

## HEBREWS: CHRIST, OUR REALITY

October 1

Hebrews 1:1-3 Christ, above all

Unlike most of the epistles, there is not a clear identification of author or recipient in this letter. Speculation is that this was written to Jewish Christians, perhaps in Judea, and was intended to encourage them to see how Christ fulfilled all of the Old Testament, thus encouraging their faithfulness. Proposed authors include Paul, Barnabas, Apollo, Priscilla (and Aquila), Clement of Rome, and Luke. There are interesting reasons for and against each one. One argument against Paul is that the book is much better Greek than his letters. For most authors proposed we have nothing with which to compare, but for Luke, we see a similar elegant, well-educated Greek in his gospel and Acts.

Interestingly, there are numerous parallels with Paul's writings, and since Luke was a close companion, their closeness could explain them. Parallels include calling the church Christ's body, knowing Timothy well, mentioning the milk and meat of scripture, quoting Habakkuk 2:4, referring to the Old covenant as a shadow of Christ, and quoting Deuteronomy 32:35 uniquely differently than the Greek translation of the time. Another thought is that Paul might have written the book in Hebrew and Luke could have translated it, or expressed Paul's ideas in his own words. There are 56 unique words shared between Paul's letters and Hebrews and 49 unique words shared between Luke's writings and Hebrews. Whatever the reality, the point is the topic, and that topic is Christ.

Christ is presented as speaking for God, inheriting all things, being creator, reflecting God's glory, representing God exactly, sustaining the universe, dying to cleanse us from sin, and ascending to be seated at God's right hand. This majestic vision, inherent in the gospels, has become clearer as we have gone through the epistles.

*Do I see Christ as the exact representation of God?*

October 2

Hebrews 1:4-14 Christ above angels

A well-informed Jew might suppose that Christ, God's messenger, was an angel. There were plenty of angel messengers in the Old Testament, and many that we suppose might have been the "pre-incarnate" Christ. But the argument here is that he was much more than any angel.

The author quoted from a Psalm and from the promise of a kingly descendant to David to identify Jesus as God's son. He cited Deuteronomy to say that the angels are to worship the

one Moses' song identified as conquering all. Then he quoted three more Psalms to demonstrate that there is a Son of God prophesied that is above all angels.

We assume that Jesus is greater than angels, but our problem is often that we are so used to thinking of him as a man that we forget he was God. Being reminded that he is above all other creatures is important for us as well.

*Do I see the uniqueness of Jesus?*

October 3

Hebrews 2:1-16 Above Angels

This book tells us that Jesus is above all things. Words like "better, more, and greater" are used 25 times. We learn that Jesus is greater than angels, Moses, Joshua, Aaron, Abraham, the priesthood, temple, and all sacrifices. But the great mystery is that Jesus chose to become a man, lower than the angels, so that by his death he might free us from death. The Messianic Psalm 8 is quoted which says that after he became lower than the angels, he then was raised above all things.

The mystery of the incarnation was accompanied by angels: the promise to Mary of Jesus' birth, Joseph's dreams, the heavenly host telling shepherds to go to the manger. Angels were at the Easter tomb, and at the ascension as messengers to the disciples. They knew he was Lord of All, and acknowledged this even in his humility.

He chose to make himself like us, his brothers and sisters. He told us that if we hear God's Word and obey it, we become his family (Luke 8:21). He knows what it is to be human and can help us with our struggles now. His humanity comforts us.

*Do I see the Lord of All above all angels as my brother?*

October 4

Hebrews 3:1-19 Above Moses

The great Jewish hero, liberator, prophet, lawgiver, and mediator Moses, foreshadowed Christ in so many ways. Not the least of this was his faithfulness in leading a group of stubborn, complaining, and rebellious people through the wilderness.

Jesus mentioned Moses several times in the book of John. The gospel has more than a dozen references and the book begins by contrasting Moses' giving the law with God's unfailing love and faithfulness in Jesus (John 1:17). Among the first disciples to follow him, Philip said they had found the one Moses wrote about (John 1:45). Jesus' complaint to the religious leaders was that if they really believed in Moses they would believe in him (John 5:46). In fact they

cursed a blind man and said they were Moses' disciples and knew God spoke to Moses, but they knew nothing of Jesus (John 9:28-29). Jesus said Moses would accuse them for not believing (John 5:45).

The author applied the lesson of the stubborn Israelites in the wilderness (and could have included the stubborn rejection of Jesus) to us. If Jesus, who is greater than Moses, is leading us, we need to have tender, obedient hearts and follow him. Jesus was the new Moses, coming to liberate, teach and mediate.

*Do I have a tender and obedient heart?*

October 5

Hebrews 4:1-13 Above Joshua

Joshua was another figure who foreshadowed Christ. He led the people into the land that was intended as a place of rest and security. At the end of Joshua's life it says, "The Lord had given the people rest from all of their enemies." (Joshua 25:1). But it did not stay that way with the peoples' repeated lapses into idolatry and its tumultuous consequences. It was not the complete rest foreshadowed by the weekly Sabbath day of rest.

Instead, the author wrote, that day of rest is available to us. Just as the Sabbath recalled God's rest after creation, the Sabbath foreshadowed that in Jesus we have rest from anxious effort. As he said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28,29)

Is this not what we want and need? Do we not go through life feeling anxious, uncertain if we're fruitful enough, or doing things right, or fighting our spiritual battles with enough vigor? Jesus told us to rest in him like the branches in a vine; they don't have to work to be part of the vine. They give fruit as part of their nature.

*Do I rest in Jesus?*

October 6

Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:1-10 Above Aaron

Aaron as high priest foreshadowed Jesus. As the author explained, a high priest dealt gently with people. In Jesus' case, his ascent to heaven at God's throne allows us to come to him there with all of our concerns. God chose him for this role, and he experienced tears and suffering, qualifying him as a priest who understands our weaknesses.

The author cited an additional verse from Messianic Psalm 110. We saw that he quoted the first verse in chapter one, and he will allude to it twice more. But here he went to verse four and explained that Jesus was a priest in Melchizedek's line. He will explain and develop this in Chapter 7. The point of Psalm 110 is a prophecy that Jesus is seated in heaven at God's right hand. This is alluded to at least 16 times in the New Testament, making it the most repeatedly quoted verse. Jesus quoted this himself to make the point that Messiah was above even his ancestor David (Matthew 22:44)

This great heavenly high priest is one we can go to with our sorrows, weaknesses, hopes and fears. He understands and will deal gently with us.

*Do I feel Jesus' gentle pastoral care?*

October 7

Hebrews 5:11-14, 6:1-18 Fruitful lives

Given what the author has shared about Jesus' greatness above angels, above faith heroes, and above all priests, he then encouraged them to take advantage of their position in Christ and become mature people. As mature people they should be able to teach beyond basic things, and never be spiritually dull.

They were encouraged to bear good fruit, not thorns and thistles. We remember Jesus' parables that repeatedly returned to the theme of fruitfulness: the seed uninhibitedly giving 100-fold fruit, the fruitless tree being watered and fertilized, the branches in the vine being primed for greater fruitfulness.

It is our responsibility to cling to Jesus and let fruitfulness emerge, in love and character, service, prayer, wisdom and joy. The author chose the great father of faith, Abraham, to encourage our faith. God's promise, sealed as a covenant with Abraham, was to bless him. Just as he received the promises of God, we will also.

*Am I maturing?*

October 8

Hebrews 6:19-20, 7:1-14 A Better Priest

Jesus' entrance into the heavenly sanctuary as a priest, introduces another priesthood, that of Melchizedek. Melchizedek foreshadowed Jesus as a priest and king who received gifts from Abraham. This priesthood was greater than the Levitical priesthood, given that Abraham was the ancestor of all Levites. The Messiah, Jesus, is identified with the line in Psalm 110 which said, "You are a priest forever in the line of Melchizedek."

Jesus identified himself as both priest and sacrifice by telling his disciples to eat his body and drink his blood. His kingship came from the line of Judah yet he became the ultimate priest for all people and all of creation. His priesthood was transcendent.

We have been made right with God by the work of this eternal priest. We, like Abraham, can live in faith and hope and trust.

*Have I accepted Jesus as the priest who can reconcile me to God?*

October 9

Hebrews 7:15-28 An Eternal Priest

The new priesthood that has been presented is like that of Melchizedek, but is even more wonderful because it is eternal. The author drew on the lines from Psalm 110 and emphasized the words "priest forever." There is no other eternal priest, only Jesus. He is unique because he is perfectly holy, made one sacrifice of himself to complete the work of reconciliation, and he has the highest place of honor in heaven.

The gospel of John had a particular emphasis on the priesthood and centrality of the temple in Jesus' ministry. Jesus identified himself with the temple and with different aspects of it, including the sacrifices. Unfortunately, most of the references to priests in the gospels are of them as opponents determined to kill him. They did not realize that as the great eternal priest, he sacrificed himself for us. He willingly gave up his life so that we might live. (John 10:18)

This was a one-time sacrifice, and now he is in the highest place of honor in heaven where he pleads for us, an eternal priest who knows all our needs.

*Do I worship Jesus as my eternal priest?*

October 10

Hebrews 8:1-13 A Better Covenant

As Jesus prepared for the cross, he told his disciples he was making a new covenant with his blood. This new covenant had been prophesied by Jeremiah, and the author included a long quotation. This new covenant replaced the old one.

The old covenant was a copy or shadow of something better and real that Jesus brought. This new covenant writes God's laws on our hearts in the Holy Spirit. This new covenant came through the death of Jesus, and he said the bread was like his broken body and the wine like his blood spilled out.

We celebrate this new covenant in our times of communion. We acknowledge Christ's body and blood as the sacrifice that freed us from sin. We hear the Spirit's voice in our hearts guiding, correcting, and comforting.

*Do I treasure the new covenant and its celebration in the Eucharist?*

October 11

Hebrews 9:1-10 A Better Temple

Most scholars think that Hebrews was written before 70 AD when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. If so, this book was preparing Jewish Christians to understand and accept that while the temple worship and sacrifices and priesthood were important, they were far less important than their fulfillment in Jesus. They needed to understand that these things foreshadowed Jesus and he was the reality.

In John Jesus had identified himself with different pieces of the tabernacle such as light and bread and wine. But he most clearly identified himself as the whole temple, saying it would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days. Here there is an emphasis on the veil being opened to the Most Holy Place. His own flesh was the veil, and as he died, the temple veil was torn in two.

Through Jesus we have access to the whole Trinity. This access to God's throne, to heaven, to the Most Holy Place, dramatically changes our ideas about prayer. This vision is one of intimate connection to power and greatness. We can talk freely to God at any time.

*Do I live aware of my access to God's throne?*

October 12

Hebrews 9:11-27 Better Blood

Having demonstrated that Jesus is better than the temple, the author now demonstrated that Jesus' blood is far superior to the animal blood of sacrifices. "Blood" occurs 14 times in this section, and reasons are given to explain why Jesus blood is better.

--It was offered once

--It was his own blood

--It can purify our hearts

--It is the ultimate real thing in heaven of which earthly blood was a copy

--it forgives our sins

Some form of the word "death" is used 10 times to explain how Jesus' death overcame sin. The author used the interesting analogy that to inherit under a will, the death of the one giving the inheritance was necessary.

Blood as a symbol for death was what Jesus used numerous times when he told his disciples to drink his blood. He said he was pouring out his blood as a sacrifice. (Matthew 26:28). Our identification with his death saves us. Blood makes us uncomfortable, but serves as a deep symbol of our new spiritual life.

*Have I drunk Jesus blood?*

October 13

Hebrews 10:1-18 A Better Sacrifice

The author returned to the idea that animal sacrifices were shadows of the reality of Christ's sacrifice. They foreshadowed what he would do. While legitimate when done in faith in the past, they could become empty rituals. Nevertheless, their divine pattern was to be followed until Jesus came. The Psalmist prophesied that "you have given me a body so that I may obey you". It is quoted here to show that the sacrifice of Jesus' body would make us holy.

He quoted Jesus as saying animal sacrifices were not needed, but his obedience was. Jesus quoted Hosea to say God wanted mercy rather than sacrifice (Matthew 9:12, 12:7). He said that love is more important than all the sacrifices in the law. (Mark 12:33)

The author then repeated part of the Jeremiah quote on the new covenant, a new covenant Jesus said was made with the sacrifice of his blood. Now that this sacrifice had been made, no more sacrifices were needed. It did not matter that sacrifices came to an end after the destruction of the temple. Their imagery was fulfilled.

*Do I trust Jesus' sacrifice?*

October 14

Hebrews 10:19-31 A Better Holy Place

The section begins with the beautiful assurance that we can now enter heaven's most holy place, because Jesus has opened the veil through his blood. We can go right into God's presence. Having explained the way Christ fulfilled the imagery of priesthood, temple, blood, sacrifice, and access to God's presence, the author returned to applying their lessons to us. He warned us to remember there had been judgment for disobedience under the law, and we should not take lightly the greater things of Christ. He urged faithfulness and reminded them of how they had endured suffering patiently. He urged them to look forward to Christ's coming. He urged them to have faith.

Each of these themes is something Jesus himself taught. He had explained how his death was a sacrifice to reconcile mankind to God. He said that those who had seen him had entered God's presence. He warned of judgment to separate good and bad. He warned of coming

persecution and urged them to take up their crosses. He told them he would return in Glory. He told them to believe in him.

The author had carefully connected Christ and his good news to the Old Testament, and he now connected it to his readers and to us. The admonition “do not throw away this confident trust in the Lord, no matter what happens” is as bracing today as it was in the past. We ask questions in the face of sin, suffering, and death, but we are told to hold on.

*Do I hold on and patiently endure?*

October 15

Hebrews 10:32-39 Suffer faithfully

These believers had suffered terribly--ridicule, beatings, being in jail, losing all their property. But the author commended them for having remained faithful through it all. He reminded them to stay confident in trusting God no matter what, and to endure patiently. He quoted from Habakkuk about the righteous not turning away, and continuing in faith.

But he also mentioned the great reward for this, and the chance to receive all God has promised. We know that these rewards can include the “better things waiting for us in eternity”, but we are also reminded of Jesus’ rather this-worldly promise of reward. Jesus said “I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News, will receive now in return, a hundred times over, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property--with persecutions. And in the world to come they will have eternal life.” (Mark 10:29,30)

He also promised that if we give, pray and fast secretly, our Father, who knows all secrets, will reward us openly. We can be encouraged that life will not be all suffering, but that there are a lot of good gifts for our faithfulness. Jesus assures us we will get a good recompense for our service!

*Do I see ways that Jesus has rewarded me in this life?*

October 16

Hebrews 11:1-31 Stories of faith

Having concluded in the last chapter that we have faith that assures our salvation, the author once more delved into Old Testament examples of what faith looks like. Each example gave another piece of the picture: Abel brought an offering, Enoch sought God, Noah built an Ark, Abraham left home, Sarah had a child, Abraham received Isaac alive, Isaac blessed his sons, Jacob blessed his grandsons, Joseph prescribed his burial place, Moses’ parents hid him, Moses

commanded Passover, Israel crossed the sea and crashed Jericho's walls, and Rahab's hid some spies.

In each story a tangible outward act demonstrated an inner confident assurance in God and his promises. The same pattern occurred in the gospels where Jesus told many people, "Your faith has healed you." The result of an inward trust and conviction was a tangible result in the ordinary world.

We can have the same experience today of bringing something into being that we believe God desires. We have a rich history of stories from visionary people of faith.

*Do I walk in faith?*

October 17

Hebrews 11:32-40 Signs of faith

Having explained that Christ is above angels, Moses, Joshua and Aaron, the author urged his readers to have faith like Abraham. Having explained that Christ is a better priest with a better covenant, temple, blood and sacrifice and heavenly holy place, he urged his readers to have faith like the Old Testament heroes.

He then generalized about their accomplishments and said they received God's promises. Some were rescued and some suffered and died. Their weaknesses became strength. He concluded that they cannot receive their prize until we receive ours.

The message is one of endurance and perseverance. Jesus repeatedly promised that those who endure to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:22, 24:13). Hebrews said that it was the hope of resurrection and a better life that helped those from the past to endure. We have far more evidence to believe in resurrection, and that hope overcomes our fear of death. As Jesus told us, he is the resurrection and the life and we will live after death if we believe in him.

*Am I unafraid of death?*

October 18

Hebrews 12:1-13 Strip off sin

The reference to "clouds of witnesses" apparently referred to people sitting in the highest seats in a stadium. It is as though we are running a spiritual race and have a terrific audience of past competitors cheering us on.

We also have Jesus ahead of us at the finish line, having been through his own suffering, but now seated next to God. We need to follow his example and not give up. Tough training

regimes, hard disciplines, are good for us and make us winners. We need to keep that perspective in the middle of the challenges of our lives. Get a grip, stand strong, and you and your teammates will not stumble.

It was Christ's courage as he faced the suffering of the passion that serves as our example for difficult experiences. That toughness carries us through to the finish line.

*Do I accept difficulties with courage?*

October 19

Hebrews 12:14-29 Seek holiness

The book concludes with an exhortation to be the kind of people we should be. We should live in peace, look after others, and eliminate bitterness. He contrasted Mount Sinai with Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem. We can look forward to heaven because of Jesus. Though earth is shaken, we will receive an indestructible kingdom.

Jesus came promising that kingdom and repeatedly said that when we believe in him we enter the kingdom now. The promise that it goes on forever after death is a great one, but equally great is that we are part of his reign over all things from heaven today.

This perspective can enable us to live with the character, endurance, and obedience that is asked for. Keeping our eyes on Jesus seated at God's right hand, we can persevere.

*Do I live aware of God's kingdom now present and to come?*

October 20

Hebrews 13:1-7 Share joy and sorrow

Hebrews concludes with an exhortation to love one another. His advice piles up and parallels instructions Jesus gave.

- Love one another
- Show hospitality
- Suffer with those in prison
- Honor marriage
- Don't love money
- Follow your leaders

He quoted two Old Testament promises that God will not fail us, and he is with us. We are reminded that Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always.". It is God's presence with us that gives us such great comfort through all the ups and downs of life. We may struggle, but he is here.

*Do I feel comfort in Jesus' presence no matter what happens?*

October 21

Hebrews 13:8-25 Spiritual strength

The author cannot resist one last Old Testament analogy. For the Day of Atonement the Most Holy Place received blood, but an animal was taken outside the community and burned. He said this is like Jesus' exit from Jerusalem to be crucified outside the city. We need to be willing to go there and share his disgrace.

After some final good advice to love God and neighbor and a request for prayer, the letter ends on a personal note. It seems to have been written from Rome, and though we are not sure from or to whom, we learn that Timothy has gotten out of jail and they hope to travel together to see the readers.

Before the crucifixion Jesus prayed, "Now, Father, bring me into the glory we shared before the world began." (John 17:5). He told us he was going home to prepare a place for us (John 14:1). The author of Hebrews reminded us that the world is not our home, but we look forward to heaven. Having connected the Old Testament, Jesus, and believers, he now says the trajectory of the story is to final perfection. That can help us take lightly some discomfort on our journey.

*Do I look ahead with joy to heaven?*

JAMES: CHRIST, THE JUST

October 22

James 1:1-11 Strong character

James, whose Hebrew name was Jacob, was one of Jesus' brothers (Mark 6:3). He did not believe until after the resurrection when Christ appeared to him. (I Corinthians 15:7). He and Paul met in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19), and he was an important participant in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 1:15). Before that Council it is thought that he wrote this letter addressed to Jewish believers scattered through the empire. Josephus, the early historian, wrote that James was killed for his faith in Jerusalem in 62 AD.

His pastoral tone began with the encouragement to face life's difficulties with joy and let them develop character. He encouraged them to expect wisdom from God. He encouraged the poor to rejoice because of God's favor and the rich to be glad to be humbled. These are reminiscent of Jesus' teachings who urged his followers to take up their crosses and suffer well. He promised that he would give wisdom to respond to opponents (Luke 21:14,15). And he

consistently favored the poor over the rich. In nine verses James gave us three important principles to live by.

*Do I face difficulty with joy? Do I depend on God's wisdom? Do I favor simple living?*

October 23

James 1:12-18 Suffer patiently

Jesus modeled patient endurance of testing, and we have seen this modeled by myriad believers through the centuries who have gone on to receive the crown of life. I wonder if James saw not only Jesus' testing, but that of his mother who suffered as she watched him suffer and die? Whatever their relationship was during childhood and youth as human brothers, James became Jesus' brother in God's family.

My sister Bev modeled patient endurance of testing. She endured 14 years of on-again off-again breast cancer, but lived graciously and in faith. Times of surgery, chemo, baldness, near death, and reprieves were all accepted with God's strength. When she died we know she received her crown of life, and she left behind her example of facing death with peace.

We would all prefer not to suffer; we like to ignore this theme that is so pervasive in the New Testament and focus on getting answers to prayer that we like. But life is not like that. We either suffer badly, or we learn to suffer well. What can help is to remember that we are God's choice possession.

*Do I patiently endure testing? Do I look forward to the crown of life?*

October 24

James 1:19--27 See yourself honestly

Was James here describing the kind of character he had seen in Jesus and in his parents? Good listening, patience rather than anger, obedience to scripture, willingness to repent, letting scripture change us, wisdom in speaking, care for widows and orphans, and resisting bad influences. For any of us privileged to be raised in a godly, loving family, this is a portrait of people in a healthy home.

Jesus used the image of God's Word as a seed which could be planted in a receptive heart and change us, bringing abundant fruitfulness, and James picked up that image.

Both James and Jesus offered cautions against the dangers of anger, and advocated patience. I have tried anger as a method for changing things and discovered it is neither terribly effective or comfortable for anyone. Better to look in the mirror, and, as Jesus said, take what is in my eye out before trying to deal with anyone else. My disastrous mistakes with anger have taught me to be more cautious.

Practical kindness to vulnerable people has surrounded me all my life. When I see love extended beyond the immediate family, I am inspired, and right now it is my son and daughter who are inspiring me with their fostering, a form of caring for those who might otherwise be orphaned. I wonder if James saw that in his own family? Did they reach out to others in their community so that Jesus' reaching out in the gospel stories was just an extension of what began at home?

*Do I have models of godly Christian character in my life?*

October 25

James 2:1-16 Special attention

Here it seems James took a page out of what has been called "God's preferential option for the poor." Jesus himself had said, "Blessed are the poor" and "woe to the rich." (Luke 6) Jesus by example, and James by means of this exhortation told us it is quite wrong to treat people differently according to their social status.

Perhaps one of the things I most treasure from my childhood as a missionary kid in Mexico is that I saw modeled graciousness to all people no matter social class or ethnicity. My parents were open and kind with the poorer Mixteco indigenous people of Oaxaca where we lived much of the time, to the more affluent Mexican people in Mexico City where we lived part of the time, and to friends and family in the US.

People mattered, not their social position. This built-in attitude is what I consider one of the greatest gifts of my unusual childhood, and I have tried to continue this in my own life. I am impressed when I see that graciousness in my children. I have been surrounded by people who took seriously the exhortation to be generous to the needs of others. I wonder if Jesus and James saw these values in their family.

*Do I cross social class boundaries easily? Am I generous to those in need?*

October 26

James 2:10-26 Show your faith

James knew the scriptures and knew that God declared Abraham righteous because of his faith. (Genesis 15:6). He knew that in all the old stories faith was demonstrated by action, and he cited Abraham's willingness to take Isaac to the altar. He cited Rahab's actions in hiding the spies.

Both illustrations remind us of the litany of actions in Hebrews 11 that are given as evidence of faith. Jesus' captured the importance of action to show faith in the story of two sons. One said

he would obey and did not; the other said he would not obey, but did so. Jesus compared this to the religious people who said they believed but did not receive him, versus the sinners who made no pretense of goodness but responded to Jesus. (Matthew 21:21-31)

Our faith and our actions are intertwined, and we honor those whose lives are consistent. My sister Bev was an example who continued to serve as wife, mother, therapist, and fundraiser for cancer research until too weak to continue. As she faced pain and death, she showed her faith by writing her testimony to share with her children, knowing this could be an influence in their futures. She even crocheted blankets for those grandkids she would never see.

*Does my faith show in what I do?*

October 27

James 3:1-11 Speak wisely

There are too many stories of Christian teachers and leaders whose children see an admirable public face and something sharp and unpleasant at home. He begged for teachers to speak wisely and well always. The goal is for praise and blessing to be what comes out of one's mouth at all times. I imagine James saw this in his brother Jesus and his family saw consistency between the public and private person.

Jesus' mother obviously had strong faith and it shows in the song we call Mary's Magnificat. Praising God and blessing others were modeled here and one suspects were what James saw as a child at home.

Learning this kind of verbal positivity is doubtless a challenge for everyone. If we are intelligent, have some critical thinking skills, and pay attention to the world, some sarcasm will doubtless come out. Jesus' showed that sarcasm and confrontation can be legitimate, but our hearts need to be in the right place.

*Do I monitor my critiques of others?*

October 28

James 3:12-18 Steady goodness

Surely James saw the kind of wisdom described here in Jesus. Jesus told us that peacemakers will be called God's children, and these are practical ideas on how to be a peacemaker: good deeds, not bragging, not selfishly ambitious, pure, loving peace, gentle, giving others their own way, merciful, impartial, sincere.... We can see these qualities of character in the gospel stories.

The list bears a strong resemblance to Paul's description of love in I Corinthians 13 and Jesus' beatitudes. I have often returned to this list, asking where I might need to change to

contribute better to peace. Gentleness as a virtue often stands out. Definitions of gentleness include having a kind and quiet nature, not being harsh or violent, and having a mild temperament. Synonyms include "affable, amiable, benign, compassionate, considerate, genial, mellow, moderate, pleasant, soft, tender, disciplined, etc." Am I growing into these qualities?

In contrast, selfish ambition is a barrier to peace, and how easy it is to become selfish and ambitious. Again, am I rejecting these qualities?

*Am I a peacemaker?*

October 29

James 4:1-12 Strength to stand

Having told us about being peacemakers, James focused on the selfish ambition that he had said gets in the way of peace. He said it keeps us from getting what we ask for in our prayers, since it is not actually conformity to God's will, but manipulating God into giving us what we want that is our real motive.

The solution is humility, repentance, and not judging or criticizing others. James promised that God will exalt the humble, and quoted Proverbs 3:34 as his proof text. Peter repeated the same call to humility and even quoted the same Proverb. The antidote to selfish ambition is humility that wants God to be glorified. My actions and will can conform to his thoughts.

Jesus promised blessings on the humble (Matthew 5:5), said he was humble and gentle (Matthew 11:29), said that childlike humility was a sign of kingdom character (Matthew 18:4), and promised something very like what James said. "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Matthew 23:12)

*Am I learning humility?*

October 30

James 4:13-17 Sinful confidence

We Americans love to plan, to set goals and to take control of our lives. The unexpected is not part of our common thinking and we delude ourselves that we are in control of what happens to us. James urged us to realize that our lives are under God's control, and we need to acknowledge that our plans are subject to his will.

Rather than resisting the unexpected, Jesus showed us an example of someone willing to adapt. His ministry was interacting and responding to those about him. For example, once he had hoped for a brief retreat, but then the crowds found him and he healed them and fed them instead. The flexibility came from inside.

If we deeply trust God's love for us, we know that twists and turns result in better things than we could have planned. I look back with gratitude on the unexpected in my life that resulted in gifts I had never thought to ask for. "If the Lord wills..." is actually a very cheerful phrase.

*Do I see God's will as a good and positive?*

October 31

James 5:1-6 Selfishness

James goes on what can only be described as a rant against the unjust rich. As Americans with only 5% of the world's population, but with over 41% of the world's wealth, this should concern us. Instead, we have created a uniquely American theology that glorifies wealth. We have forgotten the warnings that wealth can be a trap.

Jesus warned us that if we love money we cannot love God. We have to make a choice. He advocated selling what we have and giving it to those who are poor. He himself lived as a poor man. He said that sorrows await the rich and their happiness is now. (Luke 6:24). Instead, both James and Jesus advocated concern to use any resources we have to bless others.

We need the caution and a shift in attitude that is more aware that people in the world die under terrible conditions as they work to make our consumer goods. We need to think carefully about limiting our consumption, about finding out about sources for products, and about ways to advocate for better pay and conditions for others. We do not want to just be stuck in our satisfaction and prosperity.

*Am I willing to consume less and consume more carefully?*

November 1

James 5:7-20 Suffering

James redefined suffering for us by pointing out that Job patiently endured and it was "the Lord's plan" and "it ended in good." Why? Because God is "full of tenderness and mercy.". In the midst of difficulties we may not think this is so, but we are challenged by all the New Testament writers to see suffering in this way.

Jesus had said if we are willing to lose our lives we will find them. James repeated Jesus' exhortation to just say yes or no and not add vows. He repeated Jesus' exhortation for us to pray for what we need. The mark of Jesus' ministry was healing, and James said we can pray for healing ourselves. Jesus' call was for repentance and restoration, and that is something we need and James exhorted.

In our extended family we have seen many remarkable healings. One with the greatest impact for me was that of my sister Bev when she was 18. She had convulsions from a brain infection and went into a coma, and was not expected to live, or if she came out of it she could be completely impaired. We all prayed for her, including so many of my parent's farflung missionary friends. She did come out of the coma and months of slowly recovering her memory resulted in such normality that her fellow college students would never have known unless she told them. Her life was a gift.

*Do I accept suffering, knowing that God is full of tenderness and mercy? Do I pray in hope for anyone suffering?*

I PETER: CHRIST, THE HOLY ONE

November 2

I Peter 1:1-9 Go into all the world

Jesus told his disciples to take the gospel to the whole world, and Peter and the others took this seriously. Early writings say that Andrew went to Georgia and Bulgaria, Bartholomew to India, Matthew to Iran, Philip to Eastern Turkey, Thaddeus to Syria and Iraq, Thomas to Iran and Afghanistan, and Peter to the places he mentioned here. Cappadocia was to the east of where Paul traveled, and Bithynia to the north. Tradition is that he preached in Italy and established the church in Rome. At the time Paul was under house arrest there may be when Peter wrote his letters as well.

Jesus had warned them that there would be people who wanted to kill them, but not to be afraid. All the apostles except John were martyred. Under Nero, in 64 AD, Peter was martyred in Rome. We do not know about the wives, but I want to give a shout out to the ladies who journeyed with their husbands. We do not know their names, but they traveled (I Corinthians 9:5), and then lost their husbands in horrific martyrdoms.

In his letter, Peter encouraged these converts to remain strong even under persecution. One incentive is a reward ahead, a priceless inheritance in heaven. Trials now are like fires that purify our faith and make it like precious gold. Clearly, the rather bumbling disciples who used to worry about their importance changed dramatically and became gold.

*Is my faith being purified by difficulties?*

November 3

I Peter 1:10-25 Live in love and joy

Am I really "happy with a glorious, inexpressible joy?" This is to be the emotional baseline for those who look ahead to perfect salvation. All the prophets, particularly Isaiah, looked ahead to

salvation, mentioning it 26 times. He saw Christ's suffering (Isaiah 53), and he saw his glory (Isaiah 61 and many others). There are at least 365 Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament and many other cases of foreshadowing in stories, but the prophets were told it was all in the future. That future is now, wrote Peter.

Peter was present when Jesus explained how these prophecies were fulfilled in him and then told them they could share this with the world in the power of the Spirit. (Luke 24:44-49). Peter wrote "it is all so wonderful" and the angels were watching in suspense. Do I have Peter's sense of wonder at salvation? Or do I fret about unfulfilled expectations and ignore the everyday gifts of life? Given our salvation, Peter urged us to live in holiness. Because of the resurrection we can live with confident faith and hope.

Peter was present when Jesus gave them a new commandment to love one another. Minutes later Jesus would predict his denial. (John 13:34-38). But a restored Peter passed on that command to love, something we can do because we have Christ's new life. Even simple things like an encouraging email, listening to someone over a snack or a meal, giving a thoughtful gift, having fun, volunteering to serve, or praying for others are everyday ways to show love.

*Do I living lovingly and joyfully?*

November 4

I Peter 2:1-25 Love in marriage

Peter's advice to husbands and wives came from a married man. He told husbands to honor their wives and treat them with understanding, knowing that though physically weaker, they are equal before God. Perhaps he learned the hard way that if one did not honor women, God would not hear one's prayers. In the gospels Peter seems machista, overconfident, impulsive, and a man with poor follow-through. I can imagine his wife found it a chore to deal with his volatility. When he decided to leave the business he was running and wander with an itinerant preacher, what wife would approve? Perhaps it softened the blow that Jesus healed her mother. (Mark 1:30)

Peter's admonition for wives to accept their husband's decisions is modified by his assurance that God will protect them, as he did Sarah, if their husbands make a bad decision. He had probably watched his wife overcome her "fear of what your husbands might do." His tender description of a beautiful woman is surely something he learned from her. In the years when he traveled the world in ministry, she accompanied him, as apparently did the wives of other apostles and Christ's brothers. (I Corinthians 9:5). "Good for them", I think. They modeled ministry as married people who knew their relationship was an important part of their teaching.

For us today who are married, they serve as models to emulate. For married and unmarried women, inner beauty is our goal. For married and unmarried men, honoring women as equals is important, even if countercultural. Peter's wise advice helps us all.

*Do I value how marriage can conform our characters to Christ?*

November 5

I Peter 3:8-18 Love one another

Peter repeated for the second time in his book that we should love one another. We should have soft hearts, humble minds, and if someone is unkind we need to bless them. He quoted Psalm 34:12-16 reinforcing the need to live in peace with others to have a happy life. Peter added that we should not fear suffering if doing right, but we must learn to share our faith in Christ in a gentle and respectful way. If others speak evil of us, they will see our love and feel ashamed.

In Jesus' last discourse, he told his disciples for a second time that they should love one another. "I command you to love each other in the same way that I love you." (John 15:12). Despite his great love, he did suffer for doing what is right. And despite his great love for Peter, Peter did say something unkind: he pretended not to know Jesus. But Jesus forgave him completely and blessed him.

Loving those who speak ill of me or those I love has been a great struggle for me. Letting go of bitterness and blessing others has often taken me far too long. I need Peter's admonition not to worry or be afraid of criticism, to not retaliate but return a blessing. I need to learn to love in Jesus' sacrificial and forgiving way. The times I have been able to do this--even far too late--have been redemptive.

*Do I keep loving even when it is challenging?*

November 6

I Peter 3:18-22, 4:1-9 Mysterious love

Peter repeated the core of our faith: Christ suffered, died and rose from the grave. After his suffering Christ was raised to heaven, seated in the place of honor next to God where he has all authority. The kingdom has come in heaven, even if the struggle continues on earth and results in our suffering now. We need to accept our suffering willingly and learn to want God's will above all. We need not worry about rejection from unbelieving friends.

But Peter introduced a mysterious passage that has led to the phrase in the Apostle's Creed that Christ "descended into hell" between his death and resurrection. Peter wrote that when Christ died he went and preached to the dead who had rejected Noah's warnings. He added

that though bodies were punished with death, they could be alive in the Spirit. (4:9). Is this something Jesus explained to Peter during the 40 days of post-resurrection/pre-ascension appearances? Interpretations differ widely. One early church father, St. Clement of Alexandria (200 AD) wrote: "Christ went to hell in his spirit to proclaim the message of salvation to the souls of sinners who had been imprisoned there since the time of the flood." Others firmly disagree and offer other perspectives.

Does God's love for people end at death? This passage should at least make us wonder about God's infinite love.

*Do I believe in God's perfect love and perfect justice?*

November 7

I Peter 4:7-19 Love and suffering

Peter wrote for the third time in his book that we should love one another. He sandwiched it in between two ways of showing love: prayer and hospitality. Peter's three repetitions of this important command echo Jesus' three repetitions in his final discourse telling his disciples to love one another. (John 15:17).

Peter then urged people to use their spiritual gifts, to accept suffering as normal, to be happy if they were insulted for loving Christ since there is no shame in that. He promised that God's Spirit would come on them, and that God would never fail them. His tranquility and good cheer about suffering reflected Christ's promise that if we are persecuted, we can be happy. (Matthew 5:10-12)

Once again Peter has intertwined love and suffering. Living a life of love does not exempt us from opposition. He was clear that we cannot feel good about suffering that comes as a result of crimes or making trouble or being nosy. That suffering is not the result of love and fidelity to Christ. In my own life I can see distinctions (even if a little fuzzy in some cases) of suffering because of my own bad behavior, or cases of suffering through no particular failure in love. Some self-examination whether our suffering is "according to God's will" is always in order!

*Do I accept with tranquility the rejection of my love for others?*

November 8

I Peter 5:1-14 Humble shepherds

Peter ended his letter by appealing to elders to care for God's flock. That immediately recalls Peter's conversation with Jesus after the resurrection at the Lake of Galilee. Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" three times and each time Peter responded, "you know I love you." Jesus gave him three charges that changed a fisherman into a shepherd: "feed my lambs", "take

care of my sheep”, and “feed my sheep.” Peter reminded these elders that when the head Shepherd comes, they will share his glory and honor.

He urged humility, leaving one's cause to God, and guarding against Satan. He told them that after a little suffering they would be restored. That promise reminds us that when Satan tested Peter and he failed, Christ restored him and made him strong. Peter was not only a witness to Christ's suffering as he wrote in this chapter, his own death had been foretold. (John 21:18-19). Tradition is that he was crucified upside down in Rome under Nero, glorifying God by his death.

As a lowly undershepherd I listen to Peter and watch over others willingly out of my eagerness to serve God, never lord it over others, but try to be a good example.

*Do I seek to serve others in humility?*

## II PETER: CHRIST, THE FAITHFUL ONE

November 9

II Peter 1:1-11 Intro

Peter's second letter was written to be shared with all who had faith in Jesus. Many wonder if Peter actually wrote this letter since the style is very different from I Peter. But some explain the difference by saying that Peter's limitations in Greek were overcome in I Peter since he wrote “with the help of Silas”. (I Peter 5:12)

Peter was facing death and wanted to give them his last words. We remember that when Jesus faced death, he shared his love with them, and urged them to make love their highest priority. At that point Peter was on the verge of a great failure of love, betraying Christ. But after the resurrection Christ forgave him and reaffirmed him. He asked three times, “Do you love me?” and commissioned him to feed his sheep.

Peter did that for the rest of his life, including in this letter. He laid out a process that leads from dependence on Christ's power and promises to great love. This same pattern continues to work for us in our spiritual growth as well.

*Am I pursuing love?*

November 10

II Peter 1:12-21 Godliness

Peter wrote that Jesus had revealed to him that he was soon to die, but he would continue to teach as long as he lived and teach with passion. He then turned to one of the most

memorable and striking experiences of his life: seeing Jesus in the glory of his transfiguration on the mountaintop.

Jesus had taken his disciples the 25 miles from Lake Galilee to the rather pagan city of Caesarea Philippi, and in contrast to the idolatry they could see there, Peter made his great confession of faith that Jesus was Messiah and Son of God. There was a temple to Caesar Augustus who put on his coins that he was the great ruler and the son of a god. Peter knew the truth. They then climbed another 8,000 feet in 17 miles to Mount Hermon, past 20 old temples, perhaps to ancient Baal. None of that mattered. Jesus was confirmed to be the Son of God by a voice from heaven.

Peter had the witness of scripture, the voice from heaven, and interpretation by the Spirit as testimony of Jesus. We also have the first and the last of these, and Peter's testimony to his awe-inspiring mountain-top experience. He promised that the Morning Star, Christ himself, shared the awesome light of his glory in our hearts in this present moment, giving us complete confidence in the truth of what we have been taught.

*Do I believe in Christ's great glory and light?*

November 11

II Peter 2:1-22 God's judgment

Peter harshly critiques immoral false teachers who are denying Christ by their lifestyles. He warns that judgment will fall just as it did on rebellious angels, on people in Noah's day, and Sodom and Gomorrah. He said that God is always willing to rescue from judgment and used Lot's example. Balaam was an example of someone consumed with greed. Jude will give almost exactly the same critique and same Old Testament illustrations. They make the same critique that they disrespect and insult things they do not understand.

Jesus had a different set of false teachers to attack--they may not have been as immoral, but they were still hypocrites. He also accused them of caring far too much about money. He also warned in terms of Old Testament judgments that they were vulnerable if they did not repent. Today we also struggle with far too many instances when a revered Christian leader is found to have been secretly living an immoral lifestyle or whose lavish living is a contradiction of the exhortations to generosity.

In Christ we escape immorality and materialism, rescued from destruction as Lot once was. But if we return to these things, Peter says this is slavery and it would have been better if they never started on the path. He uses a proverb with two ugly images to show us what this is like. For every ordinary Christian, sex and money are ever present temptations, and if we add taking leadership and then getting entangled in these temptations we are like unclean animals to whom Jesus says "Woe!"

*Am I avoiding sins that compromise my testimony?*

November 12

II Peter 3:1-18 God's last day

Peter addressed the issue that they (and we) are expecting the return of Christ which has not yet come. The result then and now is mockery of this expectation. He pointed out that God's sense of time and our sense of time are not the same. A thousand years is as a day. By that measure the early patriarchs on day one, the flood on day two, Abraham on day three, Moses on day four, David on day five, Jesus on day six, and now us on days seven and eight make only a week. Not too long.

Jesus used the idea of his return as an unexpected home invasion, an image Peter picked up. Jesus said that meanwhile we must live alert and holy lives, and Peter repeated that. We eagerly await the new heavens and new earth where Christ's kingdom has fully come. Meanwhile we have a chance for more people to be saved.

Hold on to scripture, even things you find hard to understand, he advised. He and Paul had not always had a comfortable relationship, but he affirmed Paul's wisdom and teaching. Hold on to truth and grow in grace. The goal is intimacy with Jesus, so that as his friend we continue to be faithful servants as we eagerly await seeing him crowned as King of Kings and Lord of all, and as we then enjoy the beauty and wonder of the new heavens and new earth.

*Do I eagerly look for Christ's coming?*

I JOHN: CHRIST IS LOVE

November 13

I John 1:1-10 Living in light

Though there is no name identifying the author, early tradition is that it was written by the Apostle John toward the end of the first century. It bears so much similarity to the gospel of John that is another confirmation. The tradition is that around the time that Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, he moved to Ephesus. There he became a leader of all the surrounding churches. He was the only apostle to live so long, Paul and Peter and others already having been martyred in the previous decade.

Unlike the gospel and the book of Revelation which both have an elegant structure built around the number seven, there is not an obvious structure to John, though we will see some patterns. The whole book has strong connections to his gospel.

His starting lines that Christ has been from the beginning and became tangible flesh are similar to how he started his gospel. (John 1:1,14) That our fellowship with Jesus will cause our joy to be complete recalls Jesus' promise that seeing him will give us wonderful joy. (John 16:20). His message that God is light recalls Jesus saying he is the light of the world, and the interaction between darkness and light was a theme in his conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:19-21)

Entering the light has taken away our sin, but it does not mean we had not sinned and did not need the forgiveness Jesus brought. There is a moment when we move from darkness to light. John was a great poet who wrote a poetic gospel, poetic letters and poetic novel. He responded most deeply to the poetry of Jesus' though that used things we can see, like like, to help us grasp things we cannot see, like joy.

*Am I experiencing the joy of living in the light of Christ?*

November 14

I John 2:1-17 Love and obedience

John wrote to "his dear children", a phrase he will repeat eight times. He also wrote to his "dear friends", a phrase he will repeat five times. This loving letter to those he saw as spiritual children and friends encouraged them to stay strong in faith, and firmly hold on to the truth that Jesus' death was the sacrifice for our sins. The result is that we should obey, something Jesus said would be the proof that we loved him. (John 14:21)

His calling them children reminds us that Jesus said that it was those who became as children who could enter the kingdom of God and represent it the best. While he may have been an elder statesmen by this time who from his standpoint as older than the others naturally saw them as children, his use of the phrase reminded us and them of Christ's call for that simplicity and trust.

He encouraged them to love one another. Jesus said love of God and neighbor covered all of the law, but he also specifically urged them to love one another. This command he said would prove to the world that they were his disciples. (John 13:34,35). John took the primacy of love seriously and used a form of the word in this book 37 times, and 42 times in his gospel, more than any other books in the New Testament.

John repeated Jesus' message: Accept forgiveness, become obedient, be like simple children, and be loving people. He is often justly called an apostle of love because of this emphasis because beyond all others, he truly internalized that this was the core of Jesus' message, the same message we can give to all in our lives to bring them to the kingdom.

*Am I living in obedient love?*

November 15

I John 2:12-29 Live in truth

The phrases "I am writing" and "I have written" stand out in this section because they are repeated six times. This actually alerts us to a pattern in how John wrote this letter. He repeated a word three to five times and sometimes even more in a section, showing how important it was. Seen (1:1-3) Fellowship (1:3-9) Sin (2:1-2) Obey (2:3-6) Light (2:7-11) Writing (2:12-14) World (2:15-17) Antichrists versus Truth (2:18-22) Father and Son (2:22-25). Teach (2:26-27) Children (2:28-3:3) Sin (3:4-10) Love (3:10-20) Commandments (3:21-24) Spirit (4:1-6) Love (4:7-5:5) Water and blood (5:6-10) Life (5:11-17) God's son (5:18-21)

This is a curious and unexpected pattern, but given how much of a poet John was, it shows his creativity as he promoted what he considered the key words of the gospel. To make a simpler phrase of his key words we could say: I have seen Jesus and in fellowship with him our sins are forgiven. We are to obey him who is the light. I write to help you conquer the world, to avoid antichrists and stay loyal to truth. The Father and Son teach us children, remove our sins, give us love, and enable us to keep the commandments. The Spirit teaches us to love. Jesus' baptism in water and his blood on the cross give us life because he is God's son.

He reiterates his themes, using highlighted words in the other sections and the result is more of a poem than a carefully explained treatise. If we accept this as a poem and let it weave its spell as we bask in each comforting word, it touches our hearts and helps us let the Spirit move us closer to Jesus.

*Does John's poem touch me?*

November 16

I John 3:1-26 God's children

John tells us that we already are God's children who have been born into a new family. It reminds us of Jesus' promise of new birth in the Spirit marked by the water of baptism. The Holy Spirit has given us heavenly life. (John 3:5-7). John promised that when Jesus comes and we see him, we will take on the family resemblance.

Anyone with this new birth is going to avoid sin and become a righteous person. Satan and his hold on us have been destroyed. Jesus had said that unrighteous and lying behavior comes because we are still children of the devil. (John 8:44). But our new birth will result in love and obedience to God's commands. Since the great commandment is to love one another, we will care about our friends and lay down our lives for them as Jesus did. (John 15:13). We will help them when they are in need. Our actions will prove that we are in the truth and in the Spirit.

We need this message. It is far too easy for us to be indifferent and fail to show love. It is far too easy for us to compromise and not realize that we are moving into disobedience and darkness. It is far too easy for us to be critical and unloving to other Christians who do not think precisely as we do. John gave us such an inspiring vision of our new natures as God's children it can help keep us on track and realizing that we need to live up to our family resemblance.

*Do I understand my new identity as God's child?*

November 17

I John 4:1-21 Loved by God

Having repeated his themes with an average of three to five words, John demonstrated what was most central to him by focusing on love. He had already emphasized love in the previous chapter with eight repetitions. Now he repeated love another 29 times.

John wrote that listening to God proves one is in the Spirit (I John 4:6), something that Jesus had said as well. (John 8:47). John wrote that God showed his love by sending his Son into the world (I John 4:9). We know that Jesus made the same point in a verse that is one of the most familiar to us of all verses--John 3:16.

Love is the evidence that God lives in us. Love takes away our fears. Love is the highest mark of a Christian. It is shameful when we become hostile, judgmental and indifferent to others in need and call ourselves Christians. Our behavior proves that is not so, and in fact demonstrates the Phariseeism that Jesus condemned. Instead of calling it Phariseeism, John called it being an anti-Christ. If we fail in love, we are actually on the wrong side. This should help us wake up and examine ourselves to see if there is anyone whom we are not loving. John was trying to soak them in the word love, the ideas of how love is lived out and how it is not, and trying to help them see that love is the core aspect of our identity as people who have come to the loving Christ.

*Would others say I am a loving person?*

November 18

I John 5:1-21 Loving God

The heresy that John was trying to combat at the same time as he encouraged his friends, was one that came to be a problem for many years. It borrowed from non-Christian philosophy and made a strong separation between mind/spirit/soul which were good, and material things, including the body, which were bad. Hence, they could not accept the reality of Jesus as a combination of God and man. That broke their spiritual categories and they came up with odd ideas. One was that God came on him at baptism and left before he died. All of this was much

more compatible with Greek philosophy which separated spirit and body than with Hebrew thought, and with the offensive idea of God become flesh.

John insisted that if one denied that Jesus came in the flesh he was an anti-Christ. (I John 4:2). John insisted that Jesus was shown to be God's Son both at his baptism and on the cross. Water and blood were equally important testimonies of who he was, God in flesh. John told us that if we believe in him we have life that does not end, starting now. Jesus also said "all who believe in God's Son have eternal life. Those who don't obey the Son will never experience eternal life, but the wrath of God remains upon them." (John 3:36)

The Nicene Council in 325 AD tried to put a stop to this heresy by making it very clear that Jesus is both God and man. While it is a mystery, any efforts to separate his two natures is wrong. While on earth Jesus himself said that "he who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9). After his miraculous resurrection he made a point of doing ordinary human things like sharing meals. Our minds go from one side of his nature to the other, but our faith insists they are not separate. No matter how logical we are, there is this aspect of the faith that is a mystery slightly beyond logic that says the two natures were fully present, neither drowning out the other.

*Do I acknowledge Jesus as God and man, mysterious as that might be?*

## II JOHN: CHRIST, GOD AND MAN

November 19

II John 1:1-13 A Chosen Lady

II and III John read more like a letter one of us might send, though today it would be likely to be an email. He was sending warm regards, and announced a planned visit. When I read that it was to "the chosen lady" I could not help but wonder if that might be Mary, Jesus' mother. As we recall, Jesus gave his mother into John's charge at the crucifixion. I was delighted to discover that there are some scholars that think this might be possible, though of course it might be another specific woman or a way of addressing the church as a whole metaphorically.

But if it was to Mary, the children mentioned could be James (Jacob), Joseph, Simon, Jude (Judah) and some of Jesus' sisters. It was not a foregone conclusion that they would believe in Jesus, so John would have been delighted to seek them out and discover they had come to faith. After the ascension Mary is mentioned as part of the Jerusalem group awaiting the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). Mary's sister is mentioned as having been at the cross (John 19:25), and the children of a sister are mentioned at the end in this letter.

In addition to an exhortation to love, John offered the same warning as in I John against teachers who did not believe in the incarnation. They did not accept "that Jesus Christ came to

earth in a real body". If this was to Mary, she knew better than anyone else that Jesus' conception was a great mystery. The stories she may have told to Luke shared the mystery of Christ's birth. The mystery of the incarnation is a challenge for us today as well. That Jesus was wholly God and wholly man is something we have a hard time holding on to, and depending on the day or the scripture passage we tend to lean one way or the other and misunderstand things. John emphasized that it is both.

*Do I reflect on the mystery that Jesus is God and man?*

### III JOHN: CHRIST, OUR GUEST

November 20

III John 1:1-15 Hospitable

Another brief letter commends the hospitality of Gaius and critiques Diotrephes for his lack of it. In the previous letter John warned not to receive false teachers, but here he emphasized the importance of receiving true messengers. Given that he called Gaius one of his children, it is quite likely this was someone under his pastoral care.

At that time, Gaius was a name as common as John is for us today. There was a Gaius who gave long-term hospitality to Paul in Corinth and hosted a house church (Romans 16:3). Another Gaius from Derbe (the region of Galatia) was caught up in the Ephesian riot and then traveled to Jerusalem with Paul. (Acts 19:4, 20:4). John very well might have met that Gaius. But whoever he was, John was eager to visit and sent greetings to and from their mutual friends, once more showing the very human ties and the traveling between Christian communities that went on.

Jesus had told his disciples to accept the hospitality of good-hearted people as they traveled for ministry. Now John offered the other side of the coin: Christians should be gracious and offer hospitality to those who came to preach and teach. He offered a beautiful prayer for his friend that we can claim as well: "My heartfelt prayer for you, my very dear friend, is that you may be as healthy and prosperous in every way as you are in soul." (III John 2, J.B. Phillips). We have a vision of health, having enough materially, having spiritual riches, and being willing to share all that we have with others in hospitality as a set of reachable goals in our Christian walk.

*Is my soul prospering?*

### JUDE: CHRIST, OUR RESCUER

November 21

Jude 1:1-25 Jesus' brother

Three things make this book more useful and understandable to me. The first is to realize that the reference to being James' brother is thought to indicate that he also was one of Jesus' brothers. In a list of names for Jesus' brothers in Matthew 13:55-56 we have James (Jacob), Joseph, Simon, and Judas. Secondly, it opened my eyes to realize that Jude and Judas are translations of the Hebrew name Judah which is so important in Old Testament history.. Third, the Jewish thinking in James and Jude gives a glimpse into how moral, devout, and even scholarly Jesus' home might have been.

Jesus came announcing that repentance was necessary to enter the kingdom, and repeatedly warned of judgement for the unrepentant. Jude's message was similar and rather bracing, but his message is one we need today. He warned there is judgement for those who accept immorality, something our culture casually accepts. False teachers were saying God's forgiveness excuses immorality. To counter this he cited numerous Old Testament instances of judgement: Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed for their sexual immorality, Cain for murder, Balaam for greed, and Korah for rebellion.

The scriptures had already been translated into Greek so he would have known what was in the canon. But he chose to quote from an extra-biblical source which shows his curious mind. Perhaps this was a text popular with his audience or their teachers, and he used a story Michael confronting Satan to say we must be careful not to scoff at fallen angels, something these false teachers were apparently doing. Early church fathers said the story was from *The Assumption of Moses*, but there is not a known manuscript.

It is beautiful to meet this brother of Jesus who though he criticized, minimized, and did not believe during Jesus' life, he became a leader in the new movement. It is thought this was a relatively early letter sent to believers in Syria and Egypt. It encourages anyone who has family members critical of their faith to keep hoping and praying for change.

*Do I pray for my extended family?*

November 22

Jude 1:14-25 Remain faithful

While we don't have an extant source for the argument between Satan and Michael, Jude's source for the quote from Enoch is available in copies of *The Book of Enoch*. It is a non-canonical book thought to have been written about 300 BC. It described the fall of the angels in the first of five sections, and the remainder were said to be dreams, visions and revelations of Enoch. Though it was not incorporated as part of the Hebrew scriptures, it has influenced some of our ideas about fallen angels.

Jude used the quote to say that Christ would come and bring the false teachers to judgment. The apostles had warned that there would be self-centered scoffers at the end times, but his

readers should ignore such people and they must pray in the Spirit, and live faithfully. Jude wrote that Jesus will give us eternal life by his mercy. In turn we must show mercy to those with wavering faith, and rescue those falling into sin. In the beatitudes Jesus said the merciful are blessed and receive mercy themselves. Together Jude and Jesus taught both judgement and mercy.

The letter ends with a beautiful prayer of praise we can claim:

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling  
and to present you before his glory  
without fault and with unspeakable joy,  
to the only God, our savior,  
be glory and majesty,  
power and authority,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
before time was,  
now,  
and in all ages to come,  
amen. (Jude 1:24 J.B. Phillips)

*Do I trust that Jesus can keep me from falling?*

## REVELATION: CHRIST, OUR VICTOR

November 23

Revelation 1:1-8

Tradition ascribes this book to John the apostle, written to churches he served in Asia Minor. Some think it was written during the rule of Emperor Domitian from 81-96 AD. Domitian was more autocratic than his brother Titus, the previous emperor. He was committed to Worship of Minerva and Jupiter, and he called himself "Lord and God" which was even more arrogant than Caesar Augustus' term for himself, "Son of God." But John will make the point that Jesus is the true Lord and God.

Like the Gospel of John, there are seven sevens as the book's overall structure, with additional sets of sevens running through the book.

Revelation 1	The seven-fold Christ
Revelation 2-3	Seven messages
Revelation 4-8	Seven unsealings
Revelation 8-11	Seven trumpets
Revelation 12-14	Seven signs

Revelation 15-16      Seven bowls  
Revelation 17-22      Seven last things

I disliked this scary, symbolic book that people used like a code book to try to predict the future, but at a conference that all changed. The topic was the imaginative writings of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, both of which delight me, and a workshop compared the apocalyptic style of Revelation to their fantasy writing. They also shared Eugene Peterson's book *Reversed Thunder* which connects it to our ordinary lives today in a spiritually helpful way. This example of how to apply Revelation to our lives now, in addition to any other meanings it has, helped me get on board with the book.

We are offered a bribe for reading it: a blessing. Read in a way that applies to me today, it has become a blessing. John's vivid imaginative writing, the complexity of his structure, his historical context and his elevated vision of Christ that shows his power and glory make a dramatic and inspiring end to all of our New Testament reading.

*Am I willing to find the blessings of this book?*

November 24  
Revelation 1:9-20 Seeing Jesus

John's vision of Jesus takes us back to the transfiguration when he, Peter and James saw Christ shining like the sun. It recalls the glorious appearances in his resurrection and ascension, and the bright vision Paul saw on the road to Damascus.

His white robe and gold sash might be that of a priest, or of a commander (compare verse 5), or of a king. We members of his kingdom are also royalty and priests (vs. 6). The overwhelming impression is of brightness and glory. This vision is of Christ the Victor who has overcome evil. We are on the winning side.

There is a reference to seven golden lampstands, which we learn are the churches, and seven stars which are identified as angels serving those churches. In the subsequent letters there is a selection from the description of Christ: 1) holds the stars and walks among the lamps, 2) the first and last who died and is alive, 3) has a sharp two-edged sword (his word, since it comes from his mouth) 4) eyes like fire, feet like bronze, 5) has the sevenfold Spirit, 6) opens and shuts doors, and 7) ruler of God's creation.

As we are in Advent season, aware of the first coming of Christ as an infant, we are also challenged to remember that he is coming again as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We are connected to the most powerful one who won the battle through his own death. We may not be privileged like John to see Jesus in the glory of the transfiguration and in the glory of this

vision, but we are privileged to see Jesus through John's eyes and thereby gain an image of him that is cosmic, powerful, victorious, and beautiful.

*Do I see Jesus as the ruler of all?*

November 25

Revelation 2:1-7 Patient endurance

Ephesus was a beautiful church, as we learned from Paul's epistle to them. They were commended for their past, but the new generation had become weaker in love. They were trying to be obedient and avoid immorality, which was good, but the core was missing.

Each letter begins with a description from John's vision of Christ. Most then have a commendation followed by a warning. All are told that anyone willing to hear should listen to the Spirit. Each ends with a promise of a heavenly gift. Here it is that the victorious will eat from the tree of life in paradise. We discover that each promise has a corresponding fulfillment in the scenes of heaven at the end of the book. Trees of life with abundant fruit and healing leaves are beside a river (Rev. 22:2,3)

These were real cities and ordinary churches. Some have found symbolism of the historical stages of the church in these letters. But it is also easy to see in almost any metropolitan area, churches that fit these different profiles. This is a church with a good history, but it is declining and the lack of love is showing. Since Jesus said love of God and neighbor are the most important things, this is a serious problem, and one which many of our churches have today. Each letter can call us out for the very human failings in our churches and simultaneously comfort us that these issues have a deep historical depth, and so our lovelessness today has been a reoccurring challenge and we can be encouraged by the stories of new outbreaks of love in church history.

*How strong is my love for God?*

November 26

Revelation 2:8-17 Be faithful

Smyrna was commended and warned that persecution was coming. Jesus warned his disciples to expect persecution, to expect to be rejected by synagogues, and to count it a privilege. This rejection is normal for prophets. Persevere, Don't give up. Their promise is that they will not be hurt by the second death, a promise repeated at the end (Rev. 20:6)

Pergamum had stayed faithful in suffering, but they were in danger of compromise with immorality and idolatry. Jesus called for purity of heart. Though immorality and idolatry were condemned in the Old Testament, Jesus went farther and condemned lust and wouldn't even

mention idolatry. They were promised heavenly manna and a white stone with a new name. This looks forward to the wedding feast (Rev. 19:7) and to the gift of having God's name on their foreheads (Rev. 22:4).

These were calls to suffer well, and to stay pure. Today we have places where Christians are persecuted, and we have places where Christians are tempted to compromise. These very different circumstances both call for strong commitment and the life to which Jesus called us. Blessings will come if we persevere through either of the forms of temptation which have beset the church in this first century and many times repeatedly through the centuries and, taking a quick look around, today as well.

*Am I staying strong, committed, and pure?*

November 27

Revelation 2:18-29 Seek what is true

Thyatira had much to commend them, not the least of which was constant improvement, but they were failing in that they were listening to a false teacher who encouraged compromises. Jesus' warning against false teaching addressed the very religious sins of hypocrisy and self-righteousness. But here, in a Gentile context, idolatry and immorality were the prime temptations. Either can be a temptation for us today, and we can always find someone to justify our sins. It is truth that sets us free, said Jesus, and we must evaluate our teachers carefully and follow the call to truth.

To the victorious he promised authority over the nations, rule over them with an iron rod, and the judgment of smashing them like clay pots. This is a quote from Psalm 2:9 where the future Messiah is promised all that authority. The same line will occur in Revelation 12 in regard to Jesus. But here the authority is delegated to Jesus' followers. He had promised the disciples, who were very concerned about their future greatness, that they would be made judges. (Matthew 19:28), and this promise is repeated in Revelation 20:4.

They are also told they will receive the morning star. At the very end of the book Jesus himself says "I am the bright morning star." We know this is a metaphor, but it is a metaphor that we can see and enjoy for ourselves if we look up early enough and find delight in the beauty and promise of this harbinger of the day. Peter also used this image as a way of sharing the promise Jesus made that we would be filled with his light and glory, and as we delight in the soft beauty of this star we can claim the promise of that beauty becoming our own.

*Do I see glimpses of Jesus in the natural world?*

November 28

Revelation 3:1-13. Death versus life

Sardis was reproached for spiritual deadness. Jesus compared good spirituality to healthy trees, and bad spirituality to dead and lifeless ones. He reproached the Pharisees for their lifelessness and even compared them to dead men's bones. In contrast, Jesus brought life, more abundant, powerful resurrection life, and eternal life. There was no commendation. But there was still a promise that the victorious would be clothed in white and their names written in the Book of Life. This promise is fulfilled in heaven for those dressed in the finest white linen (Revelation 19:8) and their names written in the Book of Life (Revelation 21:27)

In contrast, there was no warning for the Philadelphia church. They had an open door. This reminds us of Jesus' sending his disciples into all the world to preach. These open doors are part of the story of Acts as they began to carry out the command, and there have been open doors ever since. They were promised to become pillars in God's temple and citizens in his city. In the end, the whole city is God's dwelling and there is no specific temple (Revelation 21:22) and all nations become part of the city (Revelation 21:26).

Some say that today we have both of these kinds of churches--many which have become spiritually inert and lifeless, but at the same time we have the largest missionary movement and harvest taking place in all of history. We have a choice as to which group we would rather be part. We can ask ourselves where we see Christ opening a door for us for maximum effectiveness in serving him and being part of the great harvest of the world.

*Am I going through my open doors?*

November 29

Revelation 3:14-22 Spiritual treasure

Laodicea felt privileged and wealthy, not unlike the US church today. But their spiritual poverty was very great, and we need to consider that possibility and examine ourselves. Jesus urged a lifestyle without concern for riches, and his voluntary poverty is an example of how to do ministry. Instead, the basics for life are enough and we can concentrate on spiritual treasures. The promise to the victorious is that they will sit on his throne with him. The throne of God and the lamb are surrounded by worshipping servants at the end (Revelation 22:3).

The image of Jesus standing at the door of our hearts, wanting to come and share a meal, has encouraged many people to begin their life of faith. It is in that relationship that we, like Mary who sat at his feet listening, find that we have chosen the best things.

But is that really what we are doing in our very affluent country? What we consider the basics are actually luxuries compared to most people in the past and most in the present. Not much more than a century back, what was normal was a small house, simple food, perhaps an icebox, no cars, no televisions, no computers, and not a lot of opportunity for education. We

are, without questions, the richest general population in history, and yet how hectic our lives, how lacking in reflection, how full of greed, and perhaps great spiritual poverty.

*Do I care more about spiritual treasure than my stuff?*

November 30

Revelation 4:1-11 Seeing the King

The image of heaven is full of color, sound, music, creatures, people, and brightness. The center is God's throne. The New Testament repeatedly tells us that when Jesus ascended to heaven, he was seated next to the Father on that throne. We are further told that we ascended with him. Spiritually, then, this chapter describes where we are supposed to be sitting and taking in life.

There are seven scenes of worship that thread through the book. Each one includes songs of praise and are alive with light and wonder. In addition to this one, we will have such scenes in chapters 5, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 19. Here we have the words, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty" which has become a much-loved hymn.

Jesus opened the way for us to approach our Father on the throne, and our access to the most powerful one is combined with his intimate parental love and care for us. He is holy and worthy to receive glory, honor, and power. If, on some level, we are aware that this is our new spiritual reality, worship is a natural response. God is a combination of everything we see, hear or enjoy that is beautiful and good, and even for earthly beauty our hearts leap up in admiration.

*Do I respond to God in spontaneous worship?*

December 1

Revelation 5:1-14 Seeing the Lamb

We are introduced to Jesus in heaven as the Lion of Judah, David's heir to the throne, and as a lamb who was killed. His self-sacrifice has made him worthy of worship. His death ransomed people from every nation who are now in his kingdom, serving as priests. Cross, resurrection, the kingdom, and inclusion of all people are gospel themes that run through all of scripture.

"Lamb" is used 31 times in the book to refer to Christ, more than any other reference. This dominant image reinforces that his way to win the cosmic battle was by receiving violence. The image connects back to the Passover Lamb, and we will see that there are moments reminiscent of the Exodus Plagues that freed God's people from slavery.

The singing of millions of angels is an overwhelming vision of beauty. And then we are told that every creature sings. Can we imagine dolphins, shales, giraffes, elephants, eagles, penguins, starfish, and more all singing with enthusiasm?

Jesus burst into praise a few times in the gospels, but in general, there are not examples of people worshipping him. An exception is after the resurrection when the women fell at his feet in worship. Now that we know the whole story, that actually is a reasonable thing for us to do. In our daily life, we may not see heaven as it is described here, but on some level, this is our new reality, and worship is a way of acknowledging that.

*Do I join nature in singing praise?*

December 2

Revelation 6:1-17 Seven seals

The Lamb took up a scroll and began to break open seven seals. It is as though this is a big picture book, and each seal opens a page with an animated image. Jesus gave us his endtime sermon in Matthew 24 and 25, and his teachings correlate with John's vision.

The first four pictures are knights: a king on a white horse, a red knight of war, black knight of famine, and a pale green knight of death. The horsemen come from Zechariah 1 and 6, but their meanings are in Jesus' teaching: war, famine and death. (Matthew 24:6-9). In the fifth seal there are martyrs and Jesus warned of persecution (Matthew 24:9). The sixth seal is a sun and moon dark, stars falling, and powers of heaven shaken (Matthew 24:29). We see seals one through five in the daily news; we wonder uneasily if the sixth seal might be the nuclear war we know is possible.

In Matthew it is at this point that they see the Son of Man arrive with power and great glory and the angels gather his chosen ones from all the earth. This promise that no matter how much the earth is falling apart, we need to be alert and watching for the return gives hope in the midst of the struggles of earth that we see every day on the news. Jesus gave a description of the troubles before the end, but John illustrates it in a grand picture book that picks up his themes and those of the Old Testament prophets and helps us feel the intensity of drama of everything preparing for the dramatic and final and complete arrival of Jesus and his kingdom.

*Am I watching in hope for Christ's return?*

December 3

Revelation 7:1-17 Servants healed

In the midst of this chaos a seal of protection is put on God's people. Twelve by twelve is a symbolic number of those protected and identified as members of Israelite tribes. But John also saw a vast multicultural crowd shouting, angels worshipping, and a white-robed crowd who had survived great struggle and suffering. In the face of the sad story of our history "read" from the scroll where danger is ever present, something quite different is happening for those who believe: protection, worship, triumph and comfort.

Jesus had said that the gospel would be preached to the whole world (Matthew 24:14), and here we see the result: a vast crowd from every nation and tribe and people and language. Knowing that there are at least 7,000 languages in the world, this is a beautiful promise, and those who have been making the effort to reach each group with good news in our generation take hope from this.

The battle between God and Satan for mankind's hearts comes to a final intense climax in this book. The way God fights is through nature and social judgment to call people out of sin. But worship is central to the competition. Christ's presence, the prayers of the people, angels as God's agents, the word of God as the weapon are what will defeat Satan. In the middle of the battle it is reassuring that God's people have the advantage of being protected and so able to carry out the mission of reaching to every people on earth with the loving message of Jesus' redemption from everything that does harm.

*Do I treasure God's protection in the cosmic battle?*

December 4

Revelation 8:1-5 Prayers as incense

The seventh seal opens up our fourth set of sevens: trumpets. Before they begin we have the incense of prayer that goes up to heaven and then returns with thunder, lightning and an earthquake. The poet George Herbert named this aspect of prayer "reversed thunder", the great impact on earth of our humble petitions.

It is a great reminder that the effect of prayer is real, and that it is our responsibility to use this privilege as our part in these cosmic battles. Herbert's poem offers us many scriptural images for what prayer really is. As we understand and meditate on his images, it can deepen our sense of the great connection God has offered us.

*Prayer (I)*

Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,  
God's breath in man returning to his birth,  
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth:  
Engine against the Almighty, sinner's tower,

Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,  
The six-days' world transposing in an hour,  
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear,  
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,  
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,  
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,  
The milky way, the bird of paradise,  
Church-bells beyond the stars hear, the soul's blood,  
The land of spices, something understood. --George Herbert

The mystery of making our requests and offering our worship to the unseen God threads through all of scripture, including in Jesus' life, the Trinity in a mutual communion into which he invites us. Every aspect of the Old Testament imagery in the tabernacle can be compared to aspects of prayer: the altar of confession, the laver of cleansing, the bread and wine of communion, the light of his presence, the incense of worship, and the throne of the ark in the Most Holy Place. The beauty of the sweet smell of incense in worship bringing God's mighty response on earth encourages us to engage with this mysterious privilege, even when we do not fully understand.

*Do I persist in prayer?*

December 5

Revelation 8:6-13 First four trumpets

If the seals showed us mankind's evil visually, we now have the world's destruction set to trumpet blasts. Many of them take us back to the Exodus plagues and there is the same sense that the point of the judgment is freeing those who are willing to believe from a disintegrating world.

First, hail and fire. Second, a mountain of fire. Third, a flaming star. Fourth, the sky darkened. Water became blood as it did in the plagues. Darkness fell. And the death of a third of mankind recalls the tragic deaths of the firstborn in Egypt.

We see some of this disintegration of earth today. We know we are destroying earth with ecological irresponsibility that leads to wildfires, exploding tankers at sea, polluted water and air pollution. Even more alarming are the power of our weapons that can do all of the things described. One almost wonders if John's vision included watching our TVs.

Jesus used Joel's image of sun, moon and stars darkening and John repeats it here. But Jesus followed this tragic time with a happy ending: his return. (Matthew 24:30). This does not let us off the hook from trying to contribute today to ecological justice; love for creation is part of our faith. But even as mankind fails, God is faithful. In John's poetic rendering, all of these

tragedies which we can clearly see are things that mankind is causing, are caused by the agency of angels and their trumpets. Perhaps this is meant to reassure us that God is still stage-managing even when all is falling apart and he has a triumphant conclusion prepared to overcome the chaos.

*Does Christ's return encourage me in the middle of the struggles of earth?*

December 6

Revelation 9:1-21 Seven trumpets

Here the author's description of the fifth and sixth trumpets goes full fantasy movie. First torturing locusts and then a vast battle. It reminds me of the movie version of the *Lord of the Rings* with horrible orcs and epic battles. That story is one of good against evil on a grand scale. So is this.

Perhaps John had a preview of our many epic wars through history and in our future. It does not take a lot of imagination to see correlations with some of our modern weapons in his descriptions. In Christ's end time sermons he gave us the warning that there would be wars and rumors of wars, and my lifetime has been constantly full of these things.

As Tolkien so masterfully wrote, the real victory was in the act of sacrifice and obedience from one small hobbit. That had more effect than all the epic battles. So also in our faith. Christ's one great act turned the tide completely. The great battle against evil has already been won. Good conquered completely in the cross and resurrection, and all of the rest of history is an outworking of that victory won, so that even with the setbacks of wars and conflicts and terrible weapons, the peaceably kingdom keeps growing.

*Do I appreciate how vast Christ's victory was?*

December 7

Revelation 10:1-11 Small scroll

The good side now has a strong bright figure carrying a book. What comes to mind here is C.S. Lewis' *Last Battle* and Father Time arising to announce the end. The angel announces that the seventh trumpet will complete God's plan.

John ate the book (much as Ezekiel once did), and it was full of bitter prophecies for him to share. The apostles and then all of those who have been sent out since do not always have a sweet or easy message to share. There is a constant need for prophetic words against every kind of evil.

Just as this angel had a great announcement, in the gospels the angels sat by the empty tomb announcing that time had changed, and the great reversal had begun to complete God's mighty plan. We hear trumpet fanfares at the resurrection. John's poetry helps us feel something that is beyond our ability to grasp. In the spiritual realm there are beautiful and powerful figures doing work that is bringing great good at the same time that humble human figures like ourselves are doing our part to bring in the kingdom.

*Does John's mysterious writing open our imaginations to the real world we cannot see?*

December 8

Revelation 11:1-14 Angel's announcement

As Peterson wrote: "The Revelation has 404 verses. In those 404 verses, there are 528 references to earlier scripture. If we are not familiar with the preceding writings, quite obviously we are not going to understand the Revelation. St. John has his favorite books of scripture: Ezekiel, Daniel, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Isaiah, Exodus. But there is probably not a single canonical Old Testament book to which he doesn't make at least some allusion." (page 23)

John's task of measuring the temple reminds us of Ezekiel, There are 1260 days in the book of Daniel. The olive trees are also in Zechariah. Worldly Sodom and Egypt which were judged for their sin, are symbolically mixed together with Jerusalem where Jesus died. Jesus' three days of death and resurrection are repeated here by his messenger. His ascension is mixed with those of these messengers as well as Elijah's ascension in a chariot of fire. The earthquake reminds us of an earthquake at the moment of Jesus' death.

One can find many speculations on how this might be fulfilled in the future, and yet there are present fulfillments as well. God's messengers do not always get a good reception, but the message keeps going out anyway. We should not expect an easy response to testifying of Christ. We recall how often Paul was beaten and left for dead and not worry about a little social rejection from time to time. Christ was killed for the message as were Paul and the other apostles, and John, the one remaining messenger of their group wrote something to try to touch the hearts of the people of his time, remaining faithful into old age, a model for us.

*Am I committed to be a faithful messenger, no matter what?*

December 9

Revelation 11:15-16 Kingdom of God

We were told that the trumpet represents the completion of God's mysterious plan: "The whole world has now become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and

ever.”. Jesus came announcing the Kingdom which arrived with him, and here that reign is celebrated.

The Holy Place in heaven was thrown open. The temple, the intersection of heaven and earth, had God’s throne, the ark, at its center. The veil between us and God was torn down in Christ’s death, and the way into God’s presence was thrown open.

Jesus’ way of announcing the kingdom included meaningful stories that emphasized its slow growth, the humility of the process of the expansion of his reign. Now John took that kingdom theme and showed us the power and the glory of the king on his throne, reigning over all the universe. Paul told us that when he ascended to his throne, we ascended with him. Even though we still live in a time when the kingdom seems to expand slowly and humbly, on some level we recognize that we are already living from this glorious perspective of what it means to be living in the kingdom. We can not only celebrate his triumph and rulership over all things, we can celebrate that we have been invited into the intimacy of family with the most loving and powerful king of kings who has defeated the cruel kings of earth.

*Do I realize I am in the king’s family?*

December 10

Revelation 12:1-18 Significant protection

Up to this point the sequence of sevens has been relatively transparent. Here we begin with seven signs that are not quite as obvious. The seven sevens that structure the book are by no means the only set of sevens we have. There are also seven visions of Christ, seven scenes of worship, seven blessings, and seven promises of no more suffering. Finality and perfection are being driven home by the poetic device of so many symbolic sets of sevens.

The seven signs that begin here are like a series of movies: 1) The Nativity--a woman and her newborn child pursued by a dragon, 2) Spiritual warfare--War in heaven between Michael and the dragon, 3) Political power--the monstrous beast emerging from the sea, 4) False teaching--the monstrous beast from the earth, 5) Worship--the Lamb on Mount Zion surrounded by harpists, 6) Angels intervening on earth, and 7) Believers--engaged in the harvest of those who believe on the earth.

Ever since the coming of Christ to earth, all the subsequent elements have been part of the story of our history. How they will all come together in a final way is still ahead, but we are reminded that we live with these spiritual realities as a backdrop to our ordinary, mundane lives. We will return to the telling of the Nativity in this chapter after Christmas, and see how it deepens our appreciation for this time of celebration of Christ’s coming.

Telling the story of our faith in the form of a fairytale lets us realize that there is much more going on behind the scenes in all aspects of our life including our weekly, perhaps mundane, gathering to worship and be reminded of this vivid world of our part in the cosmic battle, the cosmic harvest, and cosmic worship of the infant King.

*Do I realize that life is more than the ordinary tangible aspects of daily life?*

December 11

Revelation 13:1-18 Seven-headed beast

Our culture knows the number 666. We don't know what it means, but we know it is bad. We also have plenty of monster movies that are as scary and as evil as these images. We have fears about chips being put on hands or foreheads and marking us as part of those who follow the beast. In short, John contributed a great deal to our collective nightmares in this chapter.

The beast had authority to rule over every tribe, people, language and nation. Israel had been set up as a national exemplar of God's people, failures and all. Now Christ's kingdom is in competition with a universal international system. This has come about in so many ways today through our globalized financial and trade systems, our travel, our interconnectedness on the internet, and our trade to maintain our consumer culture.

Jesus' teaching never directly explained these monsters. Perhaps Paul's reference to "principalities and powers" ruling this world comes a little closer. But in Jesus' encounter with Satan he was taken to a very high mountain and shown the nations of the world and their glory. "I will give it all to you if you will only kneel down and worship me.". Jesus responded "You must worship the Lord your God, serve only him."

The competition between Christ's kingdom and worldly kingdoms and rulers, and the competition between Christ's teaching and teaching that reinforces the rulers is monstrous. We do well to keep our eyes open. Our political rulers want us to worship them and believe that they can solve all our problems, something the Caesar of John's day was promoting by calling himself "Lord and God", a clearly arrogant call to kneel down and worship mere human authority.

*Do I pray for governmental authorities that they would follow Christ's ways?*

December 12

Revelation 14:1-13

Our choirs elevate our spirits with the sound of great voices. This choir was made up of the 144,000 believers we met before. They are described as pure and blameless. At the same time, we have harpists playing together with the volume of a waterfall or thunder. From this

comes the cultural motif that heaven is a dull place where we sit on clouds and play harps. But in the context of Revelation, it is a moment of peace and relief and resistance to scary monsters!

Three angels announced the good news, the fall of the evil city, and an encouragement to endure persecution. There was an alarming warning of eternal torment. This reference to hell is a hot topic today, with interesting new insights. One is that ideas of a permanent place of torment were part of the surrounding religions of the day, so some suggest that these were borrowed ideas. Whatever the reality, the overwhelming message of scripture is of God's justice and compassion, and even in this context, the angels are announcing the "everlasting good news."

As we approach Christmas we are reminded that it was a great choir of angels that announced Christ's birth, saying "Peace on earth, good will to men.". They were announcing a savior who could rescue the world. We are being offered a glimpse of a glorious concert that celebrates Christ, a concert that satisfies everything we are looking for in earthly concerts that cheer us up, elevate our spirits, and give us delight, forerunners of the ultimate show.

*Do I delight in music that foreshadows the heavenly concert?*

December 13  
Revelation 14: 14-20

Jesus used the image of harvest for sharing the Good News and bringing people to him. Here Jesus, the Son of Man, crowned as king, used a sickle, and the whole earth was harvested.

The angelic harvesters at the end of the age did their work. Jesus had said, "I, the Son of Man, will send my angels, and they will remove from my kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil." (Matthew 13:41). Several parables talk about the angels sorting good from bad at the end of time. Old Testament references to grapes of wrath come together with images of harvest to say that judgment has come.

We want to be part of that great harvest and want to listen to Jesus' call to become harvesters. As he said, "The harvest is so great, but the workers are so few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest, ask him to send out more workers for his fields." (Matthew 9:37,38). We are already engaged in this task that is part of the vision of the end of the world, and we on a daily basis are being swung in Jesus' hand as an instrument to bring all people to faith in Jesus.

*Am I working in this harvest?*

December 14  
Revelation 15:1-8

As we celebrate Christ's birth we recognize that his coming opened a way of protection for us, and we once more are given a triumphant song. The victorious have been given harps, and they sing, "All nations will come and worship before you." It is true that because Jesus came, his name has gone into all the world, and all people have been invited into his kingdom. He truly is the King of the Nations, as this song says.

The Holy Place in heaven was opened a few chapters back, and it was opened once more. Another set of sevens begins with angels holding golden bowls that will be poured out with judgments. The impending judgment in the angelic bowls is a jarring note for Christmas time when we focus on God's humility. But the truth is that his arrival challenged the evil of the world's kingdoms. Their days were numbered.

This heavenly holy place, this temple, reminds us that during his earthly life, Christ was frequently at the earthly image of this heavenly reality. At Christmas time we are reminded that after Christ's birth he was taken for dedication at the temple. As the great God in whose honor that place had been built, he entered as an infant. A prophet recognized him: "I have seen the Savior you have given to all people." God's temple would now be opened for all those who believed in him, and the earthly place would be replaced by Christ himself.

Both the prophet Simeon in the temple, and the singers in heaven celebrated that Jesus came so that all people, all nations could be saved through him and enter in to be part of his temple, his family, and his kingdom.

*Do I celebrate that Jesus came for all people, all nations?*

December 15

Revelation 16:1-17 Seven plagues

What are the seven plagues? Malignant sores, death in the sea, blood in the rivers, scorching sun, darkness, a great battle, earthquakes and hailstorms. Earth and society falling apart. We dread this and in the middle of all this horror is the statement that these judgments are just. To some degree we already suffer these things and we question why a good God would allow such terrible things. We do not think it requires angels to bring these things since we do it well on our own.

John said God sent them, but still the people did not repent and give him glory. Instead they cursed God. Is that not our reaction so often to unexplained suffering? We focus on suffering and use it to excuse our anger and disappointment with God or even decide he is an invention. But over and over the scriptures tell us that suffering does not separate us from God's love, that we can stay close to him through whatever struggles come.

Jesus warned he would return unexpectedly in the midst of all this chaos, and warned us to watch for him. That warning is repeated here. Our annual Advent celebrations are a way of looking his coming. He came once before and is coming again. Each year as we celebrate the first coming, we are reminded to be on the watch for the end of the story when the happy ending is completed and suffering and chaos come to an end.

*Do I humbly turn to God in the face of suffering?*

December 16

Revelation 17:1-18 Scarlet lady

Here we begin the seven last things: 1) A great battle, 2) the fall of the wicked city, 3) worship in heaven, 4) Christ and the armies of heaven descend, 5) Satan is defeated, 6) the final judgement, and 7) the new heaven and the new earth.

The opposite of the Mary figure in Chapter 12 is now the prostitute, a woman dressed in scarlet on a scarlet beast. She is a terrible representative of all that is proud and selfish and evil. The angel giving an explanation said she symbolizes a great city that rules over all kings. The kings hate her and want to destroy her. This is a disturbing story, like a movie where we root for the villainous woman to lose her power. But more disturbing, the scarlet beast on which she rides represents ten kings who take complete control.

Jesus wept over a city he loved and cared about, Jerusalem. He lamented that judgment would fall once again on the city, and only a generation after his words the city was destroyed. The theme of destruction of evil and proud cities runs through scripture, and this lady exemplifies the licentiousness of the worst of our cities. The great cities that had been built in Israel in Jesus' day became ruins, and instead the country is now full of churches that honor Jesus. The whole world has been on a grand building project through the centuries, honoring the true king.

About half the people of our world live in cities today, and we know that there is a lot of work to do to alleviate poverty, crime, luxury, etc. etc. Great cities are full of what is best and worst in our world and the best things foreshadow the final beautiful city of Christ, and we can be salt and light in our cities to make them more like the new Jerusalem rather than the scarlet lady.

*Have I found ways to contribute to where I live?*

December 17

Revelation 18:1-24 Sins of Babylon

The movie we started in the last chapter continued, and the city was destroyed. All its wickedness and power and wealth were brought to nothing. As Jesus prophesied, the great city Jerusalem with its impressive structures and the largest temple complex in the world, would not

survive, and in fact, was burned and destroyed less than 40 years after his death and resurrection.

So many cities have been destroyed through history: Jerusalem, Rome, bombed cities in World War II. Our current news shows us horrifying images of bombed out cities today. It is not hard to envision yet future destruction on our great cities presented as a judgment for rejecting God, and loving riches excessively. But the great promise is that The brokenness in our cities will someday come to an end.

We are promised that a new city is coming that is beautiful and good. We will not return to the pastoral beauty and goodness of an unfallen world, but the redemption will incorporate all that has gone wrong and transform it into the perfect community we have been longing for. Perhaps that is part of our prayer for Jerusalem--that a place of historical conflict will become a place of peace.

*Do I remember to pray for Jerusalem?*

December 18

Revelation 19:1-21 Songs of victory

We now come to the story that underlies so many of our fairy tales. The prince (Christ), and his bride (the church) have a great wedding feast. The prince on his white horse (Christ) vanquishes all the evil enemies. But very much in line with what we know of him from the gospels, he is not carrying a sword in his hand and shedding the blood of others. Instead, his sword is from his mouth because it is his words that conquer. His bloodstained clothing is not from others, but is his own on the cross. He is identified as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the resurrected, ascended and victorious one.

In anticipation of Christmas, a treasured tradition for many is to listen to Handel's *Messiah*. The triumphant lines of the Hallelujah chorus come from verse 6: "Hallelujah! For the Lord God, the omnipotent reigneth". And verse 16: "King of Kings and Lord of Lords.". And finally Revelation 11:15 "And he shall reign forever and ever." The majesty of Christ's reign is what we celebrate each Advent.

Every image of glorious kingship, a happy wedding, a triumphant knight on a white horse, and heart-stopping music are bound up in our worship and joy in the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, a celebration of all that is good, and beautiful, and true.

*Do I worship the King of Kings?*

December 19

Revelation 20:1-15 Seizing Satan

The dragon, that old serpent, the devil, Satan is defeated. The first judgment comes, and anything not subject to God is sent to destruction. The victory is long-anticipated, and in Jesus' ministry was prefigured by many exorcisms, particularly one where Legion was thrown into the sea.

Jesus told at least five parables in which the final judgment was prefigured. The sorting process was compared to wheat and weeds (Matthew 13:30), to good and bad fish (Matthew 13:48), those dressed for a wedding versus those not (Matthew 22:12,13), bridesmaids waiting for the groom versus those not ready (Matthew 25:10-12), and a poor humble man versus a rich uncaring one (Luke 16:19-31). One of the most compelling is the parable of sheep and goats. The ones who are accepted into the kingdom are those who showed kindness to others. (Matthew 25:31-43)

The battle between good and evil will end and good will win, evil will be vanquished. We are on the winning side, and even if something in my life today feels like a struggle or a battle, there is a promised happy ending that can keep me vigorously and hopefully confronting whatever large or small evil I am seeing.

*Do I find comfort that God's love will win?*

December 20  
Revelation 21:1-9

We are now introduced to a new heaven and new earth. The destruction of nature we have seen with the trumpets and bowls and signs has come to a crashing conclusion.

If we go back to Genesis, we can see that this is a profound reversal:

Gen. 1:1	Heavens/earth created.	Rev. 21:1	Heavens and earth recreated
Gen. 1:5	Day and night created.	Rev. 22:5	No more night
Gen. 1:10	Land and sea created	Rev. 21:1	No more sea
Gen. 1:16	Sun created	Rev. 22:23	No more need for the sun
Gen. 3:14-17	Curse pronounced	Rev. 22:13	No more curse
Gen. 3:17	Sorrow and pain	Rev. 21:4	No more sorrow and pain
Gen. 3:19.	Death begins	Rev. 21:4.	No more death
Gen. 3:24.	Driven from paradise away from tree of life	Rev. 22:14	Paradise restored and eating from tree of life

There are seven things that are "no more": sun, death, sorrow, crying, pain, curse, and night. We can anticipate a beautiful future. All the grim destruction of what God had created and

pronounced good by the entrance of sin and sorrow will be turned into something wholly good that will never end.

*Am I joyfully anticipating and praising God for future perfection?*

December 21

Revelation 21:10-27. The beautiful city

Having destroyed the rebellious city, the perfect and beautiful city comes, sparkling like jewels. Suffering and sadness have ended, and the promise of God's presence pervading all things means there is no more temple. No heavenly sanctuary has to be flung open, because all is now God's sanctuary. The city's shape and gold remind us of the Holy of Holies which was also a cube; everything is now the Holy of Holies.

A hope of return to paradise has been replaced by taking all that is good and beautiful in our cultures and our cities, keeping them, and removing all that is wrong. Jesus described our future as the Father's house, a place of safety and security. He described a relationship of complete unity between us, Father, Son and Spirit. Our imaginations are awakened to anticipate a place of great beauty, a place where we belong.

Holding the image of a beautiful city in our minds should completely offset any ideas about a boring heaven. Imagine all the best restaurants, universities, libraries, public buildings, homes, cathedrals, performance spaces, parks, art, music, etc. that we enjoy in our cities transfigured into their best selves, and we into our best selves enjoying them and then perhaps we start to appreciate what lies ahead.

*Do I praise God for the beauty of heaven?*

December 22

Revelation 22:1-15 Beautiful trees

In this image of God's throne we see a river with fruitful trees and leaves that heal the nations. The tradition of the Christmas tree has roots in the ideas of life continuing amidst a time when many things have died, and combines images of the paradisaal tree of life, paradisaal light, and paradisaal fruit. Our Christmas trees are pale copies of something real coming when paradise is restored.

Our attempts to fill our celebrations with bright lights are a pale reflection of a time when God himself will shine on us as brightly as any artificial light. Our celebrations are full of feasts, and are pale copies of the heavenly marriage supper. Our celebrations are full of imagery of angels, but the time will come when we worship God with real angels. We make small images of Christ for our Nativity scenes, but there we will be with the real person.

We are always hoping for the perfect world we call heaven, and each year we try to mimic it in all that we put into the season. But we are promised that the perfect world is coming and there will be no more need to anticipate that joy and beauty by our celebration of Advent and Christmas, but we will have the complete fulfillment of which all we enjoy is the harbinger.

*Do I praise God for the beauty of our Christmas season?*

December 23

Revelation 22:16-28

The book ends with Jesus telling us he is David's Lord and David's heir. The child born in David's home, Bethlehem, is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He tells us he is the bright morning star. The star the wise men followed make stars an inevitable part of the season, but the reality behind their beauty is the one who created them.

He is the lamb and we are reminded of that by the shepherds who came to see him.

In this final chapter there are seven names for Christ: Alpha and Omega, First and Last, Beginning and End, Lamb, Morning Star, David's Lord and Heir, and Lord Jesus.

This integration of our vision and understanding of who Jesus is provides a fitting backdrop to our meditation on his incarnation and becoming a small, vulnerable, human child. The humility in becoming one of us is something of overwhelming wonder. We hear that he was first, the beginning, the start, and was the Creator. That the creator of all the wonderful and beautiful things we can see would have entered our fragility is overwhelming.

But he also the end, the goal toward which all our desires are moving. The end, the last, the final letter of the alphabet, the completion of our hopes for a holy happy kingdom. He is the infant we celebrate and he is the ruler of all that we look forward to seeing face to face.

*Do I worship Jesus for the range of who he is, from a vulnerable child to Lord of All?*

December 24 Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20. Christ is born

Today we take a rest from the intensity of John's visions to meditate on the beauty and simplicity of the Christmas story. The humble maid on a donkey, her husband seeking a place to stay, a humble stable for the birth, and the child in a manger are images of those who are poor. Angels, shepherds, and all the familiar things are comforting. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords as a poor baby is something we try to grasp year after year. God's arrival on earth as an infant offers us great comfort and takes away fear. My sister Bev developed the custom of writing a Christmas poem to share each year, and this is the last one she wrote before her death. It applies the Christmas story to taking away our fears.

"Fear not, O favored friend of God, His message to you I bring,  
The Son of God will be your child, the Promised Eternal King."  
The angel's words filled Mary with awe and she wondered "how"" and "why me?"  
But she humbled herself and trusted his words saying, "Your servant I will be."

To Joseph in a dream appeared a messenger with God's plan,  
"Fear not and take Mary as your wife, for her child is not from man,  
Conceived by the Spirit, Mary's son will be the Promised Immanuel,"  
God with us in human flesh, on earth with mankind to dwell.

In the darkness of night a glorious light frightened shepherds out on a hill,  
"Fear not, I bring good news to you, of God's peace, his love and goodwill.  
A baby is born in Bethlehem, the Promised Savior and Lord."  
This Lamb would be slain as a sacrifice, that God's children might be restored.

Years have passed, yet still today, God's message to me is clear,  
His presence with me throughout my life, protects me from every fear.  
My Savior and Lord has set me free, from the power and darkness of sin;  
Immanuel, in my heart dwells, God with me but also within!

"Fear not, for I am with you, let not your heart be dismayed,  
My strength is made perfect in weakness, trust in me and be not afraid,  
My loving kindness is new each day, my compassion will never fail,  
The plans I have for you are good, my love will always prevail.

To conform to the image of Jesus, my Son, that is my great desire,  
But to make you pure and shine like god, I must take you through the fire,  
Fear not, for I will be with you, in the fire you will not burn,  
My grace all-sufficient will meet every need, my wisdom and peace you will learn.

The shadow of death I will not fear, For His presence will light my way,  
To the heavenly home he's prepared for me, where I will hear him say,  
"Fear not, my child, come enter my rest, free from tears, and sorrow, and pain,"  
In the glorious presence of Jesus my King, perfect peace will eternally reign.

--Beverly Barnett, Christmas 2002

*Does seeing Jesus as a baby comfort me in my fears?*

December 25 Christmas Day  
Matthew 2:1-12. Wise men

Matthew's account gives us the star and the wise men. It gives us the gifts that are so much a part of our family celebrations. There is a great beauty in the reminder that this King of the Jews will become King of all nations. His message is for all, including these gentiles who came at this moment.

Normally it is peasants and vassals who bring their gifts to a king. But here it is kings who seemingly reverse that norm and bring their gifts to a poor, peasant child. His identity disguised for the moment, somehow they knew he was truly the one who would be King of the Jews. And not only King of the Jews, but king of all.

We three kings of orient are.  
Bearing gifts we traverse afar.  
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,  
Following yonder star.

Oh, oh! Star of wonder, star of light  
Star of royal beauty bright  
Westward leading, still  
Guide us to the perfect Light.

As I give and receive gifts may I live in gratitude for the great gift of Jesus and offer him my gratitude and worship, thank him for all he gives me, and give him all I am.

*Do I give Jesus my heart on this gift-giving day?*

December 26

Matthew 2:13-23 The Holy Family is pursued

We do not always include the story of Herod's rejection and killing of children as part of our Christmas. But this story reminds us that in fact, the seemingly harmless child was a great threat to the King of his day. The battle with evil is also part of the Christmas story.

As Peterson wrote: "Jesus' birth excites more than wonder, it excites evil: Herod, Judas, Pilate. Ferocious wickedness is goaded to violence by this life. Can a swaddled infant survive the machines of terror? Can promise outlast horror? We want him to live, we long for this rule, but is it possible in this kind of world? Are not the means lacking? But we overestimate the politics of Rome and underestimate the politics of grace. St. John's imagination is adrenaline to us of little faith, and we are again dauntless, unimpressed by dragon bluster, sure of God's preservation. The child survives, salvation is assured, God's rule is intact." (page 123)

The tragedy of the death of the innocents reminds us that we are still living in the middle of the battle. These tragedies continue and we mourn. The victories are only partial, the sadness of the world still evident, but I can take hope from the fact that things Herod built in his pride and cruelty are forgotten, whereas millions of active memorials to the child who escaped are everywhere in our world.

*Do I properly appreciate the politics of grace?*

December 27

Revelation 12:1-4 Behind the scenes

We now return to John's Nativity story and see how it deepens our understanding of the other accounts of Christ's birth. As we feel the warmth of family love, the beauty and joy and bright lights of the season, the music, the gifts, our hearts are soft. But as Peterson writes, John offers a different and deeply spiritual perspective we must take into account.

"It is St. John's Spirit-appointed task to supplement the work of St. Matthew and St. Luke so that the nativity can not be sentimentalized into coziness, nor domesticated into drabness, nor commercialized into worldliness. He makes explicit what is implicit in the Gospel stories. The messianic birth takes place out of the womb of God's people in a cosmos resplendent with wonder. The entire creation is clothing for God's people who are, Eve and Mary, mother to Messiah. The visibilities of creation and the invisibilities of salvation cohere in the action. The splendors of creation and the agonies of redemption combine in this event, the center where God in Christ invades existence with redeeming life and decisively defeats evil. It is St. John's genius to take Jesus in a manger attended by Shepherds and wisemen and put him in the cosmos attacked by a dragon. The consequence to our faith is that we are fortified against intimidation. Our response to the Nativity cannot be reduced to shutting the door against a wintry world, drinking hot chocolate, and singing carols. Rather, we are ready to walk out the door with, as one psalmist put it, high praises of God in our throats and two-edged swords in our hands. (Ps. 149:6)" (pages 121-122)

*Do I recognize how Christ's birth challenged all evil things?*

December 28

Revelation 12:5-9

John gives us a nativity where spiritual realities are exposed. The simple peasant girl is shown as a beautiful fairytale-like princess. It is not a peaceful "Silent Night", but there is war in heaven between the archangel Michael and the dragon. The sweet infant child in a manger will become ruler of all nations with an iron rod of judgment. We know that he will take that judgment on himself at the cross.

Knowing the end of the story makes the Christmas story a moment when cosmic battles are being fought and won. It is a time when our joy can be even deeper as we realize that because of this child "all things will be well."

The dragon pursued, but the mother and child were rescued. Herod did not succeed. Others will take up the pursuit as we see from the end of the chapter, and even today we, the children of the faith, continue to be pursued by the dragon. We may forget it, but we actually live in a fairy tale.

*Does John deepen my appreciation of the spiritual meaning of the Nativity?*

December 29

Revelation 12:10-12

The effect of Christ's coming is that the kingdom began and continued and will come to complete perfection. The worship scene and its song have a triple fulfillment: at the nativity, at the resurrection and ascension, and at the end of time.

"It has happened at last"--something long prophesied  
"the salvation"--the work of Christ on the cross  
"the power"--the resurrection of Christ and his gift of the Spirit  
"and the kingdom of our God"--Christ has begun to reign through his people  
"and the authority of his Christ"--He is seated at God's right hand, ruler of all.  
"The accuser has been thrown down to earth"--Satan is defeated and out of heaven  
"And they have defeated him"--because of Christ in us, Satan is defeated in us  
"because of the blood of the Lamb"--it is the cross that makes all this possible  
"and because of their testimony"--and our words of faith in him.  
"They were not afraid to die"--we know death has been overcome.  
"Rejoice, O heavens!"--the result of all of this is great joy.  
"You who live in the heavens, rejoice!"--God's servants, the angels, are full of joy.  
"But terror will come on the earth and the sea"--final judgment is coming  
"For the Devil has come down to you in great anger"--we have a ferocious enemy  
"and he knows that he has little time."--Satan knows the battle is lost.

We can rejoice! Christ's victory is secure.

*Do I live in joy and faith?*

December 30

Revelation 22:1-7 In heaven now

As we envision the final and complete reign of Christ, we are reminded that Paul told us that we who believe "are seated with him in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 2:6). In some frame of reference we already have access to the trees that heal the nations, we worship around the throne, and God shines on us.

What do we make of this? Our great mystics have tried to share their experiences of this. Our artists, poets, and musicians work to share heaven's beauty. Nature herself gives us glimpses. But most of us live with unfulfilled longing and hope.

Our faith is one of great anticipation. As we end one year and anticipate another, we keep looking forward to the great day when we see Jesus in person, and he brings all things together into the happy ending we desire.

*Do I pray that God's will may be done now on earth as in heaven?*

December 31

Revelation 22:8-21 Come Lord Jesus!

At the end of the book we come to the last of seven visions of Christ. The commander and priest (chapter 1), lamb (5), infant (12), lamb on Mount Zion (14:1), Son of Man harvesting (14:14), rider on a white horse (19), and now finally, a man announcing his coming (22).

The last verses of Revelation remind us that a blessing was pronounced for those who read the book. Do we feel blessed with John's hopeful vision? There are seven blessings pronounced in the book:

Revelation 1:3 Blessed are those who read and those who listen to this prophecy

Revelation 14:13 Blessed are those who die in the Lord

Revelation 16:15 Blessed are all who are watching for Jesus

Revelation 19:9 Blessed are those invited to the wedding feast of the lamb

Revelation 20:6 Blessed are those who share in the first resurrection

Revelation 21:7 Blessed are those who obey the prophecy written in this scroll

Revelation 22:14 Blessed are those who wash their robes so they can enter through the gates of the city and eat the fruit from the tree of life

This last section of Revelation repeats the words "come" or "coming" eight times. We have gotten so used to John's use of seven, but he appropriately added one, since eight symbolizes new beginnings. We also can say "Come, Lord Jesus!" We ask him to come to our hearts, come into our suffering, come into our troubled world, come to comfort us, and come to bring us joy.

*Come, Lord Jesus.*