

**May-June 2020**

# **Spiritual Pathways**

**Readings,  
Reflections,  
Prayers**

A man and a woman are walking across a stone bridge over a river. The man is wearing a blue shirt and dark pants, and the woman is wearing a purple shirt and brown pants. Both are carrying backpacks. The bridge is made of large, stacked stones. The river is calm and reflects the surrounding greenery. The background is a dense forest of tall trees under a cloudy sky.

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## Monday, May 4: Psalm 42

For the next few weeks we'll look at spiritual pathways, different ways we can relate to God. Especially as we go through these strange times of social isolation, it's good to remember we can connect with God in many different ways. We'll explore different ways people relate to God. This will help you find ways that work best for you. It will also stretch you to try other approaches you might not have thought about before.

Just as we have different personalities and learning styles, we have different ways that we relate best to God. We'll look at seven different ways that people often get to know God. Some will be very familiar to you – others less familiar. You will find some are come naturally to you (you've been doing them all your life), while others may be new. This can be a rich opportunity to understand how you can connect better with God, be spiritually refreshed, and encourage other people.

The standard expectation in many circles is you have to have a daily "quiet time"/"devo" in which you sit alone quietly, read a passage, and pray for at least 20 minutes (or an hour, or more). There is incredible value in that approach. Many, many people find it helpful. But many of us struggle. Some of our lives are so busy that finding dedicated quiet time is very difficult. Or our attention span is so short: our minds wander so easily. We feel guilty. And frustrated. We wonder if we're doing something wrong or if there is something wrong with us ... Yet we connect well with God in other ways.

Good friendships, marriages, relationships with children and/or parents all take work: we have to make time for those we love. It has to be quality time. We know some friends love to do breakfast, others like to go for walks, others like to work on projects, others like to talk politics ... One approach doesn't work in all relationships. Great relationships reflect the personalities, interests, and temperaments of both people.

The same is true in our relationship with God. What works best for each of us is going to reflect our unique personality, interests, and temperament. Some of us really connect with God going for a walk. Some love deep Bible Study. Others relate best to God through worship music. Others through doing things for other people. Yes, we do all need to read Scripture and pray, but that traditional "quiet time/devo" is not necessarily going to help everyone thrive. That's OK. We'll try to help you find what works for you. And don't feel guilty about it. Be excited, energized, and enthused about it.

God simply wants us to get to know Him – in whatever way works best for us (He can relate to us in all seven ways and many, many more.).

One of the keys to a great relationship – with a person or God – is honesty. So be honest with God about how you're feeling. What's working. What isn't. What's great. What's frustrating. What you are thankful for. What you're struggling with ...

Psalm 42 is an intense, personal prayer. Whoever wrote it (we are not sure) is struggling though their faith. What I appreciate so much about this psalm is that it gives me permission to express my deepest longings, greatest frustrations, strongest fears, most crushing disappointments ... and bring them to God. Sometimes we wonder how we can pray when we feel disillusioned, when we doubt, when we struggle, or when we're in pain. The answer? Just blurt it out.

*God, guide me with Your wisdom,  
God chastise me with your justice,  
God help me with your mercy,  
God protect me with Your strength.  
God fill me with Your fullness,  
God shield me with Your shade,  
God fill me with your grace,  
for the sake of Your Anointed Son.  
Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

## Tuesday, May 5: Luke 10:38-42

Gary Thomas, author of *Sacred pathways*, writes, "Expecting all Christians to have a certain type of quiet time can wreak havoc in a church or small group. Excited about meaningful (to us) approaches to the Christian life, we sometimes assume that if others do not experience the same thing, something must be wrong with their faith. Please, don't be intimidated by others' expectations. God wants to know the real you, not a caricature of what somebody else wants you to be. He created you with a certain personality and certain spiritual temperament. God wants your worship, according to the way he made you." (This book is a great starting place if you want to learn more about these different ways to get to know God)

The God of Scripture – through all 66 separate books of the Bible, from Genesis through Revelation – is one and the same God, but He relates to different people very differently.

- Abraham and Jacob love to build altars and make offerings.
- Moses and Elijah stand up against the forces of evil as activists.
- David dances before the Lord and writes passionate spiritual poems.
- Solomon builds a temple.
- Ezekiel and John dream great dreams.
- Mordecai and Stephen have compassion on those in need.
- Martha loves to serve, while Mary is more contemplative, simply enjoying Jesus' presence.

Just as we enjoy a variety of ways to refresh ourselves physically and mentally, God has also given us a variety of ways to refresh ourselves spiritually. While we may have one dominant or preferred spiritual pathway, most of us enjoy knowing God in a variety of ways. Most of us have two or three ways we relate well to God. One or two of the pathways may be very unnatural for us. But it's good for us to try them out. They will stretch us and deepen our experience with God.

The goal of this study is to help us enjoy and experience God's presence in new and powerful ways as we understand ourselves – and Him – so much better. Then we can impact the world in new ways, as well. Fill out the questionnaire on the following pages ([or online, here](#)).

We need to not to judge others. Just because one pathway works really well for us to connect with God, we needn't assume it's going to work well for another person. In fact, appreciating the various way God created – and relates to – us can help us celebrate God's goodness and creativity more profoundly.

*I will kindle my fire this morning, in the presence of God, the Creator of heaven and earth;  
I will kindle my fire this morning, in the presence of Jesus, my Saviour and King;  
I will kindle my fire this morning, in the presence of the Spirit who cleanses and guides me.  
Without anger, without jealousy,  
without enmity, without fear,  
without ill will toward anyone under the sun,  
with the holy Son of God to shield me.  
God, kindle within my heart a flame of love for my neighbor,  
for my enemy, for my friend, for my family,  
for the brave, the knave, and the servant of all.  
Kindle within my heart a flame of devotion to follow You  
and the ways You would have me go:  
ways of service,  
ways of giving,  
ways of prayer,  
ways of fasting,  
ways of study,  
and ways of love.  
Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

## Spiritual Pathway Assessment<sup>1</sup>

1. Respond to each statement below according to the following scale:

3 = Consistently/definitely true of me

2 = Often/usually true of me

1 = Once in a while/sometimes true of me

0 = Not at all/never true of me

2. Put the number (0-3) in the blank before each statement

3. Transfer the numbers you gave for each assessment statement to the grid on page 5.

4. Total each column. The highest number identifies your preferred spiritual pathway; the next highest number, your secondary pathway. The lowest is your least preferred pathway.

- \_\_\_ 1. When I have a problem, I'd rather pray with people than pray alone.
- \_\_\_ 2. In a church service, I most look forward to the teaching.
- \_\_\_ 3. People who know me would describe me as enthusiastic during worship times.
- \_\_\_ 4. No matter how tired I get, I usually come alive when a challenge is placed before me.
- \_\_\_ 5. Spiritual reality sometimes feels more real to me than the physical world.
- \_\_\_ 6. I get distracted if I notice details in the surroundings that haven't been attended to.
- \_\_\_ 7. A beautiful sunset can give me a spiritual high that temporarily blocks out everything bothering me.
- \_\_\_ 8. It makes me feel better about myself to hang out with people I know and like.
- \_\_\_ 9. I've never understood why people don't love to study the Bible in depth.
- \_\_\_ 10. God touches me every time I gather with other believers for praise.
- \_\_\_ 11. People around me know how passionate I feel about the causes I'm involved in.
- \_\_\_ 12. I experience a deep inner joy when I am in a quiet place, free from distractions.
- \_\_\_ 13. Helping others is easy for me, even when I have problems.
- \_\_\_ 14. When faced with a difficult decision, I like to walk in the woods or some other outdoor setting.
- \_\_\_ 15. When I am alone too much, I tend to lose energy or get a little depressed.
- \_\_\_ 16. People seek me out when they need answers to biblical questions.
- \_\_\_ 17. Even when I'm tired, I look forward to going to a church service.
- \_\_\_ 18. I sense the presence of God most when I'm doing his work.
- \_\_\_ 19. I don't understand how Christians can be so busy and still think they're hearing from God.
- \_\_\_ 20. I love being able to serve behind the scenes, out of the spotlight.
- \_\_\_ 21. I experience God in nature so powerfully I'm sometimes tempted not to bother with church.
- \_\_\_ 22. I experience God most tangibly in fellowship with a few others.
- \_\_\_ 23. When I need to be refreshed, a stimulating book is just the thing.
- \_\_\_ 24. I am happiest when I praise God together with others.
- \_\_\_ 25. "When the going gets tough, the tough get going" – that's true about me.
- \_\_\_ 26. My family and friends sometimes tease me about being such a hermit.
- \_\_\_ 27. People around me sometimes tell me they admire my compassion.
- \_\_\_ 28. Things in nature often teach me valuable lessons about God.
- \_\_\_ 29. I don't understand people who have a hard time revealing personal things about themselves.
- \_\_\_ 30. Sometimes I spend too much time learning about an issue rather than dealing with it.
- \_\_\_ 31. I don't think there's any good excuse for missing a worship time.
- \_\_\_ 32. I get tremendous satisfaction from seeing people working together to achieve a goal.

<sup>1</sup> From John Ortberg and Ruth Haley Barton, *An Ordinary Day with Jesus: Participant's Guide* (PG) (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2001), 67-72. Used by permission, 2005. There is a great *Leader's Guide* (LG), too.

- \_\_\_ 33. When I face a difficulty, being alone feels most helpful.
- \_\_\_ 34. Even when I'm tired, I find I have the energy and desire to care for people's problems.
- \_\_\_ 35. God is so real when I'm in a beautiful, natural setting.
- \_\_\_ 36. When I'm tired, there's nothing better than going out with friends to refresh me.
- \_\_\_ 37. I worship best in response to theological truth clearly explained.
- \_\_\_ 38. I like how all the world's problems – and mine – are unimportant when I'm praising God at church.
- \_\_\_ 39. I get frustrated with people's apathy in the face of injustice.
- \_\_\_ 40. If the truth were told, I sometimes feel guilty for enjoying silence and solitude so much.
- \_\_\_ 41. I am happiest when I find someone who really needs help and I step in and offer it.
- \_\_\_ 42. Others know that if I'm not around, I'm most likely outside in a beautiful place.
- \_\_\_ 43. People around me describe me as a people person.
- \_\_\_ 44. I often read lots of books or articles to help me work through a problem.
- \_\_\_ 45. When I get overwhelmed, there's nothing like a good worship service to get me back on track.
- \_\_\_ 46. I should probably take more time to slow down, but I really love what I do, especially in ministry.
- \_\_\_ 47. Sometimes I spend too much time mulling over negative things people say about me.
- \_\_\_ 48. I experience God's presence as I counsel some who is struggling or in trouble.
- \_\_\_ 49. When I see natural beauty, something wonderful stirs in me that is difficult to describe.

### Spiritual Pathway Assessment Scoring

Transfer the numbers from the assessment to this grid and total each column.

<b>1.</b>	<b>2.</b>	<b>3.</b>	<b>4.</b>	<b>5.</b>	<b>6.</b>	<b>7.</b>
<b>8.</b>	<b>9.</b>	<b>10.</b>	<b>11.</b>	<b>12.</b>	<b>13.</b>	<b>14.</b>
<b>15.</b>	<b>16.</b>	<b>17.</b>	<b>18.</b>	<b>19.</b>	<b>20.</b>	<b>21.</b>
<b>22.</b>	<b>23.</b>	<b>24.</b>	<b>25.</b>	<b>26.</b>	<b>27.</b>	<b>28.</b>
<b>29.</b>	<b>30.</b>	<b>31.</b>	<b>32.</b>	<b>33.</b>	<b>34.</b>	<b>35.</b>
<b>36.</b>	<b>37.</b>	<b>38.</b>	<b>39.</b>	<b>40.</b>	<b>41.</b>	<b>42.</b>
<b>43.</b>	<b>44.</b>	<b>45.</b>	<b>46.</b>	<b>47.</b>	<b>48.</b>	<b>49.</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Relational</b>	<b>Intellectual</b>	<b>Worship</b>	<b>Activist</b>	<b>Contemplative</b>	<b>Serving</b>	<b>Creation</b>

Transfer your totals below. Which are your strongest? Which are your lowest?

- \_\_\_ Relational      I connect best to God when I am with others
- \_\_\_ Intellectual    I connect best to God when I learn.
- \_\_\_ Worship        I connect best to God when I worship.
- \_\_\_ Activist        I connect best to God when doing great things.
- \_\_\_ Contemplative I connect best to God in silence.
- \_\_\_ Serving        I connect best to God while completing Kingdom tasks.
- \_\_\_ Creation        I connect best to God in nature.

## Wednesday, May 6: John 2:1-11 RELATIONAL

Some people really relate well to God when they're with other people. For more extroverted people, for instance, being together with others really helps them grow spiritually. Of course, these days, this is more challenging than normal. But there are still ways to connect: by phone, Skype, Zoom, etc.

Relational people find God in their relationships. *"In fact,"* writes John Ortberg, *"people with a relational pathway are small group junkies. You start small groups in your neighbourhood, at work, during plane trips, on long elevator rides. Your life is an open book, and you're surprised that it's difficult for others to be open. Salespeople call you up to refinance your home, and you ask them, 'How are **you** doing, REALLY?'* Being alone can drive you crazy. *'Solitude wouldn't be so bad,'* you think, *'if I could just bring a few friends along.'* Being with people energizes you – the more people, the better" (LG, p.206). Do you know people who are highly relational? Are you that way?

Relational people don't want to be alone being contemplative, don't want to be alone in creation, and – if they are being activists – it's not the cause as much as the relationships that are important.

Jesus certainly spent time alone in prayer. He spent time in His Father's glorious creation. But He also really, really liked hanging out with people. He went to parties at the homes of tax collectors (outsiders) and Pharisees (insiders, Jewish religious leaders). The guests included the rich and the powerful, and the outcasts and riffraff. What seemed to bother the stuffy, "religious" types wasn't that Jesus went to parties, but that He seemed to enjoy Himself too much. They called Him a glutton and winebibber.

Jesus performed His first miracle at a wedding banquet. Tradition says it was the disciple John's wedding. This could well be true: Mary, who was the cousin of John's mother, seems to feel some responsibility for the guests. The point of the miracle is not that Jesus had the capacity to turn water into wine, but that He knew that for the party to continue, more and better wine was needed. It is, of course, a metaphor for what Jesus' coming is all about – something new and better – the Kingdom of God – has come. Jesus has come to give us life – to the fullest.

- Enjoy the people God has given you: family, friends, co-workers, neighbours.
- Allow them to encourage you when you feel down.
- Find ways to encourage them as well ...

*God the Father, all-powerful – Jesus, all-loving – Holy Spirit, all-filling –  
Three-in-one, ever-living, ever-mighty, ever-lasting,  
who brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea,  
who brought Jonah to land from the belly of the great creature of the deep,  
who brought Paul and his companions in the ship  
from the torment of the sea, from the fury of the waves,  
from the gale that was great, from the storm that was heavy,  
save us and shield us and sanctify us.  
King of all creation and the elements,  
be seated at the helm of our lives  
and lead us in peace to the end of our journey,  
when the winds blow wild and swirl and whirl, keep us safe and free of harm.  
You are the God who saves us.  
In the end bring us to a safe harbor in heaven,  
where the winds are soft and the eddies calm.  
Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

## Thursday, May 7: John 1:35-51 RELATIONAL

When people come to Jesus they rarely come alone. They are usually invited by someone else. God bless the inviters.

- John 1:41-42: *"The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus."*
- John 1:45: *"Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'"*

For extroverted, relational people, this kind of networking is relatively easy. For those of us who are more introverted and more inclined toward more personal spiritual pathways, being relational can be a stretch. We can find people exhausting. Small groups, especially if they are characterized by deep personal sharing, can be uncomfortable. Talking with people about our faith is challenging.

The good news is that neither Andrew nor Philip did much more than say, *"Hey – there is this amazing person, Jesus. You should get to know Him."* Jesus is the One who led people to faith. Ultimately we never convert anyone, or convince anyone of the truth ... the Holy Spirit is the One who does all that.

We can simply share the relationship we have found in Jesus. We can talk about our experiences. And then we let the Spirit take who we are and what we say ... and He changes people's lives.

Think about your experiences with Jesus: what does He mean to you? What difference does He make in your life? Who do you know who would really be blessed getting to know Him. Pray about that ...

In this current culture of physical isolation, how can we stay well-connected? Who can you call, today?

*O loving Christ, who died upon the cross,  
each day and each night I remember Your love.  
In my lying down in my rising up, in life and in death,  
You are my health and my peace.  
Each day and each night I remember Your forgiveness,  
bestowed on me so gently and generously.  
Each day and each night I affirm my love to You.  
May there be life in my speech, truth in what I say.  
I place myself with those who struggle today, and pray for them.  
O Christ, You are a bright flame before me.  
You are a guiding star above me.  
You are the light and love I see in other's eyes.  
Keep me, O Christ, in a love that is tender.  
Keep me, O Christ, in a love that is true.  
Keep me, O Christ, in a love that is strong.  
Tonight, tomorrow, and always.  
Amen.*

Philip Newell

### **Friday, May 8: John 12:1-11 RELATIONAL**

Relational people love spending time with people. This is where real life really happens. Mary's act of worship and devotion are just the natural thing would happen in a small group with Jesus. Wouldn't it be great to be in a small group with Jesus?

In John 11, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus spent quality time – REAL quality time – with the people He loved when He raised Lazarus. Then He went off to the wilderness to reconnect with His Father (John 11:54). Now Jesus is back with Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and a bunch of other people having a great time. There is a wonderful rhythm to Jesus life: He is busy with people, then takes time to withdraw and renew, then He's back with people again ...

Tony Dungy, former head coach of the Indianapolis Colts football team, has a wonderful book, *The Mentor Leader*, in which he emphasizes the importance of empowering and inspiring the people around you. He

writes, "The secret to success is good leadership, and good leadership is all about making the lives of your team members or workers better." Relational people who can use their gifts to bless others have an incredible impact in the Kingdom of God. Whose life can you make better today?

"It's about the journey – mine and yours – and the lives we can touch, the legacy we can leave, and the world we can change for the better" (Tony Dungy).

If you are highly relational use your spiritual gift to serve others, encourage others, and pray for others ... How can we continue to do that in spite of social distancing? Who can you encourage, today?

*Thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, for the many gifts you have given me:  
each day and each night, each lake and each land,  
each weather fair, each calm, each wild.  
I am giving You the worship of my whole life,  
I am giving You glory with my whole power;  
I am giving You praise with my whole being;  
I'm giving You honor with my whole life.  
I'm giving You reverence with my whole understanding;  
I'm giving You offering with my whole thought;  
I'm giving You praise with my whole emotion;  
I am giving You humility in the blood of the Lamb.  
I'm giving You love with my whole devotion;  
I am giving You service with my whole desire;  
I'm giving You glory with my whole heart;  
I'm giving You adoration with my whole sense;  
I am giving you my very existence  
with my whole mind and heart, body and soul, O God of glory.  
Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

## **Saturday, May 9: John 12:12-19 RELATIONAL**

When we go through good times – it's great to have friends with whom we can share our victories. When we go through rough times – it's great to have friends who can share our sorrows with us.

When our family and friends go through challenging times, they need us. And we discover that we are as blessed helping others (or even more) than the ones we help are blessed.

Jesus is always acting in the context of relationships with those closest to Him. Although in one sense He is alone – only He is the Messiah and only He can accomplish the incredible work of redemption on the cross – He keeps His friends close. He draws great strength from his close companions.

As Jesus comes into Jerusalem on the Sunday before His crucifixion, the people wave palm branches and welcome Him as their king. His symbolic entrance evokes imagery from Psalm 118:25-26 and Zechariah 9:9, Old Testament passages that speak about the coming of the Messiah, the Saviour. Immediately after this very public celebration, Jesus spends quality time with the people most dear to Him (tomorrow & Monday).

During the good times and the hard times, our challenge is to keep our relationships strong, too. Are there people we don't talk to? We avoid? We dislike? We just left slip away? We have forgotten about?

Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian who, along with her father and other family members, helped many Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust during World War II and was imprisoned for it, writes of one of the German guards, "Even as the angry vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? 'Lord Jesus,' I prayed, 'forgive me and help me to forgive him ... Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness ...' And so I discovered that it is not on our

*forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives along with the command, the love itself."*

Who do you need to build a better relationship with? What will you do about it?

*Lord, we have fallen into sin,  
we have fallen into wickedness,  
we have fallen into evil.  
Lord, lift us up and set us free.  
Lord, we have fallen into rebellion,  
we have fallen into disobedience,  
we have fallen into unrighteousness.  
Lord, lift us up and set us free.  
Lord, we have fallen into despair,  
we have fallen into disillusionment,  
we have fallen into depression.  
Lord, lift us up and set us free.  
Lord, we have fallen into loneliness,  
we have fallen into darkness,  
we have fallen into hell.  
Lord, lift us up and set us free.  
We come to You, Lord, for You alone can heal and restore us.  
We are not able to heal ourselves;  
we are not able to forgive ourselves;  
we are not able to restore ourselves;  
we are not able to sanctify ourselves;  
we are not able to satisfy ourselves.  
We come to You, Lord, for You alone can make us whole.  
Amen.*

David Adam

### **Sunday, May 10 (Mother's Day): John 12:17-36 RELATIONAL**

How can we be relational people on Mother's Day, 2020? Call. Skype. Zoom.

One of my Facebook friends has 1,413 Facebook friends other than me. Boy, do I feel special ... not. No one can have 1414 deep, meaningful friendship with people on a social media site. Actually, this particular person and I do have a decent friendship. When I am in Toronto, if I have time, I know he will get together with me, have a coffee, and a great chat. And I know that if I ever were in some kind of crises in Toronto, he would be there to help. Actress Marlene Dietrich once quipped, *"It's the friends you can call up at 4 a.m. that matter."* I know this fellow would be there for me in Toronto ... even at 4 a.m.

Think about the people swirling around Jesus. Some are just curious about who He is. Some are His enemies. Some are His friends. And with these friends, Jesus shares His heart – even though they really don't understand at all what He is saying. As things get more dangerous, Jesus' friends will struggle (and fail) to be there for Him, give them credit for listening, caring, and staying with Him through this tumultuous time. The disciples are not perfect. But they try to be good friends.

The challenge for relational people is that we can have lots and lots and lots of acquaintances ... but not necessarily many close friends and deep relationships. Another challenge is that we can grow dependent on others and cannot actually do much on our own – we ALWAYS have to be with other people. Of course, tis has been particularly challenging over the past several weeks.

Tony Dungy says, *"Building a life of significance, and creating a legacy of real value, means being willing to get your hands dirty. It means being willing to step out in your life and onto the platforms of influence*

*you've been given and touch the lives of people in need. Whether it's in your business, your school, your community, or your family, if you want to make a difference in the lives of the people you lead, you must be willing to walk alongside them, to lift and encourage them, to share moments of understanding with them, and to spend time with them ..."* Who can you spend meaningful time with?

*You who called me to hope in your Name,  
which is the first of all creation,  
open the eyes of my heart that I may know you,  
who alone remains highest among the highest and holiest among the holy.  
You who called me to life in your Name,  
which is the source of all creation,  
open the eyes of my heart that I might love you,  
and share your love among the hurting and the lonely,  
that all may know your Name, the life and light of the world.  
Amen*

Clement of Rome (1<sup>st</sup> Century)

### **Monday, May 11: John 13:1-17 RELATIONAL**

In ancient Jewish society, there was nothing more humbling than to wash someone's smelly, dirty, calloused feet. Yet Jesus – God Himself, the Creator of the universe, the Lord of time and space – does this for His friends. *"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you,"* Jesus says, *"Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them"* (13:15-17).

Some Christians take this command literally – (before social distancing) they have regular foot washing ceremonies as part of their worship. There is nothing wrong with that. But I think Jesus is more interested in what the act of foot washing *symbolizes* than literally going through the act of pouring water on someone else's feet. Most people today don't have smelly, dirty feet. Bathing a person's already-clean feet, if it has no meaning to it, accomplishes nothing.

What is Jesus really saying? He is modelling for us a commitment to care for one another ... to do things for one another that we might rather not do ... to humbly see others as of more value than ourselves ...

Mother Teresa wisely said, *"It is easy to love the people far away. It is not always easy to love those close to us. It is easier to give a cup of rice to relieve hunger than to relieve the loneliness and pain of someone unloved in our home. Bring love into your home for this is where our love for each other must start."*

How can we truly invest in the people closest to us? How can I love – really love – those closest to me? How can I do that well today? Call. Connect. Care.

*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I bless your name this day.  
Let all creation praise you.  
Let the daylight, and the shadows praise you.  
Let the fertile earth and the swelling sea praise you.  
Let the winds and the rain, the lightning and thunder praise you.  
Let all that breathes, both male and female, praise you.  
There is no plant in the ground that does not tell of your beauty, O Jesus.  
There is no creature on the earth, there is no life in the sea, that does not proclaim your goodness.  
There is no bird on the wing, there is no star in the sky,  
there is nothing beneath the sun, that is not full of your blessing.  
Awaken my understanding of your presence all around me, Lord Jesus.  
And kindle my will, to be caring for your creation.  
Kindle within me, a love for you in all things.  
Amen*

Philip Newell

## **Tuesday, May 12: John 14 (and 15 and 16 if you have time.) RELATIONAL**

On the Thursday evening before His crucifixion, Jesus shared His final meal with His disciples (what we call the 'Last Supper'). John's gospel records a lot more of what Jesus said to His friends that evening than Matthew, Mark or Luke (after all, John was actually there). Notice how richly He describes our relationship with God. Ultimately, as the Holy Spirit is given to us after Jesus' resurrection, we have God's personal presence with us all the time. Isn't that fantastic.

Contemplative people know all about the powerful sense of God's Spirit in their lives. Those who are more relational, servers, activists, and intellectuals can struggle to know God in this kind of an intimate, personal way. So much of our experience of God comes through interactions with other people (or in the case of intellectuals with books) that we may not be really sure what a personal encounter with God's Spirit looks or feels like. One of the big challenges for relational people is to develop a capacity of silence and solitude so that you can really hear God speaking **you**. You are God's Beloved. Do you know that? Can you hear Him?

Work at spending quality time alone with God. This can be really difficult at first. But you will find that as you get to know God in more personal and more intimate ways, your relationships with other people will be deeply enriched as well. You will have more to talk about. You will have more to share. And you will treasure the times you have with other people – and your times alone with God – much more.

You may find keeping a journal helps – it gives you something to "do" if you are fidgety. Ask your friends to help you be accountable to spend some quality time alone with God. Get them to check up occasionally on you and ask how you are doing. Talk deeply about what you are learning when you're alone with God.

*Worthy of praise from every mouth,  
worthy of confession from every tongue,  
worthy of worship from every creature,  
is Your glorious Name, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:  
for you have created the whole world in your grace,  
and by your compassion you have saved the world.  
To your Majesty, O God, ten thousand times ten thousand bow down and adore,  
singing and praising without ceasing and saying,  
'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts;  
heaven and earth are full of your praises.  
Hosanna in the highest.'  
May my heart and my voice worship you in Spirit  
and in truth today, too, O my God.  
Amen*

Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389)

## **Wednesday, May 13: Acts 22:1-16 INTELLECTUAL**

Some of us don't relate so well with God in relationship with other people. We love to ponder deeply the truths and mysteries of God. Intellectual-pathway people get to know God best as we learn more about Him. We love to read Scripture and (theology and biblical study) books. We may not have much patience for emotional approaches to faith or people who love building things or making meals. During worship we may find yourself counting down songs until the real meat – the message. These days we may skip the online songs and prayers and focus in on the sermon.

We like *in depth* Bible study, and spirited, well-informed debate (it's about the learning that takes place, not the relationships). John Ortberg quips, "*In a small group, you're concerned that those relational types just swap ignorance when they get together. You are a thinker. You may have a feeling occasionally, but you've found that if you wait, it usually passes. When you face problems or spiritual challenges, you go into problem-solving mode*" (Ortberg and Barton, p. 200).

Paul was this kind of a person. Paul was a Pharisee, the scholarly people of his day. When Paul perceived his intellectual understanding of Judaism was under attack he went into problem-solving mode. In Acts 8, Paul was one of those who approved of stoning Stephen. In Acts 9 we read in more detail about his vendetta against the early Christians. Where did this zeal come from? He had studied with the best of the best of the best Jewish theologians. He knew "the truth." And he made a plan to protect the truth.

Jesus dramatically corrects Paul's understanding of the truth, of course. But Paul's intellectual bent would continue in his Christian writings. In Paul's letters – Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon – we have systematic and logical teachings about what Jesus' coming, death, and resurrection mean. Paul takes the stories of Jesus' life and ministry and draws out key themes so they all make coherent sense. He is a brilliant academic.

We need intellectuals. We need people who can help us understand and apply our faith in an ever-changing world. In fact, throughout western history, many of the greatest intellectuals have been Christians: Gregory, Augustine, Origen, Calvin, Erasmus, Galileo, Aquinas, Kepler, Pascal, Boyle, Newton, Michael Faraday, John Houghton, John Polkinghorne, Francis Collins, Tom Wright, and many, many more.

*"Our culture doesn't always think of the mind when it thinks of love and devotion," writes Gary Thomas. "Drugstores don't sell chocolate brains on Valentine's Day – it's always the heart that is exalted when love is talked about – but biblically speaking, chocolate brains would be perfectly acceptable. The Bible is emphatic that our mind is one of the key elements that we can use to love God" (p.195).*

*"'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, **and all your mind.**' This is the first and greatest commandment," says Jesus (Matthew 22:37-28). How can you love God with your mind today? Read Scripture ... Read challenging books<sup>2</sup> ... Have stimulating conversations ...*

Our prayer is from Isaiah 11:

*Lord, may your Spirit rest on me –  
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and might,  
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.  
I will delight in obeying you, LORD;  
I will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay.  
I will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited.  
Lord, may Jesus be a banner of salvation to all the world.  
Amen.*

#### **Thursday, May 14: 1 Kings 4:29-34 INTELLECTUAL**

*"God gave Solomon very great wisdom and understanding, and knowledge as vast as the sands of the seashore ..." One of the greatest intellectuals in the Old Testament is Solomon. Solomon wrote the biblical books of Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs/Solomon, much of Proverbs, and a few Psalms. These writings are part of what both Jewish and Christian traditions classify as "Wisdom Literature."*

Solomon didn't just use his mind to think about "religious" things. *"He could speak with authority about all kinds of plants, from the great cedar of Lebanon to the tiny hyssop that grows from cracks in a wall. He could also speak about animals, birds, small creatures, and fish" (4:33).* Solomon loved to learn about God's amazing creation. He certainly was well read and very observant about what we would now call biology. Most likely he was equally knowledgeable about other topics, too.

We might be tempted to call Solomon a scientist. But the words "*science*"/"*scientist*" were not actually even

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<sup>2</sup> Great resources for intellectuals: check out the books of N.T. (Tom) Wright, Alister McGrath, C.S. Lewis, Josh McDowell, J.I. Packer, Lee Strobel, Christopher Wright, John Stott ...

in existence until around 1830. Before 1830 or so, people who studied the heavens or rocks, flora and fauna, or the human body were known as "*natural philosophers*." The word "*philosophy*" comes from two Greek words: "*philia*" and "*sophia*" – "*love*" and "*wisdom*." People love God's wisdom about created things.

The word "*science*" – from the Latin verb "*scio*" ("*I know*") became popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Impartial "knowing" is what we typically associate with studying the world – scientists methodically study things using the experimental method and they "know" stuff. This kind of science deals with the hard world of facts.

What happens to our image of understanding the created world around us when we replace the idea of "*scio*" – "*I know facts about nature*" – with "*I love wisdom about natural things*"? Solomon was very much a natural philosopher. He loved learning about stuff – but also knew how to translate that in to wise action. He loved facts (science). But He also wanted to live wisely (wisdom).

One of the great ways in which science and Christianity are so complementary is that science is great at describing what "is": observable facts. But science often cannot give us wise counsel on how to use our knowledge in the world around us. We need God's wisdom to apply our knowledge. The Bible is NOT a science textbook – it doesn't give us scientific descriptions of the universe (our God-given brains can figure that out.). The Bible does give us wisdom for how to use knowledge about God's creation wisely. Francis Bacon (1561-1626), talked about "*the Book of God's word*" – the Bible, and "*the Book of God's works*" – the world around us. He urges us to "*endeavor an endless progress or proficiency in both*." It is good for us to learn about God from both Scripture and His creation.

Enjoy learning about God's creation: the universe and world around us (science). Then, seek God's wisdom for how to live wisely in His incredible creation (wisdom).

*You are God and I praise you;  
you are the Lord and I acclaim you;  
You are the eternal Father;  
all creation worships you.  
To you all angels, all the powers of heaven,  
cherubim and seraphim sing in endless praise,  
'Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might;  
heaven and earth are full of your glory.'  
Throughout the whole world the holy church proclaims you:  
Father of majesty unbounded,  
Your true and only Son, worthy of all worship,  
and the Holy Spirit, our advocate and guide.  
You, Christ are the King of glory, the eternal Son of the Father.  
When you became man to set us free, you did not abhor the virgin's womb.  
You overcame the sting of death and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.  
You are seated at God's right hand in glory;  
we believe that you will come and be our judge.  
Come, Lord, and help your people, bought with your own blood;  
bring us with your saints to glory everlasting.  
Amen.*

Te Deum, 4<sup>th</sup> Century

## **Friday, May 15: Proverbs 2 INTELLECTUAL**

Solomon loved learning. Proverbs is a summary of much of his acquired learning. Proverbs is not a description of what facts Solomon knows, although he did know a lot about many things. Rather Proverbs is his reflections on wisdom – what to do with what he knows. He begins the book with these words:

*"These are the proverbs of Solomon, David's son, king of Israel ..." (Proverbs 1:1). What is their purpose?  
"Their purpose is to teach people wisdom and discipline, to help them understand the insights of the wise.*

*Their purpose is to teach people to live disciplined and successful lives, to help them do what is right, just, and fair." What will the results be? "These proverbs will give insight to the simple, knowledge and discernment to the young. Let the wise listen to these proverbs and become even wiser. Let those with understanding receive guidance by exploring the meaning in these proverbs and parables ..."(1:2-6).*

Ultimately, Solomon says, *"Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline"(1:7).* By "fear of the Lord" he means that sort of reverence, awe, and respect that recognizes that God knows so much better than us ... and we do well to not only listen to Him but also to obey Him. It is one thing to admit God knows best; it's another to act on that conviction.

In Proverbs 2, today's reading, Solomon urges us to work at learning God's wisdom: *"Listen to what I say, treasure my commands, tune your ears to wisdom, concentrate on understanding, cry out for insight, ask for understanding, search for them as you would for silver, seek them like hidden treasures ..."(2:1-4).* This is no casual sitting back and assuming we will learn everything we need to know by some divine lightning bolt – this is hard work. This takes effort. Even reading the Bible can take some work: understanding some texts (like Ezekiel or Revelation, for example) we need to learn about the type of literature, the context, and what it meant to its first readers. That can be really hard work, but it's worth it.

What are the results of working through these things? *"Then you will understand what it means to fear the Lord, and you will gain knowledge of God. For the Lord grants wisdom. From his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He grants a treasure of common sense to the honest ... Then you will understand what is right, just, and fair, and you will find the right way to go. Wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will fill you with joy. Wise choices will watch over you. Understanding will keep you safe"(2:5-11).*

Most of us would much prefer to be "zapped" with divine revelation and wisdom than to work at learning it. And, frankly, some of us spiritualize our own spiritual laziness – *"I just pray and the Spirit tells me what to do."* That sounds spiritual. But much like the preacher who never writes his sermon down (*"The Spirit will tell me what to say when I get up to preach"*) relying on that sort of inspiration may be more of a spiritualized excuse to be lazy than genuine holiness. Maybe the Spirit wants us to use our God-given brains to become spiritually mature – through reading, reflecting, talking, questioning, thinking, and praying ... Sometimes, too, we only want people to reinforce our existing beliefs, prejudices and ideas. Solomon wants to seek God's truth ... even if it challenges us. Because that will lead to genuine maturity in our faith.

You may not be a natural reader ... but try reading more. Or if you are more of a listener, there are over 300 free lectures and courses from world-class scholars available from Regent College (Vancouver) at [www.regentaudio.com/collections/free](http://www.regentaudio.com/collections/free). Interested in science and faith issues? Cambridge's Faraday Institute has dozens of [print](#), [audio](#) and [video](#) downloads. Pick up some audiobooks. Join a Bible Study. Talk with friends and talk about challenging topics that really matter (not just the weather).

*Looking out the window today, I see the world you created –  
and I give thanks for the sky, and the trees, and the grass,  
and the sights, sounds, and smells of springtime.  
Looking out the window today, I pray for the world you created –  
I pray for your saints, suffering in Syria, Iraq, and North Africa;  
I pray for those who serve you in difficult places;  
I pray for people I know and love who need your love and grace;  
I pray for those struggling with their health;  
I pray for those wrestling with challenging family situations;  
I pray for those who are in need – of food, shelter, work;  
I pray for those who are lonely.  
Looking out the window today, I see your Spirit moving –  
and I pray that He will bring your hope, joy, peace and love  
to those I love – and to our hurting world.  
Amen*

## Saturday, May 16: Acts 17:1-12 INTELLECTUAL

Are you teachable? Are you willing to think? Or do you already know it all? Is your mind made up?

Most of the Jews in Thessalonica thought they already had the truth all figured out. They wanted to be told exactly what they already believed to be true. They did not want to think outside the box. They did not want to admit the possibility that God's truth might be bigger than what they had always been taught. They were not teachable. How did they react to Paul and Silas? Do Christians ever behave like this? What are these people like? Is that good? Am I ever like this? Is this the person God wants me to be?

Compare the people in Berea with those in Thessalonica (a mere 73 kms down the road). *"The people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth"* (17:11). These people were teachable. They were willing to think. They were willing to learn. They did have strong biblical convictions ... but they recognized that they still might need to learn how Scripture applied to their lives in new ways. Do you know Christians like this? What are they like? How can we be more like the Bereans?

What is the result? *"As a result, many Jews believed, as did many of the prominent Greek women and men"* (17:12). A living, growing, dynamic faith grows out of a desire – and a willingness – to put some effort into studying Scripture and learning more and more. That learning shapes our faith. And that biblically-shaped faith changes how we live.

Christian educator, Thomas Groome, talks about a commitment to be **INFORMED** by God's Word and Spirit, to allow His Word to **FORM** our character and beliefs, and then to let His Spirit **TRANSFORM** how we live. Informed-formed-transformed by God's Word and Spirit ... we all need that.

How can I allow God's Spirit to inform me today? For me today? Transform me today?

*Lord you have called us to hope in your name.  
Save those of us who are in affliction,  
have mercy on the lonely,  
raise up those who are fallen,  
be present to those who are in need,  
heal the sick,  
bring back those of your people who have gone astray.  
Feed the hungry,  
redeem the captives,  
lift up those who are weak,  
comfort the faint hearted.  
You all are the highest among the highest, and the holiest among the holy.  
We hope in your name.  
Amen*

Clement of Rome (1<sup>st</sup> century)

## Sunday, May 17: Acts 17:16-34 INTELLECTUAL

As Canadians – as Lethbridgeans – we live in a community of well-educated people (by global standards). The people we go to school with, work with, have fun with, live with, are friends with, and socialize with are (mostly 😊) bright, thoughtful people.

If we are going to be able to have meaningful discussions about our Christian faith with both non-Christian and Christian folk in our lives, we have to figure out how to talk about our beliefs in intelligent ways. Yes, ultimately people do become believers in Jesus through **faith**; we cannot argue people – logically – into the kingdom of God. But at the same time, we can help people appreciate that the decision to trust Jesus is not an unreasonable leap in the dark. God has given us some great reasons to believe. Christianity is based on solid evidence; it is reasonable; and it makes sense.

Paul has moved from Berea to Athens – in the first century a university town. Athens, Greece, today has three universities (because of its reputation for learning, Athens has always been a popular name for university towns: Athens, Georgia, is home to the University of Georgia; Athens, Ohio, hosts Ohio University; Athens, Alabama, has Athens State University).

Ancient Athens was the seat of lively debate about everything abstract philosophy (the teachings of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, the Stoics, and the Skeptics) and more practical natural philosophy (what we would call mathematics, physics, chemistry, geography, and biology). As a Christian teacher in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, if you wanted to get a serious hearing in first century Athens, you had better be conversant with the intellectual ideas, philosophies, conversations, and literature of the day.

Notice Paul is able to connect with their world – he comments on their altars and temples, quotes their poets, and understands their world ... at least a little bit. In the midst of this, he is also able to build bridges to connect the ideas swirling around Athens with Jesus: *"This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about"* (17:23). But He does this in a positive way. He does not say, *"You people are so stupid. You're wrong. I'm right ..."* Instead, Paul is willing to have reasonable, thoughtful, intelligent conversations with people. He wants to build bridges from where they are to faith in Jesus.

We do believe we have good news that everyone needs to hear. The best way we can share that is to be willing to have conversations with people about it. Having a dialogue means

- (1) listening – Paul listened by observing the cues in popular culture (all the altars, temples, literature and ideas), and – it is implied in 17:32-34 – in follow-up conversations,
- (2) sharing – speaking to the felt needs, issues, and concerns of people. Paul saw the spiritual longings in Athenian society and addressed them. When Paul spoke to Jewish groups (like in the synagogue in Thessalonica), he spoke about Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies (17:1-3). Speaking to the Athenians, Paul doesn't bring up the Hebrew Scriptures (totally foreign to the Greeks). In Athens, Paul speaks about Greek ideas – about who God is, what creation is, and who people are.

How can I listen better? Ask a lot of questions ... and practice listening to other people and NOT talking. Not interrupting. Not trying to give pat answers. That can be VERY difficult. But discipline yourself to do it. As you listen, try to hear what the real issues are in people's lives. The deep concerns may not be the actual topics of conversation. I find people like to "debate" superficial issues (like *"Is God real?" "How can a loving God allow evil?" "What about other religions?"*) not because they really care about these things, but because they are "safer" than dealing with feelings of loneliness, disappointment, and pain ... Ask thoughtful questions. And listen. Can I hear what is really going in my friend's life?

*May I be no man's enemy,  
and may I be the friend of that which is eternal and lasts forever.  
May I never quarrel with those nearest me:  
and if I do, may I be reconciled quickly.  
May I love, seek, and attain only that which is good.  
May I wish for all people's happiness and envy none.  
May I never rejoice in the ill-fortune of one who has wronged me.  
May I win no victory that harms either me or my opponent.  
May I reconcile friends who are angry with one another.  
May I, to the extent of my power, give help to all who are in need.  
May I never fail a friend who is in danger.  
When visiting those in grief or suffering,  
may I be able to soften their pain, by gentle and healing words.  
May I always keep tame that which rages within me.  
May I never discuss who is wicked and what wicked things he has done,  
but may I know good men and follow in their footsteps.  
Amen.*

Eusebius (3<sup>rd</sup> century)

## Monday, May 18: Luke 2:41-52 INTELLECTUAL

All we know about Jesus' life between the time of His birth and His baptism by John is recorded for us in these few verses. Is learning important to Jesus? When Joseph and Mary finally discover Him in the Temple, He is "*sitting among the religious teachers, listening to them and asking questions*" (2:46). Yes, the text goes on to say, "*All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers*" (2:47). But notice, initially, even Jesus is asking questions and listening ...

Throughout Jesus' life, His knowledge of God, the Scriptures, human character, life in general, and wisdom – how to connect the right knowledge about God with right living in the real world – amazed everyone. Of course Jesus, being fully God and fully human, has some distinct advantages over you and I when it comes to understanding God, His principles, and just about everything else. But He does set a wonderful example for us: asking and listening ... Yes, there may come a time, too, when we can express our understanding, wisdom, and possible answers. But the humility to ask and listen – first – is good to remember.

It's only as we grow in our understanding that we have much to offer anyone else. And it's only in listening that we learn and grow. And it is also in listening that we hear what other people are really saying ... and we can offer the encouragement and support that they speak to their real issues and needs.

When some Jewish teachers got together and asked Jesus, "*Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*" Jesus replied: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" (Matthew 22:37-40).

We love our neighbour best as we love God – with our mind as well as the rest of our being. ***In theory*** it's not that complicated, is it? ***In practice*** it's hard to work it all out. How can you make these principles practical in your life today? Ask. Listen. Love.

*"The LORD watches over you— the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm— he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore."* (Psalm 121:5-8)

*In my going out and coming in,  
my rising and sleeping,  
watch over me, keep me from harm.  
In summer sun and winter rain,  
my joyfulness and sorrow  
watch over me, keep me from harm.  
In the darkness and in lighter days  
my fears and comfort,  
watch over me, keep me from harm.  
This day, and all days.  
Amen.*

John Birch

## Tuesday, May 19: Matthew 5:13-48 INTELLECTUAL

Wisdom is more than knowledge. The Pharisees – ultra-religious Jews in Jesus' day – ***knew*** the Scriptures. But their ***interpretations*** of what the Scriptures meant in real life missed the love, grace, and mercy of God completely. They were tied in knots about legalistic interpretations of Scripture to the extent that they completely missed the point God was trying to communicate – living wisely and well as His beloved people, loving other people in the same way that He loves them, and welcoming the Messiah (Jesus).

Do people today ever get hung up on having the "right" interpretation of a text ... to the extent they miss the whole point of it? For instance, some people get really excited about prophetic passages in scripture. More than one person is certain they have found the coronavirus in the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and

Revelation. They are sure they KNOW we are living out the fulfillment of these prophecies right now.

Unfortunately , almost every generation throughout history has been certain they KNOW that in their time these prophecies were coming true. And, so far, every generation has been wrong.

When we try reading a book like Revelation as a commentary on the events of Spring 2020 in Canada, we miss the message. Revelation is an amazing description of the glory of God and of the salvation He provides for us through Jesus. Revelation is a profound commentary on God's grace, love, protection, and power through tough times. But when we're obsessed with linking coronavirus to the horns of a beast, we miss all that amazing – comforting, inspiring, and empowering – truth.

When you read through the Sermon on the Mount – especially these verses – we see Jesus' deep wisdom drawing out the themes of Scripture but not getting hung up on picky details. There is helpful wisdom for us as we study Scripture and try to learn wisdom – and how it applies to our world. There is also much practical wisdom here for how we handle controversial issues (like prophetic passages):

- If we think we're always right on everything, so if you disagree, you must be wrong ... *"unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."* Thinkers love to be right – and that can be dangerous. Don't confuse knowing a lot with being spiritually mature. Jesus calls us to humility. The devil knows the Bible inside out ... but he doesn't live it.
- If we find ourselves getting judgmental (*"if you don't think like me you're not a Christian"* or *"if you don't think like me you're stupid"*) we are really judging ourselves. Dallas Willard quips, *"One of the hardest things is to be right and not hurt anybody with it."* Jesus calls us to gracious acceptance.
- *"If you suddenly remember that someone has something against you ... go and be reconciled to that person."* Jesus calls us to unity – not to create a "right" group and a "wrong" group.
- *"You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven."* Jesus calls us to unconditional love.

In the end, for those of us who love God with our minds, our learning needs to lead to humility, worship and action. Worship and action consistent with being God's salt and light. We are called to be people who are forgiven and forgiving ... who have received mercy and who practice mercy ... who have been blessed by grace and give God's grace ... who have received the very practical benefit of God's love and find ways to show God's love in practical acts of service and action as well ...

*O Lord, my God, great, eternal, wonderful in glory,  
Life of all, Help to those who flee to you,  
Hope of those who cry to you,  
through your Holy Spirit cleanse me from my sins, secret and open;  
and from every thought displeasing to your goodness.  
Cleanse my body and my soul, my heart and my conscience.  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, create within me a pure hearts and a clean soul,  
that, with perfect love and calm hope,  
I may venture confidently and fearlessly to pray to you,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Liturgy of St. Basil (4<sup>th</sup> Century)

### **Wednesday, May 20: Psalm 95 WORSHIP**

Some people just LOVE to worship God. Worship makes them feel so close to God.

It can be difficult for enthusiastic worshippers to understand that not everyone is passionately "wired" for worship like we are. We need to be careful not to judge those who are not so expressive in their worship – it doesn't mean they don't love God. Some people just don't find worship the primary way they relate to

Jesus – that’s fine. Some people can be filled with the Spirit (the fruit of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (note: worship is NOT here)) and yet not be as passionate about how they sing or praise in a worship service. Those less-flamboyant people may be filled God’s love, joy, peace, etc. – they may really get passionate about God reading theology or serving other people – but worship is just not their thing. Don’t judge. We’re just different. That’s Ok.

We enthusiastic worshippers also need to be careful we are not on a spiritual rollercoaster from emotional mountaintop to emotional mountaintop – with deep valleys in between. We can get caught up in an experience-based spirituality that is addicted to “spiritual highs” from a service, a concert, a conference, a speaker, a video clip ... This is what C.S. Lewis called “*the fatal sin of saying ‘Encore.’*” – we want God to reproduce a wonderful experience or particular emotion for us. Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) once said, “*The danger in finding a way to God is that people grow to love **the way** more than they love **God.**”*

For people who love to worship, the psalms (and songs based on the psalms) are a gold mine. There are so many fantastic celebrations of praise and worship in the psalms. They give us language with which to praise God. For people who are less enthusiastic about worship, the psalms are great, too. They give us words to express our praise and worship to God when such sentiments are hard for us to express. Worship goes through Psalm 95 today.

The foundation of worship is really *knowing* the God we are worshipping. As worshipers we also need to spend time in study – cultivating a deep knowledge of the God we love so our heart and emotions are solidly rooted in the truth. It’s good for us to spend time in contemplation and prayer – even though it might be difficult for us. How can you get to know the God you love better?

*Be kind to your little children, Lord.  
Be kind to me, Lord.  
Be a gentle teacher, patient with my weakness and stupidity.  
And give me the strength and discernment to do what you tell me,  
and so grow in your likeness.  
May I live in the peace that comes from you with all people.  
May I journey towards your city,  
sailing through the waters of sin untouched by the waves,  
borne serenely along by the Holy Spirit.  
Night and day may I give you praise and thanks,  
because you have shown me that all things belong to you,  
and all blessings are gifts from you.  
To you, the essence of wisdom, the foundation of truth,  
be glory forever more.  
Amen.*

Clement of Alexandria, 150-215

#### **Thursday, May 21: Psalm 96 WORSHIP**

If worship is one of the ways you really connect with God ... wonderful. If it’s not such a big deal for you, that’s OK. I trust you will be able to identify other ways that really work for you to relate well to God.

Psalm 96 reminds us that worship is not just a human thing. In fact, all of God’s creation worships Him in its own unique ways. Isn’t that amazing?

Because all of creation worships God, it’s a further reminder that – as those created in the image of God with the responsibility to tend and care for His creation (Genesis 2:15) – part of our spiritual act of worship is to live out our faith in practical ways. If all species of bird, animal, and fish, for instance, are worshippers then the fact that 905 species have gone extinct (largely by human activity) in the last few hundred years is

a serious spiritual issue (126 species in the last decade).<sup>3</sup> 905 unique, created-by-God species are no longer praising their Creator. **We** have silenced their “voices” of worship. Does that bother you? Should it?

One of the challenges we have as worshippers is not just to protect, but to enhance the worship of God.

This means helping people meet Jesus. If you don't know the Creator of the universe, your Saviour, or the Holy Spirit, you will not praise Him. WE do (I trust) want ALL people to worship Jesus. It is good for us to share the good news of Easter.

This means caring for people who are struggling – it's hard to praise God when you are lonely, suffering injustice, ill, and persecuted. Part of our worship is to help people in practical ways so they, too, can rejoice.

This also means being advocates and caring for God's creation, so that all of His wonderful creation can worship and praise Him. Wouldn't it be great if all of God's creation were praising God. How can I help?

*You have made us for Yourself, O Lord,  
and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.  
Too late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient, O Beauty so new.  
Too late have I loved you.  
You were within me but I was outside myself, and there I sought you.  
In my weakness I ran after the beauty of the things you have made.  
You were with me, and I was not with you.  
The things you have made kept me from you –  
the things which would have no being unless they existed in you.  
You have called, you have cried, and you have pierced my deafness.  
You have radiated forth, you have shined out brightly,  
and you have dispelled my blindness.  
You have sent forth your fragrance, and I have breathed it in,  
and I long for you.  
I have tasted you, and I hunger and thirst for you.  
You have touched me, and I ardently desire your peace.  
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

### **Friday, May 22: Romans 12:1-2 WORSHIP**

My friend LOVES music – worship music. She is listening to music all the time – at home, in the car, going for a walk, on the radio, on her iPod, on YouTube ... That's great. She feels she is worshipping all the time, because she is listening to – and is really blessed by – worship music.

Music is great. Worship music is great. But music is only one – perhaps only one SMALL – part of the totality of what worship is. Paul defines worship as a whole mind, body, soul commitment to love God, to be shaped by Him, and to do His will. Music may be part of that process. But music is only a tool through which God can form and transform us into the people He wants us to be. In itself music is not worship.

In light of Romans 12:1-2, think about some of these insights:

- *"The highest form of worship is the worship of unselfish Christian service."* (Billy Graham)
- *"Worship is giving God the best that He has given you. Be careful what you do with the best you have. Whenever you get a blessing from God, give it back to Him as a love gift. Take time to meditate before God and offer the blessing back to Him in a deliberate act of worship. If you hoard a thing for yourself, it will turn into spiritual dry rot, as the manna did when it was hoarded. God will never let you hold a spiritual thing for yourself; it has to be given back to Him that He may make*

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<sup>3</sup> Many extinct species were from Canada, including the Labrador Duck, Passenger Pigeon, Great Auk, Sea Mink, Queen Charlotte Woodland Caribou, and Blue Walleye. Many other Canadian species are on the endangered list ([www.canadianbiodiversity.mcgill.ca](http://www.canadianbiodiversity.mcgill.ca)).

*it a blessing to others.”(Oswald Chambers)*

- *“To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.” (William Temple)*
- *“After learning to love God (worship), learning to love others is the second purpose of your life.” (Rick Warren)*

How does the Spirit need to transform you – mind, body, and soul? Will you let Him?

*Jesus, You are the ever-living one.*

*Jesus, You are without beginning, like the Father, and co-eternal with the Spirit.*

*Jesus, You are He who made all things out of nothing.*

*Jesus, You are the Prince of the angels.*

*Jesus, You are He at whom the depths tremble.*

*Jesus, You are He who is covered with light as with the garment.*

*Jesus, You are He who made us, and fashioned us at birth.*

*Jesus, You are He who formed things invisible.*

*Lord Jesus, help me see You and know You as my King, my Saviour, my God.*

*Amen.*

Hippolytus of Rome (165-235)

### **Saturday, May 23: Revelation 19:1-9 WORSHIP**

All our worship on Earth is a just a foretaste of what is to come in heaven. Spend some time celebrating the life we have as children of the King, as those saved by Jesus, and as those blessed with His Spirit.

We are those who are invited to come into God’s presence – today and every day. What an awesome privilege. Thank God for the wonder of our relationship with Him.

We look forward to one day, someday, celebrating this amazing wedding feast with the Lamb – Jesus.

Praise Him.

*Holy Spirit, powerful Consoler,  
sacred Bond of the Father and the Son,  
Hope of the afflicted,*

*come into my heart and establish in it your loving reign.*

*Enkindle in my tepid soul the fire of your Love so that I may be wholly subject to you.*

*We believe that when you dwell in us, you also prepare a dwelling for the Father and the Son.*

*Please come to me, Consoler of abandoned souls, and Protector of the needy.*

*Help the afflicted, strengthen the weak, and support the wavering.*

*Come and purify me.*

*Let no evil desire take possession of me.*

*You love the humble and resist the proud.*

*Come to me, glory of the living, and hope of the dying.*

*Lead me by your grace that I may always be pleasing to you.*

*Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

### **Sunday, May 24: Revelation 21:22-22:9**

*“Worship only God.”(22:9).* As we worship today – whether alone or with others, may we put aside all our distractions – all our fears – all our preferences – all our irritations ... and worship only God.

Whether we admit it or not, it is possible to worship and idolize ...

- Certain teachers, authors, or doctrines (a danger for intellectuals)
- Being busy all the time, and doing, doing, doing (a danger for servers)
- Taking on causes and changing the world (a danger for activists)
- Certain spiritual disciplines and spiritual experiences (a danger for contemplatives)
- God's creation rather than the Creator (a danger for creation people)
- Certain songs, experiences, styles, and forms of worship (a danger for worshippers)

John reminds us WHO it is we worship – we worship God, our loving heavenly Father – Jesus, our Redeemer, Saviour, and King – and the Holy Spirit, God's presence alive and at work in our world. It's all about Him. It's not in the least about us. (Marva Dawn talks about a person who, after the service, was grumping to the minister how they didn't like the songs they had sung that Sunday. The pastor's response? "That's Ok, we weren't worshipping you anyway." ☺). Our worship is our offering to God.

Our worship is also missional. Worshipping our Saviour God leads us to want to share His amazing love – in Word and deed – with all of His creation. We have such incredible good news to share with the world, how can we keep it to ourselves? Notice the missional tone in the closing verses of Revelation 22:

*"Look, I am coming soon," Jesus says ... "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End ... The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' Let anyone who hears this say, 'Come.' Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life ... He who is the faithful witness to all these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's holy people" (Revelation 22:12-21).*

*I give you thanks, yes, more than thanks,  
O Lord our God, the Father of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ,  
for all your goodness at all times and in all places.  
You, O Lord, have shielded, rescued, helped, and guided me  
all the days of my life, and brought me to this hour.  
I pray and beseech you, merciful God, to grant in your goodness that I may spend this holy day  
and all the days of my life without sin,  
in fullness of joy, health, safety, holiness, and reverence of you.  
But all envy, all fear, all temptation,  
all the influence of Satan, all the snares of the wicked,  
O Lord, drive away from me and from your church.  
Whatever sin I commit in thought, word, or deed,  
in your goodness and mercy be pleased to pardon.  
Please do not leave me, O Lord, while I hope in you;  
nor lead me not into temptation,  
but deliver me from the evil one and from his works  
through the grace, mercy, and love of your only begotten Son.  
I pray that you would bless your church, O Lord, with what is good and right.  
Through your beloved son, Jesus, our glorious Savior, be glory and power to you,  
in your most holy, good, and life-giving Spirit,  
now, from this day forth, and forever more.  
Amen.*

Liturgy of St. Mark (2<sup>nd</sup> Century)

### **Monday, May 25: Psalm 148 WORSHIP**

If you have a good memory, you will know that we have read Psalm 148 on more than one occasion before. It is my favourite praise and worship psalm.

Why? Because, as a follower of Jesus and as a geographer – who loves God's creation – I get excited about who's worshipping and praising God in Psalm 148. Notice who's praising God

- every created thing

- the heavens, angels and all the armies of heaven
- the skies, and vapors above the clouds
- the sun, moon, and twinkling stars
- creatures of the ocean depths
- fire and hail, snow and clouds, wind and weather
- mountains and all hills
- fruit trees and all cedars
- wild animals and all livestock
- small scurrying animals and birds
- kings of the earth and all people (oh, yes, people – you can rejoice, too!)
- rulers and judges of the earth,
- young men and young women,
- old men and children.

Isn't it interesting that ALL of creation worships God! In fact, the worship of people almost seems like an afterthought to the psalmist.

Look outside. If you can, get outside. Appreciate that we are part of a vast network of natural systems, creatures, and heavenly beings ALL praising and worshipping God, along with us. Praise God, today!

*O God, be all my love,  
all my hope,  
all my striving ...  
Let my thoughts and words flow from you,  
My daily life be in you,  
And every breath I take be for you.  
Amen.*

John Cassian, 360-435

## **Tuesday, May 26: Nehemiah 1 ACTIVIST**

People who relate to God through **servicing** care for people, clean toilets, wash windows, call/visit shut ins, mow lawns, etc. Activists take things to another level. We have a driving vision to see God's kingdom come and His will be done – here. Now. We see injustice in the world and want to make things right – here. Now. We thrive on challenges and opposition. We love it when you say, "*That just can't be done.*" We smile and say, "*Just watch me.*" Do you know anyone like that? Are you like that?

Nehemiah is an activist. In his day, Israel is part of the Persian Empire. Nehemiah, a Jew, is the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, king of Persia. The cupbearer was an extremely important and trusted position: you tasted the king's wine to make sure it wasn't poisoned. You also were at the king's left hand and had the opportunity to intervene at the highest political level. When Nehemiah hears about the deplorable conditions in Jerusalem he is upset and wants to take action.

In Jerusalem, the Temple had been rebuilt (albeit modestly). But the walls of the city were still in ruins. Opposition from the surrounding peoples had thwarted attempt to rebuild the city defenses. In a violent age, surrounded by hostile neighbours, the Temple and Jewish resettlers were in constant danger. Note:

- Nehemiah takes time. Most of us are always in a hurry to act – there are times when Nehemiah does act swiftly. But this time he slows down ... to pray, to spend time with God, to think ...
- Nehemiah begins his prayer reminding himself who God is. When we pray we are not just praying to the ceiling, some powerless peon, or an uncaring minor deity ... we are praying to the Creator of the universe (recall how the Lord's prayer begins: "*Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy ...*"). Often we just rush into our requests without taking time to remind ourselves who God is.
- He confesses his (and his people's) sin. Sin separates us from God. Jesus paid the price for all our sin, but we still need to recognize it in our lives, confess it before God, and know the power and joy of His forgiveness ("*forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us.*"). And we

need God's Spirit to help us live more holy lives (*"And don't let us yield to temptation,"* – something we will do on our own – *"but rescue us from the evil one"* – something only God can do).

- He brings his request before God. Does God need to know what we need? Of course not. But it helps us clarify our thinking when we express it to God. We work through what it is we really need – and how (or if) it fits in with God's character and will. (*"May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread ..."*). And it helps us to actually give our issues over to God when we verbally place our needs in His hands ... otherwise we tend to hold onto them and try to solve everything ourselves.
- Nehemiah knows this is something he cannot do on his own. Only God can do this. And God **CAN** do this. Nehemiah trusts that the true, everlasting King of Kings – God – is sovereign even over the greatest king the world had yet seen, Artaxerxes, King of Persia (*"For yours is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever ..."*).

What do you need to bring to God? Please: pray for our church. Pray for our staff. For the broader Christian community in Lethbridge as we seek to be His people in a challenging world ... Pray for a profound sense of mission and purpose as we seek to serve God and be His ambassadors in our city and around the world ...

*Jesus said, "I am the way, the and the truth and the life.  
No one comes to the Father except through me."  
Jesus, you are the way; I trust in you.  
Jesus, you are the truth; I trust in you.  
Jesus, you are the life; I trust in you.  
Come quickly to help me, O Lord God of my salvation,  
for the battle is great and the adversaries are powerful.  
The enemy is hostile, the invisible foe fighting through visible forms.  
Come quickly, therefore, to help me, and assist me  
through your holy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
through whom you have redeemed us all,  
through whom be glory and power to you forever and ever.  
Amen.*

Adapted from Origen of Alexandria, 185-254

### **Wednesday, May 27: Nehemiah 2:1-9 ACTIVIST**

Four months of fasting and prayer later, Nehemiah's opportunity comes to talk with the king. *"Nehemiah's alarm at the king's comment on his dejection sprang from sudden awareness of a breach of etiquette – for a servant's private feelings are usually best kept to himself, especially if they will strike a jarring note ... Now the moment has come, and if he mishandles it there will not be another. Further, he will be asking the king to revise his policy, for the decision against Jerusalem had been official. True, the decree had left a loophole for change (Ezra 4:21), but so quick an about face would be a great deal to ask of anyone, and 'a king's wrath is a messenger of death.' (Proverbs 16:14)"* (Derek Kidner, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, p. 80).

Persian kings had long memories and good record-keepers: Jerusalem had an ugly reputation. Ezra 4:19-22 records the official words of King Artaxerxes: *"Jerusalem has been a hotbed of insurrection against many kings. In fact, rebellion and revolt are normal there. Powerful kings have ruled over Jerusalem and the entire province west of the Euphrates River, receiving tribute, customs, and tolls. Therefore, issue orders to have these men stop their work. That city must not be rebuilt except at my express command."*

As you read Nehemiah 2:1-8 do you sense something of the fear, stress, and apprehension in Nehemiah's voice? He is asking something unthinkable (to re-fortify and re-arm a fortress known for insurrection, rebellion, and revolt) from the most powerful person on earth, officially Artaxerxes, the Great King, King of Persia, King of Anshan, King of Media, King of Babylon, King of Sumer and Akkad, King of the Four Corners of the World (notice Israel/Jerusalem don't even make the list. They are too insignificant).

How did Artaxerxes respond? God's grace and mercy come though non-God-worshipping people. Artaxerxes is religious, but not Jewish. It is startling in Scripture how often non-believers are more sensitive, more responsive, and more obedient to God's voice than God's own people are. That is disturbing. And humbling. Perhaps we need to think about how we can hear God's voice speaking to us ...

Frank Doyle writes: *"The Bible warns against talking too much. 'Is there no end to windy words?' asked Job (Job 16:3). 'The more words, the more vanity ... There is a time to speak and a time to be silent ...' (Ecclesiastes 6:11). Jesus said of the Pharisees: 'They think God will hear them for their many words' (Matthew 6:7). What is clear in the life of Jesus is that he listened with all his senses. The gospel writers often note, 'He knew what was in their hearts' – whether it was the scribes laying traps for Him, or the disciples in a state of puzzlement or unease. He listened to people, watched their faces, sensed what was in their souls.*

*"When they were about to stone the adulterous woman, Jesus did not give out to them, but said just one sentence: 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone' (John 8:7). After that he was silent and doodled in the sand, feeling the fury and shame of the would-be killers as they trooped out, beginning with the oldest. When we meet Jesus in prayer, we do not need to explain. He reads our hearts too. One of the joys of prayer is that it opens our hearts to us, so that we realise our own jealousies or resentments, our deeper feelings. To meet Him in this way, we need to be still and stop making words."*

*"Be still and know that I am God ..."* says the Lord (Psalm 46:10). How good are you at being still? At listening to God? (At obeying God?) Those with an activist temperament need to listen sometimes, too ...

*"It's always just possible that Jesus Christ meant what He said when He told us to seek the secret place and close the door,"* wrote C.S. Lewis (referring to Matthew 6:6). Try it. Spend some quiet time listening to Jesus today ... And when He speaks, do what He says ...

*Give me yourself, O my God, give yourself to me.  
I love you, and if my love is too weak a thing, grant me to love you more strongly.  
I cannot measure my love to know how much it falls short of being sufficient,  
but let my soul rush to your embrace and never be turned away  
until it is in the secret shelter of your presence.  
This only do I know: that it is not good for me when you are not with me,  
when you are only outside me.  
I want you in my very self.  
Breathe in me O Holy Spirit,  
that my thoughts may all be holy.  
Act in me O Holy Spirit,  
that my work, too, may be holy.  
Draw my heart O Holy Spirit,  
that I love but what is holy.  
Strengthen me O Holy Spirit,  
to defend all that is holy.  
Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit,  
that I always may be holy.  
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

#### **Thursday, May 28: Nehemiah 2:10-20 ACTIVIST**

The Jewish wisdom book, *Ecclesiasticus*, says: *"My child, if you would fear the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal. Be sincere of heart, be steadfast, and do not be alarmed when disaster comes. Cling to him and do not leave him, so that you may be honoured at the end of your days. Whatever happens to you, accept it, and in the uncertainty of your humble state, be patient. For gold is tested in the fire, and the chosen in the furnace of humiliation. Trust him and he will uphold you, follow a straight path and hope in him. You who*

*fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; do not turn aside for fear you fall. You who fear the Lord, trust him, and you will not be robbed of your reward. You who fear the Lord, hope for good gifts of his, everlasting joy and mercy. Look to the generations of old and see: whoever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame? Or whoever, steadfastly fearing him, was forsaken? Or whoever called to him and was ignored? For the Lord is compassionate and merciful, he forgives sins and saves in time of distress" (2:1-11).*

Activist Nehemiah is walking into a tense situation. The peoples around Jerusalem were angry about the Temple being rebuilt. They opposed reconstructing the wall around Jerusalem. Sanballat was the Governor of Samaria, north of Israel. Tobiah was the Governor of what is now Jordan east of Israel. Geshem (2:19) was the Governor of Arabian territories, south of Israel. These three governors represent a ring of steel surrounding the city. No wonder Nehemiah didn't trumpet his plans to rebuild right away.

What did Nehemiah do? He scouted out the situation. He did his research. Then he took the city leaders into his confidence. And the rebuilding began. *"The God of heaven will help us succeed" (2:20)* is Nehemiah's call to shovels, hammers, and trowels (as opposed to a call to arms.).

Nate Pyle, in a reflection on several intense personal crises, writes, *"This experience forced me to look at one such statement that gets spouted often when people go through a lot: 'God won't give you more than you can handle.' If I may be so bold, let's just call that what it is: \$#\*@\*#\$( colourful expletive deleted.). Tell that to a survivor of Auschwitz. Tell it to the man who lost his wife and child in a car accident. Tell it to the girl whose innocence was robbed from her. Tell it to the person crushed under the weight of depression and anxiety. Tell it to the kids who just learned their parent has a terminal illness. Limp, anemic sentiments will not stand in the face of a world that is not as it should be.*

*"Now that I have said how I feel, let me back up this argument with some actual Biblical evidence. This statement, that 'God won't give you more than you can handle,' isn't even in the Bible. There is a statement that sounds like it. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, 'No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.' But notice that verse is about temptation ... This text is not saying that you will not experience more than you can bear ... If anything the exact opposite is true. Look at this text: 'For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead' (2 Corinthians 1:8, 9).*

*"Later, Paul will write it is when he is weak that the strength of Christ is seen. In other words, when we can't do it any longer. When we are fed up. When it has become too much. When we have nothing left. When we are empty. When it is beyond our capability to deal with it. Then, in that moment, the strength of the God of resurrection will be seen. Until we get to that point, we rely on ourselves thinking we can handle it and take care of the problem." When we face more than we can handle, the God of heaven can help us succeed. In fact, it's when we face more than we can handle that we really do turn to God ...*

*O God of infinite mercy and boundless majesty,  
whom no distance of nor length of time can part from those for whom you care;  
I trust in you –  
be with me everywhere, and through all the ways in which I am to go.  
May you be my constant guide and my companion.  
May no adversity harm me, no difficulty oppose me;  
may all situations in my life turn out blessed, by your Spirit;  
that by the help of your right hand, whatever I have truly needed,  
may quickly be received with a good response;  
that, whoever I need to be, I may be shaped by your guiding hand;  
and that, for whoever needs aid, I will be there in your Name, O Lord.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Adapted from Gelasian Sacramentary, 5<sup>th</sup> Century

## Friday, May 29: Nehemiah 3 ACTIVIST

Ancient historians love Nehemiah 3 – it's the best description of ancient Jerusalem ever written. It's also a catalogue of what are (to those of us who are not ancient historians) forgotten places, forgotten people, and forgotten names. But take a moment to think about what is going on here ...

It's an incredible feat of organization and a fantastic example of people working together. Some people are here as family groups, some as people with common skills (goldsmiths 3:8), occupations (merchants 3:31), and callings (priests 1:21, 28; temple servants 3:26; district officers 3:9, 12, 15-17). One man even got his daughters digging and building alongside him – not the norm in ancient cultures (3:12). Isn't it amazing when people all work together how much can be accomplished? Far more than if they worked separately.

Give the people credit, too. They were giving up their normal occupations and incomes to do something for the Lord and for the common benefit of all. In a harsh, subsistence world, this was really costly.

There is one "interesting" hiccup in this example of cooperation and common effort. *"Next were the people from Tekoa, though their leaders refused to work with the construction supervisors"*(3:5). The Tekoans were there, but they were going to do it their way, thank you very much. They weren't going to take orders from anyone. They know best. Their problem isn't laziness or a lack of generosity ... but pride.

Back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Augustine wrote, *"It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels."* Pride is one of those things that really can hijack our lives. Pride is easy to recognize in other people. But very hard to see in ourselves. One of the challenges of spiritual discipline – and spending quiet time listening to God – is to allow God to help us see places in our lives which are shipwrecked by pride. One of the challenges of activists is to remain humble, too.

There is a healthy pride – a legitimate sense of self-assurance and self-confidence based on who God created us to be. It is healthy – essential – to know we have talents, abilities, skills, and gifts which we can use for His Kingdom and His glory. And then to actually USE them to serve God. These, of course, are gracious gifts He gives us, which we, in turn humbly give back to Him by serving others.

But there is also an unhealthy pride – a stubborn independence, self-righteousness, arrogance, and unteachability – that comes from thinking too highly of ourselves: we know best; we're always right; it's our way or no way. Henry Ward Beecher once observed: *"Perverted pride is a great misfortune in men; but pride in its original function, for which God created it, is indispensable to a proper manhood."* These Tekoans had pride in the "perverted" sense – they were going to do it their way – no one could teach them anything.

*"A person wrapped up in himself makes a small package"*(Harry Emerson Fosdick). A corollary might be, *"A humble person who gives himself for others is a large gift."* Lord, how can I be your gift to the world ...?

*Almighty God, before whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden ...  
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
That we may love you, perfectly,  
And glorify your Name, worthily, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.  
Take these our gifts – small, imperfect, grudgingly given –  
and amaze us by your power, O God.  
Take these our skills – rough, imperfect, hesitantly given –  
and leave us flabbergasted by Your grace, O Lord.  
Take this our time – rushed, over-crowded, reluctantly given –  
and leave us stunned by what Your Spirit can do in us and in Your world.  
Amen*

Adapted from Gregorian Sacramentary, 6<sup>th</sup> Century

## Saturday, May 30: 2 Timothy 4:1-8 ACTIVIST

Paul toward the end of his life, writes, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful ..."* (4:7). Paul is a serious thinker, but also a serious activist. He loves a fast-paced, problem-filled, complex, strenuous life. He wants to bring out the potential in other people. John Ortberg writes, *"At the end of the day, those with the activist pathway want to say, 'I ran really hard. I used every ounce of effort and zeal at my disposal, God, and it's all for you.' An activist wants to run with everything he or she has got between now and the day they die – which will probably be in their early fifties of a heart attack."*

In the 1800's, William and Catherine Booth, founders of the Salvation Army, exemplified this approach. William Booth blasts, *"You're 'not called.' did you say? 'Not heard the call,' I think you should say. Put your ear down to the Bible, and hear him bid you go and pull sinners out of the fire of sin. Put your ear down to the burdened, agonized heart of humanity, and listen to its pitiful wail for help. Go stand by the gates of hell, and hear the damned entreat you to go to their father's house and bid their brothers and sisters, and servants and masters not to come there. And then look Christ in the face, whose mercy you have professed to obey, and tell him whether you will join heart and soul and body and circumstances in the march to publish his mercy to the world."* That's the activist speaking.

These days writers like Ron Sider (*Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*), Tony Campolo (*Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?*), Jim Wallis (*Call to Renewal* and *Sojourners Magazine*) and Christian environmentalists like Peter and Miranda Harris would fit into this category.

William Carey (1761-1834), the founder of modern missions, was an English Baptist who went to India in 1793. His great line is, *"Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God."* Perhaps more of us should feel some of the zeal and passion of the Nehemiahs, Booths, and Careys of the world ...

I appreciate Carey's reflection later in life: *"If he give me credit for being a plodder he will describe me justly. Anything beyond that will be too much. I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything."* Maybe I can't run a record pace marathon for Jesus, but I can **plod** for Christ ...

*When the wave is coming over the bow and the land is out of sight,  
I can be afraid.  
When the doctor comes to give me the news, I can be afraid.  
When I see the flashing red and blue lights, I can be afraid.  
When I watch the evening news, I can be afraid.  
When the phone rings and I see who's calling, I can be afraid.  
There is so much I can fear, but you say to me, "It is I; don't be afraid."  
There is so much to worry about, but you say, "It is I; don't be afraid."  
There is so much about the future that I would like to know,  
and you say to me, "It is I; don't be afraid."  
"It is I; don't be afraid" –  
may those words be the song I cannot get out of my head;  
may those be the words I hear when I awake in the middle of the night;  
may those be the words I hold on to when all else seems to falling apart.  
It is You, Lord. I will not be afraid.  
Amen.*

## Sunday, May 31: Acts 15:36-41 ACTIVIST

The problem with activists like Paul is they sometimes run roughshod over people. If people are not as zealous as we are, don't do things the way we think they should be done, or disappoint us in some way, we will run over them or leave them behind. It's all about the task. Along the way people can get badly hurt.

Barnabas and Paul are going back to visit some of the churches they had started. Barnabas wanted to take

along his cousin, John Mark. But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in their work. *"Their disagreement was so sharp that they separated."* Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed for Cyprus. Paul went his own way – without Mark. Wow. Even great saints of the faith have their temper tantrums. Where's the grace? Love? Forgiveness?

Sometime later, they do make up. In some of his later letters, Paul refers to John Mark as his "co-worker" (Philemon 1:24; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11). In the meantime, things between them are ugly.

A challenge for activists is to take time periodically to stop, reflect, and take stock. What are we doing? Why are we doing it? Are we doing it in a God-honouring way? Are people getting hurt along the way? It is possible to get so caught up in a cause that we lose sight of what the real objective is, our underlying motivation, or we are going about it in an unloving, ungracious, un-Christ-like way ...

All of us – including activists – need to spend some time in solitude and silence. Listening to God. We need to read. We need to worship. We need to ensure we are responding to God's call, not our own passions. We also all need some good spiritual friends who will call us on things now and then, who will challenge our motives, who will ask us hard questions about why we are doing what we are doing, and who will call us on the way we may (mis)treat other people ... What is God saying to me?

*"I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the power of sin and death.  
I will free you from being slaves to them,  
and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.  
I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God."  
This is the good news Jesus brings to us – praise the Lord.  
Lord, may we know the reality of eternal life:  
we confess our sins – forgive us and give us a new beginning;  
we offer you our lives – use us as your ambassadors and servants, building your Kingdom;  
we offer you our love – may our whole beings resonate with worship and praise;  
we offer you our future – lead us in your ways today and welcome us into your Presence tomorrow.  
Today, may I make a difference to one person, in Jesus' name ...  
Amen*

## **Monday, June 1: 1 Kings 19 ACTIVIST**

Do you ever feel like you're the only one who will stand up for what is right? That no one else cares? Everyone else is wishy-washy? It's you against the world?

In 1 Kings 18, Elijah has a showdown with King Ahab and 450 prophets of Baal. He is pretty sure he is the only follower of God left (1 Kings 18:22). Elijah is God's chosen person for such a time as this.

When it's all over (and yes, God wins), Elijah is exhausted. He feels isolated. And all alone. One of the challenges for activists is that they are often loners. And, even when they are successful, they may pay a heavy price for their efforts. They've given it their all and they're done.

What Elijah discovers is that God never leaves him.

And he also discovers – when he chooses to slow down and actually listen to God – is that there are thousands of other faithful people in Israel. He is not all alone at all.

Elisha, his new protégé, will model that we simply do our best and then leave the results to God. If we don't leave the results to Him we can be consumed and driven by our success rather than by the Holy Spirit.

- We all need to know God is with – always. Do you know that? What difference does that make in your life? That is great news.
- We all need good, godly friends who can encourage us, pray with us, inspire us, and care for us. Do

- you have friends like that? If so, great. If not, make it a priority to build good relationships ...
- And we all need to leave the results to God. It's not all up to us. God is still God, and we need to trust Him. Win or lose, it's in God's hands. What do you need to turn over to Him?

*As I rise from sleep I thank You, O Holy Trinity,  
for through Your great goodness and patience,  
You were not angered with me, an idler and sinner,  
nor have You destroyed me in my sins,  
but You have shown me the same amazing love You have for all people.  
When I was prostrate in despair,  
You raised me to keep the morning watch and glorify Your power.  
And now enlighten my mind's eye and open my mouth to study Your words  
and understand Your commandments  
and do Your will  
and sing to You in heartfelt adoration  
and praise Your Most Holy Name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
now and ever, and to the ages of ages.  
Amen.*

Basil the Great (330-379)

## **Tuesday, June 2: Mark 1 CONTEMPLATIVE**

*"Let me point out an interesting comparison between the activist and the contemplative. When an activist says, 'I'll call you back,' that means 'I'll call you back when I get home – probably even before then because I've got a cell phone with me at all times.' When a contemplative says, 'I'll call you back,' it means, 'I'll call you back sometime before I die'" (John Ortberg).*

If we connect to God best through a contemplative approach we love uninterrupted time alone. The frantic pace of the activist – the constant praise of the worshiper – the love of learning/reading of the intellectual – these seem too much like "trying to earn your salvation." We contemplatives are closest to God when all distractions are removed. We love to pray. We love to reflect. If we do get too busy or spend a lot of time with people we feel drained and we have to find time and space to be alone ...

In the Mary/Martha story in Luke 10:38-42, Martha is the server, but Mary is the contemplative. She just loves sitting at Jesus' feet. For a contemplative person, they would LOVE such an opportunity to just spend time with Jesus. The problem is, in our hectic, fast-paced, highly-connected, demanding – normal – world, it can be very difficult to find those quiet places and peaceful stretches of time to connect with Jesus ...

It's interesting looking at Jesus' life. There is an profound rhythm to it. On the one hand He is very busy ... on the other hand He is spending time alone with His Father:

- He is in the crowds with John the Baptist (1:9-11) – busy
- He is off in the wilderness praying and fasting for 40 days (1:12-13) – time to reflect and pray
- A period of time passes ( "*Later on, after John was arrested...*" (1:14) – time to reflect and pray
- He announces the coming of the Kingdom of God (1:14-15) – busy
- Time passes and he is walking along a beach (1:16) – time to reflect and pray
- He calls His first disciples to follow Him (1:16-20) – busy
- He preaches and heals a man with an evil spirit (1:21-28) – busy
- He heals Peter's mother-in-law and many, many others (1:29-34) – busy
- "*Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray*" (1:35) – time to reflect and pray
- He travelled and healed many (1:36-45) – busy
- He sought out "secluded places" (1:45) – time to reflect and pray

Jesus models a wonderful pace of life: doing God's work (through serving and activism) – but also making time to reflect and pray. He is not always going-going-going. He takes time to stop. To rest. To pray.

Remember, too, the pace of life was very different in Jesus' day. Every day I check email (I have 7 email addresses – long story) at least once – some accounts several times. I check Facebook several times. I check three news websites a couple of times. I have a cellphone – when someone calls or texts I always respond right away. I have a landline – when someone calls, I answer. Every day it seems I'm driving a few places. There is always so much to do ... And my life is simpler than most people's.

Think about Jesus. He had no cellphone. No texting. No Twitter. No email. No Facebook. No Instagram. No Pinterest. No laptop. No land line. No Netflix. No TV. No iPhone. No mp3 player. No news channel. No newspaper. No mail. No electronic gadgets. No car(s). No PS4 Pro, Xbox One X, or Nintendo Switch. He walked everywhere. There was time, in the normal rhythm of life, for prayer and reflection. And He still took dedicated time to spend with His Father, too.

Realistically, our lives will never be like Jesus' was. But we can learn from Him that we need to find times of quiet, solitude, prayer, and reflection in the midst of our busy lives. Good for you to take time, every day, to read and pray. How can you do that more regularly? More meaningfully? How can you find even little breaks – 30 seconds? a minute? – in your hectic day when you can pause, meditate, and pray?

*O eternal God, King of all creation, who has brought me to this hour,  
forgive the sins which I've committed this day in thought, word, and deed.  
Cleanse, O Lord, my humble soul from every stain of flesh and spirit.  
Grant me, O Lord, to pass through the sleep of this night in peace,  
to rise from my lowly bed, to please your holy name all the days of my life,  
and to defeat the enemies that contend against me both bodily and spiritually.  
Deliver me, O Lord, from the vain thoughts that stain me, and from evil desires.  
For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,  
of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
now and forever and unto the ages of ages.  
Amen.*

Macarius of Egypt, 300-390

### **Wednesday, June 3: Matthew 26:36-43 CONTEMPLATIVE**

Gary Thomas writes, *"It's not surprising that before his greatest test, Jesus found comfort in the dark, in the Garden of Gethsemane, kneeling quietly and privately in prayer. It is in these dark, intense, and lonely times that ascetics' souls awaken. I think that anyone who has been stretched in ministry knows that the real battle was fought at Gethsemane, not Calvary (on the cross). To be sure, only Calvary provided payment for our sins and thus absolutely necessary, but Gethsemane was the real spiritual battleground where Jesus made the final decision to be obedient. In a wrenching, courageous act of self-denial, Jesus proved the mettle of his faith."*

Contemplative people are often prayer warriors. We love to spend time talking with God and interceding for people we know and love. Thank God for these people. We all desperately need people who pray for us. I am so thankful for the people in our church who I know pray for me and my family every day. We need it. Thank you.

Not all of us find this easy or natural to do. Those of us who are servers or activists want to be doing things – we often have a hard time sitting still. We can get frustrated with contemplative people who don't seem to "do" much – we need to appreciate their different way of relating to God, and the amazing work of prayer they do. To quote Tennyson: *"More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."*

At the same time, many contemplatives get frustrated with intellectuals, activists and worshipers: they are so busy DOING things all the time, they don't spend enough time getting to know God. We need to appreciate that different spiritual pathways bring different people closer to God. For some of us solitude, silence, and quiet are so spiritually enriching (a weekend silent retreat??? Fantastic...). For others of us,

actively doing things is how we grow spiritually. Neither is better. All have great value.

One of the temptations we fall into is thinking that because *I* know what works for *me* to draw closer to God, that same approach must work for everyone else. But when other people don't get as excited about the retreat, or the Servant Saturday, or the prayer service, or the march, or reading the theology book I can get annoyed. Those other people are just not spiritual. No ... they just express their spirituality differently. Hopefully we're beginning to appreciate those differences more and more. And we are discovering we can learn and grow so that we become more spiritually mature, too ...

Gethsemane does remind us that when we are facing major challenges, it is good to spend time – and effort – in prayer. "*Solitude begins with a time and a place for God, and God alone,*" writes Henri Nouwen. "*If we really believe not only that God exists but also that God is actively present in our lives – healing, teaching and guiding – we need to set aside a time and space to give God our undivided attention.*" (Henri Nouwen is a wonderful contemplative writer: books like *Life of the Beloved*, *The Prodigal Son*, and *The Wounded Healer* are wonderful explorations of reflective faith ... and practical action).

God can and will give us the wisdom, peace, and strength we need as we draw close to Him ...

*My eternal Savior, you alone are Almighty.  
You are the Lord, the God of all beings, and the God of my fathers.  
You, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,  
are merciful, compassionate, long-suffering, and rich in mercy.  
To you every heart is opened, and every secret thought is revealed.  
My soul cries out to you;  
my hope rests confidently in you.  
You have created the world to be a battlefield, where my faith will be tried.  
Yet you have also opened to me, and to all, the gate of mercy,  
and made clear that just as the possession of riches is not everlasting  
and just as beauty will not last;  
strength and power are likewise easily gone.  
Only the fruit of true faith will last:  
the only thing that will last and take us to heaven,  
is the possession of a life of true faith.  
Lord, strengthen my faith.  
Lord, hear my prayers as I battle on.  
You know, too, the prayers I have not spoken,  
for your Spirit reaches even into my heart,  
and your all-seeing gaze searches my thoughts, Lord.  
Lord, have mercy on me.  
Amen.*

Apostolic Constitutions, 4<sup>th</sup> Century

#### **Thursday, June 4: Matthew 6:24-34 CONTEMPLATIVE**

Richard Foster writes, "*Freedom from anxiety is characterized by three inner attitudes. (1) If what we have we receive as a gift, and (2) if what we have is to be cared for by God, and (3) if what we have is available to others, then we will possess freedom from anxiety. This is the inward reality of simplicity. However, if what we have we believe we have gotten, and if what we have we believe we must hold onto, and if what we have is not available to others, then we will live in anxiety. Such persons will never know simplicity regardless of the outward contortions they may put themselves through in order to live 'the simple life.'*"

Contemplatives are often drawn to an ascetic (in the best sense) lifestyle. Often contemplatives like

- solitude (Jerome, a 4<sup>th</sup> century saint, wrote, "*to me solitude is paradise*"),
- simplicity (apart from all the distractions of the materialistic world), and
- spiritual disciplines, making time and effort to pray, meditate, fast, and study

As Jesus talks about some of the things that distract us and worry us, it is helpful to reflect on how a life focussed on God and His goodness can help dramatically reduce our worry. Foster says, "*Jesus Christ and all the writers of the New Testament call us to break free of mammon lust (desire for more and more money and 'stuff') and live in joyous trust ... They point us toward a way of living in which everything we have we receive as a gift, and everything we have is cared for by God, and everything we have is available to others when it is right and good. This reality frames the heart of Christian simplicity. It is the means of liberation and power to do what is right and to overcome the forces of fear and avarice.*"

What contemplatives like Foster and Nouwen point us to is a life radically focussed on **Jesus**. It is not a self-centered life. Sometimes contemplatives can become selfish – **I** want spiritual experiences so **I** feel spiritually fulfilled. But the life Jesus is calling us to is a life which – strengthened by a great relationship with Himself – we serve **God** and **other people**. Far from being self-focussed it is God-focussed and other-focussed. If we are obsessed with our own spiritual experience, we are missing the point.

How can I find ways to get to know God better ... to trust Him more ... and then serve others more effectively?

*Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path.  
I've promised it once, and I'll promise it again:  
I will obey your righteous regulations.  
I have suffered much, O Lord; restore my life again as you promised.  
Lord, accept my offering of praise, and teach me your regulations.  
My life constantly hangs in the balance, but I will not stop obeying your instructions.  
The wicked have set their traps for me, but I will not turn from your commandments.  
Your laws are my treasure; they are my heart's delight.  
I am determined to keep your decrees to the very end.  
O Lord, listen to my cry; give me the discerning mind you promised.  
Listen to my prayer; rescue me as you promised.  
Let praise flow from my lips, for you have taught me your decrees.  
Let my tongue sing about your word, for all your commands are right.  
Give me a helping hand, for I have chosen to follow your commandments.  
O Lord, I have longed for your rescue, and your instructions are my delight.  
Let me live so I can praise you, and may your regulations help me.  
I have wandered away like a lost sheep; come and find me,  
for I have not forgotten your commands.  
Amen*

Psalm 119:105-112, 169-176

## **Friday, June 5: Psalm 139 CONTEMPLATIVE**

David is complicated. He's a soldier – an activist. A poet – a worshiper. A scholar – an intellectual. And he is also a contemplative. In Psalm 139, David reflects on the amazing love and care of God in Psalm 139. David finds himself as He finds his identity in his relationship with God. In the *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen writes to a friend struggling with his life, purpose, self-worth, identity, choices, future, and faith:

*"Ever since you asked me to write for you and your friends about the spiritual life, I've been wondering if there might be one word I would most want you to remember when you've finished reading all I wish to say. Over the past year, that special word has gradually emerged in the depths of my own heart. It is the word 'Beloved,' and I'm convinced that it has been given to me for the sake of you and your friends.*

*"Being a Christian, I first learned this word from the story of the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth. 'No sooner had Jesus come up out of the water then he saw the heavens torn apart and the spirit, like a dove, descending on him. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my son, the Beloved; my favor rests on you' (Luke 3:21-22). My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being – you **are** the Beloved ...*

*"It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: you're no good, you're ugly; you're worthless; you're despicable, you're nobody ... These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. That's the greatest trap. It is the trap of self-rejection. Over the years, I've come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity and power can, indeed, present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions.*

*"The real trap, however, is self-rejection. I'm constantly surprised how quickly I give in to this temptation as soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone or abandoned, I find myself thinking: well that proves once again that I'm a nobody. Instead of taking a critical look at the circumstances or trying to understand my own and others' limitations, I tend to blame myself – not just for what I did, but for who I am. My dark side says: 'I am no good – I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected and abandoned.' ...*

*"Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the Beloved. Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence ... We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives. That's the truth I want you to claim for yourself. That's the truth spoken by the voice that says, 'You are my Beloved.'*

*"Listening to that voice with great inner attentiveness, I hear at my center words that say: 'I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I've carried you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one.'"*

You are God's Beloved. Be still. And know that He is your God. He is with you now ... and always ...

*Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings: you have power over life and death.  
You know even that which is not clear, but hard to understand.  
Even what I think and feel is not hidden from you.  
Therefore, cleanse me from my hidden sins, for you have seen the wrong I have done.  
As each day passes, the end of my life comes nearer, and my sins increase in number.  
You, Lord, my Creator, know how feeble I am:  
in my weakness, strengthen me;  
when I suffer, uphold me,  
and I will glorify you, my Lord and my God.  
Amen.*

Ephraem of Syria (306-373)

### **Saturday, June 6: Psalm 23 CONTEMPLATIVE**

Psalm 23 speaks to the contemplative within us. Knowing God's love, knowing His presence, knowing His care and protection, knowing His provision is such a blessing.

*"The unfathomable mystery of God is that God is a Lover who wants to be loved," adds Nouwen (p. 106). "The one who created us is waiting for our response to the love that gave us our being. God not only says: 'You are my Beloved.' God also asks, 'Do you love me?' and offers us countless chances to say 'Yes.' That is the spiritual life: the chance to say 'Yes' to our inner truth. The spiritual life, thus understood, radically changes everything. Being born and growing up, leaving home and finding a career, being praised and*

*rejected, walking and resting, praying and playing, becoming ill and being healed – yes, living and dying – they all become expressions of that divine question: 'Do you love me?' And at every point of the journey there is the choice to say 'Yes' and the choice to say 'No.'*

*"Once you are able to catch a glimpse of this spiritual vision, you can see how many distinctions that are so central to our daily living lose their meaning. When joy and pain are both opportunities to say 'Yes' to God, then they are more alike than they are different. When the experience of being awarded a prize and the experience of being found lacking in excellence both offer us a chance to claim our true identity as the 'Beloved' of God, these experiences are more similar than they are different. When feeling lonely and feeling at home both hold a call to discover more fully who God is whose children we are, these feelings are more united than distinct. When, finally, both living and dying bring us closer to the full realization of our spiritual selfhood, they are not the great opposites the world would have us believe; they are, instead, two sides of the same mystery of God's love ...*

*"Where does all this lead us? I think that it leads us back to the 'place' we come from, the 'place' of God. We are sent into this world for a short time to say – through the joys and pains of our clocktime – the great 'Yes' to the love that has been given to us and in so doing return to the One who sent us with that 'Yes' engraved on our hearts ...*

*"Eternal life is not some great surprise that comes unannounced at the end of our existence in time; it is, rather, the full revelation of what we have been and have lived all along. The evangelist John expressed this succinctly when he says, 'My dear people, what we are to be in the future has not yet been recorded; all we know is that, when it is recorded, we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is.' ... I listen to that small soft voice calling me the Beloved, and I know that there is nothing to fear and that dying is the greatest act of love, the act that leads me into the eternal embrace of my God who is everlasting."*

How can you see everything that happens as an opportunity to grow in your experience of the God who loves you? God IS saying to you, "You are my Beloved" ... say "Yes" to Him in whatever way you need to ...

*Whom will I serve?  
Joshua answered, "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."  
How can I serve my Lord in the next five minutes?  
How can I serve my Lord in the next hour?  
How can I serve my Lord I serve today?  
Lord, teach me what service to You really looks like ...  
It sounds so simple, but I struggle to find practical applications.  
May I serve you as I pray for those I love – and those I don't.  
May I serve you as I care for someone who is lonely, ill, or in need.  
May I serve you as I encourage someone.  
May I serve you as I smile at a clerk or server.  
May I serve you as I choose to be joyful rather than dour.  
May I serve you as I choose to be light in the darkness.  
May I serve you as I \_\_\_\_\_.  
I will to serve, Lord: please help me, every day, to learn what that means.  
Amen*

### **Sunday, June 7: James 1:1-8 CONTEMPLATIVE**

The wonderful blessing contemplative people have is a deep, deep love for Jesus. But we live in a messy world. That can be hard for contemplative people to deal with. And so when friends, family or society disappoint us, we may be tempted to retreat to our inner world. James challenges us to stay engaged with the real world – with all its good, bad, and ugly. The church – other Christians – need the prayers, encouragement, and wisdom that contemplative people can bring.

New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, comments, "You can never look at the way the world is and read God's

*purposes off from the way the world is. It's always more puzzling and confusing than that. I am right now looking out a window at a beautiful blue sky, at a lovely winter's morning, and you just think 'This is a wonderful world, it's so beautiful, it's so full of promise and life.' And yet I've actually just had breakfast with a friend whose husband died just a couple of years ago, and she is still processing the question of why in early middle life would something like this happen?*

*"We live in a world where you can't simply look at the evidence and say, 'There you are, there is a good God, everything's OK.' That's why the good news of Jesus is that in the middle of this confusing world, with so much beauty but also so much sorrow, what God has done in Jesus launches a project, which says 'Yes, the sorrow is real, but God has dealt with it and is dealing with it. The beauty and power of creation are real. God is going to do the new thing, for which those are signposts.'*

*"Part of our trouble is that in the Western world, we've assumed that God is, as it were, the celestial CEO of this thing called the universe incorporated. And then, as one of Woody Allen's characters says: 'I sort of believe in God, but it looks like He's basically an underachiever.' In other words, He's not a very good CEO, He's not good at running this show. But actually, the world is much more complicated than that. It's not simply a machine or a business with God as the CEO. God is involved with it in ways which it's hard for us now, particularly in the modern world, to grasp.*

*"When we read the stories of Jesus and see what is going on in those stories, perhaps we need to rethink the meaning of the word 'God' around who we see in Jesus. Then all sorts of things come clearer and into sharper focus. It's not simply a matter of 'Has God blundered? Has He got it wrong?' But no, He's been in the middle of this mess with us and He's taken the worst the world can do onto Himself. He has launched His project of new creation. That's what the story of Jesus is all about.*

*"On a practical level, since we're in the middle of that and we can't really see what God is doing, how do we live in light of that reality? It is always a mystery, but the classic Christian disciplines, of prayer, worship, the study of Scripture, and particularly, service to the poor ... in all of those ways, we are actually plugging into the new creation, which has already been launched. We become mysteriously part of that. Not that we can bring the new creation by our own efforts – God brings that in God's time. We don't build the Kingdom, we build for the Kingdom. God builds the Kingdom, but what we do in present is actually going to be taken up and used within that larger project. It seems to me that this is what the Church, at its best, is always doing, usually below the radar. The Church consists of all God's people going about this Kingdom work day by day, year by year, and this will be part of the new creation which God will eventually make."<sup>4</sup>*

Notice the focus of Wright's comments – prayer, worship, Scripture ... and service to the poor. Well-rounded spirituality combines deep contemplation with a deep commitment to action (more tomorrow ☺)

*Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy.  
Act in me, O Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy.  
Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit, that I love but what is holy.  
Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy.  
Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit, that I always may be holy.  
Amen.*

Augustine, 354-430

## **Monday, June 8: James 1:9-27 CONTEMPLATIVE**

Yesterday we thought about Tom Wright's observation that, in order to deal with the evil in our world, we need to have a passion for both *"the classic Christian disciplines, of prayer, worship, the study of Scripture, and particularly, service to the poor ..."* As we do so, *"we are actually plugging into the new creation, which has already been launched ... God builds the Kingdom, but what we do in present is actually going to be taken up and used within that larger project. It seems to me that this is what the Church, at its best, is always doing, usually below the radar. The Church consists of all God's people going about this Kingdom*

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<sup>4</sup> [www.relevantmagazine.com/god/worldview/if-god-control-why-does-bad-stuff-keep-happening#7cmk0mv5xA1I9R7x.99](http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/worldview/if-god-control-why-does-bad-stuff-keep-happening#7cmk0mv5xA1I9R7x.99)

*work day by day, year by year, and this will be part of the new creation which God will eventually make.”*

James makes this same point over and over again in his letter – living as a person of God includes both a deep contemplative love for Him and a determination to live that out in practical service. Even though we may be a contemplative by temperament, we need to find ways to be involved in active service. That way our insight and intimate knowledge of God can be shared in genuine way to bless other people.

We all need to stay connected with other people, even when those relationships are difficult or challenging.

*I do not fear this day  
for you are with me  
wherever I might go  
your light to shine ahead  
your footsteps to lead the way.  
I do not fear this day  
for your word will be my guide  
your strength will sustain me  
your love revive me  
this day and all days.  
I do not fear this day  
for you are with me.  
Amen.*

## **Tuesday, June 9: Luke 5:17-26 SERVING**

Not everyone connects with God through scholarly pursuits, worship, activism, or contemplation (though these are all good). Others of us primarily connect with God through service. For us, we sense God's presence most tangibly when we're helping others. We can even be uncomfortable in a setting where we don't have something to do – we'd love to call people, make coffee, clean the countertops, care for someone, knit some booties, make a bookshelf, decorate, change lightbulbs, weed the garden ...

Jesus models serving for us time and time again. He is never too busy or too preoccupied to overlook the needs of people around Him.

In Luke 5:17-26, this man's friends model serving as well. They know what the man needs. And they are determined enough – and creative enough – to ensure he gets the help he requires.

How about you? Are you a "server"? Do you love be doing things for others? If so, great. Do it. Get plugged into places where you can be doing things.

If this is not a really key way of relating to God for you, pray about that. You may not ever become a "super-server" who is always doing things, but on the other hand, be aware of the people around you who need a helping hand. Some of us are not as well attuned to the opportunities to help as others ... so ask God for the occasional opportunity to help out. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive ...

*O Lord, my soul's Healer,  
Keep me at morning,  
Keep me at noon,  
Keep me at evening.  
When I am on a rough course faring,  
Help and safeguard my ways this night.  
I am tired, astray, and stumbling,  
Shield Thou me from snare and sin.  
Amen.*

### Wednesday, June 10: Acts 9:36-43 SERVING

Of course it's wonderful that God restored Tabitha (Dorcas). But notice: (1) Peter was willing to be available to help, and (2) who Tabitha is – her character.

Tabitha "*was always doing kind things for others and helping the poor ...*" (9:36). When Peter came into her room, it "*was filled with widows who were weeping and showing him the coats and other clothes Dorcas had made for them*" (9:39). Tabitha's name was synonymous with servanthood and caring for the poor.

More recently, we might think of Mother Teresa and her community who serve the homeless and critically ill in the slums of Calcutta. I think of people I work with, who volunteer with the City on committees around homelessness and affordable housing, who give their time and energy to care for those who are struggling. I think of those who, in normal times, volunteer at the hospital. And at schools. Who deliver meals on wheels. Who pickup groceries for shut ins and vulnerable people. And in many, many other places in our community. Thank you for all you do in our city.

I think of those who volunteer in our church – who call people, who (in normal times) visit our shut ins, volunteer in our kids and youth ministries, maintain our facility, lead worship, look after our finances, supply our kitchens, serve coffee, wash dishes, and clean our washrooms. We take all this for granted. But thank you to all our servers.

Is there some way you can serve someone this week?

Is there someone who serves you that you just take for granted – thank them.

*Thanks be to you, O God, that I have risen to-day,  
To the rising of this life itself;  
May it be to your own glory, O God of every gift,  
And to the glory of my soul likewise.  
O great God, aid my soul  
With the aiding of your own mercy;  
Even as I clothe my body with wool,  
Cover my soul with the shadow of your wing.  
Help me to avoid every sin,  
And the source of every sin to forsake;  
And as the mist scatters on the crest of the hills,  
May each ill haze clear from my soul, O God.  
Amen*

### Thursday, June 11: Matthew 1:18-25 SERVING

This is one of our favourite Christmas readings. It may seem odd to read it in June. But think of it as a passage on service. Joseph has been described as "the silent saint." Scripture does not record a single word Joseph **says**. But what he **does** is incredible.

We do see Joseph is willing to **listen** to God. As we have noticed before, listening to God, to Scripture, and to others is a skill we all do well to work on. Larry King once said, "*I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I'm going to learn, I must do it by listening.*" One of the keys to godly wisdom is simply being willing to listen and to learn what God – and others – are saying to us.

We also see that Joseph is willing to **do** what God instructs him to do – even though he doesn't understand everything. One of the other keys of godly wisdom is the willingness to actually act on what we know is right, even when we may not always want to ... "*The only way you can serve God,*" says Rick Warren, "*is by serving other people.*"

Through the years, Joseph will teach Jesus a trade. He will model for his children what it means to be a man of God, a husband, and a father. Joseph's silent legacy looms large in the life of Jesus and in the lives of his mother and brothers and sisters.

Do you know any Josephs? People who may not say a lot, but do a lot? Praise God for those people.

How can I be a Joseph? Listen more (and maybe talk less). And do something ...

*For all whose image of your creation is marred by pain and suffering  
Your kingdom come, Your will be done.  
For those who wake each morning to shellfire and destruction  
Your kingdom come, Your will be done.  
For children dispossessed of childhood and transformed into soldiers  
Your kingdom come, Your will be done.  
For orphans wandering lonely roads to uncertain futures  
Your kingdom come, Your will be done.  
For each persecuted family carrying your Cross  
Your kingdom come, Your will be done.  
In each of us, Lord,  
Your kingdom come, Your will be done.  
Amen*

### **Friday, June 12: Ruth 1 SERVING**

Bad things happen to good people. How do we handle it when those things happen to us?

Bad things certainly happen to Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah. I'm sure they had all sorts of questions for God. Why did this happen? Had they done something wrong? Could anything have been done to save Elimelech, Mahlon, or Kilion?

Throughout Scripture, there is often no direct correlation between suffering and sin. Certainly this text makes no such connection. Unfortunately, we often live with unanswered questions about big – challenging – issues such as these ladies are wrestling with. Sometimes life is just hard. The "Why?" question is not answered. The real practical question is: How am I going to handle this?

What is interesting is Ruth's response. She recognizes Naomi's plight: as an older widow, Naomi had no way of earning an income and few prospects for remarriage; she would be destitute unless a relative took pity on her. So Ruth is determined to help her out. Ruth is willing to move out of her own country into a strange community, where she would be an outsider, in order to care for her mother-in-law (no mother-in-law jokes for her).

In those days this was a HUGE sacrifice and commitment. And a big risk: what if the people of Bethlehem rejected her as a person from Moab? She is an Arab going into the Jewish heartland ...

Mother Teresa comments, *"Prayer in action is love, and love in action is service. Try to give unconditionally whatever a person needs in the moment. The point is to do something, however small, and show you care through your actions by giving your time ... We are all God's children so it is important to share His gifts. Do not worry about why problems exist in the world – just respond to people's needs ... We feel what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean, but that ocean would be less without that drop."*

How can you make the world that much better today?

*God of Grace, in whom I put my trust,  
Be my rescuer when sins ensnare,  
The liberator of my soul,  
The still small voice that says, 'Be free.'  
God of Love, in whom I put my trust,  
Be my joy and comfort at all times,  
The source of all my thoughts and words,  
The still small voice that says, 'Rejoice.'  
God of Peace, in whom I put my trust,  
Be my tranquillity in times of turmoil,  
The steadying hand in raging seas,  
The still small voice that says, 'Be calm.'  
God of Power, in whom I put my trust,  
Be my confidence when faith is challenged,  
The sword and armour that protects,  
The still small voice that says, 'Be strong.'  
Amen*

### **Saturday, June 13: Ruth 2 SERVING**

Ruth is a server – caring for her mother-in-law. And Boaz, we discover, is a server, too. Thankfully.

God is able to take the disaster of three tragic deaths and bring something beautiful out of them (spoiler alert – if you read on to Ruth 3-4, Boaz and Ruth get married and have a son, Obed, the grandfather of King David. Thus David – and thus Jesus – have a non-Jewish person (what we today would call an Arab) in their family heritage ☺). God does amazing things through generous acts of service by Ruth and Boaz.

In the midst of crises, what should we do? I'm sure Naomi and Ruth prayed. But they also acted. They did something.

Paul, in Romans, writes, *"The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them"* (8:26-28).

Notice the Scripture does **NOT** say God **causes** everything that happens. It **DOES** say that whatever does happen God can redeem and bring something good out of it.

At the time, Naomi and Ruth could see nothing good that could possibly come out of their losses. And yet – over time – God was able to work miracles. Because of people who served.

When you are going through tough times ... pray.

But also find opportunities to serve. When we help others it takes our minds off ourselves. We get a better perspective on life. And we never know what tangible blessings may come to those we serve – or even to ourselves – as we help out others.

*"If you can't do great things,"* Mother Teresa used to say, *"do little things with great love. If you can't do them with great love, do them with a little love. If you can't do them with a little love, do them anyway. Love grows when people serve."* How can you serve today?

*Amazing grace –  
How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found;  
Was blind, but now I see.  
Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed.  
Through many dangers, toils and snares,  
I have already come;  
Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.  
The Lord has promised good to me,  
His Word my hope secures;  
He will my Shield and Portion be,  
As long as life endures.  
Amen*

John Newton

**Sunday, June 14: Luke 10:25-37 SERVING**

*"The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But the Good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"*(Martin Luther King Jr.).

As we think about the power of serving, the parable of the Good Samaritan speaks to us about (1) crossing boundaries to help other people ("*Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans*"(John 4:9)), (2) seeing a need and responding, and (3) simply doing what you can. Notice the Samaritan did not do x-rays or orthopedic surgery. He just did what he could with what skills, opportunities, and resources he had.

(Notice, by the way, Jesus chooses to cast the Samaritan – the despised non-Jew – as the hero. This reviled non-Jew is helping the insider – the good Jew – in this story. Meanwhile two other good Jews have already passed him by. Jesus is deliberately challenging our thinking of who is "good" and "not good." In today's Israel, Jesus could retell the story of the Good Palestinian. An Israeli is injured. Two other "good" Israelis pass by. But a Palestinian stops to help ... Or in Lethbridge, the parable of the Good Moslem. A white Christian is injured in a car accident. A pastor and a church elder don't stop. But an Iranian Moslem person does ... How does this challenge our thinking? Does it upset you? Good! Because that is EXACTLY the response Jesus was trying to get from His Jewish audience)

Jesus' point in the parable is that we all have people in our lives we can help, even just a little bit. But do we see them? Or, if we do see them, do we find excuses to avoid them? Or do we do what we can with the skills, opportunities, and resources we have?

Tim Keller writes, "*We instinctively tend to limit for whom we exert ourselves. We do it for people like us, and for people whom we like. Jesus will have none of that. By depicting a Samaritan helping a Jew, Jesus could not have found a more forceful way to say that anyone at all in need – regardless of race, politics, class, and religion – is your neighbour. Not everyone is your brother or sister in faith, but everyone is your neighbour, and you must love your neighbour.*"

Some people are natural "servers". Thank God for such people. But we can all find small ways to make a difference in the lives of our neighbours. Pray that God would help you see small – and large ways you can make a difference (shovel a walk, send a card, phone a friend, take over a meal, smile at a clerk ...).

*"Do something wonderful,"* writes Albert Schweitzer, *"people may imitate it."*

*God, bless to me this day.  
God, bless to me this night;  
Bless, O bless, O God of grace,  
Each day and hour of my life.  
God, bless the pathway on which I go.  
And bless, O God, my labour and my toil.  
God, bless the earth that is beneath my sole.  
Bless, O God, and give to me Thy love.  
O God of gods, bless my rest and my repose.  
Bless, O God, and give to me Thy love.  
Bless, O bless, O God of grace,  
Each day and hour of my life.  
Amen*

### **Monday, June 15: Hebrews 13:1-3, 20-21 SERVING**

Unless we work for emergency services, we may not be called to go looking for injured people lying in the ditch (as in the story of the Good Samaritan, yesterday). The writer of Hebrews simply encourages to keep our eyes open, to be available, and – if an opportunity to help or encourage presents itself – to take it.

The challenges for those who love to serve are

- Not to resent other people who don't serve as much as we do. Yes, some people just love to be Martha – always doing things – great. But we can snipe at other believers who relate to God in other ways: *"Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me"* (Luke 10:40). Yes, we can – and should – all do something ... but not everyone is called to be as busy as you like to be.
- We are saved by God's gracious gift of love, mercy, and forgiveness. God loves you as His beloved child whom He has saved through the blood of Jesus – you are not saved by what you do for Him. Your service is your spiritual act of worship, out of gratitude for your salvation – it does not earn your salvation. So serve Him gladly – in worship – to glorify Him, not to earn credits with Him.
- Remember you are loved by God and other people, even if you are not doing anything. You are loved for who you are – God's precious beloved child – not what you do. So relax a bit.
- Serving can be exhausting. Make sure you find balance in your life:
  - Don't sacrifice your own family because you are so busy serving others;
  - Don't destroy your own health to serve others;
  - Make sure you are refreshed through worship and prayer, reading Scripture and being part of a community of people who care **for you**.

Ultimately God is the One who does things in and through you. You need to stay close to Him and be led and empowered by His Spirit: *"Now may the God of peace – who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, and ratified an eternal covenant with his blood – may he equip you with all you need for doing his will. May he produce in you, through the power of Jesus Christ, every good thing that is pleasing to him. All glory to him forever and ever. Amen."*

*Let nothing disturb you,  
Let nothing frighten you,  
All things are passing away:  
God never changes.  
Patience obtains all things.  
Whoever has God lacks nothing;  
God alone suffices.  
Amen*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

## Tuesday, June 16: Psalm 104 CREATION

A few days ago, we read Psalm 148 – one of my favourite psalms. It reminds us that, while we tend to think of worship as a human thing, in fact all of creation praises God!

IN Psalm 148, who worships God? The heavens ... the heights above ... all his angels ... all his heavenly hosts ... sun and moon ... shining stars ... highest heavens ... waters above the skies ... great sea creatures and all ocean depths ... lightning and hail ... snow and clouds ... stormy winds ... mountains ... hills ... fruit trees ... cedars ... wild animals ... cattle ... small creatures ... flying birds ...

And, oh yeah, people do worship God, too. Almost as an afterthought the psalmist adds, kings of the earth ... all nations ... princes ... rulers on earth ... young men and women ... old men and children also worship.

Among a similar theme, Psalm 104 reminds us that God is the good creator of all the natural beauty around us. It makes sense then, that many of us feel close to God when we are surrounded by His glorious masterpiece – this world and this universe He fashioned with incredible beauty, complexity, and wonder.

Many of us feel close to God in His creation. When we are in His world, we know we are part of an amazing symphony of worship. Just as an orchestra has many, many different instruments playing many, many different notes which all come together to create one amazing musical masterpiece, God's creation has many, many different worshippers (only one group of whom are human beings) praising God in many, many different ways, all coming together in one incredible cacophony of praise and worship. An orchestra composed only of oboes all playing an F# would make for a very boring musical experience. The variety of instruments and harmony of notes create the richness of a great orchestral work. In the same way to think of worship as only a human activity – all taking place in the same way – would be very dull. The variety of praise-ers, celebrating God in their own unique ways, makes His creation so exciting.

Enjoy being part of the grand symphony of God's creation ...

*May the blessing of light be on you - light without and light within.  
May the blessed sunlight shine on you like a great peat fire,  
so that stranger and friend may come and warm himself at it.  
And may light shine out of the two eyes of you,  
like a candle set in the window of a house,  
bidding the wanderer come in out of the storm.  
And may the blessing of the rain be on you,  
may it beat upon your Spirit and wash it fair and clean,  
and leave there a shining pool where the blue of Heaven shines,  
and sometimes a star.  
And may the blessing of the earth be on you,  
soft under your feet as you pass along the roads,  
soft under you as you lie out on it, tired at the end of day;  
and may it rest easy over you when, at last, you lie out under it.  
May it rest so lightly over you that your soul may be out from under it quickly;  
up and off and on its way to God.  
And now may the Lord bless you, and bless you kindly.  
Amen.*

## Wednesday, June 17: Psalm 19 CREATION

How do the heavens speak about God? Obviously they don't do so with an audible voice. But if (to quote Jesus) we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we can appreciate that we can learn a lot about who God is by observing His handiwork in His creation. Just as we can learn much about an artist by what he creates or an author by what she writes, we can learn a lot about the Creator of the universe by observing His creation.

Psalm 19 may seem a bit schizophrenic. In 19:1-6, David celebrates the wonders of God's natural creation and affirms that we can learn much about Him by observing His cosmos. In 19:7-14, David turns his thoughts from the God's world to God's Word, writing "*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.*" David praises God for two types of teaching and wisdom – for what God has revealed in both nature and Scripture.

In later centuries, theologians introduced the metaphor of two "books" where both nature and Scripture are seen as revelations of God's nature, character, and will. The Belgic Confession (1561) states,

*"We know God by two means:*

- First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: God's eternal power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict humans and to leave them without excuse.*
- Second, God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God's glory and for our salvation."*

We certainly need Scripture to teach us God's specific revelation about the nature of salvation that comes only through the death and resurrection of Jesus. But God's creation also helps us learn about the ongoing sustaining love that God has for His creation. Both God's general self-revelation through His creation and His very particular self-revelation through Scripture help us know God better.

The classic hymn, [\*How Great Thou Art\*](#) brings these two themes together beautifully:

*O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the worlds thy hands have made,  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed:*

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee:  
How great thou art. How great thou art.  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee:  
How great thou art. How great thou art.*

*When through the woods and forest glades I wander  
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees,  
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,  
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze:*

*Chorus*

*And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,  
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,  
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,  
He bled and died to take away my sin.*

*Chorus*

*When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation  
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart.  
Then I shall bow in humble adoration,  
And there proclaim, My God, how great thou art.*

*Chorus*

*May you have -  
Walls for the wind  
And a roof for the rain,  
And drinks bedside the fire.  
Laughter to cheer you  
And those you love near you,  
And all that your heart may desire  
May God be with you and bless you.  
May you see your children's children.  
May you be poor in misfortune, rich in blessings.  
May you know nothing but God's grace  
From this day forward and forever more.  
Amen*

## Thursday, June 18: Psalm 24 CREATION

Alistair McGrath writes, "We (need to) reclaim the idea of nature as God's creation and act accordingly, bringing attitudes and actions into line with beliefs. We have been entrusted, corporately and individually, with the jewel of God's creation and given the responsibility of tending and nurturing it, before passing it on to others. We are like curators of the great art collection, who are accountable to posterity as well as to the present for our tending of its treasures. We must learn to appreciate and prize this entrustment, as perhaps the greatest privilege this earth can offer. And more than this: we must see nature as a continual reminder and symbol of a future renewed creation, a world that we do not yet know but believe to lie over the horizons of our human existence."

Psalm 24 reminds us that the Earth – and everything and everyone in it – is the Lord's. This brings us back to the ethical imperative in Genesis 2:15, to tend and care for His creation. In light of that, the rest of Psalm 24 is a call for us to be holy people. Some people who love God's creation choose to simply drop out of everyday society, believing they can best be "holy" as far away from other people and modern society as possible. Some early monastic orders did the same – small groups of monks (or individual hermits) would live spartan lives away from other people and human activity. They spiritualized withdrawal from real life.

But in God's world, holiness means being who God would have us be, living as God would have us live, and doing what God would have us do ... To be holy is actually to be powerfully engaged in real life in the real world. While we may be spiritually recharged by getaways into God's creation, we are also called to actively care for and nurture God's creation – including other people.

To be God's holy people, we ought to be those who (1) care most for God's natural creation and are on the forefront of environmental advocacy ("This is our Father's world ..."), (2) care most for human beings who suffer from injustice, violence, poverty, and other physical needs, and (3) care most for the spiritual needs of people – everyone needs the Lord.

We often focus on one aspect or the other: it's ALL and ONLY about sharing God's Word (evangelism) or ALL and ONLY about doing deeds of justice and mercy. Or it's all about God's creation. In fact, it's all of these and more. Yes, everyone needs to know Jesus. But to tell people about a loving God who created the world – while we treat His creation in disrespectful ways – destroys our credibility. We come across as inconsistent and shallow. However, if people see our love for God reflected in how we treat one another **and** His creation, our words ring true.

Sharing God's love in Word and deed is a both/and not an either/or. Jesus certainly talked about forgiveness, faith, and the new life we can have in Him – but He also healed people, fed people, and embraced people. Like two wings of a bird, both God's Words of love and acts of love come together beautifully. To be holy is to be people who are, who say, and who do the love of God ...

*You are the peace of all things calm.  
You are the place to hide from harm.  
You are the light that shines in dark.  
You are the heart's eternal spark.  
You are the door that's open wide.  
You are the guest who waits inside.  
You are the stranger at the door.  
You are the calling of the poor.  
You are my Lord and with me still.  
You are my love, keep me from ill.  
You are the light, the truth, the way.  
You are my Saviour this very day.  
Amen*

## Friday, June 19: Romans 8:18-39 CREATION

Romans 8 is a fantastic chapter about the new life we have through and in God's Spirit. There are some wonderful truths in this passage:

- The Spirit helps us as we pray and actually intercedes for us (8:26-27);
- *"In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose"* (8:28) – God does not cause everything, but can work good through everything;
- *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* – nothing and no one can ever separate us from God's love (8:31-39).

We often don't know quite what to do with Romans 8:19-22. Paul is teaching us that all creation has been affected by human sin and is waiting for (1) God's people to **be** God's people here and now, and (2) for Jesus' return when all things will be completely and finally restored.

Through the cross, God is making **all** things new – not just human beings. As humans we naturally focus on the "people part" of the good news – especially the **personal** people part: **I** am saved/**you** are saved by the grace of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is great news. Fantastic news. But God is in the process of redeeming **ALL** of His creation – not just me and not just people. That makes some people a little bit queasy: isn't the good news **ONLY** about us? Romans 8 – and many other passages in Scripture including Revelation 21-22 – challenge us to appreciate that God is more than big enough to renew absolutely everything. God is dealing with **ALL** of the consequences of evil – in my personal life, in human society, in His natural creation, and so much more. I don't understand all that. But it's wonderful.

*"All creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are ..."* (8:19) In other words, all of creation is waiting for us – God's children (8:1-18) – to **BE** God's children, and to take up the mantle for which we were created: to be wise stewards of God's creation, including loving His people.

Before sin ever entered the world, people – you and I – were placed in God's perfect garden, *"to tend and watch over it"* (Genesis 2:15). We were created to help bring order, peace, and harmony to all of God's creation. That fundamental mandate – part of our core reason for being as creatures made in "the image of God" – has never been revoked. That is our purpose as renewed, restored, saved people.

Some practical thoughts for all of us:

- Care for people.
- Try to think and talk about "**God's creation**" – you begin to look at the world differently ...
- Reduce, reuse, recycle – this is God's creation. As Christians we should be the most environmentally conscious people around (certainly not the least.) – we live in God's art gallery.
- Be aware of how much "stuff" you use in a day – water, gas, food, waste, energy – and try to reduce it, a little bit (or a lot.) ...
- Think about some of the **BIG** issues regarding God's creation today: climate change ... carbon emissions ... waste disposal ... air and water pollution ... How should we respond?

*Bless to me, O God, each thing my eye sees;  
Bless to me, O God, each sound my ear hears;  
Bless to me, O God, each odour that goes to my nostrils  
Bless to me, O God, each taste that goes to my lips;  
Each note that goes to my song,  
Each ray that guides my way,  
Each thing that I pursue.  
Bless to me, O God,  
The zeal that seeks my living soul.  
The Three – Father, Son, and Spirit – who seek my heart,  
Amen.*

## Saturday, June 20: John 11 CREATION

Jesus did incredible things. He healed a lot of people. He challenged a lot of Pharisees. He taught a lot of searching people. But also regularly withdrew into the wilderness (11:54). On this occasion He is doing so partly to get away from the religious powers-that-be. But partly this was His regular routine after a major time of stress. He knew He needed to spend time with His Father. Being in God's creation – away from the demands, threats, pressures, clamoring voices, and grasping hands of regular life – was one of Jesus' key strategies for spiritual health. Jesus felt close to His Father in His Father's created world.

John Calvin comments, "*There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice.*" God intends us to feel close to Him in His creation. Of course some of us do feel closer to God in nature than others of us do. If you do feel close to God in His world – get out there. You need to connect with Him in His world.

If God's creation is not necessarily a place you feel particularly close to God, try going for a walk in the park or a drive in the country ... and purposely choose to look with new eyes, reminding yourself that this **IS God's creation**. You can learn about Him by observing His world. Spend some time listening to the wind, feeling the sun on your face, tasting the air ... and ask God to speak to you .... Brian Doerksen's [Creation's Call](#) is a wonderful song that expresses this sentiment (CCLI 662904):

*I have felt the wind blow, whispering your name  
I have seen your tears fall, when I watch the rain.  
How could I say there is no God? When all around creation calls.  
A singing bird, a mighty tree, the vast expanse of open sea  
Gazing at a bird in flight, soaring through the air.  
Lying down beneath the stars, I feel your presence there.  
I love to stand at ocean shore and feel the thundering breakers roar,  
To walk through golden fields of grain with endless bloom horizons fray.  
Listening to a river run, watering the Earth.  
Fragrance of a rose in bloom, a newborn's cry at birth.  
I love to stand at ocean shore and feel the thundering breakers roar,  
To walk through golden fields of grain with endless bloom horizons fray  
I believe, I believe, I believe ...*

*It's all in the touch -  
the touch of love,  
the touch of healing,  
the touch of compassion,  
the touch of reassurance,  
the touch that says  
'You are special, wanted  
held in high regard.'  
It's all in that touch -  
that very special touch -  
the touch you give through us  
who reach out to those in need  
to those who need to know.  
Help us to be channels of your touch in this dark world  
to bring your love,  
healing,  
compassion,  
and reassurance  
to a world that knows none of these.  
Amen*

## Sunday, June 21 (Father's Day): Exodus 2:11-3:6 CREATION

Moses grew up in Pharaoh's court. His journey of self-discovery brings him into the wilderness of Midian. Here, in the heart of God's untamed creation, Moses discovers a meaningful life – in relationship with a loving family. And here, away from the bustle and distractions of courtly life, He discovers God.

Some of us need to get away from the noise, confusion, distraction, demands, frenzy, and busy-ness of life from time to time – to find our true selves. And to find God. Some of us hear God and talk with God so much better out in God's creation. Those of us who feel close to God in creation resonate [with this hymn](#):

*This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears  
All nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.  
This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought  
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas; His hand the wonders wrought.*

*This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise,  
The morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker's praise.  
This is my Father's world: He shines in all that's fair;  
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass; He speaks to me everywhere.*

*This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget  
That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.  
This is my Father's world: the battle is not done:  
Jesus Who died shall be satisfied, And earth and Heav'n be one.*

*This is my Father's world, should my heart be ever sad?  
The lord is King – let the heavens ring. God reigns – let the earth be glad.  
This is my Father's world. Now closer to Heaven bound,  
For dear to God is the earth Christ trod. No place but is holy ground.*

*This is my Father's world. I walk a desert lone.  
In a bush ablaze to my wondering gaze God makes His glory known.  
This is my Father's world, a wanderer I may roam  
Whate'er my lot, it matters not, My heart is still at home.*

Charles Haddon Spurgeon put it this way, "Surely everything that comes from the Hand of such a Master-Artist as God has within it something of Himself." We learn about God's salvation through Jesus in Scripture. But we can I draw closer to God through His creation. How can I worship God, today?

*If we had a fraction of the faith in you that you have in us  
then this world would be transformed, Lord.  
If we showed a fraction of the love that you show to us  
then this world would be transformed, Lord  
If we possessed a fraction of the patience that you display with us  
then this world would be transformed, Lord.  
If we shared just a portion of the blessings that we have received from you  
then this world would be transformed, Lord.  
If we showed as much trust in others as you have shown in us  
then this world would be transformed, Lord.  
If we claimed just a fraction of the power you promised to your Church  
then this world would be transformed, Lord.  
Transform us first, Lord, that we might transform this world  
through your love and your power.  
Amen*