

AN EXPLORATION OF HOW
CHRIST IS PRE-FIGURED
IN PEOPLE, STORIES, IMAGES AND
PROPHECIES
IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

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CHRIST FORESHADOWED

Hebrew Scriptures point to Christ

Introduction

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. The Kingdom Promised | <i>Genesis</i> |
| 2. The Kingdom Prepared | <i>Exodus — Deuteronomy</i> |
| 3. The Kingdom Foreshadowed | |
| Begun | <i>Joshua — Ruth</i> |
| Flourishing | <i>I & II Samuel, I Kings 1-10, I & II Chronicles 1-9</i> |
| Failing | <i>I Kings 10–II Kings, II Chronicles 10-36</i> |
| Promise Regained | <i>Ezra — Esther</i> |
| 4. Wisdom of the Kingdom | <i>Job — Song of Solomon</i> |
| 5. The Kingdom Foretold | <i>Isaiah — Malachi</i> |

Endnotes

INTRODUCTION

*All these things are no more than foreshadowings; the reality belongs to Christ.
(Colossians 2:17 Phillips)*

In his letter to the Philippians the Apostle Paul shared a poem that he said can teach us how to think:

Let Christ himself be your example as to what your attitude should be.
For he, who had always been God by nature,
did not cling to his prerogatives as God's equal,
but stripped himself of all privilege by consenting to be a slave by nature and
being born as mortal man.
And, having become man,
he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience,
even to the extent of dying,
and the death he died was the death of a common criminal.
That is why God has now lifted him so high,
and has given him the name beyond all names,
so that at the name of Jesus "every knee shall bow",
whether in Heaven or earth or under the earth.
And that is why, in the end,
"every tongue shall confess" that Jesus Christ is the Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11 J.B. Phillips)

Christ's life was repeatedly foreshadowed in the Old Testament (also known as the Hebrew scriptures.) These 365 reflections go through the whole Old Testament, allowing one to read it in a year. Each entry begins with reference to a chapter and a related New Testament text, explains a connection to Christ, and ends with a personal application. The intention is for this to contribute to not only an appreciation for scripture, but to deepen our spiritual lives.

CHAPTER 1

The Kingdom Promised

Genesis



January 1
Creation — Genesis 1, Psalm 104, John 1:1-5

John tells us that Christ was the creator, and his word gave life and light. John unites the man Christ with the maker of the splendors of the outdoors, the complexity of our bodies, and the subtlety of our minds that can create art, technology, literature, and community. God, the artist, paints and sculpts and writes and composes in the natural world.

Scripture uses nature as a source of metaphors, comparing Christ to things from each day of the creation poem: light, water, rock, vines, a morning star, lamb, lion and many others. The environment is made on the first three days, and what moves within each environment is paralleled in the next three days.

The Hubble Space Telescope has so greatly expanded our understanding of the immensity and complexity of the universe that our wonder at God's vastness and power is increased. At the same time, the message that God became a small infant becomes an even greater source of wonder. A daily act of worship in noticing created things evokes our appreciative awe and is worth writing down.

January 2
Making us — Genesis 2, Colossians 1:15-17

Christ demonstrated God's love by preparing a home for us. Today we are aware of what a unique home our planet is, are more curious than ever about what makes a planet habitable, and are finding possible planets to explore. One issue is the distance from the sun so the temperature is right, along with enough protection from solar radiation. Another is the existence of liquid water and carbon. We do not yet understand all the factors, but we know that the combination is rare and special. Here we see God as our provider.

As the chapter begins, the first poem ends and announces God's rest on the seventh day. We are invited to remember creation each week at rest in our home, enjoying the gift of life. This rhythm of rest teaches us that everything that maintains our life is a gift.

The previous chapter spoke of the creation of mankind on day six, but the second story is more detailed and personal. God gave mankind everything needed: life, a place to live, beauty, fruit, water, limits, knowledge, work, companionship, marriage, language, and connection to the creatures of the world. The invitation to relationship sets up the whole subsequent story of God caring about us, carrying on conversations, leading us, quarreling with us, and passionately loving us.

There are mysterious but intriguing details: there was no rain, there are named rivers, and exceptionally pure gold and onyx. What does this mean and why is it here? It is a reminder that these stories were told in times and places far away from us, and perhaps it is inevitable we do not understand everything.

Some have seen Adam's sleep which brought his bride to life as an analogy to Christ's death and resurrection which brought his bride, the church, to life. The forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil is juxtaposed with the mysterious tree of life. These are the first symbolic trees of scripture, and these and many more will point to Christ's tree, the literal wooden cross that solves the problem of good and evil and gives life that does not end.

January 3

Adam and Eve — Genesis 3, Matthew 13:37-39

Christ is perfectly obedient and leads others to life, unlike disobedient Adam and Eve who led others to death. In his parable Christ said the devil introduced evil into the world just as this mysterious story says happened through a talking snake.

We are introduced to something that becomes a backdrop to many stories: suffering and death are consequences of disobedience to God, yet there is always a loving and merciful call to return. In this story we see how God told them not to hide from him and covered their shame. We learn that it is safe to be vulnerable with our creator.

The promise of a descendant who will crush the serpent's head prefigures Christ, showing us that God chose to be with us, leaving paradise and joining us in our exile. Sacrifice as the means of transformation is also introduced, something that will be elaborated and will culminate in the cross. Later Paul will explain that death came through Adam, but resurrection came through Christ and through him we are given new life.

Angels stood with swords of light to keep mankind out, separating sin and holiness. As God showed mercy, angels no longer kept mankind away from him, but welcomed us: angels were part of the tabernacle and temple, they spoke at the empty tomb, and they spoke at Christ's ascension. In the parable, Christ spoke of the end time work of the angels in judgment and mercy, rejection and welcome.

Christ's invitation is to turn from our sin, and to live our daily lives in the preview of paradise. To do this requires recognizing the separation from him and asking for the gift of salvation in Christ. In addition to doing this for the first time, it is good to examine ourselves with God's help on a daily basis. The

fundamental message is that God loves us no matter what and will forgive our sins if we but ask.

January 4

Cain and Abel — Genesis 4, Luke 23:46-47

Abel was the first innocent victim recorded in the Bible, and so prefigured Christ, a good man who did not deserve death. The story introduces death and murder as part of the terrible reality of our world. Abel's blood cried out for vengeance, and that need for justice continues. In Christ, God suffered with the victim as he still does today.

Cain received a measured punishment, exile rather than death. God condemned the violence and yet simultaneously showed mercy for the murderer. When Lamech committed murder, he misinterpreted God's mercy to Cain, imaging it was a crime with no consequences.

Christ warned that it is not just murder we need to beware of, but that anger itself is spiritually dangerous. We need to ask ourselves: Do I erupt with verbal violence? Am I harsh? Do I discipline impulsively? What is my reputation regarding resolving conflict?

January 5

Genealogies — Genesis 5, Luke 3: 23, 37, 38

Scripture genealogy starts broadly with all nations, then narrows to Abraham's descendants, and finally to the point: Christ. They make dull devotional reading, but serve an important purpose to link the scriptures together and show us how it is one story. God knew the plot-line from the beginning and populated his story with lively characters.

There are mysteries: the long life-spans, and the disappearance of Enoch. In all there are 18 chapters devoted to geneology in the Hebrew scripture ending with Christ's geneologies in the New Testament. Geneologies are not the only dull reading, and the following poem asks why.

Why is this here?

Land records and family trees
Public health codes and liturgy manuals
Donor lists and instructions for craftsmen
Architectural descriptions and org charts

Amid the poetry, dramatic stories, and wisdom
Is all the ordinary, work-day information
It gives authenticity,

A touch of the materials of history.
I suppose it's too hard to preach from lists
So without reading all of scripture ourselves
We can easily lose the sense
Of how much God must approve of the mundane.

The seemingly extraneous and down-to-earth details in scripture force us to realize that it is not a magic answer book, but it a book of stories, of the history of real people, and that the details increase authenticity.

January 6
Noah — Genesis 6-7, I Peter 3:19-20

Noah is an archetype of an obedient, righteous person who is the means of salvation for those willing to listen. In this sense he is like Christ who in perfect obedience provides salvation for the whole world. We see that God is a rescuer, a first-responder.

The ark Noah built has multiple imagery: the church, a place of safety and salvation, and Christ who shelters us from judgment. The wood of the ark reminds us of the wood of the cross. The waters serve as imagery of the symbolic death of baptism and subsequent resurrection.

While we do not know how many people died in the flood, and it raises questions about God's goodness and mercy in allowing people to be killed by natural disasters, war, disease, or interpersonal violence. In this case, the tone is a sorrowful one of disappointment, repeating twice "I am sorry I ever made them." It "broke his heart." The flood, it is said, was designed to put an end to mankind's violence and depravity, and attempt to start over with one righteous family. A surgical intervention. There is a word of mercy in the New Testament passage that Christ preached to them after his death.

Today some Christians see natural disasters as a sign of God's judgment, though perhaps it is wiser to speak of his sovereignty in permitting such things and apply the exhortation to pray if we are suffering. Christ urged caution about concluding that disasters equaled judgment, but called us to have a humble recognition that we all need to respond in repentance.

January 7
Rescue — Genesis 8-9, I Peter 3:21

Peter made the connection for us between Noah's flood and the waters of baptism that Christ called us to experience as a sign of his taking us from death to life. It symbolizes God's loving rescue from destruction of those who

turn to him. God's post-flood promise emphasized his love for every creature he has made.

The dove, a symbol of the Holy Spirit and of peace, reveals that judgment has passed. The rainbow reminds us of the glory of God. Thus we see the Trinity: Christ as ark; the dove as Spirit; and the rainbow as the Father on the throne. Noah's sacrifice points toward Christ's sacrifice. After the flood a covenant with and promise to Noah included all living creatures. The covenant with all of creation is repeated seven times, emphasizing that God has a covenant with all his creatures and motivating what today we are calling "creation care", recognizing the extent of humankind's failure to honor this.

After this remarkable start to a new world, sin is evident once more. We have the first instance of drunkenness, which continues as a scourge even today, and the first instance of a parent cursing his grandchild. Some interpreters say that since this was a human curse, not of God, it was simply an expression of bad temper and guilt on the part of Noah after his binge. That has not kept it from being used as an excuse for slavery, something Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called "a blasphemy" and an idea completely contrary to the Christian faith.

The blessing that Noah gave to Shem, however, is fulfilled in the call of Abraham, the creation of Israel, and the coming of Christ. While sad that starting over with one righteous family immediately failed, hope is reintroduced, looking forward to someone who can both preserve us and cleanse us from sin.

The promise of rescue and restoration from the disasters of our lives often include small hopeful signs. Like the olive leaf in the dove's beak, we also receive tiny signs. Despite the hopeless situation we see, there are signs the change is coming. At a time when I was struggling with long-delayed answers to prayer, I saw a beautiful rainbow in the sky that reminded me of Noah's hope.

January 8

The Nations — Genesis 10, 11:10-32, Psalm 9, Matthew 1:1

In these two chapters, the story of all nations narrows to the story of one person, Abraham, who becomes the founder of the particular nation from which Christ will come. Matthew began his genealogy of Christ from that point, unlike Luke who went back to Noah and Adam. The unique starting over that Abraham represents is the core story of the scripture, but none of the nations are forgotten. Allies or enemies, respectful or disrespectful of God, they were all to be targets of blessing through Abraham.

It has been pointed out that if one counts, there are 70 nations listed. This looks ahead to other symbolic groups of 70 that are part of redemption: 70 of Abraham's family moving to Egypt, 70 Israelite elders who share a covenant meal with God, and 70 disciples Jesus sent to preach.

Human nature is to prefer our own family, our own group, our own nations. God's vision has always been universal, and just as Abraham was selected to be a blessing, we also are to have that universal vision. This list of nations reminds us that this is God's vision—He loves every person and every nation. The Psalm assures us that God will judge nations justly, repeating six times the message that God is in control of all. Christ fulfilled this in sending his disciples to all nations.

In our age of many prejudices we need to challenge ourselves to cross cultural boundaries and learn God's universal love. The many cultural boundaries I have crossed have enriched my life, teaching me curiosity, openness, respect, and certainty that God loves every person.

January 9

Babel — Genesis 11, Acts 2:1-4

Pentecost reverses Babel. At Babel languages were multiplied and caused separation. At Pentecost people heard the gospel in their own language and were unified. Perhaps one can say that the separation caused by Babel is the negative, and the unity brought by Pentecost is the photograph. The confusion (which is what Babel means) is overcome and brought into order by the Word (Christ). Language, invisible but essential to life, makes a good metaphor for God.

Today's Bible translators transform Babel into Pentecost, and are preparing for a heavenly celebration of people from all languages. God seems to love language, even incorporating multiple languages into scripture itself.

All of us need a calling, a vocation

Jesus called the disciples

And he's never stopped calling

Great leaders of the church

Augustine, Jerome, Calvin, Tyndale, John Wycliffe, John Wesley,

William Carey, Hudson Taylor, Billy Graham, Cameron Townsend,

Ken Taylor, Eugene Peterson

All in a great chain to the present

Lovers of God's Word, they were translators.

We know now there are over 7000 language groups

And 1,800 do not have scriptures in their language.

Here is the goal: Projects underway in all languages by 2025.

I imagine there are a lot of people
Jesus is ready to call to this work.
"Drop what you're doing and follow me.
Transfer your skills to my program!"

January 10

Call of Abram — Genesis 12, Hebrews 11:8-10

Christ's incarnation is prefigured in Abram, who left his home and became a pilgrim. Abram's journey, symbolized by the tent in which he lived, parallels God's journey among the people of Israel in a tent, and parallels Christ living among us. Christ did not cling to his position but became a pilgrim, born as mortal man.

God promised that all the families on the earth would be blessed through Abram, a clear prophetic preview of Christ. Even when Abram and Sarai made poor choices to lie about their relationship in a foreign land, God protected them, knowing his plan would be ruined if Sarai became the wife of another.

As the father of faith, Abram's story raises questions for us. How could he be sure he was hearing from God? We have not only scripture stories of promise and fulfillment, we have centuries of people who say they heard from God and what he said happened. We even have plenty of living testimonies. His example of faith challenges us to listen.

January 11

Abram and Lot — Genesis 13, Luke 9:58

Abram was like Christ in his pilgrim life, and Lot is like those who cannot accept Christ's call, turning away, because they find the world more attractive. We can apply God's promise of a place for Abram to our own need for a place in the world. God is our landlord.

Because both men had prospered, the land could not support all of their livestock and they made the decision to separate. Abram gave his nephew the first choice of where to go. In the next chapter we see that this results in Lot's capture by warring kings, and Abram's sacrificial work to rescue him and his family.

Lot was drawn to more exciting city life among people who were rebellious toward God, and the consequences were grim. Abram chose better. Today so much entices us to Lot-like choices. But Abram received a much deeper gift—the promise of the land as a permanent possession and abundant descendants, not only physical ones, but we who are his spiritual descendants as well.

In a time when we overvalue our homes, we must remember that we, like Abram, are on a pilgrimage, and not put our roots down too deeply in the world. Am I willing to listen to God and obey even if challenged to leave my comfort zone and reach across barriers or make a difficult move? Can I let go of my home, my family, and my things if that is God's call? What risks am I willing to take in faith?

January 12

Melchizedek — Genesis 14, Hebrews 7:1-3

Christ is a prophet, mediator, priest, and king like Melchizedek. Hebrews 7 is an extended meditation on how Melchizedek and Christ compare to one another, emphasizing Christ's priesthood, superior to the priesthood of the law. Melchizedek is a King of righteousness and peace, the same description Isaiah will give Messiah 1500 years later. Melchizedek ruled Jerusalem where Christ would teach, be killed, resurrect, and inaugurate his kingdom. In Christ, God showed himself to be like this peaceful king.

Melchizedek's appearance previews the theme of coming King and Kingdom. Abraham had not yet been given the promise of kings as his descendants. However, he had interacted with kings, receiving protection from Pharaoh, rescuing Lot from the marauding kings, and then honoring and sharing a communion meal with this king.

War between different coalitions, the cost to civilians who became prisoners or refugees, the need to rescue and protect civilians, and the importance of not taking economic advantage of war are all introduced in this chapter and still familiar today. The contrast between these warring kings and the peaceful king Melchizedek emphasizes the contrast between our warring nations and Christ's peaceable kingdom.

In the Hebrew scriptures we see four identities that will apply to Christ—king, priest, warrior/liberator, and prophet. In this instance Abram carries the identity of the liberating warrior to rescue his nephew. As a prophet Melchizedek recognizes Abram as particularly blessed by God, plays a priestly role, and is called a king. Christ takes on all of these roles and we benefit from each aspect of his character and work.

January 13

The Covenant with Abram — Genesis 15, Acts 3:25-26

Abram was promised many descendants when he did not even have one child, and he believed God and God honored his faith. His greatest descendant, Christ, was the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of blessing the whole earth through his descendants.

Very humanly, Abram asked, “How can I be sure?” God made the promise a binding contract, or covenant. In our time, paper, lawyers, and notarized signatures would be the method; in that time, it involved a ceremony with sacrifices. The sacrifice reminds us of the cross, the darkness that unnaturally occurred from noon to three p.m. during the crucifixion. God appeared as a flaming torch going through the sacrifices, something we can compare to Christ as the light shining in the dark. Abram was warned of the oppression his descendants would experience, but was promised they would return after 400 years and would own the land.

God told Abram to look at the stars. He could see perhaps half of the 9,000 stars visible to the naked eye, and had no idea that eventually with a telescope we would be able to see 200,000. Today the Hubble Space telescope allows scientists to estimate there are 100-170 billion galaxies in the observable universe, and that we may eventually be able to see farther to see more. They estimate a total of a septillion stars (7 x 10 with 24 zeros!), a mind-boggling number. It is an astonishing promise for a man who had no children at all.

His faith challenges me. Am I willing to believe that God will fulfill things that seem difficult or unlikely to me? His patient faith, particularly when he saw nothing concrete makes me want to really measure up to his example.

January 14

Hagar — Genesis 16, John 14:9

Hagar encountered the angel of the Lord in the desert, and many see this figure as the pre-incarnate Christ. It is beautiful to realize that these experiences made her our sister in the faith. As an outsider, a woman, a servant, and a foreigner, how beautiful that he appeared to her, his first such appearance. Her role in Abram and Sarai’s story was a result of their lack of confidence in God, yet it was turned to good in her life. We see through her that God meets us in our loneliness and need. He is a comforter.

Hagar encountered “the God who sees me” when she ran away from Abram and Sarah. When sent away again because of problems between Isaac and Ishmael, she went through some of what Israel would later experience—being in the wilderness, fearing death for her son, lacking water and having it provided, encountering God in the desert, and having God with her as she raised her child.

Hagar is an ironic figure – an Egyptian woman rejected by the father of faith, and maligned as the ancestress of today’s Arabs. It seems fair to also recognize her as a believer, one of many non-Jews who would come to faith in Abraham’s God. Her personal experience of faith is an encouragement to any of us who

feel like outsiders, marginalized or minimized in some way. To God, she mattered.

January 15

Circumcision — Genesis 17, Colossians 2:11

Circumcision was a mark of the covenant relationship between Abraham and God, and paralleled Christ's ability to cut away sin. It also highlights how important the promise of descendants, and of a Descendant, was for God's people. This promise of great honor shows us God's desire to honor those who follow him. Repeated exhortations to circumcise ones' heart and to allow the love of God to grow are followed by New Testament admonitions that this inward reality matters more than any outward sign.

God changed both Abraham and Sarah's names to raise them to greater honor as the "father of nations" and as a "princess." They were promised that kings would be among their descendants, clearly fulfilled throughout Israel's history, but most fully with Christ the King. That God appeared to Abraham, talked, and left him, implies a visible form, but it was still a stretch of faith to accept the promise of many descendants when he had no child. We have the greater gift of Christ incarnate, risen from the dead, but Abraham's struggle to believe is also our struggle.

January 16

Sarah — Genesis 18, Luke 1:30-33

Sarah prefigures Mary, the mother of Christ, in receiving from angels the promise of a child. The mystery of a tiny baby growing in its mother's womb is full of wonder, and because of Sarah's advanced age, and because of Mary's virginity, the mystery was even greater.

The arrival of the three angels to tell Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son has beautiful symbolism. Artists have used this story to illustrate that the three angels represented the Trinity, the tree under which they sat reminds us of the cross, and the shared meal parallels the Eucharist. The angels brought a message of judgment (Sodom and Gomorrah would be destroyed), and a message of hope (Isaac would be born). The hope, though they could not fully understand it, was also a message of mercy that Christ would come to save from judgment those who responded to him. As Abraham pled for mercy, he also prefigured Christ.

Mary did not react with skeptical laughter and disbelief to the angel's announcement as did Sarah, but with curiosity about the impossibility of bearing a child as a virgin. The joy of receiving a miracle child was true for each of them. The promise seemed hilariously unlikely to Sarah, and surely

most of us can identify with her cheerful skepticism. But God's response to Sarah encourages us: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" as does his response to Mary: "For nothing is impossible with God."

January 17

Sodom and Gomorrah — Genesis 19, Luke 17:28-30

God's messengers who rescued Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah prefigured Christ rescuing people from judgment. The angels show us that God accompanies us from destruction to safety. Christ compared the last judgment to the destruction of these towns, but there is mysterious future hope for these cities. He said that because people were not responding to his message and his miracles, Sodom would be treated better than them in the final judgment.

Christ also used the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as an exhortation to be alert, aware, and ready to flee from danger. He told us to compare ourselves to Lot's wife who died by looking back with longing for her old life. We are exhorted to let go of the past.

Tragically, Lot's daughters felt their chances to marry were minimal and so chose to become pregnant by their inebriated father. The descendants of the children of this incest, Moab and Ammon, became Israel's enemies. In the midst of this disheartening story we are reminded that God listened to Abraham's request and kept Lot safe. His prayer of negotiation in the previous chapter had an effect, which encourages us to ask for safety and rescue for ourselves and those we care about, even when they are living disobedient or disorderly lives.

January 18

Isaac vs. Ishmael — Genesis 20, 21, Galatians 4:22-23

As Paul wrote, Isaac was born as the fulfillment of God's promise, and he goes on to compare those of us who believe in Christ as promised children like Isaac. This imagery then sets up his illustration of Sarah as representing the heavenly Jerusalem (grace) and Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, as representing Mount Sinai (law).

Before Isaac's birth, Abraham and Sarah repeated their lie about their relationship that allowed her to be taken into a king's harem. But God was merciful in protecting her, remaining faithful to his own promise which their sinfulness could not undo. Isaac was born at God's appointed time.

To think sympathetically of Ishmael who was set to one side in favor of Isaac, we can see him as an outcast, a character type recurrent in the scriptures (e.g. Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David.) An important part of the theme is that the

outcast encounters God in his loneliness away from family. As Ishmael suffered the rejection from his father, wandering aimlessly in the desert, water gone, mother crying, he was dying, he experienced an overwhelming accumulation of trauma. Here God shows us he will be present to us in our depression and fear, and provide for us when we have nothing.

God heard the boy's cries and he promised that Ishmael would live and have many descendants. Ishmael foreshadows Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. Hagar was shown a well that saved their lives, the water prefiguring the Spirit. The story ends with a comment on Ishmael's growth as a talented archer and the marriage his mother arranged. Later we are told he had twelve sons who became the leaders of twelve tribes, and he lived to 137 years of age. Some measure of reconciliation between Ishmael and Isaac is implied since they came together to bury Abraham.

Despite Abraham and Sarah's times of unbelief that led to bad decisions, and painful human relationships, they received the promised child who was not only an ancestor of Christ, but who foreshadowed his life. The joy of fulfillment once more gave laughter, now joyful laughter, not skeptical laughter, and that is what Isaac's name means. I, too, can identify with laughter prompted by a fulfilled dream. The more unlikely the outcome, the more joyful the response.

January 19

Isaac's Resurrection — Genesis 22, John 19:16-18

Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac reflects God the Father's sacrifice of his son, Christ. Twice God referred to Isaac as Abraham's beloved son, a term that God would use for Christ at his baptism. This is also the first time the word love is used in scripture, as God acknowledged that Abraham loved Isaac so much.

This is a difficult story: 1) why God would command human sacrifice, 2) why would Abraham consent, 3) and why would Isaac cooperate? In pagan cultures human sacrifice was common, so why not stand clearly against it? The story ends with God himself taking that stand, and the substitution of a ram for Isaac makes a very clear analogy to the substitution of Christ for us. God will suffer and die in our place.

Hebrews 11 tells us Abraham had faith in God's promise, and a hope of resurrection. Isaac, in his obedient walk up the hill, carrying the wood for the sacrifice, is a poignant parallel to Christ carrying his wooden cross without any resistance to the death and suffering coming to him. As the story begins, God calls Abraham to go to a mountain in the land of Moriah, the place the Jerusalem temple will be built, intensifying the symbolic importance of this story in light of Christ's sacrifice. That Isaac did not die in this story but lived on to old age prefigures Christ's resurrection.

This story meant a great deal to me at a moment in my life where I felt I had to let go of something, and yet that letting go felt like the most horrible sacrifice imaginable. The story helped me believe that if I let go, my sacrifice could come back to me in a resurrected form. Soren Kierkegaard used this story as an example of how we are called to a leap of faith. Annie Lamont credits her conversion to reading Kierkegaard's reflection. This difficult story touches something deep within us, even because of our questions. In my case, I did receive the resurrection hoped for after many years, and so feel a tender affection for the story and the characters in it.

January 20

The Promised Land — Genesis 23, Hebrews 11:13-16

The land God promised to Abraham prefigured the Kingdom of God that Christ brought. Just as the promise was not fully realized for Abraham, we live in a time of tension when the Kingdom has begun but is not fully realized. Seeing how God fulfilled his promises to Abraham helps us believe God is at work to fulfill his promises to us. His guarantees are good.

Abraham purchased a burial plot after Sarah died. It is touching that he left her body and asked for the land, identifying himself as a stranger in a foreign land. This grave and a well he had dug were all he personally possessed of the promised land. Remarkably, Abraham's descendants did own the land starting about 500 years after him, and held it for another 1500 years. It is even more remarkable that after a nearly 2000-year gap, his descendants are once more on the land.

In their time, the places the patriarchs made camp were probably oasis areas. There was a mix of forest and desert when Israel lived on the land, but it was later deforested. Today 7% of the country has been reforested in an impressive effort of creation care, and 20% of the country has been protected as nature reserves. A 4000 year old promise is viable today.

Abraham had a present experience and a future promise of a homeland. We also look forward to a heavenly homeland even when enjoying life and/or suffering with our earthly problems. Our lives are a mix of sorrow and happiness, and the cross and resurrection are simultaneous realities for us in this in-between time when the Kingdom is "already" and "not yet."

January 21

Rebekah — Genesis 24, Ephesians 5:22-23

Rebekah prefigures the church as the bride of Christ. In using analogies to read this story, Abraham is like the Father, Isaac the Son, and the servant sent

for Rebekah is like the Holy Spirit. The servant drew her away from her world and took her to the Son, completing imagery of the church as the bride of Christ. Our own marriages bear this same imagery as we are brought together with a spouse. Deeper yet, God is like our spouse.

Perhaps Abraham already had hope Rebekah could be a spouse for his son, having gotten word about her birth and that of her siblings. The beauty of the story is that God himself orchestrated the encounter, answering the servant's prayer for guidance and for a sign of who God himself had selected. He repeatedly spoke of the quest for a wife in terms of God's purpose and destiny: he asked that she be the one God had appointed, the one the Lord intended him to meet, and expressed gratitude for being led along the right path.

Once he found Rebekah, he described it as a successful mission. With this strong sense of destiny, Rebekah was willing to leave her family and go to a strange place. The happy ending: Isaac loved her very much and she was a great comfort to him.

This story comforts me as a parent, showing another parent who desired an appropriate partner and a happy wholesome marriage for his child. It demonstrates that God himself cares about this and works to bring marriage partners together through answered prayer and meaningful encounters. The story encourages me to pray with faith and hope for the many young single people in my life.

January 22

A New Generation — Genesis 25, Romans 4:16

Christ called us to a life of faith, making promises that if we pray in faith, we will receive what we ask. Scripture calls Abraham the father of faith, and in his day, he was unique in his intense life of faith.

As promised, before he died, Abraham had more children and so did become the father of many nations. Some of his descendants would become Israel's enemies. It is sobering that so many of Abraham's descendants did not follow him in his faith.

Isaac, the heir to Abraham's faith, already had significant spiritual experiences: not dying at Mount Moriah and the providential finding of his wife. He now had faith to pray for a child and was answered with twins twenty years into marriage. (Such long delays!) Rebekah had faith to ask God why the twins were struggling within her and to receive a prophecy regarding their futures. One cannot help but wonder if conflicts between their sons created tensions in the marriage. Rebekah's solution was to later deceive her husband

to make the prophecy she had received come true, whereas Isaac may have been more willing to let life unfold and pray in faith.

The twins themselves, Jacob and Esau, started out with very little evidence of faith. Jacob manipulated his brother and gained a financial advantage, and Esau did not care. But their subsequent stories tell how they slowly did come to faith in God, and their lives changed, an encouragement with anyone dealing with wayward children.

As the story moves forward, the number of heroes of faith increases. Now, since Christ has come, there are millions, perhaps even billions, living out lives of faith in their unique contexts, true children of Abraham. Today we have the same struggles of passing faith to our children, not forcing it on them, but allowing them to learn from their own experiences. If they aren't interested, or reject the faith, or live troubled lives, we may be tempted to manipulate them like Rebekah. But we know it is better to pray, to take the long view, and ask God to call our children to himself.

January 23

Isaac — Genesis 26, Matthew 5:9

Isaac foreshadowed Christ's role as he worked for peace, a role he has given to all of us. As we have seen, Isaac's life was like Christ's in many ways. He was a promised and long-awaited child whose birth miraculously overcame human limitations. He went through a death and resurrection experience on Mount Moriah. Now he received an appearance from God and a reiteration of the promises to Abraham regarding many descendants and ownership of the land.

He was also a fragile human who did not always live a life of faith. This is the third time we see the motif of the beautiful wife being desired by a king, and God interfering to protect the couple for whom he has an important destiny. Scripture does not hide the foibles of its heroes, and here Isaac repeats his parents' errors.

In this chapter we also see his character as a peacemaker. Like his father, he became a rich man. Unlike his father, he did so through agriculture. His neighbors maliciously filled up the wells he inherited from his father, and he lost his agricultural land because the Philistines were jealous of him. He struggled to survive against his surrounding neighbors, and yet continued to be committed to peace. Isaac was on the land God had promised him, but conflict forced him to move six times. He accepted this opposition patiently, and continued to look for water, fully trusting the promise that he and his family belonged on this land promised to him and his father, and receiving yet another reiteration of the promise that caused him to worship God.

Eventually the very ruler who had ordered Isaac to leave the country came to him and said it was clear that God was blessing him. They made a treaty and Isaac sent him home in peace. That very day Isaac's servants once more found water, made a new well, and he found rest in the land. Isaac exemplifies the beatitude as a peacemaker whose patience and meekness resulted in receiving God's blessing.

I need to ask myself: Am I patient and willing to lose when opposed or rejected? Am I willing to forgive and reconcile when others are willing to restore a broken relationship? Do I have the faith that God will set difficulties right? Am I a peacemaker like Christ?

January 24

Jacob — Genesis 27-28, Romans 9:11-12

Jacob, though called by God to bless all people, was deceitful, troubled, and skeptical. It took a personal encounter with Christ to change him. When Christ appeared to him in a dream, Jacob did not yet have the faith of his parents or grandparents. Despite his lack of faith, he was promised land, descendants, and the role of blessing all people. Jacob's story encourages us that God does not give up on us when we make mistakes, but he continues to find ways to encounter us and speak to us.

Jacob offered a conditional response, much like so many of us today, thinking we will believe in this God if he does good things for us. When Jacob returned to this same place after many years, God once more met him there, changed his name to Israel, and at that point Jacob came to personal faith. In the New Testament passage it is clear that God had a special calling for him and persisted in pursuing him until he believed.

My Christian parents and grandparents shared their faith with me, but personal experiences were needed to make the faith my own. I shared my faith with my children, but they also needed moments of personal encounter. We can be part of these grace-filled moments for others by being willing to listen to their stories even when their story is full of skepticism. Their stories are not over.

January 25

Rachel — Genesis 29, Matthew 2:17-18

Rachel, who married Jacob, later gave birth to Joseph. Since Joseph clearly foreshadows Christ in character and experience, this makes her parallel to Christ's mother, Mary. Rachel died in childbirth with Benjamin and was buried at Bethlehem. Many years later Mary came to that same place to give birth to Christ.

When Rachel and Jacob met, he was at the lowest point in his life. His desceptive attempt to gain wealth and honor had backfired, and he was desperate, insecure, anxious, alone, uncertain of his future. In his refugee experience, he needed a new job, a new place to live, and new people in his life. His encounter with beautiful Rachel, being welcomed by her, falling in love with her, and being able to marry were a gift of grace. We, too, are blessed when God gives us the grace of a loving partner. For Jacob and Rachel we see how comforting a loving marriage can be, but for her sister Leah we see the sadness of marriage without love, and yet her wisdom in turning to God for that missing love.

The prophecy of Rachel weeping for her children looks ahead to Herod's slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem in his quest to eradicate the threat of a rival King. One can imagine Rachel grieving over the suffering of her people throughout the centuries. During the Holocaust, a poet wrote a lament and called on Rachel:

What do I require of you?
I ask that you wake from their sleep
Our mother Rachel
And the saint of Berdichev
And that the three of you go together before God.
You will thunder and demand
Rachel will weep and plead
And Levi Yitzhak will argue his lawsuit. Proclaiming
—If, Lord of the Universe, you will not be Savior
Of Living Jews,
You will, God forbid, be the Savior of Corpses. — Simkhe Bunem Shavevitsh

January 26

The Family — Genesis 30, Matthew 6:7-8

Does God answer prayer? Christ said he does, but not because we say the magic words. In Jacob's family jealousy and hurt between two sisters who struggled for their husband's attention and approval was centered around the birth of children. They added two servant girls as wives and the result was twelve boys and one girl, and a lot of sibling rivalry.

Both women seemed to believe in the efficacy of a mandrake root to become pregnant. The plant contains hallucinogens, can be shaped like a small person, and they have had ritual magic uses from ancient times to the present. It must have been a wake-up call for them that the one that did not have the mandrake root is the one who got pregnant.

Their father also depended on divination and revered idols. Jacob's techniques for increasing the kind of animals he wanted seems magical as well. Perhaps he thought he was being scientific, but in the next chapter God appeared to him and took credit for increasing his flocks in an act of justice. Abraham's brother's family seemed immersed in magical thinking, and Jacob fit right in.

Three pregnancies are described as God's answer to prayer: Rebekah, and now Leah and Rachel receive children as a gift from God. Perhaps God was trying to teach them the contrast between magic and prayer to a living God. We, too, can fall into magical thinking, supposing if we just offer the right formula we will get what we want. Instead, learning to truly trust God comes from a combination of waiting for answers and receiving answers. The waiting can be long and painful, but we are encouraged to keep asking.

January 27

Laban — Genesis 31, Mark 10:42-45

In addition to finding analogies to Christ in characters, we find characters who fail to carry the image of Christ, such as Laban, who is an example of a leader corrupted by selfishness. In contrast, Christ's concept of leadership is one of service, caring for others and liberating them. Laban is also an example of a poor father—his daughters obviously resented being sold as his property. In contrast, God is the image of the perfectly caring, compassionate and protective father. God watched over Jacob and his family and protected them from Laban just as he does for us.

Untrustworthy, disagreeable and unjust, Laban made agreements with Jacob and broke them. He agreed to the marriage with Rachel and then at the last minute substituted Leah, thus ensuring unhappiness for this less loved wife. He made exploitative agreements, and Jacob plaintively complained that he had changed his wages ten times, and that God is the one who made sure he did not go away empty-handed.

Jacob and family left at night, whereupon Laban chased him and arrived full of accusations, insisting that Jacob stole from him, arguing that everything was his: daughters, children and flocks. They solved their differences by agreeing to stay away from one another and setting up a boundary marker.

In contrast, Christ-like leadership gives generously, tells the truth, blesses, respects, and shows sacrificial love. How different from claiming everything. Perhaps we can (unfortunately) recognize these difficult family conflicts in our own experience or others we care about. The tensions in families, the tensions over money, and tensions that lead to not speaking to one another can be extremely painful. Christ's caring love that is kind and patient is our call.

January 28

Jacob Encounters God — Genesis 32, Matthew 5:8

As Jacob returned to his homeland and waited in fear to see his brother, he wrestled with an unknown figure who changed his name to Israel. That figure has been identified as a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. Jacob, who did not find faith easy, acknowledged he had seen God and remained alive. Here we see a God who lets us struggle with him. Arguing with him as we might with a friend is allowed. This is a level of sincerity we can compare to purity of heart.

Frightened of his brother, Jacob's prayer reminds me of some of my own: "God, I am trying to please you and obey you, and I know I do not deserve anything, but I thank you for your provisions, and I need your protection. I have fears, but I am trying to trust your promises." In many ways, very self-centered praying. Jacob sent gifts to Esau, hoping he would be friendly, reminding me of my tendencies to try to manipulate others. Then came the wrestling match.

In Fredrick Buechner's sermon on Jacob, he wrote of the wrestling match as a time when the stubborn wilfulness of Jacob's life was broken, making a place for something new: "He merely touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh, and in a moment Jacob is lying there crippled and helpless. The sense we have, which Jacob must have had, that the whole battle was from the beginning fated to end this way, that the stranger had simply held back until now, letting Jacob exert all his strength and almost win so that when he was defeated, he would know that he was truly defeated; so that he would know that not all the shrewdness, will, brute force that he could muster were enough to get this. Jacob will not release his grip, only now it is a grip not of violence but of need, like the grip of a drowning man."¹

I ask myself if my self-will has been broken and if I have come face to face with the depths of my need for God. The answer appears to be that this is something that must happen more than once. The struggle continues.

January 29

Esau — Genesis 33, 36, Matthew 18:21-22

Esau showed the forgiveness that Christ requires from us. When he and Jacob reconciled, Jacob compared his friendly smile to God's face. God is at work in our lives to bring reconciliation to broken relationships. He is the God of peace.

We recall Esau as the one who impulsively sold his birthright to his twin, Jacob, and as the victim of deception. Logically so, since these interpretations

are in the New Testament and are legitimate analogies. His selling the birthright is used as a warning that there comes a time when it is too late to repent.

Jacob fled and when the time came to return, he sent a message hoping for a friendly reaction from Esau. He became understandably anxious when he heard Esau was coming with 400 armed men. Jacob prayed, sent livestock as gifts, wrestled with the angel, and lined up his family in order of his preferences. When Esau ran to meet him and embraced him affectionately, they both cried. All the past bitterness was wiped away in forgiveness.

At first Esau's nation, Edom, was the more successful one while Jacob's descendants went into slavery. Genesis 36 gives us elaborate detail on Esau's descendants, showing his importance as founder of one of the many nations as Abraham's grandson. Eight kings ruled before there were kings in Israel. Descendants of Esau's grandson Amalek became particularly cruel enemies and God pronounced a judgment on them which David carried out. Kinship was not enough to get the Israelites permission to pass through Edom on their way out of the desert, but they were reminded to care about them as their relatives. The prophecy that the elder would serve the younger was finally fulfilled under King David who dominated Edom.

Tensions in families separated by grudges and resentments can be so painful. Growth in both Jacob and Esau enabled them to let their bitter past together go, and they reconciled, and later came together to bury their father. The story reminds us that forgiveness and reconciliation can happen even after years of estrangement. The tears of relief, gratitude, and joy remind us that there may be deep love hidden by the distance.

January 30

The Troubled Family — Genesis 34, 35, Acts 3:19

Jacob's family made huge mistakes, offended and harmed others, just as the church of Christ has managed to do through the centuries. Rather than being a blessing to others as promised, they killed others, something which is a painful part of Christian history as well. Jacob's family was supposed to be an image of God to the world and failed; we are supposed to be an image of Christ to the world and our failures today and in the past are obvious. Just as he did with Jacob's family, God can use us for good despite these failures. Our past does not determine what God can do.

Nor was Jacob's family immune to tragedy. Living in Shechem, having bought some property, daughter Dinah wanted friends. Perhaps allowed to be too independent, she became a victim of date rape. Jacob considered allowing a marriage with her abuser, but two of her full brothers, also Leah's children,

decided revenge was best. They became like violent gang members, killing most all in the rival gang. At the end of his life Jacob called these sons of his men of violence.

Jacob urged his family to destroy idols, which they buried in Shechem. They moved to Bethel and worshipped God, marking the place where he had received kingdom promises: the land would belong to his descendants and there would be kings among them. It was reiterated that his new name was Israel which means “one who struggles with God.”

A day’s travel south, Rachel tragically died in childbirth at Bethlehem. Another family tragedy, Reuben’s sexual relationship with his father’s wife Bilhah, caused Jacob to disown him as his firstborn. Another day’s travel south brought Jacob to his father in Hebron. He was there again when his father died, and together with Esau they buried Isaac.

Reading about things going wrong in Jacob’s family awakens compassion for any families who suffer these things today: rape, forced marriages, a child becoming violent, family involved in occult practices, death of a wife in childbirth, incest, death of parents... It seemed unlikely that good could come from this family, but we know that by grace, it did.

January 31

Dreams — Genesis 37, Hebrews 12:1-3

Joseph’s story of going from favored son, to rejection, to honor serves as a parable for Christ’s life and work on our behalf. Joseph’s extraordinary character is far above that of his quarreling, killing, womanizing family. Jacob had deeply wronged his brother and had to flee for his life. Joseph’s brothers went much farther, selling him as a slave out of their jealousy. The price, twenty pieces of silver, reminds us of Judas’ betrayal of Jesus. Joseph’s bloody coat foreshadows Christ’s robe at the cross.

His story serves to challenge us who often have dreams and hopes that we think come from God, but which may be questioned or mocked by others. In Joseph’s case, we know these dreams eventually came true, but I cannot help but speculate about his emotions. When his brothers put him in a well, potentially facing death, in that dark place his dreams surely felt meaningless, confusing, and difficult to interpret. Most of us doubtless experience times of shattered dreams and fear and anxiety and disappointment. We are not told how Joseph survived this, only given his inspiring example to know that he did.

The level of rejection I have experienced has been extremely painful, but truthfully, it has been minor compared to Joseph’s experience. I have longed for transformation in alienated relationships, and I cannot help but wonder

how much painful but hopeful longing Joseph experienced. His heart was obviously tender when it became clear his brothers were ready for reconciliation, but how often he must have recalled their rejection through the years and thought how hopeless reconciliation would be. His story helps us realize that God is still with us in dark, disappointing times, and it makes more sense to hope in him than to give up in despair.

February 1

Judah — Genesis 38, Matthew 20:27-28

Judah prefigures Christ's willingness to suffer for others, something that did not occur until late in his life. Judah's grandson became King David's ancestor and through him came Christ. Judah's example assures us that God can redeem bad choices. He can change our future.

Judah started badly. He instigated selling Joseph into slavery, a particularly cruel and jealous reaction that parallels the betrayal of Christ. He abandoned his daughter-in-law Tamar, who then seduced him incognito. He was outraged when she became pregnant and had a double-standard that he could have sex outside of marriage but she could not. He then recognized his sin, and out of this relationship tainted with incest came an ancestor of Christ—always mysterious, redemptive grace at work.

When Judah and his brothers went to Egypt, he had begun to change. He fought to keep Benjamin out of prison and acknowledged his mistreatment of Joseph. He offered himself as a replacement for Benjamin. The old sin of selling Joseph was so far redeemed that Judah became an image of Christ, offering his life for his brother.

When Leah gave birth to Judah, her suffering had taught her dependence on God and she named him "praise." He was the fourth child, but in his father's final blessings he was honored with a promise of authority. This would be fulfilled in all the descendants of King David, including Christ.

This story of redemption encourages any of us who have failed that there is always hope. Grace is always available, and the end can always be greater than the middle of the story. There is no reason to live in depression about the past, but to repent as needed, and look to the future with hope and joy.

February 2

Joseph's suffering — Genesis 39, 40, Philippians 2:5-8

Joseph's life foreshadows Christ's betrayal, death, resurrection, and glory. Both suffered, were imprisoned, and were raised to honor. Both compassionately

forgave their brothers and were the means of saving them. Their stories assure us that God is with us in our suffering.

The Psalmist wrote that until the time came to fulfill his dreams, Joseph's character was being tested. Under difficult circumstances as a slave and in prison he worked hard and was promoted to leadership positions. In both cases it says his bosses had no more worries, and everything ran smoothly. He further remained honorable in the face of attempted seduction and accepted the set-back that resulted.

Joseph's excellence in terrible jobs challenges each one of us to do our very best even if our jobs are not what we would prefer. If we trust, we can be like Joseph where God gave him success in everything, caused him to become a favorite, and enabled him to bless his employers. God was with him and gave him wisdom, a reassuring promise for us in our troubles.

Joseph even endured the disappointment of not having his case taken to Pharaoh by the chief cup-bearer. For two more years he simply continued to do his job. At God's providential moment, the door to freedom would open for him. This is true faith. Accepting what is, doing our part, not complaining when being treated unfairly, and continuing to live in hope. It is the quality we see in Christ in his incarnation, the same attitude we are called to have.

February 3

Joseph raised to honor — Genesis 41, Philippians 2:9-11

When Joseph was raised to honor this prefigures Christ in his resurrection and ascension. Joseph was made second in command, similar to Christ at God's right hand. Joseph prophetically shared God's word, as did Christ. His confidence that he could hear from God was borne out by what followed.

Joseph was taken to Pharaoh to interpret several disturbing dreams, something that only could have happened because of his kindness to the cup-bearer in prison. The coming economic crisis needed a wise person to manage it and Joseph suggested Pharaoh find the wisest man available. Pharaoh concluded that Joseph was that man. He thus began his public role at thirty years of age, the same age as Christ, who was also the wisest man in the land. When the seven years of abundance ended and famine began, Joseph was in a position to provide bread for the hungry, one of Christ's roles as well.

In Stephen's masterful summary of history from Abraham to Solomon, he said that God gave Joseph unusual wisdom. Even Pharaoh recognized that he was filled with God's Spirit of God. This is the first use of this important idea which eventually becomes available to every believer in the New Testament.

In applying Joseph's example to ourselves, we want to be like him, so filled with the Spirit and unusual wisdom that it is obvious to unbelievers. We want to be in a position where we have bread, literal and spiritual, to freely share with those around us.

February 4

Joseph's Reconciliation — Genesis 42-45, I Peter 2:24

Joseph's brothers are like us, guilty, subject to death, fearful, in need of redemption and forgiveness. Joseph offered forgiveness, foreshadowing Christ's role for us. They were hungry and needed provision, and they were estranged and needed reconciliation.

At first Joseph was rough, accusing, and imprisoned them. He put them through a series of difficulties to test them. He had lived for many years with success at work and happiness with his wife and children, and claimed to have forgotten his family when he named his first son. It must have been a shock when his brothers stood before him. The last time he had seen them they were planning to kill him and ended up selling him into slavery.

On a human level we can sympathize that their arrival forced him to face his past traumatic relationship with them. Step by step Joseph grieved, crying repeatedly, with the result that his trauma was healed and replaced with kindness and forgiveness. For the brothers, also, this allowed them to grieve and repent of their treatment of Joseph, to confess their guilt, and to try to make amends. When Joseph revealed himself to them, he went so far as to say it was God who sent him to Egypt, not them, with the good purpose of preserving their lives.

Few of us have experienced the level of Joseph's trauma, but whatever trauma we have experienced, the example of grieving and forgiving is a model. He had the power to avenge the past, but instead he wept, and slowly opened himself to a new relationship with his brothers and a new positive future together. May we all develop that same tender forgiving heart toward any who have harmed us. God can continue to work on our behalf to restore broken relationships. He understands the depths of our emotional pain, he works to transform us, and turns our sorrow into joy.

February 5

Joseph's Resurrection — Genesis 46-47, John 11:25-26

For Jacob, who had thought his son was dead for so many years, seeing Joseph was like a resurrection. Like Christ's resurrection, Joseph's work raised the family from near starvation to abundance, from an unsettled life to one rooted in a beautiful place, from dishonor to honor, and from being a small group to

becoming a vast people. God restored what had been lost, just as he does for us. He provided creatively and abundantly for them, just as he does for us.

It is touching that when Jacob and Joseph were first reunited they embraced, and Joseph wept on his father's shoulder for a long time. The grief from all the suffering of the lost years together, and the relief of seeing his father again, came flooding out. This was the fifth of seven times we are told that Joseph wept. The first was when he overheard his brothers acknowledging their cruelty to him. The second was when he saw the one brother not involved in harming him, Benjamin. After Judah's offer to take Benjamin's place as a prisoner, Joseph revealed himself to them and his weeping was so intense it could be heard elsewhere in the palace.

His tears of joy flowed as his brothers recognized him and they reconciled with one another. Perhaps his healing was complete when he was once more reunited with his father and he wept away his grief and loss. For seventeen years we hear of no more weeping until the moment his father died. After that, his brothers came humbly and fearfully to ask for his forgiveness and to offer to be his slaves. He wept again, but assured them that he not only forgave, he saw God's hand in all that had happened. He was able to speak kindly to them, a great contrast to his rough speech when they first reappeared in his life.

If we have suffered loss followed by restoration, perhaps we can identify with the intensity of Joseph's emotions. Joseph foreshadows Christ's tender, loving, and forgiving heart, and we are called to have the same heart. We need to be willing to cry when we need to without shame.

February 6

Jacob's Blessings — Genesis 48-49, Mark 10:16

Jacob's prophecies at the end of his life included adoption, promise of Messiah, and repeated promise of blessings. These are blessings the Father also gives us through his Son. In Jacob's first blessings he adopted Joseph's sons as his own into his family and away from Egypt. Thus Ephraim and Manasseh became known as two "half-tribes" of Israel. Further, the younger son was made greater than the older, a theme of grace repeated from Jacob's own life.

Jacob gathered his sons and gave prophecies. He passed over Reuben for having slept with one of his wives, passed over Simeon and Levi for having been murderous to avenge their sister, and he offered authority to the next in line, Judah. He promised that rulership would not depart from Judah until the coming of the one to whom it belongs whom all nations would obey, a prophecy fulfilled in Christ.

For Joseph, however, the prophesy referred to a fountain, perhaps Jacob's well. When Christ arrived at the well Jacob had dug approximately 2000 years earlier, one can see that Jacob's blessing for Joseph prophesied Christ as well.

Joseph

Joseph is a fruitful bough
By a well
God (and Jacob) as Shepherd
God as Rock (cf. Joshua's stone)
Blessings on him who was
separated from his brothers
Acknowledged as the firstborn

Jesus

The vine
Sitting by Jacob's well
The good shepherd
The rock
Separated in death and
restored to them in resurrection
Firstborn of many

For Joseph the word "blessing" was repeated seven times, reminding us that this is God's desire for us.

February 7

Joseph's Forgiveness — Genesis 50, Luke 23:34

Joseph had Christ's forgiving heart which erased what was done against him and saw God using his misfortune for a greater purpose. When he revealed himself to his brothers he told them not to be angry with themselves, because it was God who had sent him there ahead of them. After Jacob died the brothers supposed he had been kind to them only for the sake of their father, and they came to Joseph to offer to become his slaves. Joseph told them not to be afraid of him because God had turned into good what they intended for evil.

Joseph's remarkable response teaches us to reinterpret events in our own lives. His brother's actions were cruel and horrifying. God did not cause them to allow their jealousy to become homicidal. Nor was it God who caused them to wait so many years to beg for forgiveness. But Joseph could see the good that God brought from the evil. God is like a talented novelist who has the end of the plot in mind.

Abraham had been warned that his descendants would remain over 400 years in Egypt. After Joseph's death God seemed to be silent, similar to the 400 years before Christ when prophets no longer spoke. But Genesis ends with a declaration of faith on Joseph's part that God would surely take the people back to the land they had been promised. The New Testament celebrates his faith in asking them to bury him in the land.

Joseph's example gives me several very practical way of letting God teach me how to think. If someone harms me in some way, I can look for how God turns evil to good. I can be quick to be forgiving and to speak kindly and

reassuringly. If God has promised something, I can hold on to it with confident faith.

CHAPTER 2

The Kingdom Prepared

Exodus — Deuteronomy



February 8

Moses — Exodus 1-2, Hebrews 3:5-6

Here we are introduced to the towering figure of Moses. He foreshadows Christ in almost every aspect of His life.

Nativity: Moses' birth bears a direct parallel to that of Jesus. Their lives were in danger from tyrannical political leaders, and God sovereignly engineered an escape.

Temptation: Moses spent 40 years in the desert after leaving Pharaoh's court, paralleling Jesus' 40 days in the desert.

Passion: Moses underwent suffering as Pharaoh refused to let Israel leave Egypt, which corresponds with Christ's suffering from the rulers of his time. The climactic moment of Passover is a direct analogy to Christ's death.

Resurrection: Moses led the people across the Red Sea, escaping from Pharaoh's army to freedom, and the New Testament tells us this is imagery of Christ leading his people to freedom from death.

Teaching: Moses presented the Law, a Covenant, to the people, which corresponds with Jesus giving us the teaching of the New Covenant.

Leading us through life: Moses led the people through the wilderness for 40 years and led them to the Promised Land, just as Christ leads us.

In his years in Midian, Moses could not know the full destiny God had for him, and he was faced with discouragement. Psalm 90 is identified as Moses' prayer and contains a reflection on our human struggles with time. It contains the line "How long will you delay?" Moses spent the first 80 years of his life as part of a time when God seemed silent, longing for change. The final line is a great encouragement, saying God knew it was time to act.

February 9

Burning Bush — Exodus 3, Matthew 17:2-3

The burning bush is the presence of Christ calling Moses, paralleling His call on our lives. Jesus was marked for ministry by the Spirit at his baptism and Moses was marked for ministry by his encounter with the fiery bush. Moses' response to God's call, "Here I am!" is to be our response. God, personal and knowable, startles us and speaks to us.

This took place near Mount Sinai, and part of God's reassurance to Moses was not only that He would be with him, but that he would return to worship at that very mountain. He promised that He would do miracles to liberate his people.

For us, an encounter with Christ and His Holy Spirit in a blaze of fire sets the trajectory of our own ministries. We look back to these moments with gratitude, known God provides power beyond ourselves to do what he is calling us to do.

February 10

Zipporah — Exodus 4, Ephesians 2:14

Zipporah and Jethro foreshadow Christ's message to all nations, not only the Jews. Moses, the lawgiver, and founder of the Hebrew nation, married a Gentile. When he escaped after murdering a man in Egypt, he met the seven daughters of Midianite priest Jethro, became part of the household, and married daughter Zipporah.

At this moment of crisis and encounter with God, Moses was given the capacity to do several miracles. His insecurity was very great and he asked for his brother as a spokesperson. In this transition and calling, Zipporah agreed to accompany him with their children, but to add to his stress, a serious marital disagreement arose.

When they stopped at an inn, she was furious at having to circumcise her son. Moses insisted, saying he felt that God would kill him if he did not. It reminds me of the Ignatian principle that if we are in disobedience to God, we feel the force of conviction to change as an oppressive thing. Her anger at Moses for forcing this ceremony against her will is humanly understandable, but his children needed to be identifiable as Abraham's children in the leadership role he was undertaking. We are not told precisely at what point Moses sent Zipporah back to her father. But at Mount Sinai Jethro brought her and the two sons to be part of God's people.

There are other instances of marriage with Gentiles—Joseph with an Egyptian, Boaz with a Moabitess, Esther with the Persian King—and in each case it served as a reminder that Jews were called to bless all nations. Christ came and told his disciples to go to all nations, breaking down all ethnic and cultural barriers.

February 11

Moses' Despair — Exodus 5-6, II Corinthians 12:9

Moses' moments of despair over the impossibility of liberating his people point to similar moments of despair in Christ's passion. Moses was fragile, human, and uncertain, particularly as he began his difficult role. After Pharaoh reacted to his appeal, he plaintively asked, "Why did you send me?" Christ went through emotional pain in the garden to the point that he sweated great drops of blood. On the cross as he was dying, he expressed agony, saying "My

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Just as God gave Moses the courage he needed, he gives us courage to confront oppression today.

A leader in the Civil Rights movement once said that people suppose that they knew the movement would succeed, but that was not the case. They persisted because they felt the cause was righteous. The resulting change in laws and opportunities for the African-American citizens of the United States was not a foregone conclusion. We have a similar inability to fully empathize with Moses’ position because we know how the story ends with success. He could only hope and pray it would end that way and try to keep doing the next right thing.

Today whole groups of people are in oppressed situations. Becoming part of social movements to change these situations is certainly part of our calling. The literal slavery of our own time, often called human trafficking, is certainly one of many causes. Our own lives may feel oppressed, or we may feel like a situation has us enslaved and we cry out for freedom. As for Moses, things may get worse before they get better, but we should not give up hope.

February 12

Pharaoh’s Stubbornness — Exodus 7-8, Romans 9:17

God challenged Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron to liberate his people. This liberation becomes a principal theme of the relationship we can have with God, and is used throughout scripture to foreshadow Christ’s liberating us from Satan’s power through the cross.

The mysterious interplay between our free choices and God’s sovereign knowledge and plans is highlighted in the interwoven story of Pharaoh’s stubborn heart and God’s foreknowledge. There is an alternating chain: God says he will cause Pharaoh’s stubbornness. After plagues 1-5 it is repeated that Pharaoh is stubborn. After plague number 6 it says that God increased his stubbornness, while simultaneously reinforcing that this was Pharaoh’s choice. The plagues correspond to escalating warnings, and because Pharaoh did not respond he lost everything, including his life.

The first four plagues might have help the Egyptians recognize the suffering the Hebrew slaves experienced. These are today still challenges for those who are poor: contaminated water, and vulnerability to animal and insect plagues.

Pharaoh is an example of people who will not change, no matter what signs and calls are offered. Here is the simultaneous mystery of free will and God’s purposes and plans, both of which are true in our own lives.

God has not changed. He still acts on behalf of the oppressed who call on Him. He still listens to our appeals to soften the hearts of people who oppose us,

people who criticize or reject us unfairly, and people who refuse to listen to the Holy Spirit. He is still engaged in contests for human hearts.

February 13

Ten Plagues — Exodus 9-11, John 3:16-18

The ten plagues of judgment foreshadow Christ taking our judgment on himself on the cross. Moses' intervention and the protection of the Israelites represents God's mercy, both of which were part of Christ's death on the cross as well. The plagues, something powerful and uncomfortable, were necessary to liberate oppressed slaves. Today the Jewish people remember each plague in the Passover celebration with gratitude.

God, the creator, used nature to challenge the oppressor. With the fifth plague, there was a financial loss, minimal compared to the financial loss the slaves had experienced from several centuries of exploitation. The skin diseases showed the greater vulnerability of the poor to disease followed by more financial loss through the hail and locusts. Perhaps the darkness served as a warning that they should be afraid. Each time, as soon as the problem was resolved, Pharaoh rescinded his agreement for them to leave.

Killing the firstborn of Egypt was harsh, but killing Hebrew newborns had been going on a long time and the society as a whole accepted it, or at least ordinary Egyptians may have thought, "there's nothing we can do." They suffered the same tragedy to which they'd been so indifferent as national policy. Exercising power to overcome Egypt's gods was important as proof of God's reality. This became an important theme as God continued to act on behalf of weaker Israel in the face of more powerful nations.

Whatever is oppressing us in our lives—guilt, addictions, illness, poverty, conflict, social upheaval, depression, disappointment, a sense of failure—the fundamental lesson is that liberation is possible.

February 14

Passover — Exodus 12, I Corinthians 5:7

The Passover lamb prefigures Christ's death. The beauty of the story is in the triumph of the weak, oppressed, enslaved, and stubborn people. Their freedom, celebrated each Passover by the Jews and completed in the celebration of First Fruits, parallels our freedom in Christ.

The people were told to put lamb's blood on their doorposts so the angel of death would pass over and spare their children. This perfect prefiguring of Christ's death was celebrated on the same day through centuries, and became

the very day of His crucifixion. The lamb was to be chosen four days before, the day Christ entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Other details look forward to Christ on the cross, such as the admonition to break no bones. John made the point that Pilate ordered the legs of the three men being crucified to be broken to hasten their deaths, but Christ was already dead. The repeated admonition to have no yeast in the bread, not even in the house, has been seen as a symbol of purity and sinlessness in Christ's body broken for us.

The Passover meal Jesus shared with His disciples has become our memorial bread and wine. It bundles together so many meanings: forgiveness of sin, freedom from slavery and oppression, God's sovereignty over life and death, over rulers, over his people, his commissioning and call of prophetic leaders to bring freedom, his supernatural intervention on behalf of those who trust him, and a promise of a coming Messiah.

A Messianic Jewish Seder is a wonderful way to understand how Christ celebrated Passover and identified with each symbol. The mystery of his identification with our brokenness, the protection we have through his suffering, and his presence and deliverance deepen our appreciation of his crucifixion and resurrection.

Many poems have been written for contemporary Passover celebrations, including this beautiful song by *Liberated Wailing Wall*.

Pharaoh had us all enslaved, laboring in his land,
The Lord God heard our cry and freed us by His hand.
And by the blood of the pure and spotless Lamb,
We're free, we are all set free.

Passover Lamb's blood upon the door,
Forming a cross to seal us from death's jaw.
And by the blood of the pure and spotless Lamb,
We're free, we are all set free.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah,
God of Abram,
Thank you for the Lamb.

February 15

Ransom — Exodus 13, I Peter 1:18-20

The firstborn's ransom foreshadows Christ. He compared his death to a ransom, which Peter tells us was Christ's blood. This chapter helps us

understand what it means for Christ to ransom or redeem us. He liberated us from the slavery of evil, he purchased us with his blood, and he paid the full price.

The people had left Egypt but not yet crossed the Red Sea and were given two instructions that would identify them: celebration of Passover, and the purchase of firstborn sons. Both were intended to remind them of their liberation from Egypt, and both look forward to Christ's work of redemption.

In the context of liberation from Pharaoh's slavery, God had protected the firstborn from death and they belonged to him. As the people purchased them back, they were reminded that their freedom had come through God's miraculous work. When Christ came, he chose Passover as the time for His death to tie it to this story of liberation. God in Christ bought us from slavery with his own blood.

In our modern culture we feel that God owes us rather than that we owe him everything. We unconsciously think that he owes us a good life, protection, or positive circumstances, and if we pay up appropriately with the right prayers, good actions, and participation in a church community, he will pay us back. This ransom serves as an important reminder that we owe our lives to him and are in no position to make demands.

February 16

Exodus — Exodus 14, I Corinthians 10:1-2

Crossing the Red Sea foreshadows Christ's death and resurrection, and symbolizes baptism into his death and resurrection. This is the central story of redemption for the Jewish people. It predates the giving of the law, demonstrating that God's mercy is what opens the opportunity for an obedient and holy life.

For Passover, the Jewish people today sing a song, *Dayenu*, which means, "it would have been enough". The first eight stanzas celebrate bringing the people out of Egypt, executing justice on the Egyptians, executing justice on their Gods, slaying their firstborn, giving them the Egyptian's health and wealth, splitting the sea, leading through on dry land, and drowning the oppressors. The last seven stanzas celebrate His care in the wilderness. Each one of these things "would have been enough."

In Jude we are told that Jesus first rescued the nation of Israel from Egypt, and he has been seen through history as a liberator ever since. The escape of slaves from the most powerful empire of the time is astonishing. Marc Chagall painted and drew the Exodus in many ways, but one of the most compelling is an image of Christ on the cross with a halo around his head above the people

being freed. If today we are not living as free people, we need to claim our freedom.

February 17

Celebration and Healing — Exodus 15, Colossians 3:16

This song of celebration for deliverance pointed ahead to heavenly songs of celebration in Revelation, and our songs of worship. It ends with the affirmation of God's everlasting reign, the theme of God as King.

So quickly after their great song of celebration, the people turned against Moses when the water they encountered was bitter. God showed Moses a branch to put in the water to make it sweet. He promised health based on listening and obedience, and exemption from the common diseases of their old culture. This branch points to the cross which gives us health.

The story reminds us to celebrate the times and ways God delivers us, to have faith that he can give us health, and to avoid the sin of complaining when we have needs we are worried will not be met. The two things are related. If we live a life full of gratitude and confidence in God, that has remarkably important impacts on our health. If we worry and complain and conform to inappropriate cultural norms, our health may be a bigger challenge. Even so, finding things to celebrate is the right and helpful course of action in the middle of that challenge. Perhaps deliverance will come.

February 18

Manna — Exodus 16, John 6:32-33

Manna prefigures Christ as the bread of life and the source of provision for our spiritual need. When the people in the desert needed food, God provided a way of gathering it. Christ compared himself to this bread from heaven, sustaining food in a place of scarcity. When people proposed that Christ give them manna, he compared himself to that manna.

In the feeding of the 4,000 the disciples asked how they were supposed to find enough food to feed people in the wilderness, a complaint parallel to that of the Israelites. Similarly in the feeding of the 5000 they said they would need to work for months to earn enough for the needed food. Christ, in both cases, multiplied bread, replicating the manna experience.

Christ made the point in his interaction over manna, that the people living in the time of the desert all ended up dying, despite the miraculous provision of this food. In contrast, He said that anyone who is able to eat him will live forever. This very beautiful promise brings us to the Eucharist. We know that at the last supper Christ gave the disciples physical bread as a sign of his

coming death, but also as the life brought through resurrection. The communal Eucharistic meal sustains us, can heal us, reaffirms our forgiveness, and strengthens us.

February 19

Water from the Rock — Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 81, 95, I Corinthians 10:4

Water from the rock presents Christ as the Rock and the water as the Spirit. As Christ said, the water brings us eternal life. Christ fulfilled this in a particular way at the well in Samaria, and at the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. At that festival this event was commemorated as part of the journey in the wilderness wanderings.

This becomes an iconic moment for God's people. This story of Israel's complaints and unbelief and the miracle of water from the rock is repeated in scripture as a theme of testing and provision. Moses asked "Why are you testing the Lord?" and named the place Massah, "testing". An additional name, "Meribah", meaning "quarreling" is repeated twelve times through the Hebrew scripture. In reviewing the journey, Moses exhorted the people not to test God as they did at Massah, and Jesus quoted this when confronting Satan in the temptation.

We are also told that God was testing the people at Massah and they failed the test. The theme that God tests our hearts, faith, emotions, thoughts, and purifies us is repeated at least 32 times in scripture. When life is hard, when we lack something, it is helpful to see it as a test of our faith. But the positive words for our relationship with God—blessing, joy, rescue, deliver, save, peace, love, protect, prosper, heal, provide—occur ten times more than testing. The goal is faith, repeated 500 times.

Despite complaints and lack of faith, God provided abundant water, but the lesson was not learned and did not prevent more faith failures. The lesson for us is not to follow this bad example, hardening our hearts and forgetting God's miracles.

February 20

Judging the Amalekites — Exodus 17: 8-16, Psalm 83, Matthew 5:43-45

God judges sin by taking life, and Christ warns us of the possibility that we can lose our lives if we do not ask for mercy. In this story God says he will blot out the Amalekites, thus elevating them to an archetype of those who oppose God. They were descendants of Abraham, yet had become enemies.

The judgment was for Amalek's cruel treatment of a wandering people, striking down the weak stragglers. Here we see God's strong rejection of cruelty which

will repeatedly be used as a reason for judgment against nations. It was Saul's decision to preserve the life of the Amalekite king that caused him to be replaced by David who, in fact, did pursue the Amalekites, though even then, some escaped.

The word "genocide" was coined after World War II, but we can see the concept here that nations should cease to exist, and in this case, God authorized it. I wrestle with this. A web search yields numerous sites documenting and critiquing violence in scriptures, and I feel empathy for the angry websites, particularly when Christians advocate violence. Stories in the Hebrew scriptures have justified violence through history, a contradiction of Christ's teachings of non-violence and love of enemies. It is particularly painful to discover that this story was used to justify war against Native Americans.

In Christ, we are called to love all, even enemies. In recent history we see wars against cruelty as some of the most justifiable cases, for example, World War II. Our conflicts with terrorism and nations that support them are justified based on cruelty. Some Christians justify a split between the actions of nations and those of individuals, saying we are only called to operate with forgiveness on an individual level. But other Christians insist we must find a way to apply love of enemies on all levels, working for peace, and engaging in dialogue with nations with whom we are at odds. While we still operate today like Israel did with the Amalekites, Christ has introduced a challenge to our willingness to vilify other people and nations,

February 21

Jethro — Exodus 18, Luke 10:1-2

Jethro demonstrates similar organizational wisdom to that of Christ. On his visit to Moses and his daughter and grandchildren, he was pleased to see his son-in-law's success. He acknowledged that God is greater than all others Gods, and made sacrifices, joined by Israel's leaders.

God's wisdom came in a practical way to Moses through another person, as it so often does for us. Jethro noticed Moses' overwork in resolving conflicts, and offered advice to delegate. Leaders for groups of 10, 50, 100, and 1,000 could manage among themselves leaving less to report to Moses' core team of Aaron and Joshua, leaders of the twelve tribes and a group of 70 elders. We see a similar structure in Christ's choice of three intimate friends, twelve disciples and 70 sent to preach. Five-hundred came to see him after the resurrection, 3000 joined them on Pentecost, and they continued to grow as apostles and Paul planted more congregations.

The concept of circles of intimacy has been a great help to me in my own relationships. Who are my three closest friends? Who are in my circle of

twelve? Who are the seventy? By noticing this I can stay balanced in connecting with people in my life. From that healthy core of people I know, there is a chance to reach out in prayer and service beyond that group without being overwhelmed.

February 22

Mount Sinai—Exodus 19, Matthew 5:1-3

As the covenant is given, the call to love and worship God prefigures Christ's call to a relationship of forgiveness and love. Obedience was to flow from gratitude for God's liberating work, his rescue from their oppressive slavery. They were to become God's kingdom of priests, just as Christ would call people into the Kingdom of Heaven. The law foreshadows Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, where he took what was given at Mount Sinai and went deeper.

The people arrived at Mount Sinai two months after leaving Egypt. Moses ascended Mount Sinai seven times, four of them in this chapter, obtaining the constitution of the new kingdom. These ascents have parallels in Christ as he announced the Kingdom, called for purification through baptism, was raised from the dead on the third day, and was seen in glory at the transfiguration.

This is a story of God's powerful presence. At the giving of the law there was smoke, fire, and a trembling mountain, which sounds like the active volcano near my home. *The Message* uses volcano in this passage. Though the location of Mount Sinai is uncertain, for 1500 years our tradition has placed it in the Sinai Peninsula at a non-volcanic mountain. However, there are volcanoes in Midian where Moses lived after fleeing Egypt, and some Bible encyclopedias say this could be the route. When Moses saw the burning bush he was promised that he would return to that mountain to meet God.

This was a climactic moment for Israel, an archetypal mountaintop experience. When we have such moments of intense spirituality and encounter with God they sometimes come through the natural world and its wonders. As I see the fire from our volcano I am filled with gratitude for God's awesome power.

February 23

Covenant — Exodus 20, Romans 10:4

Just as Christ rescues us from the slavery of sin, God reminded them that he rescued them from slavery in Egypt. Because they were his people, no other gods should be worshiped, no idols should be made, and his name was not to be misused, all of which applies to believers today. No false image of God could be tolerated, because it is distorted and empty compared to the true image of God in Christ. The inability to obey this law became Israel's downfall, thus becoming an overarching theme for the rest of the Hebrew scripture.

If they disobeyed, the consequences would last four generations. If they obeyed, God would lavish his love on them for a thousand generations.

God taught them goodness. The primacy of the Ten Commandments is highlighted by the text, and Christians acknowledge the importance of obeying this moral law today. Unlike the rest of the instructions, God spoke these directly to all the people. The people responded fearfully, asking not to hear God's voice, but rather asking for Moses to serve as a mediator.

A solution for any failures is built in to the chapter, for us and for the people: a sacrifice to forgive sins. Sacrifice, or substitutionary atonement, is one important image for the meaning of Christ's death. The later part of this chapter describes a simple earth altar and the sacrifices to be made on them, a way of seeking forgiveness for any infringements of the law. Christ made the connection between sacrifice, covenant and himself in the Last Supper.

This is the call of faith in Christ, to repent, confess our sins, allow Him to change us, and to then walk in new life. For many of us, we can point to a date and time when we first did this. From that time on, there may be repeated confessions, but always with the understanding that Christ covers all our sins.

February 24

Freedom and Refuge — Exodus 21, I Peter 2:16

Before examining connections to Christ, it is important to think how differently these laws about slavery would have seemed at the time, compared to how they seem to us now. We know the terrible history of exploitation and oppression of slavery in our country and even that it was theologically justified. We also know the large number of people today in slavery situations who need to be liberated.

At the time, however, these must have seemed progressive laws to people who had come out of centuries of hopeless life-long slavery only two months previously. The idea that there could be limits, that there could be choices, and that women who were taken as wives must be treated as equals must have been so much better than what they had known that they would nod their heads. Over time, the complete repudiation of slavery arose from those who knew that in Christ we are neither slave nor free.

Just as Genesis exposes problems with polygamy, it exposes problems with slavery. Abraham had an Egyptian slave wife, Hagar, who suffered. In turn his descendant Joseph suffered injustices as a slave to an Egyptian. And the Israelite descendants suffered under oppressive slavery in Egypt. The limits on slavery introduced in the law made it a form of bonded servitude rather than

what became chattel slavery in our culture, the actual ownership of others as property. Our form of slavery was far more cruel.

Freeing slaves is later used as a metaphor for Christ's work. A slave's choice to stay with the master recalls New Testament passages of our choice to serve God, and Paul's choice to call himself God's slave. A slave girl taken as a wife must be treated as a full wife, and reminds us that we, as slaves to sin, are taken as the bride of Christ. A detail of the value of a slave who has died is that the repayment is 30 pieces of silver, the amount Judas received for betraying Christ, thus identifying him as a dying slave. The gospel encouraged masters to be just and fair and recognize equality between master and slave. Paul appealed to his friend to free the slave Onesimus in a short but important book, Philemon. Thus the gospel's message of equality began changes we continue to work on today.

The provisions for accidents and injury not only created legal precedents we still observe, they serve as yet another metaphor for Christ's work. We have injured others and violated boundaries and so deserve the death penalty, but He takes the penalty for us. Cities of refuge were places of those who had accidentally murdered another. Their imagery serves as analogous to Christ as a place of protection from the punishment that we deserve.

Neither Jews nor Christians accept slavery today through centuries of reinterpretation, reminding us that these are ancient texts, part of the culture of their day, and not always rigidly applicable now. Interestingly, Jewish commentators have used the compensation laws in verses 22-23 to decide that the fetus is not a human until birth, thus giving a different view on abortion than that of most Christians. A text like this should give us the grace to be humble about how to apply scripture in our world today, and give us a willingness to acknowledge and repent of ways scripture has been used to treat others with cruelty.

February 25

An obedient life — Exodus 22-23, Romans 13:9-10

Christ taught us that love for neighbor covers all the details of the law. In this section the Ten Commandments are elaborated in more detail:

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Do not murder | Exodus 21:12-36 |
| Do not steal | Exodus 22:1-15 |
| Do not commit adultery | Exodus 22:16-17 |
| Do not covet | Exodus 22:21-27 |
| Do not worship other gods | Exodus 22:16-20, 28-31; 23:13 |
| Do not bear false witness | Exodus 23:1-9 |
| Honor the Sabbath | Exodus 23:10-12 |
| I, the Lord, rescued you | Exodus 23:14-19 |

Covetousness is the sin that can lead to oppressing foreigners and other vulnerable people. The exhortation is repeated twice here and six more times in the law with sixty more exhortations to be inclusive of foreigners among them. We are also warned against being swayed by a crowd to do evil, twisting justice against a poor person, or putting an innocent person to death, all of which were done to Christ.

The New Testament tells us that the law is summarized in loving our neighbor. It also includes instructions for holy living that parallel what is included here. In Colossians 3 there are instructions that parallel these instructions of what to avoid: sexual sin, greed, angry behavior, lying, treating the vulnerable without equality, and a call to mercy. We now have the Holy Spirit in our lives, enabling us to love as we are called to do.

Participation in three annual festivals was required and each festival was prophetic of Christ. The Festival of Unleavened Bread prefigured the crucifixion. Pentecost prefigured the giving of the Spirit and start of the church. Tabernacles prefigured the second coming.

The call to conquer Canaan, led by God's messenger, seemingly the pre-incarnate Christ himself, was the climactic command in the covenant contained in these four chapters. God's command to kill the people of these idolatrous nations raises difficult ethical and interpretive questions we will look at in the conquest narratives. But for Christians, our relationship to idolatry has changed. Paul was deeply troubled by the idols he saw, but used them as a springboard to call people away from them to the true God. He advocated witnessing to the true God as one associated with those worshipping idols. We can honor the call to abolish idolatry by being repentant of placing anything above God in our own hearts and that of others.

The qualities of character we are to have are not only those of avoiding sin, but are the positive ones laid out in Colossians 3: holy, tenderhearted, merciful, kind, humble, gentle, patient, making allowances for other's faults, forgiving offenders, full of love, harmony, and peace.

February 26

Ratifying the Covenant — Exodus 24, John 1:16-17

Both the covenant with Israel and Christ's new covenant called people to obedience. But obedience followed deliverance from slavery. In the old covenant Christ's work occurs as images, foreshadowing, a prediction of a future reality.

Once the covenant was given, the people formally accepted it and agreed to obey these provisions. We can see an analogy between Moses writing the covenant, and the gospel writers providing us with Christ's teaching. Moses said the blood confirmed the covenant God had made, and Christ spoke of the cup of wine as a sign of his blood making a new covenant.

God showed his glory to the leaders of the people, sharing a meal together in the divine/human unity we see in Christ sharing the Eucharist with his disciples. Perhaps the covenant meal was with the pre-incarnate Christ. It raises interesting questions, since elsewhere it says we cannot see God and live. The floor of brilliant blue lapis lazuli floor sounds similar to the crystal glass sea in Revelation. After this, Moses and Joshua again ascended the mountain for 40 days and nights, and after the resurrection Christ taught his followers about the Kingdom of Heaven for 40 days before his ascension.

This is a beautiful and mysterious story, one that speaks of an intimacy with God that one supposes could have kept Aaron, sons and the seventy elders full of faith and obedience. Yet before forty days passed, they were worshipping an idol they had made. The disciples also, after seeing Christ's glory in miracles and the transfiguration and having eaten a covenant meal, then denied and abandoned him. How can one go so quickly from such a mountain-top experience into disloyalty? If we are honest, we know we can do the same. We are so fragile, so unable to stay in faith on our own.

February 28

The Ark of the Covenant — Exodus 25, Revelation 11:19

The Ark of the Covenant prefigures the Trinity: the presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ, the reigning Father, the invisible presence of the Spirit. The Ark in the Most Holy Place was the symbol of God's throne, or his footstool on earth. In the instructions Moses received, the Ark was the first and most important part of the Tabernacle. The Hebrew word for Ark, *arown*, means chest or coffin, fittingly symbolizing Christ's death. Two angels with outspread wings adorned the cover, thus pre-figuring the resurrection where angels announced the living Christ. They are described as sitting on either side of where Christ's body had lain, almost in perfect imagery of the Mercy Seat. The lesson of the Ark and of the tabernacle as a whole is that God lives among us.

Combined with imagery of God's throne in Ezekiel and Revelation, the Ark became a medieval artistic motif. The Father on the throne held Christ crucified or dying, with a small dove of the Spirit linking them; it became a symbol of the Trinity known as the Gnadenstuhl, or Mercy Seat.² This

powerful image of the Father's compassionate engagement in Christ's suffering demonstrated his love and power in the face of our pain and suffering.

We are told to come boldly to God's mercy seat, now that Christ has opened the way into God's Holy place. Recognizing that every aspect of the tabernacle was intended to be a holy place and visualize God's presence with His people, we can apply the symbols to our life of prayer today. The Ark represents a place of worship, awe at God's holiness, and communion with a living Christ.

March 1

Plans for the Tabernacle — Exodus 26, John 1:14

The Tabernacle is an image of Christ's presence. *The Tent of God* explains:

God also had a tent, built at His own command, according to the pattern He showed to Moses on the mountain. The startling fact that the first sanctuary built by God's people was a tent is obscured for us by the translation "tabernacle," though "tent of meeting" might be a better name. Obviously, while the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, the house of God had to be movable. But here, too, there is a deeper spiritual meaning. God's tent is a symbol of His amazing love and condescension, a sign that He wished to live among His people in a house like theirs. And, even more, it is a sign that God shared the wanderings of His wayward people, for He Himself tells us that He "walked among them in a tent." Even this does not exhaust its meaning. For God continued to "walk among" His people in a tent for nearly three hundred years after the people lived in houses. When David wished to build Him a house of cedar, God replied that He would walk in a tent until His people had peace from their enemies. Thus the tent of God becomes a symbol of the fact that the journey of God's people is not solitary, nor is it purposeless. God Himself accompanies us as we travel. Indeed, He directs our journey, He creates in our hearts the wish to return to Him, and the power to travel along this otherwise quite impassable road. All of this culminates in the incarnation, when God actually *becomes* man, and walks the dusty roads of Palestine. The Old Testament ends with the amazing event of God assuming not a tent of fine embroidered linen, but the tent of human nature. "And the Word became flesh, and camped among us, and we beheld his glory."³

Today, each believer is metaphorically described as God's temple because the Holy Spirit is in us. It is startling to think that we also are God's tents moving through the world.

March 2

The Menorah — Exodus 27, John 8:12

The tabernacle lamp prefigures Christ as light of the world, burning continually. In this chapter we are introduced to the altar which we are aware

symbolizes crucifixion, and to the courtyard, symbolizing a sacred space for worship. Inside the Holy Place was the lamp, along with a table for bread, and an altar with incense.

The tabernacle light was lit around 1400 BC and was part of worship until the destruction of the first temple in 586 BC. Seventy years later it shown once more when the Temple was rebuilt. Another interruption is the story behind Hanukkah. Jewish priests revolted in 167 BC against Antiochus IV Epiphanes who had massacred many Jews. For eight years he forbade Jewish religious practices and ordered Zeus worship. He sent an Athenian senator to dedicate the temple to Zeus who covered the altar with prohibited offerings.

The Talmud says that after the forces of Antiochus IV had been removed from the Temple, the Jews discovered that almost all the holy oil had been profaned. They found one sealed container, enough for the Temple lamp for one day, yet it burned eight days, enough time to make more oil. Because of that, today's Menorahs have room for the eight days of the miracle and a ninth for a candle to light the others, in contrast to the Temple candlestick of seven branches. The historian Josephus says that the restoration of sacrifices lasted eight days and was called the "Festival of Lights." The leaders instituted this as an annual festival. The Menorah, reminiscent of the tabernacle lamp, shines in homes annually to this day.

This was called the Festival of Dedication when Christ attended and declared that he was one with God. The instruction was that the light should be constant, but in 70 AD the Temple was once more destroyed. Now it is us, the people of God who are called temples because the Holy Spirit is in us. We are exhorted to let the light of Christ shine into the world through us.

March 3

Plans for the Priesthood — Exodus 28-29, Hebrews 2:17

Christ is our High Priest and the role pre-figured him. Garments described in these chapters reflect the color, style, and artistic motifs of the tabernacle. The High Priest has been described as a small tabernacle carrying God's presence. Clothing added dignity, was to be glorious and beautiful, a uniform that would distinguish him, made of fine linen, gold, blue, purple and scarlet thread.

Names of the twelve tribes were carved in onyx on the shoulders, representing carrying these names before the Lord. Priests were dressed analogously to the spiritual armor of God. The breastplate, covered with twelve jewels for each of the twelve tribes are also in Revelation as the jeweled gates of the New Jerusalem and were beautiful and represented carrying the names before God. The priests also had a woven belt (like the belt of truth), and a turban with a

gold plate attached (like a helmet of salvation) which said they were set apart as holy to the Lord.

The sacrifices for their dedication served to set them apart as well. They were to serve in a place made holy by God's glorious presence. We are also called a kingdom of priests, and so can set ourselves into the picture as well: to be dressed beautifully as righteous people, to constantly carry with us the names of those for whom we pray, and to be set apart. Our calling is to live at all times as people who are holy, aware of God's glorious presence. We have a role that makes us distinguished, and is full of dignity.

March 4

Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh — Exodus 30, Matthew 2:9-12

When the Wise Men came to see the Christ child, they brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. In the tabernacle these three things played an important part in priestly prayer, and this chapter explains their roles. The incense altar in the Holy Place was covered with gold. The priests washed and anointed themselves with oil containing myrrh and other spices. They burned incense on the altar which included frankincense. The formulas for the oil and incense were exclusive for worshipping God. Consequently, it seems particularly fitting that they were brought as gifts to Christ.

They remind us of the crucifixion: gold for a king, and myrrh and frankincense for suffering. Myrrh is a resin which bleeds from a tree when pierced, and is medicinal. Frankincense is resin obtained by slashing the bark of the tree, and is used for healing wounds.

In the Holy Place there were three pieces of furniture, and between them they appealed to all the senses: the light from the candlestick made it possible to see the beautifully woven curtains; the bread and drink on the table appealed to touch and taste; and the incense appealed to the sense of smell. It also could become a cloud of smoke by adding coals and the result simulated the Cloud of God's presence. A census tax on all men provided funds for this place of worship, and is once more called a ransom, reminding us that God owns our lives.

In Revelation we are told that incense represented the prayers of God's people. That is reiterated as the incense is mixed with fire from the altar and the result is thunder, lightning and a terrible earthquake. This image of prayer as reversed thunder was taken by the poet George Herbert to emphasize that God honors us as active partners in the world. Our prayers matter.

Our forgiveness from sin as we approach God is prayer matters also. Through history priests and kings were anointed with oil to set them apart and make

them holy. Christ came fulfilling these roles, and has passed them to us, making us priests and royalty. We now carry on his work as anointed, holy, and worshipping people empowered by his Holy Spirit.

March 5

Creativity — Exodus 31, Ephesians 2:10

The artists, Bezalel and Oholiab, are images of Christ as artist. In this chapter artists are commissioned by God's direct selection and instruction to Moses, showing their importance. These artists were given skills as designers and the ability to teach others their crafts. Creativity is honored.

The second half of the chapter gives instructions regarding the Sabbath. Israel was given two reasons to observe this: God's rest on the seventh day after creation, and the liberation from slavery. The point is made that employees are to rest as well. Jewish culture benefitted from sacred time devoted to reflection on God and his commands, becoming more reflective, analytical, and ethical as a result. We are told that we should enjoy and delight in the Sabbath, and that we should gather with others.

Art is a way of living in the image of the creator, and Sabbath rest has a beautiful side-effect of enhancing our creativity. Today we know, that no matter how minimal our talent, engagement in art gives us a sense of accomplishment, enhances brain function, increases our empathy, and is a great way to reduce stress. Art is even a great way of improving our health. Music, visual art, dance, writing, theater, even cooking—we can all benefit from choosing to try things to the glory of the greatest Artist.

March 6

Aaron — Exodus 32, Luke 13:3

Christ is our High Priest, a perfect one, in contrast to imperfect Aaron. Aaron started out well, helpful to Moses in his negotiations with Pharaoh, using his rod to do miracles, helping to organize the people. Things deteriorated badly at Mount Sinai. When the people complained about Moses' long absence, Aaron made the infamous golden calf for them to worship.

Moses returned and was furious, administering a judgment of drinking gold-water. He organized the Levites into a harsh policing role, killing 3000, and there were more deaths from plague. "Have no other gods" and "don't make idols" were commands numbers one and two in the list of Ten Commandments to which they had agreed, and so quickly violated.

Moses had to plead for Aaron's life to be spared. Despite this failure, Aaron was chosen as high priest. The striking theme of the overall story is that God will

forgive our sins. His blatant sin was forgiven and he was clothed with dignity and given a special role as a leader of the people. In fact, while Aaron was making the golden calf, the beautiful garments he was to wear to mediate between God and the people were being described to Moses.

This theme, the failure of human priesthood, threads through scripture as the preparation for a perfect priest. Bad priests, false prophets, arrogant warriors and incompetent kings serve as foils for someone much better to come.

What a dramatic demonstration of God's grace to take a failed leader who led people into idolatry and make him the primary representative of his holiness. There was no cover-up since all the people who had to acknowledge him in his new role knew about the failure. Aaron did not have an image of righteousness, but rather the reality of being forgiven.

How encouraging for us who seek to love and serve others in priestly roles of listening and focusing people on God to know that our own failures are part of the story. Honest sharing of our own woundedness and God's healing is good—we do not need to worry about maintaining an image of super spirituality.

March 7

Grace and Forgiveness — Exodus 33-34, Ephesians 2:4-9

Moses' mediation for the people before God parallels Christ's mediation for us. The people failed so quickly. Moses received the covenant, the people and elders ratified it, he left again, and in a little over a month they broke their agreement, and many died as a result. This story highlights the grace that was so much a part of the law since God forgave them and continued his life with them. God's unfailing love and forgiveness are for us as well.

God's first response was to say he would not travel with the people. Moses called for repentance and the people responded with mourning. Moses' intimacy with God continued, and he pleaded for God to accompany them, and he asked to see God. For the seventh time he went up the mountain, now with a replacement stone tablet, and he saw God's glory. God responded with grace, promising to accompany the people, and then for forty days reiterated aspects of the law.

Ceasing to worship God and turning to no-gods, to idols, brought death. Paul points out that this is mankind's foundational mistake, but Christ is the solution. This point is hammered home over and over in the Hebrew scriptures which are brutally honest about the failure of the people not to worship idols. Because it is repeated so much, we need to take it seriously for our own lives and examine ourselves and our priorities. Often it is our worries that are an indicator of what we are worshipping instead of God.

March 8
Details of the Tabernacle — Exodus 35, Hebrews 8:5

The structure, furnishings, materials, and rituals of the tabernacle connect to Christ. Scriptures present symbolic meanings for elements used in the tabernacle. For example, gold for God's city, silver for redemption, bronze for judgment, blue for God's throne, scarlet for purification, white linen for righteousness, and wood for the cross.

Christ's work correlates to places in the tabernacle: reconciling us to God at the altar, cleansing us at the large wash basin, inviting us into his presence in the holy place with bread/light/incense, and welcoming us into the sacred throne room of the most holy place. The four sides had structural wooden supports with crossbeams covered in gold, making five crosses on each side.

Curtains were particularly beautiful. Images of angels were woven into the sheets of fine linen in blue, purple and scarlet. When my children were small we found instructions for making a toy tabernacle. Our process paralleled the scripture story: a set of plans, collecting materials, constructing pieces and setting it up. As we enjoyed our project, I could not help but think of the scriptural comparison that the real tabernacle was a model, a miniature of heaven.

Clearly, places of worship are intended to be beautiful, and the historical church has constructed many such spaces and filled them with remarkable works of art. Our homes can also be places of worship with beautiful things that remind us that God is with us.

March 9
Why Repetition? — Exodus 36, Luke 2:37

Images of worshipping Christ in the tabernacle are highlighted by repetition. Seven chapters give plans for the tabernacle, and six chapters describe building it. The sheer quantity of material should alert us to the importance of this theme for the overall story of scripture: worship in a beautiful place honors God.

Exodus has five chapters of guidelines and thirty-five chapters about relationship to God, and that proportion parallels our spiritual experience. At the beginning of the book, the people were oppressed. A Deliverer was raised up who led them through the death and resurrection of the Red Sea just as we are liberated from sin through Christ's death and resurrection. (Exodus 1-14) As the people began their lives in freedom, they were shaky complainers, as we tend to be. (Exodus 15-18) Once they arrived at Mount Sinai, they had an

opportunity to become grounded in God's word and to develop in their relationship with him. (Exodus 19-24)

When Moses received instructions for ongoing spiritual life in the imagery of the tabernacle—repentance, cleansing, fellowship, worship—the people could have been patient, obeying what they knew. (Exodus 25-31) Instead, they became frightened and turned to idolatry. (Exodus 32) which required repentance and God's mercy. (Exodus 33,34) Then they turned to crafting a beautiful tabernacle, and dedicated priests and the place (Exodus 35-40), starting to learn a life of worship.

In this chapter we see that they showed changed hearts with their generosity. Metalworking craftsmen, carpenters, jewelers and weavers were needed. The weavers' work on 6 feet by 42 feet pieces could have been done in the Egyptian style of two women working on a horizontal loom. Then the embroidery of blue, purple and scarlet cherubim would result in a bright, lively design representing the angels at worship.

Living among gloriously rich, bold, colorful woven goods made on backstrap looms in Guatemala, I can imagine how glorious the result would have been. The creativity reminds me that we have a part to give and play in making things beautiful for worship, and even more fundamentally, that we are to be beautiful places of worship ourselves.

March 10

Bread of the Presence — Exodus 37, Luke 22:19

Bread in the holy place is an image of Christ's body, and in this chapter the table for the bread is made as well as the Ark, lampstand, and incense table. The detail of making containers—bowls, ladles, jars and pitchers—for wine offerings makes the connection to the Eucharist even more clear.

Luci Shaw's poem, *The Partaking*, connects this holy bread, Christ, and us.

Bread of the Presence was
in Moses' day
served on engraved gold plates
to you and your select few.
And in exclusive glory
one alone and lonely man
sprinkled, with fear,
the ceremonial drops that pleaded
failure for another year
to you, known then
as only high and holy—

heavens apart
from common men.

Often we taste the
granular body of wheat
(Think of the Grain that died!)
and swallow together
the grape's warm bitter blood
(Remember First Fruit!)
knowing ourselves a part of you
as you took part
of us, flowed
in our kind of veins
quickenened cells like ours
into a human subdividing.

Now you are multiplied—
we are your fingers and your feet,
your tender heart—
we are your broken side.

Take now and crumble small and
cast us
on the world's waters—
your contemporary showbread.
Feed us
to more than five thousand men
and in our dark daily flood of living
pour yourself out again!

John 6:53-56 —Luci Shaw

March 11

Building the Tabernacle — Exodus 38, I Corinthians 3:16

John's gospel shows how Christ is like the tabernacle. In this chapter the fabric enclosing the space is described, and simply by setting up this boundary as they camped, this became a holy place. Similarly, Christ incarnate in human flesh became the boundary in which God was present. The remarkable thing is that we are called to become like him in this way.

The first piece of furniture was the altar, and in John 1 Christ was identified as the lamb of God who takes away sin. Next came the washbasin, and in John there is baptism. Inside we have the bread, and Christ identified himself as the bread of life in John 6. We have the candlestick, and Christ identified himself as the light of the world in John 8. The incense symbolized prayer, and

in John 17 Jesus prayed to the Father for us. The veil separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies was torn apart at the moment of Christ's death. He opened up the way for us to approach the Mercy Seat and to live in God's presence.

A sacred process of becoming like Christ is represented for us in this place of worship. We first repent of sin, are baptized, and then learn to live in communion with him. If we follow Christ, over time it changes who we are, and the moment will come when we stand before God's throne.

March 12

Holy to the Lord — Exodus 39, Hebrews 4:14

The High Priest wore a medallion on his turban engraved "Set apart as Holy to the Lord." Similarly, Christ said that the Father had set him apart and sent him into the world. The priests were clothed and anointed to fulfill their role, just as Christ, the anointed one, was commissioned to fulfill his priestly role by the Spirit. The clothing for carrying out this office is similar to that of Christ in Revelation 1.

We can apply each aspect of the priest's garments not only to Christ's priesthood, but also to our own priestly role in the world.

- The rich colors—gold, blue, purple, scarlet—remind us that the care of souls is a beautiful and honored task.
- Jewels on the breastplate and the stones engraved with the names of Israel remind us of constantly carrying those we care about into God's presence. Their beauty and value is not forgotten.
- The bells on Aaron's garment were a musical proclamation of worship.
- The woven pomegranates symbolized life. As a Christian symbol of the resurrection, including in paintings of Christ as a child holding the fruit, they celebrate the joy of eternal life.

The high priest is the main representative, but we recall that Israel was told they would become a kingdom of priests able to carry out a reconciling role for the world. The same call is on us in the New Testament to be royal priests.

March 13

The Cloud of God — Exodus 40, Acts 1:9-11

The bright cloud of God prefigured Christ's glory. When the tabernacle was dedicated, the cloud was a sign of God's presence. Moses and 70 elders climbed the mountain for a meal in God's presence. Then God's glory in the cloud on Mount Sinai remained six days. On the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from inside the cloud. To the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, the glory of the Lord appeared at the summit like a consuming fire.

Christ's ascension, the second coming, and the transfiguration connect his glory with clouds. The disciples saw Moses, Elijah, and Christ together and a bright cloud came over them and God spoke, saying Christ was his beloved Son.

Most of the chapter consists of people carrying out divine instructions to set up the space for God's glory. Once the glory became part of the space, its movement served to guide them. For us, the analogy is that as the temple of God, we are to be filled with his glory. This first happened with the filling of the Holy Spirit first with God's glory described as tongues of fire. From that time on, the Spirit within them guided them, just as he does for us today.

Christ said he had given glory to his disciples, and we are challenged by this to become like them, bright with goodness and love that draws others to God.

March 14

Broken Body — Leviticus 1-3, Matthew 26:26

Christ compared his broken body to the grain offerings which were part of many centuries of the sacrificial system. He compared his blood to the blood that was used as way a cleansing people to be able to enter into God's presence in worship. In this chapter we read the details of how the animals were cut apart and how bodies were torn before they were consumed in fire. In the same way, the crucifixion was an excruciating tearing apart of the body.

The sacrificial system demonstrated that God is merciful and forgiving. We see that every thing and every action pointed to Christ. He was in every detail of where the sacrifices took place as we saw in the construction of the tabernacle. He was in the priests doing the work, and in the animals they sacrificed. He was in the blood that purified, the fire that consumed, the bread that was eaten, and the wine that was drunk. He was the forgiver of sins, the reconciler, and the one eating a shared meal of peace. Seen through Christ, these ancient and unfamiliar practices become beautiful symbols.

From these chapters we see that there is not just one meaning to sacrifice, but that there are many nuances: a gift, the giving of a life to sustain us, a substitute for us as sinners, eating together in peace, the reconciled community, and others. The first three offerings show us different aspects of the crucifixion:

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <i>Whole burnt offering</i> | Christ gave himself to us in the death on the cross. |
| <i>Grain offering</i> | Christ offered his body broken for us. |
| <i>Peace offering</i> | Christ created a communion meal that brings peace. |

These chapters offer detailed instructions to priests regarding how to do their jobs and so is a notoriously dull and off-putting part of scripture. It is repetitive, and it is fair to skim. It also provides occasion for meditation on Christ's body broken for us, and our frequent remembrance of this in the Eucharistic meal. We cannot meditate enough on the crucifixion and resurrection and its implications for our own lives that both suffer and rise up in power.

March 15

Crown of Thorns—Leviticus 4-6, Matthew 26:27-28

Christ made the comparison between his own blood and the sacrifices explained here. As sacrifice, Christ's blood was poured out and by being taken into the Most Holy Place, it opens the way for us to be reconciled to God. Christ's back was scourged with a lead-tipped whip, which resulted in profuse bleeding. Also, since blood vessels are close to the surface, scalp wounds bleed profusely, and the crown of thorns would have resulted in great quantities of blood on his face and body.

In these chapters there is an emphasis on how sin is covered and cleansed by sacrifice:

Absolution offering or sin offering — Unintentional sins are completely cleansed.
Compensation offering or guilt offering — Reconciliation with others.

Centuries of symbolic theater built an understanding of forgiveness of sin. At the right time, Christ came and fulfilled every aspect of this imagery, so we come to him in prayer and accept once more the completeness of his sacrifice. Anything we have done wrong can be transformed, and holding on to self-criticism is made pointless.

March 16

The Third Day — Leviticus 7, Matthew 17:22-23

Christ repeatedly prophesied that he would die and rise on the third day. The third day of resurrection occurs symbolically in the sacrificial system, and symbolically in many other stories. For example, it was on the third day after Passover that the Israelites were completely delivered from Pharaoh.

Sacrifices were not to be used after the third day—they were obsolete. While this brings to mind a practical avoidance of food poisoning in a time without refrigeration, it symbolically brings to mind the end of all sacrifices by Christ's resurrection on the third day.

Forty years after Christ's death, the Temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system came to an end. Without a tabernacle or Temple these laws could not literally be carried out, and Judaism adapted to that reality, making these symbols of spiritual offerings. From the New Testament we see that we are to offer our own bodies as a living sacrifice. We are crucified with Christ and now live in his resurrection life.

On a practical level, what does it mean to me to live as one sacrificed and resurrected? We are warned that on-going suffering to be part of redemption is to be expected. Mourning with those who mourn. Caring for those who hurt. When we mourn and hurt, we need to keep hungering for righteousness.

March 17

Image of the Priest — Leviticus 8-9, Hebrews 8:6-7

Aaron became the first high priest, and Hebrews tells us that though Christ has this same role, it is far higher and better since it involves going into heaven itself. God's glorious presence affirmed Aaron and his sons in these new roles, and the people shouted with joy.

It is in John's gospel that we see Christ presented to us as a priest. There is no birth story, but the identity of Christ with God the creator is followed by the announcement that he is like a tabernacle among the people, the place where priests brought people into relationship with God. In John there are more stories and events centered in the temple than in the other gospels, and in the passion narratives we have the most references to the fact that these events are occurring at Passover, the time of the sacrifice of the lamb.

In John Christ gave them the priestly role of offering forgiveness as bearers of God's presence through the Holy Spirit within them. In our taking up our roles as priests in the world, listening to the confessions of others and sharing the forgiveness of Christ is part of our ministry. The listener role needed in the world is infinite—we can be priests almost anytime and anywhere if we remember that.

After the consecration a point is made that their work began on the eighth day. The symbolism is that this was the day of the resurrection, the first day of the new creation. We must not forget that we are living in a world made new and that we will see it complete some day. In the midst of any suffering, we always live in hope, knowing that creation started over when Christ rose from the dead.

March 18

Priests who Failed — Leviticus 10, Hebrews 12:27-29

The death of disobedient priests contrasts with Christ's death as a perfectly obedient priest. The sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, were to take incense in to the tabernacle, but when they added it on top of coals of fire, an explosion killed them. Carelessness and fire do not mix, and carelessness and serving God do not mix well either.

Fire had been a positive sign of God's presence when they were ordained in the previous chapter. Here, however, its dangerous quality that we know so well took their lives. Even today one can find news stories of fires which were started by incense killing people.

This is one of a number of stories where a leader representing God—prophet, priest, or king—is held to higher standards than others and removed from position when they fail. Spiritual leadership is demanding and the New Testament warns that teachers are judged strictly. God did not even allow Aaron to grieve, demanding that his position take priority over his personal relationships.

This story warns us not to tamper with what is holy, but to humbly recognize God's holiness in our world, and to seek to become holy ourselves through the work of Christ and the Spirit. It also should make us cautious about desiring positions of spiritual leadership; it is a serious responsibility.

March 19

Eating right — Leviticus 11, Matthew 15:10-11

Christ took the dietary system and transfigured it into the spiritual ways we defile ourselves in what we say and do. He explained that it is what comes from within us that is the problem. With this instruction he transfigured rules about food into the call to holiness they always symbolized. Despite any restrictions, the underlying reminder is that God provides our food.

The same principle received emphasis for the apostle Peter in a vision of unclean animals which applied to breaking down the barrier with Gentiles. Christ's redemption of all superseded the past.

If you look at the food list you will see, that with the exception of pork and some shellfish, our culture tends to agree with what one does not eat. Refrigeration has made these things safer, but disease is still possible.

Good nutrition teaches us how to eat. Unfortunately, we can become legalistic or rebel against what we knew is best for good health. The principle to eat and drink to God's glory makes sense. Rachel Stone wrote *Eat with Joy: Redeeming*

*God's Gift of Food*⁴ which beautifully addresses many of the complexes we currently have around food. She shares that we can learn to receive food as God's good gift, bless others with it, and celebrate community life through food.

In our time there is so much information available on healthy lifestyles, including exercise, reducing stress and a good diet, that with God's help we can do this. We can ask that our habits regarding food, exercise, sleep, and stress management will be done well with God's help.

March 20

Purification after Birth — Leviticus 12, Luke 2:25-32

Christ's parents fulfilled the post-birth requirements laid out in this chapter. The miracle of any birth is thus tied to the miraculous incarnation of God as man through birth. After circumcision on the eighth day, the family went to the Temple on the fortieth day and took a purification offering. In this context we have the encounter of Jesus with two prophets who recognized him as Messiah, Simeon and Anna, both deeply spiritual people.

Simeon, a man wise and old,
Heard from God of Israel's release
And at the temple found a child to hold.

"Lord, now I can die in peace,
I've seen the Savior, your light to all.
Let Israel's glory now increase."

He blessed the parents and the child so small
"To some this child will be their greatest joy.
Others will reject him and will fall."

"Mary, don't let your pain destroy,
Though a sword will pierce your very soul
As you see what happens to your boy."

He heard from God and understood.
Like him I wish to hear God's voice
And be one who lives in His good.

Christ has come and we can now rejoice,
By God's grace, this is our holy choice.

March 21

Leprosy Healed — Leviticus 13, Luke 5:12-13

Leprosy symbolizes sin and Christ healed both the physical and spiritual disease. In his healing ministry he told lepers to go to the priest who served as a medical inspector.

Healing leprosy is an accomplishment of our lifetime. For thousands of years this bacteria-caused disease was incurable. Even in 1950 when Mother Teresa began her work in India, leprosy was widespread, and she built leper cities. Multi-Drug-Therapy began in the early 1980s, and patients could be treated over a twelve-month period. Now there is a single dose treatment. In the past 20 years 15 million people have been cured.

For us, the instruction on how to be cured from the difficulties of spiritual, emotional, and physical illnesses can be practical. The wisdom of a counselor who can listen and advise, learning to enter into prayer in our solitude, and finding the loving support of a community are all integral to our healing. I can attest that each of these were important to alleviate my own depression, the depression of someone close to me, and now are part of how I advise those who ask me to serve as their counselor.

March 22

The Healing Process—Leviticus 14, Matthew 8:4

Christ affirmed the process outlined in this chapter to prove the cure. It is possible to see in these steps some possible analogies to the spiritual cure from sin that Christ provides us. In this chapter we have both the purification of a person and then the purification of places.

The details of the rituals surrounding demonstrating that leprosy had been healed can be instructive for healing experiences for us. The first step was one-on-one interaction between the priest and the patient. In personal pastor care the priest would offer a sacrifice, sprinkle blood on the leper repeatedly and then pronounce them clean. For us we can see that it is Christ's blood that purifies us, that we are healed and purified in him. One detail of the ritual was that a living bird would be let loose, a symbol of freedom. Clothing would be washed, reminding us of the fact that what people can now see in the one healed is righteousness and holiness. The washing of the body reminds us of baptism and all the symbolism surrounding that.

The second step was a week of personal reflection and solitude for the healed person, much like a retreat. They would stay outside their tent, engage in more washing, and then on the eighth day, the day of new creation, take lambs, flour and oil for sacrifice. Once more we are reminded of Christ's sacrifice and the ongoing celebration of Eucharist.

The final step was reintegration to the worship patterns of the community. At the tabernacle they would be re-presented to the community, a lamb presented as a public acknowledgement that sins were forgiven, and the blood placed on different parts of the body as a symbol of dedication of every part of the healed

body. Sins were forgiven in another sin offering and they were affirmed to be completely well.

This is a drawn out spiritual process to make profound changes, and it serves as a lesson that we also must expect our spiritual purification and transformation to be a process. There are deep places in us that have been affected by the disease of sin, and it takes time and effort for the healing needed. But the end-result of the process is complete restoration to normal community life.

March 23
Washing — Leviticus 15, John 13:8

Cleansing from contamination on a physical level parallels the cleansing Christ brings on a spiritual level. In this chapter “wash clothes” and “bathe” are each repeated eight times. Water for cleansing our bodies prefigures the water of baptism for cleaning our hearts.

Hand-washing is nowhere in the Torah, and it had become ritualized in Pharisaic Judaism as an extension of the commands here. Jesus challenged this by saying that eating with unwashed hands did not make people unholy.

Nevertheless, there was something deeply right about the culture of cleanliness that the Law helped create. Washing clothes and bathing, cleaning linens, cleaning the house, and even washing hands are necessary for good health. World Health Organization campaigns encourage hand-washing, finding that it eliminates many diseases, and has more impact than many more complex health interventions. Keeping our homes, our clothes, ourselves, our hair, our teeth, our dishes, and our possessions clean is an image of order that coordinates with the holiness to which we are called. John Wesley coined the phrase, “Cleanliness is indeed next to godliness.”

On the eighth day, once cleansed, people brought an offering to show their purification. “Eighth day” is repeated nine times in the book and marks the same day the Resurrected Christ appeared to his disciples. Each reference completes a call to holiness, prefiguring resurrection. In addition to purification, priests began their work, children were marked as part of the community, healing was demonstrated, celebration was completed, and rest was complete.

Brother Lawrence, the medieval monastic whose advice in *The Practice of the Presence of God*⁵ is so wise, had it right: “Lord of all pots and pans and things, make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates!” We need to see the spirituality in washing dishes, doing laundry, taking care of ourselves, and cleaning our houses. We want to do every small and trivial task, conscious of God’s presence, offering these things to his glory.

March 24

Yom Kippur — Leviticus 16, Hebrews 9:7-8

Details of the holy day Yom Kippur symbolize Christ's death and our resulting freedom from sin. On this day the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place. God, the one who forgives, is presented here.

After temple sacrifices ceased and the ceremony could no longer be carried out, Yom Kippur became a day of prayer and fasting, actually preceded by ten days of repentance beginning with Rosh Hashanah. This is how most Jews observe this holiday in our time. A song from this 10-day period is the *Avina Malkeinu*, a beautiful prayer. Music for the service includes the *Kol Nidrei*. Max Bruch wrote a particularly beautiful cello/piano version. Beethoven used the theme in his Quartet in C Sharp Minor.

I am struck by the humility of an annual corporate day of repentance, a time of recognizing that no matter how much we desire to follow God, we so often fall short. Our American-style optimistic "God is on my side" Christianity perhaps needs some balance with the humble recognition that we are not always on his side, even when we vociferously suppose that is so. Our corporate life would doubtless benefit from more poverty of spirit. May it be so.

March 25

Life — Leviticus 17, John 6:53-56

Christ, in instituting the new covenant, clearly links his own blood to the blood of sacrifices for forgiveness of sins. Blood is an important theme in scripture, occurring 277 times with 71 instances in the New Testament. Leviticus outstrips other books with 58 references. God's miracle of life is in our blood.

Blood was not to be drunk from animals as a sign of respect for life. In contrast we must symbolically drink Christ's blood to receive his life. When Christ said this his disciples responded that this was a very difficult concept. Christ acknowledged that they were offended, and it sounds strange to us as well. The metaphor of his death being the means of our life is made very clear by the metaphor of life in the blood.

Science tells us that blood carries necessary nutrients and oxygen to cells, removes waste, fight infections, carries messages about damaged tissue, transports hormones. It regulates body temperature, which, if too cold or too hot, causes death. With five liters of blood in adult bodies, the loss of two liters brings death. In by-pass or transplant surgery blood is temporarily diverted

and does not flow to the heart which becomes dull and inert. Restoring blood, the muscle contracts, beats, and keeps us alive. Life really is in the blood.

The imagery in the Levitical sacrifices was that the blood served as a way of cleansing the people to make them able to stand fearlessly before a holy God. We have that same image in Christ's blood cleaning us up and allowing us a place before God, making us holy. A continuing return to this, daily even, changes who we are.

March 26

Sexual conduct — Leviticus 18, I Thessalonians 4:3-6

In this chapter we see that violated sexual boundaries can be redeemed in Christ. A litany of inappropriate sexual relations reminds us of Christ's ancestors and other heroes of the faith. God's positive, connecting gift of sexuality is to be enjoyed within limits.

- Abraham married his half-sister Sarah, a forbidden relationship (18:9)
- The relationship between Judah and Tamar, his daughter-in-law, is defined as wrong, but is part of the line of Christ. (18:15)
- Jacob is the classic example of the rivalry that comes from marrying two sisters. Wrong, but also in the line of Christ. (18:18)
- King David committed adultery with his friend's wife, Bathsheba, and yet their child was in Christ's line. (18:20)

Christ redeems every one of these boundary violations in his incarnation.

Other prominent violations include:

- Moses' parents crossing a line, since his mother was her husband's aunt. (Exodus 6:20, Leviticus 18:12)
- Lot had incestuous relations with his daughters, also forbidden. (Leviticus 18:17)

Characters with multiple wives loved God. However, Christ affirmed the ideal of a man leaving father and mother and being united to his wife. Our culture accepts these boundaries, but is debating homosexuality. The relationship is forbidden here, mentioned four more times in scripture, and occurs in two stories. Perhaps the lesson of boundary breaking in the line of Christ is that sexuality must be dealt with in charity.

Sexuality has enough pitfalls that it can be a troubled area in our lives, and so needs the wisdom, grace, and kindness that are in Christ. We have slowly learned to be less judgmental about divorce, or even adultery, while perhaps being unhappy about the problem, but caring about the people involved. It is an area where it is so easy to feel condemned or to be condemning of others, and therefore important to remember redemption.

March 27

Love your Neighbor — Leviticus 19, Matthew 22:36-40

Christ's call to love God and neighbor summarize the teaching of this chapter which contains the line "love your neighbor as yourself." Practical details on how to love your neighbor include: judging them fairly, not showing preference for rich or poor, not gossiping, not getting ahead at your neighbor's expense, not nursing hatred in your heart, confronting wrong directly, and never seeking revenge. God's love develops healthy community.

Rabbi Simlai in the 3rd century compiled a list of 613 laws from the Torah. Maimonides in the 12th century codified a standard list. At least 134 of these rules are things that Christians still must do, such as loving and worshiping God. Another 56 are good principles that seem valid to us today in our social life. Another 303 are fulfilled by Jesus in his death and resurrection. The other 120 laws seem culturally conditioned to the time of Israel as a nation, though we can find analogies for our actions today. This chapter has examples of all of these categories.

Christ made it clear in the scripture above that the overarching principle for all of these requirements is love for God and love for neighbor. We Christians are not off the hook as far as needing to show that love, and the principles in the law can help guide us to see what the loving course of action might be.

March 28

The death penalty — Leviticus 20, John 8:5-9

The death penalty prefigures Christ's cross, and the judgment we are under for sin. Only God truly has the power of life and death. Christ's response to a woman brought to him for stoning emphasizes mercy and the ways our own sins disqualify us from imposing a death penalty. Nevertheless, God requires that community standards must be upheld.

The Ten Commandments are followed by exposition of the details of the law, many of which include restitution. For lying or bearing false witness, the correction is to tell the truth. For stealing, it is to give back the stolen article plus two to five times its value. Other sins are liable to death—idolatry, dishonoring God, dishonoring parents, adultery, and murder.

We have stories where the death penalty was carried out for blasphemy, and Sabbath-breaking. Religious leaders used these precedents to accuse Christ (falsely) of blasphemy and Sabbath-breaking as the reason he deserved the death-penalty. In contrast, we are reminded of Christ's mercy on the woman brought to him when caught in adultery. The leaders wanted him to condone

the death penalty, but instead he challenged their right as sinful people to impose it.

As a result of Christ's example, the early church opposed the death penalty. In our time movements against this have made the compelling argument that we have too often erroneously condemned people to death, and numerous exonerations have rescued death row inmates. In desiring justice and mercy, may we err on the side of mercy.

March 29

Priesthood — Leviticus 21,22, Revelation 5:9-10

The priesthood in Israel prefigured Christ's priestly role. The thread of Kingdom imagery and expectation is reinforced here and connects to the first question for Moses at Mount Sinai: are the people willing to become a kingdom of priests? Once again there is an emphasis on being holy to be qualified to serve God, something that still applies to us. God has high standards for those who represent him.

The chapters on priestly responsibility remind us that the people are all to take on this role and life of holiness, even if certain ones are selected for the tasks to be done. Included in the instructions are the things a priest needs: robes of righteousness, cleansing by the blood (of Christ), anointing of oil (the Holy Spirit), and consecration to a life of service.

Christ acknowledged his own priestly role. The prayer He taught begins "Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name" which he may have drawn from verse 32 which uses "hallows" in older translations.

The priests were to be people who could connect people to heaven. We also have this same mysterious role, and as the nature of Christ grows in us through the work of the Spirit, hopefully all our interactions advance this connection between heaven and earth. A continuous return to holiness is required.

March 30

Celebrations — Leviticus 23, Luke 24:27

The annual celebrations are an important part of current Jewish culture, and each one reflects an important aspect of Christ's life:

Pesach—Passover: The details of the celebration beautifully describe sacrifice, liberation and victory over evil in the cross and resurrection.

Feast of Unleavened Bread—Christ equated unleavened bread with pure teaching. A theme of purification thus surrounds Passover (crucifixion) and First Fruits (resurrection) for a symbolic seven days.

Sfirat Haomer—On the day after the Sabbath in Passover week, they lifted up newly harvested grain. This serves as a fitting image for resurrection as does the name Early First Fruits and the timing, Sunday after the passion.

Shavuot—Latter First Fruits: Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Rosh HaShanah—New Year comes in the 7th month, in September or October. Perhaps the time of the start of Jesus' ministry, that included a call to repentance. The sound of the trumpet reminds us of the return of Christ.

Yom Kippur—Day of Atonement: The most holy day 10 days after Rosh HaShanah. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies to make atonement prefiguring both the crucifixion and final judgment. Today this is a day of fasting and repentance.

Sukkot—Feast of Tabernacles: Eight days of camping out recall the wilderness journey and celebrate the fall harvest in October. Some think that this may be the time of Christ's birth. Candlelight in the valley of Jerusalem sounds beautiful.

The corporate experience of these celebrations was, and continues to be integral to the religious experience of the faithful. For Christians, Christmas and Easter have become our central celebrations, but I have derived great pleasure and insight from the opportunity to be part of Messianic Jewish celebrations of these festivals and highly recommend seeking out such opportunities.

March 31

The Blasphemer — Leviticus 24, Matthew 26:65-66

In this chapter the determination was made that blasphemy was worthy of death, and the penalty was carried out. It is this precedent that was used as a means of condemning Christ to death. Christ was repeatedly accused of blasphemy: for forgiving sins, since the implication was that he was God, and for claiming to be the Messiah as proven by his miracles. He was condemned to death when he claimed to be the Son of Man at God's right hand.

Christ also referred back to this chapter when he referred to an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but called his people to go further in forgiveness and

meekness. His kingdom demand is for us to be willing to suffer rather than obtain justice.

Earlier in the chapter we see candlelight and bread, images that Christ applied to himself. The lamp in the tabernacle it to be alight at all times, and the bread is to be continually renewed and eaten by the priests. Christ's opponents could not see that he was the Messiah, the fulfillment of the images of light and bread, and therefore they were the ones guilty of blasphemy, accusing Him falsely. We are ever in danger of not seeing him in our lives and, even as believers, dare we say it, thereby teeter into blasphemy.

April 1

Economics — Leviticus 25, Luke 6:20-21

The call to economic justice is part of the Kingdom of God where Christ reigns and everyone flourishes. Through tithes for those who have become poor all needs are met. The system included the year of Jubilee every Sabbath of Sabbaths (49 years) when slaves were freed, debts were forgiven, and land was returned to the original owners. Jesus' first sermon drew on Isaiah's Messianic prophecy of freeing the oppressed and bringing the year of Jubilee. He identified this as his work, and his radical economic vision included his own example of owning nothing. .

The Sabbath was an important part of the system as a reminder that all we have comes from God, that we are to rest, relax and trust His provision. Every seven years a Sabbatical allowed Israelites additional rest and reflectivity. Ideally, everyone was to be middle-class, with their own property, freedom to do their own work, and generous when crisis affected someone in their community. We learn that God desire us to rest, that it honors him when we do it consistently.

Today it is easy to give money to great causes and to share time and money with those living on the edge. Creative simple living enables us to share more generously and so become more like Christ. Today we Christians need to understand that sharing poverty is cross-bearing work that extends the Kingdom. However we choose to do it, we see in this chapter that God wants us to work for economic justice.

April 2

Blessing or Cursing — Leviticus 26, Galatians 3:13

Christ brings blessing to us, particularly that of God's presence. In this set of promises the blessings include agricultural abundance, births, and peace. We are reminded that God gives us free will and we can choose to obey or disobey and our choices have consequences.

The curses are prophesied for not listening and obeying God and fulfilling his desire to bless the world through Israel by making them a kingdom of priests. The six escalating curses in this chapter accurately describe Israel's history from the time of the divided kingdom when idolatrous worship was institutionalized until the exile and return. It begins with terror and political instability, then drought, wild animals killing children, famine, cannibalism, destruction and exile and suffering in exile. Elijah, for example, proclaimed drought. Wild animals, famine and cannibalism occurred in the time of Elisha, and were specific signs to sound a warning and call people back to God.

In Deuteronomy Moses repeated the theme of falling under curses for turning from God. In the promised land Joshua read the law including all the blessings and curses and the people recommitted themselves to obedience. After the return from exile the people resolved to accept God's curse if they failed.

God knew that if they failed, he would come and transfigure the story by taking the curses on Himself at the climactic moment, which he did on the cross. In Christ we are called to love, even our enemies, and we are exhorted to bless, not to curse, those who harm us. In the end, we are told in Revelation that God will remove all curses in heaven. Those who live in the Kingdom now are not only part of blessing the world, suffering has a new meaning: it is part of obedience that is transforming the world, not the result of a curse.

April 3

Redemption — Leviticus 27, Matthew 27:9-10

Christ was dedicated to God, just as people, animals, and land could be dedicated. The result could be death, priesthood, or a redemption payment each of which foreshadows His life. The firstborn had to be redeemed. The values in silver were: 50 for a man, 30 for a woman, 20 for a boy, 10 for a girl, 5 for a baby boy, 3 for a baby girl, 15 for a man over 60, 10 for a woman over 60. Lawsuits today make similar calculations for loss of earnings due to death or injury.

Christ's redemption value at his betrayal was that of a woman or slave. He fulfilled a prophecy that a person specially set apart by the Lord for destruction cannot be redeemed and must die. By making himself worth little, he made us valuable to God.

The redemption of firstborn sons is still observed among Jews, including in Messianic congregations, where its connection to Christ as our redeemer is made explicit. It is a service of dedication for the child, occurring a month after the birth with godparents present.

As far as commitment to the point of death, estimates go as high as 70 million martyrs in history following Christ. Even if we live a comfortable, relatively easy life, the idea is that our commitment is to be as intense as that of one willing to die. This gives us a motivation to take any suffering in our life and ask that it be used to bring the Kingdom in some way, thus giving it a meaning and purpose it would otherwise not have.

April 4

Organizing the people — Numbers 1-4, Ephesians 2:20

In this book the people of Israel are on a journey toward their new land, and their journey has parallels to Christ's journeys during his ministry, and to our spiritual journeys with him today. All three are journeys that take place in community.

Christ organized twelve followers. In this portion of Numbers twelve tribes of Israel were assigned a location in the camp, given a marching sequence, and fighting men were counted. We are reminded that we worship God in community and are to fight for his agenda in community

Mundane details for organizing a large group has been replicated in church, government and business. Structure, formalism, hierarchy and physical plans can become dull. Revival moments often return to Christ's simple personal community relationships.

The tabernacle, centrally located, had Levites close at hand to care for it. In addition to details of how to respectfully move sacred things, we are told that all Levites belonged to God and served as redemption for firstborn sons. The other tribes surrounded this center with one tribe on each side serving as leader for a march.

Tribal government worked for Israel for about 500 years, longer than our own social experiment with democracy in the United States. They then introduced a stronger executive position—the king—still under the Law and still relying on tribal leaders. Tribes marched under family flags and this group experience became an important part of Israel's identity at this time.

Perhaps the closest thing I have experienced to this was a march for immigration reform where participants were asked to bring flags from many countries. An immense crowd of families with children walked together. Flags flew festively and all were full of joyful hope. The energy of a joyful crowd can be a wonderful thing—don't be afraid of it as an expression of civic life!.

April 5

Purity in the Camp — Numbers 5,6, Philippians 1:10-11

Our journey with Christ requires a process of purification and dealing with conflicts in our community. Purity in Israel required external acts, whereas Christ took it deeper, calling for inner purity as well. In contrast to exclusion, Christ included sinners in his circle and purified them. In these chapters, lepers and adulteresses are excluded, and touching the dead results in temporary exclusion. In contrast, we recall Christ's healing inclusion of lepers, his forgiving inclusion of adulteresses, and his willingness to touch the dead and resurrect them.

Stories in Numbers show how exclusion was overcome. When Miriam became a leper she was healed and included. After committing adultery with Moabite and Midianite women, the offenders returned to the community. Those defiled by the dead could not celebrate Passover, but the solution was to celebrate later.

The way of resolving "he said/she said" situations in regard to sexual transgression seems magical. The assumption is that since God knew the truth, he would make the test come out correctly. We are reminded that God knows what we are thinking and can bring it to light in many ways. However, this became a trial by ordeal that was eventually discouraged by the Catholic church in 1215 and slowly died out, only to be revived in the early witch trials in the United States, a tragic regression from Christ's call for grace and spiritual healing.

The Nazarite vow, a commitment to holiness, was externally noted by long hair and abstention from alcohol. John the Baptist demonstrated this ascetic approach to spirituality, whereas Christ engaged in society. Christ affirmed both by his own engagement in the world, and lauding John's asceticism.

The chapter ends with a beautiful blessing we can claim.

April 6

Organizing a Worshipping Journey — Numbers 7-10, II Corinthians 9:7

Our journey with Christ cannot avoid the mundane. The practical, financial side of maintaining a worship community, of keeping the lights on, of having a staff, a recruitment and retirement program, and managing scheduling conflicts explained here contrasts with Christ's lack of formality and preoccupation with funds. Chapter 7 is read during Hanukkah, a time of giving gifts, a portion each day. The twelve tribes bring the same thirty-five gifts, repeatedly itemized, reinforcing a spirit of giving. There is validity in

both formal fundraising and financial simplicity, and our giving to God is a privilege.

God beautifully promised to journey with them in a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. When it moved, it was the signal for the people to move, and the alert came in the form of trumpet calls. As they started their march as an organized people, they set out with flags waving. It reminds us that God accompanies us and leads us through life today.

Numbers teaches us how much God loves community. Modern researchers have rediscovered that the connection to families and friends, living in proximity, and generally having strong social networks is fundamental to human happiness. Numbers demonstrates how this aspect of God's design for an ideal society was made practical. It challenges me to think about what practical things I am doing to build community among those I know.

April 7

Complaints about Food — Numbers 11, Philippians 4:11-12

Our journey with Christ calls us to live with a humble and grateful heart. The people of God were called to live in contentment, and in this chapter they were discontent with their food, wanting to return to slavery for tasty meat, fish, cucumbers, melons, leek, onions and garlic. Manna was boring.

God responded emotionally to them, first in anger, and later in forgiveness. In human relationships, anger is a natural response to feeling we are being unfairly accused or criticized, and God shows this very human reaction in his relationship with his people. Thomas Merton helps us think about this: “And we should remark in passing that the so-called ‘anthropomorphic’ portrayal of God in human form—so often complained of by people who believe the Bible is not sufficiently ‘spiritual’—has this particular purpose. The whole idea of covenant, dialog, reciprocity, mutual respect—and above all the idea that God respects man’s liberty, dignity, and rights—is brought out by giving the exchange a frankly human character.”⁶

Their complaints about hardships resulted in fire on the camp’s outskirts which killed no one. The people cried out, Moses prayed, and the fire went out. The response to complaints about meat resulted in quail, but many died from food-poisoning, called here a plague. Remembering that there were ten judgments on Egypt, four identified as plagues, it seems like equal treatment that there are ten judgments on Israel for complaints and rebellion, five plagues and five other tragedies.

In our time we are constantly being fed discontent by advertising or even by comparing ourselves to others on social media. It is an ever-present temptation

to think that we deserve something better from God and to become like the Israelites—whiney, unrealistic about the past, discontent, anxious about the future. A healthy antidote whenever we notice this bad attitude is to sit down with a journal and make a list of things for which to be grateful. It can usually help put whatever difficulty we face into a better perspective.

April 8

Complaints about Leadership — Numbers 12, I Timothy 5:17

Our journey with Christ calls us to acknowledge with gratitude the spiritual leaders in our lives. The people of God were called to respect their spiritual leaders, as are we. In this instance, Moses' siblings could not see why he had a special role and complained. God reinforced his support for Moses by Miriam's leprosy that was healed when she repented. We see that sickness can be a form a judgment, but that God heals in response to prayer.

God wants us to have the same compassion Moses exhibited toward his sister. Rather than reproaching her for her actions, telling her the illness was her own fault, he simply cried out to God for her healing. Christ did not tell us to criticize the sick, blame them for not having enough faith or not having forgiven another, but rather he told us to pray for them and visit them. Moses demonstrated compassionate leadership in seeking healing for the very one who had opposed his leadership.

The text emphasizes that Moses was humble, more humble than any other person, and God defended him, saying He uniquely spoke face to face with him and asking them why they weren't afraid to criticize him.

It is human nature to criticize those with power and to be discontent with their decisions. We are called to have a truly respectful attitude, and to be supportive of our spiritual leaders. The tendency to not be happy and to gossip and complain are our temptations as well. That is not to say we should be blind to failings that discredit them, and we are called to appeal to them respectfully.

I had been taught that respect meant not being negative, but was surprised to realize that the definition actually includes praise. As a result, my hope is to find what is good and can be complimented and affirmed in leaders, and to praise them to other people.

April 9

Scouting out the Land — Numbers 13, Acts 7:5

Our journey with Christ calls us to be courageous and willing to be bold in following in whatever direction he is calling us. The people of God were called

to take action to fulfill the promises of God, as are we. The land had been promised to them through Abraham and the time had come to carry out this plan which was part of preparing for Christ's coming. Moses sent scouts to see what the land was like, wanting to be prepared to lead the people wisely.

They were not troubled by questions of the morality of taking the land (which is my struggle.) Their difficulty was that the people in the land seemed bigger, more powerful and intimidating. Rather than allowing their sense of weakness to turn them toward asking for God's help, they simply promoted negativity. When faced with a challenge today, how tempting it is to behave in the same way.

Our arena of ministry has been compared to our promised lands, and that we also must have the boldness to accomplish our calling. The example of learning all that we can about the new location, new population, or new context makes sense. Like Joshua and Caleb we should not let what we learn discourage us, but maintain our faith that the dream is possible. Because of their faith, they did eventually enter the land, unlike their more fearful companions.

April 10

Grumbling vs. Faith — Numbers 14, Philippians 2:14-15

Our journey with Christ calls us to face any challenges and endure any hardships with good cheer. Joshua foreshadows both Christ's leadership and is an example of willingness to do what is difficult.

When the time came to invade Canaan they wailed all night wishing they'd died. God threatened death, but relented at Moses' plea. The tragedy that ensued did not mean God withdrew his promises or his presence. However, he imposed consequences—the immediate deaths of the ten discouraged spies, a year of wandering for each day of the 40 that scouts had entered the land, and death for everyone over 20 without entrance to the land. This is the central crisis of the book, the turn on which everything changes and a short journey becomes a long journey ending in the death of those who had experienced the liberation from Egypt. We see that God strongly rejects fearfulness.

Moses foreshadows Christ's mercy to those who deserve judgment. God expressed anger at the complaining, rebellious people, but he responded to Moses' appeals for mercy. God had liberated them, provided for them, given them leadership, and offered them a new land, when they did not appreciate these things, he demanded justice. Moses appealed for mercy.

Grumbling undermines faith, and these stories teach us to silence our complaints or to ask for mercy when we fail. Christ challenges us to expect good things and to respond with patience when things go wrong. When

tempted to complain, I think of the example of these people, and try to find something positive to notice. I do not always succeed, of course, but the consciousness is there. God's exasperation at their inability to trust him and appreciate what he had done, serves as a warning to me not to be exasperating.

April 11

Offerings — Numbers 15, Ephesians 5:2

Christ is the offering symbolized in all the beasts and foods in this chapter. Perhaps the previous chapter of failure needs the balancing reality that a way of forgiveness is available through sacrifice. People brought offerings, animal substitutes for the giver, just as Christ took our place. For us, the offering he made was complete and final, and our response should be gratitude. The act of selecting an animal, flour, olive oil, or wine, and taking them to the tabernacle became a repeated lesson in offering oneself to God. We see that our offerings please God.

The placement of this instruction is particularly interesting. The people had just failed so spectacularly that they were condemned to forty years of wandering. Those forty years are covered in seven chapters, three of which are instructional like this one. After this failure, there is still the reiteration of expectations for when they would settle in the land, and forgiveness for unintentional failures. In contrast, brazen disobedience was considered blasphemous that must be eradicated from the community.

Unfortunately, this is the category for the whole generation over 20 years of age, and the theme of death is repeated in these six chapters: for Sabbath-breaking, for rebellion, Miriam's death, a death-wish as the people once more complained about no water, and Aaron's death. Sometimes, even today, judgment is inevitable if there is blasphemy and unrepentance, and we can see our own version of wilderness wanderings.

At the end of the chapter men were told to wear tassels on their clothing to be reminded of God's commands and the need to obey them. The woman who reached out to Christ for healing by touching the tassel of his garment reminds us he was the Word represented by this imagery. Today we look to Christ's death, the sacrifice for sins prefigured here, and we know we are thereby rescued.

April 12

Korah's Rebellion — Numbers 16, Matthew 10:28

On our journey with Christ we need to guard against becoming rebellious and difficult people. While God's mercy is always available to us, even today those

who rebel against the spiritual leaders God has given them can experience difficult consequences.

The fall of Korah and the other rebels into *Sheol* alerts us to Christ's teachings on hell. This story of judgment ends with the rebels being swallowed by the ground alive into the underworld and fire consuming another 250 people. All of these people were under a sentence of death because of their rebellion against going into the promised land, but death came quickly. The rebellion stirred up against Moses was just another evidence of their disbelief. We see how strongly God rejects rebellion.

Sheol in the Hebrew scripture denotes an underground place of the dead which is dreary and dark and where people live in captivity. There are thirteen references to hell in the Gospels, and Christ's parables include a warning of being sent to a place of outer darkness.

As a teen, the idea of hell so disturbed me that I decided to quit the faith. What brought me back was a recognition that my ideas of justice are not greater than those of God, and I can trust that there is utter fairness as the heart of reality, and that I will be satisfied with God's justice. Precisely how things will turn out in the end I do not know. But I am reassured that in this story Moses stood between the living and the dead and stopped the plague, foreshadowing Christ's work in confronting death for us and giving us life.

April 13

The Rod — Numbers 17, John 11:25-26

The rod, as wood, reminds us of the cross, and its blooming reminds us of Christ's resurrection. When people challenged Aaron's leadership Moses took a wooden staff from each leader of the twelve tribes. Aaron's staff bloomed and was preserved in the Ark. This life-giving affirmation of his leadership silenced the critics who said the miracle reminded them of the sentence of death they were under. We see once again how much God supports the leaders he has chosen to represent him.

The almond blossoms the rod produced are associated with life and light. The almond is one of the first trees to bloom after winter, and it was the model for a tree-like lamp in the temple.

For me the tree which reminds me of resurrection is the jacaranda. Everywhere I have lived, their lavish lavender flowers in the spring are a repeated reminder that no matter how difficult a situation, resurrection can come. Just as Aaron's almond branches strengthened him, the jacaranda blossoms strengthen me with their annual message of hope.

April 14

No Inheritance — Numbers 18, Luke 8:1-3

On our journey with Christ we need to put ministry first and not worry or be consumed with financial needs. Priests and Levites had no land, corresponding to Christ's lack of property. Instead, they were supported by gifts from the people of God. Those receiving tithes were told to tithe their income as well. Christ had numerous women and others supporting his work. We are reminded that serving God is a real job, worthy of adequate pay.

A call to ministry and willingness to be supported by the donations of other believers is a strong pattern in modern missions. During my childhood as the child of Wycliffe Bible Translators, I saw this lifestyle as completely normal, since all of my parents' colleagues lived with the same system. I also saw a pattern of generosity to those around them.

This way of living, so contrary to the values of our materialistic culture, is a beautiful way of following in the footsteps of these ancient Hebrews as well as of Jesus. If not called to do that, we are surely called to be generous to those who do have that calling. If God is calling one to live from donations for ministry, it is nothing to be afraid of!

April 15

The Red Heifer — Numbers 19, Hebrews 13:11-13

The red heifer ceremony is analogous to Christ's death. The animal is a biological anomaly, perhaps analogous to the unusual biology of Christ. Because the animal is without blemish, slaughtered outside the camp, blood sprinkled, and burned, we can see analogies to the crucifixion. Afterwards the priest bathed in flowing water, an analogy to baptism in the flowing Jordan River.

Cedar, hyssop, and wool dyed scarlet, added to the fire, and the resulting ashes were mixed with water to make a holy water to purify things that became impure. The rest of the chapter explains how being around death contaminates and needs to be purified. As the generation under condemnation died away, death must have been a constant for them, perhaps an average of one hundred people a day.

The Mishnah explains there were only nine red heifers sacrificed in Israel. An attempt to breed red heifers is motivated by Maimonides' prediction that finding one will correspond with the Messiah's coming. The Temple Institute, located in the same plaza as the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, is making preparations for rebuilding the Temple, and as part of their efforts has twice thought they had a legitimate red heifer and then disqualified them.

Tradition is that the red heifer is suffering Israel, an image Chagall incorporated into many paintings. For us it is not only suffering Israel, but also the suffering Christ. The perfection and uniqueness of Christ is highlighted by this imagery of a rare breed. Just as the holy water purified people, we are purified from the contamination of death by his death.

April 16

Rock—Numbers 20, I Corinthians 10:4

Christ is identified as the rock which provided water in this story. Moses' and Aaron's disobedience of striking the rock rather than speaking to it resulted in their dying before entering the promised land. We see how much God requires his leaders to trust him and show his holiness to others.

They were to command the rock to give water instead of striking it as in Exodus 17. Instead, they struck it and said "must WE bring you water." God responded by saying they did not trust him, they rebelled, and they would not lead the people into the land. The rebellion so characteristic of the people they had been leading finally infected them.

The forty years of wandering had almost come to an end and they were starting preparations to enter the promised land. To do so by the most practical route would have been through Edom, but when Edom refused, they had to take a detour, given that God had forbidden them to fight these close relatives.

Aaron died and was mourned by the people. Before Moses died, he acknowledged God as Rock in his final poem. This theme continues through scripture and culminates with Christ's exhortation for us to build our lives on the Rock. In my own life this has been an image of stability when life is unstable and uncertain.

April 17

The Bronze Serpent — Numbers 21, John 3:14-15

Christ interpreted this story as an image of himself on the cross, the means of saving from certain death. The Israelites complained of being tired of manna. Result: punishment and death by poisonous snakes. Moses was told to make an image of what caused their death and for those bitten to look at it and be saved.

This represented the final dying out of the rebellious generation that had wandered the desert for forty years. The new generation had new attitudes. Most had never seen Egypt so could not have been part of the crowd complaining about having been brought out of Egypt to die.

This new generation had the toughness that came from being raised in a difficult environment, and perhaps they had a great deal more enthusiasm for the idea of fighting to have a settled, more comfortable life without any misplaced nostalgia for the Egyptian past. Even before the bronze snake incident, when some were attacked and captured, they boldly went and got their people back.

We are told later that it was just before their encounter with the Amorites that the entire previous generation had died. When Amorite King Sihon refused them safe passage, they were energized to fight and win against him. His main city, Heshbon, was parallel with the north of the Dead Sea. When King Og of Bashan attacked them, they fought back and defeated his people. His territory was more parallel to the Sea of Galilee. These early battles perhaps gave them confidence for the wars to come, but they also provided extensive territory on the east of the Jordan.

The chapter goes from death and complaining to victory in battle. This is the same direction we want our lives to go. We want to become sturdy, hardy people of faith who have confidence that with God's backing, we can win the spiritual battles ahead of us.

April 18

Balaam — Numbers 22-23, Matthew 6:24

On our journey with Christ we can be protected from enemies who wish to harm us, whatever their motives. Whether unbelievers like the King of Moab, or a believer like Balaam who should have known better, God can turn curses into blessings.

Balaam's greed contrasts with Christ who lived contentedly as a poor man. Balaam is the archetype of the religious man corrupted by seeing the money he can get from ministry. Balaam responded to the King of Moab's promise to pay him well, despite God warning him against it. God told him he must bless, not curse. Given God's frustration and desire to wipe out Israel a few chapters earlier at the start of the forty years of wandering, this represents a new era and new time for Israel. Balaam had to say in mercy that God saw nothing wrong with Israel.

The talking donkey had more spiritual perception than his human owner, making for comedy. In the New Testament we're told that Balaam loved to earn money for doing wrong, but was stopped when the donkey rebuked him with a human voice. Today our emotions and drives for health, self-esteem, status, identity, adventure, and avoidance of our fears, are manipulated to sell goods, turning us to consumer products to meet those needs. We know it is a

trick, but we fall for it anyway, even among religious leaders. Balaam's sin is alive and well.

Moab was south of the land of Ammon they had conquered, bordering the Dead Sea. Balak, King of Moab, was alarmed and threatened, and called Balaam to fight back with a spiritual curse. Twice, despite all their offerings and efforts, Balaam blessed Israel, and this beautiful blessing that we can promise comes from this compromised prophet. God does not lie, change his mind, fail to act, or fail to fulfill a promise. God's blessing cannot be reversed.

We can claim this promise of blessing for ourselves and those we know. We can also claim what is repeatedly said of this incident, that God turned a curse into a blessing. When there are those who truly wish to do us harm, this is remarkably comforting.

April 19

A Star will Rise—Numbers 24, Matthew 2:1-2

Just as Balaam, a non-Israelite prophet, was able to foresee the coming of the Messiah, so the Wise Men in Christ's time came from afar, having somehow discerned there was a new Jewish king. This third effort to curse Israel resulted in even greater prophetic blessing and the rage of King Balak who had hired Balaam to curse his enemies.

Despite his sin, Balaam saw the coming Kingdom and predicted: a people set apart, who would be numerous, blessed, protected, receiving wonders from God, beautiful, like fruitful trees, well provided for, exalted, and with a victorious ruler. The Messianic prophesy, of a star from Jacob, and a scepter from Israel applies to David and Christ. In scripture, God continually allowed his people to foresee the future, something granted at times to us today.

The theme of this mysterious future ruler who will come from Israel and rule all the nations is refined and developed over the centuries, so that by the time Christ came, the number of Messianic prophecies he fulfilled is overwhelming. For us this not only increases our faith that Christ is truly the one who was promised, it increases our confidence that everything promised in the New Testament for us who believe will come about.

April 20

Phinehas — Numbers 25, John 2:17

On our journey with Christ, we need to ruthlessly root out the compromises of worldly and idolatrous living that may tempt us. Israel failed terribly with idolatry and needed a zealous leader to bring them back to being the community they were called to be.

Phinehas' passionate zeal for holiness corresponds to Christ's zeal for God's holiness, but the power was used in very different ways. Phinehas used a spear to kill, whereas Christ turned over tables and used a whip to drive out livestock. Phinehas is a unique figure, a policeman/priest in this story, as well as at the end of Judges. We see God's strong rejection of idolatry and immorality, evils that must be stopped. In Psalms we are told Phinehas had the courage to intervene and so has been regarded as a righteous man. In Deuteronomy the point is made that everyone who worshipped the idol died, and those who resisted temptation lived.

Even though the new generation was proving themselves to be hardy warriors, they quickly fell for sexual temptations which led them to idolatry. Not only Moab, but people from Midian who were from yet further south in the Arabian peninsula, tempted them and engaged them in worship of their gods. Balaam is credited with this strategy, despite having been forced to bless Israel.

I struggle to accept that idolatry and immorality deserve death. Accepting the legitimacy of death for idolatry explains most God-sanctioned violence in scripture. My sensibilities have been so trained by grace and mercy in Christ, that rejection of anyone is superseded by the desire to win others over to God's love. I can see that idolatry is a desecration of God's image, and since Christ is the true image of God, anti-idolatry history prepares the way for him. Idolatry leads to death, and in this instance the immediacy of death serves as a warning.

However, my anxiety about the story is not out of place. Among white supremacists a book counseled following in Phinehas' footsteps to avenge harm to Whites. The result: several home-grown terrorists had this book in their possession before committing their crimes. Given such a serious misuse of the story, we need to understand what is the appropriate use of force in light of Christ's example and teaching. We need wisdom to control violent offenders without excessive violence, and to find the correct ways of policing in our time.

April 21

Preparing for Inheritance — Numbers 26-27, Ephesians 1:11-12

Inheriting land prefigures our final inheritance. Alec Moyter explains the meaning of the land so well: "As we seek to grasp this biblical development, it is not that a New Testament concept of 'a kingdom not of this world' replaces the Old Testament geographical land; nor is it a New Testament spiritualization of what is physical in the Old Testament. No, it is neither a replacement theology nor a spiritualizing theology; it is a cumulative theology, the final and perfect flowering, the actualizing in full reality of what had always been there."⁷

The second census described who would receive the land. This second census parallels that of Chapters 1-2. This time it is the new generation of fighting age men, a total of 601,730 people compared to the earlier total of 603,550. A new generation must take up the faith, a continual process that applies today.

Women would inherit when there was no male heir is given. This is repeated four different times, highlighting the importance of keeping the family line connected to land. Joshua, who had served as Moses' primary assistant and the leader of the armed forces, was commissioned as the one to distribute Israel's inheritance. We are reassured by this story of how much God values the rights of women.

As the passage in Ephesians tells us, we have received a great inheritance through Christ, and in other passages, the Holy Spirit, His gifts, the promise of salvation, God's word, and eternal life in heaven are in our inheritance. We live with much greater dignity if we remember all these spiritual riches.

April 22

More sacrifices — Numbers 28-29, John 6:54-56

Christ's death gives life to us, just as the sacrificial system of worship acknowledged that God is the source of life. These chapters build on previous instructions regarding worship through sacrifices, and the number of normal annual offerings for the community was prescribed. Totals in a year would be a minimum of 1,044 lambs, 95 bulls, 31 rams and 24 goats, or 1,194 creatures in all. This served as food for the priests and their families. We are reminded that our offerings please God and that worship routines help sustain our faith.

The central feast as far as the number of sacrifices was Tabernacles. The week started with sacrifice of thirteen bulls, and went down one per day until seven were sacrificed on the seventh day, followed by one on the eighth. This feast represents our lives in God's presence in happiness and celebration.

The differing moods of the festivals come through here: from the drama of a week of sacrifices as people live outdoors for Sukkot, to an intimate family meal at Passover, to community gatherings on Pentecost and Rosh Hashanah, to fasting for the Day of Atonement/Yom Kippur. Going without food for a day as a sign of humility before God, is still done annually by the Jewish community. While offering animals, even feasting on them, was part of demonstrating commitment, fasting was a way of being humble. Perhaps it is fair to say that doing without food temporarily is a way of offering oneself as a sacrifice.

While Jews and some Christians celebrate these events today, they do so without any sacrifices. For Jews, sacrifice ended when the temple was

destroyed. For Christians, it ended when Christ died and rose again. But the symbolic sacrifices of prayer, worship, and even fasting are still available to us. They all, particularly fasting, can help align our desire and longings with God's will and give us the confidence that God's will is good.

April 23

Vows — Numbers 30, Matthew 5:33-37

Christ quoted from this chapter when teaching that it is better to mean what you say rather than make promises those with authority over you can change. We see how much God values truthfulness and integrity. In the context, Christ said he was not nullifying the law, but he raised the bar: not just no murder, but manage anger well; not just no adultery, but no inner lust; a higher commitment to marriage; not seeking justice when offended, but responding with mercy; not just loving neighbors, but loving enemies as well.

We can thus interpret this to mean that we should not just do what we formally promise, but that our intentions, words and actions all align. This heart level obedience and sincerity is a struggle and it is only through the promptings of the Spirit and we even notice and we are falling into the worst aspects of our human nature or hypocrisy. Who of us have not fallen into hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, or envy which we know are not aligned with God's Spirit. Nor is the insincerity of not doing what we say.

April 24

Vengeance on Midian — Numbers 31, I Corinthians 12:2

On our journey with Christ we will face times when our community is in danger of losing its identity and loyalty to God. A strong and stern response may be necessary for the integrity of the community and its journey. Christ faced this with the corruption in the religious hierarchy, particularly the Pharisees. Even more intimately, he faced it with what Judas chose to do. In Israel's case the challenge was idolatry and worldliness, and in ours it is usually the same—something other than God is in danger of becoming the priority.

Phinehas led 12,000 warriors into battle against idolatry. Christ, the true image of God, came to rescue all mankind from making up their own gods. We see how strongly God rejects idolatry and are challenged to examine our own tendencies today to put other things in his place. Once Christ came and

revealed God in human form, his call has been to call idolaters to himself, not condemn them to death.

So sadly, the history of the church justified the violent approach and continued in the way of Phinehas instead of that of Christ. Taking vengeance on Midian for idolatry is presented as God's command, but on a purely human level, it looks like blaming and scapegoating those with whom you were complicit in wrongdoing. Painfully, after killing all the men, Moses insists they kill woman and boys. Intellectually I accept this as a consequence of leading others into idolatry, but emotionally I find it difficult. Making matters worse is that Midianites were children of Abraham by his concubine Keturah, so they were relatives. Moses' wife was a Midianite.

After Christ, the approach to idolaters was transformed. We see this in Paul who was a spiritual warrior who said he fought with wild beasts in Ephesus. That great and wealthy city was a center of Diana/Artemis worship, the temple one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. When Paul preached he was nearly killed by the Diana-devotees fearful of losing business. Nevertheless, his preaching won. About 200 years later the temple was destroyed by non-Christian invaders, and was not rebuilt. Today it is a ruin while over time Ephesus became an important Christian city, and Paul's letter to the new believers is read and treasured by millions every day. Paul won through preaching and patient suffering, not violence, and he is our model.

April 25

A Written Record — Numbers 32-33, Luke 1:3-4

The written record of Israel's journey reminds us that we are provided with written records of Christ's journeys and even those of Paul. Moses was instructed to keep a written record, and in this chapter we have geographic details which fill in information from the previous stories. We are reminded how important it is to remember and review our own journey with God.

The importance of written law is reinforced in instructions to the king who is to make an authorized copy and read it daily which will keep him from pride and thinking he is above his fellow citizens. Moses was told to write down the words of his song, and from that instruction the application was made that each man should have his own Torah scroll to read. It is said that women also were taught to read and write.

The emphasis on literacy in Jewish culture created love and skill in learning which enabled Jews to surge to the forefront as intellectuals in the modern era. Their contributions are astonishingly out of proportion to their numbers, affirming the promise that other nations will see they belong to God and be in awe.

Synagogues have divided the Torah (the first five books) into a year-long set of Sabbath readings. In addition, a selection from the rest of the Hebrew scriptures is read, and on holidays additional readings are done. Since the inventing of the printing press and the exhortations of the 16th century reformers, Christians have been urged to read scripture for themselves. This exercise, which we are engaged in here, challenges us, causes us to seek out more information, causes us to think deeply, and in many cases, such as my own, causes us to write yet more.

April 26

A Well-Ordered Place — Numbers 34-36, I Timothy 2:1-2

Any peaceful, well-ordered kingdom in the world is in some measure a precursor of Christ's well-ordered Kingdom. The book began with organizing the moving people, and this section anticipates creating a settled life. There is an outline of the territory, leaders selected to distribute land, towns and surrounding pastures for the Levites, cities of refuge, and affirmation of inheritance rights for women.

Once again we see organizational patterns that became characteristic of nations and churches. Bishops governed in community over specific physical spaces. Within their domains were homes and provisions for monastic communities. Churches were envisioned as places of sanctuary. Roles for women were established within a patriarchal model.

Adventures will intrude, but Israel experienced many years of orderly and pleasant life by following these guidelines. The pleasure of ordinary times is captured in one of C.S. Lewis' Narnia stories: "He talked of whole centuries in which all Narnia was so happy that notable dances and feasts, or at most tournaments, were the only things that could be remembered, and every day and week had been better than the last. And as he went on, the picture of all those happy years, all the thousands of them, piled up in Jill's mind till it was rather like looking down from a high hill onto a rich, lovely plain full of woods and waters and cornfields, which spread away and away till it got thin and misty from distance."⁸

We are told to pray for kings and authorities that we might live in peace, in a foretaste of what is to come at the end of time. So often the news of the politics of our day is the opposite of the happy community. Consequently, we need to pray for these things, but we also need to spend time appreciating what is good in our communities and not get trapped in the tragedy of the day.

April 27

Farewell address — Deuteronomy 1, John 16:16

Moses' farewell address to Israel can be compared to Christ's farewell address to his disciples in John. These are tender messages that speak to the deepest parts of who we are. If Exodus was the foundation of the society and worship, Leviticus the details of worship, Numbers the account of their journey, Deuteronomy was personal instruction from someone who deeply loved his people and wanted the best for them.

Moses reviewed their life together and looked to the future, just as Christ reviewed his love for them and promised the presence of the Spirit. Both occurred in a moment of crisis and change. Moses would soon die, transfer leadership to Joshua, and the people would finally enter the land.

Moses reviewed the journey from Sinai, appointing leaders, scouting the land, the refusal to enter, and the disobedient and failed military campaign. The structure of the book includes three different speeches, and an epilogue regarding Moses' death. Seven times he reminds them of how they provoked God's anger. Ten times he warns them that if they worship idols and other gods rather than God, they will provoke God's anger and judgment. But throughout the book are many reminders of God's love and promises of blessing.

Hearing God's word spoken continues as our tradition with today's preaching. It has been amplified with so much available on the internet and on videos. In our time we have access to a multitude of creative, faithful teachers whose thoughts and words can make a difference in our lives, and a listening heart will be blessed.

April 28

Holy War — Deuteronomy 2-3, Matthew 5:43-45

Israel's role as conquerors foreshadows the peaceful extension of Christ's kingdom. Unfortunately, despite Christ's call to extend the kingdom by means of preaching as we see in the case of the early apostles, later Christians reverted to the sword. In a tragic regression, Christians defined their enemies as Canaanites and felt free to enslave and exterminate.

Chapter 2 sets limits to war. They must respect the nations of Edom, Moab and Ammon. All are Israel's relatives, and the point is made that God gave them their land, just as he is giving Israel land. In contrast, when a proposal of peacefully crossing land and paying for anything used was turned down by

King Sihon, they conquered him. Similarly, they conquered King Og and all the resulting land was distributed to several tribes.

One moral ranking is to say that war for selfish ends is the worst, and yet that is the starting point of many modern wars. Israel's holy war to carry out God's purposes is seen as a moral step up. It carries out both the purposes of removing idolatrous nations with truly cruel practices as well as fulfilling the promise of this land to Abraham's descendants who suffered 400 years as slaves.

In our time, in the past 50 years, we have had many non-violence movements which have been remarkably effective, even more effective than violent conflicts in creating healthy societies. This strategy seems to be the best fit to Christ's call to love our enemies. Diplomatic dialogue has also averted many conflicts. Statistics on both non-violence and diplomacy are impressive. Nevertheless, we are in a conflict-ridden world where the immorality of war is evident.

In the early church the Christians prided themselves on gaining converts by their peace-loving lives. So much so that church fathers thought the prophecies of turning swords into plowshares had been fulfilled. Christianity won political power and Christians became soldiers from the 4th century on. There are different Christian perspectives today, but I fall firmly on the side of working ardently for peace.

April 29

Obedience — Deuteronomy 4-5, James 1:22-24

Both Moses and Christ highlighted that obedience out of love was the path to pleasing God. God's people are called to obedience to the moral law, but it is to be from the heart, not a superficial and rigid life. While we may not be subject to details of the law that have been fulfilled by Christ or are culturally bound, we still have a responsibility to fulfill the requirement to put God first, to love him, to love our neighbor, to observe the boundaries that are set up by the commandments.

Moses reminded them of the experience of gathering to receive the law. He reviewed the Ten Commandments which described a society based on worshipping a transcendent unseen being who also required justice, something very different from most surrounding cultures of that time. He predicted that when other nations would hear about these laws, they would exclaim over the wisdom and prudence of God's people. To this day we are grateful for what we call our Judeo-Christian heritage.

The hope of living long and prosperous lives in the land could only be fulfilled by this combination of worship and justice. It was easy to fail by worshipping idols, and to fail by allowing injustice, so the ideal was never fully realized. Yet it served as a preparation for the higher ideals of the Kingdom of Heaven. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the ideals of a beloved community where justice and equality are realized. We are well aware that we still fall short; there is much work to reach such ideals, even in our own country. Through his instructions, God offered us wisdom that is relevant today.

April 30

Loving God with our Hearts — Deuteronomy 6, Matthew 22:37-39

Moses and Christ teach us that the primary call to love God puts every other aspect of our lives in order. In this chapter we first hear the call to love God with heart, soul, and strength which Christ called the first commandment.

The Ten Commandments are repeated, and in them we are reminded that we are not to worship any other gods. Thomas Merton helps us understand the contrast between loving God wholly and allowing idols to enter our hearts: “The Bible is a ‘worldly’ book in this sense that it sees God at the very center of man’s life, his work, his relations with his fellow man, his love of his wife and children, his play and his joy. On the contrary, it is characteristic of the idols that they are objectified and set up on the periphery of life. It is the idols who dominate specific areas of life from outside it, because they are in fact projections of man’s fragmented desires and aspirations. It is the idols that man goes out to meet when he reaches his own limit, and they are called in to supplement his strength and his ingenuity when these run out. God is never shown by the Bible merely as a *supplement* of man’s power and intelligence, but as its very ground and reality.”⁹

May 1

People of Love — Deuteronomy 7, Matthew 22:37

The love, humility, fear of God, worship, justice, and obedience called for by Moses are the same qualities that Christ encourages. We can now claim to be people chosen as a special treasure to be his holy people and chosen simply because he loves us.

This chapter harshly condemns the idolatrous nations that Israel will replace, once again reminding us how things have changed in Christ. We, both Gentiles and Jews, have been idolatrous, and Christ comes to free us from this false way of looking at life. A contrast is set up between the nations to be evicted, people

God will clear away, and the kind of people God wants them to be in the land instead. Key words include holy, chosen, rescued, faithful, obedient, listeners, relying on God's word, praising, being careful, not forgetting, and not being afraid. God in turn desires to love them with unfailing love, to bless and to protect them.

The call is to live from the heart, a word that Deuteronomy uses 33 times. Love is repeated 27 times in Deuteronomy. Out of the heart of love comes obedience. Deuteronomy uses the word obey 75 times, more than any other book in scripture, even coming close to the whole New Testament usage (111 times). The emphasis on obedience coming from love and from the heart is central in Christ's teaching. We know it is not enough to act right; we need goodness and justice to transform us and flow out of our lives.

May 2

Humility — Deuteronomy 8, James 4:10

Christ and his death are the most perfect example of humility, and here God's people are called to humility. This chapter links humility with testing, saying that their time in the wilderness had those purposes. There is a practical exhortation that humbling and testing were for their good so that would not think they had achieved wealth with their own strength and energy. Rather it is God who gives power to be successful.

Life repeatedly offers lessons in humility in reoccurring challenges. In my case these have included relational struggles, illnesses, financial insecurity, a sense of inadequacy in work or ministry, conflicts, concern for my family members and friends, and many more things. Each case is an opportunity to cry out and say, "I need help. I cannot cope with this on my own," and in that place of dependence God has so often met me whether he intervened to solve a problem or not.

Hopefully, these hard things change me. I learn that I do not know it all, know that I am not able to do everything right, and realize that I rub some people the wrong way. Further, that I make a lot of relational mistakes even in my good relationships. All of these are lessons learned in the time of humbling, and hopefully I will never forget them.

May 3

Forty Days and Nights — Deuteronomy 9-10, Matthew 4:2

As Moses reviewed the time at Sinai, he recalled the forty days and nights he spent fasting, pleading for the people after the sin of idolatry with the golden calf. Christ also spent a forty-day fast in the wilderness and was tempted by Satan. Moses' had another forty days and nights of conversations with God on

the mountain which parallel the forty days that the disciples experienced in the presence of Christ learning more about the kingdom of God.

There is a long history of thirty-day retreats as part of Ignatian spirituality, and those who have done them have found a deepening of their relationship with God. There are forty-day devotionals that have helped many people. Scripture repeatedly returns to fasting as a way of having a humble heart before God. This passage and others teach us that the primary purpose of fasting is intercession for the urgent needs of others. Radical retreats, particularly with the help of a wise spiritual director deepen our relationship with God and others.

May 4

Christ's Obedience — Deuteronomy 11, Luke 11:28

Moses called the people to obey, repeating it seven times in this chapter. Christ was the perfectly obedient one and framed his own crucifixion as an act of obedience. He repeatedly said he was here to do his Father's will, and he urged us to obey. This chapter urges the people to obey by going in to possess the land, to love God with heart and soul, to teach God's love to their children, to receive God's blessings which will be proclaimed in the new land. We see clearly that God wants a love relationship with us.

From the rest of scripture we know how partial their obedience turned out to be. But Christ's obedience was perfect, even to the point of death, and he called us to obey him as a sign of our love for him. There is an emphasis throughout Deuteronomy that the obedience is to come from the heart and from love.

Merton speaks to this: "Loyalty to our own inner truth and to the reality of our own lives therefore includes and demands loyalty to this *inmost* truth which is in a sense utterly beyond us. From this inmost center come imperatives which we do not naturally anticipate. From this center God grants us assistance which is absolutely necessary and yet which we cannot claim as a strict right. The Bible adds that we are congenitally inclined to doubt and disobey this deepest and most intimate imperative. There is in us a native and ongoing contest between our deepest ground and a more shallow identity which seems more familiar to us, which we are more ready to accept as 'ourselves,' and which we prefer to this inner and transcendent ground of freedom. But the Bible (illustrating in one event after another, whether in the history of individuals or of the People of God) teaches us that it is disastrous to prefer our more shallow self to the transcendent will that is in us yet beyond us."¹⁰

May 5

Worship — Deuteronomy 12, Matthew 2:11

Christ reinforced some patterns of worship from the Hebrew scriptures and replaced others. In this section we are told that worship was to take place in a particular place that God would choose — sacrifices, feasting and tithing must take place there.

During the conquest the place was Gilgal. Once the conquest was completed the tabernacle moved to Shiloh and remained there during the time of the Judges. King Saul moved it to Nob near his home in Gibeah where he then killed the priests. It then moved to Kiriath-jearim. All of these places are slightly north of Jerusalem. David moved the Ark to Jerusalem though the tabernacle remained in Gibeon until Solomon brought it to the new Temple. The establishment of Jerusalem as the place for worship thus took about 350 years.

Christ came when the Temple was firmly established in Jerusalem, but he knew it would be destroyed and worship would be spread all over the earth. Worship does not have to be done in a particular place or time, but can be anywhere at any time. No longer were people obliged or even able to bring sacrifices to a particular place, since the temple was destroyed. His sacrifice completed that preparatory imagery.

Worship still involves feasting together before God. It still involves offerings and tithes and still required not worshipping other gods. While we may not be tempted to boil kids in their mothers' milk (a pagan fertility rite), there are other things worth avoiding. While location and rituals have changed, the fundamental call to us is still the same: seek God and honor him.

May 6

Dangerous Voices — Deuteronomy 13-14, Matthew 7:15

Moses and Christ both warned that we need to have discernment about what teachers and teachings we believe. The people of God are called to turn away from and repudiate the voices of those who call them to worship something other than God. We need to learn discernment to distinguish God's word from those of others.

In our time our world is full of such voices, in the form of a constant barrage of information that tells us we need more things. Greed is a constant temptation, surrounded as we are by this cultural noise and a greedy person is compared to an idolater. Other voices whip up political anger and fear, and yet other voices encourage us to just assuage our difficulties with some fun. We even have a

vast selection of lies presented as news, widely believed and circulated, even in the context of the fact-checking industry that has arisen to try to stop this.

What is an antidote to falling for idolatrous teaching? Perhaps it is appreciation for the beautiful and good things God has made, appreciation of people, appreciation of experiences, and appreciation of nature. When my heart is full with appreciation there really is no room for either greed or other substitutes for God.

May 7

Freedom — Deuteronomy 15, Galatians 5:1

Christ brings us freedom, and Moses announced release from debt and release from slavery. These became images or metaphors for the meaning behind the death and resurrection of Christ. We live in a time of tension when both suffering and liberation are at work in the world.

Despite this millennia-old call to freedom, and despite Christ's announcement of freedom through his death and resurrection, Christians did not listen. Instead white Christians in the United States justified slavery as a scripturally-based institution, unable to see that the call to freedom was for all. We can be grateful for the prayers of the slaves that were answered. There are many moving works of art regarding moving from enslavement to freedom. One well-known poem by an African-American captures the longing for freedom. Its last two stanzas are as follows:

Sympathy

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Til its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a' swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—

I know why he beats his wing!
I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings! --Paul Laurence Dunbar

May 8

Going to Jerusalem — Deuteronomy 16, Luke 2:41

Christ attended the festivals that prefigured his work. In the gospels many incidents in Christ's life occurred when he attended these festivals prophetic of His future work.

Some of the incidents in Christ's life were built around festivals:

| | |
|----------|---|
| Passover | Removed cattle, sheep and doves (John 2:13) Prophesied to rebuild the Temple in three days Many believed he was Messiah (John 3:23) Galileans believed because of miracles (John 4:45) |
| Passover | Fed the 5000 (John 6:4) |
| Shelters | Offered living water (John 7:2) |
| Hanukkah | Controversy with Pharisees (John 10:22) |
| Passover | Final supper with his disciples (John 13:1) |

For Christians, the rhythm of the church year has changed. We celebrate Advent, leading up to Christmas and the coming of Christ; we then celebrate Lent, leading up to Holy Week; and we celebrate Eastertide, leading up to the Ascension. It has also been rewarding for me to experience the Jewish traditions of celebration, particularly as they make clear their connection to Christ. In every case, we are taking ourselves into an observation of time that allows heaven and earth to interlock.

May 9

A Coming Prophet — Deuteronomy 17-18, Acts 3:22

God predicted through Moses that God would raise up another prophet like him, and Peter applied this passage to Christ. An obedient life is described here and in the teachings of Christ. In the scripture above he calls us to respect and obey what God had said in the law, and at the same time we can see how Christ himself fulfilled the law.

We can see parallels between these chapters and Christ's teachings:

| <i>Moses</i> | <i>Christ</i> |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Judging hard cases | Christ the perfect judge |
| Guidelines for a king | Christ the perfect king |
| Gifts for priests and Levites | Support for those in the ministry |
| Call to Holy living | Blessed are the pure in heart |
| True and False prophets | Good and bad trees |
| Cities of refuge | Christ is our refuge from our sins |

Concern for justice

Hunger and thirst for righteousness

Here we see a vision of society with just judges, rulers, spiritual leaders, and prophets that challenge injustice. We see people who care about holiness, justice, and forgiveness of sins. We also must share the social vision and need to recognize that we err if we feel like Christ cares only about our individual relationship with him. We are called to be world-changers in the direction of justice.

May 10

Justice — Deuteronomy 19, Romans 11:22

God's people are called to create a society filled with justice, because that is his nature. The New Testament reinforces this by telling us that justice and fairness are in Christ's character. We are inspired to seek these things today, knowing God loves mercy and justice.

But what do we do when we fail? What is the answer when the beautiful community is harmed in some way? In this chapter we have the example of manslaughter. We instinctively know that there is a difference between a death that is an accident, and a death caused with intention. In both cases, though, there has been harm done. The solution of a refuge for those who killed unintentionally is repeated here and elsewhere.

This theme of mercy based on what was in someone's heart helped develop a morality that is not too rigid to take human nature into account, but still balanced the scales, here protecting the one at fault from the natural desire for revenge.

Respect for property rights and respect for the need for accurate testimony to determine what truly happened and what the solution might be are also foundational social principles we still respect. In the case of Christ, they were legalistically trying to fulfill the need to have two witnesses, but had trouble finding any credible ones. He was thus a victim of the miscarriage of a just system.

The law was not unrealistically idealistic; it set precedents we still use in our own system of justice. Since justice is responsive to what is happening at any point in time, we have to work to keep a sound system in place. A weak court system in developing countries holds many back from their full potential. In our own system and in so many places in the world, justice fails and requires us to advocate for change based on the vision these wise texts provided.

May 11

Rules of War — Deuteronomy 20, Matthew 26:52

Christ chose to be a victim of violence and thereby transform it, whereas in the Hebrew scriptures, war was assumed to be inevitable and moral boundaries were placed around it.

The rules for war included compassion for fear or for not having yet experienced life on the part of soldiers. It required the people to offer peace before engaging in war. The requirement to destroy the Canaanites is once more repeated. For perhaps 2000 years the consensus of Rabbinic reflection was that these were no longer binding commands since these ethnic groups were no longer identifiable. A position of non-violence became the established view of Judaism, a logical necessity for a stateless people.

However, the creation of Israel as a state has once more opened all the questions regarding war. Modern Israel is almost evenly divided: should they appropriate former land or not? should they take critiques of other nations seriously? should they retain the status quo with the Palestinians? are peace talks viable? States inherently take on violent roles within and outside their borders.

These rules of war have made a positive contribution to formulating what might be just. Nevertheless, it is important to keep the focus that Christ chose to align himself with those receiving violence, even though he was clearly innocent. He raises a standard for us that is more reflected in this statistic than in Israel's nationhood: 22% of organizations that have won the Nobel Peace Prize were founded by Jewish people, though they comprise only a small part of the world population (0.2%).

May 12

Holy Living — Deuteronomy 21-22, Matthew 5:21-22, 31-44

Moses taught profound spiritual and moral principles, but Christ came and took all of them to an even deeper and more demanding level.

Moses

Cleansing for murders
Marriage and divorce
Rights of firstborn
Rebellious son
Care for property
Do not mix things
Sexual purity
Rights of women

Christ

Reconcile, do not hold on to anger
Divorce only for unfaithfulness
Christ is the firstborn
We are all prodigal sons
Detach from material things
Value the heart's purity
Do not look at a woman with lust
Compassion for the adulteress

We also see a prophecy of Christ's body being taken down and buried the day of his death.

Christ's expectations of us are far more demanding than the law, but his provision for our ability to obey in this way is greater than the law. He lives in us, enabling us to live obedient lives. Even in the midst of my failures, I look up to him and ask for help: "Conform me to your ideals."

May 13

Exclusion and Inclusion — Deuteronomy 23-24, James 1:21

Moses and Christ called us to holiness, Moses calling for exclusion and Christ for inclusion.

Israel was to be apart from nations descended from Lot. The prohibition for Moabites to be part of God's assembly for ten generations was later taken to mean that Moabites could never be part of the community of faith at the time of Nehemiah. In the story of Ruth the Moabitess, however, she not only became part of the people of God, her great-grandchild David became king, a picture of grace overcoming exclusion.

Even though Moabites were part the prohibition, Ruth's story shows grace to a particular woman from that country. Christ redeemed in a way explained in this passage and exemplified in the story of Ruth and Boaz. Woven in among the laws in these and the next several chapters, are seven essential to the story of Ruth.

Secondly, though Ruth's story took place in the time of the judges when people did what they thought right, Boaz attempted to follow God's command of empathy for foreigners, orphans and widows, recalling the peoples' slavery in Egypt as a point of common ground to remember being vulnerable. He obeyed the injunction to leave grain in the fields.

Christ taught us to overcome exclusion by his acceptance of sinners and tax collectors. The holiness God requires of us means that we must be quicker to identify the sin in our own hearts, rather than looking for sin in others. Our call to a particular tenderness for the vulnerable and marginalized is reinforced here as well as in Christ's teaching. There may be times we or our family need protection and exclusion is the right course. But his call of inclusion is always with us.

May 14

Preview of Ruth — Deuteronomy 25-26, I Corinthians 1:30

The provision of an economic and social redeemer in the law, became an image of the redemption Christ brought us. In these chapters we are introduced to the customs that will be worked out in the story of Ruth and Boaz. The principles reinforce that God sees giving to the poor as a privilege.

A brother or near relative should marry a widow to continue the family name and maintain property rights. This set up Ruth's request to Boaz for him to be the redeemer. Taking off of a sandal was a sign of contempt in Deuteronomy for those unwilling to do this, but by the time of Ruth it was a stylized way of confirming land purchases. This image of Christ purchasing a right to us, redeeming us, became a foundational metaphor in the New Testament, as did that of his role as the bridegroom and husband.

Sometimes we think of Christ's redemption of us in very transactional economic terms. These laws and Ruth's story demonstrate that though the economic provision was critical, the love that established the relationship was even more critical.

May 15

Cursing — Deuteronomy 27, Galatians 3:13

Moses promised blessing for obedience and suffering or curses for disobedience. Christ transfigured this by taking the curses of the law on our behalf. The terrible curses of these passages are part of our world today, but each one can be reversed through Christ's work on the cross. In his life and ministry, he healed sickness, provided abundant food and wine, and removed madness, all things we are called to do as his followers. In his crucifixion he was defeated, an object of horror and mocking, but he turned this to blessing through his victorious resurrection and ascension.

I can see that there are consequences even today for the list of bad behavior in this chapter: making idols, dishonoring parents, stealing land, mistreating the blind, sexual sins, secret murder, killing for hire, and ignoring the Law. I am most struck by a very common sin mentioned here: mistreating the vulnerable—foreigners, orphans and widows. Perhaps most common of all is the error of dishonoring our parents, and failing to acknowledge our deep debts to them, including for the very gift of life. This can lead to distortions of personality of which any psychologist is aware. It is a spiritual calling to forgive their offenses and honor them with our hearts. We are promised blessings for this.

Any time we feel things are going badly, it is wise to come humbly to God and ask him to show us if we have fallen into any sin which is bringing negative consequences in our lives. Repentance brings blessing.

May 16

Blessing — Deuteronomy 28-30, Matthew 25:34

Christ introduced his blessings by saying that the first step is to be humble people who realize they have nothing, but that God's gifts to them are everything. God's people are called to live a wholesome life within the blessings of God. The abundance of material and social blessings promised here is also available to us. Deuteronomy 30 is a beautiful solution if we have failed. We are called to reflect, return, wholeheartedly obey, to choose life and to choose to love the Lord. The result: blessings. Here we learn how much God loves to exalt us, to make us winners.

I think it is understandable that we like these extravagant promises, and we tend to agree with the definition of what makes us winners. But Christ redefined blessing in the Beatitudes. It is not material prosperity, but voluntary poverty; not cheerfulness based on all going well, but a heart sensitive to our pain and that of others; not being powerful, but being ordinary; not enjoying all of life's good things, but wanting God the most; not feeling fully satisfied with life, but longing for things to be more just; not triumphing over our enemies, but showing them mercy, and in fact, not being a fighter at all, but making peace. Christ finishes by saying that even if our reputation is maligned, that is a blessing because it is how prophets can expect to be treated.

In short, the Kingdom of Heaven has a new measure for what blessing really is: being conformed to Christ in both the suffering of the cross, and the resurrection from the dead.

May 17

Transition — Deuteronomy 31-32, Romans 15:7-10

When Christ was preparing for his death, he encouraged his disciples that they were ready to take on leadership. Similarly, it was time for Moses's death, and after his compelling and transformative leadership, it was intimidating for his assistant Joshua to have to take his place.

For Joshua's difficult task of conquering the land, he went with Moses and God appeared to them in a pillar of cloud at the tabernacle. Three times Joshua was exhorted to be strong and courageous, something repeated four more times in Joshua 1. Clearly these were things he needed in this difficult transition. Weakness and fear would make sense when taking over an unruly

group that would have to become unified warriors, and particularly when having lived in the shadow of such a great man for all his life.

Moses' song celebrated that God would avenge his enemies and cleanse the land. Paul transfigured the meaning of this in the New Testament by selecting only the call for the Gentiles to rejoice with his people, placing in the context of how God was having mercy in the Gentiles in Christ. What a remarkable transfiguration of the message of judgment on the Canaanites into the gospel of peace for all people in Romans.

Joshua's challenge to lead a military victory has become a challenge to us to lead spiritual victories. In my own life the exhortation to be strong and courageous is a necessary antidote to temptations to fear and anxiety as I try to carry out that calling. We see here that though God foresees the failures of the people, he is also dependable to overcome those failures, just as he can overcome ours.

May 18

Song of Moses — Deuteronomy 33-34, Luke 24:50-51

Moses' departure from the people foreshadowed Christ's departure in the ascension. It was a moment when both of them offered blessings. In his final song and final blessing, Moses reminded them that God was their king, something that would become more clear in Christ.

Moses then gave a blessing to each tribe full of visual images. Marc Chagall used this imagery and that in Jacob's blessings to create a set of twelve beautiful stained glass windows. The *Jerusalem Windows* are a spectacular visual of this chapter.

Moses climbed the mountain and died, still strong at 120, and his people mourned him. His epitaph as one who God knew face to face is beautiful. How reassuring to us today that because of Christ's work, every believer, not just great spiritual figures, can have that relationship of great intimacy with God.

As we end with the life of Moses we are once more struck with what a monumental figure he was, and what an effect he has had on world history. This initially timid leader became one of those we cannot ignore, even today. We are not called to be Moses, but we are called to allow the Holy Spirit to fill us and enable us to completely fulfill our calling and have the impact that we are to have. May his example of faithfully carrying out a monumental and difficult task encourage us to do the same.

CHAPTER 3, Part 1

The Kingdom Foreshadowed: Begun

Joshua — Ruth



May 19

Joshua — Joshua 1, Acts 13:19

The time had come for Joshua to lead the people to take over the land promised centuries before to Abraham. Jesus' and Joshua's names both mean "salvation", and it has been traditional to see the promised land as emblematic of our entrance into the Kingdom of God, as representing freedom for slaves, and as representing any challenge, as well as looking toward the new heavens and new earth.

Joshua led the process of possessing the land, something that is repeated three times in the chapter. That the land was God's gift was repeated five times. Israel served as a microcosm of God's Kingdom, preparing for Christ to come and extend it to all.

God's exhortation to be strong and courageous was repeated four times, with an additional charge to not be afraid or discouraged. Joshua remembered how intimidating their opponents were, recalled that the ten discouraging companions had died, and recognized that of his generation, only he and Caleb were left after the forty years of wandering.

We also need strength, courage, and not to let fear or discouragement take hold of us in the challenges of our lives. We need to be able to let go of memories that would hold us back, and focus our energies on this present moment. Joshua is a model of courage in the face of an overwhelming situation, and we can emulate him in this.

May 20

Entering the land — Joshua 2-5, Hebrews 4:8-11

The still insecure people of God needed a series of encouragements to prepare them to take the land, and Christ himself appeared to encourage Joshua.

The first encouragement was the report of the spies that the people were terrified of them. Rahab who hid the spies showed her faith that they would win as they came into the land, and she appealed for her life.

Second, they were reminded that the Ark of the Covenant meant that God was present with them in their journey. Third, they saw a miracle of waters piling up and leaving a dry river bed. Crossing the Jordan in this way looked back to crossing the Red Sea and looked forward to the baptism of Christ in that same place, all three events inaugurating a new kingdom.

Fourth, they placed twelve memorial stones in the Jordan and another twelve as an altar on the land to mark this moment, something to serve as a way of

teaching their children. It was this extraordinary experience that made the people revere Joshua as their leader.

Fifth, they recommitted to the covenant, and circumcised the uncircumcised. Sixth, they then celebrated Passover. Both of these ceremonies reminded them of God's mighty work on their behalf in the past, in Abraham and the promise of land to his descendants, and Moses' liberating them from Egypt.

Seventh, Joshua encountered the commander of the Lord's army, and was told to take off his sandals because he was in a holy place. This vision of Christ, taking place after the Passover, symbolically parallels Christ's resurrection appearances. The new kingdom would be created with spiritual force and God himself in control.

Each of these encouragements can apply to us as well: we are on the winning side against spiritual enemies, God is with us, we have been baptized into Christ, the apostles are our foundation stones, we are made holy, we have been rescued from sin, and Christ is present to lead us.

May 21

Rahab — Joshua 6, Hebrews 11:31

Rahab's scarlet thread has been seen as representing the blood of Christ. In the New Testament we are told her friendly welcome to the spies showed faith, whereas others refused to obey God. Her reward is that she became an ancestress of Christ, redeemed from death.

Rahab's status as transformed prostitute recalls women in Jesus' ministry: the woman caught in adultery, the Samaritan, and the woman who anointed his feet. The disciples disapproved of his talking to the Samaritan, and the Pharisees were horrified Jesus would let her touch him. Mary Magdalene had seven demons, but became a new person and was honored as the first to speak to the risen Christ. The love he showed for marginalized women parallels the kindness and love of Salmon, the Israelite who married Rahab and integrated her into the community.

Because Rahab was so redeemed, she became an archetype of the forgiven people of God. Dante, author of *The Divine Comedy*, described her as a luminous figure in Paradise.

This first encounter with the Canaanite world started out far more like a demonstration than a military engagement, with Israel walking silently around the city for six days. On the seventh day the walls collapsed and they destroyed everyone, young and old, animals, and they burned the town. Only Rahab and her family were saved.

I cannot forget the refrain: “completely destroyed”. “Destroy” is repeated at least 24 times in the first half of Joshua, along with burned cities, and “men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep, donkeys—everything.” Wrestling with the ethical implications is important. An excellent book that analyzes the problem of war in the Hebrew scriptures, particularly the holy wars of this book, is *Fight: A Christian Case for Non-Violence* by Preston Sprinkle.¹¹

Lest we feel self-righteous and judgmental, we must remember that war is not only an historical reality, in our time sophisticated weaponry often results in 90% civilian casualties, making it even more immoral. Our call today is to prevent or alleviate that suffering.

May 22

Destruction — Joshua 7-9, Colossians 2:15

Joshua’s triumphs foreshadow Christ’s spiritual conquests. Christ’s opposition came from the demonic forces he overcame as he liberated those who suffered. On a human level his opponents were Pharisees and religious leaders. He was poor, provincial and politically powerless, yet his sarcastic diatribes spoke truth to power and confronted hypocrisy, and ultimately they killed him for it.

We can use the stories of Joshua and apply them to ourselves and our spiritual conflicts:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Command against taking things | Stealing in ministry is still stealing |
| Achan’s secret greed led to death | The consequence of greed is defeat |
| Defeat led to repentance | Our defeats need to be repented |
| Ai was defeated and burned | Second chances are always possible |
| The old covenant was renewed | God wants relationship with us |
| Gibeon deceived them | We should be discerning, not credulous |

The largest change for us is that we follow Christ’s way of prayer and prophetic speech, versus the literal physical battles of Joshua. While Christendom has had a history of using Joshua’s methods, the people and periods we most admire followed in the way of Christ. In extending the Kingdom, we should not be afraid to call out hypocrisy, cruelty, foolishness, lies, and manipulation in our political and religious leaders.

The Hebrew scriptures repeatedly present God as a victorious warrior whose presence with his people brings victory. Some celebrate this image, and others like myself find it challenging. In either case, Merton reminds us: “We must not therefore open the Bible with any set determination to reduce it to the limits of a preconceived pattern of our own. And in reading it we must not succumb to the temptation of short-cuts and half-truths. All attempts to

narrow the Bible down until it fits conveniently into the slots prepared for it by our prejudice will end with our misunderstanding the Bible and even falsifying its truth.”¹²

May 23

Conquest — Joshua 10-12, I John 5:4

Christ’s victory over evil was won at the cross, and he gives us victory. Four times these chapters tell us that victory came from God as they won the land. It encourages us today to realize that God is still giving victory to those who trust him.

Living in a century when millions of people have died in our wars, it changes the picture to realize that the 31 kings who were conquered ran cities and surrounding villages, much like feudal lords, and the populations would have been relatively small. Israel, formerly so timid, now took a determined position against more powerful enemies and was successful. They accepted the conquest as God’s project and saw every victory as a sign of his favor.

Repetitions of Joshua’s story abound in history. In early Christianity peacemaking was the norm, but starting in the 4th century Christian rulers began to compel conversion by means of the sword. Not only the Crusades, but the New World conquests were seen as holy wars. Jesus’ call to be inclusive, “Compel them to come in” (Luke 14:23 KJV) was used to justify conversion at the point of the sword.¹³

Handel was not as squeamish as I am about conquest. Best known for his oratorio *Messiah*, he also wrote numerous oratorios on violent scripture stories, including *Joshua*. It contains a popular and often performed piece “See the conquering hero comes” later translated into English as the Easter Hymn, “Thine be the Glory, Risen, Conquering King.” This is strangely appropriate since ultimately it is Christ’s victory and creation of a peaceable kingdom that gives us hope.

May 24

Caleb — Joshua 13-15, Matthew 4:25

Caleb prefigures Christ’s Judean identity. Caleb, one of the twelve spies who went into Canaan, was full of enthusiasm to take possession of the land. For the next forty years in the desert he saw his friends die, all but Joshua, fulfilling the prediction that only these two adults of their generation would enter the land. The chapters begin with reference to Joshua’s age and all that remains to be conquered. Caleb was 85 years old when he came to ask permission to conquer Hebron. Both he and Joshua had seen first-hand the race of giants that so frightened their fellow scouts, but Caleb asked for the opportunity to conquer these challenging people and did so.

Abraham had lived in Hebron where he received the promise of the land. He bought a cave to bury Sarah, and was buried there by his sons. Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah were also buried there. Caleb links Abraham and David, not in Christ's ancestral line, but as a claimant of the promise of the land. Christ lived and died in Judea, a descendant of Judah. Today the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron is Israel's second most holy site and the highest point in Israel. A divided city, it is the center of West Bank trade, the largest of Palestinian cities, with a small but determined population of Jewish settlers, and consequently a site of struggle.

Caleb inspired leadership in others. He gave his daughter in marriage to the brave conqueror of another impressive giant's city about eleven miles southwest. It is touching to realize that this daughter had lower status as daughter of a concubine. Nevertheless, she had the boldness to ask and receive two water sources from her father. The story is repeated in Judges 1, emphasizing this unusual woman, Acsah, and inspiring us to be bold. She must have been an encourager for her husband Othniel who became the first judge upon whom God's Spirit came, who overthrew their oppressors and brought forty years' peace. May our families be as bold and distinguished as this family.

May 25

Distribution of the Land — Joshua 16-21, Matthew 13:44

The land Joshua distributed to the people was the formation of the kingdom in his time and foreshadowed Christ's gift of the kingdom to us. In the second half of Joshua the word "inheritance" reoccurs 47 times (KJV), and the emphasis in these chapters is the practical side of the fulfillment of that long-ago promise of land to the patriarchs. Joshua affirms that not a single promise remained unfulfilled.

From the lack of battles, and the refrain in Judges 1 that they failed to drive out the people, we can see that they perhaps moved into their territory and lived alongside others. The prediction that they would succumb to idolatry and be dominated by other nations did, unfortunately, happen. Ultimately ten tribes lost the inheritance altogether and two tribes lost it temporarily but were able to return.

In a remarkable modern parallel, today's Jews entered the land nineteen centuries after being evicted, reclaiming their inheritance and displacing others. The political consequences are still problematic, and there is a great irony in that a post-holocaust nation has displaced others into camps. But once again it affirms that not a single promise has remained unfulfilled.

May 26

The Covenant Renewed — Joshua 22-24, Luke 22:20

Joshua instituted a covenant with the people before he died, just as Christ made a new covenant before his death. Joshua warned them what would happen if they failed to keep their promise to serve God. His relationship with them and with us is the right balance between love and high standards, like a wise parent who is both emotionally responsive and sets appropriate limits.

Joshua reviewed Israel's history, and the people declared they would not follow foreign gods, but would obey God. Joshua rolled a large stone beneath the oak tree, near the tabernacle at Shechem, which served as a memorial. He buried Joseph as had been promised. This looked back to Jacob's prophecy 500 years previously, and looked forward 1500 years to when Christ would sit there with the woman at Jacob's well.

Preparatory to this, Phinehas served as a mediator and averted civil war. He verified that the Trans Jordan tribes were not worshipping idols, but honoring God with a memorial. Joshua, the warrior, and Eleazar, the high priest, both died, ending an era.

Despite this renewal of the covenant, they quickly failed. In the next chapter, Judges 1, we are told of all the Canaanites among whom they lived that they did not defeat and were not trying to defeat. Soon they were diligently intermarrying. God's messenger, perhaps Christ himself, came to tell them they had broken their side of the covenant, and God would allow them to be defeated and would allow the gods of their neighbors to be a source of constant temptation.

Like Israel, our past victories do not mean we always stay strong in the face of the next challenge. Life is difficult, and there is always another struggle that challenges our faith. But the reminder that promises are fulfilled encourages us to expect God's good promises to come about today.

May 27

Judges — Judges 1-3, Luke 4:18-19

Judges foreshadows Christ as the victor over evil. Warfare in Judges is different than in Joshua. These are the uprisings of weaker people against stronger nations that oppress them, demanding slave labor. The oppression resulted from having failed to drive out those already there, and then adopting their neighbors' idolatry. Repentance resulted in leaders who brought freedom for the people.

The first hero, Ehud, defeated the king in a special forces action. When I read the Bible for myself as a young teen, I found this story distasteful, rather shocking that the Bible would mention someone not only going to the bathroom, but the bowels emptying because of the knife plunged into him. Not to mention that the king was fat. Why was this in a book designed to help us grow spiritually? I now accept that this is an earthy book, and over-delicacy is a symptom of idealism, rather than Hebrew or Christian thinking that accepts the unity of body and spirit. Ehud made me ask questions.

In the text, the total time Israel is oppressed is 74 years, and the total time of peace is 296 years. So even in this time of great conflict and trouble we see God's mercy.

May 28

Deborah — Judges 4-5, Luke 22:69

Deborah and Christ spoke prophetically. Deborah and Barak's song prophesied Christ's triumph in his ascension. Lines regarding the earth shaking at God's presence, heavens dropping, rain, and Sinai moving, dominion over the mighty, and leading captivity captive were picked up in Psalms. The latter phrase is applied to Christ's ascension in the New Testament.

Jael is celebrated for pounding a tent peg into Sisera's head: "Most blessed of all women..." is a phrase repeated regarding Mary, Christ's mother. Abigail Adams identified with Jael. She applied the story metaphorically as a call to die to self when she did not want her husband to go abroad. Since Abigail Adams was living as a woman alone with her children in the Revolutionary War perhaps she wondered if she might have to apply this literally.

Handel wrote an oratorio on Deborah. His choice of characters with dramatic conflicts and triumphant military finales reflects his 18th century context of dramatic battle. Triumphant music celebrates Jael's killing of Sisera. He also wrote oratorios for Samson, Jephthah, Saul, Solomon, Athaliah, and Esther. .

The idea that God "gave them victory" is repeated three times in these chapters, and 19 more times in the book. The idea that God acts to bring victory, not me, is reassuring whenever I feel weak and overwhelmed. As I look back on life I can see victories in many areas: ministry, finances, relationships, health, and wisdom for different situations. These positive memories help me face the next challenge.

May 29

Gideon — Judges 6-7, Hebrews 11:32-34

Gideon foreshadows Christ as leader of a small group of followers who dramatically turn the tables on more powerful people. Gideon and Christ let

crowds go, and selected a small committed band of followers for battle against their enemies who had stolen all their food and left them starving. With a small band, Gideon routed the enemy, and with twelve followers, Christ turned the world upside down. This story encourages us that God is with us and gives us strength and courage we do not have.

A favorite image from this story is setting out a fleece. Christians use this example to ask for a tangible sign of God's leading. Another favorite lesson is that one does not need strength in numbers, but rather strength of commitment and determination. The final lesson is that God wins the battle, and all we have to do is let our lights shine. Gideon was fearful, did not want the responsibility, but won his battle and place in history.

The time of the Judges somewhat reminds me of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels. Small nations, some good, some mixed, some downright evil, are in the midst of a massive competition between freedom and domination. The 40 or 80 year periods of peace remind me of the Hobbit residents of the Shire who take their small, happy lives for granted. But when the larger struggle intruded on them, they became unlikely heroes—weak, fearful and reluctant—but ultimately winning, letting their smallness and weakness become strengths.

May 30

Gideon's Sons — Judges 8-9, Mathew 13:34-35

Jotham, the youngest son of Gideon, survived the slaughter of his seventy brothers, similar to Christ's survival of slaughter of the innocents. When he spoke up against his brother using a parable, he prefigured the extent to which Christ would also speak against his brothers in parables.

After Gideon's success he became oppressive and idolatrous. One of his sons, Abimilech, murdered most of his brothers and became a tyrant and oppressor. Jotham pointed out his brother Abimelech's injustice by means of a parable. Trees sought a king, asking olive, fig, or vine to rule them, each of which refused. When they asked the bramble, it accepted, the analogy being acceptance of kingship by an unworthy man. Jotham prophesied that Abimelech would destroy his people by fire, and would be destroyed in turn.

A thousand people from Shechem who had supported Abimilech's kingship died by fire. He was wounded by a millstone thrown down by a woman, and asked his armor bearer to kill him. The moral given is that he was punished for murdering his brothers.

Story-telling against injustice may seem like a very small act, particularly if the immediate result seems ineffective. We do it, though, not because we know it will have the right impact, but because we know it is right.

May 31

Jepthah — Judges 10-12, Matthew 5:37

Jepthah stands in contrast to Christ. Jepthah treated the vulnerable irresponsibly and made a foolish vow that showed general disregard for others. He suffered when it was his own daughter. In contrast, Christ showed compassion to the poor, the ill, children, and women.

Jepthah, rejected by his brothers because he was a prostitute's son, gained a rebel following. When community leaders asked him to fight the Ammonites, he sent an appeal to the opposing King. He asked for respect for their 300 years possessing the land.

When he won the resulting war, he carried out his vow to sacrifice whoever met him upon his return which was, unfortunately, his daughter, celebrating with tambourine and dance. Perhaps the result was perpetual virginity, not death, but a sad result of foolish words. As Christ exhorted us, we should simply say what we mean and mean what we say. Making promises we cannot keep gets us in trouble.

When disrespected by fellow Israelites, he retaliated by killing 42,000 people.

Jepthah

Son of a prostitute
Led rebels while in the wilderness
Leaders promised power
Demanded reassurance of his position
Made and fulfilled a foolish vow
Took vengeance on his own for disrespect
Ruled only six years

Jesus

Son of a virgin
Defeated temptation in the wilderness
Leaders opposed his authority
Operated out of interior authority
Advocated making no vows
Allowed his own to kill him
Is an eternal King

Before and after Jepthah we have ordinary leaders who did not have great battles but kept the peace—Jair for 23 years, Tola for 22, Ibzan for 7, Elon for 10, and Abdon for 8. How good to be reminded that a good ruler often does not have to make a big splash, but is gladly remembered for letting ordinary life go on.

June 1

Samson — Judges 13-16, John 5:19-22

Samson's birth and death parallel Christ. Samson was the opposite of Christ in so many respects. He was stubborn, impatient, impulsive, sensual, and manipulated by women. But his birth was prophesied to his parents by an angel, and his decision to sacrifice himself by pulling down the pillars of the pagan temple and dying along with Israel's enemies has some parallel to Christ's self-sacrifice.

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* makes the point that in Samson's story we have two motifs at once: the exploits of a successful hero, a strong man akin to Hercules, as well as the tragedy of personal weakness and failure to live up to his calling. These ambiguities make him a complex character who has intrigued artists through the centuries, creating an archetype we easily recognize.

Through his twenty years as champion, the people were only partially freed from the Philistines. Most touching in the story was Samson's acknowledgment of need when he was thirsty and God provided water, and at his life's end when he asked for strength to defeat his enemies. These moments of humility contrast with his arrogant forgetfulness that his strength was a gift.

Outward success and inner weakness and subsequent failure is something we have seen in political and religious leaders in our day. Our movie action heroes often have Samson's same strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps all these stories speak to us because we are aware of our own ambiguous qualities as a mixture of heroism and failure, prone to anger, violence or lust, even as we aspire to champion the good.

June 2

False religion — Judges 17-18, John 4:24

God called for spiritual worship in both Old and New Testaments. Idolatrous religion and ritual had starting points, and this story is a case study. Micah, the one starting the new religion, admitted to stealing his mother's money. Getting it back, she used part of the funds to make an idol.

Micah set up a shrine, and commissioned his son as a priest. When a Levite needed work, Micah hired him. His motive was to manipulate the supernatural world to receive a blessing, rather than the curse his mother had pronounced on the unknown thief which turned out to be him.

The priest prophesied success for Israelites traveling through who were so pleased they asked him to become tribal priest and to steal the religious artifacts. Despite Micah's protests, they stole his manufactured religion. Sadly, the image was worshipped by the tribe of Dan for a long time.

The end of Judges shows a culture collapsing in fake religion, sexuality, and violence. The refrain "Israel had no king" was preparation for kingly rule, hoping they would bring more stability.

This deconstruction of starting a religion warns us to notice our own cultural patterns and critique them. We, too, fall into trying to manipulate God by following the right formulas. We want power over God and to get things from God, with the result that we are no longer in a relationship of humility and worship.

June 3

Levite and his concubine — Judges 19, John 21:15

The Levite's mistreatment of a woman contrasts with Christ's respectful kindness to women. Christ treated women with kindness and encouragement. In contrast, the Levite abused his concubine, treating her as a possession, not offering marriage, and offered her to others as a sexual object. Her death became a conflict between men, and her dead body was mutilated.

Respectful treatment of women is an ideal not always reached, and in our society, it is estimated that one in three women and one in four men have been victims of violence from a partner in their lifetime. During one year, the estimate is the more than 10 million experience abuse. While efforts to counter these realities are vigorous, we still have a long way to go. In our country, serious effort to protect women from abuse did not begin until the mid-1800s, and the first services for abused women were not started until 1974. Add rape and child abuse to the picture and the social problems we need to address are enormous. We can help. We can raise awareness. We can volunteer. We can donate. We can be part of making sure counseling and safe houses are available.

The ugliness in this book stands in contrast to what Israel was intended to be. God's call for a kingdom of priests was to create a space where heaven and earth were in concert, preparing for the full expression through Christ. The repeated failures, the repeated offensive turn toward revering idols could have meant the end of the story. But in God's faithfulness to His own plan and promises, he fought for them, and mercifully restored his presence with them. His mercy has never changed.

June 4

Repentance — Judges 20-21, II Corinthians 7:10

There is one bright place where we see Christ in this dark story. In the midst of chaos of these chapters, the people go to the Ark of the Covenant where they weep and repent and appeal for mercy. That place of mercy is Christ. Phinehas, just as he had in the wilderness wanderings, served as a person to urge a stern and forceful response to the compromise with evil in the community.

While Israel's story is full of failure to live up to being a kingdom of priests, this is case of particularly bitter failures:

- the Levite has no qualms about cutting up his concubine's body to arouse a political response, a kind of propaganda
- the men of Gibeah had normalized their sexual perversity
- their fellow tribesmen defended this sinful behavior rather than judge it
- the result was civil war
- those carrying out the judgment were imperfect and suffered extreme casualties
- given all that goes wrong, we can at least ask if they were receiving true guidance from God
- the engaged in genocide
- aghast at the outcome they forced women to marry these men without their consent, and then authorized capture of other women

It is ugly, disturbing, and a classic text for asking “where is the spiritual benefit?” The sad truth is that we have parallel tragedies in our own day—sexual perversion, propaganda, civil war, genocide, violence in God's name, exploitation of women. Commentators find this a difficult passage, and it is understandable it is not a favorite story and rarely chosen for preaching or study. However, an evaluation is given in Hosea that it was right to attack these wicked men.

In light of the failures, it seems God abandoned His people, but He was still there in the Ark of the Covenant, and He would continue to intervene, sending prophets, kings, and priests. He would even send messengers that descend from this sordid story: Jeremiah the prophet, and Paul the apostle.

This is an ethically messy story where one really wonders about the decision-making. Given the situation it is hard to see a black and white solution, and this “shade of gray” solution is a challenge. Perhaps it is worthwhile as a discussion of ethical dilemmas: what might have been better?

June 5

Ruth and Boaz — Ruth 1-2, Ephesians 5:25-27

Ruth foreshadows Mary as an ancestress of Christ. She is one of four women in Matthew's genealogy of Christ, one of two we are sure were not Jewish, reinforcing that Christ is inclusive, the savior of the whole world.

In Ruth we see a woman humble enough to tolerate being an outsider, to do menial work, and even to make a counter-cultural marriage proposal. In the end we see her reversal of fortune, being raised to honor, even the great honor as the ancestress of an unbroken line of kings from David to Christ. A search through scripture reveals the gifts of humility, many of which she experienced:

exaltation, honor, grace, earthly property, greatness in the Kingdom, rescue, seeing God at work, being cared for, supported, and victory.

Ruth serves us well as an example of loyal love. Her declaration of loyalty to Naomi and her God has entered our marriage services as an ideal of committed relationship. Here is relational evangelism at its finest, even though Naomi was herself struggling with her own faith. Ruth is an example of a widow who finds new people to love, does not stay stuck in her past life, but moves into a new period of fruitful life. She serves as a great example for any of us who have suffered the death of someone we care about, an example that love fills in our losses.

Boaz' romance with Ruth not only reminds many of their own romances, but reflects Christ's romance with his bride, the church. His kindness as he takes an interest in "that girl over there" and his initiative in welcoming her, affirming her, feeding her, and providing for her are tender signs of love that eventually lead to their engagement and marriage. He welcomes this foreigner into the community and she is changed by this love.

I have so many single friends who struggle with questions like, "Does God have an appropriate spouse for me?" "Where could I meet the right person?" "Why am I having to wait?" "Will I ever get married?" "Should I try on-line dating?" "Why aren't there more great singles at church?" These can be very painful questions. Young widows like Ruth have the same questions.

Part of what is beautiful in Ruth's story is that her love and loyalty to Naomi led her to actions that created an unexpected encounter with an eligible man. Can we, like Ruth, make a life of love for God and for those we know be our priority, trusting that in the process an appropriate marriage can come about? As I have lived alongside so many single people, my confidence and faith have grown for this area of life, and I confidently pray for God's very best for them.

June 6

Redemption — Ruth 3-4, Luke 1:68

Boaz reflects Christ as redeemer, rescuing from poverty, exclusion, loneliness, and unfruitfulness. As was explained in Deuteronomy, he chose to fulfill the laws regarding caring for the widows of one's relatives. In the midst of the chaotic period of the Judges, he was an example of an honorable man, obedient to the law.

Seeking marriage, Ruth set aside any clothes from mourning her widowhood, she dressed beautifully, and approached Boaz privately in the context of a harvest party. She let him know, just as her mother-in-law had instructed, that she was available for marriage.

Taking the fact that Ruth was a Gentile coming to Boaz, a redeeming Christ-figure, her humble approach was a request to be part of the family of faith. She asked to be covered and redeemed, something we also ask.

For the single women of today, I have wondered what our cultural equivalent to sneaking up to sleep at the feet of a man after the harvest party could be. Perhaps the most obvious is being willing to invite men to events, joining fun activities where there are men, participating on mission trips and Bible studies where there are singles, and not being too timid to get to know people by asking good questions. In each case, it makes sense to copy Ruth and be well-groomed and attractively dressed! Ruth and Boaz inspire us and we can aspire to a love story just as tender.

The legacy of Ruth and Boaz' life was the coming of Christ, the same legacy we desire to come through us. Boaz redeemed Ruth and married her. The result of their marriage was a child, the ancestor of King David and his descendant Christ. Here we have a key point of this gentle romance and its importance in scripture.

Ruth's story, and the birth of her son who is an ancestor to Christ, took place in Bethlehem where Christ was born. Together Ruth, Boaz and Obed become an image of the Holy Family.

The fact that Naomi is identified as Obed's grandmother even though there is not a blood relationship is an encouragement. In our day of widespread infertility it is a gift to be able to offer foster care or to adopt children and to truly claim them as their own.

Trusting God for children and grandchildren can be a challenge if there are delays in pregnancy. Trusting God as we care for children as they grow can be an even bigger challenge. And trusting Him if a child falls into difficulties can be the biggest challenge of all. Yet children are God's blessing, and we can pray in faith and hope and joy that the blessing will be complete.

CHAPTER 3, Part 2

The Kingdom Foreshadowed: Flourishing

I & II Samuel, I Kings 1-10, I Chronicles, II Chronicles 1-9



June 7

Hannah — I Samuel 1-2:1-11, Luke 2:27-31

Hannah foreshadows Christ's mother Mary. Both women had children when it seemed unlikely that they could. The story encourages me that God hears our prayers and understands our longing to have children. It also encourages me that a parent can influence their child's faith and willingness to serve God.

When Hannah's sincere and persistent prayers were answered she acknowledged that God had given her what she prayed for, and she dedicated him to God for life. Both Hannah and Mary took their sons to the temple in dedication, an example for every Christian parent.

Like Mary, Hannah was a poet, and similarities stand out as we compare their poems line by line. In her poem Hannah offers a prophecy of Christ's resurrection that God brings death and life, brings down to the grave and raises up. Both women show fierceness, affirming God's approval of strong women.

Mary's poem, the Magnificat, and has become a treasured part of Christian worship with many beautiful musical settings. This inspiring affirmation of faith thus spans not only the thousand years from Hannah to Mary, but two thousand more to our day.

June 8

God Speaks— I Samuel 2:12-36, 3, Matthew 13:23

Christ emphasized hearing God's word and letting it change us. Samuel we have the story of a small child who heard from God and went on to become one of the greatest prophets.

The example that a small child could hear from God made this my favorite childhood Bible story. It planted the idea that God can speak to our hearts today and it intrigued me that Samuel at first did not know it was God's voice. It made me want to learn how to hear God myself. Fortunately, the prophetic gift is available to all of us since Christ came, and Paul encouraged us to request it. As a result of the work of the Spirit in his life everything Samuel said was wise and helpful.

The content of God's message to Samuel was a warning to Eli, the high priest of his day. He is a tragic figure in whom the human failures of priests are highlighted, and he is an example where God's message did not take root and produce good fruit. Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas (note: not the same Phinehas from Numbers, Joshua and Judges), were scoundrels who took the best meat for their food, sometimes even snatching it before the sacrifice, and

they grew fat. Eli reproached them, but they would not listen. A prophet warned Eli that all of his family would die, his two sons on the same day. The sons carried the Ark to the battleground which was captured, and as prophesied, the two sons were killed. When he heard the news, Eli, 98 years old, blind, and fat, fell backwards and broke his neck.

Merton describes what the right kind of hearing can do to us: “The basic claim made by the Bible for the word of God is not so much that it is to be blindly accepted because of God’s authority, but that *it is recognized by its transforming and liberating power*. The ‘word of God’ is recognized in actual experience because it does something to anyone who really ‘hears’ it: it transforms his entire existence.”¹⁴

June 9

The Ark of the Covenant — I Samuel 4-6, Hebrews 4:16

The Ark of the Covenant represents Christ’s presence with His people. Several times the Ark is referred to as God’s throne. When the people moved, it followed the lead team of Judah and two tribes. Entering the land, the Ark went first and waited mid-river as it went dry until all the people had crossed. Located at first in Gilgal, it was then moved to Bethel, then to Shiloh. Talmudic tradition says it remained in Shiloh for 369 years until this story of its capture.

Philistines became afraid of this sign of God’s presence. Their idol fell before it twice, and illness broke out wherever it was taken. They sent it back. When the people of Bethshemesh casually looked into it, 70 people died, so they sent it to Kiriath-jearim, fifteen miles from Jerusalem. There it remained.

During David’s time it may have moved among Levitical families. David formally moved it into a tent in Jerusalem. Solomon moved it into the newly built Temple. Once the first temple was destroyed we hear no more of it.

We have previously noted the death and resurrection imagery the Ark carries so well. By extension, we also become “the Ark” because we carry the presence of God. The question is, do we become a source of healing as well as becoming powerfully dangerous to evil, causing spiritual forces to be overcome?

A simple wooden box
Became more than a box
Adorning it with golden angels
Placing treasures inside—
God anointed it with power.
It was dangerous.

I am a simple wooden box
Made more than that
Adorned with glory
With centuries of wisdom inside—
God anoints me with power.
Life flows out.

June 10

Samuel — I Samuel 7, John 10:27

Samuel prefigures Christ in many ways: he was a miraculous child, his mother's song of celebration was like Mary's, he was dedicated at the temple by his parents, he stayed at the temple, he liberated people from oppression, he was a traveling preacher, he prayed for the people, he opposed unfaithful religious and political leaders, he anointing others with the Holy Spirit, he offered instruction regarding the kingdom, he called for obedience and putting God first, and he appeared after death.

Parallel comments are made regarding the childhoods of Samuel and Christ that they grew taller, and gained favor with God and with the people. Both waited patiently for public ministry. Tradition is that Samuel was a teenager when the Ark was captured. He continued in ministry for twenty years before calling the people to action when in his thirties. Similarly, Jesus lived humbly under the authority of others until the start of his ministry when he was about thirty years old. Samson never succeeded in liberating the people from the Philistines, but God miraculously did so under Samuel.

The Psalms and the New Testament highlight Samuel along with Moses as two of the greatest spiritual heroes. Clearly, our chances to become spiritual heroes greatly increase as we continue to listen to God in our hearts.

June 11

Samuel Anoints a King — I Samuel 8-9, John 1:22-23

In anointing a king, Samuel bore a resemblance to John the Baptist who announced Christ as Messiah. Transition from prophetic leadership to kingship was painful for Samuel. God told him to do as the people asked because it was not Samuel being rejected, it was God. Before this, God was king and earthly leaders were his assistants. Now they wanted to be like other nations, and God allowed it, reminding us that he gives us free choices.

The man selected, Saul, seemed wonderful and godly, but soon started to make serious mistakes. God took the throne from him and later from his descendants. Samuel's dialogue with God gave him predictive capacity for upcoming events. When Saul was to become king, Samuel gave him three

signs to encourage him this was God's call, which parallel things Christ told his disciples.

Samuel

Saul donkeys would be found
Men with meat, bread, wine
would give him bread
The Spirit of God would come on him
making him a new man

Christ

Disciples told where to find a donkey
A man would share his home
for their Passover supper
Disciples should wait for the Spirit
at Pentecost

For us, now that Christ has come, being anointed with the Holy Spirit is something that is available to all. Requesting prayer from a person who demonstrates spiritual power is a good way to receive God's gifts. Saul's failure serves as a cautionary tale that the gift can be withdrawn.

June 12

Saul Crowned as King — I Samuel 10-12, I Corinthians 4:20

After Samuel anointed Saul, he was publically identified and acknowledged as king, the Spirit of God came on him, and he became a different person with a new heart. He received the scroll of the king's duties, and he had companions whose hearts were touched by God. We can see parallels to Christ's baptism and the disciples who began to follow him. They also serve to remind us that God's spirit comes on us and changes our hearts.

Some of Saul's people were under threat of becoming servants to the king of Ammon and were to be blinded in one eye. Saul responded with righteous anger, cut up an ox, and sent pieces by messenger throughout Israel. A force of 330,000 gathered, the campaign was successful, and he was formally crowned.

In a touching postscript many years later, when Saul was killed in battle and his body and that of his sons hung on a wall, the grateful people he had rescued traveled all night to get the bodies, burned them, and respectfully buried their bones.

In Samuel's farewell address he defended the integrity of his ministry and reproaches them for having asked for a king. Nevertheless, God would not abandon them. Samuel promised that he would not sin by ceasing to pray and teach. He encouraged them to remember all the wonderful things God had done for them.

Once again we are reminded of the recurrent scriptural theme that God forgives even when we fail him. We are reassured he will not abandon us. We know, looking ahead, that Israel will fail, that the people will not follow God. But we are still reading these scriptures because God never abandoned his people despite that failure, and he sent Christ to love and redeem us all.

June 13

Saul as King — I Samuel 13-15, John 11:53

Saul is an archetype of those who turn away from God and actively work against him. His own disobedience created his spiritual depression and jealousy that led to his opposing David. He thus becomes an image of Christ's opponents: Herod in his infancy, Pilate/Herod/Pharisees in his crucifixion. Herod pursued Christ and Saul pursued David, both fearing they could be replaced as king.

Each chapter shows poor decision-making: taking on the priestly role, telling his troops they could not eat, and sparing the Amalekites. Saul's story presents interpretive challenges: how do we understand the history of Israel and Amalek? How do we understand the idea that God sent an evil spirit on him?

Saul was commanded to exterminate the Amalekites, which were descended from Esau's grandson. He lost his kingdom for not carrying this out. Amalekites had attacked as Israel journeyed toward Mount Sinai and ruthlessly killed the feeble, faint, and weary. For this offense God determined to destroy them as a people, which happened after Saul's time.

God's Spirit left Saul when David was anointed. In its place came depression, a tormenting spirit of conviction. One way of understanding this comes from Saint Ignatius. He wrote that when we are in sin, any depression and anxiety we feel comes from God for the purpose of bringing us to repentance. When we are living in obedience, depression and anxiety come from the enemy trying to defeat us. In Saul's case, his depression became characteristic of the rest of his life. We do not have to live with this—repentance and recovery are freely available.

June 14

David anointed — I Samuel 16, Luke 1:69-70

David, anointed to be king, is an image of Christ, the anointed one, Messiah. Selected by God through Samuel above all his older brothers, and above all from the tribe of Judah, he had a heart for God that prepared him for his role. David is another example of God's gracious choice of younger sons over the cultural norm of older sons. Similarly, Christ's background was one of obscurity.

Anointed with oil, God's Spirit came on him. Similarly, when Christ returned from the temptation, filled with the Holy Spirit's power, he announced that Isaiah's prophecy of the Spirit upon the Messiah was fulfilled in him. It is

because Samuel anointed this ancestor of Christ that Peter could say that starting with Samuel, all the prophets had looked forward to the time of Christ.

The young shepherd, whose poetry we still use in our prayers, was selected from obscurity and became the great shepherd king. He was not only the ancestor of Christ, he foreshadowed Christ's kingship most strongly of all the kings that were to come.

June 15

David Rescues God's People — I Samuel 17-18, Colossians 2:15

David came forward to confront the giant Goliath when no one else from the people was willing or able to do that, paralleling Christ's unique confrontation with evil. The result in both cases was freedom for oppressed people. In David we see that acting in God's name has greater power than any human or spiritual force against us, and we can claim that same power today.

David's services as a musician had not made him stand out to Saul, and he had been going back and forth between the court and tending sheep. David's extra bravery and success made Saul wonder if he was from a notable warrior family. The real secret was his anointing with the Holy Spirit.

After killing Goliath, David and Prince Jonathan became friends, and he stayed permanently at the palace. Saul gave him a military command, and he was popular with soldiers, officers, and the public. The public acclaim, however, turned Saul against him, made him jealous and afraid of being usurped. Twice Saul threw spears at him and he demoted David to a lesser rank, but David continued to be successful "for the Lord was with him."

Princess Michal fell in love with him and Saul allowed the marriage, secretly hoping the bride price of dead Philistines would kill David. David's success filled Saul with fear.

For us, too, it is the anointing of God's Spirit that makes possible a level of success that may intimidate people who are not doing the right thing. If we become part of challenging them, it is God's Spirit in us that will make us successful, not our own cleverness or ability. But the fundamental lesson of the story is that, analogous to David's defeat of Goliath, Christ fights for us, liberating us from whatever is oppressing us.

June 16

Jonathan — I Samuel 19-20, John 15:14

Jonathan foreshadows Christ as the perfect friend. He overcame the jealousy and failures of his father Saul, and maintained a loving, close relationship with

David who he knew God had called to replace him. When Jonathan made a pact with David, the text says he “loved him as his own soul,” and gave him the royal robe, sword, bow and belt he was wearing. This makes Jonathan a picture of Christ who is the King’s son, takes us to his heart and “loves us as his own soul,” makes a new covenant with us, and clothes us with his own righteousness.

Jonathan was a brave and daring warrior without jealousy, a warm and loyal friend, and a peacemaker. He interceded for his friend David with his father Saul and succeeded in making peace. He also served as a protector by speaking well of David. When Saul once more pursued David, Jonathan stood up for him to the point of endangering his own life. When Jonathan died in battle, having forgiven his father and engaged in the fight beside him, David’s mourning included this praise: “Your friendship was a miracle-wonder, love far exceeding anything I’ve known or ever hope to know.” His character and actions are like Christ and serve as an example for us.

I ask myself if I know how to be a good friend. Do my friends know they are loved? Can they depend on me? Do I stand up for them when that is needed? Do I value them as they should be valued? Jonathan’s example teaches us that we can treat others with God’s faithful love.

June 17

David Flees from Saul — I Samuel 21, Psalm 56, Matthew 5:3

David on the run from Saul became poor and a wanderer, just as Christ chose poverty and homelessness. Unfortunately, Saul’s jealousy could not be contained, and David fled. In this difficult time, he could have thought, “I will never be king,” or “Since Saul is trying to kill me, I have a right to kill him,” or “What am I doing wasting my life, running around in the wilderness?” or “This life hardly seems appropriate for a future king.” Nevertheless, his actions and prayers in the Psalms show a heart of confidence in God.

Having lived in the palace, married a princess, and been a popular commander, he lost it all: his home, his fame, his popularity, and his princess. He instantly become a poor man. He was so poor he had to beg for bread for himself and the young man with him from the priests, and took the special tabernacle bread.

He went to the Philistine King, but quickly felt unsafe there and feigned madness to get away. The Psalm he wrote after this (Psalm 56) shows his heart when in these difficult and stressful situation of loss: “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.” “I trust in God, so why should I be afraid?” “You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.” “God is on my side.” His example challenges me to think about how I respond to loss in my life.

June 18

Suffering — I Samuel 22, Psalm 52, Matthew 5:4

David's own suffering, the sufferings of those who chose to join him, and the unjust murder of the priests who had helped him, reminds us of Christ's suffering and his compassion for the suffering of others. In David's time of weakness, we see an attractive faith and character which contrasts with his errors once he became strong

Doeg, who saw the priests help David, told Saul, with the result that 85 priests were killed along with their families. Abiathar fled to David and joined the malcontents who had already gathered around him. David's Psalm (52) accuses Doeg: "You call yourself a hero, do you?" "Why boast about this crime of yours?" "You love to say things that hurt others." "But God will strike you down."

In this story Doeg serves as an image of the many people throughout history who have massacred others. I felt David's cry for justice at the perpetrators of massacres in Guatemala. For many years I prayed that some kind of justice would be done. When a series of trials resulted in sentences for perpetrators of serious human rights violations, it felt like an answer to this prayer.

June 19

Betrayal — I Samuel 23, Psalm 63, Psalm 54, Matthew 5:10

The betrayals David experienced parallel the betrayals Christ experienced. Even though David protected the people of Keilah from the Philistines, they planned to betray him to Saul. Once more David fled to the wilderness. We see in this story the principle that God can give us concrete, practical guidance in our difficulties.

David's response to being in the wilderness (Psalm 63) turned the dryness of the landscape into a prayer of longing for God: "I earnestly search for you. My soul thirsts for you; my whole body longs for you in this parched and weary land where there is no water." While in the Judean wilderness, Jonathan came to him and affirmed, "You are going to be the next King of Israel," and they renewed their covenant of friendship.

Another betrayal by the men of Ziph exposed his hiding place to Saul. David went even further into the wilderness. His response to the betrayal, (Psalm 54) was to plea for help: rescue me, defend me, and may my enemies' plans for ever be turned against them.

Christ offered forgiveness of those who had betrayed him and put him to death. He said, “Father, forgive these people, because they don’t know what they are doing.” We are to do the same. At the same time, it is notable that in the midst of his suffering he is full of joy. Psalm 63 is predominantly praise. Gratitude, no matter the circumstances, is something David teaches us.

Some of my favorite childhood books were the Narnia series by C.S. Lewis. He created a number of compelling young kings, one of which bears a resemblance to David. Prince Caspian, though the rightful heir to the throne, lived in the woods with his companions, pursued by a Saul-like usurper. The fictional figure’s nobility, growing leadership, courage, and confidence in his call beautifully parallel David at this time of his life. The example of these characters, including David, can inspire us to emulate their noble qualities.

June 20

Mercy — I Samuel 24, Psalm 57, Matthew 5:7

David’s mercy to Saul prefigures Christ’s call to show mercy. David was in a cave and Saul came in, but rather than killing him, David cut a piece of his robe. When Saul left, David shouted to him, bowed to him, and pled his case. David said, “I will never harm you” and asked that God would judge between them. Saul responded, saying, “You are a better man than I am!” “Who else would let his enemy get away?” And most tellingly, “I realize you are surely going to be king.” David’s story reassures us that God judges between human opponents, vindicating us if we are in the right.

David hid in a cave in chapter 22, and here once again. David writes of this (Psalm 57): “I will hide beneath the shadow of your wings until this violent storm is past.” He expressed his faith in “God who will fulfill his purpose for me.” His heart of worship is repeated twice in saying: “Be exalted, O God, above the highest heavens! May your glory shine over all the earth.”

I know I am called to mercy toward anyone who wrongs me. I am never to stand in judgment, but to do what David did and ask God to do the judging. Christ’s call in his Sermon in the Mount is to “judge not that you be not judged”, something David learned through the Holy Spirit. If I try to fix things with my anger, I make them worse, but if I commit the situation to God, good changes can take place.

June 21

Abigail — I Samuel 25, Matthew 5:9

Christ is the source of wisdom and peacemaking that Abigail demonstrates. The story shows her in the role of a wise mediator in a conflict, the same role Christ takes in our conflicts and in our conflict with God. Abigail’s example teaches us that God can use us to prevent tragedies if we listen and obey.

A contrast is set up between wisdom and foolishness comparing Abigail and Nabal. We are told that his name means “fool.” Unlike the good shepherd, wealthy, with 3000 sheep and 1000 goats, he did not see himself as their protector and appreciate what David and his men had done. Instead, he was selfishly committed to preserving his own wealth. The image of the poor shepherd is used to depict unfaithful ministers, and it is often the case that the sign of this unfaithfulness is a self-centered preoccupation with wealth. When David perceived that lack of appreciation, he became angry. Instead of forgiving, he was determined to show he was right, and destroy his enemy.

Abigail, knowing her husband was in the wrong, wisely decided to offer amends. Humbly, appealing for forgiveness, she focused on David’s call from God to ask him to forgive. She took responsibility for something she did not do, and David was grateful for the wake-up call. When Nabal heard, the shock resulted in his death. David rewarded Abigail for her wisdom with an offer of marriage.

Christ calls us to be peacemakers in conflicted situations. Abigail’s story puts flesh and blood on how that looks in a very difficult situation. My own conflicts have taught me that to be like Abigail, quick to say “I’m sorry”, works best.

June 22

David Spares Saul — I Samuel 26, Matthew 5:5

David’s rejection by the nation foreshadows Christ’s rejection. We are all called to humility and meekness, and it challenges our competitiveness. Because David believed God had anointed him as king and it was God’s responsibility to fulfill his plan and promises, he could relax and let things go wrong for a while, knowing they would eventually be set to right.

Once more the men of Ziph betrayed him. David could have killed Saul when he slipped into his camp and found him asleep, but because of his respect for God’s anointed, David acted on the call to love our enemies.

Saul was humbled. “I have sinned. Come back home, my son, and I will no longer try to harm you, for you valued my life today. I have been a fool and very, very wrong.” He predicted “you will do heroic deeds and be a great conqueror.” David’s lament was, “You have driven me from my home, so I can no longer live among the Lord’s people to worship as I should. ... Must I die on foreign soil?”

David’s example shows he did not interpret having enemies as evidence he was displeasing God, he just stayed out of their way. Christ’s call to love and bless our enemies can happen even when needed boundaries protect us from harm.

Enemies are not a problem, and if we are patient and trust God as David did, the problem can be made right.

June 23

David Undercover — I Samuel 27, 29, 30, Matthew 5:9

David was rejected and went into exile, living among the Philistines, just as Christ was put in the hands of his enemies. David left Israel to avoid Saul, just as Christ withdrew from those wanting to kill him (for example, after he had preached in Nazareth). It did work: Saul stopped hunting David for the last year and four months of his life.

Years before, David had killed Goliath, killed many Philistines to gain a dowry for getting his wife Micah. When first fleeing Saul, he went on his own to Gath and pretended to be a madman to save his life. Now, returning with a group of 600 warriors, he was welcomed by the Philistine king. Saul quit his pursuit, having successfully evicted his rival from the community of faith in Israel.

The context created a situation of moral compromise. He kept the confidence of the King of Philistia by lying to him, and by massacring villages completely so they could not expose his lies. Fortunately, he did not gain the confidence of the King's officers who thereby prevented him from having to go into battle against his own people. The outcome of the battle however, was the death of his nemesis Saul, and the death of his well-loved friend Jonathan.

Christ was killed by His enemies. He willingly went toward where they were in Jerusalem, knowing this would be the outcome. Rather than inflict harm, His strategy was to receive harm and transfigure it which He decidedly did in the resurrection. This model of allowing ourselves to "be wronged" goes against our competitive culture, but Christ's challenge is there for us.

June 24

The Death of Saul — I Samuel 28, 31, I Chronicles 10, John 19:28-30

Christ's death and Saul's death stand in contrast. Christ knew his death was prophesied, knew when he would die, and his death was full of purpose. In contrast, Saul had lived disobediently, dreaded death, and his death was full of tragedy. The respect with which Christ's body was buried contrasts with the disrespect shown to Saul's body.

When Saul consulted a witch, asking her to call up dead Samuel, he engaged in necromancy, something the Law condemned. Saul had obeyed the Law in removing such practitioners of magic, but was desperate because "God is departed from me, and answers me no more, neither by prophets, nor by

dreams...” Samuel said God had become his enemy, removed his kingdom, and that he would die.

Wounded by the enemy, Saul pled with his armor bearer to kill him, was refused, and so fell on his own sword. The armor bearer followed in a poignant suicide. I Chronicles 10 gives us the horrifying post-script. The Philistines came and found his body, cut off his head, proclaimed his death to their idols and the people, placed his armor in Dagon’s temple, and placed his and Jonathan’s bodies on the wall. The commentator says he should not have sought a medium instead of the Lord, and so died for his unfaithfulness.

We can face death boldly, following the example of Christ, doing so without fear, and knowing that our death can be meaningful. It can be a time of blessing others, leaving helpful and nourishing memories for those who follow us.

June 25

David’s Lament — II Samuel 1, John 11:32-35

Christ’s grief in the face of the death of his friend, and David’s grief in the face of Saul and Jonathan’s death reminds us that the depths of our grief are also tenderly understood by God.

Any of us who have lost a deeply loved friend or family member can resonate with David’s lament for Jonathan. Any of us who have lost an intimate person with whom our relationship has been conflicted can identify with his lament for Saul.

David is like Christ in truly demonstrating love for his enemies. When Saul died and David learned of this, David expressed affection and respect for Saul who had pursued him, as well as Jonathan whom he had loved. Three times he repeated “How the mighty heroes have fallen!”

The “Dead March” Handel composed for his oratorio on Saul has been used for solemn funerals of heads of state ever since. Comparing it to the elegy of David for his slain rival, perhaps this is fitting.

As I look back on my losses, I am struck that as time goes by it is the most tender parts of the relationship that still stand out to us and cause us to remember others with appreciation and affection. Reaching that acceptance takes time and we need to accompany our grieving friends with kindness and patience.

June 26

Innocent blood — II Samuel 2-3, Matthew 27:24

Christ's death was acknowledged by Pilate as a case of shedding innocent blood. David judged the actions of his commander Joab as meriting judgment because he shed innocent blood in a time of peace.

After Saul and Jonathan's death, David moved to Hebron where Judah, his own tribe, crowned him King. Despite his outreach, Israel remained loyal to a son of Saul, Ishbosheth. Civil war was threatening, and Joab led David's troops, and Abner led those of Ishbosheth. In an early encounter, Abner unwillingly killed Joab's brother Asahel. Later Abner was offended by Ishbosheth and joined David's side. Joab still held a grudge however, and killed Abner.

Though he verbally complained and championed Abner as an innocent victim, David felt too politically weak to oppose Joab, a relationship complicated by family ties. Joab was David's cousin, son of Aunt Zeruiah and brother of Abishai and Azahel, other top commanders. Amasa was another cousin, son of Aunt Abigail. These men and 400 other malcontents joined David when he fled from Saul, and were part of the David's mighty men.

At David's death, he asked his son Solomon to carry out the judgment. This story helps us see that though David was a warrior, he lived by an honor code of who could be fought and who could be killed and who could not. For us the standards have been raised even higher by the call to love our enemies. In Revelation Christ is presented as a warrior, but the imagery firmly places his triumph over evil in his words ("a sword came from his mouth") and in his sacrifice ("a lamb who had been slain.") Words and suffering are our weapons.

June 27

The Shepherd King — II Samuel 4-5, Luke 23:3, John 10:14

David was crowned as King of Israel when he was 30 years old, the same age at which Christ began to announce His Kingdom. David of all the kings is the one who best bears the image of Christ and of whom it is said Christ was his son. He is a towering figure in the scriptures, his name occurring more than any other figure. In the Gospels his name occurs 32 times, 11 of those referring to the "son of David" who is, of course, the Messiah, Christ.

With the murder of Ishbosheth (which David condemned and punished), the way was open for him to become king of the whole nation, not just his tribe of Judah. The people acknowledged him as having been promised by God as the shepherd of Israel. This identity tied him even more to Christ who called Himself both shepherd and king.

His first acts included conquering Jerusalem which had remained unconquered for nearly 500 years, renaming it the City of David and moving his capital there. He built his palace, married more women and had more children. He defeated his old enemies, the Philistines by carefully asking for guidance on his strategy. These victories began a process that would allow his kingdom to live in peace.

While these meditations emphasize that Christ is King, it is important to hold on to other images as well. That of shepherd is extremely comforting since we know that sheep cannot survive well without the care and protection of their shepherd. Our dependency and need for God are acknowledged in this image.

June 28

Moving the Ark — II Samuel 6, Mark 5:30

God's presence became centered in God's city with God's king when David moved the Ark to Jerusalem. In Christ God's presence also went to God's city and became king through his death and resurrection.

Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom under David, became the spiritual center, the center of Christ's ministry, and where he died and rose again. We first heard of Jerusalem with Melchizedek, the king and priest. Mentioned in Joshua as they entered the land, the name occurs 1027 times in scripture, with the final occurrences showing that it looks forward to the perfect City of God at the end of time.

The Ark, as we have seen before, carried God's presence. They had forgotten this and forgotten that it was only to be carried by particular dedicated priests. Their sloppiness in carrying it on an oxcart and the inadvertent near accident led Uzzah to touch it. It is almost as though it was electrically charged that Uzzah died from the shock.

A more respectful and joyful move included David leaping and dancing, and massive celebration with sweet food. His joy in God's presence could not be contained even if his first wife, Michal, critiqued it.

Christ was the Ark of God, carrying God's power and presence in the world, a power that could be felt as he touched people in healing rather than death.

June 29

The Covenant with David — II Samuel 7, Revelation 19:16

The everlasting throne promised to David is fulfilled in Christ. Having brought the Ark to Jerusalem, it was in this context that David desired to build a

temple. At first the prophet Nathan agreed, but returned saying God had never thought it necessary to have a building, a tent was enough. Instead, God wanted to build David a house, to give him an eternal kingly dynasty.

David's prayer of response shows the depths of his faith. We have the benefit of hindsight, knowing that the promise was fulfilled in Christ, his lineage that of kings. Though different in Matthew and Luke (possibly a difference between Joseph and Mary's lineage), both trace back to Zerubbabel, the last named king, and back to David. Joseph was addressed by the angel as a son of David. Mary was told by the angel that he would have the throne of his ancestor David.

This story is repeated word for word in I Chronicles 17. The everlasting throne with an everlasting king who is David's son is an important prophesy of Christ, and reinforces the kingdom theme. The final words of David's prayer are a model of how to pray for our own families, asking him to keep his eye on them always and give them eternal blessings.

June 30

**David as Warrior King — II Samuel 8, I Chronicles 18, Psalm 60,
Revelation 19:11-16**

Christ's triumph over all enemies results in the peaceable kingdom. For David, once he received the promise of an everlasting kingdom, he set about conquering Israel's long-time enemies and bringing peace. Opponents of Israel since Moses' time — Edom, Moab, Ammon, Philistia and Amalek—were finally defeated. These victories were a turning point in Israel's history and resulted in peace during David and Solomon's reigns.

The text says David was fair to everyone, but this comes after the story of his laying out a rope to measure two-thirds of the Moabites to be killed, crippling chariot horses, and destroying 18,000 Edomites. We cringe at the distinctions between how he treated his own people versus his enemies. Today these actions would invite a war crimes tribunal and protests from animal rights activists. There was a consequence; he was not allowed to build the temple because of being a man of war.

Before feeling self-righteous about David's wars, it is important to look at ourselves. In our own Civil War only about 150 years ago, over a million soldiers were killed, wounded or missing. Weapons had become more sophisticated and destructive, but medicine was primitive, leading to horrendous suffering, and deserters were subject to barbaric tortures. Statistics for World War I are 17 million dead and 20 million wounded. For

World War II over 60 million were killed. David's wars seem small in comparison.

Today we claim to have higher standards, but in actuality we constantly fall below those standards and struggle with the high incidence of civilian deaths, issues of torture, and the destructive nature of bombing. Horror and disappointment at the destruction of war are legitimate Christian responses since we have a call to commit to the hard work of peacemaking.

July 1

David's Tenderness and Triumph — II Samuel 9-10, I Chronicles 19, Philippians 2:9-11

David's triumph over enemies foreshadows the day when every knee will bow to Christ. David went from a fugitive taking refuge with Israel's traditional enemies to becoming a king who defeated all the surrounding nations. They became his vassals, without power to fight back. Just as at the end of time all will bow to Christ whether they believed in him or not, so all the surrounding nations bowed to David.

Between the battles, there is the tender story of David's compassion and loyalty as he reached out to Jonathan's son Mephibosheth, and welcomed him into his palace. He further gave him the astonishing abundance of all of his grandfather Saul's property.

We look forward to a time when the promise to Messiah of complete victory will be realized and we will live in a permanent state of peace. For us, there is now possible a life of overwhelming victory that comes from our faith. We also have a place at Christ's table seated with him in heavenly realms. We are provided for abundantly since when we seek Christ's kingdom everything we need is given to us. These are the new spiritual realities that are foreshadowed by David's victory and David's hospitality. It changes our self-image to grasp that the Eucharistic table is that of the king and we are welcome there.

July 2

Bathsheba — II Samuel 11-12, I Kings 1, John 8:4-11

Bathsheba became a forgiven woman, just as the adulterous woman Christ forgave. She began as a foolish adulterous woman who invited the king's attention by bathing on her roof within his view. After her husband's contrived death, she married David. A beautiful but foolish woman, she added to the discord in David's already dysfunctional family, harming his rule and reputation.

David repented and grieved the promised judgment of their son's death. Bathsheba must also have repented, because their next child was a sign of grace. David comforted his wife, Solomon was conceived, and God particularly loved him. David promised Bathsheba that Solomon would succeed him as king. As David was dying, she collaborated with Nathan the prophet to make sure Solomon became king rather than another son, a spoiled child David had never reprimanded, who had claimed the throne. Bathsheba became an ancestress of Christ and is acknowledged in Matthew 1, along with her late husband.

This story comforts us if we have made bad sexual choices or if anyone in our friends and family have created relational messes. Overwhelming redemption is possible.

July 3

A parable to change the heart — II Samuel 12, Matthew 13:11-12

Prophets used parables to appeal for repentance just as Christ did. David, a Spirit-filled man obedient to God, was brought to repentance by a story that got his attention and helped him see his behavior in a new light.

Nathan the prophet told him about a greedy rich man who stole a poor man's little pet lamb. After getting angry and having the analogy to his own behavior pointed out, David confessed his sin..

God warned David of the consequences of his sin: there would be violence in his family, his own family would rebel, his wives would be publically violated, and his child would die. In God's mercy he would not die because God had forgiven him. But all these terrible things did happen for the time of David's life covered in the next eight chapters.

David's response was fasting and repentance followed by worship when he knew his request had been refused. This is such a humble response that it challenges me to ask how I respond in my relationship to God when I have failed in a significant way. Again we see the familiar message that if we confess our sins, God will forgive us.

July 4

Consequences — II Samuel 13-14, Hebrews 12:7

Christians are told to be grateful for God's wise discipline for us his children. Here we are given the example of a father who failed to discipline and experienced terrible consequences as a result. Perhaps David knew he had lost moral authority because of his own adultery and his own murder. Rather than

strong authority and strong love, he modeled permissiveness and emotional distance. But the results were tragic.

David's son Ammon raped his half-sister Tamar, and though David was angry, nothing was done. Tamar's brother Absalom was angry enough to arrange for the murder of Ammon and then escaped to avoid consequences. When David was unwilling to condone his son Absalom's murder of his brother, and refused to allow him to return to Jerusalem, Joab asked a wise woman to tell a story to change the king's mind. He allowed him back, but did not speak to him.

We can be grateful for God's discipline as a sign of his love, as sign we are his children, and as a way of making us holy. Sometimes his discipline takes the form of disappointments or setbacks, but our best strategy is to humbly accept these difficulties and let them change us.

July 5

The Rejected King — II Samuel 15-16, Psalm 3, John 13:21

Setting aside David's overindulgent attitude to his children that created so much difficulty, one can see a parallel to Judas in the betrayal of Absalom. As the crisis grew, both David and Christ left Jerusalem. David loved rebellious Absalom, and he humbly left his capital and trusted God to restore his kingdom.

David's heart shows in the prayer written for this occasion, Psalm 3.

- God is my shield
- God is my glory and the one who lifts me up
- God heals me when I cry
- God sustains me so I can sleep and wake
- I'm not afraid of my opponents
- God saves me and defeats my enemies
- God gives blessing and salvation

Once again, David challenges me. Can I make these statements of faith when I am in the middle of truly difficult situations?

July 6

Absalom's Death — II Samuel 17-18, Hebrews 12:9

God's compares his love for us to that of a father grieving over his wayward children. In this story we see David's grief over Absalom's death despite every cruel, rebellious, devious, shaming, deceitful and arrogant thing Absalom had done. In this case, Absalom's rebellion ended in death by hanging from a tree, a death not dissimilar to Judas, Christ's betrayer.

A parent's grief over a troubled child is deep. We so want good things for our children that we feel their distress. We think about how we contributed to their problems. Hopefully, as Christian parents, we devote ourselves to prayer. But it has to be the kind of prayer that does not displace God or other people in our lives.

David's combination of deep love for his son, and yet willingness to accept what had happened and let go serve as a model to us not only of God's love, but of how our love should be for troubled people in our lives.

July 7

David's Care of Mephibosheth — II Samuel 19, Matthew 9:36

David's care of Mephibosheth reflects Christ's care of us as vulnerable people who are taken into his household without any merit of our own. When David fled from Absalom, Ziba, the steward in charge of Mephibosheth's land, lied to David, saying Mephibosheth was disloyal, and in consequence, David gave Ziba all the land.

When David returned to Jerusalem, he reconciled with Mephibosheth who assured him he cared more about being back at the King's table rather than his property. He saw his place there as an undeserved honor, since he merited death as a descendant of David's enemy. What mattered to him most was his place at the king's table.

For us, too, it is not God's blessings that are most important, it is God's presence and the privilege of the Eucharistic meal. Like Mephibosheth, we are lame and helpless, unable to fend for ourselves, and vulnerable to our spiritual enemy. The grace and reconciliation he received foreshadow our own.

July 8

Rebellion—II Samuel 20, Luke 23:21

David's political weakness reminds us of Christ's time of weakness in his passion. Having already been through the rebellion fomented by his son Absalom. David's nephew Amasa had supported Absalom, so David tried to regain the support of his own tribe of Judah by offering him the job as commander of his troops, replacing Joab.

Meanwhile Israel, which had seemed supportive, was instigated to rebellion. David sent Amasa to mobilize troops against the leader Sheba, but when he acted too slowly, had to send Abishai. Abishai's brother Joab went along and killed Amasa as soon as they found him. They put down the rebellion with the help of a woman who persuaded the people to betray Sheba. At this point of political weakness, David made Joab his commander once more despite the

murder. His personal isolation in accepting collaboration from someone he disapproved of must have been painful.

We see a time of weakness in Christ during his passion when Judas betrayed him, his disciples abandoned him, Peter denied him, and the crowd insisted he be crucified. We are reminded that Christ experienced the range of suffering that we can see in our own lives in his passion. That he became weak and understands our weakness gives us confidence he is with us in those hard experiences.

July 9

The Last Battle — II Samuel 21, I Chronicles 20, Mark 12:35-37

David's last battle made him triumphant over all his enemies. Christ used David's prophecy of God putting his enemies under his feet and said it applied to the Messiah. This quote from Psalm 110:1 is repeated four times in the New Testament.

After fighting Philistines much of his adult life, these people who had plagued Israel in the times of Samson, Samuel and Saul, were conquered. In a reprise of his early conflict with Goliath, David once more fought a Philistine giant. He was nearly killed, but was rescued by one of his men, and this became his last battle. A total of four giants were killed, and the Philistines only reappeared in the time of Hezekiah to be defeated once again.

A tragic judgment on Saul's sons for the sins of their father in breaking an ancient treaty once more showed David's struggle to find the balance between compassion and justice. He authorized these deaths to protect the rest of his people from a famine, but gave them a compassionate burial.

Christ's last battle was the cross. He completely overcame his great spiritual enemy who is now under his feet. It is in the light of his triumph that we are part of the skirmishes that remain.

July 10

God is my Rock — II Samuel 22, 23:1-7, Psalm 18, Matthew 7:24

Christ is our rock, as David sang. At the end of David's life, he called God Rock five times in this poem which is repeated in Psalm 18. In his dying words he addressed God as the Rock of Israel.

Psalms uses this image 22 times, and the Hebrew scriptures an additional 19 times. The rock was part of the wilderness wanderings, and Moses' song used it at the end of Deuteronomy. David's years fleeing Saul are the background to this poem, and God his Rock countered his insecurity.

At an insecure time in my life I saw this Psalm and others and the word rock left out at me giving me reassurance I needed. Christ told us to build our lives on the rock and that would enable us to endure any storm and remain confident and firm. From my own experience, I now know this is true.

July 11

Bethlehem — II Samuel 23, Luke 2:4-6

The prophecy that Christ would be born in Bethlehem resulted because as descendants of David, Mary and Joseph went there for a census. Just as Christ's lineage mattered, his birthplace mattered.

David's nostalgia for home during the time he was on the run from Saul creates a tender story. The Philistines occupied Bethlehem, and three friends went behind enemy lines to obtain well-water from his home. Rather than drink this water, so sacrificially obtained, he poured it out as an offering.

Today Bethlehem's main source of income is tourism from several million annual visitors. In addition to the site of Christ's birth, there is Rachel's tomb, and perhaps David's tomb in the church of Saint David. Near Manger Square there are three cisterns excavated in the rock, said to be where David's water came from.

The story of Christ's birth in Bethlehem is even more significant when we realize that is where Passover lamb's were raised. Only five and a half miles from Jerusalem, the shepherds were perhaps caring for those lambs in Bethlehem. How beautiful that radiance of God's glory appeared around them, and angels sang.

July 12

Innocent Victims — II Samuel 24, I Chronicles 21, Matthew 27:19

Innocent victims foreshadow Christ who died that others might live. David's sin and pride in making an unauthorized census resulted in a choice between seven years of famine, three months of defeat in war, or three days of plague. He chose the latter because he had more confidence in God's mercy than that of other people.

As a result, 70,000 people died. When David saw the angel of death he pleaded for the people saying that he was the one in the wrong, not them. He was told to build an altar and carry out a sacrifice near Jerusalem and the disaster ended.

The texts give us four somewhat different interpretations of the census: God's anger against Israel caused David to harm the people, God told him to count the people, David confessed these actions as sin, and in the Chronicles account the motivator of the census was said to be Satan. The first three interpretations seem contradictory, even though they are in the same chapter of II Samuel. It reminds me of James' warning that we should not accuse God of being the tempter, because he does not tempt anyone. Perhaps David blamed God for the decision which actually came from his pride, or perhaps, as the passage in I Chronicles says, Satan was the tempter.

The site he purchased was where Abraham and Isaac went to sacrifice, and became the temple site. Judgment was replaced by mercy in this place: for Isaac, for the people in David's time, and when the temple was built, each story prefiguring Christ. These surprising details alert me to plot, foreshadowing, and symbolism in scripture that reach their climax in the cross and resurrection.

July 13

Family of the King — I Chronicles 1-9, Matthew 27:11

I Chronicles presents the kings of Judah, the kingly line of Christ. Matthew repeated this genealogy. The story before the kings is summarized by showing how this family, from which the kings come, went back to Abraham and even to Adam. That is included in Luke's genealogy of Christ.

This book prepares the news that a king is coming. In the Hebrew scriptures the two books of Chronicles come at the end, thereby serving as a summary of the whole story preparing for Messiah. People of note from Adam through Abraham, through Moses, through to the time when kingship began, end with the death of the first king, Saul. The rest of the book is a narrative of David's rule.

For Jacob's family, all the tribes are included, but in an interesting order. Judah, the ruling kingdom, is first and longest and most detailed. Levi, the priestly tribe, gets extensive treatment in the middle. Benjamin, the tribe that remained loyal to the king of Judah, is at the end. Genealogies at the return from the exile include Levites, people from Judah, Benjamin, and Joseph's descendants from Ephraim and Manasseh. Admittedly dull reading, each name is an important link from creation to Christ.

July 14

The Godly King — I Chronicles 11-15, Acts 13:22-23

David, who loved God, foreshadowed Christ, who loved perfectly. I Chronicles is the good-parts version of David's life. In this version, we take all of David's

years of agonized waiting, the civil war after Saul's death, and go directly from Saul's death to David's coronation by Israel. Much is made of moving the Ark. David's song of praise in response to the arrival of the Ark in Jerusalem is given in full. The covenant promise to David moves to his victories, his census and God's justice and mercy in that situation, and then preparations for building the temple.

David receives full credit for his faith and righteousness, and his sins are gently overlooked. None of his compromised moments appear: when he was undercover in Philistia or Moab, his family problems, his problems with his own military officers, his adultery, his murder, and the tragic rebellion and death of his son.

There is a lesson for us in this. Are we able to set aside the failures and sins of the past and celebrate all the great things God has done in our lives? If I am praying for another person should I be focusing on their sin, or on the grace and victory in their lives? Here we see the gift of focusing on what is good.

July 15

David's Heart — I Chronicles 16-17, Matthew 12:23

Jesus was the promised Messiah, the son of David. He fulfilled the prophecy of an eternal king who would come from David's descendants. Instead of accepting David's proposal to build him a house, God promised the Messiah, saying he would instead build a household, a lasting kingdom, an eternal dynasty.

We see this remarkable promise fulfilled in the unbroken line of kings of Judah, a lineage that can be traced to Christ, the eternal king. We have been adopted into this royal family, and we are now kings and priests, raised into the heavenly places with Christ.

This new identity is one we need to learn to hold on to in the rough and tumble and difficulties of our daily lives. We are no longer ordinary. We have an eternal life ahead of us, and that eternal life has entered us and is part of who we are now. We do not just live in God's kingdom, we are part of his royal family.

Our ideas about royal families may help us grasp our own transformed identity: they have power, dignity, dress beautifully, have beautiful homes, are gracious hosts, wisely rely on good counselors, work to resolve disputes, and represent their people. May these things be true of us.

July 16

David's preparation for the Temple — I Chronicles 22-29, Matthew 13:44-45

David's preparations for the temple parallel Christ's gifts to us. Once David knew that his son, Solomon, a man of peace, should build the temple, he energetically prepared place, materials, and an architectural plan. David received instructions similar to the way Moses received instructions for the tabernacle. David set up Solomon for success in this important venture.

David gathered gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, onyx, precious stones, costly jewels, fine stone and marble for the project. He donated his personal treasure of gold and silver. David's gifts signified how much he valued making a place of worship.

An application for us as we seek the kingdom is to use all we have for Christ. No material things in our lives have any importance other than to glorify him. At the same time, his gifts to us are lavish. With these gifts he has given we can give back to him.

David's prayer offered before all the people can serve as a model for us. He begins with praise, expresses humility and gratitude, acknowledges that his success comes from God, and asks God to enable his people to continue to love God.

July 17

Solomon as Judge — I Kings 1-3, II Chronicles 1, John 5:30

Solomon as judge foreshadows Christ as judge. The story begins with one son, Adonijah, attempting to take the throne without his father's consent, simply knowing his father was old and feeble, and enlisting Joab and others in the coup. When told of the plot, David took the necessary measures to place Solomon on the throne. When David advised Solomon in his new role as king, he told him to execute judgment on David's enemies, which Solomon did.

Solomon pleased God by asking for wisdom rather than long life or riches or death for his enemies, and humbly identifying himself as a little child. God promised to make him extraordinarily wise and understanding. Solomon's role as a discerning judge is best-known from his decision made for two prostitutes quarreling over a living child. Through saying they should divide the child in half, he discovered which was the true mother. The public was impressed with his wisdom.

Christ's wisdom is perfect, and his ability to judge fairly can be trusted. At the Day of Judgment, we are told that everything will be set to right, all the ills of the world will be sorted out correctly and we will know his judgments are good.

July 18

Good Politics — I Kings 4, Matthew 21:5

Solomon's peaceful kingdom foreshadows Christ's peaceful kingdom. When first crowned, he rode on King David's personal mule and all the people played flutes and shouted for joy, foreshadowing Christ's entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

During his reign the people were numerous, contented, had great food, and lived in peace. The economy was good with each family having a home and a garden. Taxes to support the king were not seen as too onerous, the administration was well-organized and the king was wise, not only in administering justice, but in pursuing the arts and sciences of the day. He was a writer, poet, a botanist, a zoologist, and an excellent diplomat.

Security, prosperity, good administration, wisdom—all things we hope for in our political systems and sometimes achieve, even briefly. All of this foreshadows the perfect administration to come. God demonstrates with Solomon the principle repeated often in scripture that humility leads to exaltation.

Had Solomon not subsequently fallen into sin, he would be a striking image of Christ, creating a peaceable kingdom without war, building a beautiful temple, and being wise. Unfortunately, because of his sin, these good accomplishments are overshadowed. This time of his successful rule is a beautiful example of what we want in our political world today.

July 19

The Temple — I Kings 5-7, John 2:19-22

The temple foreshadowed Christ's presence in the world. The tabernacle represented the presence of God with his pilgrim people and Solomon's temple represented God's presence with his settled people. Each one was based on an ordinary dwelling, but was made more beautiful and elaborate. The functions of cooking, eating, resting and privacy were made part of God's house.

The dedication of the temple took place in the fall, during a lengthened two-week Festival of Shelters. This feast looked forward to the incarnation, and carried the same emotions as Christmas does for us, a time of great joy.

This beautiful building took seven years to build and the talents of the best craftsmen and architects. The gold-covered square Holy of Holies pointed ahead to the golden city of God. The cedar and cypress woodwork, and the carvings of gourds, palm trees and open flowers pointed backwards and forwards to paradisaal gardens.

In our time we have the accumulation of beautiful churches and cathedrals that have utilized the most cutting-edge architecture and art of their time. In our time an astonishing basilica is pushing architectural limits, using mathematical computer aerospace modeling, robots, and new materials. Designed by Gaudi in Barcelona, Spain, it has been under construction for over 130 years. Every detail inspired from scripture and nature makes it a work of art. The nave is like a giant forest with tree-like branches holding up the roof. The entire set of eighteen towers, sculptures of nativity and passion, trees, and stars are an iconography of worship.

Though we may justly take pleasure in beautiful spaces for worship, the scriptures make clear that not only was Christ God's temple, we are that dwelling place as well.

July 20

The Veil — II Chronicles 2-6, Hebrews 10:19-20

Hebrews compares the veil, or curtain, protecting and separating the Most Holy place, to Christ's flesh. At the moment of his death the veil was ripped from top to bottom.

In the passage in Kings on the temple, the doors are mentioned, but here we are told about a curtain with cherubim in blue, purple and scarlet. Furnishings and layout followed the outline of the tabernacle. Two immense golden statues of cherubim with seven and a half foot wings stretched thirty feet across the Most Holy Place. The floor of the temple was paved with gold, reminding us of the city of with golden streets described in Revelation. Innovations included two named pillars in front of the temple and storage rooms around the outside.

The veil was crossed only once a year for the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Christ tore down that veil and we now can enter into God's presence at any time.

July 21

Temple Dedication — I Kings 8, 9:1-9, II Chronicles 7, John 2:19

When dedicated, the temple building was imbued with God's presence. Christ took the imagery and applied it to himself as the combination of human and divine dimensions in one place.

The temple is mentioned 162 times in II Chronicles, far more than any other book. Jerusalem, the temple site, occurs 121 times in the book. Solomon asked that God would hear humble and earnest requests when the people prayed in the direction of the temple.

Solomon's dedicatory prayer reminds us of Christ's prayer, both of which teach us to pray.

Solomon

Listen from your home in heaven
Blessed be God
All people on earth will know God
Forgive us our sins
Deliver us from enemies

Christ

Our Father who art in heaven
May your name be holy
Your will be done on earth as in heaven
Forgive us our debts
Deliver us from evil

N.T. Wright helps us understand the significance of this place of worship: "The Temple was, after all, the place where heaven and earth met. Why not say that one particular person might be the ultimate example of the same phenomenon, a person equally at home in both dimensions."¹⁵ In the New Testament we are called the temple of God, enjoined to be places where heaven and earth meet. May we live up to this high calling.

July 22

Solomon's glory — I Kings 9-10, II Chronicles 8-9, Matthew 6:28-30

Solomon's glory reflects the glory of Christ the King. Just as for his father David, II Chronicles only gives us the positive aspects of Solomon's life. These chapters present Solomon as the model king: wise, glorious, and admired. The Queen of Sheba came from far away and expressed amazement at his power and glory. His unique throne of ivory had twelve lions on six steps and was like no other earthly throne.

Jesus referred to the glory of Solomon twice, once in reference to beautiful clothing, the second time to compare his own glory as greater than that of Solomon. Christ said that the Queen of Sheba would condemn those in the last judgment who rejected Him, since she had the wisdom to seek Solomon, a lesser person, in her day.

In addition to his wisdom, Solomon surrounded himself with beautiful things: a palace that left the queen breathless, food, spices, splendid clothing for his officials, robes for his cupbearers, gold jewels, cedar wood, gold dinner service, plentiful silver, peacocks, and fine musical instruments made of beautiful wood. There were 1400 chariots, and 12,000 of the best horses that money

could buy. Solomon's carriage had wood from Lebanon, posts of silver, a gold canopy, and a seat of purple cloth.

Palaces today remind us of not only Solomon's splendor, but the greater splendor of the greater king to come. Solomon's throne foreshadows God's throne, and we, as royal children, have complete access to that place of power and love.

CHAPTER 3, Part 3

The Kingdom Foreshadowed: Failing

I Kings 11 — II Kings, II Chronicles 9-36



July 23

Solomon's Failure — I Kings 11, I Corinthians 1:8-9

Solomon's failure did not negate God's promise to send Christ through David and his descendants. God removed Solomon from the throne for his idolatry and compromise, but he kept external and internal enemies from harassing him. God warned him he would take all but one tribe from his son's rule.

I and II Kings demonstrate that God fulfills his promises and prophecies, and that he punishes idolatry. The framing promise is that of the eternal kingdom given to David that will lead to Christ. Therefore, even idolatry and failure in the kings of Judah does not result in their removal, whereas the succession in Israel is chaotic. The chaos in Israel serves as a foil, highlighting God's faithfulness to Judah despite their failures.

In Israel the kings were uniformly disobedient. In Judah there were periodic purifications and revivals under Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah. In each revival scripture was recovered, the temple was cleansed, and prophetic voices could be heard.

Kings has thirty-six prophecies and their fulfillment. It also fulfills Leviticus' prophetic warnings of the consequences of disobedience. I and II Kings contain a *chiasm* where fulfillments follow in reverse order to the prophecies.

Prophecy

| | |
|---|------------|
| David's throne eternal despite Solomon | I Kings 11 |
| Only one tribe will remain | I Kings 11 |
| Jereboam's false religion will be destroyed | I Kings 13 |
| Israel will be abandoned | I Kings 14 |

Fulfillment

| | |
|------------------------------------|-------------|
| Israel destroyed by Assyria | II Kings 17 |
| Josiah destroys the false religion | II Kings 24 |
| Judah and her kings remain | II Kings 25 |
| Christ, the eternal king, arrives | Matthew |

Ultimately Judah was disciplined through the Babylonian captivity, but succession from David was never broken. The fundamental lesson of I and II Kings is God's faithfulness in the face of the people's unfaithfulness, something we can certainly apply to ourselves.

July 24

Rehoboam — I Kings 12, II Chronicles 10-12, Acts 2:30

God fulfilled his promise to David by preserving Solomon's son Rehoboam as king of Judah, so that Christ could come as his descendant. Rehoboam's

idolatry was so horrendous, he deserved to be removed from the throne immediately: pagan shrines, sacred pillars, Asherah poles on every high hill and under every green tree, and shrine prostitutes.

Because of the promise to David, Rehoboam remained. Jereboam's revolt against him was successful in part because of his foolish decision to be harsh and demanding with the people. When he decided to go to war he heeded a prophetic warning not to do so, showing some vestige of respect for the faith of his fathers.

The split of the Kingdom into Israel and Judah occurred around 930 BC and lasted until 722 BC when Israel was taken into captivity and disappeared into Assyrian culture. In contrast, Judah was not taken into captivity until 586 BC and was restored to the land.

This division between Judah and Israel led to reoccurring hostility, even war, between these tribes. Their story is full of cautionary tales, teaching us what not to do.

July 25

Jereboam — I Kings 13-14, Luke 1:51-52

Jereboam was a transitory ruler who used religion to reinforce his political position. In contrast, Christ as an everlasting king of an everlasting kingdom. Jereboam was the first king of Israel in a divided kingdom. Because of Solomon's disobedience, Ahijah the prophet had told Jereboam, who worked for Solomon, that God would make him king of ten tribes. Jereboam fled to Egypt when Solomon heard of the prophecy and tried to kill him. After Solomon's death, Jereboam returned and became a spokesman for the people to Rehoboam. When these efforts failed, he revolted.

Jereboam created a false religion for political ends, worried that people would return to Rehoboam if they made pilgrimages to Jerusalem. He made two golden calves, said they had brought the people from Egypt hundreds of years before, recruited priests from any tribe, and established a fall harvest festival that mimicked the Festival of Shelters.

A prophet warned that Israel would be shaken, uprooted and scattered for their idolatry. He said false religious priests and their altars would be desecrated by a future Judean king who would burn human bones on the altar, something done by King Josiah after Israel had been removed from the land.

Jereboam experienced two miracles to which he could have responded: ashes fell out of a split altar, and his hand became paralyzed and was then healed. His political needs caused him to invent a religion, another cautionary tale.

July 26

Abijah and Asa — II Chronicles 13-16, Matthew 6:13

Christ protects us as we depend on him. In the early years of the divided kingdom, the Judean kings still depended on God for protection. Abijah held on to faith in God when Israel tried to conquer, and God delivered Judah.

For 35 years Asa reigned in peace and influenced the people to seek God with all their heart and soul. Then he failed, and turned to Syria for help against Israel. A prophet reminded him that God was watching and ready to give strength to those fully committed to him from the heart. Rather than repenting, he became angry and oppressive, and when he became ill he was more committed to getting help from doctors than from God. Political instability and disease were among the first warnings from Leviticus that consequences for breaking the covenant had begun.

Political factions engaged in constant power-struggles, with loyalists maintaining their opposing viewpoints no matter who was in power. In Israel the Baal/Asherah faction gained the ascendancy until Israel disappeared into the Assyrian Empire. In Judah there was more back and forth. Asa tore down the pagan shrines, and Jehoshaphat continued that process but did not remove all the shrines. Someone always rebuilt them no matter how often they were torn down.

Parallel to our political life today, we can see that ideas not in line with God continue even if and when we are fortunate enough to have God-fearing leaders. Worldliness is part of culture, and those at the top have only partial influence. Our best strategy, perhaps, is winning friends and neighbors to obedience and faith in God, building our society and culture from the bottom up, not the top down.

July 27

If you do not listen — I Kings 15-16, Mark 4:9

Christ called his followers to keep their spiritual ears open, just as God through Moses had made the same call. For those who would not listen, Christ warned that even those listening would not understand. In the Law God warned that if they did not listen there would be consequences.

One would think this would be enough to cause the people to question the idolatrous path they were on, but they simply continued this perilous course. In Leviticus 26 Moses gave six terrible consequences if the covenant was broken: political instability/disease/sudden terrors, drought, wild animals killing children, famine, cannibalism, exile.

These chapters contain political instability and many sudden terrors, one of the first signs: the king's family was killed, another king was assassinated, family and even distant relatives of another king were killed, a king committed suicide by burning himself inside a house, two sons died when a city was rebuilt, there was constant war, another king had a wasting disease, and there was civil war.

With all the warnings, however, there was still a promise of mercy and grace. If the people would repent, they would return from exile. God said he would not harm them if they quit worshipping idols. As Israel and then Judah moved through these consequences, there was repeated intervention, and miraculous and positive actions on God's part, offered as encouragement for repentance.

Our call is to be part of those who are turning around and calling others to turn around and go once more in the direction of a life obedient to God. No matter the cultural and political environment we are in, we can remain strong and loyal to God's ways.

July 28

Elijah — I Kings 17-19, Matthew 17:10-13

The New Testament compared Elijah and John the Baptist. In his discourse on John the Baptist Christ pointed out Malachi's prophesy of the return of Elijah and applied it to John.

Elijah appeared on the scene to announce drought, the second sign of judgment prophesied in Leviticus. Kings had dominated the stories with the prophets in a secondary role. Noq Elijah took the stage as an equal to evil King Ahab, in direct competition for the hearts of the people. After him, the prophets became the principal characters and kings were secondary characters to whom they spoke. When Elijah announced the end of the drought it was yet another moment of mercy, allowing more time for people to respond to the call to repentance.

In competition with Baal's prophets at Mount Carmel, Elijah proved that God was real and powerful and Baal was imaginary. The idols of our own hearts need the same powerful defeat that Elijah's faith brought in his time.

In Elijah's discouragement after the victory at Mount Carmel, he began to replicate much in the life of Moses. He was alone in the desert and had a direct encounter with God's messenger, much as Moses at the burning bush. He then spent forty days and nights wandering in the desert. Since it is 200 miles between where he started and the traditional site of Mount Sinai, his journey had to involve detours. Elijah's encounter with God at Mount Sinai

represented a return to the roots of faith when the law was received. The temple had been corrupted.

Christ used Elijah's example to demonstrate God's love for all nations, mentioning how he went to a Gentile, a widow in Sidon, during famine. Christ responded to a Gentile woman's pleas for help in this very same place.

Elijah's story looks back to Moses and forward to Christ. The desert experience, and the miraculous provision of food. When the widow's son died, Elijah's successful prayer resulted in a return from the dead, just as Christ raised a widow's son. The layers of spirituality are clear here: Moses, Elijah, Christ, John the Baptist, and us today. We are to walk in the footsteps of all these spiritual giants.

July 29

Ahab and Jezebel — I Kings 20-21, John 3:20-21

Ahab and Jezebel foreshadow Christ's enemies. Naboth, their victim, is an image of Christ. Jezebel, an archetypal evil woman, comes to a much-deserved gruesome end, thrown out a window like a fairy-tale witch. Her bad character negatively influenced her husband and children, encouraging idolatry and disbelief in God. She supported her husband's childishness and sulkiness, determined to get him whatever he wanted, no matter the cost, including murder.

The couple most parallel to Ahab and Jezebel in Christ's life were Herod and Herodias. Just as Ahab opposed Elijah, Herod opposed John the Baptist. Just as Herodias asked for John the Baptist's head on a plate, Jezebel put Elijah on notice that she planned to kill him. In the life of Christ, opposition and cruelty came from political and spiritual leaders who, like Jezebel and Ahab, did not want their leadership challenged. Naboth and Christ both had false accusers who said they blasphemed God and deserved death.

Prophets gave Ahab messages that could have brought him to repentance: no rain, rain would come, he would defeat Aram, he would be attacked within a year, he would die for allowing the king to survive, dogs would lick his blood, his wife and descendants would be killed, and he would temporarily be spared because of his repentance. At the end, he was warned he would die in battle. His life story is structured around prophecies and their fulfillment made tragic by his refusal to repent.

July 30

Jehoshaphat—I Kings 22, II Chronicles 17-20, Mark 1:21-22

Jehoshaphat prefigured Christ as a wise ruler, teacher, and defender of his people. Jehoshaphat was a good king who removed pagan shrines as did all the

good kings. In addition, like Christ, he sent out excellent men on a teaching mission throughout Judah, using scripture as their text to draw people to God. Later the king visited his whole nation, exhorting them to return to God.

He set up three levels of the judiciary and charged the judges to make decisions based on respect for God and His law. When threatened by an enemy, Jehoshaphat called the nation to fasting and prayer and God gave an unusual victory with a choir leading the army.

Jehoshaphat's failures came from collaborating with wicked Israelite kings. But he accepted correction humbly, as for example, a shipwreck in a shared business venture, and repented of these moments of poor judgment. His godly life models Christ better than most of Judah's kings.

Jehoshaphat faced an overwhelming army which was routed by God without human effort. In victory the people engaged in worship, praise, shouting, singing, giving thanks. Their acknowledgement of blessing, their joy, and their harp, lyre and trumpet music are a great example.

July 31

Elijah's Ascension — II Kings 1-2, II Chronicles 21, Acts 1:9-11

Elijah was like Christ in challenging an evil king and being pursued and in danger of his life. Like Christ, he called a disciple, Elisha, to follow him and continue his ministry. His disappearance into heaven in a fiery chariot foreshadowed Christ's ascension.

Elijah appeared in the gospels at the transfiguration along with Moses, both towering figures who prepared the way for Christ's ministry. When Samaritans rejected Christ on his way to Jerusalem, and the disciples proposed sending fire from heaven on them, some manuscripts add "like Elijah" since he had done this. Jesus said no.

Elijah was powerful in the Spirit, doing many miraculous signs. Christ promised us power when we receive the Spirit, a gift now available to all believers rather than selected leaders only. In the last 120 years there have been so miraculous signs with many walking in Elijah-like power it inspires and challenges us.

August 1

Elisha — II Kings 3-5, Luke 4:27

Elisha foreshadows Christ as prophet, healer, teacher, miracle-worker, and trainer of a group of followers. He reached beyond the ethnic boundaries of Israel, and healed a Syrian, an example Christ used to speak of God's universal

love. Elisha's life is full of good stories taken on their own terms. Repeatedly God offered undeserved mercy and miraculous interventions through Elisha.

Elisha's relationship to Elijah resembles that of Joshua to Moses. Both served as assistants, both were nearby when the leaders were taken to heaven, both divided the waters of Jordan to cross it. He also resembles Moses: purifying water, providing water, rescuing from poisoned meat, and healing a leper. But there are even more parallels to Christ that are unique to Elisha.

We have a disturbing story of wild bears who attacked 42 mocking young men. This recalls the Levitical warning that if people persisted in their stubborn disobedience attack by wild animals was the third curse. What follows, however, are seven miracles that directly look forward to Christ. These intrude before the fourth curse (famine) and fifth curse (cannibalism) occur.

| II Kings | <i>Elisha's actions</i> | <i>Reminders of Christ</i> |
|-----------------|--|---|
| 3 | Prophesied victory to a believing king | Prophesied his victory over evil to his disciples |
| 4:1-7 | Multiplied oil | Turned water to wine |
| 4:8-37 | Raised a child from the dead | Raised the widow's child |
| 4:38-44 | Multiplied bread | Multiplied bread twice |
| 5:1-19 | Healed a leper | Healed many lepers |
| 6:1-7 | Floating ax head | Walking on water |
| 6:8-21 | Protected by angels | Served by angels |

Elisha's example inspires me to pray for miraculous interventions, healing, protection, and a deeper awareness of the spiritual world. We, too, can impact our world for good as we walk in the Spirit.

August 2

The Angelic Hosts — II Kings 6-7, Luke 2:13-14

At Christ's birth, a host of angels came announcing peace on earth. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures angels played many roles: messengers, protectors, rescuers, singers, and worshippers. They fought alongside Israel, or took care of the battle on their own.

Elisha had the capacity to see the angel armies and their fiery chariots surrounding the human army that had come after him. Here they not only protected Israel, they brought peace. Elisha prayed for the army to be blinded, singlehandedly led them to the king, and insisted they be released as prisoners of war.

Then comes the tragic story of famine and resulting cannibalism, once again part of the series of curses from Leviticus 26. More stories of mercy follow. The angel army created enough noise for the attackers to be alarmed and leave. Outcast lepers were the means of bringing the good news that the famine was over.

The Psalmist gave us a sense of the angelic world, referring to twenty thousand chariots of God with thousands of angels. Daniel wrote of millions of angels serving God. In Revelation John wrote of thousands and millions of angels. Christ chose not to call the angels of heaven to his rescue, but knew that he could call on thousands of angels for protection. These are mysterious, but inspiring, spiritual figures that we have been told we may encounter, especially in any acts of kindness to a stranger.

August 3

Mercy and Judgment — II Kings 8, John 3:18

Christ brought a message of mercy for those willing to believe, and judgment for those unwilling. Elisha brought a similar message. After the judgment of the famine which was reversed, people could respond with belief. One who did was the woman whose son was raised from the dead. She returned to the land, trusting that the seven years of famine Elisha prophesied were over. As her testimony of resurrection was being recounted to the king by Elisha's servant Gehazi, she arrived. She received back her land and the value of her crops, receiving justice.

While the sixth Levitical curse of being taken from the land would happen, there was still time for repentance. There would be more disbelieving kings and some believing ones. Elisha gave messages of political judgments on unbelieving kings, thereby fulfilling work commissioned to Elijah

Elijah was told to anoint leaders:

| | |
|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Hazael to be king of Aram | I Kings 19:15 |
| Jehu to be king of Israel | I Kings 19:16 |
| Elisha selected and anointed | I Kings 19:16, 19 |

Elisha carried out these anointings:

| | |
|--|-------------------|
| Elisha anointed Hazael | II Kings 8:13, 15 |
| Elisha sent younger prophet to anoint Jehu | II Kings 9: 3,6 |

Elisha gave yet one more prophesy to Jehu's grandson when on his deathbed. Always, he stood out as God's witness to the unbelieving kings of his time

August 4

Jehu — II Kings 9-10, II Chronicles 22, Matthew 16:27

Jehu exercised judgment reminiscent of final judgment. However, his cruelty contrasts with Christ who will judge with perfect justice. Jehu's story is one of prophecy and fulfillment. He was the instrument of judgment on Ahab's family, but in turn was warned that his family would only last four generations.

Prophecy and fulfillment explain much about Israel's kings.

| | |
|---|-------------------|
| Jereboam's descendants will all die | I Kings 13:10 |
| Baasha kills all of Jereboam's family | I Kings 15:29 |
| Baasha's family will be destroyed | I Kings 16:3 |
| Zimri kills all of Baasha's family | I Kings 16:11 |
| Ahab's family will die | I Kings 21:19 |
| Jehu kills all of Ahab's family | II Kings 9,10 |
| Jehu's throne would last four generations | II Kings 10:30 |
| Fourth generation assassinated | II Kings 15:10,12 |

Three more assassinations before Israel fell meant that the line of succession was continually broken. In contrast, Judah's succession was unbroken. The writer editorializes that God was not willing to destroy David's dynasty because of the covenant he had made.

Jehu vigorously destroyed Ahab's family. He killed prophets of Baal, destroyed Baal-worship, and desecrated their temple, making it a public toilet; however, he kept the golden calves. The promise that his descendants would be kings to the fourth generation was fulfilled in Jehoahaz, Jehoash, Jereboam II, and Zechariah, none of whom were obedient kings. Zechariah ruled six months before his assassination, and Jehu's succession ended. Hosea confirmed that Jehu overdid the judgments and so his dynasty was brought to an end.

In contrast, John's gospel speaks of Christ's mercy: God sent his son into the world not to judge, but to save. Christ judges justly because he carries out God's will, he looks beneath the surface, and does not judge by human standards. Our model when called to make judgments needs to copy Christ, not Jehu.

August 5

Joash — II Kings 11-12, II Chronicles 23-24, Matthew 2:16

Joash was preserved as an infant foreshadowing Christ's preservation in the slaughter of the innocents. Though his brothers died, he became king as a young child, started well, cleansed the temple, but eventually turned away into sin.

Power-hungry Queen Athaliah reminds us of King Herod who ordered the massacre of the innocents. Related to Israelite King Ahab, she married the prince of Judah, and had an evil influence. When her husband became king, he killed his brothers, and he ruled so badly, no one regretted his death. When her son Azariah became King, she encouraged his wrong-doing. When he was murdered, she attempted to kill the royal heirs, failing to kill Joash only because he was rescued by his aunt.

Jehoiada, the priest who killed Athaliah and installed the seven-year-old Joash as king, lived until he was 130 years old was honored by burial among kings. While he lived, King Joash supported temple restoration and repair, but as soon as Jehoiada died, Joash failed. He resisted Jehoiada's son Zechariah's prophetic words against Asherah poles, and ordered Zechariah to be stoned. The story did not end well for Joash who was wounded in battle, and then assassinated on his sickbed by his own officers.

Christ spoke of this when he said the generation he was preaching to would be guilty of all the murders from Abel to Zechariah. Since the Hebrew scriptures place Chronicles last, Zechariah is the final murder of an innocent man. Christ's lesson is for us to be humble enough to listen to prophetic voices, not to resist them.

August 6

The Eternal Kingdom — II Kings 13, 14, John 11:25

Elisha's story foreshadows Christ's resurrection. Even his death became a sign of hope. In the midst of political chaos as Israel continued to decline and head toward destruction and exile, Elisha continued to faithfully give prophetic messages to the kings. An unnamed man was in the process of being buried, but since enemies surprised them, his friends put him in Elisha's tomb. Upon touching Elisha's bones, he returned to life.

This is one of three resurrection stories in the Hebrew scriptures, and they compare to stories in Christ's life. Christ raised Jairus' daughter and the son of the widow of Nain, just as Elijah and then Elisha raised children to life. Then Christ raised Lazarus. These stories make Christ's resurrection the seventh of scripture. His was qualitatively different, because he will never die.

Our experiences of illness and healing have a similar connectivity to the power of the resurrection. I will never forget the powerful experience of my sister Beverly's healing. When she was eighteen she had convulsions, went into a coma, and doctors predicted either death or significant brain damage. When she opened her eyes at first she could not speak and was like a small child. Over several months she regained her memory and her abilities, and she went

to college the next year. No one would have known that she had suffered such a significant and life-threatening illness. For us, this was a resurrection that built our faith.

August 7

Obedience and Failure — II Kings 15-16, II Chronicles 26-28, John 3:36

Kings in Judah alternated between obedience and disobedience, showing the same ambivalence we have today. Christ called us to obedience and warned that judgment awaits the disobedient. All these kings—Uzziah, Jotham and Ahaz—had the benefit of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry warning them and calling them to obedience. Micah preached in the time of Jotham and Ahaz. It was as though as the final crisis came closer, God increased the number of strong voices, amplifying his warnings.

Uzziah began well. He had many accomplishments, listened to the prophet Zechariah, built towers and cisterns, defeated surrounding enemies, and had engineers build engines to defend his towers. Then, in pride he took on the priestly role, and was struck with leprosy and knew it was God’s judgment. He lived in quarantine and never could enter the temple again, nor could he be buried in the royal cemetery. Uzziah’s son Jotham became co-regent, lived in obedience, and in consequence became powerful.

In contrast, Jotham’s son Ahaz returned to idolatry and suffered defeats. Judah and Israel went to war, and Judah lost. In a precursor to just war theory, a prophet told the returning Israelite soldiers they had gone too far by killing them without mercy and all heaven was disturbed. A further encounter served as preview to Geneva Convention standards for treating prisoners of war.

In II Kings Christ appears in the background as a judge carrying out the rulings from the law. The people had been warned of the consequences of breaking the covenant. Obedience brought victory and blessing, and disobedience brought defeat. Christ would come and take that defeat on himself on the cross, and would restore a path to blessing through the resurrection. Meanwhile, the people were on a path to destruction and exile.

August 8

The Fall of Israel — II Kings 17, Matthew 25:31-32

The judgment that fell on Israel foreshadows end-time judgment. Christ will make a separation between those who love him and those who do not. In this case, judgment meant the loss of identity as part of the kingdom foreshadowing Christ’s future kingdom, a loss of being members of Israel and heirs of the promises to Abraham, Moses and David.

The last Kings of Israel, Pekah and Hoshea, met their doom from Assyria. Judah had about 135 more years of existence than Israel before she went into exile. But unlike Israel, she returned in a great act of God's mercy and faithfulness to fulfill his promise to David of an eternal kingdom.

This climactic moment of judgment had been warned of ever since the giving of the law. Repeated warnings came through Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah and Micah, and all went unheeded. Instead the people and their kings continued their idolatry. Hoshea, subservient to Assyria, conspired with Egypt, and after a three-year siege, lost his kingdom. Israel was taken away and Samaritans were resettled from various places in Assyria. The ten tribes of Israel disappeared, assimilated into the pagan culture to which they were taken.

In our time we have had many instances of evil that seem even more ferocious than that which brought about Israel's end. For example, Stalin imprisoned about 14 million innocent people in the Gulag. One of the survivors who gave prophetic witness was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and he described evil this way:

“Evidently evil-doing also has a threshold magnitude. Yes, a human being hesitates and bobs back and forth between good and evil all his life. He slips, falls back, clambers up, repents, things begin to darken again. But just so long as the threshold of evil-doing is not crossed, the possibility of returning remains, and he himself is still within reach of our hope. But when, through the density of evil actions, the result either of their own extreme degree or of the absoluteness of his power, he suddenly crosses that threshold, he has left humanity behind, and without, perhaps, the possibility of return.”¹⁶

A famous line from Solzhenitsyn reminds us of how these warnings are for all of us: “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”¹⁷

August 9

Hezekiah — II Kings 18-19, II Chronicles 29-31, John 2:13-15

Hezekiah foreshadowed Christ as a sanctifier as each one engaged in cleansing the temple. Jesus cracked a whip and knocked over tables to take the Temple from a den of thieves back to a place of worship. Hezekiah called for repentance, organizing a group which took sixteen days to clean out the mess. Consecrated with worship, he then reinstated a Passover celebration which motivated people to tear down pagan altars and give generously to temple maintenance.

Several prayers are recorded, including one for deliverance from the attacking Assyrians, and another for healing when he was dying. When he was healed he became arrogant instead of grateful. Fortunately, he repented, but not before inappropriately showing his treasures to Babylonian messengers. He failed to pass on his faith to his son Manasseh and was complacent that the Babylonian conquest would fall on his descendants. While his temple-cleansing offers much to admire, his pride serves as a warning.

When I have seen a situation that seems impossible and overwhelming, Hezekiah's story encourages me to not give up, but to keep praying. His miraculous healing experience is repeated three times—in II Kings, II Chronicles, and Isaiah—highlighting its importance.

August 10

The Remarkable Rescue — II Kings 20, II Chronicles 32, John 15:7

Judah's rescue from enemies foreshadows Christ's rescue through the cross. Ten years after the fall of Israel, the King of Assyria attacked Judah and forced Hezekiah to pay tribute. Judean leaders despaired, and listened to the mockery of Assyrian representatives who boasted of their strength and successful conquests.

In this dark moment Hezekiah prayed and sought the prophet Isaiah's wisdom. Isaiah assured him the enemy would return home, the king would be assassinated by his sons, and his army would fail to enter Jerusalem. Miraculously, all these things happened, an utterly astonishing reversal in an impossible situation. God's angel destroyed 185,000 Assyrians without a battle. Nor did they suffer more threats, since the king returned to Nineveh and was murdered by his sons.

We can take heart that God gives victories if we trust him. It is not our strength or wisdom that make the difference, it is our confidence in asking for his help. Christ has already won the victory over our spiritual foes, and we can ask for that to be made evident in our lives.

August 11

Josiah — II Kings 21-23, II Chronicles 33-35, I Peter 1:15-16

Josiah foreshadows Christ as sanctifier in restoring true worship in contrast to mere religiosity. He tore down pagan shrines, cleansed and repaired the temple, found the missing scriptures, read them aloud and committed the people to obedience. This near-to-last Judean King celebrated Passover better than any since Samuel's time.

Temple worship had deteriorated since Hezekiah's cleansing. Utensils were used to worship Baal, Asherah and heavenly forces. Prostitutes wove coverings for an Asherah pole, and there were altars and shrines all over the country, including one for sacrificing children. Josiah's purification, parallel to Christ's purification of the temple, could not prevent the coming judgment in the next generation when Judah was taken into captivity.

Josiah's grand-father Manasseh had sacrificed his sons in pagan rituals. Taken captive in Babylon, he repented there and God restored him as king. When he died, his 22-year-old son Amon was crowned, but was assassinated after two years on the throne.

Josiah may have been influenced by his penitent grandfather during his first six years of life, but an even stronger influence was a prophetic voice. Josiah became king at eight, began to seek God at sixteen, and set out to reform Israel at seventeen. Jeremiah started preaching when Josiah was 21, a great voice joining him to promote reform.

This reminds us that no matter what our spiritual heritage or lack thereof might be, we can follow God with our whole hearts and live in obedience and faith.

August 12

**The Destruction of Jerusalem — II Kings 24-25, II Chronicles 36,
Luke 19:41-44**

The destruction of the temple foreshadowed Christ's death as he prophesied. Christ's death was followed by resurrection, and the destroyed temple was rebuilt. What did it mean after so many years of emphasis on the temple as the meeting place with God for it to be destroyed? God's people had to learn to worship him without a particular house in which to do so.

The captivity cured the tendency to build pagan altars. The Jews become known for their faith expressed through scripture study, community life, prayer, and economic generosity. When the temple was restored, these lessons remained, and even when once again destroyed after Christ's ministry, these expressions of faith continued until today.

Temple destruction occurred on the 7th to the 9th day of the 5th month, or the month of Av. Because the Jewish calendar is lunar, the date varies between the end of July and beginning of August. The second temple destruction in 70 AD occurred on the same day. Strangely, numerous subsequent Jewish tragedies occurred on this same day which is why *Tisha B'Av* continues as a day of repentance.

Just as the Law promised, despite their sins, God would show mercy and restore the people. The very end of II Chronicles takes the story to the moment of the proclamation to return to the land. These same verses are repeated in Ezra. But the destruction of Jerusalem and temple is such a climactic moment of despair and horror that Jeremiah, who had been warning this would come, wrote his poem in Lamentations to capture this terrible time.

Perhaps the real end of the story comes in Nehemiah with the profound repentance for a history of rebellion and not listening to God. They acknowledged that God's punishment was just and what they deserved. They also acknowledged God's grace, mercy, unfailing love, and greatness. They asked that all their hardships not be as nothing to him. Their prayer is our prayer.

CHAPTER 3, Part 4

The Kingdom Foreshadowed: Promise Regained

Ezra — Esther



August 13

Zerubbabel — Ezra 1-4, John 17:1-4

Zerubbabel is a king like Christ whose glory was temporarily hidden. Though the kingship was diminished, a son of David was still king. The royal line continued, and Zerubbabel was Christ's ancestor. The story demonstrates to us that after times of discipline and repentance, God's kindness was generously poured out in faithful love.

Zerubbabel led the return of the first group of exiles. The king's abundant provision encouraged them and perhaps explains why they made a detailed list. He led the group through the difficult process of temple re-building. Zerubbabel's faithfulness to make worship the center of the return is something to admire.

Zerubbabel, the king, and Jeshua, the priest, led a Festival of Shelters, and before Ezra's arrival, they led Passover. This is the last Passover celebration of the six described in the Hebrew scriptures: when they left Egypt, in the desert, preparing to enter the promised land, under Hezekiah, under Josiah, and now under Zerubbabel. Christ's Passover observance becomes the seventh in the series.

In light of the despair from the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the misery of a long captivity, this is an important reversal of fortunes. In our lives also we may find that we go through dark times, but these stories remind us to hold on to hope.

August 14

Cyrus — Ezra 5-6, Luke 19:5

Just as Christ called Zacchaeus by name, God called Cyrus by name. Isaiah predicted Cyrus would restore Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. As the 70 years of exile ended, Daniel, taken into captivity at the beginning of the exile, remained as an advisor when Cyrus came to power. Perhaps he influenced Cyrus to pay for temple supplies and allow exiles to return. When opposition arose in the transition to a new King, records were searched, and this authorization was found. The temple rebuilt gave the people great joy, and we too have times in our lives when God's acts in fulfilling a vision fill us with overwhelming joy.

Isaiah 45:1 calls Cyrus the "Lord's anointed," a phrase that means Messiah, or is translated into Greek as "Christ." The phrase was applied to four people in the Hebrew scriptures: Saul, David (numerous times in I Samuel), Zedekiah, and Cyrus. Daniel prophesied of a future Messiah, an anointed one who we recognize as Christ.

What a statement that a Gentile king served to fulfill prophesy and served as an image of Christ. No one knows all of his motives in allowing the captives to return, but both Ezra and II Chronicles say he fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy.

Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC by diverting the Euphrates and entering through the lowered river. Under Darius, Babylon flourished as a center of learning with advancement in astronomy and mathematics. It served as the capital of the Persian Empire for two centuries. Remarkably, it is estimated that Cyrus ruled over 44% of the world's population, more than any other emperor in history.

It is reassuring that God knew how he would use an unbelieving king to accomplish his great purposes, and reminds us to pray for our political leaders.

August 15

Ezra — Ezra 7-10, Mark 10:17

Ezra foreshadows Christ as teacher. Both recruited disciples to become leaders in the new community. He called for separation and a holy life, and injected new life into temple worship. Ezra repeatedly referred to God's gracious hand which encouraged him and can encourage us as we see God act on our behalf. He gives as an example of asking God for protection for us, our children, our possessions and our journeys. Ezra's prayer points out that God's grace allows us to survive, to be secure, to have relief from trouble and to be revived.

Chapter 7 starts 57 years after the temple dedication in 515 BC. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 BC, and Nehemiah would arrive 13 years later.

There is much of God's undeserved mercy and favor in Ezra's story, and he saw grace in several things: first, the king of Babylon gave him everything he asked for; second, because he and his group arrived safely in Jerusalem after a four-month journey; third, because he was honored before the king, his council and all the powerful princes; and fourth, because their group was protected from enemies and bandits on their journey.

When Nehemiah arrived to rebuild the wall, Ezra continued as a leader. At the Festival of Shelters he read aloud from the Law for seven days. Ezra is credited with compiling much of the Hebrew scriptures, and writing not only the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but perhaps I and II Chronicles as well. This love and dedication to teaching God's word, and being the author of scripture points toward the New Testament writers, who left us accounts of Christ's life, and epistles of instruction.

His example of loving and teaching scripture inspires us today to take seriously the written account we have of centuries of seekers of God recording their experiences.

August 16

Nehemiah — Nehemiah 1, Ephesians 4:9

Nehemiah foreshadows Christ incarnate. Leaving the palace out of love, building his people up, creating protection, sacrificing his rights to privilege, advocating for the poor, teaching the word, and purifying the community, are all part of Nehemiah's story that parallel Christ. God kept his promise of unfailing love for those who love him by putting concern for Jerusalem in Nehemiah's heart.

Nehemiah was so grieved by Jerusalem's suffering that he wept and prayed, much as Christ was grieved for the city. The empathy Nehemiah felt for the suffering of his people, while knowing it was a just judgement, caused him to take responsibility, confessing that even he and his own family had sinned. How similar to Christ who took complete responsibility for all of our sins.

Nehemiah's compassion evoked the King's sympathy, resulting in financial support and a decree to rebuild. Remarkably, this king had commanded the city to stop rebuilding and not to start again without his express command. Nehemiah's position of influence as the king's cupbearer, made change possible.

Nehemiah's example of prayer and a vision for the progress of the Kingdom can serve as an inspiration for us. His prayer is a beautiful model.

August 17

Rebuilding the Wall — Nehemiah 2-6, Matthew 6:13

Nehemiah's actions on behalf of the people as he led rebuilding, parallel Christ's protection for us from danger, opposition, and slander. As Christ taught us to ask for deliverance from evil, Nehemiah taught that God will both protect us from enemies and defeat them. God gave him favor with the king, and he encouraged others with the reminder that God is great and glorious.

Since we live in a day when cities do not depend on walls for protection it is hard to understand the depths of Nehemiah's despair that Jerusalem's walls lay in ruins. Cities were built on hills, walls were either double or extremely thick, and the gates of iron served to protect from enemies. Ruinous walls not only left the people unprotected, they indicated an uncivilized place, completely inappropriate for the city that was to be God's earthly residence.

As I intercede for people I care about, the imagery of needing a wall of protection around them is a useful one, recognizing that good boundaries, gates that open and close, safety, alertness to opposition as one is building security, are all relevant to our spiritual and emotional lives.

August 18

Hearing God's Word — Nehemiah 7-9, Hebrews 4:12

The people paid close attention to God's Word as it was read, and listened to an explanation of each passage. As we have seen in these meditations, the meaning pointed to the coming Messiah, Christ himself.

As they listened they were convicted of sin, and wept and repented. But they were told to rejoice because the Festival of Shelters they were celebrating was to be a time of joy, acknowledging God's presence with them as a pilgrim people. The festival looked forward to Christ's presence with us. We claim the promise they received that the joy of the Lord is our strength.

Though normally the time of repentance would precede this time of joy in the festal calendar, this was reversed and the Levites led them in a great prayer of confession several weeks later. This great prayer in Nehemiah 9 tells the story of Israel, using "they" for the disobedient actions of their ancestors. But at the end, it becomes a personal prayer of confession, using "we", an example for us.

August 19

Called by Name—Nehemiah 10-12, Luke 6:12

Christ called his disciples by name, and he calls each one of us by name. In Nehemiah, four and a half chapters are largely names: chapter 3 lists families working along the wall, chapter 7 repeats Ezra 2 listing settlers, much of chapter 10 lists signatories of the covenant, half of chapter 11 lists those resettling Jerusalem, and half of chapter 12 lists priests, Levites and musicians.

It raises interesting questions. Is there another ancient literature that so faithfully gives us the names of individuals? More commonly in old stories the focus is on the hero and his enemies.

The culture of appreciation for the individual and respect for each person, each family, seems to be deeply rooted in Hebrew thought. All are important. All of the names in Nehemiah represent "pioneers," "founding fathers," "signers of the constitution." We even learn the names of seven trumpet-playing priests, eight singers, and the conductor.

With so many publications of scripture, think how many times these obscure names have been highlighted! We may feel unimportant, but as members of the community of faith, our names are important.

August 20

Purification — Nehemiah 13, II Peter 3:11

Purity was Nehemiah's concern as he revisited Jerusalem. We see this same concern for purity in Paul and the other apostles as they began to build the community of faith.

Nehemiah's intense anger over foreign wives came from his horror at the possibility of repeating the sins that led to exile. Children were losing not only their faith, but even their language. Strong commitment was needed in this community of just under 50,000 if it was to retain its identity. By the time of Christ there were 7 million Jews, 2 million in Palestine. Nehemiah's goal for them to retain their identity as messengers of God's word succeeded.

It serves as a model for us to follow Christ's call to maintain our distinctive identity in the world, to be salt and light that are influencing the people around us in a positive way, rather than being pulled into the wrong thinking that surrounds us.

August 21

Esther — Esther 1-5, II Timothy 4:18

Esther foreshadows Christ as mediator and deliverer, risking her life to save her community. It is beautiful to have a woman prefigure Christ, at the side of the most powerful emperor of that time. It also encourages us to follow her example and boldly speak up for what is just.

To place this story in history, not all Jews from Babylon had moved back to Jerusalem after 538 BC. Many remained in the Persian kingdom, and some moved over 1700 miles away to where Cyrus built a winter palace in Susa. Located in southwestern Iran, it is the modern city of Shush. As immigrants, Jews were vulnerable, and the story reflects the racism to which immigrants are so often subject.

Persia's wars with Greece had begun around 500 BC and lasted for 50 years. In the midst of this Xerxes I, known also by his Hebrew name King Ahasuerus, invaded Greece in 480 BC. Possibly the banquet that resulted in deposing Queen Vashti took place during the six-month summit at Susa to plan his war against Greece in 483 BC.

For women especially, the example of the bold, clever, and beautiful queen inspires. Her faith, influence and obedience encourage us in whatever challenge we are facing. Her success in stopping a genocide is celebrated in Israel with floats, costumes and fun. Today we have many female role models who have worked for justice, inspiring more women to join their ranks.

August 22

Mordecai — Esther 6-10, John 17:12

Mordecai foreshadows Christ as protector and defender of the people. He took in his orphaned niece, just as Christ adopts us. He raised her and nurtured her as a godly woman, promoted her to a high and honored position, remained near her to protect and guide her, and checked on her every day. She continued to obey him even as queen. He encouraged her to fulfill her calling through the opportunity she had been given, and inspired her courage. Mordecai shows us a godly person who worked for the good of his people.

The figure of evil in the story is Haman and Mordecai overcame him. Mordecai won the conflict to the point Haman was forced to bow. Mordecai became the king's advisor when he had removed Haman and his evil advice, and the king responded to Mordecai's advice to undo the damage he had done. Mordecai was raised to honor with a royal robe and crown, and his rise to power helped preserve the Jewish people to fulfill God's promises.

God's blessing on Jewish people continues. For example, Jews make up .8% of the world's population and 2% of that of the United States, but in science Jews have won 27% of the Nobel prizes, and women in science are 35% Jewish winners. Twenty-three percent of peace prizes have been awarded to organizations founded by Jews. Since 2000 Jews have been awarded 27% of all Nobel prizes.

God's blessing was on the Jewish leader Mordecai, and still today they are important in his purposes for the world. Anti-semitism, such an ugly part of Christian history, should have no part in our hearts today. We need to honor the excellence God has given in faithfulness to his own promises.

CHAPTER 4

Wisdom of the Kingdom

Job — Song of Solomon



August 23

Job, suffering in patience — Job 1-2, James 5:10-11

James explains Job's bewildering experience to us, writing that he was an example of someone who endured suffering patiently. Christ also exemplified patient suffering, and so Job foreshadowed him. Scripture emphasizes that suffering can be God's loving discipline, or judgment for the unrepentant. But in Job we learn another meaning to suffering which is much closer to the suffering Christ experienced as the truly innocent one. God repeated twice that Job was a man of complete integrity who would have nothing to do with evil, and Job affirmed that his conscience was clear and he believed he was innocent and did not deserve the tragedies that befell him.

Christ was a victim of Satan's work, just as Job was. This is the first appearance in scripture of Satan, a name Christ used for his chief opponent. Job's reflections teach us that not all suffering can be explained as correction for sin. We are shown that God allows suffering and changes us through that suffering.

Knowing what deep pain there is in the death of a child, I cannot imagine Job's grief in losing all ten of his children at once in a tragic accident. Job's wife is often criticized for adding to his trials, but losing all your children so tragically and suddenly could drive any mother to madness. God apparently did not judge her as harshly as we do. There is no sign that Job got a new wife; she was there when their family was restored.

Job's responses to loss and illness are models of trust in God's sovereignty. He acknowledged that God gave and took away, but should still be praised. He exhorted his wife to accept both bad and good from God. And then he was silent, for his suffering was too great for words.

Job's story offers us practical wisdom to trust God and not blame him when we suffer. We can demonstrate that our faith is not based on receiving gifts from God, but is a love relationship with God himself. Despite all his depression and questioning, Job stayed oriented toward God and thus proved to Satan that Job's motives were right. Our difficulties offer us the same opportunity to pass difficult tests.

August 24

Why Suffering? — Job 3-8, Matthew 16:24

Job's dialogues and Christ's teachings make a similar point: suffering does not equal punishment. Reframing suffering was essential preparation for Christ, the innocent sufferer. To go from the covenant promise of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, to Christ's exhortation and example to

take up our crosses, to Paul's extreme suffering for preaching, and to James' exhortation to see trials and temptations as an occasion for joy, something had to intervene. Job's story is that middle point.

Job knew he had been keeping the covenant to the best of his ability, so the intensity and breadth of his suffering made no sense to him. He knew his paradigm was shattered by his experience. What took its place was a persistent faith in God despite so many losses, the very thing Satan had challenged God and said would not happen.

The first two chapters are a prose prologue, and then chapters 3 to 42:6 are poetry. In the poetic debate the broken paradigm is presented by Job, with the friends insisting on the old one: God blesses obedience, and punishes disobedience. Job broke his silence, and a friend responded. After three cycles of Job countering his friends' arguments, Job summarized the debate, and a new figure, a young angry friend, expressed exasperation with all of them. Then God himself spoke and Job responded. In a prose post-script, Job's fortunes were restored.

In these chapters Job expressed his despair, and Eliphaz encouraged him to present his case to God. Job protested that his guilt was being assumed, and simultaneously begged God for pardon. Bildad promised that he would be restored if he prayed and lived with integrity. It is important to remember that, wise as the friends sound, at the end of the book, God said he was angry with the two friends for not speaking accurately about him as Job did.

That should put a stop to any simplistic interpretations of our own suffering or that of others. Scripture gives a complex picture of suffering as both deserved and undeserved, and God as both one who suffers with us and one who rescues us from suffering. Whatever the case, he offers us comfort in our suffering and we take what we have learned and comfort others.

August 25

The Mediator — Job 9-11, Hebrews 9:15

Job asked God for a mediator to explain his suffering, but said there was no one. Christ came saying he was that representative that brought God and man into dialogue. Christ's answer included the fact that he came to share our suffering.

Though Job thought there was no mediator who could bring man and God together as people do for their friends, he could not know that his question was preparing for the mediator.

We now know that the mediator who came fully understands human suffering, having endured discomfort, rejection, and physical torture. In part, the answer

to Job's questions about suffering are that God in Christ suffers with us. There is no depth of our anguish that he does not understand. We also learn from Job and from Christ that the very act of suffering in faith can have a redemptive quality for other people. Job's misery has provided wisdom for millions over millenia.

In these three chapters, a form of the word "innocent" is repeated nine times out of its 23 occurrences in the book. Job asked how anyone can be declared innocent before God, and we now know that Christ is the answer to that question. His friend Zophar responded that Job was mocking God, should be ashamed, and was doubtless being punished less than he deserved.

Our sins are forgiven if we ask. Job seemed to sense that God's mercy was the answer, whereas the friends emphasized a transactional relationship where receiving blessing is conditional on doing the right thing. Sadly, this is an error we still fall into today, and even worse, sometimes offer opinions to a suffering friend that are more Zophar-like than Christ-like.

August 26

You are no better — Job 12-14, James 4:11

Job protested, twice saying that his friends were no better than he. Christ warned us not to condemn others, saying that the standard we use for others will be turned on us. If we think we can critique another, perhaps we need to look carefully at our own distortions, the log in our eye versus the speck we are removing from another.

The three friends said the wicked are punished with suffering, Job was suffering, therefore he must be wicked. He insisted this was not the case, that his friends were no different from him and were not suffering. He offered the famous evaluation that they were miserable comforters. He warned them that their judgmental attitude was dangerous, reminiscent of Christ's warning to stop judging others lest we be judged. Offering comfort out of our own experiences of suffering is better, rather than moralizing condemnation like Job's friends.

This seems to be one of the hardest lessons for us to learn. When I see the faults of others, I am enthusiastic about correcting them, but perhaps not quite so enthusiastic to have others correct my faults. This becomes particularly pernicious when we interpret difficulties in another's life as a sign of God's disfavor, just as Job's friends were doing to him. I repeatedly have to ask myself, "Am I being judgmental? Am I assuming I am better than this other person?"

Far better is tender empathy. Chagall designed a tapestry for the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, a center for the disabled. Toward the right, Job is barely standing, supported by his wife. To the left are small figures. Looking closely, one can see they are disabled people. The shape of the crowd is vaguely the figure of an evergreen tree, and on the top of the tree, almost like a star, is the figure of Christ crucified. On the back is the text: “For there is hope of a tree if it be cut down, that it will sprout again. And that the tender branch thereof will not cease.” (Job 14:7)

We need to be people who offer the hope of new life for others, not judgment, no matter the difficulties of their situation. We need to encourage others that there is always the possibility of new growth.

August 27

The Resurrection — Job 15-19, John 11:25

A cryptic comment from Job foreshadows Christ’s resurrection. Job wondered if mortals could live again. If so, this would give him hope in his struggle, making him wait eagerly for release. His second declaration was a clearer vision of Christ resurrected, saying he knew that his redeemer lived and would stand on the earth, becoming a prophet in the midst of his pain. He affirmed that he would see God in the body with his own eyes even after death.

Before reaching this declaration, however, Job protested that his friends were torturing, breaking and insulting him, being harsh, and using his humiliation as evidence of sin. His protested against God as well: God had wronged him, blocked his way, plunged him in darkness, stripped him of honor, demolished him, destroyed his hope, and considered him an enemy.

This is the cry of anyone who has seen their child suffer, or experienced a tragedy. For anyone in despair over their relationship with God, I think back to similar moments in my life when I have felt that God let me down. I try to remember how I felt, and use that memory to be understanding, and empathetic.

Extreme pain cannot go on forever, and the hope of resurrection gives us strength to face our struggles. Paul reminded us that our current troubles are relatively small and short-lived, no matter what they are, and he encouraged us to look ahead to the great and everlasting glory that is coming.

August 28

Pure Gold — Job 20-25, James 1:2-4

We know that Christ’s suffering is the model the New Testament calls us to follow. We are promised we will share his glory if we share his suffering. Job’s

experience foreshadowed the benefits of suffering we see in Christ. James explains that we should suffer cheerfully, knowing it will bring about faith and perseverance.

Over the course of the debate, Job arrived at a view of suffering that fit well with the backstory he knew nothing about. He said, “But he knows where I am going. And when he tests me, I will come out as pure as gold.” (Job 23:10) In the prologue, we know that his suffering was set up as a test of loyalty to God, and Job was purified as he went through this suffering. The trying of our faith results in pure gold, something beautiful for God and frustrating for Satan.

To follow God with our whole heart, loving and serving him to the very best of our ability, we need a theology of suffering that helps us. Accepting suffering as God’s way of purifying our faith can be the theology that gives us strength to bear it gracefully. We easily fall into Job’s theological error, and a clash between our theology and experience causes agony. He had not lost his faith, but was confused, wondering why God did not speak to him and tell him what he had done wrong.

My sister Beverly taught me the lessons of Job. She went into a coma when she was 18, and though it took several months, she was healed completely, an example of God’s rescue. At 36 she was diagnosed with cancer, and lived bravely through the challenges and reprieves for 14 years after a diagnosis, celebrating God’s presence with her in victories and defeats. During the terrible physical suffering of her last year of life, she showed pure love and faith, writing her wisdom for her children, making baby blankets for grandchildren she would never see, and walking for the cure for cancer. She showed us how to suffer well. She did not give up her fight for health, she celebrated and enjoyed the good years of health won, she did not blame God, she sought to love those around her, and yet she accepted her moment of defeat with grace and the hope of resurrection. She endured, and became perfect and complete.

August 29

The wisdom of the cross — Job 26-31, I Corinthians 1:18-30

In Job’s final speech, he asked where to find wisdom and affirmed that God knows where it is. He said, perhaps prophetically, that death and destruction had heard rumors of wisdom. We know from the New Testament that the ultimate expression of God’s wisdom is Christ, and the ultimate wisdom about suffering is Christ’s death on the the cross.

Job thoughts show ongoing turmoil in his final speech. He affirmed that he had a clear conscience, had faith in God’s power, and celebrated God’s wisdom. He not only reviewed his past blessings, but he expressed his present anguish as

well. He examined his past behavior trying to see where he had done well or poorly, but he still wondered why he was suffering.

Job and his wife were still grieving the unaccountable, sudden deaths of their ten children, not to mention their financial losses, and his illness. While purification and endurance provide theology to encourage a believer, this does not answer agonizing questions about sudden accidents and death. It is not hard to make a litany of innocent sufferers: victims of genocide, children emaciated from cholera, a child with cancer, a teen struggling with mental illness, a family going through a divorce, a person struggling with an addiction, chronic pain, tragic accidents, refugees fleeing a disintegrating city, a rejected minority group, and so many more things. In quantity and quality, it is too much, and I am overwhelmed.

We need wisdom to face these difficult things. Christ's crucifixion shows us that God suffers with us, bearing the worst that humanity does. His presence in and with those who suffer may be our deepest comfort. I do not have the strength to suffer with all who suffer, but he does. Christ's passion gives us true wisdom regarding suffering as we repeatedly meditate on each detail.

August 30

The Suffering Christ — Job 32-37, Matthew 25:31-46

Christ taught us that he is present in the one who is suffering, and so by definition Job foreshadows Christ. He said that he is present in the one who suffers and those who alleviate suffering in any way have the privilege of serving him. But Job's friends did not have this important insight, and instead of treating him with reverence, they were critical, and then contemptuous, and finally stopped talking to him altogether. The deteriorating relationship between Job and his friends reached a climax at the start of these chapters.

A younger man who had been listening, Elihu, expressed anger at Job's insistence on his innocence and anger at the ineffectual arguments of the friends. Like many younger people, he expected more of the adults and felt let down. Much of what he said is quite true. He argued that because of God's greatness, we cannot accuse him. He said God speaks to us, gives a ransom for our lives, does not twist justice, will bring justice if we wait, he hears the cries of the needy, and he gets our attention through adversity. Elihu pointed out the miracles of nature as showing God's power.

These are all true things, yet something was wrong in Elihu's attitude. He was angry and judgmental, accusing Job of arrogance, rebellion, blasphemy and speaking like a fool. Elihu is a clear example of offering good answers in a harmful way. Elihu concluded that those who are truly wise show reverence to God. What he did not grasp is that the truly wise also see God in their

suffering friend and show them reverence. We can avoid his error if we see the one suffering as Christ himself, and humbly, respectfully, reverently respond to them.

Job proved, even in his frustration and questioning, that his fundamental motivation was not to receive blessings, but was having an intimate, communicating, relationship with God. He had passed the test and shown that Satan's accusations were false. His love for God was real. May we be able to do the same

August 31

The Glory of Creation — Job 38-41, Colossians 1:15-16

Christ, the one through whom God created, is before and above creation. Ultimately, he, supreme over all creation, will come and respond to Job's questions by sharing our suffering. Here God celebrates mysteries of creation as his response to Job. As an answer to "why am I suffering?" it is entirely beside the point. Instead, it is a glorious poem to the incredible complexity of the world we live in.

Yet in some mysterious way it answers the questions. At a point when I was discouraged, I had a dream of many beautiful things in the natural world. It filled me with awe and happiness and when I woke up I was still amazed and cheerful. I thought to myself, "I have been given the same answer to suffering as Job. The world is so full of the astonishing works of the Creator that my inability to understand suffering is eclipsed." It did not resolve the problems, but it served as a touchstone to which I returned.

God's challenge is to interact with creation as a way of knowing him. God asked many questions which can be summarized by one: "Do you know the laws of the universe and how God rules the earth?" To date, no matter what we learn there is always more to explore. We do not understand the mysteries of creation, incarnation and resurrection.

Today we are privileged to enjoy the work of documentary filmmakers and nature photographers who seek out beautiful, strange, compelling, and unknown things in our world. We enjoy seeing things no one could have seen in the past. Today cutting-edge questions include particle physics, black holes, dark matter, the expanding universe, how our brains work, creatures deep in the sea and many other things that awaken wonder as we explore the questions. Neither the questions nor the glory have ended.

There is a subtext, however. Nature, so full of beauty, complexity, power and life, is made and managed by God. If that is so, is it not logical that he can intervene in my much smaller crisis? The ultimate intervention after Christ's

suffering was the resurrection. It is the primary reason to believe God has the power to transform suffering.

September 1

Job's Happy Ending — Job 42, John 16:22

Job repented, the same repentance Christ required for entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven. The book reaches its climax as Job acknowledges that he has seen God. This is the reward of the pure in heart. He took back everything he had said, and was full of repentance. He recognized his arrogance in feeling he could judge God.

Job's friends who thought all suffering could be explained as punishing sin were wrong also, and Job served as their priest to obtain forgiveness. Job did not get his children back, but he was given new children and lived to see four generations. The last line of the book says he died an old man who had a long and good life.

Thomas Merton wrote wisely: "The terrible 'problem of suffering' is regarded by the Bible not so much as a problem to be explained or as a mystery to be contemplated, but as an inscrutable existential fact. The one book that deals most explicitly with suffering as 'problem' ironically derides the answers of the wise men who come to comfort Job, the actual sufferer. In the end, God himself speaks, and instead of resolving the problem and answering the question, simply states forcefully that there is really no answer to suffering regarded as a problem. He says equivalently that man himself is the problem, and also that God is somehow central to the fact that man is man's own problem. But nothing further is explained—least of all by Job's 'happy ending.'"¹⁸

Suffering is never fully explained, because it repeatedly touches our lives. But blessings returned for Job, and he lived once more in the joy, peace, and power of new life. If he foreshadowed Christ in his suffering, the ending foreshadows resurrection and ascension, and our lives have those times as well.

Book 1: Psalms 1-41

September 2

Foreshadowing Christ — Psalms 1-2, Acts 4:25-28

Christ was the word of God, Son of God, and the king of all. The first two Psalms introduce him in these roles. Some see these two Psalms as serving as an introduction to the whole book. One key to their connection is that a person is happy if they delight in God's law at the beginning of Psalm 1, and at the end of Psalm 2 happiness comes to those who humbly celebrate God's rule.

Both the Psalmist and Christ compared a godly person to a fruitful tree. This is one of many wisdom poems in the Psalter, and commends meditation on God's word as the way to become wise and fruitful people. Several early church fathers compared Christ to the godly person described in the first Psalm.

Psalm 2 is repeatedly quoted in the New Testament and applied to Christ. The opposition of worldly leaders such as Herod and Pilate to him is said to have fulfilled the first three verses as the disciples prayed in Acts 4. Paul said that the Father called Christ his son in Acts 13:33, saying "this is what the second psalm says about Jesus."

Many Psalms praise the king or celebrate his enthronement, and the application to Christ here shows us we can see beyond the references to earthly kings to his eternal kingship in every Psalm of this type. Related Psalms include those that offer praise for the king's city, Zion or Jerusalem, and praise for seeing him in the temple, enthroned with the ark as his footstool. Jerusalem was the site of Christ's victory and he identified himself as both temple and king, making each Psalm of this genre a prophetic celebration of him.

September 3
Lament — Psalms 3-7, Mark 7:20-23

Christ expressed the anguish of his heart in prayer in the garden before the cross to the point that he sweat drops of blood. He was facing such fierce opposition from enemies and his prayer expressed the two sides to a lament: "let this cup pass from me" and "not my will but yours."

Psalmists expressed anguish in laments, and there are more poems of this genre than any other, over a third of the Psalter. We see the pattern of expressing distress, but also of expressing hope and confidence that God will rescue. Some sources of distress include enemies or pursuers, a general depression and absence of well-being, evil or arrogant people, or physical suffering. All of these we experience, and all of these Christ experienced.

The Psalms teach us that honest cries from our hearts of our need make good prayers, and at the same time we can hope in God. The Psalmist's heart includes confidence that God will deliver him from enemies, will give him renewed joy and peace, will rescue him from death, will provide refuge, justice, and appropriate judgement for those perpetrating violence. From this example we learn to express hope and faith along with the depths of our need and fear.

Whatever causes us to be sick at heart, it comforts us to know that Christ shares the anguish. The reassurance that God cares about our heartbreaks and responds to our cries for help increases the longer we follow him.

September 4
Incarnation — Psalms 8-11, Hebrews 2:9

According to the writer of Hebrews, Christ's incarnation was prophesied in Psalm 8. The writer of Hebrews didn't look up the reference but wrote, "somewhere in the Scripture it says..." which is a delightful reminder that scripture writers did not necessarily footnote. Hebrews recognizes that the only one of whom it can truly be said that all things are under his feet is Christ.

Because of the incarnation, he too, was made a little lower than the angels, but has now been crowned with glory and honor. Christ was literally lower than the angels as they announced his birth to the shepherds as he lay in a manger. His death was something angels do not experience. His resurrection, ascension, and his ascent to the Father's right hand raised him higher than the angels once more, ruler over all creation.

Praise for God is the second most dominant genre in the Psalms which not only calls us to praise, but gives us reasons to do so. In this poem, we are called to praise God for his creation. The prophetic allusion to incarnation unites the great mystery that the creator became a humble child within his creation.

Because he became a human being he understands from the inside the complexity of our lives. He knew sorrow and suffering, and he knew that griefs turn to joy. Psalmists knew this as well, and poems of lament are balanced with poems of thanksgiving. Psalms 9-10 go together as one acrostic poem built on the Hebrew alphabet. The first is full of thanksgiving for prayers that have been answered. The second is a cry for help. The reality is that our lives alternate between thanksgiving and lament. The poem ends with confidence in an eternal king who defends the oppressed, a king we know to be Christ.

In Psalm 11 the distress of lament has been answered, and once more there is joy and peace and hope. In this Psalm are three reoccurring themes for praise: the king, his enthronement, and Jerusalem. We see that these apply specifically to Christ as the eternal king who was enthroned over all nations in his ascension, and whose city is the site of his presence and great victory. His incarnation never took away his divinity.

September 5
Our Sin — Psalms 12-15, Romans 3:23

Christ's work on the cross removed all that is evil, the vile things that people honor. The Psalmist complains of the wickedness of others and the need for God to arise and do something about it, the need for something to be done

about his daily sorrow, and for salvation to come from Jerusalem. Christ fulfilled these cries.

Universal sin and a universal need for repentance and new birth are presented in Psalm 14:2-3. Paul quoted this in Romans 3 as evidence that all, Jews and Gentiles, need salvation. He chained together additional Psalms to build his case that all mankind needed redemption. After concluding that all have sinned, Paul gave the hopeful transformation of this problem in Christ. This Psalm is repeated with only a small variation in Psalm 53. The message is important and reinforced by the repetition: man's sin is a serious problem and a cry for salvation to come out of Zion was answered in Christ.

The Psalmists repeatedly asked God to declare them innocent while simultaneously acknowledging that no one is innocent before God. We see the solution in Paul: innocence is declared through Christ's work. We know that Christ identified himself with the temple, and a series of temple-themed poems such as Psalm 15 insist that it is only the pure who can join God in his temple. We now understand that it was Christ's purity that opened the way for us to become pure enough to become his temple now.

Christ's ability to do this was repeatedly foreshadowed in stories and prophecies, but it was not until after his death and resurrection that even those closest to him recognized the possibility. For us, we take this good news a little for granted, it has become so familiar. But how wonderful that even though we are ashamed and guilty people, God declares us innocent because of the cross. Our sin, shame and guilt have a complete solution, and we can rejoice.

September 6

Preaching Christ — Psalms 15-18, Acts 2:24-28

Psalm 16 contains a clear prophecy of resurrection according to Peter who quoted it in his Pentecost sermon. Peter applied the promise that God would not leave his holy one to rot in the grave to Christ, saying that David was a prophet and knew that one of his descendants would sit on his throne and be resurrected.

Psalm 17 evokes the image of a mother bird protecting her young, an image Christ used regarding his desire to protect his people in Jerusalem. The Psalmist expresses confidence that God will protect him from his enemies, and we see something that points to our resurrection and Christ's resurrection in the phrase that we will see God when we awake.

Psalm 18 is a repetition of II Samuel 22. In verse 9 we see a hint of the incarnation in the phrase that "he parted the heavens and came down." God's military victories through David are transfigured by Paul who uses a quote

from Psalm 18 in his argument that the gospel is for the Gentiles. Paul moves from David's context of God paying back those who harm him to good news that nations are welcomed into God's community, quoting verse 49 in Romans 15:9. Paul gives us a post-resurrection reinterpretation of the relationship of the people of God to non-believers.

The gospel is in the Psalms: Messiah has been resurrected and he loves the whole world.

September 7

Victory--Psalms 19-21, Romans 8:37

These three Psalms of praise can all be applied to Christ. Psalm 19 celebrates him as our creator, the word, the rock, and our redeemer. Psalms 20 and 21 take up the theme of kingship, celebrating the victory of the anointed king and that the eternal king is a just judge. Resurrection and eternal life are predicted when the Psalmist says that the days of life will stretch on forever.

Variations on the word victory are repeated five times. I like the optimism of Psalm 21 that asks that God will grant our heart's desires, make all our plans succeed, so that we can shout for joy over this victory. In Psalm 21 I like the sound of a victory shouts from the king for success and prosperity

What I struggle with, of course, is the time between requests for victory and their fulfillment. Victory delayed often feels like victory denied. The Psalms remind us that victory is possible, victory is coming, and no prayer is forgotten. This helps us to keep expecting something good even when we cannot see it.

We look back to Christ's victory over sin and death. We look forward to the ultimate victory. But meanwhile, as Paul tells us, we have been given victory. As John tells us in his first letter, we have won victory because the Spirit in us is greater than the spirit in the world, and our victory comes through faith.

September 8

Christ's Lament—Psalm 22, Matthew 24:36

On the cross Christ cried out the heart-wrenching first line of this Psalm. The sense of God's abandonment in suffering is something we can identify with, and it strengthens us to know Christ experienced that. At the same time, it puts this cry into a larger context to realize it is the beginning of a lament which alternates between complaint and trust.

Surely Christ knew the whole song. The heading tells us the tune was “Doe of the Dawn” which sounds plaintive and poignant. Perhaps he recited the whole song in his mind during the crucifixion. It provides a pattern for how to pray in our own struggles.

After the cry of despair, the Psalm turns to recalling God’s past actions as a source of encouragement. There is once more a complaint over being mocked, and the words are very like what bystanders scoffed and shouted at Christ on the cross. The next expression of confidence in God speaks of being an infant and reminds us of his incarnation. The following complaint describes the physical suffering of the crucifixion in graphic detail and ends with the prophetic word cited in the gospels about throwing dice for his clothing. The following petition is for his life to be spared, something fulfilled in the resurrection.

The rest of the Psalm is praise, and the vow to proclaim God’s name to his brothers and sisters is quoted in Hebrews as what Christ does for us. The final lines of praise celebrate that all the earth will acknowledge God and bow before him, and that those not yet born will hear about all he has done. It is deeply touching to me to think that on the cross Christ was praying this, thinking of those of us generations in the future who would come to believe in him.

September 9

Shepherd, King, The Way — Psalms 23-25, John 10:11-14

Christ called himself the Good Shepherd and in well-loved Psalm 23 we see details of what that means. Books have been written to help us truly grasp what a loving image this is. Psalm 24 celebrates the return of the king; the moment he entered the gates of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as well as looking ahead to his re-entry at the end of time. Psalm 25 returns repeatedly to asking God to show his path or way, and Christ told us that he is the way.

Each of these metaphors is one of protection and guidance. When I feel lost or uncertain, it is a comfort to read any one of these Psalms and allow them to speak deeply into my heart for current needs. I can remember a moment in my life when I felt lost and confused, and a friend offered a book meditating on Psalm 23 that repeatedly reminded me that even if I did not know the way to go, the shepherd did, and could be trusted. Despite my anxiety, at an even deeper level I knew this must be true, based on years of walking in faith and finding God to be faithful. Every part of the Psalm seemed to come true in my life, and I can attest that God’s goodness and unfailing mercy have followed me, and I look forward to the future eternal home with God.

September 10

Metaphors for Christ — Psalm 26-30, Luke 24:45

Christ took themes from Psalms and developed them in his own teaching, using metaphors for God found in these prayers and applied them to himself—light, rock, shepherd, teacher, guide, helper, father, king, and judge. Interestingly he did not use imagery of God as warrior, or metaphors for God that are tools of war—shield, horn, fortress, and high tower.

In each of these Psalms we see at least one thing that Christ later applied to himself or his kingdom: the temple in Psalm 26; light in Psalm 27; a shepherd carrying his sheep in Psalm 28; being worshipped by angels in Psalm 29; and being raised from the dead in Psalm 30. The first three of these Psalms are laments, followed by a song of praise and one of thanksgiving. Christ knew the Psalms and recognized himself in them.

Many Psalms celebrate the beauty of creation, but Psalm 27:4 expresses a desire to gaze on God's beauty. Simone Weil helps us apply this: "The beauty of the world is the tender smile of Christ to us through matter. He is really present in universal beauty." And "The desire to love the beauty of the world in a human being is essentially the desire for the Incarnation."

Christ's own teachings were beautiful stories and metaphors, and this way of thinking helps us to interpret the ancient texts of the Hebrew scriptures in a way that is profitable and touches our hearts. We do not want to treat the scriptures as merely an encyclopedia, or as a rule book, but to take it on its own terms as literature with profoundly symbolic and beautiful meanings.

September 11
God's care — Psalms 31-35, John 17:11

A reoccurring theme in the Psalms is that God intimately cares about each one of us and meets our needs as individuals and as a community. Christ expressed his deep love for his followers and promised they would have his presence with them through the Holy Spirit. Many Psalms are personal expressions of emotional connection.

Christ protects us, and the Psalmist celebrates protection in Psalm 31. Psalm 32 is a well-known song of praise for forgiveness. Psalms 33 and 34 are simply cheerful. David affirmed that while we have many troubles, God rescues us from each one. In Psalm 35 there is a prayer for processing things when friends have been treating one badly, but it ends with joy, praise for God's greatness, and testimony of God's justice and goodness. Verse 19 is applied to Christ in John 1:25, saying he was hated without cause.

Psalm 31 had significance for me when I read it as a college freshman. I had always felt protected and secure, so the idea of experiencing anguish of soul,

grief, tears, scorn, being ignored, having rumors circulate about me, conspiring enemies, the possibility of disgrace, accusations, and my city under attack all sounded awful. Surely this could not be right, and God's obedient children would be blessed instead.

Years later I remembered this Psalm when difficult things befell me, but then the promises stood out in sharper relief: God would see to it I was not put to shame, he would be a rock of safety, he would lead me out of danger, he cared about the anguish of my soul, he hid me in the shelter of his presence, he blessed me before the watching world, and I was able to put my future in his hands. I was comforted and amazed that this was true.

September 12

Meekness — Psalms 36-37, Matthew 5:5

Christ called for a humble, meek heart in the Beatitudes, quoting Psalm 37:11. There is much to tempt us away from that meekness. In both Psalms the author complains of wicked people, but ends by affirming his faith and asking that the wicked will not move him away from the solidity of faith. He tells himself to be calm and not worry or be envious of those who do wrong.

Meekness can be defined as humility toward God and others, and one demonstration of it is to “Be still in the presence of the Lord, and wait patiently for him to act. Don't worry about evil people who prosper or fret about their wicked schemes.” (Psalm 37:7)

A pastor told me that waiting on God was just waiting, like waiting in line or in a doctor's office—just waiting to see what God would do. This was a, to me, shocking alternative to bustling about and trying to fix things myself. This way of waiting is an act of trust in God's goodness, and the peace and hope it brings are a healthy way of living. God has promised he will take care of those not obeying him, that is not my business.

Our culture values asserting ourselves to the point of aggressiveness, and values self-promotion. These are anti-Christian values that need to be cut out of our hearts.

September 13

Healing — Psalms 38-41, Matthew 8:7

Healing people was the predominant activity of Christ's ministry, and Psalms return repeatedly to faith in God's promise to heal. There are many positive affirmations, but the Psalmist also does not hesitate to complain about bad health. David knows, however, that relationship with God is more important

than health and affirms that even if health fails, God is still the strength of his life.

There are 31 healing stories in the Gospels. In the scriptures, some variant of the word healing is used 252 times, with over half of the occurrences in the Gospels (124), showing how central this was in Christ's life.

Psalm 38 is a penitential lament. If our own sins are the cause of our distress, what is needed is confession and repentance. Our sins have bad effects on our health, and our repentance is part of seeking our healing. These Psalms model that confessional process for us. I appreciate the balanced approach that recognizes that God is both with us in illness, and can also restore our health, even calling God a nurse in Psalm 41. We also have an example of fasting for the health of another.

The New Testament tells us that Christ carries our sins in his body on the cross and it is by his wounds we are healed. (I Peter 2:24) Psalm 40 reinforces that in an exegesis in Hebrews 10:3-10 which shows that Christ is the final and complete sacrifice for sin. Both say that God does not need sacrifices, but there is a subtle difference in the New Testament quote taken from the Greek translation done in the 3rd century before Christ: "But you have given me a body to offer."

We need these principles in facing our own illnesses or those of others: the cross is the source of our healing, we can confess sins that create health problems, my relationship with God is more important than my health, he is present with me, and miraculous healing is real. All are part of our prayers. Even with chronic illness, we have learned that a stance of gratitude to God makes any limitations bearable. God is with us.

Book 2: Psalms 42-72

September 14

Longing for God—Psalms 42-43

Seeing the sin and suffering of the world can provoke us to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and Christ said we will be blessed for this. The Psalmist expresses his thirst, comparing himself to a deer in desperate need, saying he is thirsting for God.

Four times in these two Psalms he repeats that he feels downcast and disturbed, and yet each time he has a solution to his angst: put hope in God and praise will come. This is a practical spiritual lesson for our times of anxiety or yearning for something to happen.

The beautiful song based on this Psalm was a great consolation to me in a time of severe sorrow and pain. I played it on the piano and sang it and the words worked their way into my soul, giving me hope. The answers eventually came, and as Christ said, I was satisfied, and as the Psalmist said, I could praise once more.

As the deer panteth for the water
So my soul longeth after Thee.
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship Thee.

You alone are my strength, my shield.
To you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship Thee.

You're my friend
And you are my brother
Even though You are a King.
I love You more than any other
So much more than anything.

I want you more than gold or silver
Only You can satisfy.
You alone are the real joy giver
And the apple of my eye. -- Martin J. Nystrom

September 15

Christ the King — Psalms 44-48, Matthew 6:10

The central theme of Christ's preaching was the Kingdom of God, and the Psalms repeatedly referred to God as king. "Kingdom" occurs 158 times in the New Testament, and 123 of those instances are in the Gospels.

In Psalm 44 he refers to his king and God who gives victory, and despite current defeats, there is hope for intervention. Psalm 45:6,7 is quoted in Hebrews 1 and applied to Christ. His eternal throne, royal power, justice,

love for the right, hate for wrong, anointing and joy described in these verses is supplemented by references to his gracious words, defence of humily, nations falling before him, etc. As an earthly king marries his beautiful bride, it is not too difficult to transfer this symbolically to the marriage of Christ and the church.

In Psalm 46 we have references to earthquakes, mountains falling in the sea, the end of war, and a river in God's City—all reminiscent of end-times imagery in Revelation. Praise for Zion reminds us that Christ the King accomplished his greatest work of salvation on the cross and resurrection in Jerusalem. This makes it the most praiseworthy city of all, and a foretaste of the perfect city at the end of time when all people will bow to the King of Kings. In the fulfillment of his kingdom all wars will cease, something to which we still must look forward in our chaotic times.

The rule of God as King of Kings and Lord of Lords is prefigured in Psalm 47, even the trumpets blaring. This Psalm is sung to celebrate the ascension, and reading it with that knowledge helps me see its prophetic appropriateness. Psalm 48 celebrates God as great and celebrates Zion as the city of the great king.

Understandably, when Christ came, people expected kingly prophecies to be fulfilled by Messiah, and were puzzled when he rejected becoming the leader of a revolutionary movement to overthrow Roman domination. Between resurrection and ascension Christ taught them about the Kingdom of God, but even then they wondered if literal freedom for Israel was at hand. He explained that when things will be complete is known only to God, but they could announce that Christ had come and so preach the kingdom. Today, we have the same charge.

September 16

The Gospel — Psalm 49-51, Matthew 4:17

In the middle of a Proverb-like poem, Psalm 49, which gives us a wise perspective on wealth, we are told that we cannot redeem ourselves from death. We are not able to pay a ransom to God, because no one could ever pay enough to escape death. For a Christian, one cannot help but think “but Christ did pay that ransom and redeem us from death.” No matter how difficult, we now know that there was one able to “pay enough” for us to live forever. Then comes a prophetic hint of resurrection in verse 15 when David says God will redeem his life and snatch him from the power of the grave, something that only came through Christ.

Psalm 50 presents the truth that the covenant with God is through sacrifice, yet critiques the rituals of animal sacrifices. He calls for a sacrifice of

thanksgiving, which is what replaces animal sacrifice because of Christ. This Psalm seems to prophecy that replacement, coming down firmly on the side of thanksgiving as the needed response.

Because of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, we know we have forgiveness of sins if we but ask. David committed adultery and murdered a friend. When confronted by the prophet Nathan, he confessed his sin and repented. Psalm 51 is that deep cry of repentance that knows that forgiveness comes from God's grace. We have nothing to justify ourselves; it is God himself who does this.

Our redemption, our resurrection, and our forgiveness are because of Christ's work and love. Thanksgiving and praise are the right response.

September 17

Conformed to Christ — Psalms 52-59, Philippians 3:10-11

These Psalms present Christ's unjust suffering and his resurrection which made our forgiveness possible. These Psalms emerged from experiences in David's life according to their titles, yet his suffering and rescue were part of a prophetic life pattern that would be fulfilled in Christ. The pattern of David's life foreshadowed Christ's life.

Betrayal and judgement: (52:1,5) Doeg's betrayal to Saul.

Universal sin: The text declaring this is repeated in the New Testament to explain the need for the good news. (53:1-3, Romans 3:12) David's meditation.

Enemies calling for death: (54:3) Betrayed by Ziphites to Saul.

Betrayal by a friend: (55:12-14, 20-21) David's song.

Resurrection: (56:13) When Philistines seized him in Gath.

Vindicated by God: (57:2) Fled from Saul into the cave.

Treated unjustly by rulers: (58:1,2) David's song.

Innocent yet verbally condemned: (59:4,7) Saul's soldiers sent to his house.

Paul expressed the desire to be conformed to Christ's sufferings and Christ himself urged us to take up our crosses. Suffering in life is inevitable, but we can choose to suffer for God's purposes and glory as Paul and David did. David previewed Christ's suffering, and Paul copied it. We can make the same choices and let our suffering be part of this pattern.

September 18

Protection — Psalms 60-64, Luke 13:34

Christ desired to protect suffering people like a mother hen, but they would not let him. The Psalmist cries out in Psalm 61 for the shelter of God's wings, and in Psalm 63 he sings in gratitude in the shadow of the wings. Here the believing Psalmist does allow that sheltering presence of protection.

A portion of Psalm 60 will be combined with a few verses of Psalm 57 to form Psalm 108. Rather than the laments from which they are taken, the words of triumph are combined in a new way to emphasize that God is fighting on the people's behalf against every enemy. The enemies mentioned had harassed them for centuries, and in David's time he put an end to them as a threat. Once again, the emphasis is on God's role as protector.

The theme of God as a mother bird protecting her young occurs throughout scripture. Boaz' blessing on Ruth: "May the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully for what you have done." (Ruth 2:12) Elsewhere in the Psalms: "Guard me as you would guard your own eyes. Hide me in the shadow of your wings." (Psalm 17:8) and "How precious is your unfailing love, O God! All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of your wings." (Psalm 36:7) "He will cover you with his feathers. He will shelter you with his wings. His faithful promises are your armor and protection." (Psalm 91:4)

It is a tender image, one that reassures with its down-to-earth quality, the maternal connection, and a kind of miniaturization of God into a small creature who cares for even smaller creatures.

September 19

King of the Nations — Psalms 65-68, Revelation 5:9-10

Christ is presented to us as king of the nations in the New Testament, and in the Psalms we are told that the Lord is the king of all the earth, and that all kings belong to him. Ultimately, he will cause wars to cease and be honored throughout the earth. Those from the ends of the earth stand in awe of his wisdom. The nations will be glad because God governs with justice and directs the actions of the whole world. All nations will be blessed through him and give him praise, and the whole earth will be filled with his glory.

Psalm 67 celebrates that all the nations will praise God, and Christ's command to go into all the world with the gospel is a practical outworking of making that happen. Psalm 68 celebrated military victory and conquest, but was spiritualized in the New Testament. Paul used the quote as a reference to the ascension, spiritual liberation, and the giving of spiritual gifts. This precedent of using formerly physical warfare as an image of Christ's triumph over

spiritual forces makes clear the transformative nature of Christ's coming to earth.

A great theological mistake was made by forgetting that Christ came to us through Israel, that Gentiles can be reconciled with God through him. Instead, Gentiles began to imagine that they replaced Israel, and that they had a right to treat potential colonials as Canaanites.

Theologian Willie Jennings demonstrates how this and other distortions helped historically to justify slavery, dispossession of colonized peoples, and anti-Semitism, establishing the racism that troubles modern American Christianity.¹⁹ The United States adopted the same self-ascription as Israel and the same sense that her enemies were God's enemies. The more accurate reading of these Psalms is that through Israel's Messiah the world will be brought to unity and peace. The Kingdom of God, not any particular nation state, is the fulfillment of the promises to Israel.

September 20

Zeal for God's House — Psalms 69-72, John 2:15-16

Christ's action in expelling merchants evokes the above a quote from Psalm 69. The disciples seemed to feel that since all of scripture was about Christ, applying it in this way was acceptable poetic license. The New Testament quotes the Psalm five times in reference to Christ, with additional references in all four gospel accounts regarding sour wine to satisfy thirst, a crucifixion event. After the ascension, Peter quoted the prediction of Judas' betrayal from this Psalm. While these may seem to be taken out of context, Peter identified them as prophesies of the Holy Spirit, speaking through David.

Using their textual freedom, one can see references to insults and suffering in Psalms 70, 71, and 72 as applying to Christ as well as the Psalmist. Psalm 70 repeats a portion of Psalm 40. One highlight is the request that those who love God will always say "The Lord is great!" At the ends he pleads, "Lord, do not delay!" For anyone who has made prayer an important part of their life, these are two sides of a coin: confidence in God's character and desiring answers ASAP!

In Psalm 71 there is a resurrection prophecy of being restored to life, lifted from the depths of earth, and restored to even greater honor. In Psalm 72 we look ahead to a king who defends and rescues the poor and needy, who has an everlasting kingdom, and whose glory fills the earth.

Christ told his disciples that all the scriptures pointed to him, and in these Psalms we see that it is so. Prophecy and fulfillment increase our confidence in God's word and the validity of our faith.

Book 3: Psalms 73-89

September 21

Persistent Prayer — Psalms 73-74, Luke 18:1

Christ commands us to not give up, and to make our requests to him persistently. Asaph, author of these Psalms, begs for action saying that he is pleading and praying all night long.

Asaph, author of Psalms 73-83, was a musician and Levite David appointed to lead worship. He seemed to have a Job-like philosophical bent. He worried about judgment on the wicked and how badly things were going for the nation and for him. Faith in a glorious and majestic God kept him persistent in his prayers saying until God acted, he was without joy, moaning, and longing for God's help.

Psalm 73 is a wisdom Psalm that struggles with the dissonance that the arrogant have a good life apart from God. Asaph suddenly realizes that, from an eternal perspective, things do not necessarily turn out so favorably for them, but rather do for those who believe. He apologizes for his bad attitude and refocuses, a good prayer model in our affluent, image-conscious age.

Psalm 74 mourns the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the pain of exile. He says plaintively that no one know how long this will last. The lament turns once more to remembering that God is king, that he brings salvation, that he is ruler of creation. He pleads for God to act.

Christ tells us to keep asking, to persist, not to give up, but to keep hoping and knocking. Sometimes it seems that it takes forever for a prayer to be answered, or the answer is against our preference. When something is in the open-ended category, it seems fair to keep asking with deep trust that God is loving, faithful, and intervenes for our good. When uncertainty gives me anxiety, relinquishing my imaginary control and humbly recognizing God's sovereignty gives peace. Then when prayers are answered, there is no pride, just gratitude.

September 22

The Cup—Psalms 75-77, Matthew 26:42

In the garden, Christ prayed that he might not have to drink "this cup", but accepted that if it was God's will he would do so. The cup referred to the

suffering he was to experience. In Psalm 75:8 there is a cup of judgment, a cup of wine the wicked will drink.

This is one of seven references to drinking the cup of God's anger in the Hebrew scriptures. The theme is repeated twice in Revelation. Christ drank that cup of judgment on our behalf, and now it has been transformed into a cup of communion.

These three Psalms present God as a fair judge who shows compassion to those to cry out to him for mercy. Because Christ drank the cup of judgment, there is a cup of compassion for us. The Eucharistic cup comforts us as a reminder that our sins are forgiven, our suffering is understood, and we are part of a community of love.

September 23

Parables — Psalms 78-79, John 16:25

Christ chose parables as his preferred mode of teaching, and Asaph used Israel's history as a parable. The lesson is that even though the people rejected God, He continued to love them and show mercy. "I will speak to you in a parable" is quoted in the New Testament to explain Christ's teaching style.

In his preface to Psalm 78 Asaph emphasized the importance of sharing history with new generations. He castigated Israel (Ephraim), for forgetting history. He reminded them of the exodus, wilderness wanderings, plagues, the conquest and the time of the judges.

He concluded with the start of David's reign, and high hopes that the people would now be obedient, recalling this checkered history. We know these hopes were not realized and that David, Solomon, and the subsequent kings failed, with exile resulting.

Psalm 79 describes Jerusalem's destruction and the beginning of exile, so was written by Asaph's descendant who returned from exile. Though the people had failed, God's mercy still did not fail and his promises were fulfilled. Their stories provide parables for our lives, full of warnings and full of hope.

September 24

Sheep and Vine — Psalms 80-83, John 10:16

Christ called himself a shepherd, and called us his sheep. Psalm 80 says God is Israel's shepherd, and Christ extended this to all who listen to him. Christ called himself the vine, and called us his branches. The Psalmist called God a gardener who needed to care for his vine.

This is tender imagery of being loved and cared for that reoccurs throughout scripture as the fundamental reality of our relationship to God. Both are images of dependency and need for care. The theme of wandering sheep and fruitless vines reoccurs as an expression of God's disappointment that his care is not appreciated, and that we his people choose to resist the healthy dependency he desires.

At the same time, there are images given us of our nature as strong and independent in our relationship to him, including the characterization that we can take on the divine nature. Christ quoted from Psalm 82:6 to counter the accusation of blasphemy by the religious leaders when they picked up stones to kill him because he was making himself to be God. He insisted that those who believe in him become God's children. While that is also an image of dependency, it carries a sense of dignity and power that as members of God's royal family, we are not to be taken lightly.

September 25

Living in God's Home — Psalms 84-87, John 14:1-3

Christ promised that he is making a home for us. The Psalmist celebrated home: the temple, Israel's land, and Jerusalem. All of scripture can be framed as a story of returning home. Psalm 84 celebrates the beauty of God's home, the temple, and that what makes it a true home is God's presence. Psalm 85 celebrates the whole land as home. Psalm 86 celebrates that all nations will come and find their home in God at the end of time. Psalm 87 speaks of the city of Jerusalem as God's home.

Three of these Psalms are from descendants of Korah, Levites who served as musicians and gatekeepers in the temple. David appointment to guard gates on all four sides of the temple. The four chief gatekeepers guarded the treasuries, and some lived in the temple to open and close its gates. They managed supplies, and baked the bread. Eleven Psalms are attributed to them, and in the genealogies in Chronicles we are told that the musicians lived in the temple.

Given these roles, perhaps it is not surprising that they celebrated the privilege of living in God's home. In Psalm 87 predicts that people from everywhere will become citizens of Jerusalem. Because citizenship in the kingdom comes from Christ's actions in that place, Jerusalem is the spiritual home of God's people. We are called on to pray for the peace of that great city.

For us, the ultimate eternal home begins now as we make Christ our home. He promised that anyone who lives in him will never die.

September 26

Suffering and Death—Psalm 88-89, Luke 24:16-21

We know that Christ suffered and died for us, but this was unexpected for the disciples since the Psalmists and other prophets largely spoke of a future reigning king. These two Psalms speak of death and of a suffering king, and with other prophetic voices, the crucifixion could be foreseen.

A new author, Heman the Ezrahite, wrote Psalm 88. He was Samuel's descendant and was put in charge of temple music and service by David. Asaph and Ethan were his assistants, and Ethan wrote Psalm 89.

In Psalm 88 “dead” or “death” is repeated seven times, and other allusions include “the lowest pit, darkest depths, grave, place of destruction, and land of forgetfulness.” The final line says that only darkness remains. There is no expression of hope. Essentially this is a poem about death, a compelling theme which great poets have repeatedly reflected on. Does this not express death's finality, the depressing end the disciples thought had come when Christ died and was buried? The abandonment by his friends reminds us that all of Christ's friends left him as well. Psalm 89 begins optimistically, pointing to the eternal king and the firstborn son of God, but ends with concern that enemies are mocking this anointed king. This detour into suffering remained troubling and unexplained.

The short doxology at the end which blesses God forever is a coda for the third book of the Psalms and like those at the end of the other books. Neither Psalm, then, ends with hope or joy. They end in the bewilderment and loss we recall each year on Holy Saturday. Death and the grave seem to have won. When all seems lost, sadness is the appropriate response.

Book 4: Psalms 90-106

September 27

Miracles — Psalms 90-92, Matthew 4:5-7

Prophetic references to Christ's miracles include the call in Psalm 90 to notice God's miracles and the celebration in Psalm 91 of how great God's miracles are. Miracles do not guarantee belief. We are reminded that Israel had seen God's miracles, and yet they still did not trust God him. Hebrews 4 quotes the warning from Psalm 95, and urges us to enter God's rest. If we do not notice God's miracles on our behalf, our hearts are turning from God, and we are not resting in appreciation.

In Psalm 92:4 we are told, “I sing for joy at what your hands have done.” Often we see creation as the work of God's hands, but when we think of Christ, we remember how often he healed with his hands, multiplied bread with his

hands, and most touchingly, saved us through the nails in his hands on the cross.

So, I pray. Prayer can seem like something thoroughly unrealistic and useless, a form of talking to oneself. But Christ told us to pray privately and he would see to it that we were honored by real world events. As things change there is wonder, whether we describe something as a miracle or not.

September 28

The Lord Reigns—Psalm 93-99, Ephesians 1:19-23

We know that Christ has been raised to rule over all, and three of these Psalms begin with the proclamation that “The Lord reigns,” and another repeats this mid-Psalm. They refer to God as king, a great king above all Gods who is also our creator. Psalm 94 refers to his rulership by speaking of him as the judge of all the earth.

What does it practically mean for me that God in Christ reigns? We know from other scriptures that Christ has made us part of the royal family and we have an inheritance and privileges as a result. We know that even if things go terribly wrong, because Christ is king, we can count on justice being done. Because he is king, he has wealth, connections, wisdom and power that he shares with us. We are comforted in our suffering to see that when Christ suffered on the cross even then his kingship was acknowledged on a sign above his head. That kingship became evident at his ascension and we are beneficiaries of his great power in our lives today.

September 29

Joy — Psalms 100-101, Luke 10:17-21

The Psalms are full of joy, reminding us that Christ is in joyful communion with his Father and with the world. Psalm 100 begins with a call for the whole earth to shout for joy, to sing joyful songs. We are to enter his presence with thanksgiving and praise. Psalm 101 sings praise for God’s justice and with a desire to be holy and bring holiness to the nation.

The disciples returned to Christ delighted in their work to bring holiness through their spiritual authority. In response Christ told them to take joy in being citizens of heaven, and he was filled with joy in the Spirit for giving spiritual discernment to simple child-like people. He promised overflowing joy, that no one can rob our joy in him.

Knowing God’s love for us, knowing his sovereignty in the world, knowing his redemptive work, and knowing his ultimate triumph gives us a solid basis for joy no matter what the circumstances. Psalms far outstrips any other book

with 97 references to “joy,” and another 44 references to “rejoice.” The poems give us plenty of ideas of what to be joyful about, particularly, of course, God himself.

Joy is so often a matter of perspective, of noticing what is terrific, and a matter of being present to God and life in this moment. Even in difficulties, there can be humor or beauty to remind us that life is good. Paul encouraged us to always be joyful (I Thessalonians 5:16), implying that it really is a choice we can make.

September 30

Creator — Psalms 102-104, Hebrews 1:10-12

Christ is creator, something prophesied in Psalm 102 and affirmed in Hebrews. Once we see that this is a Messianic Psalm we see references to Christ everywhere in it: my days vanish like smoke, he cut short my days, my enemies taunt me, it is time to show compassion in Zion, he will appear in his glory, a people not yet created will praise the Lord, etc.

Christ compared God to a compassionate Father, as does Psalm 103. God’s compassion is cited in many ways: he hears the prayers of the destitute, releases those condemned to die, forgives sins, heals diseases, ransoms from death, fills our lives with good things, he is merciful and gracious, and extends salvation to our grandchildren.

In Psalm 104 he is once more celebrated as creator in one of the loveliest nature poems in the Psalter. Appreciating and enjoying nature’s beauty seems like one of the easiest and best ways to learn to pray. Here we are given a model, and our celebration can be a daily source of joy to us, simply noticing things around us and being grateful for them, delighting in them, and thanking Christ as creator.

October 1

Israel’s Miraculous History — Psalms 105-106, John 2:11

In the Gospels, the word “miracle” occurs twenty-five times and “miraculous” an additional eleven times, an indication of how important these signs were in validating Christ’s ministry. The miracles God did for Israel parallel Christ’s miracles, culminating in the greatest miracle of all, the coming of Christ. Zechariah, in his celebration of the birth of John the Baptist, alludes to the promises in Psalms 105 and 106 that God will fulfill the covenant he made with Israel’s ancestors and rescue them from their enemies.

We are told to tell others about the miracles and to think about what he has done for us and for Israel. There are so many glorious miracles we cannot

praise him enough, but the sad truth is that the people who came out of Egypt soon forgot the miracles they had seen.

We are not so different from Israel in that we so easily forget God's interventions in our history. We have so little faith sometimes, that we fall into the same complaining ways of the people. Making lists of things that have seemed miraculous to us and reviewing them can counter our forgetfulness.

Book 5: Psalms 107-150

October 2

Calming Storms — Psalms 107-109, Luke 8:23-24

Psalm 107:29 previews one of Jesus' miracles: "He makes the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still." Calming waves reminds me of my sister. When she was told she had cancer she was understandably frightened and wondered why God had allowed such a tragedy for her and her family, including an infant son. Another friend with cancer pointed her to the following beautiful song. She survived, often with good health, for fourteen years, and when she died the confidence and tranquility of her faith moved many people. We sang *He Calms the Storm* at her funeral:

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|---|--|
| All who sail the sea of faith Find out before too long How quickly blue skies can grow dark And gentle winds grow strong | Sometimes He holds us close And lets the wind and waves go wild Sometimes He calms the storm And other times He calms His child |
|---|--|

| | |
|--|---|
| Suddenly fear is like white water Pounding on the soul Still we sail on knowing That our Lord is in control | He has a reason for each trial That we pass through in life And though we're shaken We cannot be pulled apart from Christ |
|--|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| Sometimes He calms the storm With a whispered peace be still He can settle any sea But it doesn't mean He will | No matter how the driving rain beats down On those who hold to faith A heart of trust will always Be a quiet peaceful place —Scott Krippayne |
|---|---|

October 3

Seated at God's Right Hand — Psalms 110-112, Acts 2:34-35

The Psalmist prophesied that Christ would be seated in victory at God's right hand. This verse is quoted five times in the New Testament, giving it prominence out of at least 100 Messianic prophecies in the Psalms, and 100

direct quotations. Peter quoted the same verse in his Pentecost sermon, and the writer of Hebrews did so to demonstrate Christ's superiority to the angels.

Christ pointed out the paradox of saying Messiah is David's son and is David's Lord. C.S. Lewis wrote that Christ was "hinting at the mystery of the Incarnation by pointing out a difficulty which only it could solve."²⁰ In *Reflection on the Psalms* he wrote:

We find in our Prayer Books that Psalm 110 is one of those appointed for Christmas Day. We may at first be surprised by this. There is nothing in it about peace and good-will, nothing remotely suggestive of the stable at Bethlehem. It seems to have been originally either a coronation ode for a new king, promising conquest and empire, or a poem addressed to some king on the eve of a war, promising victory. It is full of threats. The "rod" of the king's power is to go forth from Jerusalem, foreign kings are to be wounded, battlefields to be covered with carnage, skulls cracked. The note is not "Peace and goodwill" but "Beware. He's coming."²¹

Because He is at God's right hand and coming in power, He is full of blessings. The Psalms that follow are full of joy for those who fear God. Psalm 112 celebrates happiness, successful children, blessing a whole generation, wealth, good deeds, light bursting into the darkness, all going well, not being overcome by evil circumstances, trust when there is bad news, and influence and honor.

October 4

The Rejected Stone — Psalms 113-118, Matthew 21:42-44

These Psalms are the Hallel prayer, recited on Jewish holidays, and probably what Jesus and his disciples sang at the Last Supper. Each one of them has elements prophetic of Christ, climaxing with a Psalm repeatedly quoted in the New Testament.

Psalm 113 tells us that the poor, and the weak will be lifted to honor.. The most archetypal case is Christ. He was rejected to the point of death, and then exalted to the right hand of God. In Psalm 114:7 the earth will tremble and this happened both at the death and resurrection of Christ. In Psalm 115 we are warned that idols have non-functioning mouths, eyes, ears, noses, hands, feet, and throats. But Christ came and had all these very human things, and was truly God.

Psalm 116 points to Christ who was entangled with the cords of death, knew the anguish of the grave, lifted the cup of salvation in the Eucharist, was delivered from death in resurrection, and walked among the living between

resurrection and ascension. The call for all nations to praise God in Psalm 117 is cited in Romans 15:11 as an announcement of salvation for the Gentiles.

But Psalm 118 is particularly rich in Messianic allusions. Verse 26 was quoted to welcome Christ to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The following verse mentions joining the procession with boughs in hand, something the people did as they sang. Christ quoted verse 26 regarding his second coming.

Verses 22-23 are an important Messianic quote regarding the rejected cornerstone that was repeated by Christ and three apostles. The pun between “stone” and “son” (*eben* and *ben*) makes a fitting allusion to God’s son. The foundation stone on the Temple Mount under the Holy of Holies or under the altar was an ordinary-looking rock which one might consider discarding, but became Judaism’s holiest site. How appropriate that all these allusions to his work were sung by Christ and his disciples at the Last Supper.

October 5

Poetry — Psalm 119, John 6:63

Christ is the Word and this Psalm celebrates the Word. The Word gives wisdom and Christ is wisdom. Celebrating the Hebrew scriptures, the poem is an acrostic, starting each stanza with the same letter, then going through the alphabet. In honor of the form, I made my own acrostic, and the number indicates the verse from which the line is drawn:

All my heart seeks you. (2)
Buried in my heart are your words. (11)
Clear my eyes to see truth. (18)
Delight in your miracles satisfies me. (27)
Entering your path gives me happiness, (35)
Failure isn’t possible when it comes to your love. (41)
Guff from the proud doesn’t stop me. (51)
Have mercy on me as you promised. (58)
I used to wander off until you disciplined me. (67)
Just as you promised, you surround me with mercy. (76, 77)
Keeping your ways keeps me from shame. (80)
Longing for your salvation gives me hope. (81)
Must I wait to see your promises come true? (84)
Never will I forget you for you restore health and joy. (93)
O how I love you and your word! (97)
Paths are well-lit with the lamp of your word. (105)
Questioning you is not right. (113)
Rejecting your principles is not right. (118)
Sustained faith in your salvation is right. (117)
Truths in your promises will be fulfilled. (123)
Up above you can look down on me with love. (135)

Very trustworthy and tested are your promise. (140)
When I get up I cry out to you for help. (147)
Xtreme sorrow makes me need your protection. (153)
Your word is a great treasure to me. (162)
Zig-zagging, I leave your ways. Please come find me. (176)

October 6

Psalms of Ascent — Psalm 120-134, Matthew 26:30

Christ knew and sang the Psalms.²² These Psalms of ascent were sung on the way to Jerusalem for three mandated feasts: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. As a child with his family, and as an adult with his disciples, Christ walked to Jerusalem's festivals, singing, talking, and part of holiday crowds.

Well-loved lines are in these songs that have made their way into our current hymns. Themes include God's protection, his city, his mercy, liberation, security, restoration, rest, humility, harmony and blessing. In Psalm 116 we have resurrection hints once more: "you, Lord, have delivered me from death."

In the middle of these songs, which were sung as families traveled and celebrated together, is tender feminine imagery for God. In Psalm 131 Christ's call for those of the kingdom to be like children is foreshadowed in the imagery that the Psalmist has learned to be a contented child with its mother.

In Psalm 132:11 the Lord swore he would enthrone one of David's descendants on an eternal throne in Zion, and adorn him with a radiant crown. This can only be Christ the King whose triumph in Jerusalem established the eternal kingdom. Because of his humanness in the gospels, we sometimes lose sight of his glorious crown and the regal dignity of his throne.

The journey to Jerusalem singing these songs was a journey to anticipate the coming of that great king. How remarkable that he went with the crowd in disguise, the hidden king, only to be revealed after suffering.

October 7

Anger and Justice— Psalm 135-140, Matthew 5:22

Christ and the Psalmist part ways regarding anger. Christ speaks of its dangers, the need to quickly reconcile with others, and the need to bless enemies. The Psalmist is sure God is as angry with his enemies as he is, and suggests methods for revenge. One of the most dreadful images is that of smashing babies against rocks.

C.S. Lewis in *Reflections on the Psalms* devoted a chapter to these vengeful Psalms and began: “In some of the Psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like heat from a furnace mouth. In others the same spirit ceases to be frightful only by becoming (to a modern mind) almost comic in its naivety.”²³

I empathize with the anger. Captives had suffered defeat and were traumatized by violence. In the Guatemalan conflict, terrible things were done to babies, and people remember what they saw. Revenge is a natural desire, but it has been astonishing how many victims have chosen justice and reconciliation instead.

While I cannot identify with wanting what the Psalmist wants done here, I can identify with being angry enough for wanting his enemies to be punished. If I express my anger and outrage to God, it dissipates. I become calm enough to know he can deal with the situation, and I can recognize my faults in the matter. I can then forgive whether the other is ready for reconciliation or not. Used this way, anger becomes a gift and we learn to deal wisely with situations that have aroused our anger.

Psalm 140 and others encouraged me to pray for justice in the face of the violence and human rights abuses of the Guatemalan conflict we lived through. People plotted evil, and poisonous tongues betrayed others. I agreed with the prayer for liars not to prosper, but for disaster to fall on the violent. When the human rights movement gained strength, and brought successful lawsuits in Guatemala against perpetrators of violence against civilians, I could see the truth of the promise of help for the persecuted, and God’s support for the rights of the poor.

When direct action is blocked in some way, we can still appeal to God for justice. In the Psalm, burning coals on heads or falling into fires and pits was vengeful, but Paul took the image and focused on leaving vengeance to God and conquering evil by doing good. Psychologists affirm that we need to be self-aware of our anger, name it, but then engage in problem-solving based on respect, justice, reconciliation, and creativity, a point of view consonant with Christ. We can desire and demand justice, and trust God’s ability to punish appropriately and extend mercy to the penitent.

October 8

A Powerful God — Psalms 141-144, Matthew 7:7-8

Christ tells us to persist in prayer, and the Psalmist demonstrates it. There are repeated pleas for God to act: “I am calling, hurry, listen, I cry, I am in constant prayer, I look to you, I cry out, I plead, I pour out, I pray, hear my cry,

rescue me, hear my prayer, answer me, I reach out, I thirst for you, come quickly, save me, bend down, reach down, rescue me.”

Some Christians focus on faith and positive expectations to an extent it leaves no room for longing, uncertainty, and desperation. If one is in need, it is just a sign to believe more or pray more. The Psalmist can admit “I am overwhelmed, I am losing all hope, I am paralyzed with fear, my depression deepens, and bring me out of my distress.” He asks because he knows God is powerful and able to act for him.

Psalm 144 focuses on God’s power, referring to awesome natural phenomenon, including a volcano. I live near an active volcano, there are days when a huge cloud of smoke billows up from the Volcán de Fuego. “Fuego” means fire, and at times there are rumbling loud noises, shaking, bright fire shooting up, and red-hot lava streaming down the mountain, all reminiscent of this Psalm. When I watch my volcano, I think about it as a sign of God’s power, and the amazing show as provoked by God’s touch. Given that, why not have more confidence God will hear my prayers?

October 9

Worship — Psalms 145-150, Luke 19:36-40

Christ is the king worthy of our worship. The king and kingdom we celebrate were announced in two-thirds of Christ’s 46 parables. The nature of that kingdom, prefigured in these Psalms, is a kingdom of peace. Christ’s message of the kingdom draws from the Psalms that described it as glorious, everlasting, universal, with God himself as king. In the passion, Christ identified himself to Pilate as that king.

The celebration of Christ as the king entering Jerusalem was full of singing, and the last two Psalms are praise full of music and dance. The Psalmist finds praise delightful, and in turn is grateful God delights in us. The result is a crescendo of happy praise, delighting in nature, in music, in dancing, and in God’s victory.

Chagall gives us a joyous depiction of Psalm 150 and all the instruments being used in the worship of God. The stained-glass image in the Cathedral of Chichester England has a red background, an image of King David on a donkey on the top, surrounded by all the musicians and worshippers. That image evokes Christ coming into Jerusalem on his donkey, and the praise surrounding him.

Part of what is attractive about modern Christianity is the great, cheerful, celebratory music that has become so much a part of our worship. We are delighted as we rejoice in praise in a congregation, a way to celebrate our king.

October 10

For Children — Proverbs 1-4, Luke 18:15-17

Both Proverbs and Christ emphasize the importance of children. Proverbs tells children to listen to instruction. Christ tells us to receive instruction from the example of child-like humility and trust. Proverbs begins with warm, wise and affectionate appeals to the author's child, reiterated at least ten times in these four chapters. The book encourages parents raising children to follow God.

We are encouraged that our children will be free, God will be their refuge, they will be blessed, and they will continue on the right path as they grow older. For parents, it is important to remember how responsible we are to teach our children wisdom. In a fine book called *Raising An Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting*, psychologist John Gottman demonstrates how empathizing with a child's anger and sadness, but seeing it as a teaching moment when you guide them to a wise response, develops much more capable adults. It is this kind of wise teaching and learning that Proverbs is urging for parents and children.

Proverbs is an encouragement that God values common sense, wants us to develop it, and wants us to pass it on to our children. It's a book where spirituality has its feet firmly planted on the ground in ordinary daily life.

October 11

Lady Wisdom — Proverbs 5-9, Colossians 2:3

Proverbs prefigures Christ as the wisdom of God. He is metaphorically identified as a woman, Lady Wisdom, who participated in creation, sustains us, and calls us to listen and gain the treasures she has to offer. Wisdom is said to be the first thing created and a lyrical exposition of the process of creation follows, thus linking wisdom even more closely to the person of Christ.

The Beatitudes are presented as a set of proverbs. They parallel things we are taught in the book of Proverbs: both call us to humility, to mourn, to be meek and uncontrolling, to desire righteousness, to be merciful, to focus on God, to make peace, and to be strong enough to take opposition. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes wisdom from Proverbs and re-presents it.

In addition to Lady Wisdom, there are two more women, one foolish and one wise. A foolish woman is described at the beginning of the book who destroys men's lives, seducing with no consciousness or repentance of doing wrong. The book ends with the image of a wise woman who loves her husband and children, cares well for her household, is diligent with her

money/food/clothing/crafts/decor, generous to those who are poor, and who teaches with kindness and wisdom.

Christians do not always show wisdom in how they analyze situations or people or political choices. Consequently, the exhortations to learn to think and process information are as badly needed today as they were when Proverbs was written.

October 12

Wisdom versus Foolishness — Proverbs 10-15, Matthew 7:24-26

Christ contrasts the wise and the foolish as those who follow him versus those who do not. For example, the wise and foolish builders mentioned above, the wise and foolish virgins waiting for the wedding, or foolish Pharisaical teaching versus his wisdom. One of his parables concludes that a person is foolish to value wealth over a relationship with God.

This section of Proverbs sets up a similar opposition between the wise and the foolish. The series of wise sayings do not seem to come in any particular order, though nearly 300 themes have been identified. As one reads through, we enter a rhythm of contrasts between someone wise and foolish, generous or stingy, joyful or angry, diligent or lazy, just versus unjust, using words to bless or using words to hurt, accepting reproof, or ignoring it. A pattern builds up in the mind of a thoughtful, kind, and gracious character, which is the outcome of living in wisdom.

As I think about people I know who exemplify wisdom, they are thoughtful, do not rush to insist on their opinions but are very good listeners, and look for ways to help others on every level. Their words are kind, their actions are kind, and they take for granted they are not the center of the world. My desire is to assimilate the advice of Proverbs and the example of wise people and to be such a person myself.

October 11

Wisdom's Humility — Proverbs 16-21, Matthew 11:25

Christ calls us to humility, and Proverbs emphasizes that humility and fear of God are the beginning of wisdom. In this section the teaching is not by way of contrast, but is rather a calling to a godly life. Christ explained humility with a call for us to become as little children.

C.S. Lewis wisely wrote: “Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent

chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”²⁴

Humility is not particularly admired in our culture. We seem to prefer strong, aggressive personalities who are willing to promote themselves. So the counter-cultural call to not place ourselves above others is one we particularly need.

October 12

Wisdom’s Rewards — Proverbs 22-24, James 1:5, 25

Both Proverbs and Christ tell us that obedience to the call of wisdom results in rewards. In Proverbs we are given a trilogy of rewards for true humility and fear of the Lord: riches, honor, and long life.

If we seek these things in a worldly way, our passion for riches opens up obsession with material things, work out of balance, and even lying and stealing. The opposite error can be a poverty mentality that expects nothing, and becomes lazy or discouraged. Instead, in Christ, we receive and give all the gifts of life.

Seeking honor in the world creates pride in our accomplishments, the illusions of fame, attention, and approval from others, or we can be overly low in our self-esteem, expecting and getting abuse and put-downs. In Christ, his ways of honoring us do not bring pride, but delight and appreciation.

The wrong approach to long life can be an obsession with self-care, overly focused on exercise, food, and our looks. The opposite error is to ignore these things and be careless, with resulting bad health. The balance of God is a life appreciative of his gifts. One lives in peace with less stress which results in better health, constantly turning all our concerns over to him.

October 13

Criticism — Proverbs 25-29, Matthew 7:1-2

Solomon’s proverbs collected by King Hezekiah’s advisers include the topic of giving and receiving criticism. Christ also warned us to criticize with wisdom and without falling into the trap of condemnation. A distinction can be made between honestly complaining to another person about their behavior and negotiating a solution, versus communicating that we think someone else is inadequate as a person.

Proverbs on this tell us to treasure valid criticism, that an open rebuke is better than hidden love, that wounds from a friend are better than kisses from an enemy. Unfair criticism does not necessarily land on its victim. But stubbornly refusing to accept criticism can result in being hopelessly broken.

Many of us live under the delusion that receiving a critique is a tragedy, and that offering criticism is cruel. Proverbs tells us and Christ shows us that this is not so. Giving and receiving criticism can be a very good thing, a valuable resource for growth. My best efforts in giving criticism have involved thinking through when to say something and how to be tactful, and preparing not to panic if I get a bad reaction. My best efforts in receiving it have been to listen appreciatively, apologize if need be, and take myself lightly enough not to be defensive. With this perspective criticism becomes a great gift, another way for God to speak to us.

October 14

Christ our Wisdom — Proverbs 30, Acts 1:11

Agur son of Jakeh offers a beautiful prophetic word about Christ: “Who but God goes up to heaven and comes back down? Who holds the wind in his fists? Who wraps up the oceans in his cloak? Who has created the whole wide world? What is his name—and his son’s name? Tell me if you know!”

Agur humbly says he has not mastered human wisdom nor knows the Holy One. He comments on his weariness, ignorance, and lack of common sense. There is something deeply ironic here. Solomon’s proverbs often sound like he has it all together and yet we know that his life fell apart—pride and idolatry led to a fall. In contrast, Agur gives us a clear vision of Christ and the promise that God’s word is reliable.

Among other pieces of advice, he uses the rhetorical device “there are three things, no four.” We are given five sets of four things that offer insights on dissatisfaction, amazement, unfortunate events, things small but wise, and things that are stately.

The answer to Agur’s question, of course, is Christ. He is the one who ascends and will return. He holds the winds and the oceans and created the whole world with the Father. He is the father’s son. He is even the reliable word of God. He defends all who come to him for protection.

October 15

A Wise Woman — Proverbs 31, I Peter 3:4

Christ’s character can be expressed through an ordinary housewife who allows him to make her extraordinary. In the beginning of the book wisdom was

identified with a woman and contrasted with a foolish, immoral woman. At the end of the book we are introduced to a wife and mother who exemplifies wisdom in her particular context of caring for home and family. Her qualities of character abstracted out of her activities can equally well be seen as qualities of the character of Christ.

These include: being of great value, trustworthy, creative, a provider, strong, observant, hard-working, caring for those who are poor, giving honor, peaceful, instructing with wisdom, and worthy of praise.

An acrostic, this is a “wise woman from A to Z.” Women sometimes read about her and think, “I cannot measure up.” The lesson is that by allowing Christ to change us we uniquely become what he envisioned for us to be. The poem also helps men notice the talents and wisdom of women in their lives. The secret of her excellence and foundation from which her accomplishments emerge is given at the end: she fears God.

Since so many young women are single and might get an inferiority complex reading about this wife and mother, or since wives and mothers might look at her with some anxiety and envy, we need to remember this is an example, and not the only one. What matters is that our character emerge from our fear of God and our particular calling. Hebrew scriptures places Proverbs right before Ruth, which means one goes from reading about a great woman in the abstract to a specific stellar example.

October 16

Meaningless — Ecclesiastes 1-2, John 14:6

Ecclesiastes reflects Christ as the source of meaning for our lives and grapples with how meaningless life is without him. This book seems particularly well-suited to the skepticism and negativity about life and its purpose that infects our post-modern world at times.

Perhaps we have felt moments of despair or depression or discouragement when we ask with this author, “What is the point of life?” In the midst of his evaluation that so many things can be meaningless, he offers these ideas of what does give meaning:

Enjoying food and drink
Satisfaction in work
Receiving wisdom, knowledge and joy
Enjoying oneself as long as you can
Enjoying fruits of ones’ labor
Receiving wealth as a gift from God
Receiving good health

Enjoying what you have
Enjoying prosperity
Having fun
Living happily with the woman you love
Giving generously
Rejoicing in every day of life

This fits well with the mantras of living in this moment, of noticing, of being grateful. With just a slight shift in perspective we can go from meaningless to meaningful.

I appreciate this book which emphasizes that God values our questions. There is much about life that is confusing, and philosophizing and trying to figure things out are apparently just fine. We do not need to be mindless people who pretend we have all the answers. God affirms our minds. When I feel rather despairing I can recognize that I am suffering from a partial or distorted perspective, and cheer up by expressing gratitude for all these ordinary things.

October 17

God's timing — Ecclesiastes 3-6, John 7:8

In this famous poem about time and how each aspect of life has its moment, we see the paradox that Christ referred to in his own life: timing matters. With the coming of Christ, John the Baptist announced that God's promised time had finally come. Christ's last days, his death and resurrection, were carefully timed to fit the prophetic calendar of Passover time, and he said that the time for the prophecy to be fulfilled had come.

Perhaps one of my greatest struggles has been regarding God's timing. Many of my prayers have been answered in my life, but often after long waits. It is only in looking back that I can perceive benefits in the wait and benefits in the timing of seeing my request granted. That does not necessarily stop me from fretting about the next thing I am waiting to see answered. Joseph experienced a long delay in his life, and we are told the waiting time tested his character. When I feel like delays test my character and faith, I ask God to help me stop fretting and pass the test.

October 18

Prosperity Gospel — Ecclesiastes 7-9, I Peter 1:6

Christ's example of suffering serve to remind us that God's people must endure suffering with grace and humility. In this section of wise proverbs, we are given several thoughts to make us realize that we cannot expect everything to go our way: "Enjoy prosperity while you can, but when hard times strike, realize that both come from God. Remember that nothing is certain in this

life.” The teacher goes on to remind us that we all die, and that we cannot count on having an easy life.

In our time, the teachings of prosperity Gospel have helped many with increased faith for God’s guidance, provision, healing, and blessings on their families and their ministries. These are godly and biblical things and the awakening of faith is a great gift. “Prosper” and “prosperity” occur 111 times in scripture. When I have heard those known for this teaching present the also that God expects us to endure suffering with grace, I am also blessed, because this, too, is biblical. To accept the trials and difficulties of life as part of God’s purposes, including his refining purposes, gives us a mature character able to wisely guide others through their difficulties. There is a subtle balance here between faith and acceptance. At the root of both is a deep commitment to God’s trustworthiness.

I never want to be too simplistic when I see that others are struggling, or even when I am struggling, but to acknowledge that God does allow things we would prefer not to happen. That is a time to ask for grace to stay close to him.

October 19

Meaningful — Ecclesiastes 10-12, John 10:10

Meaning in life becomes visible by recognizing God as our creator, one of Christ’s roles. In that context, we have purpose, and there is a hope for us in Christ. Even the mundane becomes meaningful in the context of a loving and obedient life. Ecclesiastes snaps photos of the world as it is with all its beauty, pain, and difficulty.

When I learned that Ecclesiastes is read during the Feast of Tabernacles, I was puzzled at first. Then I could see that it is a good book to recall the forty years of wilderness wanderings when life could have seemed quite meaningless. The presence of God with his people in the tabernacle would have been a constant reminder of what matters and makes life meaningful. As the author ends his book, he writes that the most important thing is to fear God and obey him.

As we continue on our pilgrimage through life, whenever tempted to feel like it is meaningless, a return to God’s presence can renew our perspective and make clear what our task for this moment might be. In these acts of faith and obedience the meaningless and despair melt away. I feel awe when I see the puzzle pieces of my own life fitting together into interesting pictures.

October 20

Courtship — Song of Solomon 1-3, Ephesians 3:19

Christ's inexpressibly great love for us is analogous to the depth of passion and desire in the romance of this book. Our own experiences of romance teach us about the depths of love and widen our hearts. It is encouraging and refreshing to read a book where we see clearly that God values our experiences of romantic love.

Paul taught that marriage and singleness are both gifts. The imagery of femininity or masculinity apply to us all, married or single, and invite us to have an appealing character. All of us, no matter our marital state, can apply this to our intimacy with Christ. During our singleness, even if it is only for a time, we can use that time well to be completely devoted and focused on Christ, without the distractions of spouse or children. It is a time to be treasured.

There is a story line in the book from attraction to marriage to a life-long relationship of committed love. Read in this way, one sees how the physical and emotional passion deepen and it becomes a model for God's ideals for our romantic love. It is thereby preparation for marriage, and a reminder to refresh our marriages.

Historically, however, various commentators and teachers have said that this story serves as an analogy to that of each heart in its love relationship with God. Many of us cannot honestly say we strongly love God, and perhaps it is worth asking for more if we are not experiencing much passion.

October 21

Marriage — Song of Solomon 4-6, Ephesians 5:11-12

Song of Solomon foreshadows Christ as the bridegroom. Here is a love poem of great beauty, full of delight, longing, misunderstanding, making up, contentment, public recognition. Just as Paul tells us that the husband is an image of Christ and the wife an image of the church, so also in this poem Christ is the King/lover and we are the queen/beloved.

The poem celebrates the passion and joy of marriage. In addition to lauding the details of one another's bodies, the groom repeats "my treasure, my bride" and tells her she is a private garden, a lovely orchard with precious fruit, a fountain, a beautiful city. These images are of delicacy in contrast to the brides' praise of the groom with images of strength and beauty: a swift gazelle or young deer, a fine apple tree with delicious fruit, a bouquet of flowers, or a king surrounded in procession with his warriors in a great chariot. They both say that the love of the other is better than wine. The lavish, sensual imagery weaves a spell of two people in joyful harmony with one another, feeling that deep security that comes from loving and being loved.

But indifference and a conflict occur, something familiar for anyone in any marriage. The relationship is diminished and harmed, and similar things happen in the years of a Christian life. Reconciliation is modeled in the story and once more the couple return to celebrating and praising one another, even with the same imagery as in the earliest days of marriage.

October 22

Undying Love — Song of Solomon 7-8, John 1:14

Christ's love for us is unfailing, and the passion of human love is compared here to several things: to fire, to something that survives a flood, to something worth more than a fortune. Once again, the husband celebrates the beauty of his wife and the wife responds with eagerness for a country retreat or a return to their childhood homes.

In scripture God's unfailing love is repeated 121 times. This quality of his character makes our relationship with him reliable, trustworthy, unshakeable. In the struggles of life, we may be tempted to doubt this or forget it, but in any situation, refocusing our attention on God's love changes our hearts and gives us peace.

In the ups and downs and challenges of life it is so often the case that we do not feel loved. We question the reality of God's unfailing love, and actually the story of scripture has so many instances where disobedience leads to difficult consequences that it is hard to hold on to an idea that unfailing love means that everything goes well in life. Here we are reminded of how deep and interior the experience of that love must be—strong as fire and flood—to take us through life with the unseen.

CHAPTER 5

The Kingdom Foretold

Isaiah — Malachi



October 23

Call to Repentance — Isaiah 1-3, Matthew 4:17

Each prophet hammered repentance, the same message Christ brought as foundational to entering the kingdom life. The written prophets began toward the end of the divided kingdom, admonishing Israel that the call to create a healthy, blessed, prosperous, God-fearing community, had failed. The messages are full of conflict, judgment, tragedy, war, interspersed with beautiful passage of hope.

Isaiah called for repentance, warning of coming judgment for idolatry, social injustice, and ungodly leadership. Christ as a prophet also confronted hypocritical religious leaders, predicted judgment on Jerusalem, and anticipated final judgment. We see clearly that God is the one who can remove our deepest sins.

Four Judean kings heard Isaiah's messages, starting with King Uzziah. Uzziah began well, seeking God and becoming successful as a result. But his power led to pride and downfall. He inappropriately burned incense in the temple, and was struck with leprosy. Though Isaiah's message was to the nation, one can hear a call to the leprous king who had invited punishment by rebelling and become sick from head to foot. The incense he offered was offensive, his worship insincere. God appealed for him to do good by seeking justice and help for the oppressed. Instead of leprous snow white skin, his heart could become snow white.

Uzziah never responded to the offer of repentance and healing, and so died a leper. Judah and Jerusalem responded sporadically, but finally their rebellion was sufficient that the predicted judgment fell. Anticipating the mercy in Christ, Isaiah promised restoration for survivors of coming judgment. For us, repentance is always available in Christ, and it is as simple as turning around.

October 24

The Vineyard — Isaiah 4-5, Luke 20:15

The prophets described disobedient Israel as a failed vineyard, and Christ used this in his parables. Despite excellent care, grapes were sour and God decided he must abandon the vineyard, tear down the fences, and allow the field to grow wild. Having warned of destruction, Isaiah wrote of hope for restoration, using imagery of a lush, beautiful, and fruitful land. Then he turned to the vineyard which must be pruned.

Christ took the image and added characters in the parable alluded to above. The owner was still God, and the vineyard was still the people of God, but the servants caring for the vineyard were the ruling religious authorities. The

owner sent servants to collect the rent (the prophets) but each time they were badly mistreated. The owner decided to send his son (Christ), but he was killed. When Christ asked what would happen to these wicked servants, the answer was that they would be put to death and the vineyard given to others (the nations).

Isaiah began warning of coming destruction about 175 years before Jerusalem's destruction and the exile. God warned them to change their ways, but carried out judgment when they failed to do so, but he did not let that be the end of the story. He planted a new community by allowing the survivors to return, and by sending the long-promised Messiah to start a new vineyard, the kingdom community.

Christ told his disciples that he is the vine and we are the branches, and through our union with him we give good fruit. As his followers, we desire to be in Christ and allow his life and love to flow out of us. From the grapes comes the new wine of the Spirit. In Christ we become a beautiful vineyard, giving sweet-tasting grapes that make a delicious drink. The result: joy and celebration!

October 25

Isaiah's vision of God — Isaiah 6, Matthew 17:2

Isaiah had a vision of God on his throne surrounded by angels. At Christ's transfiguration the disciples saw his glory.. In Isaiah's vision the temple shook and was filled with smoke. In the transfiguration a bright cloud overshadowed Christ. In both stories the glory of God humbled those present.

Isaiah's commission parallels Christ's commission to preach and teach as an ordinary man. Christ quoted what God warned Isaiah would be true of his ministry: people would hear but not understand. Isaiah's commissioning also foreshadows Christ's commissioning of his disciples and our own.

Isaiah's response to God's question "Who will go for us?" is "Here I am. Send me." "Here" expresses his desire to be present to God, and a hope for God to be present in his work. This communion of love can happen anytime, anywhere, and if we are like Isaiah, we respond. As we learn to be truly present in this moment with others and with God, we have the greatest chance for others to sense that we were sent to them in whatever their need might be.

Isaiah's vision reminds us to keep our spiritual eyes and ears open, and our hearts soft so that we can receive what God wants to give us. In our own lives we need similar repeated experiences that remind us of God's holiness.

October 26

Hope for Messiah — Isaiah 7-9, Matthew 1:23

Messianic prophecies in this section of prophecy Christ's miraculous birth. The New Testament text quotes Isaiah 7:14 which promises King Ahaz of Judah that God will triumph over Israel and Damascus. Layers of fulfillment mean it predicts the birth of Isaiah's son, still young when Assyria would defeat Israel and Damascus, and simultaneously refers to Christ. The angel quoted Isaiah to Joseph to tell him to take Mary as his wife, and Joseph accepted that this prophecy was meant for him. It is a beautiful reminder that God gives signs to those open to notice them.

As an infant in a manger and also as an itinerant preacher, Jesus' poverty proved God's love for the poor. His roots in Galilee made the same point. Unlike other places with a textured history in Israel, Galilee was rural back-country. Hiram, King of Tyre, turned down Solomon's offer of 20 Galilean cities in payment for Jerusalem building projects, calling them "Dirty!" When Jesus gained attention, the Pharisees responded that no prophets had come from Galilee. Isaiah prophesied that this marginalized area would see a great light, and Matthew 4 says Jesus' arrival fulfilled this.

Here also is the prophecy familiar from *Handel's Messiah* of a king who will transform the world with his righteous rule: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And his names will be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

These are glorious and unlikely fulfillments, a proof of the faith. We do not need to take an intellectual back seat to anyone regarding Christ.

October 27

David's Son, the Savior — Isaiah 10-13, Luke 2:11

The angels announced the Savior born in David's line, just as Isaiah foresaw the Messiah as coming from David's family. Isaiah celebrated the salvation that the Messiah would bring, and presented God as liberator, defender of the poor, comforter, and one who judges the proud.

Having announced Israel and Judah's coming judgment and having included promises of the coming Messiah, Isaiah turned to judgment on the nations. He had warned Israel that within 65 years it would be completely crushed and destroyed. The instrument of destruction would be Assyria. But Isaiah warned that Assyria would be conquered in turn, and though Judah would be threatened by the Assyrian armies, God would protect them. These predictions

came true when Assyria was defeated in Israel (701 BC), and when Babylon destroyed Assyria. (623 BC)

And yet despite this destruction, the Messiah would come with the Spirit of God on him, and he would come to defend the poor and exploited. Ultimately he would bring a Kingdom of peace where nothing destructive could affect anyone. He would be a banner of salvation for the world, a standard raised high to whom everyone could come. He would raise a flag for Israel and bring them back to their land. And most importantly, he would bring salvation, and live among his people.

The warnings of judgment are challenging to read, but the word of hope lies in the promise of Messiah and the transformation he can bring. David's son continues to be our source of hope today as we live through the political chaos of our world.

October 28

Judge of the Nations — Isaiah 14-18, Matthew 25:31-32

Christ told us in a parable that he will come as judge of the nations. Isaiah warned surrounding nations of coming judgment for their evil behavior. At the same time he offered the beautiful promises that God will give his people rest from sorrow and fear, that he weeps with those who are refugees, that his throne is established by love, that he is a rock where we can hide, and that any judgment we experience is a form of pruning us.

Babylon would conquer Assyria, and Isaiah warned that they would in turn be conquered by the Medes. All the smaller surrounding nations would be harmed in this political upheaval: Philistia, Moab, Damascus, and Ethiopia. All the judgments foreshadowed Christ's final judgment on the nations.

Amidst the warnings there were signs of hope in promises of the gospel: the good news is for all the world, it is a rule of love, and people will respond.

- Israel will return to their land and be helped by many nations (14:1-3)
- God's power will reach through the world, and his plans cannot change (14:26,27)
- God promises to feed the poor and give the needy peace (14:30)
- A faithful king from David's throne will always do what is just and right on a throne established by love (16:5)
- Suffering will cause people to turn to their Creator God (17:7)
- Nations will be converted and bring gifts to God in Jerusalem (18:7,8)

Political upheaval creates suffering refugees that, even today, and causes our hearts to weep. Through it all, God reassures us that there is a plan to bring

about his Kingdom built on love. This reminds us to engage in the struggles of the 65 million refugees in our world.

October 29

The Gospel to the World — Isaiah 19-23, Acts 1:8

Christ commissioned his disciples to go and share the good news to the whole world. In the midst of his warnings of judgment, Isaiah foresaw the success of this message of love and hope. He showed us that God heals us when we turn to him, that if he brings trouble by threshing and winnowing us, if we show remorse for sins, he wants relationship with us. Any disaster we experience is designed to destroy our pride.

Isaiah warned Egypt, which fell to Assyria as predicted. (664 BC) What follows is a promise of the spread of the gospel in the early Christian era. There were many Egyptian church fathers, and the important port city Alexandria became a center of Christian learning. Heliopolis, mentioned in the text, is a suburb of Cairo, and on maps showing the spread of Christianity one sees how it began in cities and then spread through the countryside. By 600 AD Christianity was the dominant religion from Egypt to Assyria and the promise of free mobility among those worshipping the same God was fulfilled.

Isaiah continued warning Egypt, Ethiopia, Babylon, Edom and Arabia. He warned Jerusalem of coming destruction, and reproached them for their choice to “eat, drink and be merry” since “what’s the difference, for tomorrow we die”, phrases Christ used in His parable regarding a foolish wealthy man. In a warning to a specific leader, a Messianic prophecy says one will come who can open doors that no one can shut, a phrase applied to Christ in Revelation.

The warning to Tyre, a great commercial capital, was that they would decline for 70 years and then be revived. This happened. They were conquered by the Assyrians (720 BC), but were able to revive again (650 BC) and successfully resist Babylon’s attempt to conquer them. A final message of hope was that Tyre’s wealth would be used for God. Paul spent a week with believers there in this successful port city, their generosity doubtless contributed to the mission, and so this prophecy was fulfilled.

What a remarkable vision of early successes in spreading the gospel are hidden in these grim messages. The tide turned against Christianity when Islam overcame this region, and an uneasy struggle has continued until this day. But we should not forget the miracle that loving people who had no arms conquered the most powerful world empire of that time. They used the weapons of grace that Martin Luther King, Jr. exhorted us to use in our time that the kingdom might advance.

October 30

Salvation — Isaiah 24-27, I Peter 1:9-10

Isaiah anticipated the salvation that Christ brought. The Hebrew scriptures use salvation 58 times, and 26 instances occur in Isaiah. The word salvation is prophetic—translated into Greek, it becomes the name Jesus. Isaiah's own name means Yahweh is Salvation.

Isaiah's vision extended to the end of time when God would be seated on his throne, rule gloriously in Jerusalem, and his bright light would make sun and moon seem to fade.

Beyond salvation from earthly trials he looked forward to a great feast in Jerusalem when death had ended and people would proclaim that God had saved them. Surely the Eucharist fulfills this prophecy, as will the marriage supper of the lamb. He also foresaw resurrected life, clear assurance that the bodies of those who belong to God will rise again.

Christ announced salvation's immediacy, but we simultaneously look forward to it in the last day. Salvation is not just my individual ticket to heaven; it is social, comprehensive, includes creation, and includes all nations. We look forward to the new heaven and earth when everything has been set to right, and we celebrate complete salvation.

October 31

Messianic prophecies — Isaiah 28-32, Luke 1:32

Isaiah presented Christ as Messiah, as healer, and as a man from the poor. At least 36 of Isaiah's prophecies present the Messiah in his conception, birth, redemptive suffering, character, healing, and ultimate triumph. The scope of his vision of Christ is remarkable throughout the book.

In these chapters we see the following allusions to Christ:

28:5 Lord of Heaven's Armies will be Israel's glorious crown, pride and joy

28:16 A foundation stone placed in Jerusalem, a precious cornerstone

28:29 The Lord of Heaven's Armies is a wonderful teacher

29:2 Jerusalem will become an altar (place of Christ's death)

29:13 Jesus quoted this in Matthew 15:8

29:14 Astounded people with his miracles

29:16 He is the potter and we are the clay

29:18 Deaf will hear

29:18 Blind will see

29:19 Poor will rejoice

30:19 He will be gracious if you ask for help

30:20 You will see your teacher with your own eyes

30:21 A voice will say, “This is the way you should go.” (Holy Spirit)
31:5 The Lord will protect Jerusalem like a bird protecting its nest
32:1 A righteous king is coming!
32:3 Eyes to see and ears to hear the truth
32:15 The Spirit will be poured out from heaven

There are lists of 365 Messianic prophecies in scripture, and odds of fulfillment are astronomical. As we have seen, there are even more allusions and imagery prefiguring Christ beyond specific verses. In our skeptical, secular age, we need to examine this honestly and help others see this evidence.

November 1

Preview of Paradise — Isaiah 33-35, Revelation 22:1-2

Israel as fruitful land predicts Christ’s paradisaic Kingdom. In addition, there is a straightforward Messianic prophecy of healing the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the mute. Christ used these miracles to affirm himself as Messiah. Once more messages of judgment on Assyria and Edom stand in contrast with Messianic promises: he will bring mercy and salvation, will show his power, we will see him as a king in his splendor, and he will forgive our sins.

Perhaps the prophecies of a fruitful land inspired the Jewish people who returned to Israel. They have planted forests in the desert, and flowers from the desert are exported to Europe. Isaiah predicted that the desert would blossom with flowers, and there would be abundant water. Israel’s thriving flower export business, and creative water projects in the desert beautifully fulfill these prophecies. This looks forward to a future when the environment is whole and can never again be damaged in the new heaven and new earth.

When we succeed in making the land beautiful today it is an act of worship. Our gardens, small or large, are a celebration of the forward look to paradise. My garden in Antigua is small, but full of a variety of flowers and plants, many of which attract hummingbirds. The two terraces have multitudes of potted plants, and the whole vista fills me with appreciation and delight for all the life surrounding us.

November 2

Resurrection — Isaiah 36-39, Matthew 28:6

Hezekiah’s rescue from inevitable death to unexpected life bears a resemblance to the story of Jonah in that the recovery took place in three days. Christ used the story of Jonah as analogous to his coming death and resurrection.

There are many instances where the symbolism of three days can be seen as prefiguring resurrection. Here are six stories that include the detail of three

days which prefigure Christ by taking place at the right time, the right place, or with resurrection imagery in prayer.

| | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Abraham and Isaac | At Mount Moriah |
| Crossing Red Sea | Three days after Passover |
| David's plague ends | At Mount Moriah |
| Hezekiah's illness ends | Resurrection psalm |
| Esther's intercession | Three days after Passover |
| Jonah | Resurrection psalm |

It is fitting that Christ's death and resurrection after three days are the seventh and perfect instance of the reversal of death and judgment. While only one reference in Hosea seems to speak directly of resurrection after three days, these stories, the imagery of the new creation on the eighth day, and allusions to resurrection in the wisdom literature and prophets served as preparation for this climactic event of history.

November 3

Hope of all the world — Isaiah 40-44, Matthew 12:21

Isaiah's prophecies of Messiah are fulfilled in Christ, and Matthew selected a quotation to emphasize that Christ is for all people.

The tone of Isaiah changes so dramatically here at Chapter 40 that many see it as a second book by an author writing during the exile. Honoring the first prophet, a third author may have composed Chapters 56-66 after the return from the exile.

Isaiah 40-44 is rich with allusions to Christ, and among those are four references to making the blind see. This had never been done, and Christ did so repeatedly, noting it as a sign. When John the Baptist asked if he was Messiah, Christ responded that these miracles made his case. Lepers had been healed, and the dead had been raised in the Hebrew scriptures, but there were no instances of healing the blind, lame, deaf, and mute, all of which Christ did.

Each Advent we prepare our hearts to celebrate Christ's coming as a child, and many perform Handel's *Messiah*. I deeply appreciate the exquisite annual candlelight performance in a partially restored baroque-era church in our town. The first three passages sung are the first five verses of chapter 40. The tenor calls out: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people..." and we are comforted. He goes on to announce that the way is being prepared for the coming of the Lord, and then the chorus sings loudly and triumphantly that "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

November 4

Fulfilling Prophecy — Isaiah 45-48, Matthew 12:17

The gospel writers repeatedly identify Isaiah's prophecies as being fulfilled by Christ. He was promised as our redeemer, one who cares for us, refines us with suffering, and one whose promises will be fulfilled. Precursors identified as "anointed ones", or Messiahs, will culminate in Christ.

One such anointed one was Cyrus the Great. Starting at the end of Isaiah 45, he was identified as God's shepherd who would command that Jerusalem be rebuilt allow the temple to be restored. If this section of Isaiah was written during the exile, perhaps Cyrus had already begun his reign as King of Persia. He ascended that throne in 559 BC, conquered the Medes ten years later, conquered Babylon ten years after that, and allowed the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple the following year. This perfectly fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy of a return seventy years after captivity.

As we have seen over and over, God uses macro-politics to carry out his purposes. While Cyrus became great and ruled over more people than any other ruler has done, he was still a servant to the greatest ruler. This prophetic moment reminds us to see the macro-politics of our own time as something within God's hands, potentially carrying out his purposes.

November 5

Preview of Messiah — Isaiah 49-53, Acts 8:32-35

Isaiah presented Christ as the suffering servant. Until Christ came it was a mystery how Messiah could both be a suffering servant and a triumphant king. The cross and resurrection resolved the paradox.

Christ is visible everywhere in these chapters, and yet the same promises can apply to us. They make excellent sticky-note-on-my-mirror material: a promise that called us by name from the womb, that at the right time God will respond to us, that he comforts and has compassion on us in our sorrow, that those who wait for him will never be put to shame. We are promised he will save our children, open our understanding to his will, allow us to triumph, keep us from fear of scorn, and put his words in our mouths. Most beautifully foreshadowing Christ, God promises to reveal his name, and that people will come to know its power.

The phrase "the Lord will go ahead of you, and the God of Israel will protect you from behind" is a sticky-note promise that stood out to me after we had made a decision to return to Guatemala. Encouragement deepened when the same day I had read this in the morning, a university student said God told her on my behalf that "He would go ahead of us and protect us from behind."

November 6

Call to Joy — Isaiah 54-58, Luke 10:21

Christ brings joy. Joy, rejoice, and delight are all key words in Isaiah, only following Psalms in number of occurrences. No other books come close.

| | <i>Isaiah</i> | <i>Psalms</i> | <i>All scripture</i> |
|---------|---------------|---------------|----------------------|
| Joy | 33 | 57 | 242 |
| Rejoice | 20 | 43 | 154 |
| Delight | 14 | 29 | 105 |

In these chapters sources of joy include family, God's protection, God's word prospering, being in God's house, healing and comfort, and honoring the Lord's Day.

The litany of things elsewhere in Isaiah that are said to bring joy include:

harvest and ripened fruit

wine and good food

water and streams in the desert, and the wilderness in bloom

salvation and the gift of righteousness

God's presence, his acts, his creation, and his glory

God's comfort and compassion

Sabbath rest

celebration festivals, music, worship, and singing

resurrection,

the lame leaping, the mute shouting

being rescued and returned to the land, and Israel's redemption of Israel

God's return to Jerusalem, and the city itself

children, and marriage

triumph, riches, success, mourning reversed, honor,

trust in God, fear of God, humility, and prayer

And most importantly of all, Messiah himself brings joy.

November 7

Sin, Savior, Spirit — Isaiah 59-61, Luke 4:12-19

In his first public sermon, Christ used Isaiah's prophecy to announce his arrival as Messiah, bringing a glorious new kingdom where joy replaces mourning. In his quote, Christ stopped short of the line predicting God's vengeance, focusing on the good news, signaling that God's vengeance is suspended in Christ.

These three chapters teach us the good news. Chapter 59 begins with our problem: our sins have cut us off from God. Justice is nowhere to be found, our

sins are piled up before God, so he must act. God promises that a Redeemer will come to buy back those who turn from their sins, and His Spirit will be one with them.

Isaiah 60 says the nations will come to the light of God in Jerusalem, beginning with an allusion to the wise men at Christ's birth. Mighty kings will come to see his radiance, arriving on camels, bringing gold and incense. There are then more promises for Israel's final restoration.

Chapter 61 is one of the most beautiful in the book. In addition to the verses Christ quoted, there are promises of beauty for ashes, joy instead of mourning, praise instead of despair, and people like strong and graceful oaks. The blessings including restoring ruins, receiving treasures from the nations, prosperity, joy, honor, blessing, salvation, and justice. What a litany of promises to speak out in faith, celebrating what God longs to give those who have turned from sin to the Savior.

A public prayer celebrating the light of Christ coming is possible every year in listening to Handel's *Messiah* as the chorus urges us to "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." The bass continues the next two verses of Isaiah 60 promising that the "Gentiles will come to thy light". I am one of those Gentiles, one of the nations, who has been brought into this story of a rescuing Messiah.

November 8

Prayer for Jerusalem — Isaiah 62-66, Revelation 21:10

The earthly Jerusalem and its restoration and glory are forerunners of the holy city of God at the end of time where Christ reigns. The Psalmist tells us to pray for peace in the earthly Jerusalem, something that has been elusive. Those who do love the city are promised that they will prosper.

Chapter 62 celebrates Jerusalem and the return of the Jews to the land, and ends with final judgment in chapter 63, a world harvest and new heavens and earth in chapter 65, and God reigning from his heavenly throne in chapter 66. We are promised that God blesses the humble and contrite.

In the last chapter we have a prophecy for modern Israel, a nation born in a day. At midnight May 14th, 1948 nationhood was proclaimed, and a United Nations vote confirmed it in the morning. In one day, people who had not had a nation for nearly 2,000 years were part of something new.

We live in astonishing times when we can compare newspapers and scripture and begin to see things shaping up for the grand finale. Come, Lord Jesus!

November 9

Jeremiah's Call — Jeremiah 1-2, John 7:16-18

Jeremiah and Jesus were called as prophets to deliver God's word. There was a specific moment of commissioning for their public ministries, Jeremiah with visions and a voice, Jesus with the descent of the dove and God's voice at his baptism. Their messages included hope, but the religious and political leaders resisted them for the judgement they proclaimed, causing both much suffering.

This is a very personal story. In contrast to Isaiah whose name occurs 20 times in his book, Jeremiah's name occurs 147 times in his, and there are at least 60 other personal names. Hence, rather than Messianic prophecies, the prophetic aspect is Jeremiah himself, his life foreshadowing that of Christ.

Like Jeremiah we may be called to do something we feel is far too difficult for us. God's promise to Jeremiah to be with him and take care of him can help us. Responding to God's call, discerning our vocation, and remaining faithful in it are all critically important in our spiritual development. Jeremiah's example reinforces that God has a purpose for each one of us.

In our case, our call to serve the Ixil Maya in Guatemala came through seeing a need, and was reinforced by significant external signs. At each step along the way, the sense that this was our calling gave us the energy and enthusiasm to tackle all the everyday tasks involved in the work.

November 10

God Our Father — Jeremiah 3-6, Matthew 6:9

Jeremiah referred to God as Father, and this became Christ's preferred way of referring to God. Jeremiah expressed God's the Father's frustration with rebellious and difficult children. In contrast, Christ was the Father's perfectly obedient son.

Jeremiah relentlessly called for repentance. He warned of coming disaster, using the word 37 times, about a third of all uses in the scripture. Because of their stubborn disobedience, war, famine, disease, destruction of the city, and exile would come. If they would repent, God would change his mind. Twelve times, God warned that he would bring disaster.

God's unconditional or unfailing love seems hidden by Jeremiah's barrage of critique and demands for change. On a human level, we can see that parents may go through something similar with a child choosing addiction, and in tough love make a decision the child must move out. The painful loss of relationship includes a hope for reconciliation and restoration. This imagery comes through clearly in Christ's story of the waiting father, eager to embrace

his returning prodigal who chose a life away from home. In Jeremiah as well, God promised he had plans for good and not for disaster. The prerequisite was to come home.

November 11

The Broken Covenant — Jeremiah 7-13, Luke 22:20

Israel's broken covenant with God became a new covenant instituted by Christ. Nearly 1000 years of disobedience were coming to a climactic end with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. In Chapter 11 God made the case that judgment was for breaking the covenant. He also reinforced that if they repented, he was more than willing to change his plans to send disaster. He could simultaneously say that his love is unfailing and warn that he would bring Jerusalem to ruin. His love could not tolerate their unfaithfulness and his justice required that he abandon them and scatter them like chaff. What a challenge for us to examine our own hearts and see if we are inviting discipline by our own choices to sin.

Jeremiah offered his warnings with vivid images of the people and their sin: cracked cisterns, corrupted wild vines, prostitutes, wayward children, and rejected silver. His images of destruction are equally vivid: lion from the forest, wolf from the desert, leopard lurking, burning wind, storm wind, billows and waves.

Reading Jeremiah can be painful, since not only is his message difficult, but he suffered, got depressed, and felt overwhelmed. Reading the prophets all at once is hard. They were intended for specific situations over a 400-year time-span and a wide geographic area. They are tough medicine in the overall story, critical testimony of God's faithfulness in calling for repentance and offering mercy at every juncture.

During a time in my life when I felt very broken, I identified with both reproach for having put trust in things other than God, and I was deeply touched by Jeremiah's promises of restoration. Return to the land where I had lived in a comfortable, secure home, made me feel that these promises had more than been fulfilled in my own life.

November 12

Jeremiah's Imagery — Jeremiah 14-19, Matthew 4:19

Jeremiah used vivid images that Christ re-used in his parables. Jeremiah spoke of assembling fishermen to fishing for his people. When Jesus called his disciples he invited them to become fishers of men. In a parable, he used the imagery of fish being caught sorted into those unfit to eat and those to be saved.

Jeremiah and Jesus compared godly people to fruitful trees. They both compared shepherds to spiritual leaders. Both spoke of living water. Jesus used it to refer to the Holy Spirit, and Jeremiah spoke of God as a fountain. Jeremiah's visit to the potter's house spoke of God's control of the nations, and Paul took this image and applied it to us as individuals.

Christ's metaphorical thinking from reading the prophets re-emerged in his teaching in ways to fit his time which can inspire us to re-imagine creative presentation of good news today. We are nurtured by knowing Christ has fished for us, sought us as lost sheep, planted his seed in us, made us fruitful trees, put living water in us, given us a cup of salvation, and that he is the potter forming our lives.

November 13

Imprisonment—Jeremiah 20-25, Matthew 26:50

Christ's message was resisted by religious leaders and resulted in his arrest and death. Jeremiah's message was also not well received and he spent much of his prophetic career in prison. His first arrest was temporary when he was placed in stocks at the temple gate. Later imprisonments would include the courtyard of the royal palace gate, Jonathan the secretary's house, a dungeon cell, a muddy cistern, and the palace prison. The conquerors freed Jeremiah when Jerusalem fell.

Jeremiah's life experience has always seemed to me analogous to political opponents of modern oppressive regimes, his imprisonments similar to that of modern political prisoners. One such person was Alexandr Solzhenitzyn, imprisoned and exiled for eleven years in Stalin's Gulag simply for privately expressing his criticisms of the regime. He experienced an isolated cell, a small cell shared with a few other prisoners, and various work camps. Solzhenitzyn was freed when the regime changed.

Both men wrote books that told of their prison experiences, and critiqued the evils of their society. Jeremiah used the word wickedness 31 times, evil 46 times, and sin 72 times, making him a strident witnesses against the world's wrongs. Jeremiah's message included the warning that Judah would experience 70 years of captivity, much like imprisonment.

Jesus, Jeremiah, and many political prisoners did not deserve their treatment. Judah, however, did deserve captivity for the evil that had become pervasive in their society. But the purpose of their captivity was purification, and mercifully they returned from exile. The gospel is that we all deserve exile and imprisonment for our sin, yet Christ, the innocent prisoner, took that upon himself and freed us.

November 14

Canceling Disaster — Jeremiah 26-28, Matthew 23:13

Jeremiah and Jesus condemned the religious leaders of their day and were both greeted with cries of “Kill him!” Their messages angered people who thought they were better representatives of God. Both were taken to court and accused. Both warned of coming destruction for the temple and the city. Both had a message of a way out. For both of them, observers insisted they did not deserve death. God told Jeremiah that perhaps they would listen and he could cancel the disaster.

Jesus came with such kindness and compassion for those who were humble enough to realize they could not escape condemnation on their own and needed his grace. He was equally hard on those who were proud and thought they were above repentance. It is far too easy as a Christian to fall into that second category and suppose that we are good, above reproach, and thereby become the very people that Jeremiah and Jesus targeted with their message. In our time some who think they are speaking up against evil like Jeremiah have actually become more like his accusers.

But the message of the gospel is that God has canceled the disaster in Christ. Just as in Jeremiah’s time, we must be willing to turn back to him to receive this gift. Our poor choices have led us away from where we should be, and we must turn back.

November 15

New Covenant — Jeremiah 29-33, II Corinthians 3:6

Jeremiah predicted the new covenant that Christ would bring. Chapters 30-33, called the Book of Consolation, contain many promises of restoration. Prefaced by correspondence between Jeremiah and the captives, he encourages them to be part of life in Babylon and to work for its peace and prosperity.

Jeremiah was told that God would give rest to the weary and joy to the sorrowing, and he woke up saying his sleep had been very sweet. In this context the promise of a new covenant was given with laws to be written in our hearts. Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 in chapter 8, and repeated verses 33 and 34 in chapter 10 to emphasize that the new covenant spoken of was brought to us by Christ.

In these four chapters are fifteen repetitions of the promise, “I will bring you home.” I took this touching comfort to heart. Though working for peace and prosperity in the United States, it opened hope for a return to Guatemala where I had done similar work. To my delight, the hope of return was fulfilled.

For each one of us, our ultimate home is heaven, but our hearts find security in earthly homes as well.

Jeremiah wrote that we are God's darling children, that he rejoices in doing good for us, and that he restores us. We truly can claim the promise of having a future and hope. The deepest aspect of that hope is the new covenant in Christ which allows us to live with the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts, guiding us, consoling us, changing us, and filling us with power beyond ourselves.

November 16

Integrity — Jeremiah 34-35, Matthew 5:37

Jeremiah condemned not keeping promises and commended keeping them. Christ's ethics also teach integrity, and he recommended we be straightforward in what we say and do. However, if we do not live with integrity, God can send disaster as a way of correcting us.

King Zedekiah made a contract to free slaves, and people obeyed the order. They then changed their minds, and in a stroke of startling cruelty, took people back into slavery. God challenged them for having shrugged off their oath in not freeing their countrymen. The rebuke to slavery in this passage was not taken seriously by Christian slaveholders in our country. Instead they interpreted references to slavery as Biblical justification for injustice.

Earlier Jeremiah had offered the Recabite family wine. They refused out of respect for an ancestral command. God pointed out the contrast between the Recabite obedience for their ancestor and the peoples' refusal to listen to him

Our culture readily accepts a lack of integrity. A survey revealed that 76 percent of Americans thought lying could be justified. Nearly half of men have lied about their financial well-being, and over half of women have lied about their weight. People admitted they lie on Facebook profiles, resumes, lie about diet and exercise, and lie to doctors. Fact-checking politicians and rumors circulating on the internet has created a small website industry. We need to humbly ask God and others, "How is my integrity?"

November 17

Jeremiah's story — Jeremiah 36-40, John 5:39

Jeremiah's experiences as a rejected prophet point to Christ's rejection, and his imprisonment seems symbolic of death and burial. As Jerusalem fell, Jeremiah was freed from imprisonment in a moment symbolic of resurrection. Jeremiah made relatively few Messianic prophecies, but his whole life was prophetic.

| | |
|--|--|
| <i>Called to preach</i> | “Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my spokesman to the world.” (1:7) |
| <i>Suffered opposition</i> | “I am suffering for your sake.” (15:7) |
| <i>Confident of God’s care</i> | “All will be well with you...I will rescue you from their cruel hands.” (15:11, 21) |
| <i>Arrested and whipped</i> | “So he arrested Jeremiah and had him whipped and put in stocks...” (20:2, 37:16) |
| <i>Mocked</i> | “Now I am mocked by everyone in the city.” (20:7) |
| <i>Tried in court</i> | “They rushed over...to hold court.” (26:10) |
| <i>Message rejected</i> | “Neither the king nor his officials showed any sign of fear or repentance at what they heard.” (30:24) |
| <i>Protested innocence as arrested</i> | (cf. comments in the garden Matthew 26:55): “What crime have I committed? What have I done against you, your officials, or the people that I should be imprisoned like this?” (37:18) |
| <i>Leaders appealed for his death</i> | “So these officials went to the king and said, ‘Sir, this man must die!’” (38:4) |
| <i>Ruler abdicated authority</i> | (cf. Pilate): “So King Zedekiah agreed, “All right,” he said, “Do as you like. I will do nothing to stop you.” (38.3) |
| <i>Placed in a “tomb”</i> | The officials...lowered him by ropes into an empty cistern in the prison yard. (38:6) |
| <i>Raised out of the “tomb”</i> | They pulled him out. (38:17) |
| <i>Rescued from judgment</i> | (Cf. resurrection) Released from chains of prisoners. (40:1-6) |

Because the means of extending God’s rule was the suffering of the cross, God expects us to extend the kingdom through love that bears suffering. Jeremiah’s life serves as a model of how to faithfully give a difficult message even when it is rejected, and how to suffer redemptively.

November 18

Protection amidst disaster—Jeremiah 41-45, Matthew 23:37

Amidst Jeremiah’s unrelenting predictions of disaster are promises of protection for those who love God. Christ’s image of protection—a mother hen with her chicks—shows God’s tenderness for his people even in the midst of disaster and parallels Jeremiah’s imagery. We are also told that God sorrows over the punishment he brings, and while he uses political chaos to achieve his purposes, he protects those who love him in the midst of it.

Jerusalem had fallen and those who remained in the land assassinated the appointed ruler. They hoped to escape to Egypt, but Jeremiahs' message from God was that they should stay in the land and God would not uproot them. But the people rebelliously said they would not obey this command, and defended their idolatrous reverence for the Queen of Heaven. Jeremiah warned they would suffer war and famine and all of them would die.

Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch, had received a very different message earlier, which was recorded here in chapter 45. He was overwhelmed with the messages of disaster he was helping deliver. God's tender response was for him not to be discouraged but to be aware that God would protect him in the midst of disaster. God had given a similar hopeful message to the man who rescued Jeremiah from nearly certain death in the cistern. Even though he would see the destruction of the city, God would rescue him.

I would prefer to be like these men, obedient and protected in difficult political circumstances, than be like those disobediently fleeing to Egypt. We are not promised a trouble-free life in an easy environment, but we can grasp this promise to Baruch that God will protect us in the midst of great difficulties.

November 19

Idolatry in the Nations — Jeremiah 46-51, I John 5:21

Jeremiah called the nations to repent of idolatry. Christ never used the word idols, but the spiritual world behind them was evident as he overcame demonic forces. In Christ these spiritual forces were defeated at the cross, and they are empty, able to be overcome today. Even in the midst of judgement on idolatry, he expressed mercy for widows and orphans, redeemed captives, and was like a lawyer, pleading our case.

Each nation had its own idols: Egypt revered Amon, Moab revered Chemosh, Ammon revered Molech, and Babylon revered Bel and Marduk. Other forms of false worship challenged are more similar to our own temptations today. Edom relied on pride, and the nomadic tribes were self-sufficient. Jeremiah warned surrounding nations that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was coming. Just as God's people were to receive correction and judgment, the nations were subject to the same principles.

When called, Jeremiah had been told he would give messages to nations and kingdoms. In Eugene Peterson's beautiful reflection on Jeremiah's life, *Run With the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best*, he points out that the ten kingdoms to whom Jeremiah wrote covered 750,000 square miles. The experts say the messages are great poetry, and show "extraordinary knowledge of the geography, the history and the politics of these nations...This feature makes

our understanding of the message more difficult, for many of the geographical features and political alliances can no longer be determined. But every difficulty we encounter in reading the text represents a local detail in which the Philistines and the Babylonians recognized that they were being addressed with attentive and personal seriousness.” Peterson points out how un-ethnocentric Jeremiah was in these messages, and applies this to our call to be skilled at crossing cultural boundaries.²⁵

A poem about God the creator who is contrasted with idols is repeated twice in the book. It is like a set of bookends. Idolatry is a profound rejection of the living God when we put other things in his place. We need to be quick to notice when the creator is being displaced in our lives with created things.

November 20

Jerusalem’s Fall — Jeremiah 52, Lamentations 1-2, Matthew 27:45-46

Jerusalem’s destruction foreshadowed Christ’s passion and crucifixion. The agony of suffering in Lamentations captures our painful experiences: loss, death, rejection, no one to help, feeling God’s rejection, or a tragedy that provokes repentance. The dark night of suffering profoundly transforms us if we walk through it with God.

God’s temple was burned, the city burned, walls knocked down, silver and gold stolen, and prisoners from the leaders were killed in cold blood. The king was captured, his sons were executed, and he was blinded and taken to Babylon in handcuffs. Judah went into exile, orphaned from her land. Those who remained were afraid and left for Egypt after another bloody massacre.

All the suffering of the world is carried in Christ’s suffering. In eight crucifixion paintings, Chagall’s portrayed Jesus as a suffering Jew juxtaposed with images of contemporary suffering. Chagall collapsed 400 years of slavery, years in exile, two destructions of Jerusalem and the temple, nearly 2,000 years of homelessness and wandering, pogroms, and the holocaust and wove them together in poignant pictures.

Our times of suffering are part of this bigger story that ends well with resurrection, triumph and joy as the final reality. I do not need to deny any pain, but its reality is transfigured knowing it fits into a bigger story. In the midst of the pain, Lamentations exhorts us to quietly hope for God’s help, not to give up, to choose solitude and silence and prayer, to let go of our questions, and to face the trouble honestly.

November 21

Hope — Lamentations 3-5, Matthew 12:21

Christ represents hope for all, and even in the midst of this cry of depression and despair over the loss of Jerusalem and the nation, there is a word of hope.

We, too, can experience feeling that God has been angry with us, plunge into emotional darkness, and fall into deep sorrow. Most of us can identify with the cry that all we have hoped for from God has been lost, and that we will never forget such an awful time of loss as we grieve. Though God brings us into deep darkness, he hears our despairing cries.

In the midst of this despair the prophet affirms that God's unfailing love never ends. In twelve beautiful verses there is wise thinking for anyone in despair. There is further affirmation that things do not happen without God's permission, that he hears our cries.

After more laments in Chapters 4 and 5 the prophet ends with the confidence that God remains the same. Even if we feel forgotten, feel rejected, feel he is angry with us, we can still pray for restoration and joy. These are practical sources of comfort, since all of us experience dark times in our lives. We need this model when our joy has ended and our dancing has turned to mourning. We can look to God's promises to turn our mourning into dancing.

November 22

The Glory of God — Ezekiel 1, Matthew 17:1-2

Ezekiel presents a vision of God's glory which foreshadows John's visions of Christ in Revelation. God is seen as a glorious king with rather startling transportation. The visions incorporate movement, energy, a variety of creatures, and brightness. The imagery reoccurs in Christ's transfiguration which is full of light, in Daniel, and in Revelation. Ezekiel, with his amazing visions, is shouting "glory to God!"

There are 313 references to glory in scripture, 50 in Psalms, 22 in Ezekiel, 20 in John's gospel, 14 in Revelation, and 11 in Exodus. All emphasize God seated on his throne in glory. Twice Ezekiel says God's throne is sapphire blue. In Exodus, when the elders had a meal with God, we are told that there seemed to be a pavement of brilliant sapphire. In Revelation the vision has a glow of emerald and a sea of shiny glass. In each case, colorful grandeur surrounds God in human form.

For centuries artists tried to capture the glory of God in art, including in many stained glass windows that allowed light to be part of the medium. In a church north of Manhattan Chagall made a stained glass image of Ezekiel and other prophets. As with most of his stained glass, a transcendent and very joyful blue predominates that seems to cry out "glory to God!" The artist said, "Stained

glass windows represent the transparent partition between my heart and the heart of the world.”

Christian art has associated the four faces of the creatures in this text—man, lion, ox, and eagle—with the four gospel writers who served as messengers of Christ’s glory. Traditional associations are that Matthew presents Christ as a man (Messiah), Mark as lion (courageous), Luke as ox (sacrificial service), and John as eagle (ascending to God). Christ in Majesty, ruling in his glory, is at the center. In John’s vision in Revelation, Father, Son and Spirit appear with the same creatures.

Even more significantly for us, God’s throne is surrounded by the multitudes of those who have believed and been brought inside this vision of glory. Christ’s promise and the writers of the epistles repeated the promise that glory awaits us. We will not merely be looking at this glory, we will become part of it.

November 23

God’s Scroll — Ezekiel 2-5, Mark 1:1

Ezekiel was given a bitter scroll to eat, full of sorrow and judgment. Christ adopted the name used to address Ezekiel, Son of Man, his message was that he would bear all sorrow and judgment and to free us from the consequences of our sin. While already in exile in Babylon, Ezekiel warned of Jerusalem’s coming destruction, a message his listeners found disturbing and discordant.

In Ezekiel’s time, in Christ’s time, and in our own time, great suffering has resulted in great art. One modern musician, Schoenberg, left the rich cultural environment of Vienna as the Nazi’s arrived. Composed in a 12-tone scale that rejected traditional harmonies, his work can be hard to listen to. But there is one particular piece that touches me. In 1947 he wrote *A Survivor from Warsaw* which combines speech with plaintive discordant music for a little over six minutes. The climax is a portion of the Shema Israel sung in Hebrew. In the context of commemorating a time of terror, Schoenberg’s music seems completely appropriate.

Ezekiel’s dissonant message bears a resemblance to that music: challenging to listen to, but deeply touching our souls. We need to have the stamina to take difficult spiritual medicine from time to time, to eat bitter but truthful words.

November 24

The Glory Departs — Ezekiel 6-10, Luke 21:37

Ezekiel described God’s glory leaving the temple, a sign of coming judgment. Since Christ compared his own body to the temple, one could say that his death by crucifixion is the closest parallel to glory leaving the temple. The last week

of his life, Christ taught daily in the temple, but when he left for the last time God's glory had departed.

Ezekiel saw a vision of great evils being done in the temple. Seventy leaders worshipped among walls engraved with snakes, lizards, and hideous creatures. In the inner courtyard men faced east, worshipping the sun. The indictment is that God's people had done evil, and would be scattered among the nations. Love of money led them astray, but Ezekiel prophesied that money would become like trash to them.

We see that after Ezekiel's vision of God's glory in Babylon, he saw the gradual move of glory from the temple and finally even from the city.

First vision in Babylon (1:28)
Exclamation over God's glory (3:12)
Second vision in Babylon (3:23)
God's glory in the Temple (8:4)
Glory moved to the Temple entrance (9:3)
Glory moved to the Temple door and filled the courtyard (10:4)
Glory moved to the east gate (10:18,19)
Glory moved to an eastern mountain (11:23)
Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed (33:21)

The exit of God's glory and destruction of the temple is a tragic moment in the story-line of scripture. Fortunately, this is not the end of the story. A promise that God's glory would return to the temple.

Future glory: giving Israel victory (39:13, 21)
God's glory will return to the Temple (43:1-5, 44:4)

Christ fulfilled that promise when he was brought to the temple at his birth, and continued in childhood visits and several years of teaching there. The greatest victory came at Christ's resurrection, the full demonstration of God's glory.

November 25

Idols in their Hearts — Ezekiel 11-15, Matthew 23:27

Ezekiel accused Judah's prophets and leaders of hypocrisy, and Christ did the same. They both used the image of whitewashed walls. Four times Ezekiel accused them of hypocrisy, and then accused them of having idols in their hearts.

The phrase idols in their hearts helps us identify with the problem. Many things can become a substitute for God in our hearts. Even good things can be

placed higher than him. In my own life I most often do this with relationships, and do not realize this until the relationships began to fail me. Work, romantic love, pleasure, religious ministry, money, and pleasing others can elbow out God's primary place. Even our own image of ourselves and desire to perfectly live up to cultural ideals can be idolatry.

Dr. Timothy Keller's book *Counterfeit Gods*²⁶ makes this point. Idolatry is such a strong theme in the Hebrew scriptures, but we are tempted to think that was a problem of primitive cultures and we do not have a problem today. Keller effectively shows us that is not the case.

In the midst of the temptations to idolatry God is still our sanctuary, he can spare us from judgment, he can help us recognize false teaching and reject it, helping us to learn to let these things go.

November 26

Parables — Ezekiel 16-19, Mark 4:13

Ezekiel's gift of teaching with parables and imagery prefigured Jesus' use of parable and imagery in his teaching. Jesus drew an image of judging between sheep and goats, and transformed it into the magnificent parable that tells us he separates them based on their compassion or lack thereof. Christ as good shepherd is contrasted to other dangerous and unworthy shepherds. The story of the lost sheep he seeks and finds is also from Ezekiel. Ezekiel compared great nations to tall trees that needed to be cut down. Jesus compared his kingdom growing from a small seed to become a large tree..

In Babylon Ezekiel warned of coming tragedy by using street theater, acting out the siege of Jerusalem and the process of going into exile. He used a series of parables to warn the exiles of what would happen in Judah. Judah was like God's unfaithful wife who caused grief. Great eagles taking pieces of a vine warned of political consequences for not respecting the power of the empire. A lion in a cage referred to the capture of Judah's king. Two beautiful sisters prostituting themselves were like sinful Judah and Israel. The fall of a giant cedar was like the fall of mighty empires. Unfaithful shepherds represented failures in spiritual leadership. And dry bones coming to life represented the restoration of the remnant of the people.

This style of story-telling teaching is one that Christ adopted and that is available to us. Sometimes the way to our spiritual growth is through a good movie or a good novel that touches our hearts.

November 27

Son of Man — Ezekiel 20-24, Mark 8:31

God addressed Ezekiel as “Son of Man” 92 times. This prophetic title was adopted by Christ more than any other. The phrase occurs 86 times in the New Testament, and has various connotations: Christ’s incarnation as a poor man, one offering friendship to unworthy people, a forgiving prophet, a teacher, a man who would die and rise from the dead, and one who would return in glorious triumph.

Christ used the term to speak of the opposition he received, similar to the opposition Ezekiel experienced. This emphasis on his humanity, his role as a prophet who followed in a tradition of being killed and opposed, is one side of the coin. The other side is his identity as Son of God.

The Nicene Creed captures the essence of his role as a man: “I believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ...Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.”

As fragile humans we struggle to be prophetic messengers, able to endure the suffering that may come in opposition to our message. Ezekiel endured the costly call not to grieve over the death of his wife, his dearest treasure. He kept preaching. But he also teaches us that God acts to protect his own honor, can display his holiness in us, and that though he may purify us by putting us through a fire, or allow us to be defeated, this is not the end of the story.

November 29

A Fallen King — Ezekiel 25-28, Matthew 11:21-22

The judgment on the King of Tyre in Chapter 28 bears an uncanny resemblance to a much more spiritual figure, and tradition holds that this describes the fall of Satan, Christ’s opponent. God says he had ordained an angel as a mighty guardian who had access to God’s holy mountain, and was blameless until evil was found in him. Here, then, is the root of the idea that Satan is a fallen angel whose rebellion introduced evil into the world.

Satan tempted Christ with the offer of power over the nations of the world in exchange for his worship. Christ not only rejected this, his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming return are his method to regain sovereignty over all nations.

In these chapters, condemnation came for the nations’ response to Judah’s suffering: Ammon’s scoffed at the desecrated temple, Moab denied Judah’s uniqueness, Edom and Philistia avenged themselves, and Tyre rejoiced. We are told that God will humble proud nations and proud rulers.

Three chapters warned Tyre of coming judgement. A great commercial city on an island, it dominated Mediterranean trade, but Nebuchadnezzar besieged it for 13 years after the fall of Jerusalem, finally conquering. The Persians conquered it in 539 BC, and Alexander the Great destroyed it in 332 BC. These conflicts fulfilled the prophecy of attack from many nations. Alexander fulfilled prophecy by taking stones, timber and soil from the mainland and putting it into the sea as a land bridge.

We are called to be part of the battle between Satan and the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of Christ. Our small part may be prayer, service or testimony, but it gives meaning to our lives to see we have a role in a much larger battle. Our ultimate enemy is Satan, but we have the confidence that Christ has defeated him.

November 30

Message to the Nations — Ezekiel 29-32, Matthew 25:31-32

Ezekiel warned that nations would be judged, and Christ warned of judgment on all nations at the end of time. In the interim, God raises and lowers the fortunes of nations, destroys idols, and destroys arrogant nations. His judgment on the nations teaches them who he is.

Egypt, often used symbolically for the world in its disordered and unjust state in contrast to God's coming kingdom, is warned in these four chapters. One emphasized the underworld so central to their culture. Up until this point, Egypt had been a great empire, but she was told she would never again dominate other nations. Egypt fell to Nebuchadnezzar after he subjugated Tyre, it fell to the Persians in 343 BC, and the last Pharaoh, Cleopatra, was subjugated by Rome in 30 BC.

Today international political chaos alarms us and in a world where we have nuclear weapons we can too easily imagine total disaster. The prophets repeatedly offered the message that God is in control of seemingly out-of-control politics. We must confess our fears about political realities and declare in faith that Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

December 1

The Good Shepherd — Ezekiel 33-34, John 10:14-16

Ezekiel prophesied against the shepherds of Israel and said that God himself would become their shepherd, a prophecy Christ applied to himself. God promised to find his sheep and rescue them from where they were scattered, to bring them home and to give them good pasture. We can claim the promise to the sheep that they will lie down in pleasant places in peace.

In the twelfth year of captivity in Babylon, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came and told Ezekiel the city had fallen. Ezekiel's tongue was loosened the previous day so he could explain this to the people.

In this context selfish shepherds were castigated for feeding themselves, letting their flocks starve, allowing the sick to be uncared for, not seeking the wandering, being cruel, scattering the sheep, and allowing them to be prey. Their invalid leadership resulted in their removal. God said that would search and find his sheep himself. Christ came and declared himself to be the promised good shepherd.

Henry Ossawa Tanner so loved the theme of the good shepherd seeking his sheep that he painted it many times in a style unusual for religious paintings, that of impressionism. Each painting is a tender homage to the love of Christ who seeks each one of us. There is comfort in knowing that it is not our searching for God, but his searching for us that is the basis of our faith. I want to be a sheep carried by the shepherd, not one who wanders. Most importantly in the light of this chapter, I want to a good shepherd with those around me rather than a selfish, irresponsible one.

December 2
Dry Bones — Ezekiel 35-37, Matthew 24:3

God promised Israel a glorious future after suffering, and we have become part of that glorious future in Christ. While he established his kingdom at the first coming, its completion is still ahead of us. God promised to give his people new hearts with new and right desires, filled with his Spirit. We have become recipients of these promises.

In our days we have seen unexpected literal fulfillments of renewal for Israel, even to such details as great fruit crops and harvests from fruit trees. While the parable of dry bones restored can be applied to any miraculous move of God, it is particularly poignant as prophetic of the state of Israel in the light of the holocaust.

The dry bones of those sent to gas chambers have not been forgotten. There are at least 175 Holocaust memorials and museums world-wide. Israel established the Yad Vashem museum in the midst of a forest near Jerusalem which honors those who died, including non-Jewish people who saved Jewish lives. A half hour west of Jerusalem is the Martyr's Forest, a place where six million trees were planted in memory of holocaust victims.

At the forest, impressive art work includes a sculpture of a torah scroll with one side commemorating the holocaust and the other Israel's independence. A

metal chestnut tree commemorates the tree Anne Frank could see outside her hiding place in the Netherlands.

Stories of love and courage in the painful stories of the holocaust bring me to tears. As I went through a holocaust museum and read the list of all genocides that have occurred in recent memory, I was touched to see Guatemala's story included. In every case we are reminded that these are inexcusable tragedies we must be vigilant to work against.

December 3

Israel's Future — Ezekiel 38-39, Matthew 24:6-7

Ezekiel and Christ taught that upheavals and wars would characterize our world. Though God would allow enemies to invade his people, he planned to display his holiness and glory to all nations by giving his people victory.

Most interpreters link Gog and Magog to Russia which keeps us alert to their interaction with Israel today. Mysteriously, London has two statues with these names that are periodically carried in procession. Regarding their future defeat, it is said these enemies join with all nations. Whoever they are, God will win.

God promises he will pour out his Spirit on his people, and we need not fear political upheaval, because God cares for us. Christ already began the kingdom, we are on his winning team, and we know that final victory is ours. This winning perspective keeps us positive, and as Christ said, we do not need to be fearful.

Watching the news or reading about the latest terror attacks can be stressful and alarming. The stream of negative events is unending, and with today's media, we can be kept up to date on more than we can take in. Knowing this, selecting healthy media consumption can be part of keeping our minds focused on Christ so that we are aware but not panicked.

December 4

Ezekiel's Temple — Ezekiel 40-43, John 2:20

Ezekiel's vision of a lavish future temple points to Christ as temple. Ezekiel's warnings of corruption inside it, and his vision of the removal of God's glory from it climaxed with the sorrowful news that twelve years into their exile, the city of Jerusalem, including the temple, had fallen. God's visible presence with his people was gone.

Fourteen years later and twenty-five years into captivity, Ezekiel had a long and detailed vision of an immense and beautiful temple. Years remained

before the exiles would return to build a temple, something smaller and more modest than the vision, but this grand vision must have served as a source of hope to the disheartened exiles.

Ezekiel's dimensions for the entire temple area was 1000 square feet. The inner courtyard was 200 feet square, and the temple building was inside that. When Christ came he entered a temple complex 1000 feet square with, a porched area 150 feet square, and the temple building within that. While, as far as we know, the details did not perfectly match Ezekiel, the overall dimensions and layout bear a distinct resemblance. The wailing wall, still revered by Jewish people, was actually a retaining wall built to make the larger complex possible.

Starting in 20 BC, King Herod, though not a believing Jew, tore down the smaller temple Ezra had built. The temple proper was completed in a year and a half, and more courts and cloisters had been built when Christ was taken there as an infant. When he went there as an adult, it had been under construction for 46 years and construction continued until only six years before its destruction in 70 AD. The white marble building with gold plating rose in terraces, and Josephus compared it to a snow-covered mountain, dazzling from every side. It was magnificent.²⁷

We can see the temple structure described as prefiguring Christ Himself. He was the full expression of what the temple had once been, the place of God's full presence, the full intersection of heaven and earth. Now we have become his temple, the place where he is present. We may get lost in the details and measurements, but the New Testament is firm in letting us know that we are God's temple, bearing the glory of God to the world today.

December 5

Land Restored — Ezekiel 44-48, Matthew 4:16

Ezekiel 40-48 are notoriously difficult chapters to interpret, ranging from the extreme of an early Jewish controversy as to whether the book belonged in the canon at all, to today's Temple Institute preparing to build a temple using these architectural plans. One question is to what point in time this occurs, with many expecting a literal fulfillment in Christ's Millennial reign with temple and sacrifices commemorating his past work. Others, because of the sacrifices, see this as having been fulfilled symbolically in his first coming, and then continuing with the growth of the church.

Our theme of finding Christ in every passage lends itself to the later interpretation, even if other views are valid. For Ezekiel's readers, it was an image of hope. They were in exile, Jerusalem destroyed, and living under political domination. He raised the image of a return to the land, a gloriously

rebuilt temple and reestablished worship, just rulers, and the return of all the tribes, even those who had disappeared into the Assyrian empire several centuries before. Just as with the original ideal of a utopian land, this utopia was not fulfilled either, but Israel's God fulfilled it in his own person.

The critique of priests who welcomed sacrifices from non-believing foreigners fits the time of Christ very well according to Josephus.²⁸ Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, was one of the godly priests descended from Zadok. John was ascetic, as the passage describes, and a priestly forerunner of Christ.

Christ fulfilled numerous images in the passage. He worshipped at the temple, going in and out without fanfare as the righteous prince is said to do. Some have said that God's enthronement means the prince must not be Christ, but as God's son the princely role fits. The prince offers the sacrifices, and Christ gave himself. His crucifixion covered every sacrifice—Day of Atonment, Passover, Festival of Shelters, Sabbath, and daily sacrifices. He identified himself as the temple, the presence of God and his glory. The fruitful luxurious trees serve as resurrection and kingdom imagery, and his Spirit is described as living water flowing out into the whole earth. The sacred meals of the temple compare to the Eucharist. The gifts of land and the land itself forecast a kingdom where Israel is completely restored and membership is opened to all nations in the new community of God.

The Eastern Gate was first sealed by Muslims in 810 AD as a measure to prevent the Messiah's return to counter Ezekiel's prophecy. Ironically, that actually fulfilled the prophecy: after Christ's entrance there as the Lord, the God of Israel, the gate was closed and will open at his return.

Dimensions of a holy city surrounding the temple are repeated twice, highlighting its importance, and the people living there are a kingdom of priests. Christ and his disciples traversed the land, making it something we today still call the "Holy Land."

All the imagery of a promised Messiah crescendos together in these passages, offering hope in the midst of hopelessness. As we celebrate Advent, these prophetic words anticipating Christ serve as a call to place our attention on him. For us as well, a focus on Christ is the antidote to discouragement and hopelessness. He is the center from which holiness and meaning flow out like a mighty rushing river.

December 6

Christ Appears — Daniel 1-3, John 1:51

Daniel's images of Christ in every chapter contrast sharply with the world's pride and the world's idols. In these first three chapters we see Daniel and his

friends realize that God is still with them even though they have been ripped away from their homes and culture. They are able to continue their own ways of eating in an alien environment, God responds to their prayer for wisdom though they are far from the temple, and then God appears to them in their suffering.

Chapter 1—**Wisdom:** Daniel, wise advisor to three kings, is like Christ in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He was a faithful witness to many kings, just as Christ was a faithful witness to the rulers of his day. Daniel gave advice “ten times better” than any other advisor. Daniel maintained his faith and integrity in the face of a hostile culture, and is one of the few characters we never see fall into sin, pointing toward the sinless Son of God.

Chapter 2—**Rock:** When Nebuchadnezzar could not recall his dream, Daniel prayed and received an interpretation of coming kingdoms in a statue made of different metals. The statue was destroyed by a rock growing into a mighty mountain representing an eternal kingdom. Christ is that rock.

3—**Divine being:** Having dreamt of a great statue, Nebuchadnezzar decided to make an immense one. When Daniel’s three friends refused to worship it, they were thrown into the fiery furnace. They said God could rescue them, and a divine being, Christ himself, rescued them from the fire

These images of Christ inspire me to have confidence in his wisdom, the greatness of his kingdom, and his presence with us in the midst of suffering. During Advent, all the prophets serve to prepare us for our seasonal celebration of Christ’s birth, and Daniel is a particularly rich source for anticipation.

December 7

A Tree Cut Down — Daniel 4, Luke 13:7

Christ compared the unrepentant in his parable to trees that needed to be cut down. Similarly, God sent a dream to Nebuchadnezzar of a large and fruitful tree which was felled. Daniel interpreted the tree as being Nebuchadnezzar himself, and urged him to repent, warning that if he remained proud, God would cause him to lose his mind. Daniel urged him to be merciful to the poor. He did not listen and went mad, but in time God graciously healed him.

Here we see the power of Daniel’s faith as he influenced the most powerful ruler of the world, with the result that the message of God went out freely. Nebuchadnezzar, once healed, sent a message to every culture, urging them to worship God. As a repentant man, he preached that God’s kingdom would last forever.

Though Nebuchadnezzar was repentant, his unrepentant grandson Belshazzar lost the kingdom completely. Belshazzar desecrated the cups captured from the Jewish temple to honor idols made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Daniel reproached the king, reminding him of Nebuchadnezzar's humbling. God found him wanting, and brought his kingdom to an end.

Historical records of precisely how the Persians conquered Babylon vary. The last king of the Babylonians was Nabonidus who apparently entrusted the kingdom to his son Belshazzar as co-regent when on military campaigns. Thus as a reward for interpreting the warning of doom, Belshazzar could make Daniel third highest in the kingdom, since he was second himself. Cyrus, who would liberate the Jewish people, conquered him.

The dream of the tree is a vivid image of how beautiful a peaceful and prosperous kingdom can be with fresh green leaves, lots of edible fruit, birds in its branches, wild animals in the shade, and feeding all the world. But built on man's pride, it needed to be cut down. The Kingdom of God is a tree cut down in the cross, now flourishing in the resurrection.

December 8

The Lion's Den — Daniel 6, Matthew 28:6

Daniel in the lion's den is an image of death and resurrection, foreshadowing Christ's rise from death. Daniel was placed in the lion's den by enemies who betrayed him, manipulated the king into punishing him, and placed him in a death trap, all of which happened to Christ as well. A stone was laid over the mouth of the den, just as a stone was laid over the mouth of Christ's tomb. Angels appeared in both stories.

Darius' confession acknowledging God's protection of Daniel prophesied Christ's eternal kingdom. Daniel is a truly admirable model of faith, and someone whose spirituality remained strong and uncompromised even in the midst of the temptations of power and wealth in a non-believing environment. He served at the highest level of three governments: Babylon, Medes, and Persia. His faithfulness in this complex environment inspires anyone called to work in government.

This story had particular meaning to the African-American Christian painter, Henry Ossawa Tanner who painted it twice in the impressionist style he learned in France. For him, it spoke of the recent freeing of slaves in the United States Civil War, and served as an image of any suffering and rejection responded to with hope and faith and ultimately, triumph. We can make the

application to our own suffering, or that of others, and pray in hope of protection and rescue and testimony.

December 9

Son of Man and Son of God — Daniel 7-8, Matthew 26:63-64

In the midst of his visions of the future, Daniel saw a vision of a glorious Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven, being led into the presence of God with authority, honor, and royal power over all the nations of the world. Christ who took the title of Son of Man to himself and repeatedly predicted he would fulfill this vision and come in glory and power. Both Ezekiel and Daniel were addressed as Son of Man. Daniel also refers to the Son of God entering the fiery furnace. Daniel brings these two images are brought together.

Daniel saw a vision of the future kingdoms under the guise of different animals that symbolized coming historical kingdoms: A lion with eagles' wings for Babylon, the bear for Medes and Persians, and a leopard for Greece. A monster with huge iron teeth is unnamed, but prefigured Rome accurately. In chapter 8 the animal figures change: a ram for Media and Persia, a goat for Greece, the large horn on the goat as Alexander the Great later replaced by the four horns of his kingdom divided into Asia, Egypt, Thrace and Macedonia, the explanation offered by the angel Gabriel. A subsequent ruler, Antiochus Epiphenes, oppressed the Jews and ordered the worship of Zeus in the Temple, as foreshadowed here.

Christ came into a world in political conflict. His power as both Son of Man and Son of God allowed him to transform politics by establishing a new kingdom, the kingdom of God.

December 10

Daniel's Prayer — Daniel 9, Luke 11:1

Daniel's prayer includes elements that Christ taught in his prayer: worship, repentance, and a desire for God's kingdom to come. Daniel realized the 70 years of captivity were reaching an end, having himself been one of the first captives. (605 BC) Under the Medes who had just conquered Babylon, there was hope for a change, and it soon came with Cyrus' decree. (538 BC)

Daniel's prayer is a deep, humble, and beautiful model which can serve us well as a model of repentance for our sins and those of our nation. How much difference did Daniel's prayer make? Would the captivity have ended with God faithful to his promises anyway? In Jeremiah's prophecy the end of the captivity had been linked to prayer: His prayer was, at the very least, an expression of faith that an unlikely prophecy would be fulfilled.

Daniel asked for a return to the land, but the answer brought by the angel Gabriel promised much more. Ezra was given a decree to rebuild Jerusalem in 458 BC and 483 years (7x7 plus 62x7) later in 25 AD, John the Baptist started his ministry, announcing the Messiah. The promise to Daniel was that God would bring an end to sin, atone for guilt, bring in everlasting righteousness, confirm the prophetic vision, and anoint the Most Holy One. The Messiah would be killed, appearing to have accomplished nothing, but in reality having begun a kingdom that has spread through the world.

Daniel wanted Israel's restoration, but God promised the restoration of all things through Messiah. Christ is the ultimate answer to every prayer, even one for freedom and national restoration.

December 11

Daniel's Fasts — Daniel 10, Matthew 6:17-18

Daniel prayed and fasted, wearing dark clothing and putting ashes on his head, pleading for a return to the land. He then chose a vegetarian/no sweets/no wine diet for three weeks. Christ encouraged us to fast as a private practice by dressing normally.

Perhaps the provocation for Daniel's fast was the opposition to rebuilding the temple that arose in Cyrus' third year and kept things at a standstill for sixteen more years. Even this was providential, because the rebuilt temple was thereby dedicated exactly 70 years after it had been destroyed. (586 BC to 515 BC)

Daniel realized that the Jews would be dominated by various kingdoms, but would eventually have their own ruler. His visions remind us of Christ's end-times teaching. We glimpse a mysterious battle between good and evil angels, and learn that our prayers are part of this battle. When waiting for an answer to prayer, the answer Daniel received encourages us. He was told not to fear, and that God heard his request the first day. He was told he was precious to God and encouraged to remain strong.

When I returned to Guatemala I was surrounded by people who take for granted the necessity of fasting. Daniel's example of a 21-day vegetarian fast is a practice encouraged at church as each year begins. Thanks to this and many other examples, I now see fasting as a humble, valuable form of prayer.

December 12

End Times — Daniel 11-12, Matthew 24:5

Daniel's vision and Christ's teaching prepare us for the end times. Both make references to more immediate political crises, and then describe Christ's

return. The man in white linen giving the explanation is thought to be Christ himself. Both taught us that God will be with us in the midst of suffering and that God purifies through these trials.

Chapter 11 begins with Persian kings and Xerxes' war against Greece, moves on to Alexander the Great, and the break-up of his kingdom into four: Asia (Seleucids), Egypt (Ptolemy), Thrace, and Macedonia. It then gives us much more detail on the period of struggle during the inter-testamental period. The kings of the North are the Seleucids, and the kings of the south, Egypt. Their power-struggles and drama are outlined here, and various commentaries explain the historical details. It is a head-spinning introduction to political chaos. The story of Hanukah is once more referenced here in the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes.

Into this chaos came Christ who raised people from the dead, and filled them with wisdom and light. Though political chaos continues, the end will come. The three and a half years mentioned have several possible meanings: the length of Christ's ministry, the length of the Jerusalem siege before the temple was destroyed, and a time of testing described in Revelation.

An explosion of knowledge is mentioned and we are living in it. Until 1900, human knowledge doubled each century, but by the end of World War II it doubled every 25 years. Knowledge now doubles every year and increasing.

The time of Christ's coming is surely drawing closer. We have the privilege of living in the times that Daniel prophesied.

December 13

God's Unfailing Love — Hosea 1-5, I Corinthians 13:7

Christ's love never fails despite the many failures of his people. He took the unloved and made them his people. Hosea was told to take a promiscuous woman and essentially rescue her through marriage. His name means "salvation", another way of saying "Jesus", thus becoming a clear image of the redeemer.

Hosea gave their children sad, symbolic names. The first child, Jezreel, looked back to King Jehu's cruelty, and warned of coming judgement. The second child, Not Loved, and the third, Not My People, showed how badly Israel had damaged her relationship to God.

Hosea's wife Gomer reverted to her former ways, ended up a slave, and had to be purchased. Hosea's love and compassion and acceptance of her in this

difficult situation provided a vivid image of God's love that became the backdrop to the sermons in the rest of the book.

Despite Israel's failings, God promised to make her his wife forever, loving her with unfailing love. The children would be blessed also. Jezreel, meaning God Plants, would be fulfilled by the land becoming fruitful. God would love the unloved, and accept those who did not belong to him. Peter applied this promise to all who have believed in Christ. Paul quoted Hosea and applied it specifically to the new status of the Gentiles as God's people.

God gave Hosea an exceptional love to win back his wife and rebuild their relationship, which parallels God's exceptionally forgiving love toward us. How reassuring that despite our failures, God's love does not give up. If a person fails us, God can miraculously give the same unfailing love he gave Hosea. This deep love transforms us and removes our shame.

December 14

Alive in Three Days—Hosea 6-9, Luke 24:46

Hosea was the one prophet who had the privilege of prophesying that Christ would rise from the dead on the third day. While there are many stories that symbolically prefigure the resurrection by mentioning three days, Hosea is where this is written: "After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight." (Hosea 6:2 KJV)

We are promised that though we are disciplined, God restores us and bandages our wounds, that he wants to heal us. He wants us to have a deep heart of mercy rather than external religiosity.

Hosea's critique of Israel's sins resonates with the problems of our culture today. His message is of God who has slaughtered them with words, warned them that evil is entrenched, and that Israel's story of decline has finally reached a dead end. He was the first of the prophets to warn of the coming destruction of Assyria, which meant their nation and people would disappear.

Scripture itself shows us a process of moral development. We can say that the prophets who wrote between about 800 to 400 BC demonstrate more inward ethical standards than from the time of Moses to David, perhaps 1400 to 1000 BC. The move is evident in the emphasis is that external rites are not sufficient evidence of love. Christ quoted Hosea to say that love mattered much more than the right sacrifices. It was not in the times of their victories, but rather in this period of the great defeats of Israel and Judah that this moral height was reached.

Promises of restoration permeate Hosea, and despite Israel's historical disappearance, because of the resurrection of Christ which Hosea prophesied, a way of restoration did open for these scattered people, redeemed in Christ. The resurrection still defeats evil today.

December 15

Boundless Love — Hosea 10-14, John 15:9

Christ called us to remain in his love, and Hosea repeatedly appealed for a return to God's love. Through Hosea God told them to plow their hearts, plant righteousness, and harvest God's love. Christ took this image and used it in the parable of the sower. We are repeatedly reassured that God loves us and wants to shower righteousness on us. He is our savior, he heals us, and he makes us fruitful.

Hope of redemption appears amidst the warnings, with many prophecies of Christ. Hosea wrote that God had called his son out of Egypt. There were at least three parallels between Christ and Egypt: they were taken to Egypt to survive, they returned to the promised land, and they are both God's son. There is an offer of new birth which Christ repeated in his conversation with Nicodemus. Hosea wrote that God is an evergreen tree and all our fruit comes from him, similar to Christ's promise of fruitfulness if we abide in him.

Hosea and the Apostle John focused on God's love. Hosea used love 27 times. Only Psalms, Proverbs and Song and Solomon used it more in the Hebrew scriptures. John uses love 42 times in his gospel and 26 times in the letter of I John, far outstripping any other New Testament book. Hosea called the people to act on in love, just as Christ called the love of God and neighbor the greatest commandments. The promise that God's love is boundless looked ahead to many New Testament promises.

Hosea's personal story and his application of it to Israel teach us the depths of God's redeeming love that he wants to make a reality in us. When we receive that astonishing love, we change and become people able to offer that same deep love to others.

December 16

Joel, Acts 2:21

At the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel regarding the outpouring of the Spirit the crowd saw, and concluded with a promise of salvation. Paul also quoted this promise, and both made clear this was a prophetic announcement of salvation in Christ. Though God may send a natural disaster as a wake-up call, he is gracious and merciful, and promises to restore. Even more graciously, he promises us his Spirit and a happy ending.

Before salvation could come, however, the people needed to see the challenges of a locust plague and drought as a call to wake up, humble themselves, and turn to God. The people knew the back-story: God had sent ten plagues to deliver them from Egypt. As for Egypt, the 8th of those plagues—locusts—would be sent as a warning to Israel for their disobedience.

After Solomon prayed when dedicating the temple, God responded, and Joel can be seen as an exposition of his response: “At times I might shut up the heavens so that no rain falls, or command grasshoppers to devour your crops, or send plagues among you. Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land.” (II Chronicles 7:13-14, NLT) God lamented to Amos that the locust plague had not brought the people to repentance.

Nevertheless, Joel reassures us of the depths of God’s love: He desires our hearts, is gracious and merciful, not easily angered, filled with kindness and not eager to punish, pities his people, has done great things, wants his people not to fear, wants his people to rejoice, returns what has been lost, does miracles for us, is with us, prevents disgrace, restores prosperity, is a welcoming refuge and strong fortress, pardons his people, and makes his home with his people.

Joel highlighted the coming Day of the Lord five times, warning of a last battle and final judgment, and three times refers to the sun, moon and stars being darkened. Christ repeated this as a sign of the end times. His lesson that ecological destruction is a wake-up call from God, is highly relevant in our age of global warming and the destruction of species.

December 17
Amos 1-5, Luke 6:20-21

Amos denounced oppression of the poor and called for justice. Christ repeatedly emphasized God’s love for those who are poor and made a particular point that the Good News was for them. Amos preached in a time of great affluence for the business class, and poverty for others. Twice he spoke of the cruelty of selling the poor for a pair of sandals. Amos cried out for a mighty flood of justice.

He began, however, by warning the surrounding nations that their crimes against humanity—enslavement and cruelty—would be judged. Their conscience could have and should have kept them from these actions. In contrast, Israel and Judah were warned that they had forgotten their covenant with God, were oppressing the poor, enjoying luxury and privilege, engaging in idolatry and meaningless religious ritual. A decade after his preaching,

Assyria fulfilled his prophecies against the nations by conquering them, and in another decade Israel was conquered and destroyed.

The book ends with a promise to restore David's kingdom and return his people to the land. On one level, this occurred after the return from exile when Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. As always it pointed to the greater kingdom to come under Christ, and James used this as evidence of how God had opened up salvation for the nations.

Amos' warnings that we are like fruit ripe for judgment, or that we are being measured by a plumb line and are crooked, seem true today. Our financial world is full of rich and poor. Half the world lives in poverty, and far too many in extreme poverty. Even in the wealthy United States, 14.5% live in poverty, and CEOs gain 204 times as much as their workers. Amos' warning that judgement will fall on injustice is one we need to hear.

December 18
Amos 6-9, Acts 15:15-18

As the early church attempted to discern if Christ's good news was for all people, they looked not only to their own experience of seeing God give his Spirit to non-Jewish people, they looked to the Hebrew scriptures. At the Council of Jerusalem, James used a quote from Amos as a proof-text that this had always been God's plan.

This came in the context of promises of restoration after judgement. Amos saw visions of locusts and fire and pleaded for God to be merciful, and God responded that he would not do it. In a vision of a plumbline that showed that the people were off-kilter, God said he could no longer ignore all their sins. Amos' message was perceived as a political threat and the rulers opposed him. But after another vision of ripe fruit God said he could no longer delay their punishment.

Christ is evident throughout the final chapter, which begins with a vision of him standing by the altar. The predicted destruction of the sanctuary not only occurred in 586 BC, it occurred again in 70 AD after Christ's warning. The promised restoration included the return from exile, and hinted at the return to the land we have seen in our time. But the full restoration of the kingdom was in Christ, and its promise extended to all.

December 19
Obadiah, John 19:6

Obadiah rebuked the descendants of one brother for being cruel toward the descendants of the other. While this looked back at the conflicts between Jacob

and Esau, it also looked ahead to Christ's suffering at the hands of his brothers. Christ's main opponents –Herod's father and son– were descendants of Esau.

Obadiah focused on Edom, the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau, who would be judged for indifference to Judah's suffering. Edom had even added to Judah's distress as she was destroyed. Nevertheless, they were offered a completely undeserved mercy in the future coming through the very ones they had harmed.

Though our translations refer to Edom and Israel, the Hebrew refers to Esau and Jacob, as though their sibling rivalry was still present in this moment. Esau was glad that Jacob was having such a difficult time, just as when Jacob went into exile with Laban. It further recalled the prophecy to Rebekah, not only of their rivalry, but that Jacob would eventually triumph over Esau.

Edomite Kings were conquered by David. The Maccabees conquered them and under John Hyrcanus (c. 125 BC) they converted to Judaism. After Jews were expelled from the promised land in 135 AD, Idumaeans/Edomites disappeared from history, as prophesied. Yet we know that wherever they were, mercy was available to them in the coming of Christ.

This passage causes me to ask if I am sensitive to my relatives' suffering. Do I care enough to pray faithfully for their concerns, to see how I might be able to love and support them, and to communicate with kindness and compassion?

December 20

Coming Resurrection — Jonah, Luke 11:29-30

On Christ's authority, Jonah prefigured Christ's preaching, death, and resurrection. Jonah ultimately preached in Nineveh and triggered a great revival, but only after running in the opposite direction, going overboard on a ship, and being rescued by a great fish. Jesus used the three days in the fish as analogous to his three days in the tomb. In Jonah's prayer he prefigured the resurrection, acknowledging that God had pulled him up from the grave.

Jonah's disobedience resulted in a horrendous storm. In contrast, twice when his disciples were caught in a storm Jesus calmed the waters and calmed them with his presence. Paul also preserved his shipmates in a storm. But Jonah voluntarily sacrificed himself to preserve the life of the others on the boat when he told the sailors to throw him overboard, again prefiguring Christ's voluntary sacrifice. One can also see an analogy between the wooden boat and the cross.

Luci Shaw also shows us analogies to Christ in her poem, *Rib Cage*.

Jonah, you
and I were both signs
to unbelievers.

Learning the anatomy
of ships and sea animals the hard way—
from inside
out—you counted (bumping your
stubborn head)
the wooden beams and curving bones
and left
your own heart unexplored.
And you were tough.
Twice, damp but undigested
you were vomited. For you
it was the only
way out.

No, you wouldn't die.
Not even burial softened you
and, free of the dark sea prisons,
you were still
caged in yourself—trapped
in your own hard continuing rage
at me and Nineveh.

For three nights
and three days dark as night—
as dark as yours—
I too charted the innards
of the earth, swam
in its skeleton, its raw under
ground. A captive
in the belly of the world
(prepared, like the fish, by God)
I felt the slow pulse at the monster's
heart,
tapped its deep arteries, wrestled
its root sinews, was bruised
by the undersides of all
its cold bony stones.

Submerged,
I had to die, I had
to give in to it, I had
to go all the way
down
before I could be freed,
to live
for you and Nineveh. — Luci Shaw

The same mercy that Christ showed to those who turned to him in repentance was shown to the repentant people of Nineveh. Despite an effective ministry, Jonah proved to be critical of those to whom he was sent and was unhappy God did not judge them. As the first foreign missionary, he resisted a call to people he disapproved of, was cranky about his own comforts, and critical and judgmental even when people responded to his message. Unfortunately, we have not changed. Far too often, missionaries have taken a Western superiority complex into the world and grumbled about those they serve.

December 21

Bethlehem — Micah 1-4, Matthew 2:4-6

Micah announced that Christ would be born in Bethlehem, but every chapter has prophetic promises. Though God accused his people and warned of war, he promised an end to war, and the coming of peace.

In Chapter 1 we are told he speaks from this Holy Temple, something Christ did after leaving his throne in heaven and coming to earth in the incarnation.

In Chapter 2 he promised to bring them together like a flock of sheep. In Chapter 3 he wrote of being filled with the Spirit and fearlessly pointed out Israel's sin and rebellion, something Christ did so repeatedly with the Pharisees that they determined to kill him. Chapter 4 promised that Jerusalem will be the place from which God's teaching comes and where he will restore the kingdom, something Christ began. In Chapter 5 the babe to be born in Bethlehem will be highly honored throughout the world and will be the source of peace. The people are called to love mercy and walk humbly with God in Chapter 6, and in Chapter 7 it is promised that God will lead his people from darkness to light, lead his flock, do mighty miracles, and trample our sins and throw them into the depths of the oceans.

All these prophecies, and particularly his Bethlehem birthplace, combined with the rather unlikely combination of circumstances that made that possible, is a prophecy so specific that it is a source of wonder for us in this Advent Season.

December 22

Cursing the Fig Tree — Micah 5-7, Matthew 21:18-19

Christ's mysterious actions in cursing the fig tree have some explanation in Micah 7:1 where the prophet complained he could not find a single fig to satisfy his hunger, and then compared this to the absence of godly and fair-minded people who were murderers and set traps for their brothers. Christ knew a trap was being set for him, and his unjust death in Jerusalem was soon to come.

In *Promise and Deliverance* we are given a beautiful interpretation of this story.²⁹ The fruitlessness of the tree was like the fruitlessness of the people. The curse he pronounced on that fruitlessness, however, was a curse he would take on himself on the tree of the cross in a matter of a few days. God in Christ took all judgement upon himself and we praise him for that.

In this Advent seasons, we are called to examine ourselves and see whether we are obediently bearing fruit in our time. If not, we are once more invited to enter into God's forgiving love, and to be taken from death to life. The promised is not for the past, it is for us today that we can become the godly and fairminded people for whom God is looking to renew the world.

December 23

Nahum, Luke 2:14

Nahum presented Christ as a messenger with good news and a message of peace. Amidst a message of war and battle, Christ's message—both good and peaceful—stands in contrast to our chaotic and violent world

Nahum's warning was for Nineveh. King Sennacherib made Nineveh a particularly beautiful city with new streets, squares and a grand palace of 80 rooms, but in 722 BC Assyria destroyed Israel, leaving Judah still struggling to survive. It was in response to their cruelty in this destruction that Nahum gave his prophecy that God would judge Assyria.

Nineveh remained the largest city in the world for about fifty years until civil war and rebellious subjects, the Medes and Persians, destroyed it, just as Nahum predicted. This occurred in 612 BC and served as a confirmation to Judah of God's sovereignty over the nations. Nineveh is still in ruins, across the river from Mosul in Iraq. When Nahum made his predictions it would have seemed as likely as a prophet saying New York would fall and remain a ruin.

Chapter 1 is an acrostic poem, and Nineveh is a poetically symbolic city. Both Ninevah and Babylon served as anti-cities, the symbols for all that must be torn down and never rebuilt since it is part of a rebellious world system. Jerusalem had a more ambiguous symbolism. It was the City of God, but also rebellious and thereby subject to destruction. Yet for Jerusalem there was always the promise of restoration and ultimately becoming the city of the new heaven and new earth.

It is Christ, who the angels announced as the one who brings peace to the earth, who makes that change possible. In our time we are surrounded by war and rumors of war, but always there are movements toward peace that are looking forward to a fully redeemed earth, fully redeemed cities, and fully redeemed people. We are on the side of that redemption and need to live it out daily.

December 24

Habakkuk, John 12:31-32

Habakkuk presented Christ as a righteous judge of all nations. The prophet was deeply troubled by the political injustice he saw, and received God's answer that the Babylonians would be raised up to correct his people. The prophet was then distressed by the unfairness that his nation would be defeated by an evil nation, and questioned God's justice. Habakkuk was reassured to learn that Babylon would in turn be judged.

He learned that God is just to correct us for our sins, that he fulfills his plan at the right time, and he gives us strength. In all situations he has power to save us, his power is awesome and wonderful and not diminished by our actions. All of this gives us reason to rejoice and appreciate him.

Habakkuk asked how God would deal with the cruel Babylonians, and was assured that what they had done to others would be done to them. God's word to proud conquerors was that they would be cut down. The powerful nations are compared to large and beautiful trees which will be felled.

Throughout scripture there is the promise of another tree—the tree of the death of Christ on the cross—which would reverse the fall. The small seed of the kingdom would be planted to grow into a living and fruitful tree. One day there will be trees of life in the garden of the City of God. The cross is the final answer to Christ as the righteous judge—he took judgment upon himself and offered mercy.

At Christmas time we have our trees that symbolize the season for us, the joy of Christ's incarnation, and delight in His birth. When the trees fade and the holiday is over, the joy is still with us, and there is a similar word of faith as Habakkuk ends his reflection. Even among fruitless trees we can rejoice in God and in our salvation.

December 25

The King is Born — Luke 2:1-20

We celebrate the coming of Christ with great joy. The anticipated birth that will lead to the fulfillment of all of God's promises to us is here. The glory of God is revealed in a human child, celebrated by the singing armies of heaven and humble shepherds.

We recall that the everlasting kingdom was promised through the line of King David and hence the promise of a birth in his city, Bethlehem. We are reminded that the sheep raised for Passover sacrifices were from Bethlehem. Hence, these were no ordinary shepherds, but keepers of the sheep who foreshadowed the sacrificial Lamb of God.

Though coming from a history full of conflict, a nation full of its history of victories and defeats, Zechariah had prophesied that the Messiah would guide us to the path of peace and the angels celebrated peace on earth. We are offered that peace, and made people who share the good news of peace with God and one another. No wonder our greeting for this season is "Merry Christmas" since merriment is the only proper response to this good news.

December 26

Zephaniah, John 12:23-25

Zephaniah presented Christ bringing forth a renewed world. The prophet described the horrors of world's coming end, and Christ reiterated that it will be difficult, dangerous and painful. God will destroy idolatry at the same time

he protects the humble from destruction. God will live among us as king, a promise begun by Christ.

Zephaniah began with alarming images of coming apocalypse, images that are picked up and amplified in Revelation: destruction of birds and fish, death of leaders, darkness, trumpet calls, and battle cries. His thundering conclusion at the end of Chapter 1 is that God will make a terrifying end of all people. In Chapter 3 Judgment Day is said to be one where all people will be purified so all can worship God together in humility, peace, joy, presence, protection, honor, and glory.

As is so often the case, C.S. Lewis has a helpful perspective. In *Perelandra* the King spoke about the end of the world which he described as the “beginning of all things.” Evil must be dealt with, “the siege of your world shall be raised, the black spot cleared away, before the real beginning.” There will be a war and “the evil things in your world shall show themselves stripped of disguise so that plagues and horrors shall cover your lands and seas.”³⁰ Zephaniah’s terrors are instances of evil stripped of its disguise so good can come which explains the horrors of the Last Judgment.

December 27
Haggai, John 17:17-18

Haggai presented Christ’s arrival at the temple. Haggai spoke at a key moment after the return from Babylon to motivate the people to complete rebuilding the temple. In this time when the second temple was being rebuilt, the prophet linked the work of making a place for the presence of God to an even stronger expression of the presence of God to come when Messiah, Christ, would enter that temple giving it greater glory and bringing peace in that place.

Christ was dedicated as an infant, bringing the temple greater glory than it had ever had. He then came as a youth wise beyond his years with knowledge of scripture, and as an adult he taught and healed in that place. In the victory of his death as Lord of Heaven, He tore town the temple curtain separating man from God, bringing the promised peace.

During Advent we look once again with wonder at the truth that God humbled himself to live among us as an infant. This truth of taking on human flesh and being the presence of God in that flesh is a story filled with wonder. Our Christmas carols, pageants, and celebrations sometimes capture that wonder for a moment with the lights, the music, and the loving warmth we share. The symbolism of the temple was always that God lived among his people, and that same story is in the infant in the crib.

December 28
Coming King — Zechariah 1-6, John 16:13

Zechariah presents Christ as coming King. He offered a set of visions that bear a striking resemblance to the visions in Revelation. His work, like a set of canvases, has artist's notes to explain the meaning of each item in the exhibit. Zechariah's images that reoccur in John's gospel include bad shepherds vs. a good shepherd, healthy sheep, the king on a donkey, 30 pieces of silver for betrayal, the spear thrust of the crucifixion.

God spoke with kindness and comfort, promised that he would live among us, remove our sin, enable us to complete his word, and be both priest and king for us. How beautifully these promises are fulfilled in Christ, and how our celebration of his incarnation reminds us of these truths.

In Revelation, John used Zechariah's images such as a woman in a basket, and surveyors with a measuring rod. But Revelation changed Zechariah's visions by placing Christ at the center of them.

| Images | Symbolism | Christ present |
|--|--|--|
| Horsemen (Zech. 1:8-10, 6:1-2) | God's sovereignty over the earth | The Lamb sends the horsemen (Rev 6:1-8) |
| Priest in a robe (Zech. 3:7, 8) | Priests as "symbols of the good things to come" i.e. Christ (Zech. 3:8) | Vision of Christ as priest (Rev. 1:13-16) |
| Lampstands (Zech. 4:2) | Believing congregations and God watching over them | Christ among the lampstands (Rev. 1:12-13) |
| Olive trees (Zech. 4:11-14) | Prophetic witnesses | Resurrected and ascended to God (Rev. 11:1-12) |
| Scroll (Zech. 5:1) | Judgments | Lamb takes and opens the scroll (Rev. 5:6-7) |
| Warrior (Zech. 9:14) | Defeating evil | Christ leading heavenly army (Rev. 19:16) |
| Fountain (Zech. 13:1) | Cleansing evil | Fountain comes from Lamb's throne (Rev. 22:1) |
| Continuous light but its source unknown (Zech. 14:6-9) | Holiness | Lamb is the light (Rev. 21:22-24) |

The beautiful lesson is that once Christ had come and could be seen clearly, he completed the picture and became the center of it. For us too, he is the center, and our lives make sense as we live in that reality.

December 29

Christ is Coming! — Zechariah 7-14, Matthew 21:5

Zechariah prophesied Palm Sunday. The latter half of Zechariah is one beautiful Messianic prophecy after another with many predicting the kingdom of peace with the righteous king in charge. Zechariah said that God desires justice and peace and prosperity for us, he will make us strong, and he will pour out a Spirit of grace. His fire will purify us and he will become king over all the earth.

The betrayal and purchase of the potter's field with the money Judas returned before his suicide was prophesied. (Zechariah 11:12, 13 is quoted in Matthew 27:9 and attributed to Jeremiah. This kind of slip humanizes the scripture writers. There is a "potter's field" reference in Jeremiah, but the actual quote is from Zechariah.)

Poor shepherds were contrasted with the good shepherd. Christ also quoted Zechariah to warn the disciples they would desert him. When he was pierced, the gospel writers quoted Zechariah's prophecy of this. Day of the Lord prophecies look forward to when Christ will step down on the Mount of Olives, split it apart, accompanied by his holy ones.

When quoting Zechariah regarding Christ's arrival on a donkey, John commented that his disciples did not recognize that prophecy was being fulfilled until after the ascension. So often we are blind to spiritual realities and only later look back in amazement and recognize how God was present.

All these specific prophecies were given about 500 years before they occurred, confirming that Christ was the promised one. The center of history and the center of the universe can become the center of our hearts.

December 30

Malachi, Matthew 3:11

Malachi presented Christ as a blazing fire that refines silver, burning away its impurities. A messenger identified as John the Baptist in gospel quotations was promised to prepare the way. John reinforced Christ's work as baptizing in the Holy Spirit and fire. Malachi promised that Lord they are seeking would come to his temple.

Malachi wrote during Nehemiah's time when the faltering community was dealing with indifferent and sloppy temple worship, foreign marriages, and

post-exilic depression. They were promised their community would survive out of God's grace in choosing them as those preparing for Messiah. A celebrating, worshipping, and Torah-studying culture needed to exist as the context for the promised one. Even if they lived under political domination, they could continue to live in hope of a kingdom led by righteous Messiah.

Malachi responded to questions we have a tendency to ask:

“How have you loved us?” “How have we ever despised your name?”

“How have we been insincere in worship?” “How have we spoken against you?”

“What's the use of serving God?”

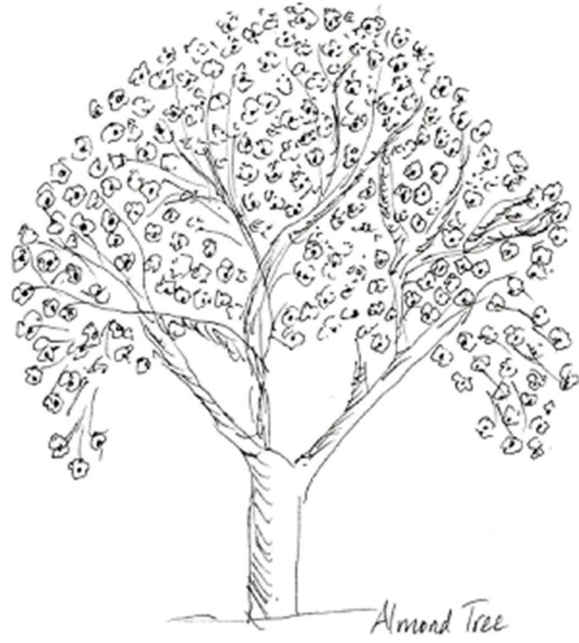
Perhaps receiving the Spirit and allowing his fire to purify us is central to answering those questions. As we recall our celebration of Christ's coming we are reminded of the passages in Handel's *Messiah* where we sing lines from Malachi regarding preparation and purification for Emmanuel, God with us.

December 31
Celebration
Revelation 15:3-4

As the Hebrew scriptures drew to a close, all was prepared for Christ's arrival. The theme of the coming kingdom was at a crossroads. The Jewish people, largely the tribe of Judah, had returned to the land promised to their ancestors, but they were now under Roman domination. The line of David was known but is not actually the ruling family. The people had finally learned the difficult and painful lesson that idolatry results in death and destruction, and had renounced it. All was prepared for Christ to come down from heaven to show God's face.

Everything in the book led us to the Messiah. Christ as king of God's kingdom can be traced through all we have seen and read. He was the one who gave Adam dominion over created things. He was the one who promised Abraham the land for a kingdom. He called the freed slaves to become a kingdom of priests at Mount Sinai, and gave a covenant to the people as their king. Once in the land of Canaan, he continued as king represented by warriors and prophets until a formal kingship was instituted. To David he promised an everlasting kingdom with one of David's descendants on the throne. Prophetic references to a future righteous king and a peaceable kingdom were repeated throughout Psalms and all the prophets.

After teaching about the nature of the kingdom, Christ died, taking on all suffering and all sin as the loving God who could redeem all people. He was raised to the right hand of God, and sent his followers out to spread the good news of the kingdom. In the final chapters of the New Testament we have the final images of his taking up his position as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.



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