

Gospel of Luke

JESUS IS PROMISED

June 10

Luke 1:1-4 Preface

Luke set out to write his gospel as an historian gathering information from different sources. One tradition is that Mary, Jesus' mother, was one of those sources, thus accounting for the beautiful birth narratives unique to this gospel. He was a careful historian and many of his details have been confirmed by archaeologists, even in several cases where they once thought he was mistaken. He was accurate about political titles, and he made reference to thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands without mistake.

Luke was a Greek, writing for Greeks, and as an educated man and native speaker, his is the most elegant language of the four gospels. He also makes a point of explaining Jewish customs for his readers. He wrote the Book of Acts which continues the story after the Ascension, and he entered the story unobtrusively and modestly, starting in Acts 16 to use "we" as he traveled with Paul.

He was with Paul to the end, and Paul made mention of him in his letters, including Colossians 4:14 where he called him "dear doctor Luke." His bedside manner was good, judging from his tenderness toward the suffering in his narrative. About half of what is in this gospel is not in the others, showing that he did manage to collect information, as he said, from "the early disciples and other eyewitnesses."

For us it is good to know we need not and should not set aside any intellectual gifts or critical thinking skills as believers. Our faith can coordinate with good analysis, information, historical study, archaeological finds, and thoughtful examination to give us the same deeper certainty of the truth of Jesus that Luke wanted to offer his readers.

Do I have an understanding of good reasons for faith? How can I encourage others regarding truth they have been taught?

June 11

Luke 1:5-10 Promise to Zechariah

Luke's starting point was the promised birth of the prophet John. But as a historian, he set this in the context of the ruler at that time, Herod the Great. Herod, son of a Jewish father and a princess from Petra, the great stone city in the desert, was raised around the Jewish kings, but was a commoner. He saw that real power lay with Rome, and in the conflicted politics of the time, became the client king, answerable to Rome. He was a great builder who transformed the landscape of Judea with astonishing feats of architecture. The Temple where Zechariah served

had been rebuilt by Herod in a year and a half, but the great complex would take 46 years to build and become the largest in the ancient world.

The announcement of John's birth took place under the sacred circumstances of Zechariah's selection to burn incense in the Holy Place. A devout priest, he represented the best of the long tradition. But there was a backstory of disappointment in God, because he and his wife had never had a child and were now very old. It reminds us of Abraham and Sarah who waited many years for a promised son. Doubtless, as righteous people, they based their prayers on the encouraging stories of barrenness overcome: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. Doubtless they were disappointed not to get a positive answer themselves, but clearly he still believed in God's goodness enough to serve as a faithful priest.

Their son would become a great prophet, but this story makes it clear he was also a priest by ancestry. His baptismal work of purification was priestly work, even if outside the boundaries of the temple. The stage has been set, the story begun.

We can examine ourselves and our disappointments. Are there unfulfilled hopes in our lives that leave a question mark about God's goodness and trustworthiness? Are we able to hold any disappointment up to God and continue to love and serve faithfully anyway? Do we wonder (hopefully) what might come out of this disappointment?

Are there things I have prayed for I have not (yet) received? Do I trust God anyway?

June 12

Luke 1:11-20 An angel appears. (1:26-33)

Zechariah's encounter with the angel reminds us that Samson's parents had a similar angelic encounter predicting their son's birth, similar instructions for their son to live as an ascetic, and similar promises of his impact. There is a promise of joy and gladness, greatness, being full of the Spirit and having a powerful ministry.

The appearance to Zechariah by Gabriel will be paralleled by Gabriel's appearance to Mary. Here begins a pattern of stories that match a male protagonist to a female protagonist, making at least 20 pairs in the 24 chapters of Luke, something that is surely not accidental. In the titles a reference to the parallel story is given for comparison to highlight this significant structural choice that Luke made.

Zechariah had perhaps fallen into the kind of discouragement that we do when there is a "no" to our prayers. Long waiting is hard on us frail creatures. We have no strength. Because he questioned this, he was told he would be unable to speak--perhaps to silence sharing his doubt with others. When we have times of hoping or waiting for an answer, sometimes silence is our best strategy as well. The angel promised that the answer would come and it would bring him joy.

His story can be one more encouragement not to give up, but to keep making our requests with faith, hope and joy. There is always plenty to be grateful for in the present, even when there are areas of life that concern us and where we want to see change. We can keep our requests for what we do not have in the context of gratitude for what we do have. The angel came with the message “God has heard your prayer.” That same comforting message coming to my heart has encouraged me to have my eyes wide open with expectation to see what will happen next. There is a promise of joy.

Am I willing to wait silently for God to act?

June 13

Luke 1:21-23 Elizabeth's hope

Elizabeth became pregnant and her response was not, “Finally, God!” or “I deserve this, I’ve been patient enough” or “How inconvenient at my age!” Instead she said, “How kind the Lord is.”

Do I truly believe in God’s kindness? Scripture repeatedly returns to this idea, that we have a kind creator who gives us the gifts of life. Because there is so much suffering in the world (and I would classify Elizabeth’s waiting as a kind of suffering), we often think that perhaps he is not kind. Why does God allow suffering, we wonder? Yet it is belief in God’s kindness that helps us through that suffering, and Elizabeth seemed to have that kind of faith.

Is this my genuine heart response to blessings and answers and gifts from God? Do I humbly recognize I have no right to demand that God meet my preferences, and most importantly, no right to demand things happen on my timeline? In all these things, God teaches me to adjust, to let my heart become more like that of Elizabeth. It requires seeing God as a loving Father or friend, not as one quick to punish me.

Do I see God as kind?

June 14

Luke 1:24-38 Promise to Mary. (1:8-23)

Centuries of artwork celebrate this moment when Mary received the astonishing message from the angel. The connection between human and the supernatural fascinates us. The angelic messenger and the virgin birth are not things we grasp rationally, but all of our art shows us how much we want this emotionally and intuitively.

A century-old tradition for a Christmas Eve service contains Nine Lessons and Carols. The lessons include the story of the fall, Isaac’s rescue from death, Isaiah’s prophecies of the coming light, the lord who will reign over a peaceable kingdom, the annunciation, Jesus’ birth, the angel’s announcement to the shepherds, the adoration of the Magi, and at the end, John’s magnificent prologue announcing the coming of the Word and the Light. The lessons are

interspersed with beautiful music, and after the annunciation reading comes a 15th century song, “I sing of a maiden”.

I sing of a maiden
That is matchless
King of all Kings
For her son she chose.

He came as still
Where his mother was
As dew in April
That falls on the grass, flowers, spray.

Mother and maiden
There was never, ever one but she;
Well may such a lady
God's mother be.

Does this story satisfy a need for wonder in me?

June 15

Luke 1:39-45 Elizabeth's joy

Over the centuries, particularly in the last two, we have developed treasured Christmas customs that include decorated trees, gifts, carols, special food, pageants, and movies. We love it particularly as a time when we spend extra special moments with our families.

We seek to draw out the things that bring us joy. We look for beauty and try very hard to create it in our homes and public spaces. We look for goodness and kindness and try to create it by family and community celebrations. This association between Christmas and joy is deeply rooted, and in this story we have the first celebration of how the coming birth of the Christ Child foreshadows all our joy.

For Mary, going to her cousin Elizabeth's home was presumably a safe place. Neither woman knew about the others' unexpected pregnancy, yet Elizabeth's child leaped joyfully in her womb in welcome of Christ. Elizabeth could not know that her glad cry would be repeated joyfully by millions every year as we recall these sacred stories. These moments of surprised joy are what the celebration of Christmas seems gifted to bring us.

Am I open to giving and receiving Christmas joy?

June 16

Luke 1:46-56 Mary's prophecy (1:68-79)

Mary's poem, the Magnificat, serves to connect the past history of Israel to a hopeful future, and Mary's song, which drew on Hannah's ancient son, has become well-loved. Since it has been a daily part of many Christian liturgies through the centuries, it has elicited beautiful musical settings from many talented musicians. A singable contemporary version by the liturgical musician, David Hass, makes Mary's song one that I can sing from the heart as my own prayer of gratitude.

Chorus: All that I am sings of the God
who brings new life in me.
My spirit soars on the wings of my Lord.

My soul gives glory to the Lord, rejoicing in my savior, God
Who looks upon me in my state, and all the world will call me blessed.
For God works marvels in my sight and holy, holy is God's name.

God's mercy is from age to age, on those who follow in fear
Whose arm is power and strength, and scatters the proud of heart
Who casts the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly ones.

God fills the starving with good things, the rich are left with empty hands.
Protecting all the faithful ones, remembering Israel with mercy
The promise known to those before and to their children forever.

Do I joyfully give glory to God?

June 17

Luke 1:57-66 Elizabeth's shared joy

Elizabeth had celebrated that God had been kind to her when she became pregnant, and now as her child was born, the same attitude of gratitude for God's kindness was prevalent among her friends. She actually could have spent the nine months of pregnancy stressing over her husband's inability to speak. But her gratitude for the child outweighed any distress on his behalf. Perhaps he had written on his tablet for her, explaining that the angel promised this would end when the child was born, and she trusted the promise.

Zechariah used a writing table to affirm Elizabeth's pronouncement that the child's name was John. Suddenly he could speak. It says that everyone reflected on these amazing events and wondered what would happen to this child. They did not know to connect him to prophecies of a forerunner for the Messiah, but they knew something wonderful would come through him.

Elizabeth is a model of gratitude and positivity worth following. Focusing on God's gifts and not stressing about the gaps is something to emulate. She had trusted God before she became pregnant, she trusted him during the pregnancy, and now she shared her gratitude at God's kindness in this birth.

Do I communicate to others how God has been kind to me?

June 18

Luke 1:67-80 Zechariah's prophecy (1:46-55)

His mouth opened, Zechariah burst into a song of praise. It has since been sung on a daily basis in morning liturgies, set to music by many musicians. His song has three parts: the Messiah is coming, my son is his messenger, and their mission together is to bring light from heaven.

He knew with Elizabeth that Mary's child would be from David's royal line and was the promised Messiah who would rescue Israel. He knew from Gabriel's announcement to him that his son would fulfill the prophecy that Elijah would prepare the way for Messiah, something said in the last few verses of Malachi. Gabriel had said John would persuade many to turn to God, and Zechariah spoke of his message of salvation and forgiveness.

Both would bring light from heaven and guide people toward peace. As this song has been sung through centuries, it has celebrated that Messiah and his messenger came and brought that light. The interplay of sunlight and shadows, clouds of all shapes and sizes reflecting the light, moonlight and stars at night, the candles in a window, floodlights, and lamplight each brings home this metaphor for us on a daily basis, inviting us into the beauty of the light.

Do I celebrate that God's light lifts darkness and the shadow of death from my life?

JESUS IS PRESENT ON EARTH 2

June 19

Luke 2:1-7 Jesus is born

Once again Luke made reference to the rulers of the time. He was introducing Christ as the King of the new Kingdom, hidden and humble though he was in contrast to ruthless earthly rulers. Caesar Augustus had been known as Octavian and killed his opponent to gain power, and Herod, who continued in power by periodically killing others, including family members, had to court his favor. By now Herod had more than 20 years as ruler under Augustus, had built three temples for Caesar worship, and was nearing death. It was into a context where the most powerful earthly ruler was claiming God-like status and the local king relied on murder to retain power that Jesus, the true God and true Prince of Peace, was born.

As the Christmas Eve Lesson and Carols begin, a traditional processional is a poem written for children in the mid 1800s. Part of a set written to explain lines in the creeds, this one was written to explain the incarnation.

Once in royal David's city,
Stood a lowly cattle shed
Where a mother laid her Baby
In a manger for His Bed.
Mary was that mother mild
Jesus Christ, her little child.

He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all,
And the shelter was a stable
And His cradle was a stall
With the poor, and mean, and lowly,
Lived on earth our Savior holy. -- C. F. Alexander

What emotions does Jesus' birth awaken in me? Do I celebrate the contrast between his rule and that of human rulers?

June 20

Luke 2:8-14 Presented to shepherds

Bethlehem, the place of Jesus' birth, had been prophesied. King David had grown up there as a humble shepherd, and Jesus was now presented to shepherds. Nearby Herod had built an astonishing city, Herodium, which involved moving a hill to make a tall fortress with a luxurious palace at the top. The great gardens and pools at the base of the hill involved complex and impressive water systems and a swimming pool large enough for small boats. His wealth, power, ingenuity, and paranoid self-protection were on full display. In contrast, Christ was born in poverty, not even in his own home. Yet who is most revered now? Christ is known throughout the world with multitudes of buildings in his honor, and all that is left of Herod's legacy are ruins.

We have already heard that Christ brings light and at this moment when the angels announced his birth to the shepherds, the radiance of God's glory surrounds them. We try every year to capture something of this radiance with all of our Christmas lights. It is always beautiful and a tiny glimpse of that moment of brilliance. They announced a message of great joy. The angel's song was elaborated in ancient times and is still used today in liturgy with many musical settings.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.
We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you, we give you thanks for
your great glory.

Lord God, heavenly king, O God Almighty Father,
Lord Jesus Christ, only-begotten son, Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.
Who take away the sins of the world, hear our prayer. You who sit at the right hand
of the Father, have mercy on us.
For you alone are the Holy One, you alone the Lord, you alone the Most High, Jesus
Christ, with the Holy Spirit in the Glory of God the Father. Amen.

What moment in the Christmas story is most meaningful to me? What Christmas music is most meaningful to me?

June 21

Luke 2:15-20 Paschal lamb

The shepherds ran to see the child in a manger as the angels had instructed. They were excited. Our Christmas cards and pageants love to portray these humble ones adoring the child and a lamb or two are part of manger scenes and pageants. How appropriate that the child would later compare himself to both a shepherd and a lamb..

Special Passover lambs were raised in Bethlehem, and these shepherds may have been caring for them. Given that this infant would one day carry all the symbolism of the Lamb, this adds to the symbolism of their selection as witnesses. But they themselves were also meaningful of past and future. David had been a shepherd like them, and Jesus' would identify himself as a shepherd.

It says that Mary quietly treasured these things in her heart and thought about them often. She is for us a model of the contemplative soul and one to emulate. We cannot contemplate enough the wonder of God becoming a baby. His drawing near to us as one of us gives us a face of God that removes our fears.

Do we run to this child? Do we treasure what we learn of him?

June 22

Luke 2:21-35 Presented in the temple

When Jesus was taken to the temple as an infant, he entered a place that had been prepared for him over a 1500 year period, a place whose imagery he would fulfill, a place that was his true home. Herod had rebuilt the core temple in a year and a half around 20 BC, but continued construction until his death close to the birth of Christ. Construction continued, and by the time Jesus began his ministry, it stood white and shining, 25 football fields large, the greatest temple of that time, again ready to receive its real priest and ruler.

The presentation of Jesus in the temple brought forth words from a godly prophet, Simeon. His poem is yet another that became part of daily liturgy. His comment that he could now die in

peace because the promise that he would see Messiah before he died was fulfilled. It does not say he was old, but most artists assume that.

Rembrandt painted this scene three times in his life, once as a young man, then middle aged, and once before he died. In the first he shows the whole family, in the second the entire temple environment, but the last painting is of a wise old man holding a child, symbolic of hearts who, over time, have become wise as they hold this child.

His song says that now he can die in peace, having seen Messiah as he was promised. Even as a young woman, aware of how much happiness I had experienced, I thought “I can die in peace!” and I have thought that several times since. These are moments of such fulfillment that nothing more seems necessary to make life complete. Simeon’s sense of completion was even more spectacular. His prophecy to Mary and Joseph warned some would reject Jesus, her soul would suffer, but also, Jesus would be the greatest joy to many. He would be light for all people.

Has Jesus become my greatest joy?

June 23

Luke 2:36-38 Anna’s joy

In the case of the prophetess Anna, it does give her age--84--and tells us she was widowed after only seven years of marriage. She had made the temple her home and lived what we would call a contemplative life. She saw Jesus, was filled with praise, and she became a publicity agent for the promised king. Jesus would preach the kingdom of God, and this wise and spiritual woman could foresee his kingship, though he was an infant.

Most of the spiritual leaders of the day had been badly compromised by their need to please the political leaders. They were more politicians than deeply spiritual people, and the temple complex had been filled with vendors and commerce. In that context it is reassuring to see that discerning prophetic people like Simeon and Anna were still there praying for the fulfillment of all God’s promises.

Anna serves as a model on how to age well: spend time in prayer, worship, fasting, and sharing the news of Jesus. Her lifestyle of prayer and fasting is impressive, and her longevity was doubtless helped by these healthy practices. There is never a need as an older person to feel no longer useful in God’s kingdom since we can grow spiritually stronger as our bodies grow weaker, increasing what we have to give, making our spiritual eyesight stronger even as eyes grow weak.

It says that Anna was “worshipping God with fasting and prayer.” Our fasting is intended as something that brings us closer to God, increases our sensitivity to God’s voice, increases our faith, and so all of these things give us a chance to experience something deeper in our worship.

Do I have a vision for myself aging well and continuing to be of spiritual service? Do I have a vision for the benefits of fasting?

June 24

Luke 2:39-52 Jesus and his parents

Matthew included the story of the escape into Egypt after the Magi had alerted Herod the Great that there was a new King of the Jews who had been born. Since he had ruthlessly killed everyone who was part of the kingly line to consolidate his power, this created alarm and he once more was ruthless, trying to eliminate any threat to his throne. But Jesus escaped and returned to grow up in Nazareth.

Our only information on Jesus' boyhood comes from this passage. Bookended by comments that he grew well physically and in wisdom, we are given a specific example of where his wisdom amazed the most learned leaders. Themes that will continue in his adulthood start here: the importance of Passover, the temple, engaging with religious leaders, bewildering his family, and his attachment to God as Father. When Jesus referred to the temple as his Father's house he drew on the dedication of Solomon's temple when God called it "my house forever." (II Chronicles 7:16)

It is beautiful that he went home and obeyed his parents and that all who knew him loved it. It is touching that his mother was a reflective person who thought about all that had happened.

I can identify with Mary asking "Why have you done this to us? We've been frantic, searching for you everywhere!". A very normal mother reaction to a missing child. But Jesus' response was essentially that he was right where he should be. Mary was taken aback, but accepted his assertion of independence used wisely. I long for every child to grow like Jesus: healthy, loved, wise, self-confident, and with a sense of purpose and destiny. We so often fail children, and may God forgive us.

Does this picture of Christ as a boy guide my vision for raising children?

PREPARATION FOR JESUS 3

June 25

Luke 3:1-6 John the Baptist

Luke once more gave the historical context of the start of John and Jesus' ministries. Herod the Great had died close to the time that Jesus was born. His kingdom was given to three of his sons, Archelaus, Antipas and Philip, as governors under Rome. There was a new Caesar, but after a decade he became displeased with Archelaus and replaced him with governors of his own choosing. Pilate was the governor at this point. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea and

so this son, having the cruelty but not the greatness of his father, became an opponent of John and Jesus.

The reference to Lysanias as governor of Abilene was one that for many years scholars attributed as one of Luke's few mistakes. However, more recent archaeology found an inscription that confirmed the accuracy of his reference. (p. 130, Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*.)

Herod the Great had killed most of the Council of Jewish Elders as part of his consolidation of power. Consequently, the remaining religious leaders were subject to him to maintain their power and roles. He appointed high priests, and the result was that any high priest was politically compromised. The priesthood was passed around among Annas' sons and in this case Caiaphas was a son-in-law. So not only was there corrupt political leadership, the religious leadership into which John came was corrupted. Hence, his prophetic challenge for repentance even to the priests and religious leaders.

Luke points out that John went public at a moment in time
29 AD, 15 years into Tiberias' rule

He lists the rulers Jesus came to challenge

So who won?

Pontius Pilate went into obscurity after 36 AD

Tiberius' reign ended in 37 AD

Herod lost his army to the king of Arabia, was exiled to Spain in 39 AD and died Roman emperors after Tiberius were assassinated, killed in battle, committed suicide

But Jesus rose from the dead and is celebrated weekly

The likelihood that an obscure peasant would be so much better known today than any of these important rulers is very low. Yet most of us have to scramble through encyclopedias, books, and documentaries to gain a little insight into the supposedly important people, whereas there is nowhere in the world that someone has not announced the name of Jesus.

Do I appreciate the historical transformation that Jesus brought?

June 26

Luke 3:7-14 John's Message

John's message, "Prove by the way you live that you have turned from sin to God" was made practical. "Be generous" he told the crowd. "Be honest" he told the tax collectors. "Be fair" he told the police-like-soldiers. It is never enough to say we believe, we must live it. Jesus repeatedly emphasized that a transformed inner person as in the heart would result in good actions. Both John and Jesus used the analogy of good and bad fruit trees.

John went out into the wilderness and then to the more isolated river to urge people to come for cleansing. Instead of the enormous pool of Siloam that Herod built in Jerusalem for this

purpose, John chose the muddy Jordan. His whole ministry was a challenge to the message and political compromises of the religious establishment. He avoided places and people who were thoroughly enmeshed with the politics of Rome, starting a renewal revival movement that wanted changed lives.

John's call for repentance, renewal and changed behavior is needed in every generation, and a younger generation fed up with the compromises of the religious is something to welcome. We have seen how awkwardly and uncomfortably religious leaders can compromise the message of Christ by a desire to "make a difference", staying too close to political power and failing to challenge it, and John's example is a salutary challenge to that temptation.

Do I prove by the way I live that I have turned to God?

June 27

Luke 3:15-19 Purification

Messianic hopes were in the air, and John deflected them by pointing to someone great who was coming. He promised that this person would bring the baptism of the Spirit, which we know came after Jesus' ascension. He also promised baptism with fire. It could refer to the tongues of flame, but it also could mean the purifying suffering the disciples underwent. John said there would be an never-ending fire, which artists elaborated into a terrifying image of unrelenting and unending torment. But one could interpret fire as removing the chaff, so that what is pure can remain.

John's preaching did not go down well with the local ruler, Herod, who imprisoned him. Josephus says he was held and executed at Machaerus. The previous Jewish rulers had built a fortress there on the east of the Jordan River to watch for invaders, but it was destroyed and then rebuilt by Herod the Great as one of a series of fortresses. These could signal one another and be seen from Jerusalem 28 miles away. In his usual style he built a beautiful palace at the top, Herod Antipas inherited this fortress palace.

The long tradition of prophetic suffering (think of Jeremiah's arrests, for example) climaxed with this arrest. He would soon be beheaded, perhaps only a year before Christ, once more serving as a forerunner even in death.

Do I see myself as one preparing the way for Christ for others as John did?

June 28

Luke 3:21-22 Jesus' baptism

That the sinless one would want to identify with us in baptism is surprising, but beautiful. He made himself one of his people by this act. This purification became the mark of our entrance into the Kingdom and is part of our churches today.

Jesus' baptism by John
Hangs as a soft, pale tapestry
With a flash of white
In the Cathedral of the Angels.
The Tapestry saints
Along the walls have
Today's faces woven with those from the past
Facing forward with us
As the people of God.

This is a moment of mystery
When God bent down,
And received a cleansing
Meant for our smudged souls.
We are confused.
Why does he act as one of us?
Dove falls, Voice calls,
We know
He is us, but more than us.
We take our place in a pew
And look for Him in you.

When Jesus was baptized the mystery of God as “three in one” was on display: a dove descended, and a voice said “You are my dearly loved Son and you bring me great joy.” If you are a believer and have not been baptised, learn more and seek it out. If you have a baptism which you can recall, it is worth meditating on the mystery of what happened at that moment.

Do I see my baptism in Jesus' baptism? Do I see Jesus in my fellow believers?

June 29

Luke 3:21-38 His lineage

Christ's genealogy is very different here than in Matthew. They both include King David, but Matthew goes through his son Solomon, and Luke goes through his son Nathan. The number of generations is different as well. Luke goes from Abraham all the way to Adam, perhaps emphasizing Jesus' universality rather than his Jewishness.

Creative explanations for the differences abound. Fascinatingly, Saint Augustin said this difference caused him to doubt the gospels when he was a young man. Once he converted, he found ways to explain this. Solutions are easy to look up with an internet search. While one has to use rational analysis to evaluate the ideas, how helpful that they are so readily available. Being able to look up anything that puzzles us in the text and see how others have approached the difficulty is a great gift.

The key point is that both genealogies emphasize the descent from King David. This background is central to his identity as Messiah.

Do I fully use my mind as I engage with scripture?

JESUS BEGINS MINISTRY 4

June 30

Luke 4:1-13 Resists temptation

The temptations that Jesus resisted are common to us as well. The temptation to false worship of something other than God was the pervading Old Testament sin, there called idolatry. We subtly put hopes and focus on things other than God in our own forms of false worship.

Temptation is so boring
Same old things work every time
 Food, fast-track, fame
Our culture is obsessed with food
 TV chefs, diets, fast food, more diets
We're determined to get on the fast-track and get
 Corporate scandals, shady government deals, bubbles
We're crazy for fame
 24/7 coverage, reality TV, boasts about our brand
I'm vulnerable
But the antidotes still work
 Word
 Worship
 Wisdom
Shift my perspective, God.

What temptation do I currently need to resist?

July 1

Luke 4:14-21 Preaches prophetic fulfillment

Jesus opened a scroll and quoted from Isaiah 60:1,2. He announced that this scripture had come true before their eyes. At the start of this section we are told he was filled with the Holy Spirit and was teaching in the synagogues. Galilee where he preached was poor. By the end of the chapter he will have freed captives from demonic oppression. He will heal the blind. He began social changes to elevate women and children from oppression. His loving presence was the ultimate expression of God's favor.

We are called to emulate him, and today we have billions who are poor, many enslaved (think human trafficking), blind who need glasses or eye surgery, and many suffering from unjust discrimination. This sounds like a social justice agenda, and for many of us today, this is the preferred method of ministry. Better yet, here it is validated by Jesus as going hand in hand with sharing good news.

But it is not just social justice, it is a miraculous and powerful intervention of the Holy Spirit that is able to transform individuals, communities, countries, and the world as a whole. This expression of Jesus' ministry that he has passed on to us is a hopeful, joyful, and energizing vision.

Am I comfortable combining social justice work and sharing the good news of Jesus?

July 2

Luke 4:22-30 Preaches at home

All went well and the people admired their hometown preacher until he had the gall to suggest that doing miracles for non-Israelites was not only a good idea, but it had Old Testament precedent. Once again Luke provides a male/female pair in the story: the widow of Zarephath, and Namaan the leper. Jesus' listeners were outraged. How prejudiced does one have to be to think this means that killing the one advocating treating outsiders well is a good idea? Fortunately, Jesus escaped the angry mob.

Nazareth, a small town we all know because of Jesus, was less than four miles away from Galilee's capital, Sepphoris. But archaeologists can only find a few graves to mark Nazareth, and think it was a community of less than 500 people. The scholars can find out much more about Sepphoris, a place we do not tend to know about, because it is never mentioned in the gospels. Archaeologists have discovered it was a very Roman town: a temple in the center of town, a large villa with beautiful mosaic floors, and a colonnaded street. Since construction was going on there during Jesus' life, some suggest he may have done carpentry. But his small town Jewish crowd seemingly had defensive feelings toward these idol-worshipping Gentiles intruding on their lives.

We have seen similar mob reactions to people who try to encourage breaking down barriers. Attachment to our political party, our religion, our nation, our race, or our culture can so easily get distorted. Instead of appreciating people who are different, we become self-protective, defensive and critical. We create "us" versus "them". Jesus' call is to include everyone in God's love. For me the biggest challenge is to love those that I perceive are far too willing to exclude others and I have to work to cross barriers toward the self-protective, and to avoid speaking of them as "those (benighted) people!"

Do I fall into suspicion and criticism of "those people"? Who are "those people" for me?

July 3

Luke 4:31-37 Preaches in one place (4:38,29)

Before he became an itinerant preacher, Jesus apparently had a regular spot in the Capernaum synagogue. A heckler tried to disrupt, but Jesus took authority over the shouter and his success set off a wildfire of talk about him.

I am impressed by anyone who can calmly and wisely respond to a person who is out of control. Calm speech, food, rest, a safe place, medical care, hot tea, prayer are all soothing strategies. When someone is threatening violence, learning to take the spiritual authority to put a stop to it is something I have tried to learn in violence prevention workshops. How to de-escalate rather than escalate is the goal. Jesus knew how to do it and he can teach me.

On a much less dramatic scale, I can ask how well I react to people who criticize me or who introduce a socially awkward conflict. Do I have the gentleness and authority to respond well? Often humor is the best way to diffuse a situation and we admire public figures who gracefully turn around a situation without disrespecting their critic. It takes some humility!

Am I willing to confront difficult situations with spiritual power and wisdom?

July 4

Luke 4:38-44 Preaching in synagogues (4:31-37)

Luke's profession as a physician made him particularly interested in Jesus' healing ministry. In John's gospel there are four healing stories, nine in Matthew, twelve in Mark, and eighteen in Luke. Peter's mother-in-law is the first specific story of healing.

Jesus' itinerant ministry now extended to synagogues in Judea. He was a good traveling preacher and healer. Luke makes it explicit that when he expelled demons he silenced them because they knew he was Messiah. He did not want them to make that public. Their shouts, "You are the Son of God" could have been opening the eyes of ordinary people. But most could not see it.

Though Jesus was recognized as Messiah and King in the birth stories, his identity was now not so clear. His story is in the tradition of an unrecognized prince who has not yet taken his throne. Only a few who drew close to him began to see who he must be. For those around him, he was a mysterious figure whose destiny was yet to be revealed. In these four chapters he has been referred to as Son of God six times, David's son three times, and the deliverer seven times. But he does not want to reveal his full identity

Am I still mystified by who Jesus might be?

THE DISCIPLES

THE DISCIPLES LEARN FROM JESUS 5

July 5

Luke 5:1-11 Fishing for men

In Mark and Matthew we are told that two brothers who were commercial fishermen, Peter and Andrew, responded to Jesus' call to follow him. Farther up the shore two more brothers, James and John, also responded. But here Luke gives us a more elaborate story set after the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, rather than before.

Jesus borrowed their boat to be able to more comfortably teach the crowds. As payback, he encouraged Peter to go for a catch. Since they had not caught anything all night long, he was skeptical, but when they were overwhelmed with fish--on the verge of sinking, it says--Peter was awestruck. He told Jesus, "I am too much of a sinner to be around you." In this account we learn that James and John were their partners. Jesus told them they would fish for people, and once on land they left everything to follow him.

They had already met Jesus, and when this miracle occurred, they were ready to make a drastic change in their lives. This is a good story, and to apply it to myself, I wonder if I have experienced enough of Jesus' goodness in my life, that it is quite easy to "leave everything."

On a more metaphorical level we can take the call to "go out where it is deeper" to apply prayers. Sometimes we stay on the surface and get discouraged when we don't "catch" what we expect to, and so we feel like giving up. But going into that deeper place of connection to God's Spirit can result in such surprising things that we become awestruck and fall to our knees in spontaneous worship.

What might I be called to leave to follow Jesus more closely? How can I go deeper into my relationship with God in prayer?

July 6

Luke 5:12-16. Faith for a leper

We have our incurable diseases today, but we have researchers working hard to cure them. In Jesus' day leprosy was incurable, but it is no longer on our list of dreaded diseases having become curable in the 1950s. It was the first disease that we learned was caused by bacteria and we now have effective antibiotics to cure it.

For the health challenges we do have today, we can make the leper's appeal: "Lord, if you want to, you can make me well again." Prevention in the form of good health habits, combined with wisdom in getting medical advice, can all be combined with trust and prayer in any situation of illness.

Matthew and Mark told this story, but Luke added a new line. “Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer.” Luke put attention on Jesus’ practice of solitary prayer, mentioning it six times. He use the word prayer and pray more than any other gospel (29 times) and 34 times in Acts, making it one of his great themes. If God himself withdrew for solitary prayer, clearly this should inspire us to do the same and to make silence and solitude a normal part of our spiritual practices, learning more about listening to God in prayer and quietly being contemplative, not just making requests.

What is my experience of healing prayer? What is my experience of solitary prayer?

July 7

Luke 5:17-26. Forgiveness for the paralyzed

Luke added some context to the story of the paralyzed man. It says the the religious critics came from many Galilean villages and even Jerusalem. Luke specified that the friends took tiles off the roof to lower their friend. He also says that the response of the general public was to express their wonder at the miracle over and over. This additional color helps us imagine ourselves into the story.

There are several characters we can choose to identify with: the sick man whose life is changed, the friends determined to get him help, the amazed bystanders, or even the critical and skeptical religious people. Perhaps at different points in our lives we are any one of these figures. As we pray through the story we can see from which vantage point we need to see Jesus. The central figure who challenges each one of them, is Jesus, there healing and forgiving sin.

Am I determined to go to Jesus for my needs and those of others?

July 8

Luke 5:27-32 Friendship with the hurting

Luke added a phrase to the telling of this story to what we learned before.. Jesus said he was not there to “spend my time” with those who already think they are good enough. This challenges me to reflect on how much time I spend with people in some kind of need. Jesus spent all his time with his friends and coworkers, but together they were constantly reaching beyond themselves to others who were ill or in need of forgiveness.

Surely most of us have someone in our lives, perhaps even a relative, who has made choices that make them less than respectable. They can feel the disapproval from the respectable relatives, and it does not help. A phone call, an email, a gift, a conversation over coffee or a holiday together can show that there is still love. That is in line with Jesus’ style rather than the culture of rejection.

What if Jesus collected some slimy used car salesman to represent him?
What if he hung out at fast food joints eating unhealthy food with lower class folks?
What if he went to the racetrack on Sundays?

You mean he already came and did things like this?
I knew it!
The professionals hated it and couldn't believe God would stoop so low
Professionals at judging and complaining...

How much time do I devote to those in trouble?

July 9

Luke 5:33-39 New Wine

John's disciples fasted and Jesus' were always feasting. This bothered the religious leaders, but Jesus defended it by saying there is a time and place for both. His presence with them meant it was a time for celebration.

If we choose to limit our consumption of food or anything else, we have an opportunity to evaluate what we most value in life, and how our lifestyle is aligning with that. Fasting can give us insight and strategies for the difficulties we face, and a deeper sense of God's guidance and presence with us. Experiencing benefits from chosen limitations makes them attractive. But Jesus' presence with us even now means there is plenty of time for feasting. Ours is a joyful faith. A friend started a Facebook group called "Feasters and Fasters" to capture this balance and encourage both ends of the spiritual spectrum.

It is striking that Jesus said that those who drink old wine don't really want the new, thinking the old is better. This describes so well our attachment to "how things have always been done." Jesus challenged being stuck in a rut and proposed that healthy spirituality is open to new things. We have to let go of our know-it-all ways and be curious, open, willing to take risks, and even willing to stretch beyond our comfort zone. How else can we keep growing in our spiritual life? We need to sip new wine and not compare (especially not critically!)

The Spirit is creative and always starting new things in our world. Even the fact that there is a connection between modern Facebook and an ancient practice like fasting is an example.

Am I willing to include both fasting and feasting in my life? How open am I to new things the Spirit is doing?

THE DISCIPLES ARE COACHED

July 10

Luke 6:1-5 What is the Sabbath?

The Pharisees said the disciples had broken the law by snacking. Jesus responded by pointing to a story where David broke the law by eating the priest's bread. When he was fleeing Saul and asked for food at the tabernacle, the priest felt it was okay to give it to them (since he had nothing else) as long as they were sexually pure.

Looking back at the law it is hard to find a specific prohibition for sharing the bread. It was given to the priests for their use, but in this instance the priest passed it on. There is also no specific instruction not to snack on grain. That was a more rigid rule that had developed to help define work to avoid.

The rigidity was contrary to the spirit of relaxation and rest that was contained in the Sabbath provision. Jesus went a step further and claimed his authority over how to use the Sabbath well.

Do I understand that there is actually some flexibility in the law and that it was not as rigid as the Pharisees proposed?

July 11

Luke 6:6-11 Criticized for healing

The Sabbath-breaking controversy was not over. The Pharisees defined healing as work and were eager to see if Jesus would break the law. Jesus responded by asking if it was a day for doing good and saving life, or a day for doing ill and destroying life? The answer should have been obvious.

But they were so sure their rules were right, that this challenged their paradigm. They had made following rules more important than love, distorting the very purpose of the law. Jesus made eye-contact one by one, looking for some flexibility.

He then healed the man. Tragically it says they were "wild with rage.". Instead of moving their paradigm, they angrily defended their existing position. This inability to take in a perfectly valid interpretation of the Law showed they had put something above the Law. That was their own interpretation which had separated them from its essence.

Unfortunately, many of us have done this with the Bible as a whole. Too many times we use it as a weapon, and are "filled with rage" by those who challenge our ideas. We have a history of shameful religious wars that arise from that rage, or today some mini-wars on the internet. We need to get busy saving life and not destroying it.

Am I overly critical of my theological opponents?

July 12

Luke 6:12-16 Praying for the team. (8:1-3)

Luke uniquely says that Jesus prayed all night before he selected his disciples. That the Trinity spent long private time together inspires us to do the same when we so badly need his guidance. His selection was good. Seemingly ordinary people turned them extraordinary ones who changed the world. I am sure he prayed for that.

They couldn't have known this was the start of many journeys
Thaddeus and Simon to Arabia, Syria, Mesopotamia
Bartholomew to Armenia, John to Ephesus
Matthew to Ethiopia or Persia
Peter to Rome. Thomas to India.
It's a little confusing which James (or if James) made it to Spain
Provincial, ordinary men
Made into men of the whole world.

Do I pray for the people I know to have extraordinary impact?

July 13

Luke 6:17-18 Ministry expands

Jesus' ministry was no longer local synagogue preaching, or even itinerant preaching. It needed to be outdoors since people came from quite distant places. He healed and taught these crowds.

We are familiar with ministries that rent stadiums or create a television ministry as a way of reaching the crowds. We even have large prayer services. Jesus example validates these larger scale efforts to reach out widely. In Jesus' case it was natural growth from local preaching, to having some fans with him as he traveled, to selecting assistants, to big outdoor venues. Just because it is big, I need to remind myself that it is not necessarily bad!

But we need to keep our focus on what our specific calling and task might be. It could be something small and supportive like the disciples traveling with Jesus, or like someone bringing their sick friend for help, or even someone making a small donation. Whatever our task, the critical point is obedience to our part.

Can I pray, "extend my reach as far as you desire, God"?

July 14

Luke 6:20-23 Preference for the poor

Jesus said the poor and hungry are blessed in one of many passages that has led to the theological idea of the “preferential option for the poor.”. God’s special love for the poor and oppressed is a thread through scripture. While the Proverbs point to character defects as a cause of poverty, there are about three times as many scriptures that point to oppression by others as the reason people are poor. Thus there is a need for liberation from that oppression, and so the creation of the useful idea of “liberation theology”.

We are told to respect the dignity of those who are poor, that indifference is sinful, and that we need to give to others even if we are poor. We are to offer gifts, empathy, just wages, loans, debt forgiveness, and justice. Jesus chose poverty to make us rich, and we have the opportunity to see his presence in anyone in need. If we are the one in need we know we can appeal to him for help and he may send a generous person our way.

Jesus included being hated and excluded as part of the package. Rejection for loving him should bring us great joy. I have had moments when this comes to mind when seeing that someone is being attacked for doing the right thing, hoping they have the inner knowledge of Jesus to be filled with joy anyway.

One of my favorite current artists who draws and paints Christian themes is Maximino Cerezo Barredo. His figures are often from Latin America incorporated into scriptures stories, and he has been called a “painter of liberation.” Looking at what he has drawn and painted, I am challenged once more to be a participant in liberating others from poverty. I am challenged to be on the side of the marginalized and the excluded.

Am I finding ways to alleviate poverty? Do I stay on the side of what is right, no matter what the cost?

July 15

Luke 6:24-26 Challenge to the rich

With our cultural admiration of wealth, this passage is a challenge to our assumptions. Jesus said there is sorrow waiting for the rich, satisfied, prosperous, carefree fun-lovers, and those getting a lot of attention. This is a hard saying for we Americans who are so relatively wealthy and comfortable. This is not a perspective the church finds comfortable or attractive.

Jesus seems to ally himself and identify with those who are poor, and his critique of the rich shows a definite preference. If we are well off, we need to develop a gift of giving (Hebrews 13:16 and many others), not expect special attention (James 2:2-4), and be humble and recognize that in God’s eyes it is the poor who are honored (James 1:9-11).

Cerezo Barredo has several paintings that capture the indifference and self-centeredness of the rich, while those around them work too hard and have too little. In one series he takes the words from Luke 6:20-26 and paints the contrasts. Unfortunately, I look a bit more like the ones being warned than the ones being blessed.

Do I have a humble attitude toward my possessions? Do I honor those who are poor? If I am in need, am I able to trust God's special love for me?

July 16

Luke 6:27-36 Love your enemies

Jesus took morality to a much deeper and more demanding level when he said we must love our enemies. If we can do them good, we should. We must pray for them and desire their happiness. We must even lend to them and not be concerned about repayment.

What a demanding and challenging call for us. Most of us are more self-protective. The circumstances of life have given me opportunities to try to love people who mistreated me. Even struggling, it has kept me going that this is something Jesus expects. Being kind to the unthankful is hard. Fortunately, I have seen that God does work through our costly obedience. It also causes me to ask myself just how annoying I am being to others!

Is there an enemy (or even someone who is merely irritating) for whom I can pray?

July 17

Luke 6:37-42 Have a generous heart

Here is another hard demand. We need to stop criticizing. We need to forgive. We need to give generously. We need to be self-aware and conscious of our own faults before we try to help others with theirs. These are human relations tips that confront our self-centered tendencies.

We would rather notice the faults of others, justify ourselves, hold grudges, keep what we have for our own use, have a great self-image, and tell others how they need to change! This radical restructuring of who we are comes slowly and painfully. The negative payback for criticizing, and the positive payback for generously helping others, guide us into having a more open heart.

Which of these calls is hardest for me?

July 18

Luke 6:43-45 Good fruit

Our natures have to change. If we have become good, good actions and good words will come out. If not, wrong actions and wrong words will give us away. Paul lamented that even when he wanted to do good, he did not manage to do so. The only answer, he said, was Jesus (Romans

7:18-25). He is the one who changes our sinful nature into that of a new creature. As we become aware of bad fruit in ourselves, we can ask to be changed.

Good fruit is described as the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When we see these things in ourselves and others, we can be grateful. If we see a failure we can ask for the pruning that will let the good fruit grow.

What fruit am I seeing in my life?

July 19

Luke 6:46-49. A solid foundation

It is interesting to see how different pieces of teaching from Matthew are recombined in slightly different ways in Luke, giving the impression that Jesus presented similar themes with variations on different occasions.

Here he complains that people want to call him Lord without actually obeying. He describes obedience as building on him as a strong foundation. My desire is to both call him Lord and obey, yet I am quite sure that there are times when I make serious mistakes. More than once I have felt like the storms of life were in danger of tearing down the house, but was grateful that the solid Rock was still there. The connection to God's presence gives me stability when the circumstances are unstable.

This sermon concludes in the first phrase in the next chapter saying that Jesus finished speaking to the people. The Greek word "rhema" is used which can mean a word spoken clearly and vividly. It speaks of something that touches the heart. As I connect Jesus words to my circumstances what touches my heart may change, but I still recall how deeply in the past my heart was touched by the reminder that he is the Rock, the source of stability in a very unstable world full of difficulties and challenges, and I recall how much peace and hope this image provided.

Can I stay connected to Christ even in very hard circumstances?

THE DISCIPLES SEE COMPASSION 7

July 20

Luke 7:1-10 A slave is healed (7:11-17)

Capernaum was a small town where everyone must have known everyone. Even an outsider like the Roman officer had integrated himself enough in the community to build the people a synagogue, and was respected and honored for it.

Whatever his religious customs, he understood from reports that Jesus had the spiritual authority to heal, and he needed it for his slave. His understanding of authority meant he did not even need Jesus to be physically present. Jesus was impressed, saying his faith was greater than anything he had yet seen.

I aspire to this level of confidence in Jesus' authority! Unfortunately, the blows of life and the delays of answered prayers shake my confidence. I struggle. I need the encouragement of others and their stories of how God has worked in their lives. Years of praying have given me a reservoir of answers to look back on, be grateful for, and so turn around a look ahead with more hope when my faith is wobbling.

Who do I know that can encourage my faith?

July 21

Luke 7:11-17 A son is raised (7:1-10)

Luke is the only one with this tender story of Jesus disrupting a funeral. Jesus' crowd ran into the funeral crowd, and he was deeply touched by the grieving mother. One translation says his heart broke for her and used the strongest Greek word for deep emotion. (Passion Bible) He felt her sorrow but he comforted her saying, "Please don't cry.". He then intervened and raised the boy from the dead who sat up and started talking to everyone.

Any mother grieving for a child in any way can cling to this moment and know that Jesus shares the deep emotion. How comforting to see Jesus' compassion and his intervention. When I am struggling for myself or for others, it encourages me to remind myself that Christ feels this same emotional connection to our suffering. The action to change things may not happen instantly, but feeling accompanied and comforted matters.

Does Jesus' compassion make me believe that is God's heart toward me?

July 22

Luke 7:18-23 Seeking Messiah

Luke told us how close Jesus' and John's families were, and how remarkable were both of their births. The faith that Jesus was Messiah was strong in both of John's parents. John seemed to believe this when he baptized Jesus.

But now that John was in prison, he was having doubts. Matthew tells us that John sent disciples to ask if he was Messiah, but Luke specifies it was two people, not a large group. Luke also specifies that while they were there, Jesus healed people including those who were blind. He then referred to the Messianic prophecy that healings were proof of his identity. He ended by saying that God blesses those who do not give up.

For John, in prison, his life in the balance, knowing he had completed his mission preparing for Messiah surely strengthened his endurance. He was about to give his life up as a prophet, not long before Jesus would also give up his life. Surely this report brought him reassurance and peace.

Am I able to persist in faith through great difficulties?

July 23

Luke 7:24-35 The Messenger

Having validated himself as Messiah to John, Jesus then validated John as forerunner to the Messiah to the crowds. Jesus quoted Malachi 3:1 regarding a messenger preparing the way, and identified John as that messenger. The crowd that had been baptized by John loved it; the religious leaders hated it.

Jesus validated John's asceticism and his contrasting participation in parties. Both lifestyles contain wisdom. The great John, the greatest who came before Christ, is outclassed by we very ordinary ones who have entered Christ's kingdom. We have been lifted from the position of messengers and servants to the position of friends and siblings in a royal family. How privileged we can feel.

Do I recognize being part of the kingdom as a great source of my importance?

July 24

Luke 7:36-39 A sinful woman repents

In Matthew and Mark we have seen a similar story in the last week of Jesus' life in Bethany near Jerusalem. But this is in a chapter that took place in Galilee (judging by the resurrection at Nain beforehand), and early in his ministry. Other differences include the fact that this was at a Pharisee's home who was critical of Christ, that the woman who anointed him was identified as sinful, and the reproach of Christ was for his allowing himself to be touched by such a person. In contrast, the complaint at Bethany was for the waste of such an expensive item.

In John's account it is Mary of Bethany, Lazarus' sister, who anointed Christ six days before Passover in her home. In Matthew and Mark it was two days before the Passover and in the home of Simon the Leper. Some have thus proposed there were three anointings, but a general consensus seems to be two, with the one in Luke by a sinful woman very different than told by the others.

To confuse the issue further, the medieval Pope Gregory preached a sermon that combined all these into one account, and conflated three women: the sinful woman, Mary of Bethany, and Mary of Magdalene. Everyone seems to agree that was a big mistake. For many years, I have found the differences between the stories confusing and see there is good historical precedent for that! But the point remains: we see here a genuinely penitent woman.

For us, though, perhaps the key line is “she has shown me much love.”. This dramatic expression of love are met with forgiveness for her sins and commendation. Our hearts need to be soft and generous like hers, not hard and critical like that of Simon the Pharisee. Has Christ’s love and forgiveness caused a spontaneous response that leads us to acts of lavish love, or are we stuck in our respectability and self-regard?

Am I willing to come to Christ in humble and even tearful repentance? Am I willing to pour myself out in love to him?

July 25

Luke 7:40-50 Forgiveness evokes great love

Simon the Pharisee was thinking negative things about Jesus’ lack of discernment that the woman clinging to his feet was immoral, Jesus answered his thoughts. This is not the only time Jesus seemed to be something of a mind-reader. He then told a story to try to illustrate what was really going on.

One person was forgiven a debt worth 500 days of work, and another a debt of 50 days work. The debt was kindly forgiven, so the question became who would be more appreciative. He then pointed out the difference in how the woman and the Pharisee had treated him. He assured the woman of her forgiveness which annoyed the dinner guests who wondered why he thought he had such power.

Do I feel I have been forgiven much, or is it a struggle to think of myself as much of a sinner?

THE DISCIPLES ARE COMFORTED 8

July 26

Luke 8:1-3 Women disciples

Luke is the gospel writer who lets us know that there were important women disciples. They not only accompanied him and the men, some were wealthy enough to fund this. Makes sense that the women would think about the food needed!

We are introduced to Mary Magdalene who had been delivered from something horrible--seven demons. John will tell the story that honors her as the first to see Jesus after the resurrection. Suzanna is mentioned, but we do not hear any more of her. Joanna was in the group of women who saw the empty tomb. (Luke 24:10). And there were “many others.”

At the crucifixion we hear of “the other Mary” who was also at the resurrection. *Matthew 27:61, 28:1). She is also called the mother of James and Joseph, and we hear of Salome at the crucifixion (Mark 15:40). Jesus’ mother, his mother’s sister Mary (wife of Clopas) are also among the Galilean women (John 19:25).

As a woman, it is encouraging to see their importance in Jesus' circle. As Paul tells us, in Christ there is neither male nor female. Our culture, including the church, still struggles to fully respect women, and each step forward builds on Jesus' evident respect. Luke highlights women more than any other gospel writer, with 36 references and 17 specific women. He continues this in Acts, highlighting women leaders and letting us know that this equality is an important social change that Jesus brought.

Am I doing my part to reinforce women's equality?

July 27

Luke 8:4-21 Close to Jesus

As so often happens, Luke gives us something slightly new in stories we have heard from Matthew and Mark. Here is the parable of the sower, but there is a new description of those who hear and respond to God's word: "honest, good-hearted people." To receive what Jesus said, it is good to know that honesty and compassion are great starting places. When we find these in someone not yet a believer, it is an encouraging sign they are coming close.

The next new item is that those who hear God's message "cling to it." The idea of clinging speaks to neediness and dependency. Here there is no mention of differing percentages of the harvest, just the encouragement that the clingy produce a huge harvest.

But as we go deeper in our third time of examining this parable, the spiritual analogy that our lives need some plowing, perhaps some pain, so that the word can take root. A poet expressed it like this:

The seed, Lord, falls on stony ground
Which sun and rain can never bless--
Until the soil is broken found--
With harvest fruitfulness.

Plow then the rock, and plow again,
That so some blade of good may start
After the searching share of pain
Has cut a furrow through my heart. -- Charles L. O'Donnell

Do I cling to God's word? Do I cling to Christ? Do I accept it when he is ploughing up my heart? Do I receive the message with joy?

July 28

Luke 8:22-25 A storm is calmed

On this crossing of Lake Galilee, Luke wrote that the storm threatened to swamp them, and they were in real danger. They woke Jesus from his nap, and he calmed the storm. They were amazed, and they were safe.

Surely each of us has moments when we feel “swamped” and when objectively we are in danger. Over and over the Old Testament tells stories of danger when people cried to God and he intervened on their behalf. This great theme of scripture is a comfort in our moments of danger.

But surely we can take an additional lesson from the fact that he was with them in the boat. Having seen his extraordinary power it would have been reasonable not to panic, but to know that his presence with them meant all would be well. This deep confidence in our storms that all will be well because God is with us can keep us in peace even when things are tough.

When my sister was struggling with cancer, the reassurance that Jesus was “in the boat with her” served to comfort, calm, and increase her faith. She faced that difficulty with courage and grace, serving as an inspiring example to the rest of us, even when, after fourteen years of ups and downs, she continued her life of faith in heaven.

Am I crying out to God to intervene in my current need?

July 29

Luke 8:26-39 Evil spirits are controlled

We know that mental disturbances exist on a range from temporary depression or anxiety to disconnection from other people and normal life. These disconnections Jesus treated by a spiritual intervention, and whatever other intervention we might seek, getting spiritual help makes sense.

I don't judge the poor man with demons--
There are probably times when we're all nuts
Help us all
I had a period when
Left to myself I might have been like
Homeless vets I've met on the streets
Who clearly let too much reality in during the war
Perhaps I've done a little shrieking in my time
Screaming, definitely
I've had moments of hysteria
Feeling the need to get away
Too many thoughts tumbling inside

Competing voices
My confusion going into the world and causing confusion
I, too, am grateful for Jesus' words that leave me
Sitting quietly, well-dressed, sane

Do I trust God to bring emotional stability into my life?

July 30

Luke 8:40-56 Jesus cares for the sick

Luke described the crowds as waiting for Jesus with open arms. If we are people who have experienced receiving help when we cry out, we will often be in this open-armed state, waiting for Jesus to come and meet our need.

Two who received answers to their needs were Jairus for his daughter, and a woman with an incurable hemorrhage. One can see this as yet another example of the pairing of care for a man (Jairus) with care for a woman that is so characteristic of Luke's account of Jesus' life.

The beautiful line in the story of the child who had died is that "at that moment her life returned". It was Jesus' touch and voice that transformed the situation. Our life-threatening experiences are also transformed by the Spirit's presence and voice in our hearts. Each experience of this makes us more eager to live arms wide open, waiting for Jesus, expectant that all the challenges we are faced with is something that he is powerful enough to deal with, and we can eagerly expect intervention and transformation no matter our circumstances.

Do I live waiting for Jesus to act?

THE DISCIPLES CONTRIBUTE 9

July 31

Luke 9:1-9 They share the kingdom

As Jesus sent out his apostles Herod was confused and threatened. Where had this miracle-worker come from? He thought he had nipped any potential rebellion in the bud by imprisoning and then beheading John. Yet Herod was curious and very eager to meet Jesus.

Three times in this passage we see the word "heal." First it was Jesus giving them the authority to do that. Secondly, he sent them out to preach the Kingdom and heal. Third we are told they went to the villages and did this.

In the last 100 years, Pentecostalism has particularly recaptured this expectation, and there are hundreds of thousands of healing stories. The movement makes up a quarter of all Christians, a remarkable change in such a relatively short time. In surveys two-thirds of American Christians said they believed in or had experienced healing.

In addition, we have had astonishing advances in medicine that contribute to our healing today. The close tie between good health and the Kingdom reinforces our need to be willing to pray for these needs.

Do I have a testimony of healing?

August 1

Luke 9:10-17. They share food

In this account of the feeding of the 5,000, it says that Jesus “kept giving” bread and fish to the disciples to distribute. In our lives we may not have economic, psychological or spiritual resources to adequately give to the people around us. But if we have this model of realizing that what is lacking in us is miraculously provided by Jesus for us to pass on, our perspective can change and we are in a much better position to pour ourselves out.

How the disciples went from feeling this was an impossible task to the point of picking up leftovers, parallels the transformation possible in our ministry experiences. At one point in my life, I was particularly aware of my inadequacy and was tempted to discouragement that I could not do what needed to be done well. This story, and the reminder that it is Jesus who “kept giving” so that the disciples could keep giving, encouraged and comforted me.

Despite the fact that Jesus had tried to slip away quietly with the disciples, when the crowds found him and followed him, his reaction was the one that we want to learn to have when stretched. There are times when people seeking us out is not what we might prefer. But it says that Jesus welcomed them and it is our desire to always have a hospitable heart.

Am I willing to receive what Jesus keeps giving me to give to others? Am I willing to welcome others even when I had other plans?

August 2

Luke 9:18-27 They see Messiah

The entire story of the passion of Christ turns around the disciples’ profound misunderstanding of what Christ kept warning them about. Peter understood that Jesus was Messiah, but perhaps he and all the others understood this to mean they would soon see Jesus as a triumphant king and be the powerful people around him.

Matthew and Mark wrote that this story took place at Caesarea Philippi but Luke left that out and focused on the fact that Jesus was alone praying. He then came over to ask them to tell him who they perceived him to be. Fitting the accounts together, it seems that Jesus’ response to a place of idolatry was private prayer and public clarity about who he was.

At a cave with a spring a Greek god was worshipped, and Herod the Great had a great white temple to him to honor the emperor. Herod's son Philip is the one who then constructed a city around them. In this place where ancient gods as well as earthly rulers were revered, a contrast was set up to declare that Jesus was the true God and the true ruler of all.

The idea that he would be rejected and suffer and be killed did not fit their frame of interpretation of the scriptures. Not accepting this, they truly could not grasp the idea that he would be raised from the dead. Trying to shift their frame from triumphalism to the humility of suffering, he urged his followers to be willing to lose their lives and to carry a cross. This absolutely went against the grain of their expectations. It also goes against our hopes for prosperity, health, success, and a good, happy life. The idea that we might have challenges that we could identify as a cross to carry is a hard word.

Am I willing to give up my agenda for my life to follow Christ's agenda for me? If I am in a spiritually negative environment, do I follow Jesus' example of prayer? Do I declare his lordship?

August 3

Luke 9:28-36 They see his glory

Jesus and the disciples had climbed from 700 feet below sea level at Lake Galilee to 1,150 feet above it to Caesarea Philippi. They probably made the 25 mile journey in a day. Now they ascended to Mount Hermon at 9,230 feet, another 14 miles. These high places had been part of ancient Israelite idolatry and there were 20 ancient temples in the mountains. It is located where Lebanon, Syria and Israel meet, is Israel's highest peak, and the only one that can be covered with snow. It fascinates me that no matter that it was present, idolatry was completely ignored in the gospels, considering how much of an Old Testament theme it was. The focus is on Jesus as the one true God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Luke adds something to the account of the transfiguration by saying Jesus' purpose was to pray, and it was as he prayed his appearance changed. Nor do the other accounts mention that the disciples had fallen asleep and woke up to an extraordinary situation. Another new detail is that Moses and Elijah were leaving when Peter proposed making shrines for them.

The transfiguration is a moment of great beauty, and as we keep our eyes open on a daily basis and acknowledge the beauty of what is around us, we are reminded of this transformational moment, and our anticipation of what is ahead in heaven. When we enter the kingdom now, when we receive eternal life, we have glimpses of heaven now, perhaps not as startling as this, but definitely real. When the time comes to enter heaven the eternal life we have been given just continues in a new place.

Am I willing to spend time praying alone, or am I a sleepy disciple? Do I see the glory of Christ in our everyday world? Do I look ahead eagerly to heaven and its beauty?

August 4

Luke 9:37-48 Characteristics of the Kingdom

The trip to Caesarea Philippi and Mount Hermon had been almost like tourism or a retreat. Definitely a break from some of their normal ministry demands. But once back in town a crisis was present. A desperate man had approached the disciples to heal his convulsing son, and they had failed. Jesus did it and healed both the convulsions and the injuries they had caused. The people were amazed.

Jesus lowered the high the disciples were on after this difficult case. He warned of his coming betrayal and they were confused. Surely his coronation was coming? Not able to hear what he was telling them, they set it aside. Instead, they argued about their relative importance. Jesus took a child to his side and said that recognizing the importance of a child was recognizing him. Then John accused a stranger of overstepping his bounds by using Jesus' name to cast out demons.

In each of these stories Jesus used a memorable epigram:

"Listen to me, and remember what I say."

"Whoever is the least among you is the greatest."

"Anyone who is not against you is for you."

Do I listen and remember? Do I treat everyone the same? Do I accept that it is not my responsibility to monitor the faith of others?

August 5

Luke 9:49-58 Homeless

This moment is a key turning point in Luke. Up to now, most ministry was in the north, but now as his return to heaven approached, Jesus "resolutely" turned to Jerusalem, showing courage in the face of certain death. The Samaritans rejected him he was not there for ministry, but just passing through. James and John wanted to punish them, but Jesus said no. How much John, one of the "sons of thunder", changed into the apostle of great love.

In his instructions to the disciples in the next chapter, Jesus would say, "If a town refuses to welcome you, go out into its streets and say 'We wipe the dust of your town from our feet as a public announcement of your doom!'" Perhaps this rejection was in his mind when he warned someone who wanted to follow him that he was essentially a homeless person and disciples needed to be willing to choose that for themselves.

How deep is my commitment and how drastically am I willing to launch myself into precarious circumstances if that seems to be what God is calling me to? Am I courageous enough to face dangers and difficulties? Am I willing to face rejection? What comforts am I willing to give up?

Am I willing to live with others rather than have my own settled place if that is what ministry requires?

August 6

Luke 9:59-62 Excuses not to follow

Jesus continued to call disciples, but here two refused him. One wished to bury his father: the other wanted to say goodbye to his family. These seem like reasonable human requests, but Jesus saw them as excuses. Perhaps the first was actually saying, “my dad won’t approve of me following you, so can we wait until he dies?” Perhaps the second was saying, “My family is not going to like this, so can I have some time to try to talk them into it?”

Jesus had been clear on other occasions that he needs to be more important than family. We need to seek his approval and separate ourselves from needing family approval. If our focus is on finding our security and approval in our relationship with Jesus, we can have the emotional balance to keep loving others even when they are difficult or rejecting, and we can have a settled sense of self that does not require us to get our egos fed from people. The result: true freedom to love.

Do I put Jesus before any one of my family members?

JOURNEY WITH JESUS

CARRYING HIS MESSAGE 10

August 7

Luke 10:1-16 Sent out in peace

Jesus’ ministry had now grown beyond his twelve assistants, so he selected 72 disciples to go and prepare the way for him in villages he planned to visit. His instructions were a combination of things we have seen in the other gospels. He warned of opposition, but he told them to enter homes with a blessing of peace, and if the family was peaceful, the blessing would stand.

Luke’s gospel makes the most references to peace (12), compared to 2 in Matthew, 2 in Mark, and 5 in John. We recall that Luke told us the angels announced “peace on earth, good will to men” at Jesus’ birth. As I engage in ministry, I am aware that part of the mission is to bring peace to troubled hearts.

When I am praying, I can tell if something is amiss in my heart if prayer does not bring peace. Settling into a place of contemplative security with God and having a quiet and grateful heart can help me then engage with my circumstances, even troubling ones, or the circumstances with others, and keep a heart of peace.

Am I a messenger of peace?

August 8

Luke 10:17-24 Returning in joy

When the 72 disciples returned, Jesus said he saw Satan being defeated in the spiritual realm, and he was filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit. Luke is the gospel with the most references to the Holy Spirit (14), compared to 6 in Matthew, 5 in Mark, and 8 in John. In Acts, Luke's continuation of the story, the Holy Spirit is strongly highlighted with 47 references.

Luke is also the gospel with the most references to joy (14), compared to 5 in Matthew, 6 in Mark, and 10 in John. Here both joy and the Spirit are combined and we get a glimpse of Jesus' heart as he prayed aloud. He was not only grateful for his authority and theirs, but he told the disciples how privileged they were to be seeing prophecy fulfilled.

Ministry actually can bring us joy rather than a sense of being overworked and taken advantage of. If I am not experiencing joy in my service it is definitely time to step back and ask myself if I am doing things "in the flesh" rather than "in the Spirit." Am I eager to do what God has given me to do, and happy as I see him at work? Gloomy or overworked servants of God are probably not really helping advance Christ's kingdom. Gloom may well be a danger sign that we have our own agendas and are advancing our own position and prestige. Instead our hearts leaping up in joyful praise and thanksgiving like Jesus did may be a sign our ministry is on track.

Do I live in the joy of the Holy Spirit? If not, what are the barriers to joy for me?

August 9

Luke 10:25-29 Who is my neighbor?

Jesus did his usual practice of not answering a question directly, but asking his questioner to answer. He accepted the religious expert's summary of the law as loving God and neighbor. "Good!" responded Jesus. But it says the man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked for clarification on what was his neighbor and Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan.

Are we not like this man? We are willing to be loving and gracious to a particular circle of people. But if we move beyond that circle, we would like there to be reasons we are allowed to reject people. Racial bias, anti-immigrant attitudes, suspicion of other nations and religions are the result.

Jesus' answer was to extend the meaning of the word "neighbor". We need today to work on the same process of extending its meaning since many who are Christians feel justified in rejecting selected groups of people. We are like this very religious man who wanted to justify himself.

Do I see all people as potential neighbors God calls me to love?

August 10

Luke 10:30-37 Hospitality for those in need (10:38-42)

It is quite easy to update the Good Samaritan story for our time, and here is one example: A homeless man lying on the street was passed by a pastor, then passed by a university professor, and was finally picked up kindly and taken to a shelter by a member of a radical Islamic sect. "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man in the street? ... Go and do the same."

Jesus' fictional character who chooses to serve is a man, but the next story had a real, practical, down-to-earth servant who was a woman, another pair of stories. In this case those who supposedly were so busy serving God with their worship were thereby avoiding love of neighbor. In contrast, in the next story, the one focused on Jesus was commended for not having a troubled heart. Together these two stories show the heart balance that has been described as living with contemplation in action.

Another interpretation can help us when we feel that we have been so beaten up by life that we are like the man lying helplessly on the road. In our state of sin and need Jesus himself is the tender and compassionate Good Samaritan who dresses our wounds, takes up to a place of safety, and provides for a time of healing. Once we have experienced that kindness, how can we not be quick to offer that to others.

Am I quick to help those who need it?

August 11

Luke 10:38-42 Hospitality for Jesus (10:30-37)

Mary, a model of contemplation, was given a great affirmation by Jesus when visiting her home: "There is only one thing to be concerned about and Mary has discovered it." Luke does not tell us the later story of the raising of her brother Lazarus from death, nor her anointing Jesus with perfume. Those are John's stories, and he does not include this one.

But the combination of these three compelling stories gives us an image of Mary as a reflective, tender-hearted, and generous soul. This is someone who blazed the trail of contemplation for the rest of us.

Martha, her sister, found her irritating and inconsiderate since she needed extra help in the kitchen. Often we also assume that the most active people are the most useful. But perhaps a good goal is to combine our inner Martha and inner Mary. Contemplation in action is a great spiritual aspiration.

Have I learned to meld action and contemplation?

JOURNEY OF THE HEART 11

August 12

Luke 11:1-4 The Lord's Prayer

With Luke's emphasis on Jesus' prayer practices, he added the context that Jesus had been out praying when his disciples asked to be taught how to do so. In addition to saying this as a memorized prayer, it is good to examine the elements in his prayer and help it to form our own prayers.

He started by placing prayer in the context of an intimate personal relationship, that of a parent to child. He then added praise, which sends us to the Psalms for more examples. He told us to ask to be part of extending God's kingdom in the way he wants that done. He encouraged requesting our daily needs, not luxuries. He told us to be humble enough to ask forgiveness for our offenses and to quickly forgive those of others. He ended with an appeal to make good choices rather than bad ones that harm others.

Often we assume God's will is negative, perhaps because Jesus did not get what he wanted before the passion, but accepted God's will. The overarching message of scripture, however, is that God's will is good, and even in the case of Jesus and the cross, great good came. How grateful we can be that we can help bring about God's will through our prayers.

When we do not know how to pray the recurring message that Jesus and the Spirit pray for us is reassuring. But we can also be encouraged to copy the disciples and humbly ask, "Lord, teach us to pray." It is a mysterious exercise, so a life-long learning curve just makes sense.

Do I pray hopefully for God's good will? Do I live with gratitude that the Spirit prays for me? Am I always learning more about prayer?

August 13

Luke 11:5-13 Persistent Prayer

Jesus told a parable to encourage the disciples not to give up if their prayers were not answered quickly. Persisting can be very hard, but this passage encourages us not to give up. Here is a modern parable for the aggravation of (as yet) unanswered prayer.

Dear God,
I figure you're on Facebook
And if the NSA can read my emails,
You can too.
So I'm just wondering
Since you know all languages,
You doubtless see binary as beautiful,
And electronics as elegant.

But I've put in several requests
For miracles and all I'm getting
Is that annoying circle
Saying something is buffering.
As we know,
A watched file never downloads.
Oh I know about miracles
Since I've already seen a few,
And I know about your love for language
Since I've seen that, too.
But couldn't you please move my requests
A little higher up the queue?

It is interesting that right after giving a model of how to pray, Jesus thought it would be helpful to tell a story about persisting even when one was not seeing an immediate effect. Prayer gives us a lot better stories when it is practiced over a lifetime and we have the arc of years to see that something asked for long ago actually did come about. It just took time.

Do I keep praying no matter what?

August 14

Luke 11: 14-26 False accusation

Jesus' power to free people from demons was unfavorably interpreted as Black Magic. Jesus challenge that by saying this would be like a house divided. Jesus also said Satan guards his palace, well-armed against defeat. But Jesus is stronger and can overpower him, strip him of his weapons and his goods. A palace cannot be left empty, because it will be retaken and made worse. When we are freed from sin, the Spirit needs to fill our inner palace to keep us free.

It is reassuring to recall in the midst of any difficult situation that Jesus is the most powerful one and can defeat evil. As we pray about any tragedy, the image of Jesus as the stronger warrior who can disarm his opponent encourages us to become valiant spiritual warriors.

But a key point is that once what was damaging is gone, what is needed is the Spirit filling up our lives with his presence and all good things. Negativity replaced with faith and positivity and joy. Complaints replaced with gratitude. Self-centeredness replaced with loving compassion. Anger replaced with patience. And pride replaced with appreciation for all of God's gifts.

Do I see Christ as the victorious one? Is he refilling me with good things to replace negative ones?

August 15

Luke 11:27-34 (Luke 14:15) Blessings on the obedient

A woman in the crowd blessed Jesus' mother, and he responded by praising discipleship and offering a blessing for those who listen to God. In Luke 14:15 a man will offer a blessing for those going to the kingdom feast. Jesus responded there with parable of those who listen to the invitation and those who do not. In another pairing of male and female examples, Jesus chose a responsive woman from the Old Testament to highlight (the Queen of Sheba), and the responsive people of Nineveh. Both stood in contrast to the unresponsive people of his time.

Jesus said he would give them the sign of Jonah. This opens the door of the Old Testament to a vast literary task of seeing the stories as prefiguring Christ. Jonah was nearly dead for three days and then was restored to life. He prayed. "You, O Lord my God, have snatched me from the yawning jaws of death." The analogy to Christ's three days in death is made in Matthew 12:40. In this passage the analogy is that both Jonah and Christ were sent to preach repentance, but the people responded to Jonah and have not responded to Christ. The analogy is a warning to his listeners.

One can see these Old Testament foreshadowings of Christ as a beautiful literary coincidence, but as one begins to see just how many there are, how almost every chapter contributes yet another analogy, one is forced to see that this is more than a literary device. It is a strong prophetic stream from one end of the Old Testament to the other that culminates in Christ.

Do I enjoy looking for these Old to New Testament connections?

August 16

Luke 11:35-41 Integrity

Jesus called not only for repentance, but for a focus on the true Light. That will transform us. At a dinner party with a Pharisee he emphasized how much more important interior spiritual cleanliness is than external cleanliness. The conversation was provoked by Jesus' unwillingness to do ceremonial hand washing. This custom had been elaborated and ritualized from Leviticus 15 which is about washing clothes, and bathing.

The religious leaders needed inner cleansing. Because of the tricky political situation where they were beholden to the Roman governor and through him to the Emperor, even those most dedicated to following the law were living with a political compromise. When Herod the Great was dying a group of devout people boldly took down the Roman eagle he had placed on the temple. He called them to account and sent them for execution. Even though that had happened many years before, they knew they were politically dependent. Consequently they had no prophetic voice toward the government, and Jesus prophetically called them out and castigated them for hypocrisy.

His consistent message was a need to be truly holy people whose inner world is right. If that is so, the external acts that flow will be good. He promised that our whole life can be radiant. I long for my family, my friends, and myself to have a radiant life, God's floodlight on us to draw others to him.

Where is there any darkness in my life?

August 17

Luke 11:42-54 Motivation

Jesus saw the religious leaders as a major barrier to people's spiritual growth. He repeated "how terrible it will be for you" six times in a discourse that accused them of being nit-picking, vain, hypocritical, arrogant, violent, and obscure. Not the most gracious comments at a dinner party and no wonder that after this "they grilled him with many hostile questions." He wanted them to wake up to their own bad behavior to which they were blind.

Today we also are in danger from our lethal mixture of looking for political power and favor that leads to compromise. We, too, have become too connected to our material goods, to our reputations, and our online image.

Prophets specialized in sarcasm and developed it to an art form.
They found terrific metaphors for creative insults and denunciation.
Jesus, the perfect loving God, affirmed their sarcasm.
So I feel quite comfortable today laughing with comedians
who see absurdity and remind us of what could be.

Am I vigilant against hypocrisy in myself? Am I willing to confront it?

JOURNEY TOWARD HUMILITY 12

August 18

Luke 12:1-12 Don't fear

Jesus' expanding ministry had reached the point where "thousands were milling about and crushing each other". Jesus turned from the crowds and warned his disciples against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. His message was they were opponents not to be feared. Perhaps his reference to what people said in secret becoming public connected to his knowledge of his enemies' plotting.

He knew his disciples would experience the same opposition and he urged them not to be afraid, to stay loyal to him, and to be confident God would give them words when they needed them. He offered profound reassurance by saying God cares about every sparrow, and so much more for us. How can we possibly live fearfully if we truly grasp that God has such intimate concern for us.

When fear or anxiety enter my life, I have to step back and ask how God has helped me in the past, and what I know of his character and his promises. It is time to go into a deeper place of prayer where the fact that I am even alive and aware enough to have these emotions overwhelms what is disturbing me. In that place of prayer there is enough peace to bring it back into the everyday world.

Do I believe I am valuable to God?

August 19

Luke 12:13-21 Don't hoard

Luke has 24 parables, and 18 are unique. This is one of them. It critiques hoarding, and shows how pointless it is in light of unexpected death. He gave important instructions we need in our consumer culture: real life is not measured by how much we own, and storing wealth without a rich relationship to God is foolish.

There is a beauty to this as a response to a request for him to intervene in an inheritance fight. Life has to be about more than getting our fair share.

Christian history is full of stories of people who listened to this call to a more significant life, letting go of their possessions. One well-known figure is Saint Francis who famously even stripped himself as he left his inheritance and went out into a life of adventurous faith. His example has inspired many through the centuries who have lived in poverty as he chose to do; one can hardly say he was not rewarded for his choice.

Am I reasonably detached from my possessions and my savings accounts?

August 20

Luke 12:22-34 Birds and flowers

Earlier in this chapter we were told that we are far more valuable than the sparrows which God loves. Now we are told God loves the ravens and feeds them, and yet we are much more valuable to him. We are told how much God loves flowers that have such a short lifespan, yet we matter so much more to him. We are his little flock, and we are urged not to worry about every day needs. Instead, God is to be the treasure of our hearts.

Here is a great line unique to Luke: "The purses of heaven have no holes." Our treasure is secure, and our daily needs are secure. Our needs will be provided and the call to us is not to worry, but to place our trust in God who cares deeply about us. The fragile beauty of every flowering plant in my garden, the colorful vines spilling over the walls of my flower-filled town, the lavish array of choices in the market, and the delicate wildflowers in the surrounding countryside, are all reminders of God's loving provision.

As I watch the hummingbirds, little flying jewels who come to eat in our garden, their beauty is joyful. As I watch flocks of birds flying west at dusk, theirs is a melancholy beauty. Noisy birdsong that wakes us up is fun and cheerful, brightening our morning. Sometimes I see the flash of a bright red head or a vivid blue body in the trees, and catch my breath. Each bird serves as a lively reminder that, even if there are times I do not feel valuable, this is not true. These birds living their mysterious lives are deeply valuable to their creator and provider, and Jesus' point is that we people matter even more.

Have I learned to trust God for my needs?

August 21

Luke 12:35-48 Watching for Jesus

The great promise in this passage is for those who are ready and waiting for the return of Christ. They are promised special favor. I know that there are news stories that I begin to follow and develop almost an expert knowledge because I am so intensely interested in the issue. This kind of focused attention is what he wants from us.

A pastor I know puts this kind of focused attention on prophecy. His delight in connecting contemporary events to scriptural prophecy has repeatedly drawn my attention to something I would otherwise not know. Each time I can see that he is discerning patterns and signs of Christ's return. My eyes are opened and his admirable watching makes me a better watcher.

Meanwhile there is faithfulness in our daily tasks, and there are two rewards, one for watching and another for faithful service. May we be diligent to get both of them!

Am I alert to signs of Christ's return?

August 22

Luke 12:49-59 Don't faint

Jesus knew his crucifixion was coming. He knew persecution was coming for his disciples. He came as the Prince of Peace, but he knew that not all are willing to receive him. Instead, what will happen, and in fact, has happened through many centuries, is conflict and rejection. Despite opposition, he wants us to be as skilled as possible at conflict resolution. He urged that we try to settle disputes out of court as quickly as we can.

He was disappointed in the people's lack of insight into the momentous times in which they were living. Messianic prophecy was being fulfilled and they were blind to it. Their indifference put them in the camp of potential opponents, crowds able to be manipulated into crying out for his crucifixion.

Knowing that Jesus' life was filled with conflict can comfort us when conflicts arise in our lives. It is less likely that we are completely faultless in a conflict, and it is always good to remember

that there are two sides to every story. Part of our effort to resolve a conflict can be to try to see how it might look from the point of view of the other person and thereby take a more humble and flexible approach. In the truth of the situation, however, we may be faced with unresolvable conflicts just as Jesus was, and we need to face those situations with his same courage and grace.

Do I accept opposition graciously? Do I work at resolving disputes?

JOURNEY OF HOPE 13

August 23

Luke 13:1-4 Accidents

Once again the violent ruthlessness of a worldly ruler was set up as a foil for Jesus' very different kind of kingship that was healing others. Pilate, who was doubtless protecting himself and Rome from potential rebellion, showed a high level of cruelty in killing them as they were at worship.

Jesus' comments here are comforting to me when I see tragic news. Perhaps people are victims of crime, are oppressed by their government, or are victims of a natural disaster. What he says is that these are not punishments. They are sad parts of life, a reminder to us all of our mortality, but they do not represent people who deserved this.

I am aware that when disaster falls there will be some hopeful stories of remarkable rescues. For these we are grateful, though still sad for whose whose lives were lost. Jesus takes it into the metaphysical reality that all of us are under a sentence of death and turning toward God allows us to be among those rescued.

How do I respond to tragedy?

August 24

Luke 13:6-9 Second chances

Here is another parable unique to Luke. The gentle response of the gardener to an unfruitful tree is to give it more time, more fertilizer, and special care. This is a good balance to Jesus' contrast between good and bad fruit trees. Here is an unproductive tree, but there may still be hope. That gentle hopefulness for change is for us when we are not seeing fruit. It is also something we can offer to others who are not seeing good fruit.

We know Jesus' analogy in John 15 to our fruitfulness coming as a result of being part of him, being in the vine. Obviously, that is our first question if our character or our impact on others is poor: am I living in Christ? But this parable gives us another set of questions we can ask: is there some brokenness in me that needs to be dug up? Do I need more nutrients? Do I need some more time to grow and mature?

Whatever the answer may be, we can trust the wisdom of the gardener to do the right kind of cultivation in our lives and to be patient with us as we are growing. We may not be giving out enough fruit yet, but if we turn to Christ the gardener, we will be on our way.

Am I patient with my own spiritual impact and encouraging for others who long to be more fruitful?

August 25

Luke 13:10-17 Mercy (14:1-6)

Usually, Jesus' enemies felt quite justified in getting more and more angry with him over defying them by healing someone on the Sabbath. In this case, his enemies were shamed. Jesus taught in the synagogue and saw a woman who had been bent double for 18 years, and freed her from what was described as Satan's bondage.

Presumably the synagogue leader had known this woman for years. Jesus reproached him for treating his animals better than this person by saying she should have come for healing on a different day of the week. The man could not really stand by his assertion that Jesus had done something wrong.

It is mysterious that her ailment was identified as Satan's bondage, but the concept is easy to apply. There are probably things in our lives where we feel stuck or tied up and we need freedom. The promise is that healing is available. If I am struggling with a long-term issue, perhaps even as long as this woman's 18-year-struggle, it is easy to give up hope for change, but this story reminds us that freedom is always possible, and it might be around the corner.

Do I care for people only when the timing is convenient for me? Do I courageously keep praying for long-time problems?

August 26

Luke 13:18-30 Judgment

In this set of parables we again have a male/female pair: a farmer with a mustard seed, and a woman with yeast. Both are doing things that start small and grow transformatively just as the kingdom of God. Matthew also told these parables the growing mustard seed and the bread growing from the yeast. He mentioned the analogy of the Kingdom as a narrow door, but Luke elaborated it. This rather alarming analogy warned that we can be left on the wrong side, locked out.

This is the only reference to weeping and gnashing teeth outside of Matthew, who used the phrase six times. It seems to capture a combination of regret and anger and the realization that one made wrong choices.

In this instance Jesus seemed to be warning those who were so certain they were insiders and did not feel concern for those on the outside that their perspective needed to change. Their very overconfidence was keeping them outside. In our time, we need to have the same caution. The narrow door is one that asks for great humility from us.

Have I humbled myself to enter the kingdom?

August 27

Luke 13:31-35 Mercy from Judgment

Luke's story has begun the ominous trek toward Jerusalem and a destiny of death. In verse 22 we were told we was always pressing on toward Jerusalem. Jesus was warned that Herod, the ruler of Galilee, wanted to kill him. Herod had moved from a place of curiosity to feeling threatened. Jesus referred to him as a fox which symbolized being weak or inept, so that power was only through cunning. The fox was symbolically compared unfavorably to a more powerful lion. In this case Jesus was truly the more powerful one, the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

But Jesus said he would keep doing his work and keep going because his death was destined to be in Jerusalem. His lament over Jerusalem included the feminine image of a hen gathering chicks, a tender image of his love for recalcitrant people. He knew the destruction of the City would come. But just as Zechariah had been killed in the temple (II Chronicles 24:21), he would be condemned there as well.

Today Jerusalem is once more a center of conflict. We also are called to feel a tender regard for the city and pray for peace.

Do I pray for the peace of Jerusalem?

JOURNEY TO WHOLENESS 14

August 28

Luke 14:1-6 Wholeness (13:10-17)

Jesus once more ran into rigidity over healing on the Sabbath. He asked if healing was permitted, and when they did not answer, he healed the man anyway. Once more he pointed out they were willing to treat animals better than humans. Still silence.

Their frame was that God commanded one not to work on the Sabbath and healing was work and therefore must not be done. Jesus' frame was that God gave the Sabbath so that people might rest and reflect. It was meant as a gift and benefit, and the gift of a healthy life fit right in with it. They could not bend their frame enough to take in his perspective, much less adopt it. Jesus kept trying to reach them.

Do I hold rigidly to my positions and fail to listen to others?

August 29

Luke 14:7-14 Humility

At a wedding as the guests jockeyed for the best seats, Jesus suggested it would be best to take the lowest seat and then accept an invitation for a closer one from the host. He also advised inviting vulnerable people unable to repay their host. God would reward that kind of hospitality. In other words, if you are going to do any social climbing, climb downward.

Over and over scripture promises that it is the humble who will be exalted. The natural tendency to want to be important needs to be redirected to what Paul said: “think of others as more important than yourself.”

A mark of real humility is self-forgetfulness. Humble people enjoy others and enjoy what they are doing and so don't have so much time for obsessive self-focus. For a believer, the deeper life of prayer that is able to examine one's own faults, repent of them, and then move on to experience the next good gift from God, allows that good combination of self-awareness and self-forgetfulness that is humble.

Is humility and friendship with humble people my goal? Am I willing to humble myself before God, accept his love and forgiveness and re-engage with life?

August 30

Luke 14:15-24 Celebration

In this modernization of the parable it just seemed humorous enough it lent itself to a doggerel style poem!

The boss had planned a bash one day inviting all the A-list
And didn't get RSVPs so wondered what he'd missed
He had his secretary call each person on the phone
But their replies soon made it clear that he was on his own.

“Got a deal on real estate, you see how things then are.”
“I'm traveling real soon you see, just bought a hot new car.”
“I'm getting married and you know it's costing fifty thou
So obviously I can't be going somewhere now.”

“Alright,” the boss said in a rage, “Invite the homeless here
Since my lousy former friends aren't willing to appear.”
“Still too few,” the secretary said. “Then made an open invite
In papers countywide, and make it bold and bright.”

And don't let any A-list people crash the party here.

They no longer are my friends--I have new friends, it's clear."

Am I responsive to Jesus' invitation?

August 31

Luke 14:25-35 Commitment

Ordinary men who through the power of God became extraordinary world-wide heroes and models for us. Our ordinariness can become something extraordinary in God's hands.

These men are our heroes
The leaders who forged the way for us
Who didn't turn back from dangerous journeys
Who didn't turn back from pain
Simon sawed in two
Bartholomew skinned alive
Peter upside-down on a cross
James beheaded
Thaddeus clubbed to death
Matthew crucified and his head severed
Thomas stoned
Philip scourged, stoned, crucified, and run through with a spear
James pushed off the temple, stoned, beaten, and cut in half
John was the only one who died a natural death
Thanks to several miracles.

Do I revere the example of the disciples?

THE KINGDOM

HOME 15

September 1

Luke 15:1-10 Sheep and coin found

The parables of this chapter are unique to Luke. Their common theme is that the one who owns something has lost it, wants it back, works at finding it. The analogy is that this is God's loving attitude toward us. We belong to him, but we have become lost and he needs to find us. We are like a missing sheep or a missing coin. We truly belong to him, and he works to regain us through the incarnation and his passion.

Success is a cause of great joy, both for sheep and coin. The shepherd and the woman call their friends to celebrate. Again we have a male and female pairing that gives us the same

spiritual truth. The shepherd joyfully carried the lamb he had found, and in both stories there is a celebration in heaven over the repentant.

Jesus told these stories when once more criticized for spending time with the riff-raff. He was doing his seeking work and trying to explain that to his critics. It is far too easy to fall into only spending time with respectable people who build up our social standing, and forget that Jesus does not divide the world in that way and we should learn to look for his presence in anyone, look for a chance to serve anyone, and cheerfully ignore people who question our association with the troubled.

Do I celebrate when Jesus finds anyone, including me? Do I understand his seeking out lost people and participate with him in this?

September 2

Luke 15:11-32 Son found

There are two modern very beautiful and helpful books about this parable. Timothy Keller's *The Prodigal God* helps us see how so many of us who are religious are unfortunately like the joyless, judgmental older brother. Just as the prodigal needed forgiveness and reconciliation with the father, the older brother needed it also. We are invited to recognize which one we are and move into the open arms of the forgiving father.

Another, Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, is based on Rembrandt's painting of the story. Through his engagement with the painting, Nouwen realized that he was like all three characters--prodigal, older brother, and the father. His reflections invite us to see ourselves in each character and move further on our spiritual journey.

Right now, which character seems most like me?

HOLINESS 16

September 3

Luke 16:1-12 Freed from sin

Jesus told a humorous story about a cheating manager. Normally, those who cheat manage to make themselves richer, but this manager remained poor but made a lot of friends with money by reducing their debts. This would be highly commendable if it was his own money, but it wasn't. He was cheating his boss.

But Jesus does actually want us to be like this manager. Since Jesus is our boss, and it is his money, he wants us to forgive debts generously. As we recall from another parable, anything we forgive--including actual loans of money--is petty compared to what we have been forgiven. Use money like this, Jesus said. Your generosity gains friends now, and is also building a reward in heaven. Do not be so careful and prudent that you fail to give.

Am I willing to see my money as God's money that is just going through me to others?

September 4

Luke 16:13-18 Money

This section seems like a crunched down version of part of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. Topics include money, the importance and viability of the law, and forbidding remarriage. The difference here is some direct scoffing from the Pharisees who “dearly loved their money.”

Even though Jesus said one cannot serve God and money, they were convinced that one can do so. That seems to be the consensus in American Christianity, and our attachment to money keeps getting us into trouble. We not only have reoccurring scandals, but we have a distorted view of what is truly valuable.

Do I hold money lightly or do I dearly love it?

September 5

Luke 16:19-31 Freed from selfishness

This morality tale of a rich man and a poor man explains how the scales are balanced after death. In the final line Abraham expressed skepticism that people would listen even to the Resurrected One. He also said that no one can cross the great chasm separating them. Yet I Peter 3:19 tells us Christ preached to those in “prison” who had disobeyed God. This gave rise to the tradition of the “harrowing of hell” when on Holy Saturday Christ rescued those who had died before his coming.

Artistic renditions of this include an impressive mosaic of Christ grabbing Adam and Eve and raising them up. Located in the Church of the Chora in Istanbul, I learned of it from Madeleine L'Engle and through the magic of internet images was able to see a small version for myself. The one who could cross the chasm was Christ and the hope of his rescue balances the despairing sense of “no way out” for someone who realizes how wrong he had been. While not bold enough to claim that God's love will win all, I am comforted by the declaration that God wants all to be saved and know the truth. (1 Timothy 2:4)

Have I fallen into the indifference to poverty of the villain of this story?

OUR CHARACTER 17

September 6

Luke 17:1-10 Qualities of a believer

Each of these teachings is familiar from longer contexts in previous gospels. But here we receive an overview of qualities we must have as disciples. 1) Be careful to guide children wisely--don't fail them or judgement will fall! 2) Forgive repeatedly. 3) Even minimal faith is extremely powerful. 4) Hard work is simply your duty as God's servant.

We can summarize these goals as: Friendship with children, Forgiveness, Faith and Faithfulness.

Lord, I am a little tired of trying to serve
Let me be a little child
That you take up in your arms.
And let me in turn
Sit in the playground
And listen to the children's conversation
Or try to help them with stencils
And obey their suggestions
On which color to use.

Children can renew us! Their freshness, their curiosity, their laughter, the unpretentiousness are often just the antidote we may need to our tendencies to take ourselves far too seriously.

Are friendship with children, forgiveness, faith and faithfulness qualities part of my life?

September 7

Luke 17:11-19 Gratitude

The Law had provided for diagnosing leprosy with the help of a priest, and also devoted an elaborate process to demonstrating healing has occurred. (Cf. Leviticus 19). We have no story about the process being used, since the Gentile healed went home immediately. (II Kings 5)

When ten lepers approached Jesus, he did not even pronounce healing on them, he simply told them to go to the priest. As they obeyed, they were healed. A non-Jew, a Samaritan, was so grateful he came back to thank Jesus. Perhaps it is okay to be slightly irritated by ungrateful people, since Jesus expressed some frustration with the nine who did not return.

However, the daily expression of gratitude changes our perspective on life. We can be thankful for both large and small things, and a habit begins to help us see how extensive God's kindness is to us on a daily basis.

Am I a consistently grateful person?

September 8

Luke 17:20-37 Prepared

The Pharisees' question about when the kingdom would come got an answer from Jesus that matters for us today. He said the kingdom was among them (or some translate "within them"). This makes the extremely important point that the kingdom is in the present. The reality is that it is spreading on earth ever since Jesus came, but its final denouement is still ahead.

The final denouement is what he discussed later with his disciples, in a shortened form from what we have read in Matthew and Mark. He explained that he will return and most will live their lives without expecting him--enjoying food and drink and weddings and buying and selling and farming and building.

But he indicated there would be signs of the end. The metaphor used, vultures around a carcass, leaves us an image that the world will be dying, and signs of death will prepare us for his coming to renew the earth. We are to be part of spreading that life now, part of the resurrected future, not the death of sin.

Am I doing kingdom-spreading work?

HAPPINESS 18

September 9

Luke 18:1-8 Faith

I am pretty sure I am like the persistent widow. I know God is much kinder and more gracious than an indifferent judge, but I do have some agenda items that he has not dealt with, so it can feel like he is indifferent.

Jesus told us that we would get justice if we ask. The moral of the story is at the start: we need to pray and must never give up. I have experienced times when my "never give up" prayers have finally been answered. That helps encourage me during the next long delay.

But this story and others justify what I might otherwise consider an unpleasant tendency to nag God. In John 15:7 we are told to ask, and the word used is to be adamant, full of expectation of receiving what has been requested. Being adamant and persistent and hopeful are my goals.

Do I persist when praying even through long delays?

September 10

Luke 18:9-14 Forgiveness

The conclusion of this story is that the proud will be humbled, and the humble will be honored. Jesus' target for the story were those with great self-confidence who privately looked down on others.

This time, though, it was not about trying to get ahead socially, but was about spiritual pride. The highly religious person thought he was better than the one who knew he had not done well and needed mercy. But Jesus reversed this and said the penitent was far above the self-righteous.

As a missionary child who very early in life became conscious of spirituality, this is a dangerous area for me. It is not only easy for me to think I know it all, it is easy to think I can correctly discern everything. In fact, writing these reflections, though done for my own good, could easily generate pride if others appreciate them. The antidote always seems to be gratitude for God's gifts and kindness and mercy.

Is spiritual pride a danger to me?

September 11

Luke 18:15-17 Fellowship

Do I have the faith of a little child? If not, Jesus said I will never get into the kingdom of God. An unspoiled child does not demand food, shelter, clothing, but accepts them and delights in life. I am most struck when around a child for a while that they are eagerly and constantly learning. Given that Jesus called us to be disciples, which means learners, it seems like that humble, open, curious stance is what he desires in us.

And children can be so exuberant and joyful about the smallest things. They laugh so easily, show delight so uninhibitedly, and generally enjoy the gifts of the moment. Even if corrected, they accept the adult wisdom that things must be done differently. A secure child knows they are loved despite or even because of the correction.

None of this comes naturally to grown-ups. But apparently this is what we should aspire to. Jesus is always trying to get us to move toward the less important, more humble position.

Is my faith child-like?

September 12

Luke 18:18-30 Freedom

This is the third repetition of this story, and it still does not appeal to us and is something we prefer not to apply. The young man left sadly because he was very rich, and Jesus commented (perhaps sadly) that it is hard for a rich person to get into the kingdom.

Wealth and longevity have gone up dramatically in our world over the last two hundred years, and poverty rates have dramatically declined, even in the past thirty years. But we still have one out of 10 people in the world living on the edge, and we need many willing to sell all, give everything away, and live among the poor. Jesus' call really can still apply to us, much as we might prefer to think not.

In Luke 6 Jesus had said that the amount you give will determine the amount you get back. The rich man should not have supposed that his life would be full of misery and need. The promises are right that we cannot give more than God is willing to give, so no matter what selling and giving to the poor we might do, the next thing we know we might have accumulated enough we need to do it again!

Am I willing to give up my financial security to serve others?

September 13

Luke 18:31-34 Friendship

Jesus emphasized once more that they were going to Jerusalem. Luke made more of the City than any other gospel: 37 references and another 71 in Acts. In his childhood Jesus' parents had taken him there for dedication, and his parents went yearly for Passover. Jesus, according to John, continued that practice. He repeated more than once that his destiny lay in that City which David had made the capital of his kingdom and had been central ever since.

At the transfiguration Elijah and Moses spoke of his coming "exodus from the world" to be fulfilled in Jerusalem. After this he resolutely set out for the City. The theme of being on their way to Jerusalem was repeated throughout the book:

- Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem (9:51)
- He visited towns and villages, always pressing toward Jerusalem (13:22)
- He said he must keep going to be killed there (13:35)
- He reached the border of Galilee and Samaria, and continued to Jerusalem (17:11)
- Jesus told his disciples "As you know, we are going to Jerusalem" (18:31)
- He told a parable as he neared Jerusalem (19:11)
- Walking ahead of the disciples, he went toward Jerusalem (19:29)

He gave a very direct prophecy about what would happen in the City, but the significance was hidden from his disciples. For us, Jesus offers an example of obedience that is determined even if the outcome is suffering.

Am I living my life as a purposeful journey?

September 14

Luke 18:35-43 Gifts

A beggar became a follower in one brief encounter with Jesus. His blindness was instantly healed. This model seems to fit us as well. We are blind, beggars who need help. Our encounter with Jesus makes us see, gives us meaning and purpose, and dramatically engages others to praise God as they see our transformation.

This encounter took place as Jesus was arriving at Jericho. Jericho is in a valley over 250 meters (856 feet) below sea level, making it the lowest city in the world. It was green and filled with palms, a place where Herod the Great combined three palaces of the previous rulers into one great palace and where he enjoyed spending his winters. He built an aqueduct and a hippodrome to make it a more vibrant city. When Herod died there, he cruelly had just killed many in Jerusalem, had ordered his son be killed just five days before, and had ordered that distinguished people be killed so that there would be mourning. Fortunately his heirs did not do this.

The road to Jericho was where Jesus had set the story of the good Samaritan, and where he would shortly meet Zacchaeus and go to his home. This ancient city, residence of a great king, now met a much greater king. As Isaiah had prophesied, the Messiah would be able to heal the blind. The contrast between a king who built impressively, but also killed cruelly, and a king who had no physical home but who healed and forgave could not be more stark.

"Your faith has healed you," this man was told. I want that kind of faith for myself and all who are in my life.

Do I ask Jesus for spiritual sight? Does what he does for me inspire praise?

THE KING REVEALED

HE COMES TO HIS CITY 19

September 15

Luke 19:1-10 Repentant sinner

The story of a man so eager to see Jesus he climbed a tree is that of a person hoping for transformation. He knew he was not doing well, as so many of us do also, and he was not sure he would be acceptable. Jesus' acceptance led him to repentance and transformation. His response as he took Jesus to his home was joy and excitement.

Once again Jesus' intervention dramatically contrasted with the earthly rulers. Herod the Great's son Archelaus only ruled over Judea for 10 years before being deposed by Caesar who replaced him with governors. By this point the governor was Pilate. Zacchaeus was collecting for those who could live in the lavish Jericho palace, and following their example of government as

a means of personal benefit and extortion. Jesus was a guest in others' homes with no place of his own, and he gave food and health to others, taking nothing. Instead, he inspired the tax collector to repay those he had cheated.

Jesus' kingdom was completely different than worldly ones. Zacchaeus was transformed by his climbing into a tree, a transformation we also can experience.

All trees can remind us of the cross
But sycamores have branches wide open in welcome
A sign of the hospitality offered us
A place of meeting
A place to come and wait for you.
We can welcome you into our homes in joy.

Do I believe Jesus' arms are open to me, inviting me into relationship?

September 16

Luke 19:22-27 Parable of servants

Jesus' stories are clever and suited to his audience and his time. It is often easy to update them so that they resonate with today's culture. Here is an example:

A venture capitalist went to Africa to do some public service. He talked to three companies and invested in each of them before he left. His public service didn't last long--several journalists wrote negative pieces about him. When he returned home, he called the CEOs. With one, the profits had gone through the roof and he offered the man a position running one of his conglomerates. Another company did very well, but the third had made no profits at all. In fact, they hadn't even implemented their business plan. "I knew you'd be upset if we lost any of the money, and even if we made money, you'd take most of the profits." "Good grief! You could have done better putting it into CDs! I'm taking your money and investing it with the company that made me money." When his assistant protested, he replied that at least that CEO would know how to use it. "Now get me those journalists on the phone, and I'm going to sue them for all they are worth!"

Am I a faithful worker, doing what God has called me to do?

September 17

Luke 19:28-40 Triumphal entry

Jesus, who had been on a journey to Jerusalem through the book of Luke, now arrived in a very public and controversial way. The story begins with the poignant image of Jesus walking toward Jerusalem ahead of his disciples, headed, as he knows, to confrontation and death. Jesus asked them to bring a colt, presumably from someone who already acknowledged him as Messiah. He entered on it, fulfilling prophecy that this is how the peaceful king would arrive.

Jesus' followers turned this into a celebration of Messiah's arrival. As usual, some Pharisees were there to object and demand that Jesus stop them. But he responded with a line we have not heard before, "If they kept quiet, the stones along the road would burst into cheers!". The prophet Habakkuk had used a similar image, but it was of stones in the walls and beams in the ceilings crying out in protest against all their misdeeds. Here it is a joyful cry of celebration as the creator came to his sacred city.

Do I daily shout and sing, praising God for the wonderful miracles I have seen?

September 18

Luke 19:41-44 A tragic city

Jesus wept at what he could see coming for this City. With the magnificent temple, large and white, and many other impressive buildings, it was quite beautiful. It had gotten a massive makeover from Herod the Great, who built new walls, palaces, a huge pool, water sources, a fortress, and three multi-story towers. As he was taking power he had engaged in a three-year siege and battle to take over the city which left destruction. Once in power, he built lavishly. Now, within a century of being at the height its impressive grandeur, it would be destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD in response to political rebellion.

I don't think we really understand that this prophecy was fulfilled
Jerusalem was completely destroyed
No people--600,000 dead (at least)
No trees--all cut down
No buildings--it looked as though it had never been inhabited
No temple--a fire spread and destroyed its beauty

The revolutionary movement had four years of victory (66-70)
Then a 143 day siege started at Passover
120,000-200,000 inhabitants
500,000 pilgrims trapped in the city, living in tents
Then destruction

Titus built an arch in Rome (which still stands) to commemorate his Triumph
The Jews remember the date--Tisha B'Av, a day of destruction

Do I suffer with those who are going through such tragedies today?

September 19

Luke 19:45-48 Temple cleansed

The temple was magnificent, the largest of the ancient world, snowy white, looking like a shining mountain from a distance. The complex had been made by slicing off the top of a mountain and

building reinforcing walls around a flat space the size of 25 football fields. The pride in this place made sense, but the sheer scope of it allowed it to become a market where money was changed and animals were sold. A marriage of religion and money had definitely occurred.

Jesus' cleansing of the temple had been repeatedly foreshadowed in the Old Testament when idols had taken over the space. Here the idol was something we are also tempted by: mixing money and business with worship. Jesus said this should not be.

The scripture Jesus quoted from Jeremiah referred to one of the times when the people were relying on the temple for security, but were contradicting their faith by leading immoral lives. Jesus replaced the corruption with his healing power, but the leaders invested in the system as it was were moved to want to kill him. They were stymied by the people who hung on Jesus every word.

Today we believers are God's temple, but am I letting my finances interfere with my worship?

TESTED 20

September 20

Luke 20:1-8 Authority questioned

Jesus' prophetic authority to cleanse the temple was paralleled by John's prophetic authority to baptize in the wilderness. John, the son of a priest, worked outside the established religious structures and started a movement of repentance.

Jesus built on that movement and took the reform efforts to the heart of the peoples' worship, the temple. But the powerful leaders who had become collaborators with the Romans and wanted to maintain the status quo were nonplussed and challenged his authority. Jesus used John's popularity with the people to silence them. As very political people, they could not afford to defy public opinion.

Speaking truth to power takes
courage, cleverness, and riposts.
Christ clearly could carry the crowd,
Crush his opponents' logic, and
crack concealed motives.
I want to copy Christ
Give me his courage and his wit.

Am I courageous enough to go against the grain of what is being done when it dishonors God?

September 21

Luke 20:9-19 God's messenger

Jesus' story about tenant farmers killing the son sent by the owners is one the leading priests realized was directed at them. They wanted to arrest Jesus but realized he had too much public support.

Jesus warned that they would all be killed, and the vineyard would be given to others. In Matthew it was his listeners who proposed this outcome. But in all the accounts he quoted Psalm 118:22 and connected it to himself as Messiah. He would be rejected, but he would become the cornerstone, the most important of all.

I prefer to think of myself as one of Jesus' supporters, not as an opponent. But there are times when I am not a good listener and do not recognize a person as one of God's messengers. Perhaps I do not wish to kill them, but I do not wish to listen. I do not want to be like the Pharisees who, when challenged, just got more stubborn and angry.

Am I willing to hear from God, even through unlikely messengers?

September 22

Luke 20:20-26 Sacred/secular authority

We have heard Matthew and Mark's account of this encounter, but as usual, Luke adds some more color. He called the questioners "secret agents" and they were hoping he would say something anti-government they could report so the Roman governor would arrest him.

Luke says they failed to trap him in the presence of the people, and were silenced. At this point Jesus' opponents were trying to win by stealth and political intrigue. Reformers today confront the same behind-the-scenes manipulative opponents who seek to entrap and accuse them of crimes they have not committed. As we bystanders watch these things, it can be frustrating that we do not have the power to stop this. But we can try.

Am I willing to speak up when false accusations are made against anyone?

September 23

Luke 20:27-40 Scripture authority

The Sadducees that now approached Jesus were the religious and political aristocracy. They were priests who cared for the temple and mediated the political relationship between Rome and the people. That included collecting taxes, equipping and leading an army, mediating internal disputes, and serving on the Sanhedrin along with Pharisees. In short, they were the Jewish elite.

Jesus spoke authoritatively on some characteristics of life after death. Those raised to life would never die again. They would not be married. And they would be part of the community of a living God. Luke's new line was "They are all live to him" speaking of God. This is part of the mystery of becoming a part of God's kingdom. A new level of life begins while we are on earth which will then continue infinitely after death.

The Pharisees who believed in resurrection were actually happy the rival Sadducees had been bested. The challenges ended for the moment. The vision of the future that Jesus offered us of being alive in God's presence encourages us.

Have I entered into the new life of the Kingdom now?

September 24

Luke 20:41-47 David's Lord

Jesus presented his argument that the Messiah, Son of David, is also David's Lord, dual roles that only he fulfilled. It was a logical conundrum that only the mystery of God becoming a man descended from David could solve.

In this account he made a public denouncement of the pride of the religious leaders. I am afraid we have religious celebrities today who are noticed in public, honored at banquets, and are somehow following in these Pharisaical footsteps. Religious leaders have fallen into financial practices which the government objects to as cheating widows. Any corruption is covered by preaching and public prayer, but Jesus says this only escalates the punishment.

Let's not be like this! Let us choose the more humble leadership style that Jesus advocated, the respect for every person no matter how vulnerable. Our loyalty needs to be to Christ, not to a particular person or ministry or institution.

Do I try to build up my reputation and public persona?

JESUS LOOKS AHEAD 21

September 25

Luke 21:1-4. The generous poor

Jesus' perspective that two pennies from a widow were worth more than gifts of rich people redefines wealth. It matters how generous we are and says of the widow, "she has given everything she has."

The building and maintenance of the temple complex required enormous resources and involved poorly paid laborers. Yet the motive of the big building project included a large measure of self-aggrandizement. In contrast, the widow who gave was making a heartfelt gift to God.. Jesus told us in Matthew 6 not to give for the purpose of getting attention, but to give

secretly, and God would reward. His calling attention to this woman has made her a faith heroine, a great reward.

I have seen this kind of generosity in people living on the economic edge, and it is an admirable sign of their faith that their needs will be met. Extreme poverty has gone down dramatically from 35% of the world's population in 1990, to 10% in 2013. The goal is to eliminate world-wide extreme poverty by 2030, and I am sure Jesus is on board with that goal. In this story we see his love and appreciation for the survival challenges of each one.

Am I concerned to contribute to alleviation of poverty?

September 26

Luke 21:5-24 Jerusalem in danger

As they looked at the magnificent temple, Jesus predicted its destruction. After his death and resurrection, its imagery would be fulfilled, no longer necessary. Shortly after his death, the Caesar wanted to turn this magnificent place into a site for his own worship, but was prevented by his own assassination. But the temple was completely destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD and has never been rebuilt, effectively bringing to an end the sacrificial system that had prefigured Jesus' sacrifice.

Jesus could see a crisis was building in the unstable political relationships between the Roman occupiers and the Jews. Rebellion and a civil strike from 66-73 AD resulted in the complete destruction of Jerusalem. A war against the Jewish diaspora from 115-117 AD was followed by a revolt led by Bar Kochba from 132-136 AD after which Jews and Christians were barred from Jerusalem.

Jesus warned them not to follow Messiahs into insurrection. The Jewish historian Josephus called the Roman Vespasian a Messiah, and a leading Rabbi called Ben Kochba Messiah as well. Jesus warned them to flee Jerusalem when they saw it surrounded. The Roman Titus did that in 70 AD and slaughtered those who did not flee. Jesus predicted that Jerusalem would be conquered and trampled by Gentiles, and it was completely destroyed then and has continued to have armies trampling it ever since.

The city has been besieged 23 times and captured 44 times. Jerusalem, meaning City of Peace, is symbolic of mankind's failure to create peace, but the New Testament promises a new and peaceful Jerusalem with Christ ruling all. When Israel was recreated in our time, the Jewish immigration into where a majority Palestinian population had been living for centuries, began a tense and uneasy relationship that has led to wars, failed peace processes, and on-going tensions centered around all the different claimants of the city of Jerusalem. It stands as a symbol of mankind's difficulties in making peace.

Do I pray for the peace of Jerusalem as Psalm 122:6-9 tells me to do?

September 27

Luke 21:25-58 Watch

Jesus concluded his warnings looking ahead by telling us to look up, notice, watch, and not to be unaware. We live in remarkable times when we have seen the re-creation of Israel as a nation after the dispersal of the people in 136 AD. Jerusalem is once more a center of tension and world attention, not a city of peace, but a powder keg.

We have many signs of the times. Roaring seas (hurricanes), strange tides (tsunamis), signs in the heavens we appreciate more with our advances in astronomy, and turmoil between nations. We are exploring heaven's stability by trying to understand dark gravity and black holes. There are plenty of reasons to keep our eyes open, looking for Christ's return.

I think the gospel has been preached to every nation
in our globalized world.

I think we've seen plenty of wars, earthquakes, famines.
We've seen plenty of death and persecution of believers
So perhaps the end is near.

Our pollution from fossil fuels has cut sunlight by a third
If we just keep it up
The plagues of Revelation are our ecological consequences.
Of course there are always the ultimate suicide bombs
That can destroy the world eight times over...

Do I pay attention to possible signs of Christ's coming?

JESUS IS TAKEN 22

September 28

Luke 22:1-6 Sharing a plot

We have, as usual, an additional detail Luke provided to the accounts of Judas' betrayal in Matthew and Mark. Despite Mark's focus on Jesus' victory over demonic forces, he did not attribute Judas' actions to them. Luke did. He said "Satan entered into Judas Iscariot."

What a tragic line! Through history we have had murderous rulers, and one cannot help but wonder if something like this explains their behavior. The leading religious leaders did not need that as their reason for murder. They had long since sold out as collaborators with Rome, and were scheming to hold on to their power. They feared Jesus' popularity with the crowds, and wanted his arrest to be done quietly.

Our tragedy is that our sinful nature often explains our bad choices. Behavior comes from our own selfishness and so perhaps we are more like the religious leaders than like Judas.

Am I aware of my own sinful tendencies?

September 29

Luke 22:7-23 Sharing a table

At the Passover meal Jesus spoke of the new covenant he would seal with his blood. The covenant given through Moses had helped guide the people into morality, forgiveness, reconciliation, and worship. Despite the many failures of the people, God kept his side of the agreement and remained faithful. Jesus' new covenant kept both sides of the bargain in his perfect obedience. Jeremiah had prophesied that God would put his laws in human minds and hearts, and he would forgive and never again remember their sins. Jesus drew on this prophecy and announced that he was doing it.

Jesus sat down with the twelve disciples at the table, and shared the Passover supper with them. Luke reiterates the word table four times in the chapter. This intimate meal is something we reenact each time we share communion, but do we really envision as we do this that the great king of the universe is seated with us, eating with us on an equal plane? That is what the imagery of the table represents. Our table talk with him, the great king, is not only intimate but exalted, looking back to this moment and looking ahead to a heavenly table.

O welcome, all ye noble saints of old
As now before your very eyes unfold
The wonders all so long ago foretold,
God and man at table are sat down.

Elders, martyrs, all are falling down;
Prophets, patriarchs are gathering round;
What angels longed to see now man has found;
God and man at table are sat down. -- Travis Cottrell

Am I in this new covenant relationship? Do I know my sins are forgiven? Do I take my place at the table with Jesus?

September 30

Luke 22: 24-30 Servant leaders

At the most inappropriate time, they once more argued about who would be the greatest. They had already had this argument and been told that being least is best, but obviously had not believed it. Be a servant to be great, Jesus told them. He promised them thrones and power in the future. They had not given up on him and he was not going to give up on them.

Jesus' idea of influence through service rather than influence through power has become a respected leadership strategy. Encouraging gifts and talents in others toward a common vision

builds the leadership capacities of everyone on the team. The disciples finally caught on post-crucifixion, and quit having these immature conversations. They became mighty servant-leaders.

Jesus, the great king, promised his friends that in his kingdom they would sit on thrones. Power would come. But just as he had spent three years sharing meals, sharing a table, with them, so they would also share his table in the kingdom. This combination of throne and table, power and equality, is a promise to us as well. We share the intimacy and familiarity of a family table with the great king, something that can help us have faith as we pray. But following Jesus' example, our task is currently to be the best servants we can be.

Do I know how to be a servant leader?

October 1

Luke 22:31-38 Sharing a warning

Luke's account of Jesus' warning to Peter includes a tender and encouraging line new to the story: "when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen and build up your brothers."

Jesus changed his instructions from their earlier preaching ministry when they were to take no supplies, to a new phase of taking things with them, including a sword. The conversation about swords is confusing, because when Jesus was arrested he said not to use them. There are various interpretations: 1) Some suggest he was referring to the "sword of the Spirit" and preparing them for spiritual battles, 2) some suggest that he knew the prophecy that he would be considered a leader of a rebellion and was organizing things to fulfill that prophecy, and 3) some suggest that he knew they had bought these swords and was making them admit it. None of these seem completely satisfactory.

Two swords could not accomplish much in terms of self-defense. Jesus knew he had the back-up of legions of angels and perhaps he was still hoping for an Old Testament-style rescue of the outnumbered and out-armed. They would shortly head to the garden where he would pray for an alternative to suffering. But when arrested, he mentioned the legions of angels, but said his kingdom was not of this world, and that he had to fulfill the prophecies of suffering. He had to receive this unjust violence.

Do I accept Jesus' call to nonviolence?

October 2

Luke 22:39-46 Prayer of pain

Jesus had repeatedly been in private prayer in Luke, and once more he entered a private place and knelt. A new detail emerges: an angel came to strengthen him. Luke had given us a lot of angels in the birth story, but this reminds us of the angels who comforted Elijah in his moment of

depression. Perhaps this is something Jesus had to tell the disciples since they seem to have spent their time sleeping.

His sweat was like great drops of blood, a sign of the depths of his distress. Perhaps we have had times of emotional struggle and pain in our prayers. That Jesus experienced this dark place helps us in our moments of agony.

When we feel the dark discouragement of something painful happening in our lives that is the opposite of what we desire, his example of relinquishing his will and accepting whatever would come can help us with any deep letting go we need to do. Life is difficult and many things happen that are not happy and good and preferable. While the hint and hope and resurrection are always around the corner, the pain of suffering and death still must be accepted as part of reality.

Do I keep praying, even in emotional pain?

October 3

Luke 22:47-53 Plot fulfilled

Now the sword-work began. As the mob came to arrest Jesus, the disciples asked “Should we fight? We brought the swords!”. The synoptic gospels merely say it was “someone” who slashed off an ear, but John tells us that it was the feisty and well-intentioned Peter who had his sword in hand and did this. Jesus told him not to resist and healed the man.

In Matthew Jesus followed up by saying that using a sword leads to being killed by the sword and mentioned his access to thousands of angels. Instead, his was to be a way of nonviolent resistance, and overcoming the violence of others through a miracle. This call to non-violence was strong in the early church up until Constantine’s conversion gave political power to Christians. We have had wars of aggression theologically justified ever since.

We need to reflect on Jesus saying: “Do not resist anymore”. His example was to heal the wounded, to accept the unjust violence inflicted on him, and to count on miraculous transformation of the situation.

What are my principles regarding violence?

October 4

Luke 22:54-66 Prediction fulfilled

After his act of bravery waving his sword in the garden went nowhere, Peter’s cowardly behavior in denying Jesus led him to bitter tears. There is the terrible moment when Jesus turned and looked at him as he had failed. First a young woman had questioned him, and then some men.

Peter knew the prophecy had come true, but perhaps he also remembered that Jesus had included the encouragement that he would repent and be called on to strengthen and build up his brothers.

Jesus knew the trajectory of Peter's life, and it seems he knows our trajectory. A failure is not the last word. Whenever we are conscious of a failure, we can do as he did and repent, even to the point of tears, recognizing that it is a real failure and we do not deserve to receive God's favor. Yet the look from Jesus was not of reproach, only honesty, and right after the resurrection, Jesus made a point of seeing Peter on his own, and then made a point of letting all the other disciples know he had been restored. We are deeply loved, just as Peter was.

Have I seen redemption of my failures?

October 5

Luke 22:66-71 Jesus is sentenced

In my community in Antigua Guatemala, this moment begins the Good Friday observance. Jesus' sentencing is acted out. We are always seeking tangible ways to try to grasp the story of the passion: movies, visual art, music, walking through the Stations of the Cross, imagining we were there, thanking Jesus for his suffering, and many more things.

This condemnation by the religious leaders of Jesus' acknowledgement he was the Messiah is the terrible moment of rejection by his own people that he had prophesied. His people had been prepared for the coming of Messiah for many centuries, and these leaders tragically misread the signs. This rejection is reenacted whenever religious leaders through history and even today, lose sight of Jesus and introduce their own agendas.

Whatever helps us grasp this story in a personal and emotional way feeds our spiritual life. For me, contemporary art that draws on the passion in creative ways helps me see the old story with fresh and more appreciative eyes. Marc Chagall, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and Maximino Cerezo Barredo are three of my favorites, but there are many more. Their eyes open my eyes.

What helps me meditate on Jesus' passion and realize he did these things FOR ME?

JESUS IS TRIED 23

October 6

Luke 23:1-12 Herod judges Jesus

Wanting the death penalty which was outside their legal scope, the religious leaders took Jesus to the Roman governor, Pilate, who evaluated Jesus as innocent. "They became desperate" and they redefined the jostling crowds who had followed him for teaching and healing into rioters, hoping this would result in condemnation.

When they mentioned Galilee, Pilate saw an out. He could send the problem to Herod, Governor of that region. Luke is the only one to include this side trip to Herod, and it reinforces his theme of Jesus' competition with that ruler. Herod combined Greek and Roman culture and Judaism, his father having been the means of imposing Roman rule. The Herodians were a political party who wanted Herod to rule over the nation as his father once had, and were in opposition to the Pharisees who wanted a Davidic ruler. Neither of them wanted Jesus as King and Lord of all.

Jesus remained silent before Herod, knowing he had impulsively killed John to please his wife. When told previously that Herod wanted to kill him, he called him a fox, which was a metaphor for being weak and inept. There was no profit in arguing with this corrupt ruler that Jesus knew was a foolish man.

Am I able to stay silent when not doing so will probably result in foolish argument?

October 7

Luke 23:13-25 Unjust Trial

When Jesus was brought back, Pilate declared that both he and Herod had determined that Jesus was innocent, but he buckled to pressure and sentenced him to death anyway. This miscarriage of justice helps us identify any victim of such a miscarriage with him.

This is the archetypal mistrial

It happens over and over

--Men spend years on death row until DNA projects reveal their innocence

_Political dissidents are under house arrest so the tyrant can relax

_Mobs move to lynching very quickly

Christ understands from the inside

--Irregular procedures

--Sloppy police work

--Biased or bribed witnesses

--Cowardly judges more worried about PR than justice

--Passing the buck

--Giving in to the mob

Am I concerned about weak justice systems or miscarriages of justice?

October 8

Luke 23:26-31 Women of Jerusalem

In Luke's ongoing balance between women and men, he told the story of the special place Simon of Cyrene had in carrying Jesus' cross, and then spoke of a group of grieving women. Cyrene was from what is now eastern Libya, so a foreigner, an important reminder of inclusion.

A long tradition of meditation on the crucifixion can include choosing a character with whom to identify and then to try to imagine oneself in the scene. In this case, I identify with the grieving women. Though grief-stricken by his suffering and weeping, he encouraged them to prepared for their own grief. Too weak to carry his cross-beam, he warned them of Jerusalem's coming destruction. He was a living tree being cut down, and the spiritually dry trees would be destroyed even more quickly.

It reminds us that though we empathize and grieve over his suffering, he also understands our suffering and grieves with us.

Jesus carried his cross in the crowd,
Fell and faltered, so finally
They seized Simon of Cyrene
And the women walked and wept.

Do I grieve over the suffering of the crucifixion?

October 9

Luke 23:32-43 Jesus forgives

All the gospels tell us that Jesus was identified as King of the Jews by a signboard above him. Though intended ironically, it was quite true, and represented a significant moment in the creation of his new kingdom.

The gospels cite different things he said during the crucifixion, adding up to seven last words. These words became a favorite for many musical settings through the centuries. Here in Luke we have the first two phrases and the last one. His first words were an expression of forgiveness for all they were doing. Jesus' example of forgiveness for these terrible acts sets a high bar for us to be quick to forgive much lesser offenses.

Golgotha, grim and gruesome,
A scarred and scoured skull.
Two criminals on cruel crosses
But set solidly in the center
Was Christ, crucified but caring:
"Father, oh Father, forgive them."

Am I a forgiving person like Jesus? Is there anyone I need to forgive right now?

October 10

Luke 23:44-49 Death

From noon to three the world became dark. Strangely, it had never occurred to me to wonder if there was any independent confirmation of unusual darkness at that time. But to those who have wondered about this, there are references in ancient writings to a great eclipse of the sun and a great earthquake at the right time. How surprising. (p. 110-1, Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*.)

At the moment of Jesus' death we have many choices of people with whom to identify. I am guessing at their emotions, but these feelings are ones that Jesus' death can evoke for us as well.

Someone at home, wondering about three dark hours mid-day: concern
A priest in the temple, seeing the torn curtain: astonishment, fear
The captain who recognized Jesus' innocence: surprise
The soldier who had won Jesus' clothes in the dice game: uneasy
Those being crucified with him: agony
The mocking crowd leaving sorrowfully: shame
Women from Galilee: anxious, grieved

The Galilean women stood at a distance. In John we are told that Jesus' mother, John, Mary Magdalene, Jesus' aunt, and Clopas' wife stood by the cross. (John 19:25). It says those standing apart were his friends, and I imagine them not being able to quite bring themselves to look closely at his suffering and see his death agony.

Dark and doom came down
Temple curtain torn in two
Solemn silence as his spirit
Christ committed to the creator
And the women watched a way off.

What emotions does the crucifixion evoke in me?

October 11

Luke 23:50-56 Burial

Joseph of Arimathea was not in accord with the decisions of the rest of the high council and showed this by burying Christ. The women followed to find the tomb and then worked until sunset to prepare spices and ointments for embalming the body. I suspect the women were frustrated that the timing of enforced rest for the Sabbath was so inopportune.

What they could not know was that the work they were so anxious to complete was not necessary. Rest was more appropriate in the circumstances, but I suspect they were fretful.

Reverently, righteously Joseph took royalty
Down, dressed him in linen, placed him deep
Into the rugged rock to rest.
While the women walked and watched.

Do I feel troubled and anxious when there are delays in times of stress?

JESUS TRIUMPHS 24

October 12

Luke 24:1-12 Empty tomb

The women who had been so emotionally involved in Jesus' suffering were the first to learn of the resurrection. They went through a roller coaster of emotions: puzzlement, fear, haste, trembling and bewilderment (Mark 16:8), joy (Matthew 28:8), and worship. What a gift that women were made the first messengers of the good news. The emotion that comes up for me most in regard to the resurrection is delight that our faith is about life.

Luke gave us the names of some of the women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, the mother of James. The *Passion Bible* chooses to identify Mary, the mother of James as Jesus' mother, an interesting idea and certainly not impossible, since we know James was a brother (Matthew 13:55). Mary was at the crucifixion, as we learn in John, and it seems fitting that a mother would want to bury her son.

They heard the angel's message and they were reminded that Jesus had promised to rise on the third day. They went and shared the story with the disciples, and Peter and John (see John 20:8-10) ran to the tomb. But though John believed, Peter remained puzzled.

Our own spirituality and understanding of the resurrection may be belief or puzzlement. We may have a spiritual experience like the women, or examine evidence like John. Ultimately it is a combination of personal experience and evidence that leads us to belief. If, in fact, Jesus' mother was there, surely she could think back to her own experiences as an aid to belief: the miracle of the promises of the angel, and the miracle of Christ's birth. Now another angel was reminding her that Jesus had said he would rise again.

Have my own experiences led me to believe in the resurrection? What emotions do I feel about the resurrection? What evidence seems convincing to me?

October 13

Luke 24:13-24 Encountering Jesus

Two followers, Cleopas and another, were walking to Emmaus. Since John says one of those at the crucifixion was the wife of Cleopas, many suggest this was Cleopas and his wife, Mary. If

so, she could have been Jesus' aunt. (John 19:25). Many modern artists that treat these scenes are now painting them as a couple. In the Resurrection Chapel of the National Cathedral in Washington Rowan and Irene LeCompte made mosaic murals with three beautiful treatments of this story: the encounter on the road, the meal together, and their return to share with the other disciples.

The couple were Jesus' followers and were deeply saddened by all that had happened. The empty tomb had not convinced them of the resurrection, it had just raised their disappointment that the one they thought was Messiah had died. Jesus took the initiative to encounter them on the road and to accompany them. He was sensitive to their sadness and asked them about this. He listened to them attentively tell him things he knew better than himself.

We, too, can be aware and not recognize where God is present in our lives, even in times of difficulty, disappointment, and sadness. Yet this story encourages us that Jesus takes the initiative to accompany us and listen to us whether we realize it or not. He is patient with us, waiting for us to notice his presence with us.

How easily do I see Jesus in every circumstance, positive or negative?

October 14

Luke 24:25-32 Explaining scripture

Jesus gave these two disciples on the road to Emmaus a compelling class. He started by challenging them with their lack of comprehension and once more explained that suffering was part of the plan. He explained the Old Testament and how the scriptures all pointed to him. As they persuaded him to come for a meal, and he broke the bread, Their eyes were opened. Perhaps hearing the prophetic scriptures had helped, but as Jesus broke bread, they knew who he was and he disappeared (in one of those acts that makes us wonder about sci-fi qualities in a resurrected body). Suddenly, they reinterpreted all that had happened and were excited to go and share what had happened with the other disciples.

Jesus' act of breaking bread and being recognized is one which many great artists have interpreted, and many contemporary artists address in new a creative ways. Rembrandt did one sketch of the three walking on the road, and then three paintings and another drawing of them at the table. In his last treatment leaves only light is left where Jesus was sitting and the disciples stare.

Is this not also part of our spiritual experience? There is so much we do not understand, particularly suffering. We are puzzled and disheartened, and then we may experience teaching of scripture that gives us a new perspective on what life is, how it works, how Jesus is foreshadowed in the Old Testament, and we begin to have more hope. But it takes personal experience of spiritual encounters to open our eyes and see Jesus as the true God, present with us. We are most likely to see something abstract like light that awakens us to God's presence. No wonder the artists love this scene at the table which crosses into a realm of great mystery.

What is my experience of God's presence in my life? What is my understanding of suffering in my life and that of others? Do I clearly see the prophecies of Jesus in the Old Testament?

October 15

Luke 24:33-49 Entering the upper room

The Emmaus disciples hurried back to Jerusalem and heard that Jesus had appeared to Peter. In their growing excitement over reports of multiple sightings of Jesus, he suddenly appeared. He offered them peace and asked why they were afraid. Their emotions were mixed: fear, doubt, joy, wonder. He calmed them down by showing them his hands and feet and eating some fish. Then he gave class #2 on how the Old Testament had predicted his suffering and resurrection. He promised them the Holy Spirit, and commissioned them to preach.

Perhaps we, too, are allowed their mix of emotions, even doubt, when examining the resurrection. This is so unexpected and beautiful that our celebrations each year try to help us grasp it with joy and wonder. I am glad there is not one "right" emotion, but that we are allowed the range of normal human reactions.

The fourteen Stations of the Cross are a familiar and very old recollection of the events in Jesus' passion. More recently a proposal for fourteen Stations of the Resurrection open our eyes to the corresponding joy of new life: Jesus alive, the empty tomb, encounter with Mary Magdalene, encounter on the Emmaus road, knowing in breaking of the bread, this appearance to the disciples and promise of peace and power to forgive, strengthening Thomas, breakfast on the beach, forgiving Peter, commissioning the disciples, the ascension, waiting in prayer, and the Holy Spirit descends at Pentecost.

There is something very beautiful and right about the balance of meditation on the suffering of Christ, and on his glory. This great mixture of life is our reality, and focusing only on the tragedy or only on the joy minimize our experience. We live in a world with both.

How does the resurrection redefine what I think (and feel) about life and death?

October 16

Luke 24:50-53 Entering heaven

Luke will give us more details about the forty days after the resurrection before the ascension, as well as the moment of Jesus' departure in Acts. But here he very simply ended his story as Jesus blessed them and went to heaven. They were filled with great joy.

Luke started his gospel with the great joy of the birth narratives, and now he ended with the great joy of the ascension. A thread of joy runs through the whole book. Sometimes we forget that the fundamental emotions of our faith are joy and gratitude. We become so serious in trying to do our part to serve others, or we are hyper-watchful for prophecy to be fulfilled, or we

are hyper-critical of the doctrinal and life-style errors of others. But even in suffering, awaiting Christ's return, and being part of the messy community of faith, we are told to life joyfully.

Truth, beauty, and goodness in life provoke gratitude, and being alert to what to appreciate provokes joy. If we are joyless, picking up a journal and daily jotting down points of gratitude and things that bring us joy can change that. We have already entered the kingdom of joy, and our deaths will not change that but simply continue and amplify that life in a beloved community. When we see tragedy in our world, we can resist the injustice, mourn for the troubles, but simultaneously see the signs, even if faint, of that kingdom where Christ reigns already.

Am I living with a joyful heart?

October 17

Luke: Christ, the Prophet on a Journey

Luke had presented Jesus as a prophet who taught others, harshly reproached hypocritical leaders, and predicted coming judgment. His commission sent them to all nations with a message of forgiveness. But to do this, they would need to be like all the previous Old Testament prophets and be anointed with the Holy Spirit and his power. The power of Christ would now be on his disciples, making them prophets as well.

Moses, a great prophet, had promised that God would send another like him. Samuel, another great prophet, had a miraculous birth that foreshadowed Jesus' miraculous birth. Like the prophets Elijah and Elisha, he did many miracles and healed many people, including lepers. He raised people from the dead as they had done. His passion and suffering with arrest, beatings, and ultimate liberation reminds us of the prophet Jeremiah. When taken into heaven we are reminded of Elijah's ascension in a chariot of fire. The Psalms and prophets included so many allusions to his coming, and one can find lists of 365 Messianic prophecies he fulfilled. After the resurrection Luke told us several times that Jesus explained how these prophecies were fulfilled in him.

Because Christ is already on his throne, all things shall be well. We have been shown over and over in Luke that he is the kind of king who is not apart, but he loves, serves, suffers with, and comforts us. He is a king seated at a table where he is welcoming all people to share a meal with him. Throne and table, two images together that give us reason for joy. The overarching message of all of scripture is that God is with us, he loves us, he comes alongside us, and he makes us part of his family that is eternal, living in the grace and joy of perfect peace. This truly is good news.

Do I worship Christ as the greatest of God's messengers? Am I walking in the Holy Spirit to be continually sharing his good news?