

Acts of Worship

JOURNEYS • WINTER 2014–2015

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About the Study

The study this quarter, primarily from the New Testament, follows the theme of worship as it pertains to human response to God. The sessions in Unit 1 explore the awesomeness of God in Hebrews, Matthew, and Luke. The sessions of Unit 2 look at prayer as found in Luke, John, Hebrews, and James. Each of the sessions in Unit 3 examines some aspect of stewardship. These sessions from Matthew, Luke, and Ephesians are concerned with fasting, serving others, reasons for good stewardship in our relationships with others, and how to fortify ourselves for Christian service.

About the Writer

Brad Berglund, a lifelong American Baptist, directs Illuminated Journeys,* an ecumenical ministry devoted to deepening the spiritual life of individuals and churches. He is a spiritual director and leads worship renewal workshops, retreats, and pilgrimage tours around the world. Brad is the author of *Reinventing Sunday: Breakthrough Ideas for Transforming Worship* and *Reinventing Worship: Prayers, Readings, Special Services and More* (both published by Judson Press). He has been a pastor, church musician, and worship leader for more than twenty five years. Brad has designed, coordinated and led worship for Baptist celebrations around the world including numerous American Baptist Biennial meetings and Mission Summit gatherings. Brad lives in Denver, Colorado, with his wife, Rita.

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Worship Christ's Majesty

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 1:1-9

KEY VERSE: **He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.** —Hebrews 1:3

Imprinting and the Essential Connection

A few years ago a lovely film called *Fly Away Home* allowed viewers to experience a close encounter with migrating Canadian geese. In the film, viewers witness healing and hope through the adventures of a thirteen-year-old girl and her estranged father, who adopt an orphaned flock of geese and teach them to fly. As land development encroaches on their Canadian farmhouse, bulldozers expose a nest of eggs, leaving them unattended and vulnerable. When young Amy discovers the nest, she is filled with compassion and brings the eggs into the barn to warm them. She is the first living creature the chicks see when they emerge into the warmth of the barn. That initial bond creates what scientists call an imprint, a deep and essential, resonating connection between Amy and her newfound brood. What follows is an extraordinary adventure of care, nurture, and flight as she and her father help the chicks become the geese they were created to be.



Our key verse from the book of Hebrews calls Jesus the “**imprint of God's very being.**” The Greek word translated as “imprint” is *carakthē*, which is where we get the English word *character*. Jesus came to earth carrying within him the very character of God's essential being and became for us the “**reflection of God's glory.**” Just as Amy's bond with the geese

involved a close, intimate connection because of their relationship to one another, so Father and Son are deeply and intimately connected.

Father and Son are deeply and intimately connected.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Think of a close, personal relationship that you have been in. What was it that made that relationship special?
- How did that bond influence your life and help you to become the person God has created you to be?

† HEBREWS 1:1-4

¹ Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³ He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Better than Angels

Hebrews was written by an unknown author to unknown recipients near the end of the first century AD. The author of Hebrews was so convinced that belief in Christ is of primary importance that he spent most of the book (ten chapters) arguing that Jesus Christ is superior to everyone and everything else and that salvation is found in him alone. This belief in Christ helps us to understand what God revealed in the past and will reveal in the future.

Verses 1-4 introduce the theme of the letter of Hebrews: the superiority of Christ. The truth of God spoken in Christ is superior to that spoken by the prophets of old. This is because of who Jesus is. He is God's Son. He is the creator and sustainer of the universe. He is the heir of all things. He reflects the divine glory. He is the exact imprint of God's nature. Jesus is who God is.

Because of his identity as God's Son, Jesus is superior to the Law and the prophets. And he is superior to the angels because "**the name he**

has inherited is more excellent than theirs” (v. 4). The name referred to here is undoubtedly the title “Lord.” Naming Jesus with the name of God (Lord) further reveals who he is.

Not only has Jesus made God known to the world, but he also has provided for its salvation. He has **“made purification for sins” (v. 3).** The destruction of the temple in AD 70 had made it impossible for Jews to continue their daily temple sacrifices, but the author of Hebrews argued for faith in Jesus as one way that faithful Jews could continue to maintain their Jewish identity in a new context. As the perfect sacrifice, Jesus fulfilled and supplanted the temple sacrifices, making both the temple and the sacrifices unnecessary.

Majesty on High

While on a recent hike high in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, a friend of mine broke through the trees, rounded a turn on the path, and nearly dropped to his knees at what he saw: a craggy peak reaching toward heaven, high above all the others, with a shaft of sunlight on the side of the mountain illuminating a deep, snow-filled natural crevasse forming a huge cross. That mountain could only be described as a majestic image of God’s glory and the cross. Bathed in sunlight, it was a larger-than-life reminder of Christ’s love for the world. Unwittingly, my friend had come face to face with the 14,000-foot Mountain of the Holy Cross in the northern Sawatch Range of the Colorado Rockies. This image brings to mind the second part of **verse 3**, which describes Christ seated majestically at the right hand of God.

The catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer*



Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 1: WORSHIP CHRIST'S MAJESTY

December 1
(MONDAY)
Great and Awesome God
DANIEL 9:3-10

December 2
(TUESDAY)
O Lord, Hear and Forgive
DANIEL 9:11-19

December 3
(WEDNESDAY)
God the Almighty Reigns
REVELATION 19:1-8

December 4
(THURSDAY)
First and Last, Beginning and End
REVELATION 22:8-14

asks the question: Why do we praise God? That question is followed by a simple and profound answer: We praise God because God's being draws praise from us. Standing before an impossibly majestic mountain rising over 14,000 feet in the Colorado Rockies gives one a glimpse of the awesome nature of God's glory and helps us understand the phrase "Worship Christ's majesty." There are moments in worship when all we can do is drop to our knees and allow the very being of God to "draw praise from us."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Think of a time when you came face to face with indescribable natural beauty. How did you respond?
- What does the word *majestic* mean to you? What elements of your weekly worship experience help you appreciate and understand the glory of God and majesty of Christ?

† HEBREWS 1:5-6

⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say,

"You are my Son;
today I have begotten you"?

Or again,

"I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son"?

⁶ And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,

"Let all God's angels worship him."

The Gifts and Challenges of Language

When my daughter was little and just learning to articulate her thoughts and ideas, she would often misunderstand the meaning of words. On a family trip to Wisconsin, she noticed a highway sign that read, "Green Lake left." In her disappointment, Brianna exclaimed, "Oh no, where did it go?" She had assumed that, rather than pointing us to a left turn, the sign was telling us that Green Lake had gone away. She had yet to discover the many nuances of meaning infused into the words we use.

Language is an amazing gift. It connects us to other human beings and allows us to express in words our experiences, thoughts,

and ideas. At the same time, language is a great mystery often limiting our thoughts and ideas to the words available to us. This is the challenge of understanding Scripture as well.

In *Koine* Greek, the common language of the people and the original written language of the New Testament, we find three words that are each translated into English as “worship.” Each of those Greek words has a distinct and nuanced meaning. The word used in **Hebrews 1:6** is *proskuneo*, a word that generally means “to reverence” or “to bow down.” It is sometimes translated as “venerate” and is used to describe an act of honoring one who is greater than ourselves. In cultures where a monarchy is still recognized, one bows to the king or queen to show respect. This respect was seen in the 2012 summer Olympics in London. When the royal family was present, a special honorary greeting was given to “your majesties.” How much more are we to bow down—to show respect—to the King of kings!

Even the Angels Worship Him

In *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, a lion named Aslan represents the Christ figure. In one scene, as Aslan walks out of his tent, the crowd bends low to honor him. This image helps us understand **Hebrews 1:6**, in which we read that even the angels worship before Christ. As human beings who are “**a little lower than God**” (**Psalms 8:5**), one of our greatest acts of worship is to bow down before the majesty of Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Bowing down before Christ suggests a physical movement. In some churches, kneelers are built into the pews to allow for this important form of worship. Does your worship include bowing down? If not, how could it be incorporated into the flow of worship?

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 1: WORSHIP CHRIST'S MAJESTY

December 5 (FRIDAY)

My Son, the Beloved
MATTHEW
3:13-17

December 6 (SATURDAY)

Honor and Glory Forever
1 TIMOTHY
1:12-17

December 7 (SUNDAY)

The Son Reflects God's Glory
HEBREWS 1:1-9

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Readings for the Winter quarter.

† HEBREWS 1:7-9

- ⁷ Of the angels he says,
 “He makes his angels winds,
 and his servants flames of fire.”
- ⁸ But of the Son he says,
 “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
 and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your
 kingdom.
- ⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
 therefore God, your God, has anointed you
 with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”

Making Space for Something New to Grow

For people living in the high desert of the Rocky Mountain West, the imagery in **verse 7** can be frightening. In the past few years, fires have ravaged the hillsides near many highly populated areas along the front range of Colorado, burning homes and scattering families. While this can create understandable fear, I recall an amazing photograph in *National Geographic Magazine* of Yellowstone National Park a year or so after a devastating wind-driven fire had consumed 990,000 acres within and 420,000 acres outside of the park. The photograph highlighted the striking contrast of an abundance of new green shoots of growth emerging up through the charcoal black of the fire’s aftermath. It was an unforgettable image of new life, made possible by the destructive, fiery removal of the thick vegetation on the forest floor.

Verse 7 reads, “**He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.**” Is Scripture suggesting that in order for Christ to emerge in our understanding as he truly is, a righteous and forever King, we may need to allow some of our “underbrush” to be removed? Is it possible that life’s entanglements, burdens, and complications keep us from catching a vision of Christ as ruler of all and God as the one who anoints with gladness those who love righteousness?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Are there areas of your life that keep you from opening your heart and mind to the expansive righteous kingdom of God?

- In your own life, what tender green shoots of new life are hidden under layers of old ways of doing things or “small” ways of thinking?

An Advent Litany

The season of Advent (meaning “coming”) is a time of waiting and anticipation as Christians prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ. Advent has four Sundays and is the beginning of the church’s calendar year. Four themes associated with Jesus’ life and ministry are the themes of the four Sundays in Advent. The theme for the first Sunday of the Advent season is “hope.” We begin here with week two and the traditional theme of “peace.”



Practice Peace (Second Sunday in Advent)

Litany with voice and movement by Rita Berglund¹

Practice peace!

In non-violent speech.

Practice peace!

With acts of reconciliation.

Practice peace!

By calming the mind and body.

Practice peace!

Inviting stillness and active listening.

Practice peace!

By creating beauty.

Practice peace!

By detaching from fear.

Practice peace!

With an awareness of God’s abiding presence.

Practice peace!

NOTE

1. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 120.

Make a Joyful Noise

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 95:1-7

KEY VERSE: O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! —Psalm 95:1

Make a Joyful Noise

One of the most meaningful moments of the Advent season for me is the Christmas Eve service, when all the poinsettias ordered by the congregation are unveiled and beautifully placed in the chancel of the sanctuary. That sea of red woven in and through the greenery and the lighted Christmas trees is breathtaking. When I reflect on the phrase “**make a joyful noise**” (Psalm 95:1), I think of poinsettias opening up and offering their rich beauty for all to see.

Advent is also a time to sing familiar, classic Christmas hymns. Even those who think they “can’t carry a tune in a bucket” seem to enjoy singing Christmas carols. Making a joyful noise doesn’t mean singing a tune perfectly or creating a textbook vocal sound. It means opening our hearts and voices to release the deep joy and aliveness that allows us to express our gratitude to God for the gift of Christ to the world and the gift of grace in our lives. In this way, making a joyful noise to God, like the natural process of the poinsettia revealing its innate beauty, becomes our expression of a deeply held and firmly rooted exuberance.

This Advent season, open your voice and your heart. Allow yourself to express the joy of the Lord in worship.



The Scripture text for this session comes from the Psalms, a collection of songs and prayers that helped the Israelites worship, that helped them “**make a joyful noise**” to the Lord.

† PSALM 95:1-2

- ¹ O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
- ² Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

The Rock of Our Salvation

One of the great songs of our faith is the hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” There is an unusual word in this hymn. At one point this word became a popular man’s name, and over the years we have lost its true meaning. That word is *Ebenezer*. In addition to being found in this hymn, the word is found in the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. After a great victory of the Israelites over the Philistines, Scripture tells us, “**Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, ‘Thus far the LORD has helped us’**” (1 Samuel 7:12).

The word *Ebenezer* comes from two Hebrew words, which together mean “stone of help.” Samuel raised an altar of stone and used it to remind the people that God was their helper.

Throughout Scripture, stones can be seen as symbols that remind people of God’s activity in their lives. Think of the huge stones used to build Herod’s temple in Jerusalem. These stones are part of an important



Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 2: MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE

December 8
(MONDAY)

*Hold Fast to
God*

DEUTERONOMY
13:1-8

December 9
(TUESDAY)

*Devote
Yourselves to the
Lord*

1 KINGS 8:54-62

December 10
(WEDNESDAY)

*Worship with
Reverence and
Awe*

HEBREWS
12:22-29

December 11
(THURSDAY)

*Sing Praises to
God*

1 CHRONICLES
16:7-15

place of prayer called the “Western” or “Wailing” Wall. For centuries, God’s people have come to those stones to pray and cry out to God. Stones help us remember that God is present and active in our lives.

Stones also provide a sense of stability and are often used to create structural foundations. Jesus declared that it is the wise man who builds his house upon the rock, while the foolish person builds on sand (see **Matthew 7:24-27**).

Some Christian cultures have taken these words of Jesus a step further and have built entire structures, including their roofs, of nothing but stone. I made a pilgrimage a few years ago to an ancient Christian church high in the Caucasus Mountains of the Republic of Georgia, one of the oldest Christian countries in the world. Built more than one thousand years ago, the stone church stands just south of the Russian border as a monument to the stability of stone and the spiritual devotion of the Georgian people. Standing, praying, and singing in that church building created in me a deep sense of God’s stability and strength.

It is no mistake that for centuries worship has taken place in stone churches. Offering our lives, singing our praise, and responding to God’s gift of salvation in the context of the rock-like foundational reality of God’s presence has great meaning and gives strength to God’s people.

Stones
help us
remember
that God
is present
and active
in our lives.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways can you be more diligent in building your life on the solid foundation of the Word of God?
- How do the qualities of stone remind you of God’s presence in your life?

† PSALM 95:3-5

³ For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.

⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.

- ⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

A King above All Others

Kingly language can be difficult for those of us in a twenty-first century culture that has no monarchy. I've been leading pilgrimages to Ireland for many years and have found there an image of kingship that can be helpful to us. In pre-Christian Ireland, tribal groups dotted the island. Each of these tribal areas had a local chief, each of whom answered to a regional king. Each of those local kings, in turn, was subject to one high king who was located on the hill of Tara in the center of the country. Rather than a dictatorial leader imposing his will on his subjects, this high king was seen as a caretaker and guardian of all the people.

A beautiful image of the unity created by this organizational model was embedded in the landscape of the heart each year during an annual festival held at the beginning of May. Legend tells us that all the flames in Ireland were extinguished the night before the May 1 feast day. That night, one single flame was left burning, the flame of the high king on the hill of Tara. One by one, other flames were lit from the high king's flame, the light of Tara being passed throughout the country. The view from space that night would have been quite an amazing sight as concentric circles of light spread throughout the entire country, emanating from one central "heart" of the land.

In early Christian Ireland, this sense of unity under one king remained. The Gaelic hymn "Be Thou My Vision" is an example of this sense of unity created by one High King, ruler above all others and the victorious salvation we receive through Christ, the High King of all: *High King of Heaven my victory won. May I reach Heaven's joys, O Bright Heaven's Sun. Heart of my own heart, whatever befall, still be my vision O Ruler of All.*

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 2: MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE

December 12
(FRIDAY)

*Ascribe
Greatness to
Our God*
DEUTERONOMY
32:1-7

December 13
(SATURDAY)

*A Sacrifice of
Praise to God*
HEBREWS 13:6-15

December 14
(SUNDAY)

*Let Us Worship
and Bow Down*
PSALM 95:1-7

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- What image appears in your mind when you hear the word *king*? Where does that image come from?

† PSALM 95:6-7

- ⁶ O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
- ⁷ For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
O that today you would listen to his voice!

Kneeling before Our Maker

When renowned American photographer Ansel Adams first encountered the awesome beauty of Yosemite Valley in the summer of 1916, he wrote, “There was light everywhere. A new era began for me. . . . From that day, my life has been colored and modulated by the great earth gesture of the Sierra.”¹ When we think of Yosemite National Park, many of us picture it in black and white because we’ve been so moved by Adams’ iconic photography.

When asked about the artistry behind his extraordinary photos, Adams said, “When I’m ready to make a photograph I . . . see in my mind’s eye something that is not literally there. . . . I’m interested in expressing something which is built up from within, rather than just extracted from without.”² Perhaps, when we see his photos, it is “something that is not literally there” that stirs our imagination. Something in his creative process draws us into the mystery of creation. Perhaps it is this very mystery that draws us back to our Creator. Rather than being “extracted from without,” a grateful response from within causes us to want to close any gap that exists between us and the one in whose image we are created.

Verse 6 invites us to kneel before the Lord, our Maker. God is clearly described as the one who created us. Martin Luther once said, “Worship is the grateful response of the creature to the Creator.” In weekly worship we have the opportunity to respond with gratitude to the one who created and formed us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- When you receive a gift from a friend, what grateful response do you find appropriate?
- What are the creative ways we can respond in worship to the gift of grace we have freely received from God?
- Psalm 95 asks us to “kneel before God.” In your church’s worship experience, do you have the opportunity to kneel before God? How does kneeling in worship create a sense of respect and reverence?

Responding with Obedience

The New Skete community in Northeastern New York State is a community of monks and nuns dedicated to the monastic life in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. As is true for most monastic communities, in addition to prayer and study, the monks and nuns earn their daily bread by the work of their own hands. Known for their gourmet cheesecakes often featured on television cooking shows, the community has also developed a love for dogs. Focusing on the spiritual connection evident between human beings and their pets, the community of New Skete has developed an expertise in dog training and breeding that has lasted more than forty years and has resulted in the publication of many books on the subject.

One of their more creative book titles is *Divine Canine: The Monks’ Way to a Happy, Obedient Dog*. This title and the training it represents is what we most often associate with the word *obedience*. Dogs can be trained to be obedient, and the monks of New Skete have developed a style of training that has proven to be very effective. But the word *obey* has a surprisingly richer and more nuanced meaning than simply training someone to follow the rules or to behave in a particular way, as important as that may be. *Obedience* comes from the Latin word *audire* that means “to listen.” Rather than simply following rules, “to be obedient” means to listen deeply to the voice of God. In worship, we respond to our Creator by listening.



QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways do you listen to the voice of God?

An Advent Litany

Traditionally, the third week of Advent is called *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* is the Latin word for “rejoice” and celebrates the joy Mary experienced as the chosen one who would give birth to the Messiah.



Practice Joy (Third Sunday of Advent)

Litany with voice and movement by Rita Berglund³

Practice joy!

In breathing deeply. (*Breathe deeply.*)

Practice joy!

By reaching wide to open your heart. (*Open your arms wide.*)

Practice joy!

With a stomp affirming the dance of our life stories. (*Stomp your foot.*)

Practice joy!

In a clap of blessing. (*Clap.*)

Practice joy!

With an “alleluia” of thanksgiving. (*Shout, “Alleluia!”*)

Practice joy!

By touching each other in gratitude for community. (*Touch the person next to you.*)

Practice joy!

By listening deeply to the aliveness of this now! (*Cup your hand behind your ear to listen.*)

Practice joy!

NOTES

1. *Ansel Adams: A Documentary Film*, written and directed by Ric Burns and co-produced by Sierra Club Productions and Steeplechase Films, 2002. Transcript available online at www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/filmmore/pt.html.

2. Ibid.

3. Adapted from Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 121.

Glory to God in the Highest

SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:1-20

KEYVERSE: **The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.**

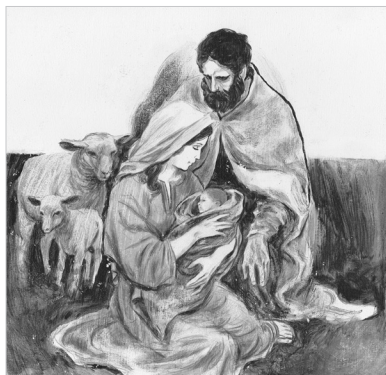
—Luke 2:20

The Birth of Jesus

Today's well-known Scripture passage is from the Gospel of Luke. Shortly before the birth of Jesus, Caesar Augustus decreed that everyone should be registered so that they might be taxed. Although Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, they were required to travel to Bethlehem, also called "the city of David," because Joseph "**descended from the house and family of David**" (v. 4). He needed to register in his hometown.

While they were there in the city of David, crowded with out-of-town visitors, the time came for Mary's baby to be born. As Luke relates the story, Jesus was born in humble surroundings, a stable, and he was laid in a manger, or feeding trough, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Then Luke's story turns to the announcement of the birth of the Messiah. We might expect that this announcement would be made to the powerful people in the country, but no! The message came to a group of lowly shepherds tending their sheep in the fields outside of the town.



† LUKE 2:8-14

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Encountering God

Imagine those shepherds working their flock on a rather typical, quiet, dark night in the Judean countryside. Without warning, one of God’s angels ripped open the night sky in front of them and the glory of the Lord pierced the darkness. “Deer in the headlights” probably describes well the shepherds’ reaction to this shocking event in their lives. Scripture simply says, **“They were terrified.”**

Fear is a powerful and basic human emotion. It is part of our brain stem and is there for a reason. Current scientific research teaches us that a normal fear response has a positive impact on our survival. Sensing life-threatening danger and responding quickly is a good thing. But, too often, fear moves from a natural fight-or-flight mechanism to an overwhelming sense of anxiety about life itself. This kind of fear shuts down our humanity. It causes us to hide. It derails our creativity. It dulls our joy.

Fear must be an age-old human challenge, because, whenever an angel appears in Scripture, the first message is, “Don’t be afraid.” In other words, “Be courageous.” Courage seems to be the antidote for life-draining fear. Courage in the face of fear allows us to see God’s glory in the darkness, to accomplish the unimaginable, to glimpse the reality of a new heaven and a new

Fear is a powerful and basic human emotion.

earth. Courage helps us become the hands and feet of Christ in this world.

The shepherds must have taken the angels' message to heart. Their courage allowed them to receive good news, to experience great joy, to hear the message that God had broken into the world to be part of humanity in a new way. As their fear was released, they could truly be attentive to God's presence. Without fear, they realized the sky was filled with angels, the universe was rejoicing, and the glory of God reached to the highest heavens. They were completely caught up in what the Eastern Orthodox Church describes as "heavenly worship that is already happening."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Think about a time when you were afraid. What are the effects of fear in your life? How does fear hold you back from following God's leading in your life?
- Describe an experience of worship that moved you into God's presence. What was it like? What were the elements of worship that allowed you to sense God's presence?
- The word *doxology* describes our praise to God. What allows you to offer a doxology, to fully praise God? Singing? Praying? Movement? Other elements of worship?

† LUKE 2:15-18

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 3: GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST

December 15
(MONDAY)

*Give Thanks
to God's Holy
Name*

1 CHRONICLES
16:35-41

December 16
(TUESDAY)

*Praising and
Thanking God
Together*

2 CHRONICLES
5:2-14

December 17
(WEDNESDAY)

*The Heavens
Proclaim God's
Handiwork*

PSALM 19

December 18
(THURSDAY)

*God's Glory
over All the
Earth*

PSALM 108:1-6

Responding to the Encounter

Imagine yourself as one of the shepherds. You've just seen an angel, you were nearly blinded by light that eclipsed the darkness, and you were caught up in the cosmic worship of a multitude of angels. Then, just as quickly as it began, it ended. The night sky is once again dark, the hillside is hushed, and you're back to tending sheep. Now what?

As we leave the sanctuary of our church each Sunday morning, I often wonder what it would be like to pass by a sign in the narthex that read, "Now what?" It's the next step, isn't it? If the church is the body of



Christ in the world today, our weekly encounter with God empowers us to become that body, loving as he loved and serving as he served. How will worship continue in our daily lives? What is our response to what we've just experienced, learned, offered, and felt?

We're told that the shepherds wanted to see the truth of what they had just heard, to see what the Lord had just revealed to them. So they left what they were doing and went **"with haste."** In like manner, many Christians today have a desire to move from worship **"with haste"** to make a practical difference in the world in the name of Christ. There is a renewed call for the church to become the hands and feet of Jesus. As the prayer attributed to Saint Theresa of Avila says, "Christ has no body now but yours."

One example of a practical service-oriented ministry can be found at the First Baptist Church of Springfield, Oregon. Churches in the Eugene/Springfield area are cooperating together in a creative ministry focused on providing safe, comfortable, affordable housing to those who are homeless, those in need of transitional housing, or those who can't afford the high cost of housing today. The project is called the Conestoga Hut, so named because the shape of each housing unit resembles a covered wagon. Each "hut" provides people in need with a small, easy to build, lockable, and dry shelter. The six-by-ten-foot shelters can be built for between \$250 and \$500 depending on the utilization of reused or donated materials. Host sites, usually churches,

sign up to receive one to three of the shelters and learn the ins and outs of being a responsible host of their new residents. This creative, hands-on ministry is becoming a popular tool to meet the needs of the world and has become a successful model of an effective, cooperative ministry that unites diverse church communities.

As God's people, we are called to move out from worship into the world each week to love and serve in creative and effective ways. Those who have come together to remember Christ ought to now be willing to be dispersed—to scatter into the workweek with its challenges, frustrations, and joy. We go as the body of Christ in the world, representing the hope, grace, and power of the One we follow as disciples.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How does your church congregation become the hands and feet of Jesus when you leave worship each Sunday?
- Are there any creative ministries happening in other congregations that would provide a way to cooperate across denominations? What are those ministries and how could your church become involved?
- How does your church's worship service motivate you to serve and love the world?

† LUKE 2:19-20

¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Reflecting on the Encounter

Time to reflect on the experiences of our lives is a great gift and sadly lacking in the pressurized schedules and routines of our modern world. But we are told that Mary made time to treasure and to ponder. The words in **verse**

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 3: GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST

December 19
(FRIDAY)

*Our Hope of
Sharing God's
Glory*

ROMANS 5:1-5

December 20
(SATURDAY)

*Expecting a
Child*

LUKE 2:1-7

December 21
(SUNDAY)

*A Savior Born
This Day*

LUKE 2:8-20

19 parallel the message of Jesus in **Matthew 6:21**, “**Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**” Mary’s heart was filled with the treasure of the encounter and the message of the angels.

At some point in our life’s journey, we all enter into the timeless quality of significant experiences. On the unforgettable night my daughter was born, I participated in that miracle as if time stood still. On a perfect summer evening, as a glorious sunset turns the sky into a celestial pallet of unimaginable colors, haven’t we all said, “I don’t want this to end”?

The Greek word in Scripture for this quality of eternal time is *kairos*. The more familiar Greek word for time is *chronos*. *Chronos*, where we get our English word *chronology*, describes the linear, moment-to-moment time of life, the step-by-step movement of the events in our day. By contrast, *kairos*, the word Jesus most often used in Scripture to describe the time of his death and resurrection, describes the quality of time within our daily events. *Kairos* helps us stay inside the experience; *chronos* moves us on to the next experience. The invitation of worship is to leave *chronos* behind and move into *kairos* time.

Perhaps worship could become a place where we encounter the glory of God anew each week and where there is time to reflect on the meaning of that encounter in our lives. Given the proper tools, participants may find that the routinized “ticking” time of daily life has been transfigured through worship into a rich, abundant, open-ended, eternal, purposeful time. As worshipers are intentionally guided through the worship portal from *out there* to *in here*, a kind of Narnia effect is created in which dreams, visions, honesty, and depth are the norm rather than the exception.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- The word *treasure* is usually used to describe financial resources. Is it possible that your life’s deep experiences are treasure as well? How can worship be a place where you mine the gems of meaning that are present in your divine encounters?

Worship
could
become
a place
where we
encounter
the glory of
God anew
each week.

- During the course of a worship service, there are often significant moments of grace and depth. What changes could we make to worship to allow more time for reflection?

An Advent Litany

Traditionally, the theme for the fourth Sunday of Advent is “love” and celebrates the divine love birthed into the world in the person of Jesus the Christ. The text of a popular Christmas hymn reads:

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.¹



Practice Love (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

Litany by Rita Berglund²

Practice love!

In thought, action, and emotion.

Practice love!

With disciplines that facilitate transformation.

Practice love!

With behaviors that heal relationships.

Practice love!

With respect for the brokenness of self and others.

Practice love!

By nurturing children and cherishing the elderly.

Practice love!

By living into truthfulness.

Practice love!

By fearlessly being Christ in the world.

Practice love!

NOTES

1. Christina Rossetti, “Love came down at Christmas,” *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1897), 251.

2. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 122.

In Awe of Christ's Power

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 14:22-36

KEY VERSE: **When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”** —Matthew 14:32-33

Jesus Walked on Water

Today's lesson focuses on the power of Christ as demonstrated in the familiar story of Jesus walking on the water and rescuing Peter from his doubts and fears. The New Testament Greek word often translated into English as “power” is *dynamis*. A more literal English translation is “dynamite” or “dynamic.” Both these words describe a quality of change. Dynamite causes a rapid change through explosive power, and something in a state of continual flux is often referred to as dynamic. As you read today's text, consider the dynamic, change-producing quality of Christ's power.

† MATTHEW 14:22-23

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.

Making Solitude a Priority

The Gospels often portray Jesus as one who made time to be alone in prayer. In this passage, we are told that Jesus, in the midst of his



by James Tissot, c. 1890

teaching ministry, dismissed the crowds and climbed a mountain to find a place of solitude.

As popular as he was among the people, it's easy to imagine Jesus moving around the country from one event and speaking engagement to another. His constant work with the disciples and consistent interactions with the religious leaders of the day would have created an exhausting, full-time ministry schedule. In this day when larger-than-life celebrities and deified super heroes fill our movie screens, we're tempted to dismiss Jesus' humanity in favor of a less grounded, comic-book Savior. But Jesus experienced many of the same challenges and pressures we face today. It's no wonder he often needed to rest his body and his voice, find time alone with God, and renew his weary spirit.

Jesus modeled a rhythm of work and prayer, engagement and solitude, speaking and reflecting that could greatly benefit the way we follow him as disciples in today's world. Inspired by Jesus' example, contemporary writer and teacher Dallas Willard has said, "In solitude we find the perspective from which we can see, in the light of eternity, the created things that trap, worry, and oppress us."¹ Solitude helps us find perspective.

Solitude
helps
us find
perspective.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 4: IN AWE OF CHRIST'S POWER

December 22
(MONDAY)

*By Faith We
Please God*

HEBREWS 11:1-6

December 23
(TUESDAY)

*Where Is Your
Faith?*

LUKE 8:19-25

December 24
(WEDNESDAY)

*I Believe; Help
My Unbelief*

MARK 9:15-24

December 25
(THURSDAY)

*The Light
Overpowers
Darkness*

JOHN 1:1-9

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- Jesus seemed to create a good balance between active life and prayer-filled solitude. Do you have a similar balance in your life? If so, how have you managed to create it? If not, what holds you back?

† MATTHEW 14:24-27

²⁴ By this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the

disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Jesus Closes the Gap

If you’ve spent any time rowing a small boat in the waves, you know how exhausting that can be. If a storm moves in and the wind picks up, it’s nearly impossible to stay on course. The disciples found themselves in just such a predicament. Normally, such fishing boats stayed close to the shore, following the shoreline to the other side of the lake. After his time of prayer, Jesus would have followed the same shoreline, only on land, to their destination. But the strong winds that can appear suddenly around the Sea of Galilee had blown their boat into the middle of the lake. It was a dangerous place to be in a shallow-draft boat amidst large waves driven by a strong wind. They were far from land and far away from Jesus.

Our story tells us that, instead of waiting on shore for the disciples, Jesus came toward them. Jesus took the initiative and closed the gap between them. We’re told that as he walked across the water he appeared to the disciples as if he were a ghost. The Greek word here is *phantasm*, related to the word *fantastic*. The disciples saw a fantastic image of Jesus walking on the water and drawing near to them in their distress. They were in awe.

Then Jesus spoke what I believe to be some of the most comforting words in all of Scripture: **“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid”** (v. 27). A beautiful prayer song from the Taizé Community in France puts into words and melody our desire for this same comforting presence of Christ: “Lord Jesus Christ, your light shines within us. Let not my doubts nor my darkness speak to me. Lord Jesus Christ, your light shines within us. Let my heart always welcome your love.”²²

What would it be like to live our lives from this prayerful, open stance? Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he said, “Take heart” or “Courage!”, as the New Jerusalem Bible puts it. *Courage*, from the French word for “heart,” means “full of heart” and is at the root of the word *encourage*.

Offering that fullness of heart to others becomes courage in action, or “encouragement.” These words of Jesus are truly encouraging. It’s as

if he is telling us to live life from the fullness of our hearts rooted in him, to put the courage he gives us into action. In this way, the power of Christ once again becomes visible in the world today.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- How do your feelings aid you in the process of understanding? How would you describe a balanced relationship between thinking and feeling?

† MATTHEW 14:28-31

²⁸ Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

A Place for Doubt

Peter literally jumped at the chance to follow Jesus into the unknown. His response was to walk on water, to be like Christ. Isn't that what we all want in our spiritual journeys—to be more like Christ?

It's important for us to remember that the opposite of faith isn't doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. It is in our certainty that we stop trusting Christ, not in our doubt. Doubt allows us to let go of our attachment to being right. Doubt causes us to rethink our stubborn point of view. Doubt softens our willfulness and invites us to risk once more. Doubt gives us one more opportunity to call out to Christ in our distress.

Like the Psalmist of old, in his distress Peter cried out to Jesus, and Jesus responded with a question. The traditional way to interpret this interaction is to see Jesus almost belittling Peter by saying, “Peter, what's your

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 4: IN AWE OF CHRIST'S POWER

December 26
(FRIDAY)

A Mustard-Seed-Sized Faith

MATTHEW
17:14-20

December 27
(SATURDAY)

Great Is Your Faith

MATTHEW
15:21-31

December 28
(SUNDAY)

Oh You of Little Faith

MATTHEW
14:22-36

problem? If you just had more faith, you wouldn't have sunk into the lake." However, I see Jesus as a master teacher who had learned to ask helpful questions. "What caused you to doubt? When did you let go of your trust? What do you think happened?" Peter's doubt, while often seen as failure, was actually an opportunity for growth.



by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, 1860

In the 1923 baseball season, the great slugger Babe Ruth struck out more than any other major league player, yet he is known as one of the greatest homerun hitters in the history of the game. Each strikeout gave him another opportunity to come back and to trust once again that he could still hit the ball. Just like Babe Ruth, Peter could use his failure as an opportunity to reflect on his experience and try again.

We don't have the opportunity to read about the rest of their interaction, but I can imagine this conversation between Jesus and Peter continued into the night as Peter wrestled with his own life and calling. As we grow in our spiritual maturity, the statement "Just have more faith" may not be helpful in our process of learning to trust Christ more fully. Instead, we must reflect on our failures and then try again, trusting that the same Jesus who drew Peter out of the water will offer his hand to us as well.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever taken a "leap of faith?" What was it like to step out of the boat? What role did doubt play in the process?
- Do you have a spiritual director or friend who asks you helpful questions? How do those questions help you become more mature as a follower of Jesus?

† MATTHEW 14:32-36

³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

³⁴ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. ³⁵ After the people of that place recognized him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, ³⁶ and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

The Son of God

After the wind calmed down, those in the boat bent down toward Jesus and declared him to be the Son of God. They acknowledged his authority, who he was, and what he had done.

The word *authority* is related to the words *authentic* and *author*. When we use those words, we understand that the contents of a thing, the nature of a thing or a person, correspond to what is seen on the outside. When we meet an authentic person we have a sense of meeting the author, not the ghostwriter. For the disciples, Jesus' inner power corresponded to what they had experienced in his life. They had seen that his authority was authentic.

The people who met Jesus on the other side of the lake recognized Jesus' authority as well, bringing those who were sick to receive healing. In a similar Gospel account of healing recorded in **Mark 5**, when a woman touched the hem of Jesus' garment, healing power went forth from Jesus (**Mark 5:30**). Jesus was a conduit for spiritual power, and once again, this dynamic power created a positive change in a person's life.

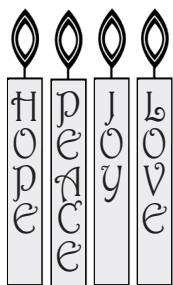
In the Gospels, this type of healing is often referred to by the word *salvation*. Its root word is *salve*, which leads us to the related concepts of medicine and healing. Nowadays, this is one of the most understated aspects of salvation. When salvation is considered in this way, however, we view the saving work of Jesus as a journey into wholeness. We see, then, the process of salvation as a gradual healing of body, mind, and spirit. Instead of simply the immediate conversion experience, salvation is also the journey toward healing, filled with progressive inner transformations that lead, in time, to long-term health and fulfillment.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- Are there people who have been healers in your life? What was your experience with them?

A Christmas Litany

In European Christian tradition, Christmas Day is the beginning of a much longer celebration, a liturgical season that has twelve days. At the end of the twelve days of Christmas, Christians have traditionally celebrated the next season of the church year, Epiphany, when the wise men took the good news of Christ's birth into all the world. Is it possible to reclaim the historic spirituality that brings us into the meaning of Christ's birth in a much deeper way? How might your church find creative ways to extend the Christmas celebration?



Practice Christmas (during the Twelve Days of Christmas)³

Litany by Rita Berglund

Practice Christmas!

By inspiring hope.

Practice Christmas!

By working for peace.

Practice Christmas!

By making sounds of joy.

Practice Christmas!

By reaching out with generous love.

Practice Christmas!

By inviting the transformation of your heart.

Practice Christmas!

By spreading the good news of Christ.

Practice Christmas!

With every aspect of aliveness.

Practice Christmas!

NOTES

1. Dallas Willard, Session 12, *Embracing Life Series*, Ed. Jonathan Hunter (Embracing Life Ministries, 1998), 172.
2. Taizé prayer. Copyright 1991, Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, F-71250, Taizé Community.
3. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 122-123.

A Model for Prayer

SCRIPTURE: Luke 11:1-13

KEYVERSE: “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.” —Luke 11:2

The People’s Prayer

Today’s Scripture points us to one of the best-known prayers in the world, commonly called the Lord’s Prayer or the Our Father. Both of these titles, however, fail to describe its intent. Jesus was teaching his disciples how to pray.

Jesus’ modern-day disciples, the Christian family around the world, continue to pray Matthew’s version of this prayer in corporate worship and in private devotion. Rather than the Lord’s Prayer, perhaps it ought to be called the People’s Prayer, for its words reverberate throughout heaven and earth in nearly every language on the globe.

† LUKE 11:1-4

¹ He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” ² He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

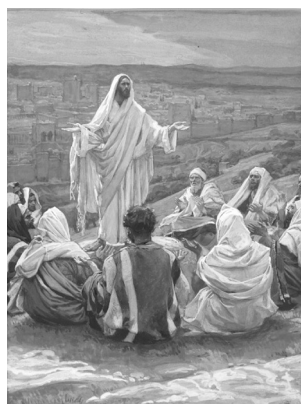
³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ And forgive us our sins,

For we ourselves forgive everyone

indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”



“The Lord’s Prayer” by
James Tissot, c. 1890

“When You Pray . . .”

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus often teaches by responding to a statement or answering a question. This portion of Scripture is a good example of this. Jesus’ disciples had learned that John the Baptist had taught his disciples to pray, and they requested the same from Jesus. In response, Jesus answered, **“When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name.”**

Hallow isn’t a word we use much in our daily English vocabulary. It means “to honor as holy” or “to set apart as sacred.” According to Jesus, our first words in prayer need to honor God’s name as holy.

“Your Kingdom Come”

I saw a marquee sign on the lawn of a church recently that read, “Jesus came to earth so that we could go to heaven.” This sighting happened during the season of Advent, so it made some sense, as a lead-up to Christmas, for the sign-maker to create a phrase that would describe the meaning of the Incarnation and offer eternal hope to a world focused on the temporal joys of overindulgence. But I’m just not sure that the primary purpose of God breaking into human history was simply so that we could leave this earth.

Of course, as followers of Christ we live with the hope of life eternal in the glory of God’s presence. Until then, however, the reign of God that began in Jesus ushered in the promise of peace, justice, love, and light for the human family here and now. This is our purpose here, as the Body of Christ on earth. We are to pray for and create kingdom values here, as his Body on earth, until that day when we experience a new heaven and a new earth.

If the kingdom of God is being created here and now as we say the words of Jesus’ prayer, then we need to raise and empower more people with souls that are large enough to forgive their oppressors. We need to raise up leaders who can create respect and cooperation between enemies. And we must long to follow visionaries who can inspire peace and justice around the world. To

The reign
of God
that began
in Jesus
ushered in
the promise
of peace,
justice, love,
and light.

pray the words “**Your kingdom come**” is to attempt to become the answer to our own prayers: to incarnate God’s kingdom reality.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- Do you agree that the kingdom of God is broader than personal salvation and going to heaven? Why or why not?

“Give Us Each Day Our Daily Bread”

For centuries in the western world, bread has been the most basic part of a daily diet. In many countries, eating bread each day is essential to human well-being. In many places, this staple food has even become a cultural symbol. For example, France is renowned the world over for its bread. Other countries have essential food as well. In Thailand, rice is the daily staple. Each culture has its symbolic food affirming basic nutrition as essential to human well-being.

Asking God for daily bread is the most vulnerable and basic way of asking God to take care of our fundamental needs. We’re not asking for more than we need. We’re not asking for something that causes others to go without. We’re asking for the basic stuff of life and acknowledging God as the giver of life itself.



QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways are you expecting from God more than you need?

“And Forgive Us Our Sins”

Offering and receiving forgiveness is not easy. It takes courage. But practicing forgiveness marks us as followers

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 5: A MODEL FOR PRAYER

December 29
(MONDAY)

Whenever You Pray
MATTHEW 6:1-8

December 30
(TUESDAY)

You Shall Not Profane My Name
LEVITICUS 22:26-33

December 31
(WEDNESDAY)

Bless God’s Holy Name
PSALM 103:1-13

January 1
(THURSDAY)

God’s Kingdom Has Come Near
LUKE 10:1-11

of Jesus like no other single act. Many American Baptists remember the model of forgiveness offered by Hector and Argentina Gonzalez when their son was killed by a drunk driver. Hector, past president of American Baptist Churches, USA, is an inspiration to many.

It was their son's birthday and Hector Gonzalez and his wife, Argentina, wanted to celebrate a special life in a special way. They spent part of their day in prison visiting a young man named Hao Lin. The couple rejoiced as they heard Hao Lin's testimony and listened to his earnest prayers as he asked the Lord Jesus to become part of his life. Hector and Argentina had visited Hao Lin before, and they had both prayed for his redemption and salvation.

Hao Lin placed his two hands against the glass of his visitor's cell and Hector and Argentina linked their hands and then each pressed his and her hand on Hao Lin's—on the hands of their son's killer. Their son, Hector J. Gonzalez, would have celebrated his 44th birthday on that December 30, 2005.

Hector J.'s and Hao Lin's lives intersected on August 28, 2004. Hector J., a Homeland Security guard at the San Jose Airport in California, was on the Bayshore Freeway traveling to work. His car stalled, so he pulled over to the side of the freeway. Suddenly, an out-of-control vehicle veered off the highway, and the silence of the night was shattered with a crash. Hector J. died that night. Hao Lin, the driver whose blood showed excess levels of drugs and alcohol, was able to maneuver his car back onto the road and drive away—soon to be apprehended, charged with a number of offenses and imprisoned.

After learning of his son's death, Hector said this about his son: "He knew the Lord and is resting while we are suffering. With God's help, we will get through this."

God led them through by enabling the family to forgive. This became evident at Hao Lin's sentencing hearing at which the entire Gonzalez family expressed their forgiveness in words and letters, and urged the court to be lenient. Hector J.'s son Marc testified, "It is because of God's true forgiveness that I can stand up here and tell you that you are forgiven." This plea for leniency, along with Hao Lin's obvious remorse, had an effect on the judge. Hao Lin was

sentenced to one year in county jail and four years of “hard probation.” In a world of violence, retribution, and obsessive self-interest, here is an authentic moment of grace, a word of love and a profound testimony to the Gospel.

The Gonzalez family did not stop there. Argentina received permission to have a Bible delivered to Hao Lin. Later, Hector J.’s sister, Mirna Borkman, was the first member of the Gonzalez family to visit Hao Lin in jail. She prayed with him and rejoiced when he indicated a desire to become a Christian.

One year to the day of the accident, Hector Gonzalez stood in front of the General Board of the American Baptist Churches USA to share his testimony. Hearing his story, the group rejoiced with Hector in the strength that God has given his family in this crisis. Tears flowed as Hector said, “If it took my son’s death to make it possible for another to come to Christ, it was worth it.”¹

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- For what do you need forgiveness, and for what do you need to forgive others?

“And Do Not Bring Us to the Time of Trial”

In 2009, my twenty-four-year-old son Brandon died after a twenty-year struggle with cancer, multiple surgeries, and debilitating treatment. It was a devastating loss. Over the years I’ve learned that it’s possible to be confronted with trials that feel simply too great to endure, yet each of us has our own capacity to find strength, comfort, and grace to face those life experiences that threaten to destroy us. Asking God to “save us” from those things that are “too great” becomes a vulnerable prayer of surrender and a lament in the face of life’s potential for pain, suffering, and injustice.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 5: A MODEL FOR PRAYER

January 2
(FRIDAY)

*Do Not Worry
about Your Life*
MATTHEW
6:25-34

January 3
(SATURDAY)

*The Lord Will
Not Abandon
You*
PSALM 37:27-34

January 4
(SUNDAY)

*Lord, Teach Us
to Pray*
LUKE 11: 1-13

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you faced a trial that felt “too great to endure?” How did you find the strength to face into the pain? How did you pray?

† LUKE 11:5-13

⁵ And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹ “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

God’s Provision

In a culture such as that of ancient Palestine, where honor and shame motivated much of societal behavior, it would have been unthinkable to disturb a neighbor in the middle of the night because you did not have enough food to offer your guests. This behavior would have been seen as shameless and dishonorable. It would have been even more shameless to turn down such a request. Reading the passage from this point of view helps us understand that Jesus’ hearers would have interpreted the human behavior in this passage as a negative behavior. Thus, this example provides an important contrast between a trustworthy and generous God who provides our needs and selfish humans who can too quickly turn their backs on others in a time of need.

One of the most beautiful and striking depictions of God’s care can be seen in the artwork of early Irish Christian tradition, in which stone crosses have been carved from top to bottom with biblical scenes. Each carved biblical scene is a depiction of God’s provision in a time of need.

From God protecting Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus being led away from danger on their flight to Egypt, these scenes are meditations that remain deeply etched in the hearts and minds of those who make a pilgrimage to this remote place. Because these scenes are carved in stone, God's promise to provide for our needs imprints our memories with a stone-like sense of assurance and power. God does provide, even when others fail us.

God will
provide for
us, like a
wise parent.

Because God's motivation is our well-being, Jesus tells us to ask, to search, and to knock, because God will respond (vv. 9-10). In the image of the child asking for food, the fish (v. 11) and the egg (v. 12) were among the better things parents could provide for their children to eat. The snake (v. 11) and the scorpion (v. 12) by contrast were among the most dangerous creatures children might encounter. The questions Jesus posed must have sounded ridiculous. Can you imagine giving your children something dangerous when they asked for something to eat? "Of course not!" was the expected answer. Although we are human (and therefore "evil"), we will provide "good gifts" for our children and keep them well. In like manner, of course God will provide for us, like a wise parent. God answers our prayers by satisfying our needs. In addition, God gives us the Holy Spirit (v. 13).

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- How does prayer nurture your relationship to the Holy Spirit?

NOTE

1. Adapted from Bob Roberts, "The Spirit of Forgiveness," *Pastor to Pastor* (Valley Forge: American Baptist Churches, USA, 2011).

Jesus Prays for the Disciples

SCRIPTURE: John 17:1-26

KEY VERSE: **As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.** —John 17:21

Who We Are

My grandfather was five years old when he immigrated to the United States with my great grandparents. They came from the northern part of Sweden and were used to the challenge of farming in a cold climate. South Dakota seemed the right place to put a plow in the ground and begin a new life.

As a young boy, Grandpa learned English easily and acquired survival skills quickly. He took care of himself, woke up early, worked hard, and began to make his own way in his new home country. Before long he left school behind and purchased his first truck and developed a growing business hauling grain and livestock to Sioux Falls. He worked alone, creating elaborate systems in his barn that allowed him to change out the sides on his trucks, transforming them into the appropriate vehicle for the job at hand. He was smart, independent, self-reliant, creative, and strong. As a young boy I idolized my grandfather. He was my hero, and he didn't need help—from anyone. Later, when I learned



As a young
boy I
idolized my
grandfather.

about the concept of “rugged individualism” I was convinced that researchers had created the concept from studying my grandfather.

The rather isolated life on the northern plains of the American frontier helped to create many such individuals. The lessons learned and patterns created in those early years of immigration reverberate through American culture to this day, and as a result individualism has become the norm. This individualism is now one of the challenges that Christians face as we seek to become the beloved community for whom Jesus prayed.

Today’s Scripture gives us a glimpse into Jesus’ desire for the unity and well-being of his disciples. He wants us to have the same sense of godly identity that he experienced, and he longs for unity among those who follow him, in order that we might know *who* we are and *whose* we are.

After speaking to the disciples in John 16, Jesus turned to God in prayer. He began this prayer for unity with the assurance that the glory of God had come to earth in him. Eastern Orthodox Christian theologians talk about God as “Uncreated Light”—light that existed before anything was created. Before the world was created Jesus experienced that light and, in a certain sense, brought it with him when he emerged on earth to become part of the human story, bringing the gift of eternal life. Jesus understood the light, glory, and power of God in a way that human beings did not. His desire for us to partake in God’s divine nature and glory is at the heart of his prayer.

† JOHN 17:6-12

⁶ “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 6: JESUS PRAYS FOR THE DISCIPLES

January 5

(MONDAY)

*Revealing the
Words of the
Lord*

EXODUS 4:27-31

January 6

(TUESDAY)

*Treasuring
God’s Word in
Your Heart*

PSALM 119:9-16

January 7

(WEDNESDAY)

*Obey the Words
of the Lord*

JEREMIAH

35:12-17

January 8

(THURSDAY)

*Abide in My
Love*

JOHN 15:1-11

truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.¹² While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.

Whose We Are

We are gifted and unique. This forms “who” we are. But our connection to Jesus and his connection to God as reflected in Jesus’ prayer for us describes “whose” we are. **“All mine are yours, and yours are mine,”** Jesus said in his prayer for his disciples.

We are
gifted and
unique.

As a psychotherapist, my wife Rita has applied a Family Systems approach to understanding family dynamics and uses these insights in her work with families and children. Family Systems theory teaches us that we cannot understand our lives and heal our brokenness outside the crucible called “family” since, for the vast majority of human beings, it has had the most influence on our growth and development.

This wisdom helps us understand not only who we are as individuals but whose we are in relationship to others. We all develop a sense of “who” we are, but that individual consciousness has a context in which it is formed and that has a deep and lasting impact on us. That context is known as “whose” we are. Noted organizational consultant Dr. Margaret Wheatley has said, “Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation.”¹ In other words, we belong to a web that is greater than our individual lives.

From her organizational research, Wheatley goes on to say, “Relationships are not only primary, but are the only way we can operate.”² In the individualism of our country’s dominant culture, it can be difficult to understand that we are

Nothing
exists in
isolation.

not simply individuals living in isolation. Rather, we are individuals who belong to something greater than ourselves. According to Jesus, that “something greater,” that web of life and belonging, is in God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- In light of the understanding that our individual identity is part of a larger identity, how do you interpret Jesus’ prayer in verses 6-12?
- As his disciples, what is the identity we share with Jesus?

† JOHN 17:13

¹³ But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

The Reason for the Prayer

In **verse 13** Jesus gave the reason for his prayer: that our joy may be complete. The Greek word used for “joy” is *charan*. Literally translated, it means “grace recognized.” The suggestion here is that deep joy is linked to the recognition of God’s grace working in our lives. It invokes an image of water filling a cup from the bottom to the top—gratitude and peace rising in us from the depths.

In this way, joy is different from happiness. Happiness is related to the word *happenance* and is dependent on good things happening to us. For example, getting a raise at work, seeing our favorite sports team win a game, or receiving an award for our accomplishments are all things that happen to us that make us happy. But joy, like grace, isn’t linked to our outer circumstances. Joy is the

Deep joy is linked to the recognition of God’s grace working in our lives.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 6: JESUS PRAYS FOR THE DISCIPLES

January 9
(FRIDAY)
This is Eternal Life
JOHN 17:1-5

January 10
(SATURDAY)
Making Known the Lord’s Name
JOHN 17:22-26

January 11
(SUNDAY)
Sanctified in the Truth
JOHN 17:6-21

recognition that all of life is a gift. Joy comes to completion in us when we recognize our oneness with Christ and the life abundant that he represents.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways do you experience joy in your life?

† JOHN 17:14-19

¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Passing Through

Verses 14-19 remind me of a popular poster from a few years ago. It depicted a traveler with an oversized shoe taking a giant step forward and said in bold letters, “Just Passin’ Thru.” There is a real sense that those of us who have been born into the kingdom of God are not of this world. Rather, we are citizens of another world, namely, the one Jesus began creating while he was on this earth: a world of justice, equality, peace, aliveness, and joy.

This “other” world, as it exists now, is not a utopian paradise. Rather, it is a messy and vibrant life that values authentic relationships and respectful cooperation. Songwriter Ken Medema calls the type of common life found in this “other” world a “Love House.” In his song “How Do You Build a Love House?” he describes the process of authentic community building. He sings, “How do you build a love house? How do you make it strong? How do you build a love house so it will last you long? Well you cannot build a love house of wood and



brick and glass. It takes talking and working and playing and praying to make a love house last.”³

Building a world where kingdom values are prevalent is our work to do. The Greek word for *sanctify*, as used in this verse, means “to make holy,” or “to set apart.” Jesus prayed that we would be “sanctified” in this process so that we can know and live out the truth of God’s kingdom even as we live in the midst of a world that rejects this truth.

Building a world where kingdom values are prevalent is our work to do.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways is your life sanctified to honor God?
- How would you describe what you have been sent by Christ to do in the world?
- In what ways does your church create community? How do you “build a love house” together?

† JOHN 17:20-21

²⁰ “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Oneness in Christ

For many years, my wife Rita and I have worked together to provide premarital counseling for couples preparing for marriage. We have a cartoon on our refrigerator that reminds us of the challenges that couples face as they create a life together. In the first frame of the cartoon, a couple dressed in their wedding attire are standing in the chancel facing the front of the sanctuary with a pastor standing in front of them. In the next frame, the pastor, with hand raised in a gesture of blessing, says, “And the two shall become



one.” In the final frame, one spouse looks at the other and says, “Yeah, but which one?” Humor helps, because the journey toward oneness is challenging.

The journey
toward
oneness is
challenging.

Jesus was not only praying for the oneness of his disciples, but also for the oneness of all those in the Christian family who would come after them. He was asking for a legacy of oneness that places God as the centerpiece. Jesus described the outcome of this oneness, of the faithfulness of those who followed him, as nothing less than an inspired belief throughout the world that Jesus is the “sent one” of God.

The unity and oneness of the Christian family has tremendously positive consequences for the sake of God’s kingdom. Why, then, are we so divided? Too often the world reads headlines like these: “The Battle of Bethlehem: 100 rival priests clash at church built to mark birth of Jesus.” The headline is then accompanied by a graphic YouTube video of rival Christian groups fighting inside the church. In addition, the Internet is filled with images of Christian leaders discussing why other Christian leaders are wrong in their views. Competition among churches for parishioners is rampant, with terms like “sheep stealing” becoming part of church growth vocabulary. Classical church musicians publically disparage contemporary church music styles as being trite and shallow. Contemporary worship leaders complain that traditional churches are irrelevant and cold when it comes to worship and music. And on it goes. There is public disunity in the body of Christ, even as Jesus’ words, “that they may be one,” are read in worship throughout the world.

It’s time for an awakening of unity within the church. With so much at stake, let’s put aside our petty liturgical preferences and ego-invested theologies for the sake of the gospel. Jesus is praying for us to make it so.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Do you have acquaintances who live out their Christian witness in a Christian “family” different than your own? What do you know about their culture and beliefs? How could you learn more about who they are? How could this new understanding help create a sense of unity between you?

The End of the Prayer

In the final verses of **John 17 (vv. 22-26)**, Jesus confirmed that his followers were now becoming his presence in the world. The church worldwide is now the Body of Christ.

Jewish thought did not separate the body from the soul. A person's character, personality, gifts, and spirit were thought of as a unit, and in this way, a person was a whole being. As a Jewish Rabbi, Jesus was faithful to this tradition. Applying this thought to Jesus' prayer, we can see that he described the church (the body) as being infused with his character, his love, and his understanding (the soul). In this understanding, Jesus and his church are united in spirit, mission, and purpose.

The church
worldwide
is now the
Body of
Christ.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways can you fulfill Jesus' desire for unity among believers?

NOTES

1. Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2002), 19.

2. Margaret J. Wheatley, "Turning to One Another," Keynote Address: Kansas Health Foundation 2000 (Leadership Institute, Spring 2000), available online at: www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/turningtooneanother.html.

3. Ken Medema, "How Do You Build a Love House?" from *Songs for a Long Winter's Night*, 1985.

Jesus Intercedes for Us

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 4:14–5:10

KEY VERSE: **We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.**

—Hebrews 4:15

Prayer as Intercession

People often have someone who makes special efforts on their behalf. A coworker may recommend someone for a promotion, or a parent may arrange a meeting with a teacher to help a student solve a problem at school.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that as children of God, we too are the recipients of special efforts on our behalf. In today's Scripture reading we learn that God appointed Jesus as an intercessor on behalf of God's people. Jesus offered prayers of intercession while on earth, and he now continues this intercession in the heavenly realms.

Let's explore the uniqueness of prayer as intercession. To do this, contrast intercessory prayer with prayers of petition. A *petition* is a formal request that something take place. In prayers of petition we ask, request, or appeal to God to do something or to give something to us or to someone else. A prayer of petition may require very little from the person praying. *Intercession* is quite different. To intercede means to intervene on behalf of another. For example, if two people are arguing, a third person might intervene in order to mediate the conversation. The one intervening is acting on behalf of the others. To offer a prayer of intercession, therefore, means to offer up yourself on someone else's behalf.

Prayers of intercession should not be offered lightly. When we intercede for someone else, we may be invited by God to become the answer

to our own prayer. Intercessory prayer is prayer that is active and engaged. The author of Hebrews wants us to know that Jesus is our intercessor and is actively engaged with God on our behalf.

† HEBREWS 4:14–5:4

¹⁴ Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

5 Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; ³ and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. ⁴ And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

A Great High Priest

It is not common for worshippers in Protestant congregations to use the word *priest* for their worship leaders. The word most often used is *pastor*. The word *pastor* comes from the word for “shepherd.” Whether leading the congregation in worship, teaching a Bible study, or visiting someone in the hospital, a pastor is seen as the one “shepherding” the people. A priest is also a pastor, or shepherd, but the word *priest* implies an additional empowerment for administering the sacraments of the church. In the Judaism of Jesus’ day, priests were the keepers of the rituals and had special ceremonial roles. One priest was elevated to the position of high priest and was the only one with authority to enter the innermost chamber of the temple.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 7: JESUS INTERCEDES FOR US

January 12
(MONDAY)

*The Grace
of God Has
Appeared*
TITUS 2:11-15

January 13
(TUESDAY)

*An Advocate
with God*
1 JOHN 2:1-6

January 14
(WEDNESDAY)

*Our Faithful
High Priest*
HEBREWS 3:1-6

January 15
(THURSDAY)

*Jesus Prayed in
Anguish*
LUKE 22:39-46

To understand the importance of the high priest in Jewish life, one must first understand the religious context of first-century Judaism and the role the temple played in the lives of the people. The Jerusalem temple was the most deeply revered and holiest place in Judaism. It symbolized the meeting place between God and God's chosen people. The most valuable and mysterious room in the first-century Jerusalem temple was the Holy of Holies. It housed the two tablets of the Ten Commandments inside the Ark of the Covenant. Once a year, on Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement—the high priest would enter this room and intercede on behalf of the Hebrew people. Because only the high priest could do this, his was a very important role. The temple is so important to the Jewish people that ever since it was destroyed in AD 70, traditional observant Jews have prayed three times a day for its restoration.



The High Priest, detail from an illustration from the 1890 Holman Bible

With this understanding of the temple and the role of the high priest as mediator for God's people, the book of Hebrews wants us to understand the cosmic significance of Jesus as the high priest of heaven. Jesus has taken on the role of an earthly high priest with two important exceptions: 1) He is not bound by the limitations of earth, and 2) Through his human experience, we recognize that God is sympathetic to our human struggles and weaknesses. This makes Jesus merciful and gracious while, at the same time, opening the way for us to approach God's throne without fear.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How do you interpret the idea of “approaching God's throne”?
- What does that image say about God?
- What other language would convey a similar idea?
- In what ways do you experience Jesus' help in approaching God?

- Do you find this to be a helpful way to experience God and Jesus? Why or why not?
- What does it mean to say that Jesus was “subject to weakness” (v. 2)?

† HEBREWS 5:5-10

⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;

⁶ as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

The Order of Melchizedek

In the Hebrew Bible, a priest was required to be a descendant of Levi. A high priest who entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement was required to be a descendant of Aaron, Levi’s great grandson. Indeed, all Aaronic priests had to trace their ancestry to Aaron. Because Hebrew kings came from the line of Judah, they could not be priests. Yet in these verses Jesus is said to be a priest even though he was from the line of David in the tribe of Judah (see **Hebrews 7:14**) and not from the line of Aaron. The writer of Hebrews explains this by saying that, rather than being in the Levitical priesthood, Jesus was in the priesthood of Melchizedek, a king who was also a priest, and therefore, like Melchizedek, able to be both priest and king.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 7: JESUS INTERCEDES FOR US

January 16
(FRIDAY)
*Gratitude for
God’s Steadfast
Love*
PSALM 107:1-15

January 17
(SATURDAY)
*Boldness and
Confidence
through Faith*
EPHESIANS 3:7-13

January 18
(SUNDAY)
*A Great High
Priest*
HEBREWS
4:14–5:10

By making this distinction, the writer of Hebrews is contrasting the two priesthoods, and this contrast demonstrates to us that Jesus' priesthood was different from that of the priests in Aaron's line. Aaron's priesthood was temporary and continually changed due to the death of the priest (see **Hebrews 7:23**). Yet the priesthood of Jesus is eternal and unchanging (compare **Hebrews 7:24-25**). While the Levitical priesthood ministered to only one nation, the Melchizedek priesthood ministers to all people.

The
priesthood
of Jesus is
eternal and
unchanging.

Practicing Intercession

As we follow Jesus' example, we too can engage in intercessory prayer for others. In light of the distinction between petitionary prayer and intercessory prayer, what might your congregation do to become more involved in prayers of intercession? Here's one suggestion:

I recently took part in a creative worship service of intercessory prayer that took on visual and symbolic meaning. As participants entered the sanctuary, they were given long, thin strips of colored fabric. During a time of "response and deepening," worshipers were invited to come forward, write their intercession on the strip of cloth, and tie it to a wooden ladder set up in the front of the sanctuary. It created a lasting and colorful visual image of our prayers ascending to heaven.

The pastors removed the strips of cloth after the service and tied them onto the limbs of a tree, where they could blow in the wind, creating another beautiful symbolic image of our prayers continuing. A photograph of those colorful strips of cloth hanging in the tree, blowing in the wind, was sent out to the congregation the following week as a reminder of their prayers. Like prayer candles burning in a cathedral, these "prayer flags" with intercessory prayers written on them allowed the moment of response in worship to reverberate long after worshipers had vacated the sanctuary.

We too can
engage in
intercessory
prayer for
others.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- If you had attended the service described above, what would you have written on your strip of cloth?
- Are most of your prayers petitionary or intercessory?

Intercession
requires
a broad
opening in
which to
hear God's
guidance.

Prayers of Intercession

Opening our hearts to God in prayer is more important than arriving at some level of professional praying. Like all types of prayer, intercession needs to be practiced, but our only advancement will be the degree to which we open our hearts to God's leading. Since praying for the welfare of others may require our involvement in their lives, intercession requires a broad opening in which to hear God's guidance. The following prayer is a good way to begin the process of opening up to what God may request of us in response to our intercession.

Prayers of the People¹

by Bruce Greer

LEADER: We thank you, Eternal God, for the ancient and living word handed down to us through the ages from the pages of sacred writings.

PEOPLE: **Open our hearts, O God, to your wisdom and inspiration.**

Silence (30 seconds)

LEADER: We thank you for the challenging words of Jesus—to put first things first in our lives, to place our greatest effort and energy on what is most important.

PEOPLE: **Help us, O God, to trust these words of wisdom and inspiration.**

Silence (30 seconds)

LEADER: We thank you for the admonition of Saint Paul—not to worry about anything, but in everything, through thankful prayers and supplications, to make our requests known to you.

PEOPLE: **Help us, O God, to trust in these words of wisdom and inspiration.**

Silence (30 seconds)

LEADER: We thank you, Eternal God, for those times and places when we have experienced your presence and peace, which surpasses all understanding.

PEOPLE: We thank you, Lord, for your peace, which surpasses our understanding.

Silence (30 seconds)

LEADER: Grant us, O God, that same peace this day as we pray...

PEOPLE: For our world, broken with shameless conflict and burdened with needless suffering.

For our nation, divided by political self-interest and distracted by selfish needs.

For our people, divided by religion, class, ethnicity, and economics. For ourselves, burdened with worry and distracted by lesser priorities.

Silence (30 seconds)

LEADER: Grant us, O God, that same peace this day as we pray...

PEOPLE: For our world, united by the good will of so many well-meaning people and encouraged by the sacrifice of so many in selfless service.

For our nation, unified by timeless principles and blessed with an abundance of resources for the common good.

For our people, unified by higher purposes and ever blessed with endless possibility.

For ourselves, strengthened by your grace and assured by your peace.

Silence (30 seconds)

LEADER: Receive, O God, the prayers we now offer in silence.

Silence (2 minutes)

LEADER: May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard our hearts and our minds, now and forever.

ALL: May it be so in us. And, may we be open to God's guidance in serving others. Amen.

NOTE

1. Bruce Greer, "Prayers of the People," (unpublished, written in 2005). Used by permission of the author.

We Pray for One Another

SCRIPTURE: James 5:13-18

KEY VERSE: **Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.** —James 5:16

Worship as a Place of Healing

According to the World Health Organization, “Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”¹ If this is true, then healing into health is different than curing an illness. This is an important distinction because it places quality of life at the center of the healing process.

Today’s Scripture passage describes what the Christian family needs to practice when members of the body are not experiencing a healthy state of well-being. We should pray, sing, anoint, confess, forgive, and do all we can to manifest God’s healing presence. The text tells us that the love and compassion required to do the work of healing and reconciling is available to those who consider themselves Jesus’ followers today. Weekly worship even provides a setting in which God’s people can open themselves to God’s radical love and become agents of healing and reconciliation.

In the face of suffering, how can worship be a place of openness and response, lament and forgiveness, anointing and healing? In her lyrics to the song “Come and Find the Quiet Center,” Shirley Erena Murray suggests the following: “In the Spirit let us travel, open to each other’s pain. Let our loves and fears unravel, celebrate

In the face
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and
response?

the space we gain.” Openness to others creates space. In this spaciousness, where love and fear have unraveled, God moves among us and healing takes place.

Openness
to others
creates
space.

† JAMES 5:13-16

¹³ Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Journeying with Our Son

When our son Brandon was eight years old, he had been living for half of his young life with brain cancer and the devastating results of treatment. He had already had seventeen surgeries, exhausting rounds of chemotherapy and radiation, and an experimental autologous bone-marrow transplant in Southern California. His fragile body was too vulnerable for any more treatment.

Having shared our story in a variety of places, we received love and prayers from many sincere and deeply spiritual people. One Sunday, a Greek Orthodox monk came into our Baptist church. With a flowing beard that descended gently to his waist, an oversized cylindrical cap, and an unadorned monk's robe, he had created quite a stir in the narthex. The mysterious visitor waited patiently for the benediction before asking to speak with me. As he approached, the warmth in his eyes was immediate. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, “I heard about your son and his suffering. I realize there is not much I can do to ease your pain, but I wanted to offer what I have.”

He reached into his pocket and revealed a small, clear bottle of liquid with a tiny cork in the opening. “This is oil that drips from the grave of Saint Walburga



in Germany. She was known for her gentleness, humility, and charity, as well as for her prayers of healing for the sick. St. Walburga is the patron saint of a monastery in Boulder. The sisters there gave me this oil to pass along to you. They thought you might want to use it to anoint your son as you pray.”

I was overcome with his kindness and the respect he showed for Brandon’s suffering and my family’s pain. As I began to weep, he embraced me and left as quietly as he had come.

Taking seriously the words of the fifth chapter of James, I called together some church friends for prayer at our home one evening that week. Brandon was sleeping when we all crossed the threshold into his room. But as we surrounded his bed to pray for healing and to anoint him with the oil that had so generously come to me, he sat straight up, wide awake, and said, “What are you guys doing?” I told him the whole story and read to him from the book of James. Then we anointed him and prayed our prayers born of hope, laden with lament, and filled with love.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- Have you had an experience of anointing with oil and praying for someone who is ill? How would you describe it? What was that experience like for you?

Confession

In his book, *Wishful Thinking*, Fredrick Buechner says, “To confess your sins to God is not to tell God anything God doesn’t already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the Bridge.”² In addition to the sacrament of anointing as described above, confession is historically another one of the sacraments of the Christian church. The word *sacrament* comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*, which means “a sign of the sacred.” One could describe

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 8: WE PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER

January 19
(MONDAY)

*Let Us Seek
God’s Favor
Together*
ZECHARIAH
8:18-23

January 20
(TUESDAY)

*Pray to the
Lord for Us*
JEREMIAH 42:1-6

January 21
(WEDNESDAY)

*We Pray to God
for You*
2 THESSALONIANS 1:5-12

January 22
(THURSDAY)

*You Heard My
Plea*
LAMENTATIONS
3:52-58

a sacrament as “an outward sign of an inner grace.” In other words, a sacrament is a public celebration of God’s active and specific presence in a person’s life.



Seven sacraments are observed in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican traditions of the Christian faith. Those sacraments are divided into three main categories: Initiation, Healing, and Mission and Service. *Initiation* includes: 1) baptism, 2) confirmation, and 3) Eucharist (Communion.) *Healing* includes 4) reconciliation (also known as confession) and 5) extreme unction (prayers of healing for the sick and dying). *Mission and Service* includes 6) marriage and 7) holy orders. Of these seven, Protestant traditions observe only two—baptism and Communion—as sacraments.

Let’s explore the sacramental qualities of confession, the act of telling one’s sins to God or a priest. Outside the Protestant Church, an Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Anglican Christian might practice confession and seek forgiveness through a priest on a regular basis. Traditionally, one enters into a small confessional unit in which a priest is seated. A person speaks his or her confession through the screen of the confessional and is offered a penance for sins committed.

For the most part, Protestants, including Baptists, have rejected the notion that God’s forgiveness could only be accessed through the mediation of a priest. Their argument is that God has called us all to be priests, so we don’t need to go to a “professional” priest for mediation with God. All believers, they say, have the right to stand before God on their own. This belief or doctrine has been called the “priesthood of all believers.” The idea is that we can make our own confession directly to God through Christ.

The emphasis in this teaching, however, is on “rights.” Very little, if anything, is ever said about the responsibility of priesthood, which includes service to one another. If we are all priests, then we have also the responsibility of service toward

A sacrament is a public celebration of God’s active and specific presence in a person’s life.

each other. Baptist pastor Carlyle Marney offers us a helpful insight: “How does it work, the priesthood of the believer?” he wrote. “You, you, take your priesthood wherever you are, to be whatever priests must be—you, all of you, are the ministry of the Word. This does not mean that you are competent to deal with God for yourself. It means rather that you are competent to deal with God for the neighbor.”³

The individualism of life in the United States has invaded our theology of the church. The emphasis upon our individual right to stand before God without a human mediator has placed our focus squarely on ourselves. This argument has taken us away from the point of our text in James—“**Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another**” (v. 16)—that we are to act as priests for one another.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Do you confess your sins to others? Why or why not?
- In what ways does confessing a sin help a person on his or her journey toward wholeness?

Journey toward Healing

In Session Four we pointed out that the root word of the word *salvation* is *salve*, which demonstrates a relationship to the concepts of medicine and healing. When salvation is considered in this way, we view the saving work of Jesus as a journey into wholeness. The process of salvation can then be seen as a gradual healing of body, mind, and spirit. Instead of simply a dramatic, immediate conversion experience, the nondramatic journey toward healing is filled with progressive, inner transformations that lead, in time, to long-term health and fulfillment.

If one aspect of salvation is the process of healing, then worship and prayer that focus on inner restoration and wholeness become an important ongoing ministry

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 8: WE PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER

January 23
(FRIDAY)

*Never Ceasing
to Pray for You*
1 SAMUEL
12:19-25

January 24
(SATURDAY)

*The Prophets’
Suffering and
Patience*
JAMES 5:1-12

January 25
(SUNDAY)

*The Prayer of
Faith*
JAMES 5:13-18

of the church. Many Gospel stories describe Jesus' own emphasis on healing. Clearly, leading people to wholeness in body, mind, and spirit was a significant part of Christ's earthly mission. James tells us to pray for one another, so that we may be healed. Through services of healing prayer, the church fulfills that call.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Does your church have a regular service of healing prayer?
- The season of Lent and the season of Advent provide a context for a service of healing prayer. What might that kind of experience look like in your church? What components of worship are important to include?

† JAMES 5:17-18

¹⁷ Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

Encouragement for a Life of Prayer

Elijah was the boldest of the Old Testament prophets. He raised a child from death to life, defeated 450 prophets of Baal, and went on to prophesy the deaths of Ahab, King Ahaziah, and Jezebel. He emerges from Scripture in mythic proportions, having acted with superhuman strength on God's behalf. Yet James found it important to offer an unvarnished reminder that Elijah was **"a human being like us."** Taken to heart, the message of these verses is clear: we can pray fervently and our prayers will matter. We don't have to be superhuman, a saint, or a monk to practice a life of prayer.



"Child at Prayer" by
Eastman Johnson, c. 1873

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What is your current practice of prayer?
- What fulfills you about your life of prayer? What changes would you like to make?

Closing Litany

The following litany⁴ was written by John Pipe. Read it aloud in class to end your session.

We Are All Disabled

LEADER: We are all disabled by sin and sickness, by despair and sadness, by hate and prejudice.

PEOPLE: **Heal us of our disabilities, O God.**

LEADER: Some of our bodies are disabled by accidents of nature and accidents from just being human; we have conditions that handicap us: we are blind, deaf, and unable to talk, to walk, to enjoy simple pleasures.

PEOPLE: **Heal us of our physical disabilities, O God.**

LEADER: Most of us have disabilities that make us blind to the hurting people, the people who are disabled because of fear, poverty, race, or greed, whom we fail to see or understand or just ignore.

PEOPLE: **Heal us of the disabilities that keep us from seeing poverty, racism, and sexism.**

LEADER: We are all disabled by sins that keep us from seeing our own mistakes, shortcomings, anger, biases, and weaknesses.

ALL: **God, we come before you acknowledging our disabilities and asking for your grace and mercy as we try to be open and aware of others and to see ourselves for who we are and can be through the power of your Holy Spirit.**

NOTES

1. "Frequently asked questions," World Health Organization website, online at www.who.int/suggestions/faq/en/.

2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 15.

3. Carlyle Marney, *Priests to Each Other*, quoted by Curtis Freeman in an article titled "Carlyle Marney on Pilgrim Priesthood" in *Baptists Today*, June 2002.

4. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 79.

The Discipline of Fasting

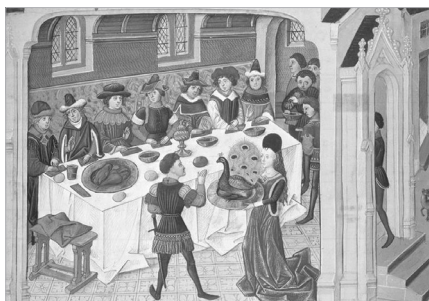
SCRIPTURE: Daniel 1:3-5, 8-17; Matthew 6:16-18; 9:14-17

KEY VERSE: **When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.** —Matthew 6:17-18

Feasting and Fasting

One of my favorite memories associated with feasting is of attending the annual Renaissance Christmas feast at the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite Valley a few years ago. Celebrated since 1927, the Bracebridge Dinner transforms the great hall of the hotel into a seventeenth-century English manor for a feast of food, song, and merriment. It's an artistic four-hour pageant of classic carols, Renaissance rituals, a historic seven-course meal, and high-energy entertainment from medieval Europe. One truly feels transported back in time to an English castle, complete with lords and ladies, squires and musicians, jugglers and poets. The Bracebridge Dinner is an over-the-top indulgence for all the senses, especially the taste buds.

One doesn't need to go to a Renaissance dinner to experience feasting, however. In our modern world, one can eat like a medieval king or queen just by driving down the street to the local buffet restaurant,



Mid-15th century painting

which often has a name such as “King’s Table” or “Caesar’s Buffet.” The “royal banquet” is nearly always available. Feasting has become a popular pastime.

Fasting, however, is much less fun and takes disciplined effort.

For one thing, it’s nearly void of the social orientation of the feast. Friends seem to disappear when you announce you’re fasting. It’s an individualized effort, possibly filled with images of Elijah eating crumbs from a raven or a scary-looking, emaciated Buddha. It’s not exactly the most attractive option for a fulfilling, joy-filled spiritual life. Or is it? Let’s explore the feast and the fast from a different point of view.

Rather than thinking about feasting and fasting only in terms of food, I’d like to suggest a broader perspective. While it is true that feasting implies overindulgence, it also refers to a general experience of abundance. Let’s change the focus of feasting from gorging to the practice of fullness, or what Jesus called **“living life to the full”** (**John 10:10**). And while it is true that fasting implies the absence of food, it also refers to a general experience of emptiness. Let’s change the focus of fasting from starvation to the practice of letting go of something, or what Jesus called being **“poor in spirit”** (**Matthew 5:3**).

The litany at the end of this lesson offers a way to explore together a broader perspective on fasting and feasting. For example, it says:

Fast from complaining;

Feast on expressing appreciation.

In this way, fasting becomes a practice of letting go of our tendency to complain. Feasting becomes a desire to practice affirmation and appreciation. Both feasting and fasting can be seen as positive experiences.

Now let’s look at Jesus’ words on fasting.

Feasting
has become
a popular
pastime.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 9: FEASTING AND FASTING

January 26
(MONDAY)

*Draw Near to
Me, O Lord*
PSALM 69:5-18

January 27
(TUESDAY)

*Help Me, O
Lord My God*
PSALM 109:21-27

January 28
(WEDNESDAY)

*Humility before
God*
LUKE 18:9-14

January 29
(THURSDAY)

*If My People
Humble
Themselves*
2 CHRONICLES
7:11-18

† MATTHEW 6:16-18

¹⁶ “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Worship: Private, Corporate, or Both?

An awareness of the human tendency toward hypocrisy is one of the recurring themes of the Gospels. The word itself suggests an inability to act out that which one professes or believes. Hypocrisy occurs when a person says one thing in public but does the opposite in private.

In this passage, Jesus referred to those who fast publicly as hypocrites because their outward actions were designed to impress others rather than to serve their intended purpose, rightness with God. By their actions they claimed to be holy, yet their motivations were anything but pure.

Matthew 6:16-18 reminds us that our deep spiritual practices, like fasting (or almsgiving or prayer), are best when seen by God rather than when being displayed for others. These practices are meant for our own growth and maturity. They are not to be practiced as a public display that can be seen as hypocritical and self-serving.

This gets tricky, however, because some spiritual practices are often practiced corporately. Worship involves the offering of our lives to God and, therefore, necessarily involves the public sharing of who we really are deep inside. The common acts of worship—singing, giving, praising, and receiving—are threshold acts, opening up our inner lives to the outer world in very public ways. In order to avoid hypocrisy, these public actions must be done authentically and joyfully while maintaining integrity of heart.

I think we often confuse the words *personal* and *private*. Privacy implies being alone, out of contact with others, and it may be appropriate

Hypocrisy occurs when a person says one thing in public but does the opposite in private.

to certain actions of worship. Being personal, however, means that we are willing to live out who we really are, that we are willing to share our authentic experience and essential integrity. Seen in this light, it is clear that being personal is not the same as being private. While we don't necessarily put that part of ourselves on display for others, being personal opens up the depths of our being to others. It's not something we hide away for fear of being exposed. Even while engaging in a private act of worship, we can still be personal. Allowing others to see who we really are can be helpful. And it moves us away from hypocrisy toward integrity.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways have you used spiritual practices like fasting to call attention to yourself?

The Question of Fasting

Matthew 9:14-17 is a passage that offers more insight about Jesus' views concerning fasting. The disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus, "**Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?**" (v. 14). Jesus responded by likening his ministry to a wedding—it was a time to celebrate, not to fast! There was a right time for everything. There would be a time for fasting, but it wasn't now. Jesus' time on Earth was short, and while he was there he focused on the joy of sharing a meal with those he loved.

When we read this story alongside **Matthew 6:16-18**, we once again see Jesus' focus on a generosity of spirit and compassion toward others rather than on finding ways to prove how holy we are to other people. We must discern the right times for both feasting and fasting.

Having set a larger context for fasting, let's look now at **Daniel 1**, in which we find a focus on fasting as the actual act of giving up specific foods and beverages.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 9: FEASTING AND FASTING

January 30
(FRIDAY)

*Humble
Yourselves
before God*
2 CHRONICLES
34:24-33

January 31
(SATURDAY)

*An Appropriate
Time for Fasting*
MATTHEW 9:9-17

February 1
(SUNDAY)

To Honor God
DANIEL 1:5, 8-17;
MATTHEW
6:16-18

† DANIEL 1:3-5, 8-17

³ Then the king commanded his palace master Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility . . . ⁵ The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court. . . .

⁸ But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself. ⁹ Now God allowed Daniel to receive favor and compassion from the palace master. ¹⁰ The palace master said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king." ¹¹ Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: ¹² "Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe." ¹⁴ So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵ At the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations. ¹⁶ So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. ¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.

Refusing the Royal Treatment

History tells us that the book of Daniel is set in a period of time when Babylon (modern-day Iraq) had taken control of the kingdom of Judah (587–538 BC). The Babylonians captured some of the most robust Jewish young men to reeducate them to carry out work for the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel was one of those young men. King Nebuchadnezzar had high hopes for these new recruits and wanted them to be in top condition, so he ordered his own diet, food fit for a king, to be given to them.



Daniel knew the king's food had already been sacrificed to Babylonian gods. Daniel had consecrated his heart and body to God and didn't want to defile his body by eating this other food. In **Daniel 1:12** we read Daniel's request, **"Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink."** The Hebrew word here translated as "vegetables" is a word that includes all food grown from seed. So the diet requested by Daniel seems to be plant-based and centered around fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. And you can see in this verse that the only beverage was water.

Many years later when Daniel was fasting and praying, he had a vision for the future of Israel. In **Daniel 10:3**, the prophet described his fast: **"I had eaten no rich food, no meat or wine had entered my mouth, and I had not anointed myself at all, for the full three weeks."** (Note the similarities to Daniel's diet in **Daniel 1:12**). For twenty-one days, it appears that Daniel ate only fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, legumes, nuts, seeds, and healthy oils, and he drank only water.

Some Bible readers today believe that Daniel's request for a variation on the king's menu, a diet more in compliance with Jewish law and values, constituted a fast. While he did not give up food completely, he abstained from certain kinds of food.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Do you eat to live or do you live to eat?
- What kinds of things do you do to ritualize eating your meals? For example, do you pray? Do you light a candle?
- In what ways does your consumption of food help you feel closer to God? In what ways does your consumption of food make you feel farther away from God?
- How does fasting help you appreciate food? Are your senses heightened? Following a fast, does food taste different to you? Do you see it in a new way? Are the aromas more or less pleasing?

A Litany of Fasting and Feasting¹

(for use in class)

Fast from judging others;

Feast on Christ dwelling in them.

Fast from emphasis on differences;
 Feast on unity.

Fast from thoughts of illness;
 Feast on the gifts of healing.

Fast from discontent;
 Feast on gratitude.

Fast from anger and bitterness;
 Feast on forgiveness.

Fast from complaining;
 Feast on expressing appreciation.

Fast from problems that overwhelm;
 Feast on prayer that sustains.

Fast from seeking to control life;
 Feast on creative collaboration.

Fast from fear of pain;
 Feast on compassion for self and others.

Fast from lethargy and numbness;
 Feast on relational engagement.

Fast from fear and fearful thinking;
 Feast on trust and vulnerability.

Fast from meaningless distractions;
 Feast on awareness and mindfulness.

Fast from idle speech;
 Feast on intentional listening.

Fast from cluttering noises;
 Feast on purposeful silence.

Fast from neglecting others;
 Feast on giving others the gift of your time.

NOTE

1. This litany is attributed to William Arthur Ward (American author, teacher, and pastor, 1921–1994). Adapted by Brad Berglund.

Serving Neighbors, Serving God

SCRIPTURE: Luke 10:25-37

KEYVERSE: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” —Luke 10:36-37

Put to the Test

Quite a few Gospel stories describe Jesus being put to the test by those who were trying to discredit him. These people are usually depicted as lawyers or “teachers of the law,” and facing down these “official” inquisitors gave extra credence to Jesus’ message. Rather than simply passing their test with a law-abiding answer, Jesus took advantage of each of those opportunities to turn traditional attitudes on their heads and teach about the new law of love that was being ushered in through his life and ministry. The time-honored story of the “Good Samaritan” is the quintessential illustration of the way Jesus invites us to live as his disciples.

† LUKE 10:25-28

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷ He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

Loving God with Heart, Mind, Strength, and Soul

Perhaps you've crossed the threshold of a Jewish home and noticed a small decorative container attached to the right side molding of the door. Known as a mezuzah, this container designates the home as Jewish, reminding the occupants and all who enter of an important connection to the God of Abraham and centuries of Jewish heritage. This small case holds a piece of parchment inscribed with the words to the oldest prayer in the Jewish liturgy. It is called the *Shema*, its name taken from its first line, and it is spoken daily as part of the morning and evening Jewish liturgy.

Shema, meaning “hear,” is the first word of the prayer proclaiming the oneness of God, spoken to the people of Israel by Moses in the wilderness. “**Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone**” (Deuteronomy 6:4). This first line is then followed by the words recited by the lawyer in these verses from the Gospel of Luke: “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind.**” The second part—“**and your neighbor as yourself**”—is taken from **Leviticus 19:18**.

By his response to the lawyer's words, Jesus made it clear that these two commandments (love God and love your neighbor) are the key to inheriting eternal life. More than just a quantitative reference, the word *eternal* also connotes a quality of time. In other words, Jesus affirmed that the one who follows these commandments will live a valuable and meaningful life.

With these words, Jesus was reminding us how to love God: with heart, mind, strength, and soul. He also told us how to love others: as yourself. This vertical and horizontal dimension of love gives us the crux, or “cross,” of Jesus' message. Loving God (vertical) and loving others (horizontal) are the top priorities for those who call themselves his disciples.

These two commandments (love God and love your neighbor) are the key to inheriting eternal life.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- How would you describe the type of love affirmed in Luke 10:27?

† LUKE 10:29-37

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The Good Samaritan

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is about sixteen miles long. Today, it’s an easy trip by car through the desert. In Jesus’ day, however, the road to Jericho was hot, dusty, and fraught with peril. One particular stretch of the road, the scene for this story, was known as the “Way of Blood,” because so many people were robbed and killed there. People listening to Jesus knew precisely where he was placing this scene.

In Jesus’ story, the first person to come across the injured victim was a priest. In a hurry to get to his destination, he passed by on the other side of the road. Not long after this, a Levite—an upstanding temple-worker—also passed by. Then along came Jesus’ surprise character—a Samaritan.

It’s important to understand the stir that would have been caused by the introduction of this choice for the

Daily Bible Readings**WEEK 10:
SERVING
NEIGHBORS,
SERVING GOD****February 2**

(MONDAY)

*If You Wish to
Be Perfect*

MATTHEW

19:16-22

February 3

(TUESDAY)

*Mercy**Triumphs over
Judgment*

JAMES 2:8-13

February 4

(WEDNESDAY)

*Keep the**Instruction of
Moses*

JOSHUA 22:1-6

February 5

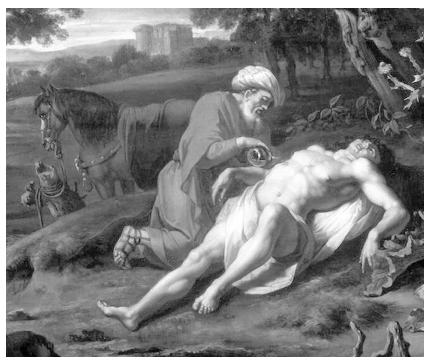
(THURSDAY)

*Look to the
Interests of
Others*

PHILIPPIANS

2:1-5

leading man. Samaritans were not esteemed by most of the Jews in the first century. The Samaritans were people who lived in what had been the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Samaria, the name of that kingdom's capital, was located between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. The Samaritans were a racially mixed culture with Jewish and indigenous ancestry.



Detail of painting titled "The Parable of the Good Samaritan" by Jan Wijnants, 1670

Although they worshiped the God of Israel, their views and practices were outside mainstream Judaism. They viewed only the first five books of the Bible as sacred, and rather than worship on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the Samaritans worshiped on Mount Gerazim. Like the Jews, the Samaritans were monotheistic.

Because of their less-than-normal Jewish practice and their mixed ancestry, the Samaritans were rejected and discriminated against by ordinary Jews. For example, rather than lower themselves by passing through the land of Samaria, Jews traveling back and forth from Judea to Galilee would cross over the Jordan River, bypass Samaria, and cross back over the river when possible. Samaritans shared in this first-century racism, only in reverse. They considered Jews to be inferior.

In light of this background, Jesus' story takes on liberating meaning, since it is the outcast Samaritan who stopped to give aid. Jesus made it clear that the Samaritan not only helped the man, he went "the extra mile" by cleaning the victim's wounds and bandaging them. The Samaritan likely would have had to create the bandages out of his own clothing. He then put the injured man on his donkey and took him to a place of refuge, paying for any expenses incurred. This is an extraordinary level of assistance, especially given the level of animosity between Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus told this parable in response to a specific question: "**Who is my neighbor?**" This was a matter that had been debated by Jewish leaders for centuries. While there was a consensus that the command to "love your

neighbor” applied to one’s fellow Jews (and converts to Judaism), beyond this, opinions varied. Some of the more extreme Pharisees interpreted the term *neighbor* only to mean other Pharisees. The Essenes excluded anyone who was not an Essene, for their teachings required that they hate all “the sons of darkness” (their term for non-Essenes).

Jesus’ parable, however, never answers that question. It does *not* make the point that anyone in need is one’s neighbor. Instead, the parable changes the original question entirely. **“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”** Jesus asked the scribe at the end of the parable (v. 36). This was a *new* question, a *different* question, and according to Jesus, the *right* question.

With this question, Jesus shifted the focus from the external to the internal, from definition to motivation, from object to subject, from others to the lawyer himself. The issue was not whether someone qualified as his neighbor, but whether the lawyer was willing to be neighborly by showing mercy, offering acceptance, and demonstrating love. **“Go and do likewise,”** Jesus told the lawyer (v. 37).

Racism Today

The 2005 movie *Crash* is set in Los Angeles, a city where nearly every nationality and culture finds expression. It’s a gritty, disturbing reminder of the sad divisions caused by racist attitudes and actions. The movie opens at the scene of a car accident. In the first line, Detective Graham Waters (Don Cheadle) says, “It’s the sense of touch. In any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people, people bump into you. In LA, nobody touches you. We’re always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something.” That line describes the way characters in the film literally crash into each other’s lives.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 10: SERVING NEIGHBORS, SERVING GOD

February 6
(FRIDAY)
The First and Greatest Commandment
MATTHEW
22:34-40

February 7
(SATURDAY)
Live by the Spirit
GALATIANS
5:10-17

February 8
(SUNDAY)
Who Is My Neighbor?
LUKE 10:25-34

The official movie description talks about the crafting of the film in this way: “This compelling urban thriller tracks the volatile intersection of a multiethnic cast of characters struggling to overcome their fears as they careen in and out of each other’s lives.” It’s a tough film to watch, but its realistic view of the tragic consequences of racism gives a modern-day expression to the age-old challenge of welcoming into our lives the “other,” the stranger, or as today’s Scripture lesson calls it, “my neighbor.” The film describes the sad results of segregated thinking and living, but it doesn’t really give any answers or solutions.

How can
we as
followers of
Jesus come
together
in all our
cultural
and racial
richness?

Martin Luther King Jr. had a vision in the 1960s that one day people, especially Christian people, would be able to come together in respect and love. In a sermon he preached at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC on March 31, 1968, Dr. King spoke words he had used in a variety of settings: “Eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of America.”

When the church growth movement was at its peak in the 1980s, one of the most popular principles promoted to evangelize and create a larger congregation was called “The Homogeneous Principle.” The argument behind this principle is that people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers. As a result, churches that are homogeneous in their membership grow fastest. Homogeneous churches promote “sameness” in the congregation. The focus is on gathering members who share a similar social, ethnic, or cultural background.

The belief, based in market research, is that people prefer to associate with people like themselves. Creating homogenous churches, therefore, is the most effective way to reach people. The result of this kind of thinking in a consumer-oriented society can actually work to grow a church. But, it lacks any of the deeper call of Jesus to love our neighbor as ourselves, especially the neighbor who is the “other.” How can we as followers of Jesus come together in all our cultural and racial richness to worship God together each week?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Has your congregation ever created multicultural worship experiences? What was it like?
- Knowing that it's difficult for any of us to see ourselves objectively within our own cultures, how would you describe your cultural preferences when it comes to worship?

What Is a Benediction?

The word *benediction* means “good speech” or “good word.” A benediction sends the congregation into the world to love and serve the least, to encourage and inspire the lonely, to awaken those who are spiritually asleep, and to impact and transform oppressive social structures. The benediction motivates and celebrates. It creates energy and promotes courage. When you offer a benediction, look people in the eye, raise your hands in a sign of blessing, and speak with strength and compassion.¹

The following benediction is adapted from the words of Mahatma Gandhi.²

VOICE 1: God demands nothing less than our complete self-surrender as the price of the only real freedom worth having.

ALL: I surrender all.

VOICE 2: When we lose ourselves, we immediately find ourselves in the service of all that lives.

ALL: Lost in wonder, love and grace,

VOICE 3: Service becomes our joy and re-creation. We are a new person, never weary of spending ourselves in the service of God's creation.

ALL: Make me a blessing. Out of my life, may Jesus shine!

NOTES

1. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 103.

2. Adapted from a quote by Mahatma Gandhi, found online at www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap45.htm, under the heading “The Gospel of Sarvodaya.”

Serving the Least

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 25:31-46

KEY VERSE: Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

—Matthew 25:40

Gathering for Worship and Service

The ability to worship God is a great gift to the church. Worship unites us in praise and reenergizes us in the Spirit. But I often hear people say things such as, “I’m not much of a worshiper; I’m more of a doer.” I think I understand what they are trying to say. They don’t sing very well or they get bored easily while listening to a sermon. But worship is so much more than singing and listening. Worship is a verb. It’s called the *act* of worship because it *is* for doers. In fact, the act of service is an essential part of the movement of corporate worship.

In *Wishful Thinking*, author Frederick Buechner writes, “Phrases like Worship Service or Service of Worship are tautologies. To worship God means to serve him.”¹ So, according to Buechner, worship itself is service, and our service is what happens because we worship.

At the close of corporate worship, benedictions that send us out to love and serve are helpful reminders that when we depart the sanctuary, we become the bridge between heaven and earth. An example of such a motivational benediction is as follows: “Our service of worship has ended. Our service to the world begins now. As you go, receive these words of Jesus anew: ‘You are the light of the world.’” Those are empowering words. Followers of Jesus are the

Worship
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us in the
Spirit.

body of Christ in the world today. At its best, worship empowers us to serve.

How are we to serve? That is the critical question. **Matthew 25:31-46**, the text for this session, is comprised entirely of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, and it provides us with an interesting answer.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways does worship give you (personally) opportunities to offer your life to God as an act of service?
- Is there a difference between serving God in worship and serving the world like Christ? If so, what is the difference?

† MATTHEW 25:31-46

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed,

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 11: SERVING THE LEAST

February 9
(MONDAY)

You Must Be Ready
MATTHEW
24:37-44

February 10
(TUESDAY)

Compassion and Justice for the Poor
LEVITICUS
19:9-15

February 11
(WEDNESDAY)

Open Your Hand to the Poor
DEUTERONOMY
15:7-11

February 12
(THURSDAY)

Celebrate with Presents for the Poor
ESTHER 9:19-23

depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Separating Sheep from Goats

The parable begins with the announcement of the coming of the Son of Man in glory with kingly authority (v. 31). God’s subsequent judgment of the nations is then described by drawing an analogy to a shepherd’s task of separating sheep from goats (vv. 32-33).

During the day, flocks of sheep and goats would intermingle, grazing on the same hillsides in Palestine. But every night they had to be separated. Sheep could remain outdoors at night, but goats had to be herded into enclosures for warmth. In a similar way, at the last judgment God will separate humanity into two groups through the Son of Man, placing some people on his “right” and others on his “left.” In Scripture the right-hand position is viewed as a place of favor and honor. Consequently, those on the right are later identified as “**the righteous**” (v. 37).

After the separation (judgment) is put into effect, the pronouncement and explanation of each sentence will take place (v. 34-46). A key phrase in this part of the text is found in the king’s words to those on his right: “**Come, you that are blessed by my Father**” (v. 34). The passive present participle used here has the meaning “you that continue to be blessed.” The passive voice indicates that God is the one doing the blessing.

This phrase anchors the inheritance of the kingdom and the experience of eternal life firmly

In Scripture the right-hand position is viewed as a place of favor and honor.

within the sphere of God's grace. The kingdom of God is not a reward for good behavior. It cannot be earned by human effort. The good deeds affirmed by the king (vv. 35-36) are the result of faith in God's grace in Christ. They are what Paul would later define as "**the obedience of faith**" (Romans 1:5). For the writer of Matthew's Gospel, they are the definition of a Christian lifestyle.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- What actions in your own life result from your faith in God's grace in Christ?

The Least of These

Matthew 25:40 says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." The New Revised Standard Version's translation of this verse may appear to confine the phrase "**the least of these**" to the Christian community, but the Greek word translated as "brothers" (TEV, NIV) or "brethren" (RSV, KJV) normally refers to neighbors or people in general when dealing with issues of human behavior. So, "**the least of these**" means anyone in need, whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, young or old.

If you have traveled in Europe and entered the great Cathedrals of the high Middle Ages, you have seen the message of this set of verses carved in stone above church doors in graphic detail. The semi-circular elaborate wall surface where these carvings are found is called the tympanum and towers above those who enter. Its medieval message is clear: The righteous are on the right; the unrighteous are on the left. The choice is yours. It is a simple way of sorting sheep from goats.

In some parts of the church today there is a more formulaic version of this sorting that relies on a doctrinal approach to faith in which theological T's are crossed

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 11: SERVING THE LEAST

February 13
(FRIDAY)

*Do Not Forget
the Oppressed*
PSALM 10:12-18

February 14
(SATURDAY)

*Share Resources
with the Poor*
ROMANS
15:22-28

February 15
(SUNDAY)

*Minister to the
Least*
MATTHEW
25:31-46

and I's are dotted, and the choice seems to lie in one's ability to articulate proper theology and doctrine.

However, a careful reading of these verses in Matthew quickly shows us that "the choice" is much more complicated than a right or left movement or a theological argument. It involves serving those we might not even "see" in our day-to-day living. The separating out of the sheep and the goats as described in these verses will be based not on our theological correctness or precision, but on our service rendered to those who are the most vulnerable in our midst.

Serving Christ by Serving Others Today

One of our American Baptist churches, Grace Baptist Church in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, has found a unique way to engage its members in just such service. Every year since 2010, Grace Baptist Church has taken one Sunday morning in the fall to "be the church" throughout the local community. Worship services are cancelled, and instead the congregation worships through service in the community. For what they call Faith in Action Sunday, the members of Grace Baptist Church choose service projects designed to directly touch lives and reflect Christ's love to others in their community. Last fall, parks were cleaned, dinners were served to volunteer fire fighters, meals were prepared and served at a local homeless shelter, shut-in congregational members received help with home repairs, and a local middle school received help with their grounds. On that day each year, church members worship through active service in their community.

One of the leading advocates for a deeper emphasis on service to the poor and vulnerable is Pope Francis. This world leader is modeling a less consumer-oriented life and is calling the church and all humanity back to more just economic systems throughout the world. In a letter to David Cameron, British Prime Minister, Pope Francis wrote, "The goal of economics and politics is to serve humanity, beginning with the poorest and most vulnerable wherever they may be. . . . Every economic and political theory or action must set about providing each inhabitant of the planet with the minimum wherewithal to live in dignity and freedom, with the possibility of supporting a family, educating children, praising God and developing one's own human potential."²

Clearly, all Christians, whether Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, can appreciate the reality that Pope Francis is a global Christian, one who seeks to manifest Christ to the world in a radical way. Like Grace Baptist Church and Pope Francis, we ought to seek ways to serve Christ by serving others.

We ought to seek ways to serve Christ by serving others.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- If you have ever participated in a “service day” or something similar, what did you do? How did this change you? What was your attitude toward those you served?
- Suspending for a moment the age-old theological differences that separate Protestants and Catholics, what is Pope Francis doing that inspires you to be more like Christ?
- What choices could you make to reduce your expenses and re-channel money to those in need?
- Jesus describes how serving “the least of these” will be part of the final judgment with sobering clarity. Who are “the least of these”?
- The parable offers a specific list of ways to serve the “least of these.” Keeping this list in mind, in what ways are you serving Jesus? Have you fed someone who was hungry? Have you quenched someone’s thirst? What other creative opportunities might there be to serve in the ways Jesus describes?

Seeing Christ in Everyone

In today’s Scripture passage, Jesus equated himself with those he called “**the least of these.**” Whether using positive language—“When you did it to them, you did it to me”—or using negative language—“When you did not do it to them, you did not do it to me”—the connection is clear: in the practical world, Jesus is present in the form of the “**least of these.**”

St. Benedict put this idea into his rule for monastic communities standardized throughout the Middle Ages and used up to the present day.

Jesus is present in the form of the “least of these.”

He said to his monks, “Welcome the guest as Christ.” Jesus is in our midst. It’s up to us to recognize him.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Think of a time when you “saw Christ” in another person: What did you think? How did you feel? What did you do?
- What makes it so hard for you to see Christ in other people? Why?
- Who are some of the people in whom you struggle to see Christ? Why is this so?

Benediction Litany³

The following litany by Julie Hodge Milcoff is a benediction to use in class.

LEADER: May the spirit of the Lord be present among you as you leave this place.

PEOPLE: Lord, help us remember what you have done for us.

LEADER: May you be a light in this world.

PEOPLE: Lord, help us bring smiles to people’s faces.

LEADER: May you have humble hearts and open minds.

PEOPLE: Lord, help us to share your love for us with others.

LEADER: May you be slow to anger and judge.

PEOPLE: Lord, help us to follow your example.

ALL: May we work together as a community of faith to spread God’s love to others. We go with joy! Amen.

NOTES

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 109.

2. “Letter of Holy Father Francis to H.E. Mr. David Cameron, British Prime Minister on the Occasion of the G8 Meet (17-18 June 2013),” letter dated 15 June 2013 and published online at www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130615_lettera-cameron-g8_en.html.

3. Julie Hodge Milcoff, “Benediction Litany,” printed in Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 109.

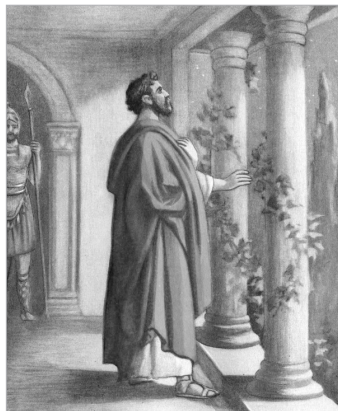
Clothed and Ready

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 6:10-20

KEY VERSE: **Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil** —Ephesians 6:11

Stand Firm

While writing the document that we know as the Letter to the Ephesians, to churches in and around the city of Ephesus, the apostle Paul was likely under house arrest in Rome, awaiting the appeal of his case to the Roman emperor (see **Acts 25:6-12; 28:16, 30-31**). Every day he encountered Roman soldiers dressed in full battle gear who had been assigned to stand guard over him. It makes sense, then, that he would use the image of a Roman soldier when he described our necessary spiritual equipment as “**the whole armor of God**” (**Ephesians 6:11**) and told us that putting it on would help us “**stand firm**” (v. 13) in our faith and lifestyle as followers of Christ.



† EPHESIANS 6:10-12

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Strong in the Lord

“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.” With these words, Paul began a description of the “equipment” needed to be a follower of Christ in a world in which Christians were being persecuted and killed for their faith. His image is of a Roman soldier in all his fighting regalia—a fierce image in its day.

In our violent, war-torn world, where too many young people dressed in combat gear have committed devastating mass shootings, it might seem troubling, or at least inappropriate, to use military imagery for the spiritual life. But Paul was making use of this imagery because, in the context of his situation, it was easily identifiable as a means of defense (rather than senseless offense) to first-century Christians who were literally under attack. By presenting them with an image of armor, which would have been quite familiar to them, he was encouraging them to feel protected and equipped.

Paul was clear that the war being waged on people of faith in his day was not, as he described it, with **“enemies of blood and flesh.”** The battle he described was being waged against the **“spiritual forces of evil.”** It was beyond the literal use of the weapons of Rome. Rather than encouraging these new Christians to go down to the local army-navy store at the nearest Roman outpost to buy used helmets and swords, Paul was making an analogy of the soldier imagery to help them become equipped for a much larger conflict—a conflict of cosmic proportions.

Knowing that the battle is a spiritual one and that the idea of armor does not refer to real armor but to spiritual protection, how can the act of corporate worship equip us for realities of this magnitude? Let’s dig deeper.



† EPHESIANS 6:13-17

¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore,

and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

The Armor of God

In this passage's description of what Paul terms "**the whole armor of God**," God's truth serves as our belt, and righteousness is our breastplate. The gospel of peace becomes the shoes on our feet. Faith is our shield, salvation our helmet, and Scripture the sword of the Spirit. Each piece of spiritual gear equips us for the coming conflict.

Our readiness for this conflict has everything to do with our practice. Each piece of the armor—the sword, the belt, the breastplate, the shoes, the helmet, and the shield—must be practiced with in order for us to use them effectively. And the discipline for such practice has been provided to us: worship!

Worship is one of the best ways for Christians to practice the spiritual life. This weekly gathering of God's faithful can be seen as the arena in which we practice in order to stand firm and proclaim the gospel of peace. Perhaps the worship experience in your church provides this kind of depth. If not, think about how worship can become a place of meaning, authenticity, and growth as we become practitioners of the gospel.

In my book on worship called *Reinventing Sunday*, I suggest that our modern liturgies may be too small for the longings of our souls.¹ In our day, the word *relevant* is used to describe one of the

Each piece
of spiritual
gear equips
us for the
coming
conflict.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 12: CLOTHED AND READY

February 16
(MONDAY)
Ready with the Word
LUKE 4:1-12

February 17
(TUESDAY)
The Battle Lines Drawn
1 SAMUEL
17:19-30

February 18
(WEDNESDAY)
Choosing the Right Equipment
1 SAMUEL
17:31-39

February 19
(THURSDAY)
The Battle Is the Lord's
1 SAMUEL
17:40-50

highest values for the worshipping community. But, in seeking to become relevant, is it possible that worship ends up looking like many of the other activities in our lives? Too often, relevance becomes the means whereby we shrink the cosmic dimension of worship to fit the day-to-day realities of our lives.

The act of
worship
expands
our souls.

The act of worship isn't meant to be small. The act of worship reflects the dance of the cosmos and brings us face-to-face with the Creator of the universe. We don't bring worship down to the level of our lives; we bring our lives into the universal reality of worship. The act of worship expands our souls and makes us larger. This expansion is beyond the control of our neatly packaged programs and efficiently ordered gatherings.

Too often we create "good worship." But I have come to believe that good worship prevents great worship. Good worship is presentational, filled with well-rehearsed, controlled, even entertaining moments of inspiration and learning. Great worship is filled with the messiness and pain of our lives, with lament and tears, with freedom and movement and the surprises of the Spirit's presence. Great worship in its authenticity and transparency, beauty and imperfection, creates space for what Paul calls the "**mystery of the gospel**" (v. 19): God's plan to bring everyone and everything together in Jesus Christ (see **Ephesians 1:10; 3:5-6**).

I offer the following ideas as possibilities for putting on the "whole armor of God" as we practice the spiritual life in the context of great worship.

THE SHOES ON OUR FEET. Paul wrote that our shoes should be made up of whatever helps us proclaim the gospel of peace. In our violent and fearful world, where massive spending on weapons of war is more the norm than the exception, proclaiming the gospel of peace becomes a countercultural activity and raises the question, "How can worship equip us each week to move into the world as peacemakers?" One answer is to make sure our Sunday liturgies are filled with resources for peacemaking at all levels of life. These would include litanies of forgiveness, reconciliation, respect for others, and a focus on justice for all people.

THE SHIELD OF FAITH. In our head-centered culture it's easy to think of the word *faith* as belief. This places our Christian faith squarely in our minds. To have faith, then, is to believe something strongly. But Jesus emphasized a more "Hebrew" way of thinking, less analytical, less concept-focused. In his way of thinking, the word *faith* would be better translated as the word *trust*. To trust in God suggests an attitude of the heart or an act of surrender, rather than a concept in which to believe. Understood this way, our shield becomes the offering of our lives to God's care and keeping.

There is a rabbinical saying that encourages us to place the words of Scripture on our hearts. If they are coated with Scripture, when our hearts break, the words of Scripture will fall in. This is a beautiful image of how trusting in God coats our hearts with protection and love in the midst of our most vulnerable moments. Rather than being used in a defensive posture, our shield becomes a coating on the heart that allows us to trust God each day.

THE HELMET OF SALVATION. The English word *salvation*, which comes from the word "salve" (to smear with oil), suggests a process of healing. Allow opportunities for worshippers to come forward for prayer. Create stations around the sanctuary for anointing with oil, confession, lighting candles for each other, and reflection through written prayers. In this way, the congregation becomes physically involved in the journey of salvation.

THE SWORD OF SPIRIT: THE WORD OF GOD. The great preacher Andrew Blackwood said, "The reading [of Scripture] itself ought to be an act of worship."² To this end, invite your congregation to stand or kneel for the reading of Scripture. Try reading Scripture responsively. Congregational involvement is a valuable way to help everyone experience what is being read. Read more

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 12: CLOTHED AND READY

February 20
(FRIDAY)

*Put on the Lord
Jesus Christ*
ROMANS 13:8-14

February 21
(SATURDAY)

*The Dress for
God's Chosen
Ones*
COLOSSIANS
3:12-17

February 22
(SUNDAY)

*The Whole
Armor of God*
EPHESIANS
6:10-20

Scripture in worship, not less. The revised common lectionary provides three or four Scriptures to read in worship each week. If your congregation doesn't use the lectionary, give it a try for the season of Advent or Lent or throughout the summer months.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways is your current order of worship too small for the longings of your soul?
- How does “good worship” create an unwanted controlled environment that keeps us from fully encountering God's presence?
- What would “great worship” look like in your congregation?

† EPHESIANS 6:18-20

¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Pray in the Spirit

The focus of this text is upon prayer, and the key phrase is “**in the Spirit**” (v. 18). Whatever form prayer may take and whenever prayer may be offered, it is to proceed from the work and movement of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. Such Spirit-led prayer will involve all forms of human need, encompass all aspects of human being, and cover all moments of human life.

Elsewhere, Paul wrote of “**praying without ceasing**” (1 **Thessalonians 5:17**) and “**constantly praying with joy**” (**Philippians 1:4**), but that does not seem to be the focus of the phrase “**at all times**” (v.18), literally “in every season/occasion.” Here the focus is upon developing a growing awareness that all of life is an opportunity for prayer with God.

The Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition has developed a practice to create just such awareness. This prayer practice is highlighted in a classic book called *The Way of the Pilgrim* written by an anonymous Orthodox monk. Known as the Jesus Prayer, this practice provides a

simple and profound way to pray at all times and in all things. The words are to be repeated over and over in the mind so that, eventually, the words of the prayer are set free in us and resonate in our hearts. The words of the prayer, found throughout the Gospel stories, are as follows: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”

Paul sought
to create a
partnership
in prayer.

Paul asked the Ephesian Christians to pray for him and his ministry in just this way—at every opportunity as led by the Spirit. Such prayer support would give him boldness that would allow him to proclaim the “**mystery of the gospel**” (v. 19): God’s desire to bring everything in creation together under one head, our Lord Jesus Christ (see **Ephesians 1:9-10; 3:4-6, 8-9**).

But Paul did not focus merely on his own needs for prayer. Before making his personal request, he encouraged the Ephesian believers to pray for each other and all Christians, those whom he called “**all the saints**” (v.18). Paul sought to create a partnership in prayer so that those who are ambassadors of the gospel—*every follower of Christ*—will be able to carry out the work to which they have been called. The use of the word *ambassador* here (v. 20) reminds us that, like modern-day ambassadors at the United Nations who represent their countries to the rest of the world, the followers of Jesus today represent Christ to everyone they meet.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What does “pray all the time” mean to you? In what ways can that be accomplished?
- Paul seems to be asking us to create partnerships of prayer. Have you ever had a prayer partner? If so, what was it like? If not, what would it take for you to try it?

NOTES

1. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Sunday: Breakthrough Ideas for Transforming Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2001), 6.

2. Andrew W. Blackwood, *The Fine Art of Public Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1939), 135.

Evaluation Form

JOURNEYS • WINTER 2014–2015

We want to hear from you!

Please take a few minutes to tell us what you think of this quarter's *Journeys*.

Put this form (or a copy) in an envelope, and mail to:

Marcia Jessen, Judson Press, P.O. Box 851, Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851.

If you wish, you may send your comments by e-mail to:

marcia.jessen@abhms.org, or complete the *Journeys* evaluation online at:

www.judsonpress.com/judson_journeys_evaluation.cfm.

1. How do you use *Journeys*? (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ I take it home and read it to prepare for the coming week's lesson.
- ☐ I use it in class.
- ☐ I leave it at home, and don't use it in class.

2. *Journeys* helped me to understand and relate to the text in the following ways:

3. *Journeys* could be improved by:

4. Would you have used online materials related to the lessons in *Journeys* if they were available?

5. Other comments/suggestions:

Please tell us about your Sunday school class:

Age range _____ Average attendance _____

Name: _____

Church: _____

Thanks for sharing your ideas! Your comments may be used to promote *Judson Bible Journeys for Adults*.