians 1:3-14

Sufficiency of Christ

Paul's Epistle to the Colossians is the fifty-first book of the Bible. It was occasioned by a report of a dangerous heresy spreading in Colossae.

In this letter to the church at Colossae, Paul is writing to a church he had never visited. He writes from his place of imprisonment in Rome. Paul has heard much about this young church (v.4). Neither love nor faith was lacking in the Colossian church. Paul has, however, a very specific reason for writing. These young, faithful believers are being besieged by pressures to conform to the beliefs and practices of their pagan and Jewish neighbors. It was false teaching which sought to be emphatically Christian but was, instead, deeply influenced by the spirit of the age. They “added to” the Christian message a note of exclusivity which was never meant to be. This is the thrust of Paul’s writing: “Jesus is all you need.” Belief in him is sufficient for salvation.

We, who are almost two thousand years along the timeline from Colossae, still face the threat of “Christian heresies.” There is a strong movement in our day toward Christianity being “more reasonable” by challenging the authority of Scripture and the doctrines of truth. Paul’s letter is addressed to us, seeking to help us be truthful brothers and sisters in our churches.

R&D *In what ways do we add to the sufficiency of Christ with various beliefs or practices?*

Prayer: *In you alone do we trust, Christ Jesus; may we not be led astray.*

Saturday, April 13

Read: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Name Calling

The First Epistle to the Thessalonians is the fifty-second book of the Bible. Paul wrote it to one of the earliest churches he had established

in response to concern the Thessalonians had about the meaning of the Second Coming of Christ.

A name can communicate many things. As children, name calling was a way to describe something (most often unpleasant) about another person. These are names which can stick in a way that colors our inner image of who we really are.

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he engages in name-calling. In this epistle, written early in Paul's ministry, he uses the name "beloved" to address the Thessalonian Christians. From the beginning Paul names them as "beloved of God" and "chosen" (1:4). They were so dear to Paul that he regarded and cared for them tenderly, like a nurse caring for her own children (2:7). He saw himself as a parent to them, urging and encouraging them (2:11-12).

Like a loving parent reminding a child of their loveliness and lovableness, Paul calls the Thessalonians to live as beloved of God. They are called not to impurity but holiness (v.7), taught by God to love one another (v.9). They are to do their work, live quietly (vv.11-12) and live as those who are assured of a future hope (4:13ff). Instead of the lifestyles of the rich and famous, we have painted here a picture of the lifestyle of the beloved of God.

R&D How might seeing yourself as beloved of God, chosen by Him, change your lifestyle?

Prayer: May our lifestyle, Lord, always be of love and of concern for others.

Sunday, April 14

Sabbath Time

And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Acts 6:8

It is generally true that we can only help people when they feel some sense of need and when they want to be helped. We may, however, cause them to become aware of a need they did not realize before by showing to them a kind of faith and zest in life to which they have hitherto been strangers, so that they begin to feel a need which is a kind of healthy envy. If you see a person with obviously radiant faith, you envy him—you can't help it. This

awakens in you a sense of need that may not have consciously been there before. Part of our work is to arouse people's imaginations, to hold before them possible pictures of themselves that go far beyond their attainments or even expectations, but not beyond their desires. Nevertheless, until a sense of need exists, it is probable that we can do little to help them.

Monday, April 15

Read: 2 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Day by Day

The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians is the fifty-third book of the Bible. It was apparently sent shortly after the first letter to that church.

Someone has said that one of the problems with life is that it is so "daily." The day in, day out, routines of work and life can make us weary and drag us down. That's why vacations and get-away times are so important.

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians addresses the "daily-ness" of life. In his first letter to the church, Paul instructed them about the second coming of Jesus Christ. Paul's teaching was misunderstood by the Thessalonians. In the midst of their daily routines of work and responsibilities the weariness of living as a Christian in a pagan society felt overwhelming. Paul's comforting words about Christ's sudden return (1 Thessalonians 5:1-5) resulted in some thinking that Christ's return was imminent. Some had quit their jobs and were living in idleness. Others had become complacent about Christian living. Paul commands them to go back to work (vv.6-13). They are to continue praying and doing the things Paul had taught them (vv.1-4). "Do not weary of doing what is right" (v.12).

Not many of us will be tempted to quit work and wait for Christ's return, but there is a weariness to the daily tasks of Christian living. Affirming one another (1:3-4) and giving encouragement and support in our daily lives is important.

R&D How might you be an encourager of others in their daily Christianity? Where can you find support and encouragement to help avoid the weariness of doing what is right?

Prayer: *Let the sunbeams of Your love shine through to us on dark days, Lord God.*

Tuesday, April 16

Read: 1 Timothy 3:1-16

Yardstick

The fifty-fourth book of the Bible is the First Epistle to Timothy. It is one of three so-called Pastoral Epistles (along with 2 Timothy and Titus) because it is directed to church leadership (rather than to the whole people of God) concerning church government, practices, and teaching.

First and Second Timothy and Titus form a section of the New Testament known as the Pastoral Epistles. While containing practical instruction for ordained leadership and laity, their central concern is organizing the church for the task of keeping the gospel story straight during a time when Christian doctrine was under attack.

Today's passage had a powerful influence on the Church for two reasons. The first is that it provides an authoritative description of one way the early church had of organizing its "official" leadership of bishops, deacons, and, mentioned later, presbyters or elders. Churches have often sought to follow this model.

The second reason is the description of leadership qualifications. His point is well taken: if the fruits of a disciplined life in Christ are not apparent in the leader's character, then he or she may not be adequate to the ministry tasks at hand.

Likewise, as an ordained minister serving in a church, these qualifications serve as a personal yardstick for me. If self-examination turns up intemperance (for me, overeating or not getting enough rest) or that I am too ready for argument, or that my marriage or child is in trouble, then I know that I am off the track and probably not doing a very good job.

R&D *What safeguards do you rely on to keep the gospel story straight in your life?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, we laypeople need to be kept in check with Your expectations of us just as our leadership are. Keep us all on track that we may fulfill Your expectations of us.*

Wednesday, April 17

Read: 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Scripture

The Second Epistle to Timothy is the fifty-fifth book of the Bible and is also a Pastoral Epistle, although it is much more personal than First Timothy.

In his second letter to Timothy the writer continues to drive home the theme of leadership that keeps the story straight. Verse 16 begins “All Scripture is God-breathed...” (RSV). This short phrase has had a profound effect on how the Church understands the Holy Bible. There are two important principles here.

First, we always need to look at Holy Scripture as a whole. A case made on one or two passages may seem very convincing until viewed in the light of the entire witness of the Old and New Testaments. This is why it is so important for God’s people to know all of the Bible—not just bits and pieces. The second principle is that the ultimate author of the Bible is God. He inspired its human writers, and He still speaks to us there. What a graceful gift He has given us!

This passage has long been an encouragement to me. When I feel troubled or disconnected from God, I know that all I need do is to turn to the Bible and that He will meet me in its pages. Truly, the Holy Scriptures have been a light for my path and they can be for yours too!

R&D Have you ever heard God speaking to you through the Bible? How would you confirm that it really had come from Him?

Prayer: *A great blessing of our day, Lord God, is that we can each find a translation of the Bible that speaks clearly to us of Your love and Your guidance for our lives.*

Read: Titus 3:1-11

Conflict

The fifty-sixth book of the Bible is the Epistle to Titus, the third of the Pastoral Epistles. It contains advice about the organization of the churches in Crete, which had been left in the charge of Titus.

In this third and final of the Pastoral Epistles, our author continues to offer his prescription for being the Church in a time when attacks are being made on Christian doctrine. Living together in an ordered and common discipline, he says, is made possible only by the mercy of Christ and “by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit” (v.5). In particular, our writer commends the avoidance of quarreling (vv.2 and 10) and “stupid controversies” (v.9). His point: a squabbling church isn’t a very good witness to the gospel.

These words are important for the Church because they address the question of how to respond to conflict. At best, the Church has been ambivalent about conflict—denying or squelching it on occasion and, at other times, going at each other with hammer and tongs. Our writer’s advice: let the leadership refute genuine attacks on the gospel and everyone else apply themselves to good deeds (v.8). In other words, deal with conflict as is necessary but don’t lose perspective.

For me this passage has been an encouragement to stay focused on ministry tasks at hand and to resist crusading for anything but the gospel. Too, it has prompted me to strive to put loving relationships based on kinship in Christ above political affiliation.

R&D Has there been a time when you allowed yourself to be drawn into “stupid controversy” at the cost of good deeds? In times of conflict, how do you keep perspective?

Prayer: Keep us focused on you, Lord Jesus, and not on our own peculiarities and prejudices.

Friday, April 19

Read: Philemon 8:16

Law of Love

The Epistle to Philemon is the fifty-seventh book of the Bible. It is a personal letter to a friend, urging him to take back in Christian love a runaway slave who has been with Paul in Rome.

In the shortest of his letters, Paul addresses the matter of Onesimus, a runaway slave. Instead of punishing him, Paul pleads with his owner to accept him back “as a beloved brother.”

Paul writes “...though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you...” (vv.8-9). Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of the law of love and teaches us that this is the basis of relationship between believers regardless of their legal status. *All* those who belong to Jesus Christ are our brothers and sisters!

In the life of the Church the law of love has been at the heart of its social ministry. This has been particularly true with regard to the church’s work to ban slavery, for how can one see a beloved brother or sister treated like a piece of property? We are challenged to keep in mind that whatever status we have in the eyes of the world, there is only one status in the eyes of the Lord—brother and sister.

For me, this letter has been an inspiration to speak to those circumstances in which a brother or sister is treated as “less than” in some way. And I believe that Paul models for us the most fruitful way of doing this—a loving appeal in the context of trusting relationship, not coercive but appealing to the highest and best in us.

R&D *How will you embody the law of love in your life today?*

Prayer: *Help us always to see Christ in others, Lord, regardless of what their physical, cultural, or racial differences from us may be.*

Saturday, April 20

Read: Hebrews 13:1-8

Christ Our Rock

The Epistle to the Hebrews, the fifty-eighth book of the Bible, is in the nature of an essay. It was apparently written to persons under pressure

of ostracism or persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ. It stresses the supremacy and finality of the revelation of Christ.

Although most Biblical scholars believe that the Letter to the Hebrews was written between Nero's persecution of the early Christians (64 AD) and the later one of Domitian (85 AD), the Church did not accept it as part of the New Testament until the fourth century. Origen once wrote that only God knows who wrote Hebrews, and a German scholar expressed his opinion that perhaps Priscilla and Aquila had written it. The author tells us that the leaders of the church to which it was written had died for their faith, and he (she, they) urges the recipients of the letter (and us) to put their trust in Christ as their leaders had done.

Even though we don't know to whom or by whom the letter was written, the Letter to the Hebrews contains two of the most reassuring, strengthening, and heartwarming verses in all of Scripture: "I will never leave you or forsake you" (13:5). This is the difference that the Incarnation of Christ our Lord has made in our lives. In all of our struggles, sufferings, and sorrows he is with us. In our joys, victories, and successes he is with us. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (13:8). In our world so full of change, so full of the utterly new and different, Christ is our unchanging, solid rock. Thanks be to God!

R&D Have you ever taken the time to recall experiences of God's presence with you in your sorrows or joys? Think about some of them now.

Prayer: We are grateful, Lord Christ, that you are always with us. We need you!

Sunday, April 21

Sabbath Time

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5:19

Jesus Christ is the Mediator between God and us. But all who follow in his steps become little mediators, helping to close the gap between the human and the divine, between ourselves as we are and ourselves as God wants us to be, between man and God.

Read: James 1:16-17

All Is Gift

The fifty-ninth book of the Bible is the Epistle of James, a “General Epistle” (because addressed to a wide circle of leaders rather than to a particular group). It contains practical advice in how to “be doers of the word and not hearers only.”

“Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.”

As a Lay Eucharistic Minister, I took Communion recently to a friend dying of cancer. After he had received the Sacrament, his wife said to me, “John says he is afraid to die.”

I said, “I think we’re all afraid to die. Death is something new and strange, and we’re all afraid of the unknown. Such fear is perfectly natural. The one thing we can always be sure of as we face death is that our Lord loves us and will be with us before, during and after death.”

“How can you know God loves you?” I asked John. “Look at this wonderful wife of yours whom you have been married to almost fifty years. She is a gift from God. Think of your seven children—all grown, educated, and living good lives. Each was a gift from God. Look out the window at the beautiful world God created for us to live in—so incredibly lovely especially now in spring-time. Think of the Church that you have always loved so much, the Sacrament of Communion that has always meant so much to you, the Scriptures telling us from the first page to the last of God’s great love for us all. These are all wonderful gifts from our Heavenly Father. Think of all the people you have dearly loved whom you are going to see soon—your own parents, family, friends—all were gifts of God’s love.” I was profoundly moved when John sat up in bed and reached out his hands to me. His wife called the next day to tell me that he had died during the night.

R&D Have you ever counted all the great gifts from God that there are in your own life? Think about them now.

Prayer: *You shower us with Your love in so many ways, Lord God. May we never forget all You have done and are doing for us day by day.*

Tuesday, April 23

Read: 1 Peter 1:1-12

Growth

The First Epistle of Peter is the sixtieth book of the Bible and is believed to have been written by the apostle Peter. It shows him to be a practical adviser to the humble followers of Christ rather than a learned or systematic theologian.

This warm, compassionate, loving letter was written, most Biblical scholars agree, by the apostle Peter—impulsive Peter who once had jumped immediately into water at Christ’s invitation only to sink ignominiously the minute he took his eyes off his Christ. Brave Peter who followed his Lord to the High Priest’s courtyard only to deny there three times that he had ever known him and then broke down and wept when Jesus turned and looked at him after his third denial. How easy it is for us frail, weak sinners to love and identify with this would-be faithful follower of our Lord!

The first twelve verses of chapter one tell us of the faith that transformed Peter the sinner into Peter the saint—his profound conviction that he had been chosen by God to be an apostle, born anew, “already filled with a joy so glorious that it could not be described” (v.8). Peter wrote this letter in about 67 AD to encourage Gentile converts following the first persecutions by Nero of the early Christians. His letter was not written to any one church—as many others in the New Testament were—but to exiles scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (v.1) who had become “the People of God,” though “once they were not a people at all” (2:10). Like the early Christians, may we who also have been “called out of darkness into God’s wonderful light” (2:9) continue steadfastly to “grow up to salvation” (2:2).

R&D *Can you identify easily with Peter? In what ways?*

Prayer: *We don’t face the persecution of the early Christians; what we face is more subtle, but equally dangerous. Protect us, Lord Christ,*

from forces that seek to change our minds and lead us away from faith in you.

Wednesday, April 24

Read: 2 Peter 3:14-18

Response of Love

The Second Epistle of Peter (like James, a “General Epistle”), is the sixty-first book of the Bible. Written during a time of threatening heresies, it urges Christians to hold firmly to the truth.

Most Biblical scholars agree that 2 Peter was not written by the apostle even though the author of the letter names himself in the first verse, mentions in his third chapter having written a previous letter, calls himself a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, believes that Christ foretold to him the manner of his death and recalls that he had the privilege of being present at what we describe as the Transfiguration. Scholars base their conviction that 2 Peter could not have been written by the apostle upon the fact that the early church did not accept it as part of the Scriptures until the fourth century.

Whoever may have written the letter, it was originally intended for Gentile converts and comes to warn us of false teachers. We are promised a new world when “the dawn comes and the morning star rises” (1:19) if we will only continue to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (3:18), which we do by the faithful practice of our faith and by our ever-growing response of love to Christ for his gift of love to us.

R&D *In what ways are you growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ?*

Prayer: *We grow in our relationship with you, Lord Jesus, by prayer, Bible study, worship, and serving others in your name.*

Thursday, April 25

Read: 1 John 3:13-18

Love in Deed

The First Epistle of John is the sixty-second book of the Bible and is also a General Epistle. It discusses the personal spiritual life of Christians.

His eyes reflected anger as he jammed bags of groceries in the trunk of my car. I thanked him for his help. He slammed the rear door to my station wagon—my children’s hands simultaneously flying to cup their ears. Cramming my cart into another abandoned one, he headed toward the store. I stood dumfounded. Was he angry over no tip? Why did he act so hatefully?

Anger rose in me. Then a downward rush of heavenly peace extinguished it. At first, I was puzzled by the quick change in feelings. Then I realized the Holy Spirit had controlled my emotions and reflected the heart of God instead. Compassion filled me as I watched the angry bagman stride away. Perhaps he’d suffered a heartbreak and didn’t know God. An urge to rush after him and ask how I could help him was squelched by three cries coming from inside the car “to turn the air conditioning on!”

Today’s passage reflects the state of our world—hostile, cold, often uninviting. It’s easy to react to people instead of responding to their core need. In retrospect, I should have taken the children in the store and approached the man to see if I could help him. Oh, how I long for God to control me, speak through me, and use me to benefit His kingdom.

R&D *What behavior in others is the hardest to forgive? Why?*

Prayer: *Help us to be more proactive, Lord; that is, to better anticipate the needs around us so that we respond more spontaneously in ways that can heal.*

Friday, April 26

Read: 2 John 4-11

Love and Truth

The Second Epistle of John is the sixty-third book of the Bible. It contains practical guidelines for Christian living.

John’s plea to believers in this letter is to stay close to their first teachings—to love one another and do everything out of love. He urges them to follow the purest doctrine and not be sidetracked by peculiar teachings interwoven with a little truth.

Today, it is easy to be swept up in the heresy that mingles within the Christian Church. A devoted Christian leader can un-

knowingly teach out of his/her own philosophies and opinions. We need to be razor-sharp in our understanding and knowledge of the Bible to know when doctrine is false. Daily communion with God will allow the Holy Spirit to be our radar to prevent errant teachings from leading us astray.

Similarly, it's easy to think, speak, and act out of love if the Holy Spirit is guiding us. He waits for our invitation. We tend to work readily out of our emotions, but as God is allowed to change us, more and more, our actions and words are His.

R&D Do you act and react differently around a Christian versus an unbeliever? How can you be loving to an unlovable person?

Prayer: There are limits to our love when we only love with human love. It is when we love with Christ's love through the Holy Spirit within us that true love shows forth.

Saturday, April 27

Read: 3 John 5-8

Hospitality

The Third Epistle of John is the sixty-fourth book of the Bible. It is addressed to Gaius, evidently an officer or member of a local church, commending and encouraging him.

It is far easier to collect used clothing and canned goods out of the pantry or write a check as a donation for missions than to invite a fellow brother or sister in Christ to share food at my table and sleep in my home. Too often, I'm content with giving at a distance rather than giving my service directly. It takes time, and time is hard to find.

In this small book, John writes to applaud Gaius for his service to the brethren and encourages him to continue likewise. He also emphasizes the need to show hospitality to strangers.

Wow! I can conceive of putting up someone I know, but could I cordially host a total stranger? Would I be safe? What would they think of my home? What would I say to them?

God's word does not answer those questions. But as verse 8 puts it, if I want to consider myself a "fellow worker in the truth,"

then I will follow Gaius' example. After all, "time" was probably hard or harder to find back then.

R&D *When was the last time you entertained a total stranger? What would prevent you from doing so?*

Prayer: *Make us more aware of opportunities that we have to serve others in your behalf, Lord Jesus.*

Sunday, April 28

Sabbath Time

"Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." Matthew 6:9

We need to understand prayer as the communion between the Father of our spirits, and ourselves. It is not a lever to pull when we want our own way; it is a relationship which is to be cultivated. Prayer makes possible everything that is possible. It brings the maximum health of which you and I, being who and what we are, are capable. It brings the maximum yield in a situation, that situation being just what it is. It helps a person to live and work at the very utmost of his or her capacity.

Monday, April 29

Read: Jude 17-22

Four Avenues

The Epistle of Jude is the sixty-fifth book of the Bible. It is a brief General Epistle, dealing with heresies in the church.

Today's world is certainly a curious one. It's confusing to hear people profess to know God and at the same time blatantly live contrary to Scripture. It's our culture's and Satan's shrewd way of watering down God's principles for living. The attitude of "this is right for me" will never find the holy life, for living holy comes from giving our passions to the Lord and receiving His grace to live in an ungodly setting.

Jude tells it like it was—and is today. But he gives four avenues to protect ourselves from being distracted by the world: build ourselves up in our faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, keep ourselves in the love of God, and wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ

(vv.20-21). Unbroken fellowship with our Heavenly Father will guard us from the subtle seduction of society's living patterns.

And his last admonishment is to witness to those who will listen and have pity on those whose hearts are hardened. Let's pray for tenderheartedness toward others and the boldness to approach them. Our words to them may be life changing.

R&D How can we keep from appearing judgmental when we share God's way of holy living with someone?

Prayer: Give us grace to share with others what life in Christ is all about without sounding judgmental of those who have yet to discover this eternal gift.

Tuesday, April 30

Read: Revelation 2:3-7

Endurance

Revelation is the sixty-sixth and final book of the Bible. It is unique because it is the only prophetic book in the New Testament. The heart of the book is a series of visions, the meaning of which has long puzzled scholars.

I've often wondered how the early Christians endured persecution. Why didn't they just hide the fact that they loved God and perhaps spare their lives in the process? I've wondered, because most of the time I would not live up to their loyalty to God. How could they choose God over their lives? How could parents willingly leave their children behind and walk to their death for Christ's sake?

Is there an experience with God that so changes one's life that they'd do the impossible? Is there more to Christianity than believing in God, attending church, and praying to God occasionally?

I believe to have been an "early" Christian, one would have had to have more than just acceptance of the family's "Christian tradition" or a profession of faith at age twelve to stand firm with conviction. There is a raw, penetrating relationship with the Holy God that so enfolds you that the normal way of living is unheard of.

The Lord charges the church in Ephesus to return to that first love with Him and then with fellow Christians. He asks for repentance and, for those who are obedient, everlasting life (v.7).

The book of Revelation challenges and invites believers to establish a love affair with God so that, should our generation be asked to face persecution, we will be one in spirit with the early Christians.

R&D *In what ways has this "Journey through the Bible" been helpful to you?*

Prayer: *Lord God, this book, the Bible, is Your Book. It is through it that we know how You want us to live. May we read, mark, and inwardly digest Scripture in such a way as to be the people You call us to be.*

