

THE LIFE OF JESUS

VOLUME 1
READINGS, DEVOTIONS & POEMS

FISHERS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

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The life of Jesus has been centermost to Christians for over 2000 years. His birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension are central to the faith for believers all around the world. Everything that came before Him is B.C. – Before Christ. All that has come since is A.D. – Anno Domini, a Latin phrase that means, “in the year of our Lord.” Indeed, Jesus is the centerpiece of history.

This study of Jesus’ life provides a means to slow down and spend a year getting to know Him more deeply, more authentically, more intimately. His life is told in the four Gospels of the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This study merges them together into one chronological series of 260 readings, at five readings a week. Sometimes an episode from Christ’s life is told in only one of the four Gospels. Other times it is told in two, three, or even all four of the Gospels. In those instances, the reference for all of the Gospel occurrences is noted.

Now a little reminder. While this is a chronological study of the life of Jesus, nobody can piece together all of the events in Jesus’ life in the exact order they occurred. This study follows a plausible sequence of events. But it is good to remember that the gospel writers weren’t overly concerned with these sequential matters. They had a story to tell. There is great merit to reading each Gospel on its own from beginning to end. But that is for another time. Here, we will attempt to look at the overarching story of the life of Jesus in roughly chronological order.

There are several components to this year-long exploration into Jesus’ life:

1. **Daily Scripture Readings** – Actually, they are five days a week. Consider reading each weekday to anchor your day in Christ. (In This Booklet)
2. **Daily Devotions** – These are written by me and correlate with the daily readings to help you think more deeply about what you are reading. (In This Booklet)
3. **Daily Poems** – These are written by my sister-in-law, Rev. Dr. Martha FrizLanger. They will help you imagine Jesus’ story through poetry. (In This Booklet)
4. **Weekly Studies** – These studies, written by my colleague Rev. Dr. Ben Greenbaum and others, are great tools for small groups and classes.
5. **Weekly Sermons** – If you cannot attend worship with us in person, you can always go to fishersumc.org/resources/sermons to view online.
6. **Weekly Podcasts** – Ben and I will spend some time each week dialoguing about that week’s readings.
7. **Seasonal Opportunities** – There will be varied opportunities for children, youth, and adults to connect with Jesus deeply throughout the year.

Many of these components are available online at fishersumc.org/the-life-of-jesus or in our Fishers UMC app that is available to download free in your app store.

Throughout my devotions, I use capital letters when referring to Jesus: Son, King, Messiah, His, He, Him, etc. This sets Jesus apart from other mere humans. An exception is when talking about his relationships (e.g. “Mary’s son”). I do the same for references to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. The hope is that we are all drawn to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in this study as One who is Holy, yet approachable through His kindness and salvation.

All Scripture references are NIV unless otherwise noted.

Enjoy the journey!

Rev. Mark A. Ellcessor
Senior Pastor, Fishers United Methodist Church

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29TH - WEEK 1, DAY 1

The Good News about Jesus Christ

☐ Read Luke 1:1-4

DEVOTIONAL

The Gospel of Luke was written by Paul's "dear friend Luke, the doctor" (Colossians 4:14). He received the story of Jesus, investigated its truth, and wrote this so that the reader "may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

Luke also wrote Acts. Notice that he addressed each book to Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). The term Theophilus is a Greek word that means "lover of God." Perhaps that was the addressee's actual name, or maybe it was Luke's way of addressing someone who follows Jesus – "lover of God." What does it mean to be a "lover of God"?

Like Luke, I believe the Lord is prompting me to write this exploration of the life of Jesus that you may know, love and obey Him more deeply. This study walks through the life of Jesus chronologically. Each day there is a snippet of the story of Jesus, where we will explore some of His character, message, and activity for us.

Some days you will read from only one of the Gospels. Others you will read from two, three, or all four when a particular event is recorded in more than one.

My prayer is that you will not only know more about Jesus, but you will know Jesus more intimately than ever before and be willing to follow wherever He leads.

POEM

Theophilus

*Dear Friend, True Lover of our God
As you embark upon faith's sod
Your deep inquiry now applaud
As Spirit's wind does guide you*

*Since ancient times upon this Way
Many commenced yet some did stray
For faithfulness then let us pray
As God's Strong Arm protects you*

*At times, the path, it will divide
You'll need discernment as your guide
As you within the Truth abide
Concerning things instructed*

*Until at last all chaos flees
And order brings you Life so free
This calling is your destiny
To see fulfilled among us*

*Dear Friend, this undertaking grew
Out of the love God has for you
Implanted tree by river true
To flourish in all seasons*

NOTES

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 30TH - WEEK 1, DAY 2

An Angel Announces the Birth of John

☐ Read Luke 1:5-25

DEVOTIONAL

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth “were righteous in the sight of God.” They had to be disappointed to be childless and very old. But this didn’t stop them from living blamelessly and serving faithfully. Too often, we make our obedience to God based upon our circumstances.

Zechariah’s selection to be the priest who burned incense in the temple was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He had waited a lifetime for this honor. This priest from the hill country was now in the big city carrying out a faithful duty in the holy temple of God. Just imagine what he was thinking and feeling! What do you imagine he was anticipating the experience to be like?

Sometimes, our expectations are met with a cold dose of reality. But, once in a while, real life exceeds our expectations beyond our wildest imagination. That’s exactly what happened to Zechariah. While dutifully serving at the altar of incense, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing right there in his presence. An angel! No doubt Zechariah didn’t see this one coming. Luke 1:12 says, “when Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.” Interesting. Zechariah was serving God, but didn’t really expect to encounter God!

He couldn’t believe his eyes. And after the angel Gabriel told him that he and his wife were going to have a son, he couldn’t believe his ears. How could an aging, childless husband and wife have a baby? Illogical. Impossible. Even if a messenger from God delivers the news.

But it happened. Zechariah went back home, and his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. That’s how God works. Illogical. Impossible. Done.
(See Exodus 30:6-8)

POEM

The Righteous

Despite long lives of sorrow
And tears in pillows shed
The hopeless dreams of morrow
The prayers whispered in bed
As disappointments tower
When pain and suffering wed
The Righteous find their power
In faith that is not dead

In dailiness of malaise
Comes call to worship, serve
They don the robes of “holy”
They summon up their nerve
To enter duty’s calling
The throne room, rites preserve
The Righteous’ expectations
Are thrown a grace-filled curve

For God’s imagination
Is wilder than their dream
God’s plan of deep salvation
The will of the Supreme
Though only seen quite dimly
Sometimes the veiled seam
Is torn before the Righteous
Exposing sacred theme

Theophany brings muteness
As tongue cannot express
The grandeur of the message
The heavenly address
Until all fullness gestates
Then birthing of the blessed
The Righteous witness favor
A miracle caress

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1ST - WEEK 1, DAY 3

An Angel Appears to Mary about Jesus

☐ Read Luke 1:26-38

DEVOTIONAL

In a single encounter, the angel Gabriel told Mary what was being planned for her by the Holy Trinity: she had found favor with God, the Holy Spirit would come on her, and she would give birth to the Son of God.

At first, her reply mirrors what Zechariah said to this same angel. While he questioned Gabriel's pregnancy prophesy because of old age, Mary did so because of her virginity. Let's be honest: both are pretty good reasons to doubt. Not many old folks and virgins turn up pregnant!

Unlike Zechariah, Mary was not silenced by Gabriel. Rather the angel patiently explained to her how the Holy Spirit would implant God the Son in her body. Somehow these words satisfied the young girl. Her answer of acceptance shouldn't be overlooked: *"I am the Lord's servant. May your words to me be fulfilled."*

This simple answer encompasses three things:

1. Her position - *I am the Lord's servant*
2. Her calling - *May your words to me*
3. Her acceptance - *be fulfilled*

Think about these three attitudes in your own relationship with God. When you woke up this morning, did you acknowledge your position before a holy God? Take a moment now and do so. What about your calling? Do you know the Lord's voice? Are you clear about who He is calling you to be and what He is calling you to do? Keep seeking His calling for your life throughout this study. Finally, acceptance is simply saying to God, "The answer is yes. What is the question?" Are you ready to pursue the Lord with that kind of abandon? (See Isaiah 7:14 Galatians 4:4-5)

POEM

Favored
A humble position
Unnoticed, obscure
Well hidden in shadows
Untarnished and pure
A lady-in-waiting
Her Master to serve

Magnificent calling
A vessel of grace
To carry an offering
Rejected, disgraced
She welcomes the Christ-Child
Divinity's face

Entire acceptance
A sacrificed life
She knows not her future
Heart pierced with a knife
The death of her ego
Brings end to all strife

NOTES

Mary's Visit to Elizabeth

☐ Read Luke 1:39-45

DEVOTIONAL

In Luke 1:15, the angel promised Zechariah that his son would be “filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth.” Now when Mary visits Elizabeth, while both are pregnant, it says, “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 41).

This raises so many questions. Could it be that the Holy Spirit filled the baby in the womb when He filled his mother? What does this say about pregnancy? How important is it for a woman to be godly while she is carrying a baby? By her choices, can she deliver a child who already has the hand of God on him or her? Conversely, can she bring evil upon her unborn baby by dabbling in the demonic?

Or was it the other way around? Perhaps the unborn baby was already filled with the promised Holy Spirit. And when he “leaped in her womb...for joy”, the Holy Spirit leaped through the amniotic fluid straight into Elizabeth’s soul. What does this say about how contagious the blessings and glory of God are?

Finally, maybe the Holy Spirit did His work of infilling each of them independent of one another. God is sovereign, after all. Still, the context and flow of this passage seem to connect the events together. AS the baby leaped in the womb, the pregnant mom was filled with the Spirit of God!

Elizabeth goes on to call Mary blessed among women, calling her “the mother of my Lord.” In an instant, the Holy Spirit revealed to her that this unborn baby would one day be her Savior and Lord.



POEM

Leap, O Spirit
Leap, O Spirit, leap in me
Come alive, your Lord to greet

Kick the boundaries of your womb
Come alive, out of the tomb

Jump for joy your dance of praise
Come alive, blessings to raise

Surge within, set life a-fire
Come alive, my one desire

NOTES

Mary's Song Of Praise

☐ Read Luke 1:46-56

DEVOTIONAL

After Elizabeth's Spirit-filled prophetic proclamation to Mary and unborn baby Jesus within her, Mary burst out with a song of praise. In this burst of praise, Mary exalts the names and activities of God:

- Lord
- God my Savior
- Mighty One
- Holy
- Has done great things
- Shows mercy to all who hear Him
- Does tremendous things with His mighty arm
- Has scattered the proud and haughty ones
- Has brought down princes from their thrones
- Has exalted the humble
- Has filled the hungry with good things
- Has sent the rich away empty handed
- Has helped Israel
- Has remembered to be merciful
- Has made promises to Abraham and his descendants forever

What names and activities of God would you add to this as you praise Him?



POEM

Like Water Breaking

*Like water breaking from the womb
May praise burst forth from parted lips
Uncontrollable
Unstoppable
Commencing the birth of true worship*

*Like water gushing from the rock
May your compassion stream from stony cleft
Uncontrollable
Unstoppable
Quenching the thirst of your people*

*Like water flowing from your side
May forgiveness be my heart's first pour
Uncontrollable
Unstoppable
Lifting the lowly to your throne*

NOTES

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6TH - WEEK 2, DAY 1

The Birth of John the Baptist

☐ Read Luke 1:57-66

DEVOTIONAL

When John the Baptist was born, “everyone rejoiced with” Elizabeth. But when the baby was named John, his father Zechariah’s tongue was freed to immediately begin praising God. All this caused the following – “Awe fell upon the whole neighborhood.”

It is amazing that this simple act of obedience could have such an impact. If his father had caved into tradition and pressure by naming him Z. Jr., who knows what might have happened. A lifetime of silence? No awe in the community? No preparatory ministry for Jesus?

What straightforward acts of obedience are God calling you to honor?

Take time to ask.

Take time to listen.

Make time to obey.

What is God doing today that is causing a stir among your neighborhood? How is the Lord calling you to be part of that through faithful obedience?

POEM

Awed by One's Obedience

*Awed by one's obedience
Amazed by God's grace
Displayed in the presence
Of neighborhood space
The common and holy
Now meet face to face
As righteous believers
Run faithfulness' race*

*What corners of common
Will burst with delight
When bearers of Christ's name
Bring torches of light
Illumining corners
Where darkness owned fright
Exposing the shadows
Thus ending souls' night?*

*Rejoice! O, you cities!
Rejoice! Heavy fields!
The labor's are coming
To harvest the yield!
With strength they will toil long
Find fruit long concealed
A threshing, a gathering
Til all is revealed!*

NOTES

TUESDAY DECEMBER 7TH - WEEK 2, DAY 2

Zechariah's Words of Prophecy

☐ Read Luke 1:67-80

DEVOTIONAL

After nine months of being unable to talk, Zechariah had to wonder if he would ever speak again. The angel told him, "you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens" (Luke 1:20). But it happened. The baby was born, and still no voice. A week passed. Silence.

On the eighth day, at his son's circumcision, Zechariah named him John. At that moment of obedience, he found his voice. At last. His first words after nine months: praise and prophecy! Teach us Lord to wait on you. Nine months. Forty years. Five seconds. Time belongs to you. Submit yourself to God's plans, calling, and timing in your life.

Like his wife and his son, Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 67), and he spoke words of prophesy about how God would use his son to "prepare the way" for the Lord and "give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins" (v. 76-77).

This prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus launched His public ministry some thirty years later. Looking at Jesus, John said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29).

John always called people to repentance and right living. But mainly, he pointed them to Jesus, who would provide righteousness for those who receive Him. Certainly, neither John (who would be beheaded) nor his parents (who were already old) would live to see that prophecy fulfilled.

Let us live into our calling regardless of whether we see the final fruits of our labor!

POEM

Five Fingers

Upon my hand are digits five
Each made by God's designing
And how I use each one today
Expose my heart's defining

Thumbs up, thumbs down—
a judgment call
Choose life or death decision
A grab to save? Opposing thumb?
Wreak chaos or provision?

The index finger, pointer role,
Can cast the blame on other
Or punctuate the Lamb of God
To sister or to brother

The middle finger, tall and proud
Can curse with vulgar motion
Or humbly bend to clasp the hand
And pray with deep devotion

The weakest finger,
number four
With wedding ring is banded
A symbol of a covenant
A heart by love vows branded

The pinkie finger, smallest one
Is sometimes overlooked
Yet quietly fulfills its role
When straightened or when
crooked

Lord, use my fingers,
one and all
Your calling to fulfill
May they bring blessing,
stretched or clenched,
Conforming to your will

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8TH - WEEK 2, DAY 3

An Angel appears to Joseph about Jesus

☐ Read Matthew 1:18-25

DEVOTIONAL

It's hard to imagine walking in Joseph's sandals. Prior to the angel appearing to him, he discovered that his betrothed was pregnant. Do you wonder if Mary tried to explain her visit from an angel and the words he spoke to her? Or maybe she just stayed silent?

Either way, Joseph knew that he was not the father, and given the choices of marrying her, public stoning, or private divorce (which was required for the legal betrothal period they were in), he chose the latter. How startled he must have been when an angel came to him and confirmed God's plan: the son within Mary would "save his people from their sins."

So, he married her, letting the community gossip about her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. And to add honor, he refrained from sexual relations with her until after the birth of Jesus. This man deserves more credit than he gets.

Joseph had an encounter with God, then he simply obeyed. Today, we have the commands of God from the printed Word, yet, too often, we fail to obey. Perhaps we would be more obedient if we quieted ourselves to hear directly from God more often.

Joseph disappears from the story after Jesus is twelve. Most likely, he died sometime before Jesus began His public ministry around the age of thirty. Yet his legacy lived on in the life of Jesus and his brothers and sisters. This faithful act of obedience and the faithful manner in which he raised and instructed his family would impact the world through the lives of Jesus and his brothers, James and Jude, who wrote the books of the Bible named after them.

POEM

Righteous Man

Betrothed lover, righteous man
Reeled into the Father's plan
Big decision, huge demand
Dreams changed by a vision

Married husband, righteous man
Asked to wait, bed's pleasure banned
By the outcast called to stand
Passion trade for true love

Legal guardian, righteous man
Called to raise the Son of Man
Dedicate his whole lifespan
Covering for the Secret

Heir of David, righteous man
Destiny since time began
Piece within salvation's plan
Serving the Great Servant

NOTES

THURSDAY DECEMBER 9TH - WEEK 2, DAY 4

The Ancestry of Jesus

☐ Read Matthew 1:1-17, Luke 3:23-38

DEVOTIONAL

The genealogy of Jesus is a veritable Who's Who of Hebrew Heroes. Patriarchs, Kings, and those who kept the faith alive in exile. Virtually all of the Jews traced their own ancestry to Abraham, and many did so with David (hence, the huge swell of people in Bethlehem for the census when Jesus was born).

This lineage was important for the Jewish readers of Matthew's gospel. Jesus was the Son of God and Son of Man, but he was also the Son of Abraham and David. God didn't leave any detail out when He sent His Son to earth to redeem His people.

Yet there are others on Jesus' family tree that you might not expect in the genealogy of the Son of God:

- Tamar – an Aramean woman who dressed as a prostitute, tricked her father-in-law, and became pregnant by him.
- Rahab – a prostitute from Jericho who rescued Joshua's spies and became a follower of Yahweh.
- Ruth – a Moabite woman who offered herself in Levirate marriage to a Jew named Boaz.
- Bathsheba – a woman married to a Hittite soldier, then seduced and impregnated by King David.
- Mary – a young, unwed Jewish girl betrothed to Joseph, who became pregnant out of wedlock with Jesus.

Matthew makes sure we know that Jesus came from and came for all kinds of people. The perfect Son of God had a very imperfect family tree.

POEM

Three Fourteens

Of all the ways to start a book!
Not very catching, God.
May I suggest a writing course
To break the boring plod
Through three fourteens of name and
name?
Aram, Amminadab...

"A dark and stormy night," perhaps?
A murder or a ruse
But, no, a bunch of foreign names
Which do the mouth abuse
Of one who'd wish to read aloud
"Achim had Eliud."

A family tree with roots begun
From Abrahamic seed
The fourteen--two times seven--yes?
A perfect witness tweed
A-woven three, the God number.
"Obed had son, Jesse."

So, hidden deep
within these names
A clue from numbers drawn
The wise, a learned pattern see
And light begins to dawn
Upon deep roots to faithful branch
"Uzziah had Jotham."

Upon the tree, five women's names
Some odd and motley fruit--
Two prostitutes, Tamar, Rahab,
Uriah's wife there, too.
Bathsheba, and a virgin girl
Mary, and foreign Ruth.

A trinity of fourteen names
Whose lives are long forgot
A grafting of both faith and shame
To carve salvation's plot
The sap of Abram, David, too.
"Azor had son, Zadok."

This olden tree formed long ago
Cut down, yet constant growing.
A pattern in the rings we see
A sign of God's all-knowing
The Jesse branch now bears the Son
Jesus, God's grace bestowing.

And thus salvation's story buds
With more mysterious news
A dream, a girl, a pregnancy
The embryonic clues
Are there to see with Spirit eyes--
Light breaks through Winter's hues.

NOTES

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10TH - WEEK 2, DAY 5

The Birth of Jesus in Bethlehem

☐ Read Luke 2:1-7

DEVOTIONAL

Several years ago when I was in Ethiopia, I had the opportunity to visit a young boy I had been sponsoring for many years through World Vision. He and his family lived in a small house with walls made out of hardened mud and clay. The whole house was about 10' x 20', and their cow (no doubt supplied by World Vision) occupied a third of it.

This kind of living was also normal for a family in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. In this hospitable culture, where people expected drop-in, stay-over guests, nearly every home had a guest room (Greek: kataluma) off to the side or on the upper level. On the lower level was the family room, which was the living space for the family where they cooked, ate, and slept. Next to the family room was the stable, complete with mangers, for sheep and other animals.

After Jesus was born, the Bible says that his mother Mary "placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room (kataluma) available for them" (v. 7). Some versions translate this as "there was no room in the inn." However, I believe the better translation is "guest room." Jesus wasn't born in a barn or cave or some remote location. Jesus was probably born in the living room of a distant relative, with other relatives already staying in the crowded kataluma peering in to see the newest member of the family tree.

If this is true, Jesus was certainly welcomed by the weary travelers and exhausted hosts, all of whom were no doubt curious that peasant shepherds would stop by and in awe that wealthy magi would come bearing gifts. After the census was completed, imagine all the relatives returning all over Israel to tell what they had seen. Jesus was the talk of the town from day one!



POEM

For Us

*Last week, I watched the pageant old
With faces new and bright
The costumes tattered, tinsel decked
On angels' crowns---a sight!
The pasted beards, twice-thrice now
used*

*All scratchy, matted, worn
A young child crawling out the bed
Of straw where manger borne
This child for us, again this year,
The tale from long ago
The Son of God sent down for us
The Conqueror of woe.*

*It seems not long ago, I placed
Upon my daughter's brow
The piece of blue cloth, banded held,
The coveted Mary, now.
The role so longed by every girl,
Most lines and center stage
And usually sitting near the boy
Most handsome, disengaged,
Who'd drawn the straw for Joseph while
Preferring shepherd, king
Yes, she, for her the child was born
And all the angels sing.*

*And in my memory, I recall
The blessed Christ eve night
When I, a youth, sang solo sweet
While holding candlelight.
Rehearsals spent, lines memorized
The practice boring, long
To weave the mystery moment
When in darkness came the song
Of "Hodie Christus Natus Est"
Clear, vibrant, piercing dark
Christ came incarnate in the peace
And birthed me---blazing heart!*

*So now I ponder, "Who else knew?"
Who else, the "For Us" crowd?
My parents, Grandma, Grandpa---they---
While singing carols loud?
When were their hearts warmed to the
core?
Did faith, their manger find?
Where did God's Spirit over shadow
And bring them to the line
Of saints a-marching, now adorned
In Christ's full righteousness
The Christmas tattered costumes shed
Replace by endless bliss!*

*For Us!! For Us!! For you and me
And people long ago
For children unborn, yet to be,
Unknown Jane and Jim Doe
For ones we love, for ones we loathe
For rich man, poor man, chief
For presidents and soldier boys
For beggars and for thieves
For ones who live in houses warm
And those whose only bed
Is on the dung heap garbage pile
Or in the cattle shed.*

*For prince and knight and water girl
Inventor, murderer, wife
For every single person born
Who breathed the breath of life.
Just how big is this "For Us" sphere
For whom the Christ was born?
The good, the bad, the ugly ones
The bright, the tattered worn.
Lord, come to us, abide with us
In every heart now dwell
For unto us is born anew
Our Lord, Emmanuel!*

MONDAY, DECEMBER 13TH - WEEK 3, DAY 1

The Shepherds Visit Jesus

☐ Read Luke 2:8-20

DEVOTIONAL

In the birth story, the baby was given the name Jesus (meaning “God saves”) and identified as Savior, Messiah, Lord, Son of Most High, Holy One, and Son of God (Luke 1:32, 35; 2:11, 21). Long before He ever said or did anything, Jesus was proclaimed as God’s anointed one chosen to redeem the world.

The shepherds responded with fear, then curiosity, and finally praise as they told others about Jesus. How often do people stop at fear, and never move forward to the greater experiences of faith. Even curiosity alone is not enough. No, the shepherds went all in with their faith, leaving their encounter with the baby Jesus to “spread the word... glorifying and praising God” (v. 17, 20).

Imagine the kind of buzz the shepherds began that night. They had seen and listened to an angel. They had experienced a whole host of angels praising God. They had met the newborn Messiah face to face. All this welled up inside them until it burst forth. In that day, nobody listened to shepherds. Except these guys. What they had experienced could not be ignored.

The result is that “all who heard it were amazed” (v. 18). Bethlehem was abuzz. The next day the news probably spread like wildfire. Everybody in Israel was waiting for the Messiah to be born. And here he was!

News must have quickly traveled to Jerusalem, only about six miles away. When the magi arrived in Bethlehem, it was no doubt common knowledge where the newborn king of the Jews was residing. And... when the babies were slaughtered by Herod, everyone had to know why.

POEM

Fear, Curiosity, Praise
Our eyes beheld the glory
Of the army hosts of God
They sang redemption's story
Sent from heav'n to humble sod
In fear we held staffs trembling
As our flock around us baa-ed
Our knees bent down in worship
Our souls were filled with awe

Then stillness filled the night sky
As all 'round us turned to norm
A curiosity arose
A plan began to form
Excitedly we stood erect
While grabbing others' arms
“Let's go and see this wondrous sight
Our Lord has now performed!”

With haste and focused purpose
We sped into the night
Went searching for this manger
Enthroning Heaven's Light
Our eyes beheld the glory
The babe—O holy night!
Our praise and good news telling
We shared with all our might

NOTES

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14TH - WEEK 3, DAY 2

Mary and Joseph Bring Jesus to the Temple

☐ Read Luke 2:21-24

DEVOTIONAL

In Jesus' time, three important rituals were observed by Jewish parents after a firstborn male was born:

1. Circumcision of the child – on the 8th day after birth. This is when He was named Jesus.
2. Presentation of the child – one month after birth. The father sacrificed a pair of doves or pigeons to redeem his son from being a priest consecrated to the Lord (Luke 2:23; Exodus 13:2, 12; Numbers 18:16).
3. Purification of the mother – on day 40 after delivery. An offering was brought to acknowledge the mother's time of purification was complete (Leviticus 12:8).

It appears that Joseph and Mary completed the first of these rituals in verse 21, and the other two in verses 22-24 as they brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem. Their faithfulness abounds. Jesus' life begins in full compliance with Jewish religious laws and customs.

Joseph and Mary were from Nazareth, a small village some 80-90 miles (five or so days walk) to the north of Jerusalem, depending on the way traveled. If Jesus had been born there, it would have been virtually impossible for them to have taken their son to the Jerusalem temple for these rituals. But because of the Roman census that forced them to travel to Bethlehem to register, they were just a few miles away from the temple.

God used the oppressive Roman Empire to place the Messiah in close proximity to the holy temple in the heart of Jerusalem. God holds history in His hands.

POEM

Mother and Dad
Mother and Dad,
As soon as you can
Bring me into the house of the LORD
And dedicate my life to God's service
Even before my new eyes can focus

Mother and Dad,
As soon as you can
Mark me as a child of the LORD
And nurse me at God's table
As my blood is shed and clotted

Mother and Dad
As soon as you can
Train me in the ways of the LORD
And engrave God's word
on my heart
With songs and words to memorize

Mother and Dad
As soon as you can
Celebrate the rhythms
of the LORD
And raise me in the
holidays of God
With intention and
participation

Mother and Dad
As soon as you can
Kneel with me before the LORD
And guide me conversation
with God
That I may communicate with
my Father

Mother and Dad
As soon as you can
Allow me to worship the LORD
And guide me in worship
of our God
That I might have a hungry
heart and praise on my lips

NOTES

The Prophecy of Simeon

☐ Read Luke 2:25-35

DEVOTIONAL

When Joseph and Mary brought baby Jesus to the temple for the important Jewish rituals, they met a man named Simeon in the temple courts. In a few short verses, we learn that Simeon was righteous and devout, was eagerly awaiting the consolation of Israel, the Holy Spirit was upon him, and he had waited for years, into old age, to see the Lord's Messiah.

This man should serve as an inspiration and role model for us. Too often, we expect God to act quickly on our timetable, sweeping our lack of righteousness and devotion under the rugs of life. But Simeon was just the opposite. Even though he was righteous and devout, he was willing to wait an entire lifetime to see what God would do.

So, when Jesus' parents brought Him into the temple courts, Simeon swept the baby from their arms into his as he burst into prophetic praise. He instantly recognized Jesus as the source of salvation to all people, both Jews and Gentiles (v. 30-32). Then this man of faith locked eyes with Mary and blessed her with a prophetic warning about the challenging life that was ahead of her.

The temple courts were always a busy place. Undoubtedly, others saw and heard what Simeon did with Jesus and his parents. People would chatter with one another about his prophetic words. The news would certainly reach the ears of the religious authorities.

Jesus was already causing a stir.

POEM

Console Me, O LORD
Console me, O LORD,
With the gentle voice of your Comforter
Reminding me of your incarnation
Your advent into my heart

Console me, O LORD
In the midst of my aging
Declaring your presence, palpable
Your advent into my days

Console me, O LORD
When all about me is crumbling
With the words of your promises
Your advent into my struggles

Console me, O LORD
As I walk through the veil
Heralding my entrance into glory
Your advent into my eternity

NOTES

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16TH - WEEK 3, DAY 4

The Praises of Anna

☐ Read Luke 2:36-38

DEVOTIONAL

Again, we see that little baby Jesus is no well-kept secret. The shepherds had told about him all over Bethlehem. Simeon had prophesied over him in the temple courts. Now, Anna tells about Jesus the Messiah all around the temple in Jerusalem, presumably in the presence of the religious leaders.

Anna was an eighty-four year old widow who had dedicated her life to worship, prayer, and fasting. She was the kind of person every priest would want around the temple, exemplifying the kind of spiritual life they encouraged others to have.

Most women married in their teenage years. Anna's husband died only seven years into their marriage. Rather than remarrying, Anna committed herself to serving the Lord in His holy temple. It is conceivable that she had been serving in the temple for up to sixty years! The Pharisees and Sadducees came and went. But Anna was a fixture. Everybody had to know her and respect her.

So, when Anna spoke prophetically about Jesus as the "redemption of Israel" (v. 38), everybody had to take notice. Forty days into His life, Jesus is a celebrity. This most certainly did not sit well with the religious establishment and King Herod, as we shall soon see.

As you prepare for Christmas day, take some time to reflect on that first Christmas season. Long before Jesus could talk, walk or even crawl, He was impacting the lives of others.

How is the story of Jesus impacting you?

POEM

Anna Haiku
*Steady pillar fixed
Great cedar of the temple
Wholy devoted roots*

NOTES

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17TH - WEEK 3, DAY 5

God Became a Human Being

☐ Read John 1:1-18

DEVOTIONAL

Long before His birth, Jesus was. He has existed from the very beginning, being with God and being God Himself. All things were created with, through, and for Him. Jesus is the giver of life and light to overcome death and darkness.

When Jesus, God's Son, became human flesh, He bore God's glory, grace, and truth for us to behold and embrace. If you want to know what God is like, look at the life of Jesus.

Jesus calls us to embrace His glory, to receive His grace, and to accept His truth. He is calling us to know Him more deeply and intimately than we ever have.

These eighteen verses contain around eighteen statements about who Jesus is and what He has done for us. Take some time to identify these statements of faith. Then, pick a few and spend some time praising Jesus because of them! Also, make note of them, for they will resurface again and again as we move through this study of His life.

Ask Jesus to show you His way, teach you His truth, and give you His life. Just days before Christmas, ask Christ for the greatest gifts He has to offer! Amen.

Genesis 1:1

1 John 1:1

POEM

This. Not That.
Have you ever noticed how
When a thought is spoken out in
Words
There is a defining sharp
But also an excluding limit?
This.
Not That.

Have you ever noticed how
When a word is spoken that
Word
Becomes a creation
Which brings life or death?
This.
Not That.

So John starts this gospel
His gospel with this
proclamation about
The Word
The source of defining and
limiting of everything
The source of all life and
death.
This.
Not That.

So what does this Word
speaking mean for me
As I enter into John's chosen
word
Jesus
Which defines, limits, sources
life, death.
And creates a new me?
This.
Not That.

NOTES

MONDAY, DECEMBER 20TH - WEEK 4, DAY 1

The Magi Visit Jesus

☐ Read Matthew 2:1-12

DEVOTIONAL

Even before Jesus was born, the entire universe was proclaiming His arrival: angelic visits, new stars, foreign visitors who possibly started on their journey before Jesus was born.

And just after His birth, there was much stirring on earth. King Herod, priests, and religious teachers were all brought in on a plot to assassinate the child. Nothing could have made King Herod more disturbed than to hear that these eastern magi were looking for the “king of the Jews” (v. 2). And nothing could have disturbed the leaders of the city more than to see Herod disturbed (v. 3).

Still, the wise men went on their way, somehow following a celestial star, like a GPS device directly, to the house where baby Jesus was. What would it have been like to be Mary and have foreign dignitaries bow down and worship your baby? What would it have been like for Joseph the provider to see these magi offer incredibly valuable gifts to his son? Were they honored, scared, happy, cautious, awed?

The gifts themselves were not only extravagant, they were prophetic. Gold is a gift for a king. Frankincense is an offering for a priest. And myrrh was used to prepare a body for entombment after death. They were for Jesus the King of kings, the High Priest, the Sacrificial Lamb.

This visit no doubt gave Mary confirmation that the angel had told her the truth about her child’s purpose. And if they told Joseph about their dream in verse 12, it may have prepared him for the dream he would receive in verse 13.

POEM

Golf, Frankincense and Myrrh

Gold, Au, number 79
An element stable
Like the best KING
Whose brow bears
The crown---
Never oxidizing,
Never changing---
A midst the winds of change
Or the storms of conflict
Continuing to shine
While being malleable
In the Hand of God
Refined in the fire
Gold.

Frankincense
Bled from Boswellia resin
Tears dripping down
The scraggy bearded bark
A tree so strong
It can bear fruit
Even in unforgiving
Hard-hearted rock
Its scent continuing
From worship to
The sewers where
Humblest PRIEST ministers
To spirits in poverty
Frankincense.

Myrrh, thorn tree,
The balm of Gilead
Able to endure the dry
And stony wilderness
Of spiritual famine
PROPHET wandering
Warning, willing to die
As teeth of proclamation
Yellow and then
Streaks of white declare
The purity of the repentant
Heart bleached
Awaiting resurrection.
Myrrh.

NOTES

Mary and Joseph Take Jesus to Egypt

☐ Read Matthew 2:13-18

DEVOTIONAL

The angels, shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and Magi had brought nothing but good news, prophetic worship, and extravagant gifts for Jesus. Now, the angelic news is a warning of death that brings terror. In the broken sinfulness of the world, many parents watched helplessly as soldiers executed their baby boys.

This is not a scene that is typically lifted up when we go Christmas caroling or when we play holiday music from our favorite device or when we gather at the church for a Christmas Eve service. It brings up so many painful questions: Why did these innocents have to die? Was this part of God's plan or just a symptom of the world's evil? Why did the angel warn Joseph and not all the other parents?

A third of a century later, Jesus would hang on a cross and die for every sinner who would accept His sacrificial gift. But as a little child, other little children would die to protect Him. No doubt, King Herod figured that this newborn King of the Jews was eliminated, since the soldiers killed all the little boys.

The upshot is that Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Egypt, where they lived until Herod died. It is not known exactly how long Jesus was in Egypt, but the different custom, language, and cultural expressions He experienced, (even as a little child) might have impacted Him later when He would minister to all kinds of people.

Even more so, the knowledge of this story that was repeated by His mother, until it found its way to Matthew's pen, must have shaped His understanding of good and evil, selfishness and sacrifice, life and death.



POEM

Down to Egypt Land
Down to Egypt land, my love,
Though memories there are bitter
Of toil and sweat
Frank slavery

Down to Egypt land, my love,
A midst Pharoah's gods we'll hide
From others who would kill
The Innocents

Down to Egypt land, my love,
A journey back through wilderness
With step on step we'll retrace
YHWH's protection

Down to Egypt land, my love,
To dwell among the Goshen shepherds
To once again bed with the flock
Good Shepherd

Down to Egypt land, my love,
For just a little white
Through sea of red, the blood in Ramah
Rachel's tears

NOTES

Mary and Joseph Take Jesus to Nazareth

☐ Read Matthew 2:19-22

DEVOTIONAL

This is the third and fourth time God spoke to Joseph in a dream. In the first, he was told that his pregnant fiancée was carrying the Son of God. In the second, he was warned to take his little family as refugees to Egypt, because Herod was going to look for Jesus to kill him.

Here, in the third dream, an angel of the Lord came to Joseph while they were living in Egypt. The encounter was brief and to the point: "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead" (v. 20). By now, the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem had certainly traveled to the Jewish community living in Egypt. It took great faith and bold obedience for Joseph to gather up his family and head back to the place that was so dangerous. But he did.

Enter the fourth dream. When Herod died, he was replaced in Judea by his son Archelaus, who was as bad or even worse than his father. This news struck fear into the heart of Joseph, until an angel warned him in a dream to bypass Judea in southern Israel and head for Galilee in northern Israel, which was ruled by a relatively safer son of Herod. There they settled in their original hometown of Nazareth. They had come full circle.

Joseph is an unsung hero in the story of Jesus. By next week's readings, he will disappear from the narrative, most likely due to his death, when Jesus was in His teens or twenties. Yet Joseph's keen ability to hear the voice of God in dreams and his courageous willingness to follow wherever God was leading allowed Jesus to fulfill so many prophetic statements made about Him throughout the Old Testament. Ah, the power of a dream from God!

POEM

Joseph Script

*There is a place of working
Away from limelight beams
A place so very quiet---shh!
Far from applauding screams
Where I've been called to labor
Unseen, unheard, forgotten
Except by my Director, who
The Play has been begotten.
I hear the Voice directing
Through whispers in my ear:
"Lights up!" "Sound on!" "Props carry!"
"Now serve the actors here!"
I'm there before the others show
Preparing for the cast.
I stay after they've all gone home
After the masses passed.
There's work to do behind the scenes:
To clean, to put away.
I sweep the stage, turn out the lights,
Keep watch against foul play.
My goal is not the clapping storm
Or crowds' adoring eyes;
My focus--my Director's call
And my faithful reply.
It's not that I am shy, you see,
The glory is not mine.
I serve Director, that's my goal,
And make His glory shine!*

NOTES

Jesus in Nazareth as a Boy

☐ Read Matthew 2:19-22, Luke 2:39-40

DEVOTIONAL

After the birth narrative in Bethlehem and Egypt, the family of Jesus “returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.” In that day, Nazareth was a small, unimportant village of around 500 people. Growing up there helped shape Jesus into the man He would become. Throughout the Gospels, He is often referred to as “Jesus of Nazareth.” The town was so insignificant that Nathaniel, one of His first disciples, proclaimed, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46).

Growing up in such a small community, Jesus undoubtedly knew everyone who lived there. But as He was beginning His ministry, at the age of thirty, his fellow synagogue friends were so angry at His message that they tried to throw Him off a cliff (Luke 4:29). Three years later, when Jesus was crucified on a cross, the Roman governor had a sign placed above His head that read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (John 19:19). It was a way to humiliate the Jewish religious leaders. Their “king” was from the backwater village of Nazareth, and was now dying a criminal’s death.

But all was not lost on Jesus growing up in Nazareth. The Bible says, “and the child grew and became strong; He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on Him” (Luke 2:40) and “so was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that He would be called a Nazarene” (Matthew 2:23).

Too often people look at where and who and how they were raised and wonder if they can ever amount to anything. God could have placed Jesus into the womb of an important woman from an important city like Rome or Jerusalem. Rather, He chose to allow Him to be raised in an obscure village by an inconsequential family. That is how God does things!



POEM

Let Them Grow
Let them grow within the temple
Let their hearts swell in the word
Let them love the wisdom of the Lord
Let every truth be heard
Let their bodies stretch and come full height
Let strength lift Spirit's sword
Let them find the favor of their peers
Let them know God's favor more
Let them live into their calling
Let their love many restore
Let them serve using their talents
Let them gain God's high reward

NOTES

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24TH - WEEK 4, DAY 5

Jesus in the Temple at Twelve Years Old

☐ Read Luke 2:41-52

DEVOTIONAL

When Jesus was twelve, He was able to listen, question and dialogue with the greatest religious scholars of His day. Had He been studying Scripture under someone's tutelage in His childhood? Was this simply His divine nature emerging? Did Jesus intentionally or accidentally stay behind in Jerusalem while his family joined the caravan back to Nazareth? Where did Jesus eat and sleep during the three days He was separated from His family? What kind of questions did He ask the scholars? Were these religious teachers some of the same people who would condemn Him two decades later at this same festival in this same city? So many questions.

When Mary found her son, she said, "Your *father* and I have been anxiously searching for you." Jesus replied, "Didn't you know I would be in my *Father's* house?" The distinction between earthly father and heavenly Father is unmistakable. Years later Jesus would say, ⁴⁸ "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:48-50).

Father. Mother. Sister. Brother. Jesus understood the distinction between His earthly family and His heavenly family. Already at the age of twelve, Jesus seemed to have a clear grasp on His identity as the Son of God, the Lord's Messiah. But this did not stop Him from being a good member of his earthly family. Verse 51 simply says, "Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them." Jesus, the good son, would become the Good Son.



POEM

What Makes You Anxious?

A parent, distracted with
friend's lively banter,
Engaging in discourse as
young child meanders
An enjoyable moment soon
changes to panic
A child lost!

Does that make you anxious?

Exposing the mishap of
moment's neglect
The truth coming out, your
friends' show disrespect
And none have the answer
you'd pay with your life
How could I?

Does that make you anxious?

Where is he? How could he?
My eyes off a moment
For this loss, for this breach,
there'll be no atonement
Tears run, gasp

Does that make you anxious?

Who took him? How safe is he?
Does he have bread?
Who's carrying for him? Was there a
warm bed?
The night falls
Does that make you anxious?

"My dear, he's been sighted,
mid temple and priests!"
"Thank God for good people who
care for the least!"
Great bother?
Does that make you anxious?

Embarrassed and humbled,
exhausted, relieved
But the scribes and teachers
can hardly believe
Astounded!
Does that make you anxious?

"With my Father I must be;
this is his house!
His essence, His call is
what I do espouse"
Never ours...
Does that make you anxious?

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

☐ Read Matthew 3:1-12, Mark 1:1-8, Luke 3:1-18, John 1:19-28

DEVOTIONAL

Nobody was as popular as John, the camel-hair-clothed, locust-eating, country evangelist. Loads of people from “the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out” to John to hear him preach, confess their sins, and be baptized by him (Mark 1:5). Among the religious pilgrims and curious onlookers were:

- The crowds: John told these Jewish citizens to repent of their sins and to share their possessions with the poor (Luke 3:3, 11).
- Religious leaders: These included the Pharisees who demanded perfect keeping of the religious Law (which they didn’t do) and the Sadducees who aligned themselves with the Roman rulers to keep their power. John called them a family of snakes with unrepentant lifestyles (Matthew. 3:7). Was Nicodemus (John 3) among those present?
- Tax Collectors: These Jewish folks got rich by collecting exorbitant taxes for Rome from their Jewish neighbors, then pocketing the excess. John told them to stop collecting and pocketing the excess (Luke 3:12-13). Might Zacchaeus (Luke 19) from nearby Jericho have been there?
- Soldiers: These Roman armed forces got rich by oppressing the poor and extorting from them the little they had. John told them to find contentment and quit taking advantage of their power (Luke 3:14). Would any of these soldiers nail Jesus to the cross three years later?

John’s public rebuke of each of these groups probably angered some, and made others deeply curious. What would John have said to you if you had been there?

POEM

Wilderness Wearer
There is an austere barrenness
Worn by the wilderness
Life’s color is hidden
Silence reigns
Except for the rattle
Of the Tempter’s tail
Or the Spirit wind blowing
Polishing sand
The sun beats down by day
The moon, frigid, by night
A place devoid of protection
Except for the hide
Of one sacrificed to clothe
The nakedness

With devouring locust
As food in the belly
Stripping all appetites
And the honey of the Word
Upon the lips of the Baptizer
The Wilderness Wearer
Enters the city
Buzzing with the noisy
Confusion of life
And begins to tear down
The billboards of fat
Pollution
Offering instead
Repentance

Wilderness rock
Pours forth
Living Water
Quenching the thirst
Of the glutton people
Cooling the brow
Of the slave to labor
And appetites
Cutting a path
Level
Straight
Scanning the horizon
For the rising, coming
Son

NOTES

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 28TH - WEEK 5, DAY 2

Jesus is Baptized by John the Baptist

☐ Read Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22

DEVOTIONAL

In these passages we learn some important things about Jesus. First, He was baptized when all the people were baptized (Luke 3:21). Also, though Jesus might have been seen as a regular Jewish guy up until then, at that moment He was set apart as someone very different from the crowd. Here is what the people saw and heard when Jesus was baptized:

- Heaven was visibly “torn open” (Mark 1:10). This must have been fearfully awesome.
- The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form, descending and alighting on Him like a dove. This must have been majestically inspiring.
- An audible voice from heaven declared, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” This must have been magnificently moving.

Among those witnessing this, were some from the citizenry, the religious hierarchy, and the Roman military and monetary system as seen in yesterday’s reading. In an instant, everybody, from every strata of life, saw with their own eyes and heard with their own ears and felt with their own beings that Jesus was no ordinary man. Indeed, before He ever preached or healed or worked a single miracle, God in heaven declared that Jesus was His Son and that the Holy Spirit was on Him to remain.

Having seen all this, do you wonder why so many among the crowds, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Roman authorities, soldiers and tax collectors spurned Jesus message and ministry? What will it take to make you fully embrace Him?

POEM

Break Open, O Heavens
Break open, O heavens
Descend heav’nly Dove
Great Spirit of bapt’sm
Express Father’s love
Announce Your full pleasure
Anoint Your own Son
Speak forth now the christ’ning
The Kingdom begun!
Break open, rock-hard heart
Receive now the Key
Which opens the floodgates
New birthing for me!
Be stamped with the mark
The great seal of the LORD
Adoption completed
Your name, Book record!

NOTES

Jesus is Tempted by Satan

☐ Read Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13

DEVOTIONAL

Luke's gospel gives some great insights regarding the temptation of Jesus. During the entire forty days in the wilderness "he was tempted by the devil" and "ate nothing during those days period." Most often we think of Jesus fasting for 40 days while in the presence of angels with Satan showing up only at the end. But here we see that he endured a 40 day onslaught.

We also see that Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" (Luke) and that he was "led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew). Yet James 1:13 says, "when tempted no one should say, 'God is tempting me.'" So God does not tempt us, but does He lead us to places where we might be tempted by Satan?

In Luke's order of temptation events, Satan tries to draw Jesus away from the Heavenly Father by taking Him:

- Down & Out – Jesus was starving. The devil tempted Him to use His divine power to fulfill his base needs.
- Up & Out – Satan offered Jesus a lifetime of fame and power in exchange for His soul.
- Out – The evil one tried to confuse Jesus in His famished and fatigued state into jumping off the temple peak to see if angels would catch Him.

This forty day onslaught was not the end of Satan tempting Jesus. Luke 4:13 says that the devil simply "left him until an opportune time." When the Bible says Jesus "was without sin," it is a remarkable claim! Hebrews 2:18 says, "Because He himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted." Thank you Jesus!

POEM

Boxing with the Devil

They entered in the desert ring
Two long time adversaries
The one aggressive, out to kill
The other, primed and ready
A dance began, the ones' full plan
To try to trip the other
A full on punch right to the gut
"Turn stones to bread and butter."
The punch fell short, "The scripture says,
'Life's more than bread,' you Foe!
My strength comes from the Word of God
Get out of here, now Go!"

"To you I will give all the world
If you just worship me,
Look at the wealth, all of this power
Yes, everything you see."
"I will not fall for this old trick,
This punch will not land home.
The scripture says to worship God,
To worship God alone.
An idol brings no mercy, love
It has no ears to hear
My praise and shouts of joy to Him
Whom heav'n and earth declare."

"Then how about a spectacle?
Become the star with power.
Surely your God would rescue you
In times of darkest hour."
'Away from me, you evil one,
My God will not be tested.
There's work to do,
not games to play,
In truth My God's invested.
You might have tempted
those before
And stolen their bright future
But down you go now for the count
Your power is gone, Abuser!"

NOTES

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 30TH - WEEK 5, DAY 4

John the Baptist Calls Jesus the Lamb of God

☐ Read John 1:29-34

DEVOTIONAL

John's gospel does not have the baptism or temptation of Jesus. Yet here we see John the Baptist (a different John than the gospel writer) reflecting on Jesus' baptism and how he had seen the Holy Spirit come down and remain on Him. This led John to conclude that Jesus absolutely was God's Chosen One, or as some manuscripts state, the Son of God (v. 32).

But John gives another term to explain the identity of Jesus: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (v. 29). The idea of a sacrificial lamb goes all the way back to the beginning of Biblical history. God provided a ram so that Abraham would not have to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22). The Lord told the enslaved Israelites to put the blood of a lamb on their doorposts so that the death that was visiting Egypt would pass over them (Exodus 12). And in Isaiah 53:7, the prophet foresaw this in the future Messiah: "he was led like a lamb to the slaughter."

In Jesus' day, the High Priest would sacrifice a lamb so that the sins of the people would be forgiven. Jesus became a High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-15) who didn't simply sacrifice a lamb; He *became* the Lamb. John the Baptist understood that Jesus would not simply remove the sins of Israel. Rather, Jesus would take away the sins of the whole world! Anyone who would accept His offer of forgiveness of sins would receive it!

"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

His name is Jesus!

POEM

It's Good but Never Easy
Let us fulfill the prophets' truth
Let us prepare a path full through
A prophet, yes
Repent, confess
Deep places rise
Heights leave the skies
Some water pure
A message sure
It's good, but never easy

Let us have You their one light be
A special blessing come from me
A river, dove
Voice from above
A desert time
A role defined
The walk begin
With out, within
It's good, but never easy

Let us, then, call some
people out
Into deep faith away
from doubt
Some rich, some poor
Some women, sure
Those outside, in
Those seen as sin
Some dumb, some wise
Honored, despised
It's good, but never easy

Let us a new creation form
Let us then groan,
a people born
Fulfill the law
Inspire with awe
Correct wrong ways
The wise to daze
The low to lift
Save those adrift
It's good, but never easy

NOTES

Andrew and Simon Come to Jesus

☐ Read John 1:35-42

DEVOTIONAL

Prior to the public ministry of Jesus, His cousin John the Baptist had his own disciples who were witnessing (and assisting?) him as he preached and baptized. Andrew was one of those learning under the teaching of John. One day, when Jesus was coming toward them, John again proclaimed, "Look, the Lamb of God" (see yesterday's reading). This time Andrew not only heard it, he believed that Jesus was the sacrificial Lamb, who would take away every sin of every person who believed in Him.

So, Andrew stopped following John and started following Jesus. Immediately. He and the other disciple attached themselves to Jesus all day long. They wanted what Jesus was offering.

But more than that, they wanted others to want what Jesus was offering. Verse 41 says, "The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ)." Andrew became the first evangelist. He was so convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, that he ran to find his brother Simon Peter to convince him as well. In fact, he did more than that. Andrew "brought him to Jesus" (v. 42).

As the story of Jesus unfolds over the next three years, Andrew's brother Peter becomes the right hand man of Jesus. Indeed, Andrew is not even among the three who make up the inner circle of Jesus (that would be Peter, James, and John). Yet there is no hint of jealousy from Andrew to his brother or his fishing partners. Andrew doesn't need the limelight. He just wants to bring people to Jesus.

How is God calling you to make a difference for His kingdom? Will you do it?



POEM

Abandon
In my hands
In my life
I clutch
and build
around myself
treasures, relationships, identity
Security

These things
These people
I mold
and fill
my day with
work, purpose, entertainment
domain

What could possibly
Who could probably
get me to
unclutch the net
leave my boat
behind, back there, in the dust
abandon

In my hands
In my life
I clutch
built in and around me
only One
Treasure, Relationship, Identity
Security

Open hands
On the way
I move
not knowing, often stumbling
following
Life, Light, Love
Abandon

NOTES

MONDAY, JANUARY 3RD - WEEK 6, DAY 1

Philip and Nathanael Come to Jesus

☐ Read John 1:43-51

DEVOTIONAL

In the previous reading, we saw how Andrew was so convinced that Jesus was the Messiah that he quickly convinced his brother Simon Peter to go see for himself. The very next day Jesus found a man named Philip who was from the Bethsaida, just like Andrew and Peter. Jesus spoke just two life-changing words to Philip: "Follow me."

These simple and well-known words are intensely impactful when obeyed. Why do so few people truly follow Jesus today? We don't face martyrdom or even real persecution in the USA, but we do face affluence and endless options. Is it harder to abandon the American Dream than Roman Occupation?

Philip went and told Nathanael (who is believed to be Bartholomew – one of the future disciples) about Jesus. It must have been compelling to be in the presence of Jesus. The first thing people did was go and tell others about Him.

But Nathanael wasn't as cooperative with Philip as Peter had been with Andrew. He doubted and scoffed that the backwater village of Nazareth could produce anyone significant at all, much less the promised Messiah. But Philip persisted with three simple words: "Come and see."

"Follow me"

"Come and see"

Sometimes the most profound things we can do are expressed in the simplest of ways. Who needs you to introduce them to Jesus? What's holding you back?

POEM

The First Time
Can any of us recall
The first time
We were
Untethered
From that which
Held us
Captive
Only to be
Unbound
And
Brought
To the
One
Who finally
Saw
The reason
And
The use
For which
We were
Created

Perhaps
You are still
Waiting
Unaware
Of your
Value
Your
Purpose
Your
Limitations
Your
Destiny
And are yet
To be
Surprised
At your
Role
In the
Great Plan
Of
Grace

NOTES

TUESDAY, JANUARY 4TH - WEEK 6, DAY 2

Jesus Preaches & Teaches in Galilee

☐ Read Matthew 4:12-17, Mark 1:14-15, Luke 4:14-15

DEVOTIONAL

After the temptation, Jesus learned that John the Baptist had been put in prison. This could have happened during that forty days, not long after John baptized Jesus. Did this frighten Jesus? Embolden Him? Reassure Him... that He was on the right path and that His ministry would be tough? What does bad news about others in their ministry settings do to us today? What about when the bad news is about someone very close to us, like Jesus was with his cousin John?

Matthew tells us that Jesus left His hometown of Nazareth and moved to Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. This community would become the base of operations for Jesus' ministry in the years to come. Mark tells us that Jesus began preaching right away about the kingdom of God and the call to "repent and believe the good news!" Jesus hit the ground running.

Luke adds that "news about him spread through the whole countryside." The public ministry of Jesus was underway, and lives were already being challenged and changed.

Jesus began His ministry in a new place (Capernaum), among new people (Andrew, Peter, James, John), with a prophetic message ("the kingdom of heaven is near!"), and a powerful display of God's grace - teaching, proclaiming, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (see Matthew. 4:23). Today we would not know the name of Jesus if He had decided to play it safe and stay among his family and friends in the familiarity of Nazareth.

How is God calling you to make a new beginning out of obedience to Him?

POEM

Regular Work
There is a monotony to
Regular Work
Pitch and throw
Sit and think
Calculate and know
What lies ahead each day
A comfortable rhythm
Like the ticking of a clock
Routine
But then
In walks this Invitation
To become
Something beyond
One's deepest
Dream born of
Hope
Beckoning us to
Follow this Rabbi
To a place we
Do not know
To do what we have
Never seen
To become what we have
Never imagined
Irregular days measured
Not by time clocks
But by
Grace

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 5TH - WEEK 6, DAY 3

Simon, Andrew, James & John Follow Jesus

☐ Read Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20, Luke 5:1-11

DEVOTIONAL

One day, Jesus was preaching about the kingdom of God from the shore of the Sea of Galilee (also called the Lake of Gennesaret). His growing popularity drew a large crowd. They were pressing closer and closer to hear what Jesus had to say. With all the jostling for position, Jesus wanted more space so that people could truly hear what He was saying.

So, at sea's edge, He reconnected with Simon Peter, got in his boat, and used it as a floating pulpit to teach the gathered crowd. It was customary in that day for the preacher to sit down while the listeners stood. Hmm. Not a bad idea.

Jesus then helped Peter and Andrew, along with their fishing partners, James and John, catch a boat-sinking, awe-inspiring load of fish. The real-life metaphor was captivating as Jesus said, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people."

Once, when I was in Florida, I spent \$17 for a three-day fishing license and another \$20 for bait. I caught a total of one 8" fish. This is like most church's evangelism programs today: lots of money and energy; little result. Rather than having boat-sinking results, we barely have rod-bending experiences. After a while, I gave up and handed my pole back to the person I had borrowed it from. I wanted to see an "expert" bring in a big catch. He didn't do much better.

It doesn't take big budgets or professional evangelists or impressive programs to sink the boat. It only takes people who have met Jesus and want others to do the same!

POEM

Beach Pulpit

*I wonder if that morning as Jesus packed his sack
And trod the path toward sandy beach
And found a place and sat
If he was wanting quiet, the rhythm of the waves
The firm earth underneath him
And warm sun on his face?
Was he in search of Sabbath?
A time of peace and rest?
And when he saw the crowd approach
Did his soul feel distress?
The sigh from interference? Frustration of
changed plans?
That day did Jesus get his way
Or bend to crowds' demands?
I guess it does not matter if Sabbath
rest was breached
The preacher rose into the boat;
Built pulpit on the beach.*

NOTES

Jesus is Rejected in His Hometown

☐ Read Luke 4:16-30

DEVOTIONAL

In Matthew 13 and Mark 16, Jesus is rejected – or better yet, questioned. They knew his mom, dad, brothers and sisters as ordinary people, and couldn’t figure out where He got “this wisdom and these miraculous powers” (Matthew 13:54). They “took offense at him” (Mark 6:3) and lacked faith so much that Jesus’ hometown miracles were rare. In the end, Jesus acknowledged the lack of honor among His own neighbors, relatives and immediate family (Mark. 6:9).

But this episode in Luke is on a whole different level of rejection. Here Jesus proclaimed His mission from Isaiah’s prophesy, then used Elijah and Elisha as examples of why hometown heroes do their best work out of town.

The people aren’t simply offended and faithless as they are in Matthew and Mark. Here, they are a furious and murderous mob, determined to do away with the fellow Nazarene who was working His wonders in Capernaum but not in hometown Nazareth.

In this tiny town, everybody knew everybody. The guy they were trying to throw off the cliff was somebody they knew. They had grown up with Him. They had frequented His dad’s carpentry shop. They went and fetched water with his mom. They were his friends and relatives. They knew this kid-turned-prophet.

But here they were asking, “What have you done for me lately, Jesus?” From His own lips, they heard him claim the authority of the Old Testament prophets and even the Lord Himself. Okay, prove it. Show us a miracle, and maybe we’ll believe. Jesus pushed them for the opposite. Show me your faith, and maybe you’ll receive a miracle.



POEM

Ah, Holy Jesus –
Johann Heermann, 1630;
Trans. Robert Bridges, 1899
*Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended,
That man to judge thee hath in hate pretended?
By foes derided, by thine own rejected,
O most afflicted.*

NOTES

FRIDAY, JANUARY 7TH - WEEK 6, DAY 5

Jesus Heals Peter's Mother-in-law & Many More

☐ Read Matthew 8:14-17, Mark 1:21-34, Luke 4:31-41

DEVOTIONAL

In this passage, demons recognize Jesus as being the Holy One of God (Luke 4:34) and the Son of God (Luke 4:41). Luke places this episode right after Jesus' hometown neighbors tried to kill Him for similar claims. Satan knows who Jesus is, and he knows who Christians are too. This doesn't stop the devil from trying to draw us away from God. Like Jesus, we must remember that we have authority over the evil one!

Jesus was never intimidated by demons, disease, or even death. He commanded demons and they came out of people. He spoke to fevers and they subsided. He touched lepers and their skin became clean. He talked to the dead and they came to life. He forgave sinners and they became free.

All this made Jesus more popular than the Beatles! People kept bringing their broken buddies to Him all the way up to sunset. Even when He tried to sneak away at daybreak for a little solitude, they tracked him down like ravenous wolves, hungry for healing and hope and wholeness, "because they knew He was the Messiah" (v. 41).

The recipients of healing knew He was the Messiah.

The demonized saw Him as the Son of God.

The hometown neighbors thought he was a heretic.

Who do you say Jesus is?



POEM

Want To
The leper said,
"My flesh is falling away.
My life is sliding further and further
Into isolation and shame.
But if you want to
You could change everything."

The Roman said,
"My servant is suffering.
My right hand man is
slipping further and
further
Into purposelessness and disease.
But if you want to
You could change everything."

Peter said,
"My mother is ill.
My True-Heart's source is
failing further and
further
Into grief and death.
But if you want to
You could change everything."

The people said,
"Our lives are captive.
Our freedom is shackled further
and further
Into bindings and sorrow.
But if you want to
You could change everything."

The disciples said,
"We are frightened.
Our lives are drowning further
and further
Into chaos and terror.
But if you want to
You could change everything."

The madmen said,
"We are hopeless.
Our lives are cascading further
and further
Into unworthiness and insanity.
But if you want to
You could change everything."

Jesus said,
"Be clean."
"I'll come and heal."
"Go. What you believed
could happen has
happened."
"I'll take your illness. I'll carry
your diseases."
"Silence!"
"Be gone, Satan!"
"I want to;
I will change everything."

MONDAY, JANUARY 10TH - WEEK 7, DAY 1

Jesus Turns Water into Wine

☐ Read John 2:1-12

DEVOTIONAL

At the end of John 1, Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." After the resurrection of Jesus, He appeared to seven of His disciples after a fruitless night of fishing. Among them was "Nathanael, from Cana in Galilee" (John 21:2). Jesus' first miracle took place in that village of Cana.

I picture Nathanael (Bartholomew) inviting the family and followers of Jesus to his hometown for this wedding celebration. Sometimes the disciples brought people to Jesus. Sometimes they brought Jesus to people.

What are some of the ways we are to bring people to Jesus? How do we bring Jesus to people? I often talk about the two I's of evangelism: Invite them to church and Introduce people to Jesus. By inviting them into the life of the family of God, we extend our arms and open our hearts. By introducing them to Jesus, we extend His arms and open His heart to them.

In this first miracle of Jesus, we find an interesting exchange between Jesus and his mother Mary. After telling her, my time has not yet come," Jesus goes ahead and honors his mother by the water-to-wine miracle. Scripture states that this "revealed His glory" (v. 11), but it also revealed his respect for His earthly parents (see Luke 2:51). Imagine parenting the Son of God who was obedient to you throughout His teens and twenties!

Jesus must have had a close relationship with His family. Jesus' brothers were at the wedding (v. 12), along with His disciples (v. 2). This moment marked a transition for Jesus from leader of the family (oldest son with Joseph apparently already deceased) to leader of a movement that would change the world!

POEM

The Wedding

*For days and weeks and months I've pined
For this awaited day
Each detail, planning, purpose, thought
To speak my love sublime*

*With each sight, will you see My Love?
With each melodic tune?
Will every taste and smell and touch
Declare deep passion true?*

*With water clean, my soul kept pure
My frame bedecked with white
With prayer and longing, counsel strong
For you whom I desire*

*Is there a space enough to hold
All I desire for you?
Will wine and joy now overflow
A miracle untold?*

*O, who will comprehend the truth
Of water into wine?
O, who will know the best has come
To mutually consume?*

NOTES

TUESDAY, JANUARY 11TH - WEEK 7, DAY 2

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

☐ Read John 2:13-25

DEVOTIONAL

The scene shifts abruptly from the small town of Cana in Galilee in the north to the bustling city of Jerusalem in Judea in the south. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus turned the water into wine. At the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus turned the tables on those who were profiting at God's expense. At the wedding miracle, "He revealed His glory" (John 2:11). At the temple demonstration, He revealed His destiny: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19).

After the wedding, "His disciples believed in Him" (John 2:11). After His resurrection, "His disciples recalled what He had said [about raising the temple - His body]. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken" (John 2:22).

Whether using the sound of His voice or a whip of cords, Jesus demonstrates His authority and calls us to believe in and follow Him.

At the conclusion of this passage, people begin believing in His name, but "Jesus would not entrust Himself to them, for He knew all people... He knew what was in each person" (v. 24-25). It makes sense that Jesus knew how people thought and acted and desired. He was present with God the Father and Spirit when Adam and Eve were created, then gave into temptation. He had seen Noah get drunk after the voyage, Joseph get sold by his brothers after a dream, and David have an adulterous & murderous affair after becoming king. Jesus knew that people were fickle. Was this why He would not entrust Himself to them? Did He already know that these Jerusalem residents would cry out for His crucifixion?

Here's the question: if Jesus really knows you, why did He die for you?

POEM

*Cleaning Day
Today's the day
To straighten out
To clean the clutter
Sort it out
To drag away
To carry out
The mess within my temple*

*The first task here
To pull all out
To lay it all
In piles about
What shall I keep?
What to throw out?
Fill bags and trash disposing*

*The corners, too
The spider webs
The buttons torn
The hanging threads
The wrinkled frocks
Unspoken prayers
The yeast full swept from hiding*

*What shall be burned
Refining Fire?
What truths be shined?
What holes of liars?
What rips repaired
From thorny briars
Of generations' cursing?*

*I rearrange
Clean closet now
Right hung in place
The humble brow
Old space returned
For prayer allow
An ordered life of worship*

*What does it take?
A scream? A whip?
Stampeding sin?
A table flipped?
The wrath of God.
My soul to strip
Before Christ's zeal
consumes me?*

NOTES

Nicodemus Comes to Jesus

☐ Read John 3:1-21

DEVOTIONAL

After Jesus cleared the temple, Jesus performed many miracles and obtained a number of believers. When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he stopped short of believing, though he approached the subject: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him" (v. 2). Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council (that is, the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, which functioned like the Supreme Court of all the lesser sanhedrins throughout Israel).

He had great power. He could have held court to declare Jesus innocent or guilty of breaking God's Law. While Nicodemus asked a question in statement form about Jesus' claims of identity ("we know that you are a teacher who has come from God"), Jesus responded with a statement about the identity of Nicodemus: "no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (v. 3). Rather than save His own skin, Jesus wanted to save Nicodemus' soul.

Jesus went on to tell him, "the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life" (v. 15). In His desire to win over Nicodemus, Jesus does reveal His identity, referring to Himself as the Son of God (v. 16).

All of this could have turned Nicodemus into a devoted follower or an angry persecutor. But Nicodemus chose the middle ground. In John 7, he stands up to his fellow Pharisees and sort of defends Jesus, and in John 19, he takes charge of respectfully burying the body of Jesus along with another secret disciple of Jesus.

How about you? Is your faith in Jesus a secretive, private thing? Is that what Jesus desired of Nicodemus? Is that what He desires of you?



POEM

Victor

The mother felt the baby move
Within her womb of knowing
Though hidden to the world around
New life within her showing
In midst of daily happenings
She pondered many names
Would Nicodemus victor be?
Would title bring him fame?

Upon the cresting of his head
Through water born of woman
Still stained with blood of birth canal
She nursed him at her bosom
With words she helped define his world
Soon mind perceived all matter

Rabbinic school, then Pharisee
His diet, Torah master
He conquered ancient languages
He mastered ancient thought
His life was seen as victory
His teachings many sought
Until one day another came
Authority profound

It turned his world upon its end
Past thoughts thrown to the ground

One night, he, sleepless, left his bed
His restlessness begged answer
With cover of the midnight black

A conversation, candor
"Great Teacher, you are from the LORD
Your miracles display.

What of this Kingdom? Help me see
Your word to light my way."

The Rabbi loved this searching one
Before the world began
"The Spirit must become your womb;
You must be born again.
As this new Parent labors strong
And births you Victor true
As water, blood combine in love
You'll nurse on Wisdom new."

"I do not understand your words?
Can I an infant be?
I'm old, a birth--impossible!
You speak in mystery!"
"Your eyes need healing, you are blind.
But if your ears will listen
And if you follow close to me
You'll apprehend my mission."

Though kicking in his new found womb
Against the goads of knowledge
New space allowed for Spirit's blood
To free him from the bondage
Of previous thought so limited
New ways of life embracing
This Victor soon discovered sure
A new triumph embracing

He saw his Rabbi's miracles
He heard good news for all
He touched the unseen in his mind
He said, "Yes!" to the call
He followed all the way to death
To tomb, anointing love
He witnessed resurrection power
New birth from Jesus' blood

And now with other followers
He shouts triumphal cry
The birthing of a royal tribe
Who will not ever die
With loud hosannas, waving palm
He leads the conquering horde
All water and true Spirit born
The Victors of the LORD

The Spirit felt the baby move
Within her womb of knowing
Though hidden to the world around
New life within each showing
In midst of daily happenings
She ponders brand new names
Each child of God a victory
Each born of praises strains
Matt Mark Luke John
3:1-21

John the Baptist Calls Jesus the Messiah

☐ Read John 3:22-36

DEVOTIONAL

Sometime after Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, He went out in "the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized" (v. 22). Does this mean Jesus baptized His disciples? Or that Jesus baptized other new followers? Or that the disciples did the baptizing?

Back in John the Baptist's camp, concern broke out that "everyone is going to Jesus" (v. 26). But John refuses to get into a baptizing popularity contest. John's response rings through the ages: "He must become greater; I must become less" (v. 30).

What will it take for us to live into this "*more Jesus / less me*" way of life? Soon, John would be thrown into prison by Herod (Luke 3:20), while Jesus would gain great popularity. Are you willing to say "*more Jesus / less me...*" no matter the consequences?

In this passage, John clearly identifies Jesus as the Messiah (v. 28) and the Son of God (v. 33-36). The heart of John's message is captured in the last two verses, "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them."

The Father loves the Son.

The Son loves the world (John 3:16).

Do you believe in Jesus as the Son of God?

POEM

$I < X > I$

$I < X > I$

$X \uparrow ; I \downarrow$

$X \infty ; I .$

NOTES

Jesus and a Woman at the Well

☐ Read John 4:1-26

DEVOTIONAL

The news of this baptize-and-make-disciples contest between Jesus and John (Jesus was winning) spread to the Pharisees. With the heat turned up, Jesus headed back toward Galilee. However, the much-hated, half-breed region of Samaria was between Judea in the south and Galilee in the north. Many Jews actually walked around Samaria to avoid it. But not Jesus.

On the journey, Jesus got tired (yes, He was fully human!). So, He sat down by a well while His disciples went into town to buy food. At some point a Samaritan woman came from the town to the well. She was alone, for most everyone avoided the noon heat when fetching water. So, the disciples had to notice her as they were going into town and she was coming out of it. I wonder, did they acknowledge her at all? Did they offer conversation? Did they just mumble?

When the woman got to the well, Jesus unashamedly struck up a conversation with her. He quickly moved the conversation from physical thirst and temporary quenching to spiritual thirst and eternal quenching. The woman didn't understand the metaphor until Jesus gave her a prophetic word about past and present relationships in her life. That got her attention!

Then Jesus shifted a comment she made about the location of worship to the spirit of worship (v. 24). Finally, when she made a statement about the coming Messiah, Jesus plainly declared, "I am He" (v. 26).

Jesus, the sinless Jewish rabbi, had no trouble entering into a deep, spiritual conversation with a broken Samaritan woman. What barriers stand between us and talking about the things of God with others? How can we break down those walls? What risks are involved if we do so? What rewards?



POEM

Changed Life

I wasn't seeing
But I didn't know it
I missed shots in life
Because I couldn't see
The target
I read incorrectly
Because my vision
Was blurred
Though people tried
To explain and point out
And name
I stood dumbly wondering
What they were
Talking about

Until one day
When the light came near
And looked into
My eyes
Readjusted
Flipped
And put before me
A new lens
Through which I saw
What many had always seen
But to me
Was a vision
New
So clear
True

And my life was changed

As I saw
Targets
Straight lines
Creation
Word
And the Light came nearer
Nearer
Until it became a part of me
And then there was
No going back
For now I knew
What others had witnessed
Now I saw
With my own
Changed life

NOTES

MONDAY, JANUARY 17TH - WEEK 8, DAY 1

Jesus Talks with His Disciples about the Harvest

☐ Read John 4:27-38

DEVOTIONAL

Near the end of Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well, His disciples returned with a little lunch and not a little dismay. Simply put, they were distressed to see Jesus talking with a Samaritan, much less a Samaritan woman. But Jesus was a master of breaking all social and cultural barriers. He cared more about the woman's soul than His friends' opinions. Jesus simply said, "My food... is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (v. 34)

In John chapters 3 and 4, people are interested in physical birth, proper worship, quenching water, satisfying food, and crop harvests. Each time, Jesus shifted their focus from the temporal to the eternal, talking about spiritual birth, worship, water, food, and harvests. In this life, it is all too easy to become preoccupied with the tings of this world. Jesus continually reminds us that the things of heaven are what really matter.

At one time, Jesus had told His disciples to stop fishing for fish and start fishing for people. Now, He says the same thing using a different imagery: "I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (v. 35). Even though the physical crop harvest was months away, the spiritual people harvest was right now! Could it be that Jesus was pointing to the people of the Samaritan village who were walking en masse out to see him?

Open your eyes.

Look at the fields.

They are ripe for the harvest.

POEM

Seeds Were Planted

Seeds were planted deep in soil
Looking dead
Dried and shriveled
Where is the life?
Tucked in the secret places
Only God knows

In the quiet of the heart
Swelling kernel
Alive and bursting
Signs of life
Quivering in the silent places
Only God sees

Tender blade breaks through debris
Seeking Son
Scared yet hopeful
Here is life!
Seen in hidden places
Yes, God sees

Stalks now,
leaves take their place
Stretching upward
Green and spreading
Grabbing life
Sun fueled garden places
Others see

Buds appear with colors
tempting
Opening flowers
Nectar and fragrance
Buzzing life
Attracting all to worship place
Seekers see

Fruit appears heavy laden
Ripening now
Sweet and nutritious
Giving life
Bold in all places
Harvesters see

NOTES

TUESDAY, JANUARY 18TH - WEEK 8, DAY 2

Many Samaritans Believe Jesus is the Savior

☐ Read John 4:39-42

DEVOTIONAL

With the possibilities of this encounter with Jesus burning in her heart, the Samaritan woman returned to her village proclaiming, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" (v. 29).

Remember, she had five former husbands and a current live-in boyfriend living in that small community. This statement certainly got their attention! In fact, many of the Samaritans believed in Jesus simply because of those words. So, the people of the town went out to the well to meet Jesus for themselves.

Again, Jesus broke cultural barriers by spending a few nights in that Samaritan village, preaching to them about the kingdom of God just like He was doing in the Jewish towns. "And because of his words many more became believers" (v. 41). If you are a believer, expect to see these Samaritan brothers and sisters in heaven!

This outcast woman, who wouldn't even go to the well with other women in the cool of the morning because of the shame she lived with, now became an outspoken evangelist for Jesus. Even the townsfolk gave her credit, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world" (v. 42)

She brought them to Jesus.

She brought Jesus to them.

God can use anybody.



POEM

All I Ever Did
All I ever did
Took me down crooked paths
Of shame and anger
Guilt and fear
Incurring God's own wrath

All I ever did
To fill an empty hole
An appetite
Never abate
A life out of control

All I ever did
Mistakes, a perfect seven
Pushed in distress
To loneliness
And out of sight of heaven

All I ever did
Was wonder how to die
When would it end?
This mad tail spin?
Thoughts filled with suicide

All I ever did
Each daily late chore trek
Was realize
The judging eyes
My life an exposed wreck

All I ever did
Was ask the question, "Why?"
Why would He think
To ask a drink
From someone so despised?

All I ever did
Was wonder about grace
Where was it found?
On mountain ground?
Or Jewish sacred place?

All I ever did
Was linger there to listen
To hear the truth
Without abuse
All secrets I thought hidden

All I ever did
Was leave my jar behind
My heart full swell
I had to tell
How Jesus read my mind!

All I ever did
Without a condemnation
He spoke, Love's eyes
His treasure, prize
True reconciliation

Jesus Preaches & Heals Throughout Galilee

☐ Read Matthew 4:23-25, Mark 1:35-39, Luke 4:42-44, John 4:43-45

DEVOTIONAL

First, a little geography at the time of Jesus. The land we know as Israel included Judea (with its capital of Jerusalem) in the south and Galilee (with Jesus' headquarters in Capernaum) in the north. These were Jewish territories.

Samaria was in between Judea and Galilee. Phoenicia (with the cities of Tyre and Sidon) and Syria (with Damascus) was beyond Israel to the north. To the East, across the Jordan River, was Decapolis (which means "ten cities") and Perea. These were Gentile territories, with beliefs and practices counter to Jewish Law.

In today's passages, we see Jesus preaching and teaching about God's kingdom in the synagogues of Galilee (Matthew. 4:23; Mark 1:39) as well as the synagogues of Judea (Luke 4:44). Beyond that, Jesus spent His time healing people from their diseases, sicknesses, and demonic spirits (Matthew. 4:23; Mark 1:39; Luke 4:40-41).

Because of this, His fame spread to the Gentile regions, and those folks "brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them" (Matthew 4:24). Jesus became a cultural icon, drawing huge crowds from all over Israel and far beyond. They traveled days to see Jesus.

At one point, some locals tried to keep Jesus all to themselves (Luke 4:42). But Jesus would have none of it. He was sent to proclaim God's kingdom, and nothing would stop Him. Not His hometown neighbors. Not the religious authorities. Not the demon-possessed. Not the synagogue leaders. Not the community members. Not even His own disciples. The kingdom's message was too important. He simply said, "That is why I was sent."



POEM

He Healed Them All
Not just one,
Not just two,
Not just strong ones,
Weak ones, too.
All the favored,
All the poor,
All the hopeless,
Grace galore!
All who suffered
From the Fall,
Everyone
He healed them all.

NOTES

Jesus Heals an Official's Son

☐ Read John 4:46-54

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus' fame was spreading throughout all the Jewish territories. Even Gentiles were open to His words and actions, His authority and power. So, Jesus became known to a royal official, probably somebody who served under Herod. This government official came to Jesus in Cana, desperate because his son lay near death twenty miles away in Capernaum.

I wonder how far we would travel to press into the hope that is found in Jesus. Are we desperate enough? Hopeful enough? Believing enough? Vulnerable enough to believe Jesus can do what we can't? It's a matter of heart, but it is also a matter of will – to go to Jesus, ask Him, believe Him, trust Him.

Also, you have to wonder if this government official (ultimately under the authority of Caesar in Rome), was putting his job (or life?) on the line by eagerly trusting Jesus to heal his son. What does it take for people to be motivated enough to go to Jesus and beg Him for a touch?

After Jesus told the man that his son would live, "the man took Jesus at His word and departed" (v. 50). What an amazing thing to take Jesus at His word! When have you done this? When have you not done this? What would it look like if all Christians simply took Jesus at His word?

Finally, when the man returned and found his son healed, "he and his whole household believed" (v. 53). The transformation was radical. The royal official, his family, and perhaps his servants all became believers in Jesus.

O God, give us faith to come to you, to take you at your word, and to change our lives because of what you have done for us. Amen.

POEM

Sick Son
Sick son,
Loved one
On the brink of death
One keeps
Vigil
Measuring each breath

Too soon,
Life strewn
Can't be time to die!
Soul keeps
Wrestling;
"O God, tell me why!"

Flesh clings,
Hands wring,
"God, this can't be ending!"
Words fail,
Tears trail,
Begging for a sending

"Someone,
Please come,
Miracle in tow.
Healing
This sting,
Source of all my woe."

Hope walks,
Grief talks,
"Do you have a cure?"
"Go home.
Shalom.
Rest in faith secure."

Son lives,
God gives
Glory for receiving
Faith rests,
Each breast,
Witnesses believing

NOTES

FRIDAY, JANUARY 21ST - WEEK 8, DAY 5

Jesus Gains Large Crowds by Healing a Leper

□ Read Matthew 8:1-4, Mark 1:40-45, John 5:12-16

DEVOTIONAL

The COVID pandemic gave us a glimpse of what it might have been like to be in a world where leprosy was a killer disease. But rather than everybody wearing masks and staying socially distanced, imagine if only you and others infected had to keep your distance. And instead of a fourteen day quarantine, imagine a lifetime sentence. That was leprosy. They had to stay away. They had to shout their presence if anyone came near. They could never again be visited by a friend or touched by a loved one.

This man with leprosy broke all the rules. He came right up to Jesus when He was with a large crowd (Matthew 8:1). He was too desperate to care about protocol. He wasn't worried about contact tracing among the large crowd. All that mattered to him was getting healed and going home.

Any other religious leader would have sidestepped the man and chastised him for putting so many people's health in jeopardy. But Jesus wasn't any other religious leader. He did the unthinkable. He reached out his hand and touched the man. To touch a person with leprosy was as ludicrous as hugging a mask-less person with COVID. Would Jesus do that? Should we do that? Should any Christian do that?

After the healing, Jesus told the man to keep it to himself. Fat chance! The guy could go home to his family. Thy guy could go to the market with his friends. They guy could even go back to the synagogue. So, "he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere" (Mark 1:45). Fame has its price, even for the Son of God.



POEM

Break the Rules

*I'm usually compliant
A good boy, that I am
I stay within the limits
The legal ways, my hem
For culture's steady progress
A citizen I be
I'm usually compliant
That makes good sense to me*

*But one day something happened
Dis-ease became my plight
The rules of life soon
changed for me
What's wrong now seemed so right
They told me to be quiet
To never make a fuss
You see, I've been excluded
The leaders think it just*

*I've always been compliant
A good boy, that was me
Until the voice of Jesus
Called out across my need
I ran so quickly to Him
Forgetting polite ways
I knelt before Him begging
Despite their judging gaze*

*His eyes were gentle mercy
His words were healing balm
The discombooble of my life
Became an ordered calm
From good boy into whole man
My life matured that day
And all around who witnessed
Were blessed in a new way*

*And so, dear friend, my witness
Is this I give to you
The laws of people hold some fast
But ways of God are true
There'll always be decrees of men
Discern and please be wise
You might be called to
break the rules
To gain the Spirit's prize*

MONDAY, JANUARY 24TH - WEEK 9, DAY 1

Jesus Forgives & Heals a Paralyzed Man

□ Read Matthew 9:1-8, Mark 2:1-12, Luke 5:17-26

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus went back to Capernaum, "his own town" (Matthew 9:1) and "the people heard that he had come home" (Mark 2:1). Though Jesus spent most of His first thirty years in Nazareth, His home was now clearly Capernaum. His arrival drew a crowd of neighbors, community members, and religious scholars from as far as Jerusalem, 85 miles away (Luke 5:17).

The air was thick with expectation, and probably with perspiration as well. The room was packed. The throng spread outside the house, with people crowding around open doors and windows just to hear what He had to say. Luke even says, "the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick" (v. 17). As people listened, Jesus "preached the word to them" (Mark 2:2).

Enter four guys carrying their paralyzed friend on a mat, from the rooftop (after they dug their way through and lowered him "into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus" (Luke 5:19). What faith and audacity these four friends had. They were so confident that Jesus would do something for their paralyzed friend, that they destroyed property of a community member and interrupted the sermon of the most famous celebrity of the town.

Rather than healing the man's paralysis, Jesus looked at him and his buddies (peering down from the rooftop) and said, "your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2). No doubt the friends were disappointed, the paralyzed man was discouraged, and the Pharisees were disturbed, accusing Jesus of blasphemy.

To prove His authority to forgive sins, Jesus healed the paralyzed man who walked out right in front of the stunned Pharisees and awed people. Mic drop. One point for Jesus!



POEM

Paralyzed

It once worked, this leg of mine
Walking, running, leaping fine
Til one day a hidden snare
Caught me firmly, teeth of err
Now I limp, each day strength waning
Faulty nerves now tingle, flaming
Shortening, slacking, movement gone
Rue the day my path turned wrong
Paralyzed, all future stolen
Muscles captured by strong-holdin'

See this arm? It once was strong
Biceps rippling, fingers long
Able heavy loads to seize
Tinkle light piano keys
Capable of chopping food
Stroke a dog, hug a brood
It touched something once forbidden
Damaged, now from cancer ridden
Scarred and mangled at its core
Doomed to pitch and swing no more

And these lips and teeth once moved
Speaking clearly, debates proved
Singing songs to melt a heart
Wisdom, counsel did impart
Gossip found a nesting place
Slander, liable, spoke disgrace
Lied and swindled, curses, bribes
Prideful boasting, evil jibes
Now in silence slack lips hang
Mocking symptoms, stroke harangue

Childlike heart that once believed
Once inspired, now deceived
Full of doubt where wonder nested
Brimming heart is now arrested
Cheerfulness from this house flown
Friends forsaken, now alone
Jealous thoughts now fill this place
Where contentment once was graced
Tenderness has turned to stone
Sighs of sorrow, grief is grown

Here I lie, movement unable
Look upon me, poor, disabled
Pass me by, don't look my way
In this state, who'd want to stay
And sit, or chat, or sing a ditty
Those who do just act in pity
Toss an alm to ease your guilt
Judge the life deserved, e'en built
Speak behind hand covered mouth
Sneer and gawk at spirit's drought

I need one or two or three
Who will come and bend a knee
Four could lift me off the ground
Take me where I'd hear the sound
Of a Savior full of grace
In his hands to take my face
"Rise and walk, your sins are gone!"
On this day new life has dawned."
Blood returns and sinews strengthen
Curled fingers stretch and lengthen

From a dirty mat I rise
Paralyzing power dies
Mouth unlocks with songs of praise
Joints cooperate to raise
Hands to heaven, feet from earth
Body spins around in mirth
Some are skeptics, some believe
Others doubt but some receive
Joy at this miraculous sight
Soul and body put aright!

TUESDAY, JANUARY 25TH - WEEK 9, DAY 2

Matthew Follows Jesus and Throws a Party

☐ Read Matthew 9:9-13, Mark 2:13-17, Luke 5:27-32

DEVOTIONAL

It was one thing for the Jewish people to have to endure Roman occupation. It was another for one of their fellow Jews to side with the enemy. That is how tax collectors were viewed in Israel. People who would strip their neighbors clean to line their own pockets. Guys who were rich with money but without friends. Greedy traitors.

When Jesus called Matthew (also known as Levi) to follow Him, it had to send shock waves through the ranks of His other disciples. Remember that Simon the Zealot was one of the other disciples Jesus called. Zealots specialized in doing whatever it took to overthrow the Roman oppressors. Matthew probably slept with one eye open for the entire three years that he hung out with Jesus.

Matthew's only friends were other outcasts that nobody would acknowledge: prostitutes, sinners, and other tax collectors. When he walked away from his tax booth, he immediately became unemployed. But he was all in for Jesus. No looking back. To honor his commitment, Matthew threw Jesus a party at his house and invited his ragtag, scum of the earth friends.

Jesus was joyous. The Pharisees were judgmental. How could He?

Unfazed, Jesus plainly told these religious scholars that He didn't come for the spiritually affluent, but for the spiritually bankrupt. Quoting from Hosea 6:6, He told the religious elite to get lost and do a Bible study on God's statement, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

The divide between Jesus and the religious establishment kept growing wider.

POEM

Who is at My Table?
I'm writing out a menu
Delectables for sure
I'm setting out the dishes
Decor I have procured
The list of invitations
Determined all my guests
There is a knock upon my door
I wonder who said, "Yes"

Ah, here's my good friend Levi
He works with IRS
And here is Sister Lily Girl
In her fabulous red dress
My cousin John's disciples
Have shown up with the wine
And there's a Rev and Dr. here
All come with me to dine

I love to throw a party
When guests have not yet met
My dearly loved companions
Invited here to sit
Right next to one another
I choose their dining place
Will they enjoy the evening
And welcome each with grace

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 26TH - WEEK 9, DAY 3

Jesus Teaches about New Wine & Old Wineskins

□ Read Matthew 9:14-17, Mark 2:18-22, Luke 5:33-39

DEVOTIONAL

The disciples of John and of the Pharisees fasted and prayed on a regular basis. But the disciples of Jesus went on "eating and drinking" (Luke 5:33). Jesus compared His disciples to friends of a bridegroom (Himself). Nobody mourns at their friend's wedding. Referring to His own death, Jesus said, "The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast" (Matthew 9:15b).

Jesus went on to compare their desire to have the Apostles fast with sewing new, unshrunk cloth onto an old, shrunken garment... or pouring new, expanding wine into an already used, stretched wineskin. The results of all these unmatched pairs are a grieving groom, a ripped garment, and a burst wineskin.

Jesus didn't come to be an unmatched pair cobbled together with an oppressive government and a corrupt religious system. He came to be and do something that the Roman occupiers and Jewish establishment could never be or do. He came to proclaim the kingdom of God.

This new wine & old wineskins analogy makes sense in some of the conflicts we have in the modern church. This is often seen in the way the existing church responds to new forms of worship, discipleship, mission, and ministry. Sometimes a new wineskin is called for to accommodate a new thing God is doing.

But we must be careful with the wineskin of the Word of God. We cannot simply discard it for a new, trendy theology that accommodates modern zeitgeist. Not every new wineskin is needed, for not every new wine is the best. Lord, give us discerning minds.



POEM

Poverty 101

*I hate poverty
and I blame the poor
with their unclean bodies
their stale sweat smell
their tobacco breath
their rotting teeth
their unkempt clothes
their self inflicted tattoos
their unshaved chins
their lack of manners
their constant need*

*I hate poverty
and I blame my mom
with her tapes in my head
saying, "Go anyway
Do what is right
Put on the mask
Smile and engage
Start conversation
Control your thoughts
Sit at their table
'til it comes naturally"*

*I hate poverty
and I blame myself
as I judge on the inside
and feign interest outside
as I secretly mock
and puff up my righteousness
as I believe deep down
I'm above, they're below
as I look at the clock
and hope this encounter
will end soon
as I lie, lie, lie*

*I hate poverty
and now I blame her---
the one across the table---
who claims she recognizes me
"Aren't you your mother's daughter?
Isn't she my cousin?"
How can I sit here
at the table of judgment
when the woman sharing bread
is my kin
offering me hospitality?*

*I hate poverty
and I blame you, Jesus
as you bless the poor
and invite me in
and wash my feet
and offer me bread
and look at me
when I deny you
"No, I don't know him."
or ask
"Am I my brother's keeper?"*

I hate poverty

THURSDAY, JANUARY 27TH - WEEK 9, DAY 4

Jesus Heals a Man Who Couldn't Walk for 38 Years

☐ Read John 5:1-15

DEVOTIONAL

It's an interesting question. On one level, of course. Nobody wants to be paralyzed. On another level, getting his legs would mean that the man would have to quit waiting for others... "I have no one to help me" (v. 7), and take responsibility for his own life.

"Do you want to get well?"

The man didn't really answer the question. Jesus healed him anyway. After thirty-eight years, the man "picked up his mat and walked" (v. 9). And rather than rejoicing that this paralyzed beggar could now walk, the Pharisees got upset that this mat-carrying, Sabbath-breaking man dared strut his stuff in front of them at the temple of God.

Jesus later found the guy and said something puzzling: "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (v. 14). What could be worse than being paralyzed for thirty-eight years?

The answer is clear: missing out on the Father's love & forgiveness & eternal life. Thirty-eight years is a drop in the bucket compared to endless eternity. Paralysis is paltry compared to non-stop, non-ending torture & teeth-gnashing in hell. Not being allowed into the synagogues because of a deformity is small when considering everlasting absence from God.

How about you? Do you want to get well?



POEM

Flint Water

*It seemed like clean water
This beautiful pool
With legends of healing
With only one rule
You must wait for stirring
Then rush from your mat
The promise of curing
In two seconds flat*

*It seemed like clean water
This stream from the tap
With promise of purity
Fresh from the lab
The Flint people trusted
No problem expected
But rust in the pipeline
Brought lead quite destructive*

*Excuses were plenty
"Financial decline"
Compassion was legging
"Can't get there in time"
So poverty heightened
While trust disappeared
Their future, once bright, now
Was worse than they feared*

*It felt paralyzing
The system was crippled
The dream was a nightmare
No stirring, no ripple
So sitting seemed all
That the people could do
Would this tragic sorrow
End? Hope came unglued*

*But one day a man came
Assessing the lot
Of people all huddled
Around public plot
"Get ready, get up now
This is not your plight
If you want to walk free
Depression you'll fight!"*

*What was the new word
That arrived on that day?
What moved feet to action?
Despair pushed away?
Was it in the wanting?
To have a new life?
Was it the encouragement
Faith to apply?*

NOTES

FRIDAY, JANUARY 28TH - WEEK 9, DAY 5

Jesus Announces He is the Son of God

☐ Read John 5:16-30

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus did so many miracles right in front of people, yet the religious leaders refused to put their faith in Him. Rather, they tried to discredit Him for healing on the Sabbath – persecuting Him (v. 16) and trying to kill Him (v. 18).

This didn't surprise Jesus, nor even concern Him. Instead, it gave Him opportunity to explain His relationship with the Father, calling Himself the Son, the Son of God, and the Son of Man. This angered the religious establishment, even more for "making Himself equal with God" (v. 18).

There it is: the Divinity of Jesus put on display for all to judge. Jesus was claiming to be God in the flesh – something just too blasphemous for the religious authorities to stomach. In their eyes, this self-proclaimed Son of God was a dead man walking.

Even today, some people say that Jesus was just a good man, but never claimed to be God in the flesh. They just haven't read the Bible. Either Jesus was telling the truth, lying, or just plain nuts. You have to decide.

By His actions, Jesus displayed the power of God. By His words, He proclaimed the relationship with God His Father. He cherished the chance to contrast belief and unbelief, light and darkness, life and death.

Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life" (v. 24). He made it as plain as day. Was He telling the truth?

You decide.



POEM

Child's Play

*Simon Says, a favorite game,
I played as just a child
An order given, Simon Says,
Obedience required
But be aware! Without the name
of Simon used announcing
You'll end up doing something which
will lead to much denouncing
And back you'll go, your progress
lost, all to begin again
You have to listen carefully if your
goal is to win*

*And now let us play a different game,
the leader let us follow
Will he first skip? Will she jump tall?
Will you be called to bellow?
Let's swing our arms; let's hop like toads;
there really is not limit
Of what the leader can propose
exuberant or timid
It takes full trust to play this game;
Where will we be arriving?
Where will the leader take our throng?
The piper is deciding*

*Become a child, the Master says,
come follow, join the fun
You'll have to listen and discern
direction from the Son
You might be asked to toss a net
or dare to walk on water
You might be asked to take a
stand or just to follow Father
Yet either way,
it's up to you to get into game
And if you do, the promise is you'll
never be the same*

NOTES

MONDAY, JANUARY 31ST - WEEK 10, DAY 1

Jesus Says the Scriptures Testify about Him

☐ Read John 5:31-47

DEVOTIONAL

To the man who was paralyzed for thirty-eight years, Jesus did offer healing... on the Sabbath. But He offered so much more. He offered eternal healing from spiritual paralysis for an eternal Sabbath. His miracles, the Scriptures, and the words of John the Baptist and others testify to Him (v. 36, 39). But more than that, the Father testifies about Him and gives Him glory (v. 43-44). If we miss that, we miss Him altogether.

Throughout John 5, Jesus reveals much about His identity. Embrace His words:

- “The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing” (v. 19)
- “The Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these” (v. 20)
- “The Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it” (v. 21)
- “The Father... has entrusted all judgment to the Son” (v. 22)
- “Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father” (v. 23)
- “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life” (v. 24)
- “The Father has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man” (v. 27)
- “For the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me” (v. 36)
- “the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me” (v. 37)
- “I have come in my Father’s name” (v. 43)
- “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me” (v. 46)

POEM

Not Without My Father
I'll not step foot upon earth's soil
Not Without My Father
I'll never enter saving toil
Not Without My Father
Don't think that I will do my will
Don't think that any sweat I'll spill
Don't think that any ground I'll till
Not Without My Father
Each prophecy can't be fulfilled
Not Without My Father
All majesty won't be revealed
Not Without My Father
Though glory in my bosom lies
Though glory I can fill the skies
Though glory comes e'en when I die
Not Without My Father

NOTES

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 1ST - WEEK 10, DAY 2

The Disciples Harvest Grain on the Sabbath

☐ Read Matthew 12:1-8, Mark 2:23-28, Luke 6:1-5

DEVOTIONAL

By now, the Jewish religious leaders were convinced they needed to get rid of Jesus. So they chose Sabbath law violations as a way to discredit and condemn Him. When His disciples picked grain for food on the Sabbath, Jesus reminded the religious scholars that King David had broken religious law and was honored as a hero of the past.

The Sabbath was an important part of Jewish heritage. It dates back to creation, when God created everything in just six days. Then,

² By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³ Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (Genesis 2:2-3)

By Jesus' time, the religious leaders had established dozens of categories of forbidden activities on the Sabbath, including harvesting grain. When the Pharisees saw the disciples picking wheat and rubbing the grain in their hands, then eating the kernels, they deemed this harvesting, not merely preparing a meal for themselves. Famished or not, the disciples were breaking the religious rules.

Jesus responded to them by saying, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28). This angered them even more, as Jesus equated Himself with God by saying that He was Lord of the Sabbath. The Pharisees had found their trap. They would find a way to eliminate Jesus based on His Sabbath violations.



POEM

Sabbath Freedom

*Imagine the joy of walking with one
Who speaks right to the
depths of your soul
As you walk along the wheat fields
With hand sailing above
the sheaf swaying
And beautiful, swollen wheat berries
From hand to mouth
Bursting with flavor
Quenching hunger
Grain of bread
Bread for life
Sabbath freedom*

*Imagine the disturbance
of critical authorities
Who break into the freedom
with inflexible rules
As you stand in the shadow
of the rabbi protected
With hand over mouth of
open surprise
And beautiful, swollen ancient words
From mouth to ear
Bursting with truth
Quenching guilt
Grain of bread
Bread for life
Sabbath freedom*

*Imagine the possibilities
for God's people
Who realize the kindness-depth of
the Sabbath's Lord
As we labor and rest and
ponder and play
With hand over heart and
hand extended
And beautiful, swollen grains of
compassion
From heart to healing
Bursting with joy
Quenching despair
Grain of bread
Bread for life
Sabbath freedom*

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 2ND - WEEK 10, DAY 3

Jesus Heals a Man's Deformed Hand on the Sabbath

☐ Read Matthew 12:9-14, Mark 3:1-6, Luke 6:6-11

DEVOTIONAL

One Sabbath day, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. A man with a shriveled right hand was present. "The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath" (Luke 6:7). They even prodded Jesus, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" (Matthew 12:10).

How sad. Rather than being hopeful that this man's hand would be restored, they were more interested in catching Jesus in breaking the religious law. So Jesus answered their question with a question: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4). None of the religious scholars had an answer. So, Jesus "looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts" (Mark 3:5) then completely healed the man's hand.

This only made the Pharisees more determined to do away with Jesus, so they left "and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus" (Mark 3:6).

Normally, the Pharisees and the Herodians couldn't stand each other. The Pharisees were all about establishing their prominent place in society by constructing religious rules and traditions that only they could keep. The Herodians were more about political ambitions, and were more interested in Herod the Great's line of authority than religious rituals. But, as they say, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Jesus stood in the way of the Pharisees' religious authority. Jesus stood in the way of the Herodians' political ambitions. Together, they agreed to kill Jesus. In your life, what allegiances are in conflict with the purposes of Jesus?



POEM

Just Who is in Charge?
In the midst of busy ministry
And tasks upon your slate
Fill every square on calendar
And squeeze more in each date
As your phone constantly pings and rings
With callers, messages, texts
When you find yourself arriving late
And only think "What's next?"
The question must be asked of Soul
As you bustle and you barge
Just who's the master of your life?
And just who is in charge?

As you stress and grieve about your friends
As family life increases
As schedules and routines fill up
Emotions fall to pieces
As fear wells up, as shame creeps in
As anger fills each thought
As love seems lost and patience thins
And more and more is sought
The question must be asked of Soul
As your hope seems much less large
Just who's the master of your life?
And just who is in charge?

When troubles come,
when illness strikes
When friends deceive and hurt you
When persecuted for your faith
And many lose their virtue
When everything seems
heavy, hard
And all joy is escaping
When family and all you love
Refrain from you embracing
The question must be asked of Soul
When was your Sabbath stolen?
Just who's in charge? the world?
your Lord?
To whom are you beholden?

NOTES

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3RD - WEEK 10, DAY 4

Crowds from Everywhere Follow Jesus

☐ Read Matthew 12:15-21, Mark 3:7-12, Luke 6:17-19

DEVOTIONAL

To the chagrin of the religious establishment and politically ambitious, the common folk ate Jesus up. Once again (see Week 8, Day 3), we see people coming to Jesus from all over the place. They were hungry to have their spiritual curiosity piqued. They were eager to have their diseases healed. They were restless to have their impure spirits removed.

They came from everywhere, "crowding Him" and "pushing forward to touch Him" (Mark 3:10) because "power was coming from Him and healing them all" (Luke 6:19). The crowds became more sizable. The power became more manifest. Jesus' identity became more evident - the demonic spirits even fell at His feet and shouted, "You are the Son of God" (Mark 3:11).

Again, we have to wrestle with the tension. Why did the religious scholars conspire to kill Jesus while those with evil spirits clearly saw Him as the Son of God? What preconceived notions do people have these days that prevent them from seeing Jesus as He truly is? Let's get real. What sunglasses are you wearing that shade the truth of the identity of Jesus? Or maybe you are wearing blinders. Or blindfolds.

As we read through the life of Jesus, we keep seeing these large crowds go to have their physical or emotional itches scratched by Him. But it is good to remember that, not too far in the future, Jesus would die alone. Everyone would abandon Him, including His closest friends.

Are you in need of healing? Run to Jesus! He is waiting for you. Does everything in your life seems pretty good right now? Run to Jesus! He is waiting for you. Here is the truth: Jesus is the Son of God and the Lord of Life all the time.

POEM

Grab and Run

*You live among the alleyways
You wrestle rats for food
There seems no offer of next meal
All's rotten, none is good
You seek among the garbage heaps
You beg within the streets
Among the people walking by
There's ne'er a smile to greet*

*You glance within the windows warm
A hearth with table laden
Your belly growls with hunger sore
You search for crust forsaken
Such hunger! Is it known by all?
Or just the lonely beggar?
Is this the life of Adam's seed?
To struggle sad and haggard?*

*And then a man says he has bread
And feasting for the asking
Can you believe this meal is free
To cease this endless fasting?
You're tempted to just grab and run
To gorge your empty mouthing
But Jesus bids you stay and fill
Your soul by His allowing*

NOTES

Jesus Appoints the Twelve Disciples

☐ Read Mark 3:13-19, Luke 6:12-16

DEVOTIONAL

Up to this point, Jesus had many followers, many disciples. But, in order to move the ministry forward even beyond His own life, He needed to establish a leadership team. Twelve people to be with Him. Twelve people to be trained to preach and heal. Twelve people to change the world.

Before Jesus made this huge staffing decision, he engaged in intense, prolonged prayer. This is the way of the Master. This is the way of His people! Luke 6:12 says that Jesus spent the entire night praying to God. Too often, Christians want to offer an obligatory “quick prayer” before a family meal or a church meeting or a night’s sleep.

Of all His multitude of disciples, which twelve did he designate apostles? The best? The brightest? The most educated? The most connected? Nope. He chose twelve ordinary people. After Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, two of these apostolic leaders got in hot water with the same religious bureaucracy that crucified Jesus. Here is what Acts 4:13 says about how those religious scholars viewed them:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

They had been with Jesus. When Jesus selected them as His apostles, their main assignment was to be with Jesus. That is the hope of this study. Don’t just read, check the box, and move on. Spend time getting to know about Jesus. But more importantly, spend time getting to know Jesus. Who knows who He will call you to be and what He will call you to do!



POEM

Kindred Spirits
Perfect unity
Lovely harmony
True affinity
Peace serenity

Deep conversation
Focused concentration
Corporate meditation
Joint occupation

No division
No derision
No omission
No suspicion

One intention
One direction
One affection
One perfection

NOTES

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 7TH - WEEK 11, DAY 1

Jesus Teaches the Beatitudes

☐ Read Matthew 5:1-12, Luke 6:12-16

DEVOTIONAL

Today's passage marks the beginning of the longest recorded sermon we have from Jesus, spanning three full chapters in Matthew alone. The context of this teaching is a mountainside among large crowds of people, as well as the Twelve. Luke personalizes it (Blessed are you) while Matthew keeps it in the 3rd person (Blessed are the...).

The word "beatitude" means "supreme blessedness" or "exalted happiness." Most of us say we are blessed and happy when life is going well. Jesus flips the script, saying you are most supremely blessed and exaltedly happy when life gives you whatever life gives you. Apparently, it's more about your stance than your circumstance!

In the space below or in a separate journal or in your own Bible, pick out one of the statements Jesus made, then ask Him how He wants you to live this out.

Blessed are _____

for _____

And from Luke...

Woe to you _____

for _____

How I will live into these...

POEM

Climbing the Hillside

When life gets so crowded with people and stuff
Past treasures seem empty, enough is enough
Then climbing the hillside in search of fresh air
The trudging, the plodding, the physical prayer
Allows the disciple to hear words of blessing
To sit and to ponder, to yield to the wresting
Which loosens the grasp on the things
made of naught
To graze in new pasture, be fed and be taught.
It's here in green pasture the pilgrim finds rest
The thirsty dry soul by fresh water is blessed
The spirit in poverty fills to the brim
The sorrowful one receives lullaby hymn
Contented, now, has more
than ever one dreamed
The hungry sup richly on honey and cream
The servants find others care deeply for them
The mocking loud voices who love to condemn
Are silenced; the martyrs courageous, now live
The Shepherd, anointing, true healing does give
The path of the hillside, the Beautiful climb
And there with the Master abundantly dine.

NOTES

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 8TH - WEEK 11, DAY 2

Jesus Says, "You are the Salt of the Earth"

☐ Read Matthew 5:13

DEVOTIONAL

Today's reading is a single verse, "'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."

In a world without preservatives and refrigeration, salt was a very precious commodity. Salt was so valuable that people were often paid wages in salt. A valuable employee or soldier was said to be "worth his salt."

It's as if Jesus were saying, "The whole world will need you and notice you. Don't misuse or misplace that gift. Flavor the earth!" A Christian who doesn't impact the world is as useless as flavorless, unsalty salt!

At another time, Jesus used salt that had lost its saltiness as a metaphor for a Christian who wanders into sin or even causes someone else to do so (Mark 9:42-50). Yet another time, Jesus compared salt without qualities of saltiness to supposed disciples who lack absolute devotion and commitment to Jesus (Luke 14:25-34).

Salt is a very basic, common compound with magnificent qualities and enormous usefulness. What are the salt-like blessings, promises, and gifts God has placed in you?

How does He want you to use them to be "the salt of the earth?"

What changes will you make to keep from losing your "saltiness?"



POEM

Old Salt

A young gal,
I moved to a very small town
From city to country; it felt a step down.
Life lost its pizzazz, like a seltzer gone
flat.
Yet, there God had placed me;
I guess that was that.

I met an old woman whose heart was
still young--
A spicy, vivacious gal, jammed packed
with fun.
She welcomed me into her small homey
kitchen
And taught me the secrets of pie dough,
fried chicken.

As flour and salt were thrown up in the
air
I sat and I listened on gingham pad
chair
To a master of cooking, a wizened old
sage
Who opened life's recipes, page after
page.

Her proverbs,
hysterically salted with joy;
Her wisdom on how to raise girls and
raise boys;
Her thoughts on reality;
good matrimony;
The secrets of living a life
that's not phony.

She took me to markets
and showed me
her world
She taught me to style hair
and permanent
twirls.
The night of my labor, she woke from
her bed
And stayed by my side;
baked my husband
fresh bread.

Preserving cucumbers, she taught me to
can.
She showed me the stomach is the
heart
of a man.
From beef stew to lamb chops her
secrets
uncovered;
"It's all in the salting is what you'll
discover!"

This Old Salt, still briny, despite years of
living
Gave flavor and zest, moving bland to
thanksgiving.
I shake out her saltiness
now on my young
While tasting her gourmet words of
truth
on my tongue:

Jesus Says, "You are the Light of the World"

☐ Read Matthew 5:14-16

DEVOTIONAL

As with yesterday's reading on salt, we might miss the significance of light's value in Jesus' teaching. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." Growing up in the age of electricity, most of us have rarely experienced true darkness. Most people have candles, flashlights, and generators at the ready in case of a loss of power. We can't imagine traveling across the city, down the street, or even to the other side of the house in utter darkness.

Jesus said it would be ludicrous for somebody to light a lamp in a dark room, then promptly put that lamp under a bowl - or in our language, to set a metal five-gallon bucket upside down over the lamp. By contrast, Jesus said anybody with any sense would put the lamp on the bucket, not the bucket on the lamp.

It's the same for Christians. Keeping your faith to yourself is like hiding a light under a bucket. Not us! We are the city of God! We are the town built on a hill that everybody is looking at. We are the lamp on the stand that illuminates the entire room. We are the light of the world!

How is God calling you to "let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"?

On another occasion, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). How does this make a difference in how God is calling you to let your light shine?



POEM

Shine!
Shine!
There are those longing to see brilliant rainbows of promise!

Shine!
Each cell in your body sparkles, glimmers with light!

Shine!
Though others try to water down your enthusiasm...

Shine!
The oil of the Spirit is being poured upon you!

Shine!
The glow of the Light is not to be hidden...

Shine!
One spark conquers all darkness!

Shine!
Who are you not to?

Shine!
You are the light of the world!

Shine!
You are the gleaming city of God on the hill!

Shine!
Shekinah glory from heaven's throne!

NOTES

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10TH - WEEK 11, DAY 4

Jesus Came to Fulfill the Law and the Prophets

☐ Read Matthew 5:17-20

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (v. 17). Christians often divide history into two parts: Old Testament (doesn't apply to me) and New Testament (this is what I should pay attention to).

Yet Jesus said His entire presence on earth is a fulfilling of everything from Genesis to Malachi –including the Law (the first five books of the Old Testament) and the Prophets (the last seventeen books of the OT).

That is the very nature of this year-long deep dive into the life of Jesus: to see how everything before Him AND everything after Him is fulfilled by Him. Jesus is the very fulcrum of human history; everything pivots on His birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

After Jesus' resurrection, He was walking with two of His disciples. But they didn't recognize Him. Don't be too hard on them. They witnessed His crucifixion and attended His funeral. What did Jesus talk about? "And beginning with Moses (the Law) and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Later, when their eyes were opened to recognize them, the two guys asked, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

ALL of Scripture points to Jesus. ALL of history pivots on Jesus. ALL of your life is about Jesus. How will this change how you read the Old Testament, view the daily news, or go about your normal life?

POEM

God's Law

*To abolish God's Law would be worse
Than to douse each star in the sky.
To complete God's Law allows each star to shine
And each human to be the light of God.*

*To abolish God's Law would remove the rock
Upon which the foundation is laid.
To fulfill God's Law allows paths to be straight
And each human the joy of the Way.*

*To abolish God's Law is to abolish One's self
To make One's existence trivial.
Complete fulfillment gives ultimate purpose
And transforms the Felon to Honored Beloved.*

*God's Law is perfect.
God's Law is true.
God's Law is eternal.
God's Law is completely fulfilled
By the Word of God
Jesus.*

NOTES

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 11TH - WEEK 11, DAY 5

Jesus Teaches About Reconciling

☐ Read Matthew 5:21-26

DEVOTIONAL

Anger is an unhealthy attitude to hold onto. Jesus says that anger-bearing and name-calling and grudge-holding are all outside God's best for us. These behaviors make us subject to God's judgement and keep us from engaging in true worship. In fact, the debt of unforgiveness and anger makes us worthy of being thrown into debtor's prison for life, until complete restitution has taken place. Ouch!

The payment is restitution.
The currency is reconciliation.

Staying angry with someone is simply not the Jesus way. If anybody could have stayed angry with someone, it is God who could have withheld his compassion toward humans who have turned our backs on Him. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Jesus forgave us all our sins. We ought to forgive the wrongdoings of others. Period. Colossians 3:13 says, "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Ephesians 4:32 agrees: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Is there anybody from whom you are withholding forgiveness? How is Jesus calling you to be reconciled to that person?

POEM

Them's Fightin' Words
They say that words can wound
More drastically than
sticks and stones
And this is true

I've been punched in the stomach
By a balled up fist of hate
Or perhaps jealousy

My judgment has been impaired
By a right hook powerfully
and expertly
Aimed at wisdom's eye

And lips gloved with a
puncher's padding
Have delivered cruel and
mocking sentiments
Intended to paralyze the core

Swift kicks to the solar plexus
Expertly drawn back, then
delivered
Have lain me flat

My natural response is
to fight back
To join in the murderous duel
Them's fightin' words

Where does one find the
courage and strength
To stand silent in the midst of
The pummeling?

To return blessing for curse
To stop the curling of fist and
the gritting
Of one's own teeth?

To relax the tension
of the body
To stay the heated breathing
And to stand...still?

NOTES

Jesus Teaches About Lusting

☐ Read Matthew 5:27-30

DEVOTIONAL

Some people say that you can't legislate morality. I disagree. The laws of a nation, community or church are nothing, if they are not the legislation of what that culture deems moral or immoral. In this short teaching, Jesus moved the discussion from outward morality to inward morality.

The seventh commandment given to Moses prohibits adultery – to keep marriages strong and intact (Exodus 20:14). Here Jesus raised the bar from lustful actions to lustful thoughts, looks, hopes, and fantasies. He said we should gouge out the lustful eye and lop off the wandering hand if necessary, for entering heaven with a maimed body is much better than eternity in hell with a whole body.

Jesus' red-blooded male disciples didn't immediately jump up, grab daggers, and start disfiguring themselves. Yet His metaphor made a lasting point: when we draw the line in the sand justifying how "far" we can go in a relationship with a non-spouse, we have probably already crossed the line of God's best for us. Indeed, one-eyed, one-handed people can still lust. Sin only requires a corrupt heart that is "curved in on itself," as St. Augustine once said.

A little self-examination is of great value. 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?"

In what area have you let your heart and mind wander from God's truth found in His word? What can you do to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5)?



POEM

Cleaning

There are two kinds of cleaning
The one I suggest
When my company's coming
To prepare for a guest
Is a quick lick and over
The surface looks clean
Just remove all the droplets
Or dust quickly seen
Then turn down the lights
Cover up all the rest
A quick spray of freshener
Leaves bad smells addressed
Then hope that no one looks
High up or low down
Spotting cobwebs or dust balls
Or dirt on the ground
And pray that the closet
Full shut they avoid
Lest opening see
Stuffed in junk, then annoyed.

The best kind of cleaning
Is deep and revealing
Where you pull out all furniture
Dust bunnies shielding
You get rid of the stuff
That you never will use
And reorganize, straighten
Recycle, reuse.
You take down all the fixtures
You wash them to shine
You wipe down the pictures
Re-balance, align
You scrub down the grout
You polish the mirror
You open the windows
And freshen the air
You spend lots of time
At the end of the day
Your temple is ready
For Your King now to stay

NOTES

Jesus Teaches About Divorcing

☐ Read Matthew 5:31-32

DEVOTIONAL

In addressing the topic of divorce, Jesus shifted the “how to” instructions of Biblical law (Deuteronomy 24) to “only if” there is unfaithfulness (NLT translation), that is sexual immorality (NIV translation). In Jesus’ day, divorce was fairly uncommon in Israel. In our day, divorce is much more common.

Recently, I read a Focus on the Family study which said that divorce is just as high within the church – and even in pastor’s marriages – as it is in our secular culture. I also read a secular study that said kindness and generosity are the two key ingredients to maintaining a healthy marriage. All this is hard, as we live in a self-centered, sex-saturated, never-content culture.

When I was a teen, our family was on vacation in Florida. One sunny day we were driving down a beach-front road, my dad and mom in the front seat, my brother and I in the back. Walking up the sidewalk, my brother and I spotted a shapely, young blonde wearing a skimpy bikini. We were shocked to see my dad point her direction and exclaim, “Look at that...” My brother and I exchanged wide-eyed looks. A moment later my dad completed his thoughts, “...a ’57 Chevy!” He never even saw the young woman.

That lesson has stuck with me through the decades. We can train our eyes. We can train our minds. We can train our hearts. We can see what we want to see. We can do what we want to do. The Holy Spirit is with us and in us. We cannot fail with Him!

Take a moment and review the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and the definition of love (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). What adjustments do you need to make in order to be the kind of person your spouse deserves?



POEM

No More

It's hard to remember
the time we glowed
It's hard to remember when I
love overflowed
"In love"ness is gone
It all has gone wrong
I just do not like you
No more

Those constant annoyances,
your ways bother me
Constant infidelities have now
eroded me
The base of our promises
The foundation of vows
I just do not trust you
No more

Our road has divided,
your way far from mine
Our values collided,
we walk different lines
Life's challenges hard
Emotions are scarred
I just do not love you
No more

Though memories hold that
bright day
When we stood before God,
promise made
Our covenant was sealed
Three way contract revealed
I just don't trust God
No more

So sign the darn papers,
my Dear
Before the court judge
we'll appear
We'll rip up our home
We will end God's shalom
I just don't have grace
No more

NOTES

Jesus Teaches About Making Vows

☐ Read Matthew 5:33-37

DEVOTIONAL

It is common, in all times, for people to make oaths and not fulfill them. Jesus said we should be careful how we make those vows, that is, we should not swear by heaven, earth or anything else – so much for people swearing to God with a stack of Bibles on their mother’s grave, all while promising to stick a needle in their eye!

Jesus said, “All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (v. 37). In James 5:12, Jesus’ half-brother echoes this teaching: “Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ Otherwise you will be condemned.”

The choice of the words condemned and evil one are interesting. We must take great care not to make a promise invoking God or anything He has created. This is not the way of Christ; this is the way of the antichrist.

How about you? Are you good to your word? Do you feel the need to back up your promise with a ridiculous oath?

Put succinctly, do you follow through with what you say you will do?

What change is God prompting you to make?



POEM

Promises, Oaths

Promises, oaths
Are like
Media posts
At moment
Full volume
Then gone
From the one
Who’s mouth
Uttered
Yet exposed now
Uncovered
Weighing heavy
Eternal
Created

Our words fly
Like insects
Vex pesky
In air
Our curses
Recorded
By demons
To snare
In webs
They’re held
Fast
Until all
At last
Full death

Let “yes”
Be Assent
An “no”
Not relent
Rein your tongue
In silence
Be holding
Until what
Is true
A-gushing
From you
Pure fountain
Not cistern
Stale, broken

NOTES

Jesus Teaches About Going the Extra Mile

☐ Read Matthew 5:38-42

DEVOTIONAL

"She started it" and "he hit me first" and "I was just giving them a dose of their own medicine." These are common expressions we use to justify our pay-backs we give to others. It only seems fair to get even. But Jesus gave us a different way to respond to offenses:

- Do not resist an evil person.
- If anyone slaps you, turn the other cheek.
- If anyone takes the shirt off your back, give him your coat too.
- If anyone forces you to go one mile, go the extra mile.

The audience Jesus was speaking to was already beaten down and oppressed. A Roman soldier could legally force citizens to carry their gear for certain lengths. The thought of Jewish citizens in occupied Israel gladly carrying it beyond the legal limits had to be startling to hear.

In fact, the Jews were expecting a Messiah who would rally the people, kick butt, and take names later. You have to wonder if this teaching disappointed them. Or was it so intriguing that it drew them closer to Him?

Before you answer too quickly, think about the way you emotionally respond to someone who is a terrorist, or a person who had committed a heinous crime, or even an acquaintance from that other political party. We are great at being friends and followers with those in our agreement circle. We've even invented phrases like "confirmation bias" and "cancel culture" to capture the essence of our ducks-of-a feather condition.

How is Jesus challenging you to respond differently to *those* people?

POEM

Which?
Which is harder? I'll ask,
The more difficult task?
To pay back or to humbly withdraw?
To be lead or to follow?
To demand or to swallow?
To be first?
Or to wait and
Be last?

Which is wiser? I'll inquire,
To exert or retire
From a battle about to begin?
To make fists or shake hands?
To drop back or grand stand?
To seek peace?
Or to keep the feud
Going?

NOTES

Jesus Teaches About Loving Enemies

☐ Read Matthew 5:43-48, Luke 6:27-36

DEVOTIONAL

Typically, we love those closest to us the most: immediate family, then other family and close friends, then neighbors & acquaintances – while having indifference toward strangers and hatred toward oppressors. Jesus flattened out this concept and said we should love everyone equally, enemies and persecutors included.

Why? Because that is the model our Father in Heaven has set for us. Romans 5:10 says, “While we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.” Pushing away from God only made Him come closer to us.

If we desire to be children of God, we must act like the Father. The choice is to behave like we will in heaven (love others to the point of perfection), or behave like others do on earth (love those who love us back; greet only those I know).

Through this week’s readings, we have seen that how we live matters. Don’t murder, commit adultery, divorce unjustly, break oaths, retaliate unfairly, or associate with the wrong people. Easy, for the most part. But Jesus took these to a whole new level. No anger, no lust, no divorce, no oaths, no retaliation, no hatred for anyone regardless of their actions. The Jesus way is the impossible way.

Perhaps that is why He summed it up, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48) and “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Jesus expects us to be like God as we interact with people in the world.

How we live matters.



POEM

Unlovable, Yes?

Bottom line, God,
I actually do not want to do it.
I do not want to be around those
Who make me uncomfortable
with their
Social ignorance
Going on and on and on
About nothing
Wasting my time
Polluting the air with fluff
Stupidity.
Unlovable, yes?

And what about those ones
Who are just plain mean--
Bullying and manipulating
Everyone with their
Cruel threats and
Mocking insults?
ERGGG...they really get to me
And make me so mad
As they attack the weak
Among us.
Unlovable, yes?

And do you really want me
To love the arrogant who go around
Demanding their rights of
Entitlement
Constantly butting in line
Grabbing the best for themselves
Totally unaware of others' presence
Stepping upon the hearts of others
As they climb their own ladders
Of popularity?
Unlovable, yes?

And then there are those who yawn
And apathetically laze around
While injustice prevails.
Their silence allows the smelly
MRSA infection to spread and kill
Our communities.
Nasty, nasty...
Their lack of courage
Fuels the tyrants' power and
Scope of influence.
Unlovable, yes?

Then, there are those who hate
their neighbors
Just because the color of skin
Is not their own
Or their tongue speaks with a different
Rhythm or their home
Offers a different fare.
They love to call others
Demeaning names
Shaming a native culture
And identity.
Unlovable, yes?

Why are you so insistent
That we love these unlovable ones?
Wouldn't it be easier if you just
Fixed them or
Chastised them or
"Healed their brokenness"
(Which sounds so politically correct
after all)-----
Or does this tirade show the true
Darkness of my own heart
Making me
Unlovable, yes?

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 21ST - WEEK 13, DAY 1

Jesus Teaches About Giving

☐ Read Matthew 6:1-4

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus had just said, "Be perfect" (Matthew 5:48). He followed that with, "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them." Indeed, how we live matters, and this includes our inner motives. Jesus assumes that His listeners will give, pray, forgive, and fast. But He warns us to do so with secret humility. That alone will unleash heaven's rewards poured out by the Father who sees our secret actions.

Earlier, Jesus had railed against the Pharisees for setting a bad example. But here He seems to say we should set NO example – living out our faith in complete secret. This is hardly the point. Much of the faith is to be shared (healing, testimony, laying on hands, etc.), but these more private works (giving, praying, fasting, etc.) are to grow us into the image of God so that we may be the humble ambassadors of God in the world.

So, how we give is as important as what we give. In fact, generosity is assumed: "When you give to the needy." Those who do it loudly and publicly will be honored by others. But those who do it quietly and privately will be honored by God: "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." We have a clear choice – please God or please people. We can't have it both ways.

The hard part is not letting internal pride well up for our generosity. Jesus said, "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." Does this mean we should not keep track of our giving? Keep records for taxes? Track it to make sure we are at least tithing? I think not. This is more about our motivation for giving. God is always more interested in the heart than the action.

POEM

Behind the Scenes

*There is a place of working
Away from limelight beams
A place so very quiet---shh!
Far from applauding screams
Where I've been called to labor
Unseen, unheard, forgotten
Except by my Director, who
The Play has been begotten.
I hear the Voice directing
Through whispers in my ear:
"Lights up!" "Sound on!" "Props carry!"
"Now serve the actors here!"
I'm there before the others show
Preparing for the cast.
I stay after they've all gone home
After the masses passed.
There's work to do behind the scenes:
To clean, to put away.
I sweep the stage, turn out the lights,
Keep watch against foul play.
My goal is not the clapping storm
Or crowds' adoring eyes;
My focus--my Director's call
And my faithful reply.
It's not that I am shy, you see.
The glory is not mine.
I serve Director, that's my goal,
And make His glory shine!*

NOTES

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 22ND - WEEK 13, DAY 2

Jesus Teaches About Praying

☐ Read Matthew 6:5-15, Luke 11:1-4

DEVOTIONAL

As with giving, Jesus said praying shouldn't be showy. Prayer is about intimacy with and dependence upon God, not impressing people with eloquence and verbosity. Jesus then gave the Lord's Prayer as a model for how we should pray.

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name"

We have a Father-child relationship with God, yet He is holy ~set apart~ from us. God desires both intimacy with us and reverence from us in our prayer life.

"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"

This is remarkable, that God's kingdom and will should be manifest on earth just as it is in heaven. Kingdom living is about bringing heaven to earth. This is a bold way to pray!

"Give us today our daily bread"

To rely on God for daily bread and breath is to understand our true dependence upon Him for everything we have and need.

"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"

Forgiveness is the heart of God; being a forgiving person is the heart of a God-follower (see verses 14-15).

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one"

Though we are forgiven, we are always vulnerable to temptation and evil. We should pray for strength and power to seek righteousness and overcome evil.

POEM

The Tent of Meeting

*In the midst of the day
The noise and the clamor
I pitch a Tent of Meeting.
I lift the prayer shawl
Over my head
To block out the storms,
To rest from my labors,
To commune with my Love.*

*In this holy closet
I am covered with grace
Enough to focus on the
Holy who sits before me.
Precious words are spoken--
Comfort, call, exhortation,
Wisdom, challenge, peace--
Which create a sanctuary
In the barren desert places,
Keeping the grit of the sand
From blinding my vision;
Shielding from the heat of the day
And the chill of the darkness.*

*Cover me, Love, with your blanket
Of consummation.
Upon the wings of your tallit
I fly like the eagle.
If I but touch the tzitzit
Of your face
I shall be healed.*

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23RD - WEEK 13, DAY 3

Jesus Teaches About Fasting

☐ Read Matthew 6:16-18

DEVOTIONAL

When you give. When you pray. When you fast. None of these are “if” but “when.” Jesus assumes we will give and pray and fast.

In each of them, Jesus warns against making a public show in order to gain the admiration and applause of other people. Rather, our giving, praying and fasting need to be a private matter between us and God, who will reward us for our private acts of devotion.

Next week is the beginning of Lent, a six-week period of reflection and repentance, beginning with Ash Wednesday and leading up to Easter. During that period, many Christians fast (abstain) from something that is a normal part of their lives. Some fast from things like a meal a day, or meats, or desserts, or TV, or social media... anything that is a habitual part of life. Fasting from them causes the person to focus on how much more important it is to be dependent upon eternal things than on these temporal things.

But Jesus gives us a clear warning in today’s passage: Don’t make a public show of your fasting, telling everybody how awesome you are for your great sacrifice. Rather, look your best, make it unseen, and keep it secret.

In each of this week’s teachings on giving, praying and fasting, Jesus used the word hypocrites for those who make a public show of godly disciplines. Nobody wants to be a fake, an actor, a person whose inner life doesn’t match the outer displays. No, we are to be people of integrity.

Prayer: Lord, I seek to honor and glorify you alone. Remind me when I do things to impress people instead of you.

POEM

True Hunger
McDonald's and Wendy's
Subway, Chick-Fil-A
Kentucky Fried, Arby's
Auntie Anne's, Chipotle
Will we ever go hungry
With so much junk to fill?
This call to prayer, fasting
Just won't fit the bill

There's Hulu and Netflix
And ESPN
Brit Box, PBS
Don't forget Amazon
And channels to fill
Up our hours each day
We just don't have time
To be still and to pray

With our bellies full-weighted
And our brains entertained
With our appetites sated
Our delights unrestrained
Will we ever know hunger?
True hunger for God?
Or keep eating at pig troughs
On Prodigal sod?

NOTES

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24TH- WEEK 13, DAY 4

Jesus Teaches About Serving God & Money

☐ Read Matthew 6:19-24

DEVOTIONAL

Treasures on earth vs. treasures in heaven. Jesus seems to be saying that it is impossible to pursue both: "You cannot serve both God and money" (v. 24). This follows a teaching on giving to the needy (Matthew 6:2; Luke 12:33) and precedes one on not worrying about food, drink, or clothing (Matthew 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-34).

So, what are "treasures on earth?" Food? Clothes? Money? Homes? Cars? Pensions? Luxuries? In Luke 12:33 Jesus said, "Sell your possessions and give to the poor." What possessions? Excess? Unnecessary? Expensive? All?

If we try to have two masters (God and money), Jesus says we will end up deciding to love and be devoted to one while we hate and despise the other. Not a lot of middle ground there. What we desire with our hearts, what we long for with our eyes, what we do with our time – these are indicators of what really matters to us.

Even followers of Christ are caught in the tension between the temporal and eternal, the physical and spiritual, the kingdoms of earth and the Kingdom of God. Because we live in the here & now & tangible, the "things" of the world – treasures on earth – are continually in front of us. These can be a snare that immobilize us in our forward progress in our spiritual walk.

Picture a man who is freely moving and ministering with all the fruit and gifts of the Spirit. More and more things of earth become attached to his arms & legs & body & head, to the point that he can no longer move about freely in the spiritual realm as he did before. Pray this: God, help me shed whatever encumbers me in my spiritual journey with you!

POEM

Treasure Box

*Some people work for money
Some people hoard their wealth
Some people seek for treasure
Some people guard their health
Some people spend their time as if
They'll never face their death
Some people step on others
Some people waste their breath.*

*It's said that where your treasure is--
Where time and talent's spent--
Is where your heart will follow
It's where path is bent
So ponder wherein lies your joy
To what your life is given--
How full is now your treasure box
Stored up for you in heaven?*

NOTES

Jesus Teaches About Worrying

☐ Read Matthew 6:25-34, Luke 12:22-34

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus' statement, "You cannot serve both God and money" is immediately followed by, "therefore I tell you, do not worry...." This is easier said than done. Many Christians worry quite a bit. Their favorite books of the Bible are 1 & 2 Concerns followed by 1 & 2 Worries. But Jesus said that worrying runs counter to trusting God.

Do not worry about your life – that won't add a single hour to your life.

Do not worry about what you wear or eat – even pagans do that.

Do not worry about tomorrow – it will be there, with its own challenges.

Our dependence on God needs to look like birds of the air and flowers of the field. When is the last time you have seen an anxious robin or a nervous lily? Jesus simply reminds us to prioritize God's kingdom and righteousness. He will take care of your life. He will provide you clothes and food. He holds tomorrow in His hand. The NLT translation puts it well: "Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need" (Matthew 6:33).

What does it mean to passionately seek after the Kingdom of God? How do we fully pursue God's presence and power and calling and promises? Better yet, why do we not do it, considering all that God offers us?

Lord, let me pursue you with passion and live righteously in all I do. May my purposes and practices honor you alone. Amen.



POEM

Worry Wart

There is a little wart on my toe.
I can't remember when it first appeared.
They say I received it
Because of some vulnerability in my body.
It is rough and scaly.
Most of the time, I do not think about it.
But sometimes,
when I have been walking
A long time,
It bothers me.
I pick at it.
It spreads.
They say there is something available
To rid its infecting power--
That I need to apply acid daily
Over a long period of time
To get at the core
It's center.
I want to be rid of it
But to have the discipline to
Daily
Keep it from growing and spreading
Is hard to do.

There is a little worry in my soul.
I can't remember
when it first appeared.
They say I received it
Because of some vulnerability
in my life.
It is bothersome and persistent.
Most of the time,
I do not think about it.
But sometimes, when I have been
fearful
A long time
It bothers me.
I pick at it.
It spreads.
They say there is something
available
To rid its infecting power--
That I need to apply trust daily
Over a long period of time
To get at the core
Its center.
I want to be rid of it
But to have the discipline to
Daily
Keep it from growing
and spreading
Is hard to do.

NOTES



9691 E 116TH STREET, FISHERS IN 46037
WWW.FISHERSUMC.ORG

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