

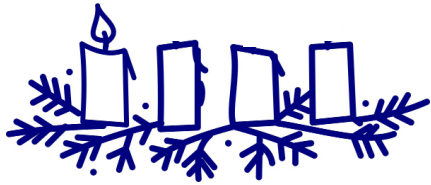
This Must Be the Place

On the song "This Must be the Place," from the Talking Heads' fifth studio album, *Speaking in Tongues*, lead singer David Byrne sings, "Home is where I want to be, but I guess I'm already there. I come home, she lifted up her wings. I guess that this must be the place." Byrne longs for home, and the discovery of it has caught him by surprise. He has found peace and stability, not in a place, but in the love of another.

So surprising is this discovery, he goes on to ask, "Did I find you or you find me?"

Whether we realize it or not, every single one of us is searching for home. We look for it in countless places, but it often feels fleeting and even hard to define. However, the invitation of the Gospel is to find home, not in a place or in a state of self-actualization, but in a person who has come in love to find you. It is in the experience of the love and grace of Jesus that we find home and can say, "This must be the place."

—Pastor Marcus Lane



Week 1

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear

Isaiah 65:17-25

A Perfect Home | Marcus Lane

What I was experiencing is, I think, perfectly captured in the German word *unheimlich*. Typically found in the work of German psychologists, *unheimlich* means "strange, uncanny, or weird." It comes from the German word *heim*, which means "home." *Unheimlich* is the experience of un-home-ness.

You may have lived in one place your entire life, but you've experienced *unheimlich*. Every single one of us has experienced the feeling that we are out of place, that we don't belong, or that we are disconnected from those around us.

The experience of *unheimlich* makes the hope of Isaiah 65 that much more beautiful. God's response to the *unheimlich* that sin has brought upon the world is to make everything new. The world that we are made for has been marred by sin, but God does not want to discard it. He wants to heal it through the power of his gracious forgiveness.

The answer to our un-home-ness isn't to run and find the perfect place we can belong. The answer is to cling to the Person who invites us to belong in his kingdom. Or, as Augustine puts it:

*We need not fear to find no home again
because we have fallen away from it;
while we are absent our home falls not to ruins,
for our home is your eternity.*

Reflection: How might you put into practice finding your sense of home in Jesus this Advent season?

Monday, December 4, 2023

Genesis 1:26–29 (2:4–18)

The Stewardship of Paradise | Monica Heissenbuettel

Being outside in God's natural creation always soothes my soul. No matter what time of the year it is, I don't feel quite like myself if I don't spend time outside, breathing fresh air, in the company of trees and wild animals. I love to smell the vari-colored leaves in the Fall, feel the chill of the cold air on my face as my boots crunch through snowy paths in the Winter, revel in the sound of birdsong in the Spring, and gaze upon the reflection of dancing light on sparkling water in the Summer.

And to think God created all of this majesty and beauty for all of us! To think that He designed all of it to work together in life cycles: systems that are sustained, renewed and regenerated as all of life surges forward, marking the seasons and repeating again, all in a harmonious dance of interconnected dependence of light, color, sound and goodness.

Genesis 2:15 states: *"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it."* And in verse 18: *"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.'" God created Adam, and later Eve, from Adam's rib, to be stewards of the lush earth He'd created. He fashioned this place, this Paradise, specifically to be inter-connected with all life, and with Him. This was His design for His creation, His perfect plan.*

In verses 28b–29 we read: *"And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.' And God said, 'Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.'"*

I grew up on a small farm in mid-Michigan, one that has been in my family for several generations and was taught stewardship at a very young age. My siblings and I helped plant, grow and hoe vegetables that were frozen, canned and preserved by my mother for food all winter long, and crops for the chickens and livestock. I worked alongside my father for many of the farming chores ... milking the cows, making feed for them, gathering eggs, baling hay, watering and weeding.

I've carried this stewardship with me and try to practice it with my own family, thoughtfully connecting the reality of food and farming and sustainable practices to how we practice our Christian faith and practice gratitude with all we've been given.

God's intention for His creation remains; He still graciously provides all that we need to sustain and support our lives. *"The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing"* (Psalm 145:15-16).

Let's remember to be mindful of His gifts, His generosity, and His kindness as we strive to properly steward His creation!

Reflection: How does being mindful of the Creator's Divine Purpose point to His plan for your own life? What can you do to steward His gifts?

Tuesday, December 5, 2023

Psalm 23

The Lord is My Shepherd | Amanda Fogo & Alison Doerr

As busy college students, we live a very hectic and chaotic life. Occasionally, we have hard days where we struggle to find balance and allocate our time. Our days can often feel like an uphill battle, that we will never win. In the midst of all of this, it can be hard to remember that God is with us, and God is our Shepherd. We have come to realize that during these battles, God calls us to take a step back and encourages us to reflect on his Word.

Everyone goes through their own seasons of trials and unbelief. During these periods it is easy to forget that we have the Lord to turn to. We have to remember that He is guiding us and we have no reason to fear, for He is always there to comfort us. When we live by this, we don't have to worry because God reassures us that His goodness and love will follow us wherever we go.

Matthew 18:20 says, *"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."* As college roommates, we have found it prudent to have a fellow Christian to turn to as we navigate God's journey for us. We can rely on each other for reminders of God's unconditional love and support. We encourage you to find fellowship on your faith walk as you navigate God's plan for you.

Reflection: Going forward, when are you going to build in time for rest and reflection? Whom can you rely on to help and support you in this time?

Isaiah 4:2-6

Following the Links of Scripture | William Cannon

This passage is written like a well referenced and cross-linked Wikipedia article. There are references to branches, mountains, booths, and fire that connect to other parts of the Old Testament. Without being able to click on these “hyperlinks” much of the meaning of this passage is lost.

Upon first reading, this is a passage of deep reassurance that is much appreciated after passages where Isaiah is communicating threats and displeasure from God with his people. Isaiah is addressing a remnant of who is left in Zion and Jerusalem, the place where God dwells on earth, and he is consoling them that the Lord will make them holy, purified, and protected from destruction. This is a major shift in tone from the previous chapter! More depth and consolation comes as we click through these hyperlinks to other parts of the Bible.

The branch that is mentioned at the start refers to the coming Messiah as we see in Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12, and Isaiah 11:1. This is a powerful image because this branch is said to spring up from a destroyed tree, *“the stump of Jesse.”* Our God is One who loves to bring life through death, hope through despair, peace through tribulation. Isaiah is taking a reprieve from the destruction and tribulation, he is foreseeing for God’s people to shine a ray of hope, peace, and life in this passage.

When we click through the Mount Zion covered in smoke and fire reference we go back many years to where God is giving his people the Law on Mt. Sinai while they were wandering in the desert after being freed from Egypt. Instead of the fear and destruction of God’s unbounded presence on the mountain, we get *“a booth of shade by day ... and a refuge and shelter”*—another move from destruction to protection.

Reflection: How do you see the image of a branch springing forth from a dead tree stump reminding you that God is always bringing life through death, peace through tribulation, and abundance through scarcity? How has the Lord showed up in a big way in your past but now might be calling into a booth for shade and refuge from a surrounding storm?

John 14:1-7

Well-Placed Trust | Amy Robson

Numb. Fearful. Bereft. All these feelings tumbled chaotically in my mind while the doctors ran down the hall on either side of my daughter's hospital bed. One turned back to say, "We'll update you as soon as we can!"

Like Jesus' disciples, we could not follow—even though our hearts yearned to be with our daughter and understand what was happening. We didn't want to wait, yet we trusted these doctors—they had proven their wisdom and knowledge during the week leading up to the emergency C-section. Jesus knows His disciples trust Him. He says, "... if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?" He reassures them further: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

While the wait seemed long, a doctor returned within a half hour and explained what had happened. They reassured us that our daughter and her baby were out of immediate danger but would need special care. We were then led to the recovery room and could see for ourselves. Relief, love, and thankfulness flooded my heart.

While the recovery room is more immediate than heaven and the doctors are not Jesus, our trust was well placed. How much more can we trust Jesus to lead us to our heavenly destination! It will not be a stranger who shows us the way; it will be Jesus Himself: "I am the way and the truth and the life."

Reflection: When God the Father seems far away and you are fearful, reflect on Jesus' acts of healing, words of love, and His redeeming sacrifice. Then remember John 14:7: "If you really know Me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him."

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Living in the Light of Christ's Return | Thad Polk

My freshman year in college was not exactly characterized by regular Bible study and prayer. I had not become a Christian, and let's just say that godliness was not at the top of my priority list. After one particularly raucous Friday night, my parents decided to make a surprise visit on Saturday morning to take me out to brunch and to check up on how things were going. They asked one of my suitemates if he knew where I was, and his reply was something like, "With the hangover he must have, I don't think he wants to see anyone right now!"

As unpleasant as that visit was for me (and undoubtedly for my parents!), the consequences were short-lived and relatively minor. I was obviously very embarrassed, and my suitemates took great joy in ribbing me about it for months afterwards, but it didn't lead to any long-term harm. In fact, it may have served as a wake-up call that ultimately led me to reevaluate how I was living and to make some long overdue changes.

But try to imagine what it will be like for non-Christians when Jesus returns. As Paul puts it in this passage, for them, Christ's return will come like a thief in the night (v. 2). Destruction will come on them suddenly and they will not escape (v. 3). I don't know about you, but for me these verses serve as another wake-up call, namely, about the importance of doing everything I can to be an effective witness to friends and family who don't yet know Christ.

They also inspire me to live a life that reflects genuine faith, love, and hope. As Paul puts it, we belong to the day, not the night, and so we should put on the breastplate of faith and love as well as the helmet of the hope of salvation (v. 8). Apparently, exhibiting faith and love will protect our hearts while the hope of salvation will protect our minds. May we all live that way, shining the light of Christ to the world around us.

Reflection: Suppose you knew for a fact that Jesus would be returning tomorrow, or next week, or next year. How would that knowledge affect the way you live today?

Revelation 21:1-7

A New Heaven and a New Earth | Nate Zuellig

As Christians, we are expected to pray for and look forward to the rapture, but even among believers we often shy away from stating this too explicitly. It could shock or upset many people. We worry that we will come across as one more religious nutcase rambling about the end times. But the honest truth is that nothing is more objectionably wonderful than "rapture." I mean, the word rapture literally means "the feeling of intense pleasure or joy." We could just as easily call it "ecstasy."

Revelation 21:4 paints this picture: He will wipe every tear from their eyes. *"There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."* How and when, then, did the impending ecstatic climax of history become replaced with the horrific, gory images most of us think of when we think of the end times? Why is the default assumption that God has destined humankind for catastrophe, that His will has set us on a crash course with disaster rather than glory? How did the word "rapture" come to mean its exact opposite?

The other day I was at a party and a friend asked me out of the blue if I thought that the Rapture was approaching. He was becoming convinced that current events were signs of the end times and was worried. I reassured him, though, that just about every generation thinks that Jesus is returning in their lifetime and that he shouldn't let his fears get the best of him. On the drive home, though, I was beating myself up for missing a golden opportunity to share something that might bless and point him to Jesus. What I wish I would have said was that whether Jesus returns in our lifetime, or whether we die and see him again during the final judgment, either way all of us will come face to face with our Creator and Savior. And so, either way, it is urgent that we live honestly before Him and strive to embody His heart of sacrificial love today.

Reflection: Do you feel a sense of urgency to invite God to work in every area of your life? What might your life look like if His presence surrounded you at every moment?



Week 2

O come, thou Wisdom from on high
Who ord'rest all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach ius in her ways to go.

Luke 15:11-32

On The Run | Pastor Chris Troxel

What spurs someone to run? Change. Some run for health benefits, changing the health of their bodies and lives. Some run for a team, to change their speed and time for their own benefit and that of the team. Some run to escape. That seems to drive a person to run from their home. Change; to escape some type of negative or undesirable experience.

So what was so undesirable for the younger son to run from his father and family? He wanted more and something different. Anything outside of his family! This son thought he knew how the world worked. He thought he either a) had it all figured out, or b) had enough figured out that he could make it. And he did ... for a time. This run, this change, was worth giving up his family that only seemed like dead weight to him. So he treated them like they were dead and asked to be treated the same.

Shortly later, he's depleted everything. Desperate for survival, the only work he can find is one of the lowest jobs he can imagine, longing for food no longer fit for anyone but pigs, but he gets nothing, and no one gives him anything. The only thing he does have kicks in: memory. The memory of home, the truth of home, the warm power of his father. The memory of home, the memory of his father, gives him hope. Fully aware of the bridges he burned, the ruined relationships, and his own devastatingly foolish pride, he repents of what's left of his life and begins to return home.

Before he gets there, the father perceives him and rushes to meet him where he is. Before he can speak a word, the father is filled with compassion, embraces him, kisses him—accepts him. As he begins to repent, he leaves out the part about becoming a servant. He knows he cannot do anything to heal what he broke. He just knows he's no longer worthy. The father's instructions for dressing him are a declaration of forgiveness, of recognizing him fully as his son, killing the fattened calf means this is a party for the community, for the father to restore the son to the community.

This is God's church. This is what Jesus does. He makes the way for every person every time you thought you knew better than God did. What we are powerless to do, Jesus does everyday with the same power and potency as when you first believed. Undimmed power, undimmed love. God runs from home to you even when you're a long way off to change you from death to life, from sinner to saint, from one who doubts to one who believes.

Reflection: What does this tell you about God? What does this tell you about yourself and/or the world around you? How will you live because of it?

Psalm 51:1-14

God Knows Our Transgressions | Todd Baker

A recent devotional I read convicted me of how we can convince ourselves that our sins are actually good. Psalm 51:3 says *"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me."* However, we can so easily deceive ourselves that the sin before us is actually a blessing for others. Take a look at these mindsets and how in our sin we can reframe them as holy.

- Greed can be reframed as good stewardship of our wealth and possessions.
- Anger can be reframed as righteously standing up for what is right.
- Lust can be reframed as an admiration of the beauty of God's creation.
- Gossip can be reframed as concern for others or getting something off of our chest.
- Theological pride can be reframed as a commitment to God's truth.
- Pride in our accomplishments can be reframed as seeking to be a righteous child of God in the best ways possible.
- Co-dependency and idolatry of others can be reframed as a commitment to community and love of others.
- Loving personal control can be reframed as being a good godly leader.

No matter how much we may try to hide our sins from ourselves and others, God sees it all. In Psalm 51:12, David says, *"Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit."* The good news that we can reflect on this Advent season is that through the Christ child, God does restore to us the joy of our salvation. His forgiveness conquers even the sins that we try to hide.

Reflection: Do you ever try to hide your sins as positive actions? If so, how do you do that?

Tuesday, December 12, 2023

Genesis 3:1-7

With God, We Fight Temptation | Monica Schneggenburger

In these Scripture passages we observe two interactions. The first is that Adam and Eve were able to talk to God directly (without an intermediary) and walk freely in the garden of Eden. God had given them permission to eat from all the trees in the garden except for one. The second interaction we read about takes place between Satan (in the form of a serpent) and Eve. We observe Satan's cunning and manipulation in his interaction with her. With cunning, the serpent convinced Eve to distrust God's authority and warning. She succumbed to his guile and tasted the forbidden fruit, thus disobeying God's command.

We find ourselves faced with these kinds of situations all the time, sometimes daily. For example, we listen to justifications and cling to norms of the group's and cliques we belong to in our lives, judging the actions of others. In this way, we turn away from God's command to love God with our whole heart, mind and spirit and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Let us allow God to take us deeper in love rather than condemnation. Let us demonstrate our faith through actions that set us apart from the non-believing world. God our Creator has reconciled us back to Himself through the death and resurrection of his son Jesus.

Let us receive God's grace given to us through Jesus. Let us grow our relationship with Him by regularly reading His Word and continually praying, strengthening our relationship with Him. In order to be equipped to face Satan's daily attacks to mislead us, destroy our faith, and steer us away from eternal life, let us constantly beseech God to strengthen our faith. .

Reflection: Let us ask God to renew our faith and our walk with Him daily.

Isaiah 59:14-21

Let's Be Truth Seekers | Rachel Thoms

Earlier this fall, a friend and I challenged ourselves to a "spending freeze." For a few weeks, we held each other accountable to only spend money on needs—true needs. Things like groceries, gas, or necessary household costs were in the clear. Items that were more superfluous like a new sweater, tickets to a show, beauty products, decor items, or new subscriptions were not allowed.

Only until you consciously decide to say "no" to buying things that you do not need do you truly realize how much consumerism is saturated in every facet of your life. Buy this online workshop to solve all my parenting problems. Use this spray and my plants will never die. This billboard says I need a new kitchen. That offer says if I become a member I'll have an easier life. It goes on and on and on! We are inundated with proposals, quick fixes, and promising upgrades. Truth is lacking from this deluge. We fill ourselves with empty promises that these things will solve our problems and ease our minds.

This is a somewhat lighthearted take on the reading for today from Isaiah referencing evil and injustice, but I think it's important to remember that Satan will lie to us in every corner of our lives in both big and small ways. We have to put on our armor of God every day. We must seek the truth by opening our Bibles instead of clicking purchase on our phones. Our peace and contentment does not arrive via Amazon boxes on our doorstep.

"He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; and his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him" (v. 16). God takes notice of our weakness and he intercedes for us. He takes all of our sin and brokenness upon himself and repays our debts. He is our Savior and promises us salvation through him. I am so grateful that his goodness and grace permeate our lives more than the lies of the world ever could!

Reflection: Where are you seeking the truth? The next time you're being sold a quick fix, instead spend a few minutes in God's Word and seek the truth he has for you.

Luke 1:5-17

Shockingly Good News | Rob Kasemeyer

When was the last time someone predicted shockingly good news? What good news would completely catch you off guard? The Lions winning a playoff game or even the Super Bowl? How about shockingly good news that involves you? Like, "You are going to ace all of your finals this semester with an absolute perfect score" or, "your client would like to buy everything in stock and pay in advance."

Events that involve us that are both good and shocking are rare. Hence the shocking part. One reason it is so difficult to believe shockingly good news is that it has been predicted several times before. Zechariah and his wife *"were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord."* For years they heard, believed, and lived their lives according to the great shocking news that the messiah would "one day" come and save His people. "One day" just became a lot closer—for Zechariah and for us as well. The Good News of the Gospel lets us know "one day" we will see Him face to face. It will happen.

Just as the morning of December 25th will happen along with all the festivities that surround it, so is His return going to happen. Just as Zechariah got to be involved in the greatest story ever told, the invitation is extended to us. We can participate in sharing the shocking Good News that Jesus is coming. We will celebrate His first arrival on December 25th and celebrate with all believers on the "one day" that lies ahead.

Reflection: How does the announcement of Jesus' arrival affect your holiday season?

Luke 1:26-38

Lego Mary | Zach Marotzke

As the holiday season approaches, families engage in various traditions, from Advent calendars to watching cheesy Christmas movies. Among the numerous traditions in my family, one stands out as both unique and slightly peculiar—the annual reading of the Christmas story.

As a child, my primary excitement during the Christmas season centered around receiving new Lego sets, and admittedly, Jesus took a backseat to my Lego obsession. Recognizing this, my wise mother discovered a book that ingeniously merged my love for Legos with the timeless narrative of Jesus' birth. This book, a complete account of the nativity in Luke, featured Lego depictions of each scene. Thus, every Christmas Eve, my family gathered to read the story of Jesus' birth, brought to life by these humble Danish building blocks.

The particular scene in Luke 1:26-38, as portrayed in the Lego storybook, always intrigued me. Mary, upon receiving the world-altering news from the angel, is depicted with a seemingly stoic, straight-line mouth expression, I always chalked it up to the limited amount of emotion that can be expressed on Lego heads. However, upon closer examination of the text, it becomes evident that the author of the Lego book aptly captured Mary's complex emotions!

While Mary initially expresses fear and poses an understandable question in verse 34: *"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"* She quickly accepts what is happening in one of the greatest displays of faith in the Bible. In verse 38, Mary accepts the seemingly impossible reality, declaring, *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."* The apostles throughout the gospels see Jesus do great miracles over and over again and don't fully get and place all their trust in God, but Mary after one sentence is fully on board and is submitting to God's will. As Christmas nears let us be reminded to try to trust God like Mary and be willing to say, *"God let it be to me according to your word."*

Reflection: As Christmas approaches, how can Mary's declaration, *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word,"* inspire you to trust God? Are there specific areas in your life where you need to trust God more completely?

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Good Shepherding is Divine Leadership | Kris Palmer

We hear numerous accounts of failed leadership today—from our government representatives, to corporate board rooms, and even among institutional leaders who are supposed to serve and protect us, the failures are numerous. Many of our religious leaders have not been immune to failed leadership as well. In Jeremiah chapter 23, vs. 1-6, we learn that failed leadership is not a new phenomenon.

God, through the prophet Jeremiah, has important things to say to us about it. God is angered by the evil actions taken by the descendants of King David who ruled over Judah. In contrast to good shepherding, every religious ruler or king Jeremiah addressed had failed in their duties to execute justice for the people they were supposed to represent. In turn, it was the poor and the needy who were most vulnerable and who, under failed leadership, experienced violence and oppression. Like many leaders of our day, the religious rulers and kings of Judah were self-serving “shepherds.”

Jeremiah warns the evil rulers that they will receive divine judgement as a necessary response to their actions of abandoning the flock. This retribution should make us think about our leaders as well as our own leadership roles today—whether big or small, are we actually serving the people God has brought into our lives who need “good shepherding?”

While it’s hard to imagine the severity of the consequences of our leaders, we learn that God has a unique solution, not one of retribution. Instead, God tells his people that He will assume the role of the “*good shepherd*” personally and “*will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number.*”

This startling message is followed by another that offers eternal hope for us all. Jeremiah’s prophesy continues by telling us that the days are coming when God “*will raise up for David a righteous branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.*” Approximately 600 years following Jeremiah’s prophesy,

Jesus is born in Bethlehem, in a humble stable and “*This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord our Righteous Savior.*”

Reflection: What are some ways we can practice “*good shepherding*” in our own lives through daily practices and prayer? Do we regularly pray for our leaders? What are some ways we can take action to support those who are hungry, poor and forgotten in our community?



Week 3

O come, O come, thou Lord of might,
Who to thy tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times didst give the law,
In cloud, and majesty, and awe.

Hebrews 11:8-16

Journey Home | Deaconess Norma Polk

I love adventure and traveling abroad. My husband often works in Germany during the summer, and so we often travel for an extended period of time. He is usually responsible for booking the apartments or we will choose something good. I can also look at pictures of the apartment online and do internet research on the neighborhood, which gives me a pretty good sense of what to expect. Furthermore, even if I don't love the place we're staying, it's only temporary. I know we'll be returning to our cozy and familiar home in Michigan in a few weeks regardless.

In this passage, we read that God told Abram to travel from Haran to a strange land called Canaan. And unlike me, Abram had absolutely no idea what to expect. Furthermore, there was no guarantee he was ever going to return to his homeland. God did promise to make Abram and his descendants into a great nation and to protect them, but Abram had to take everything on faith. And that's exactly what he did: "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him,..." (Genesis 12:4a). It required complete faith in God to obey and to start this journey into the unknown!

Abram's faith has been an inspiration to others for thousands of years and it can be an inspiration to us today. Just as God had an amazing plan for Abram and used him to change the world, God also has an amazing plan for you and me. And that plan is also meant to have a profound impact on the world around us, especially the people we come into contact with.

But if we want our lives to have that kind of impact, it's going to require faith. Like Abram, we need to be willing to step out of our comfort zone and pursue the path that God is calling us to, even if it's unfamiliar and uncomfortable. That might be scary, but we can rest in the assurance that God loves us and only wants the best for us. Just as God blessed Abram and kept His promises to him, we can also be assured that God will bless our own efforts to follow in Abram's footsteps and walk in faith.

Reflection: Does Abram's example inspire you to follow in his footsteps, by faith obeying our Lord? How is God calling you to step out in faith in your life?

Psalm 84

At Home in the House of God | David Carlson

"I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psalm: 84:10)—the psalmist's word; or I'd rather be a butler in God's house than remain master of this lonely place—my words; or *"How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ... make me one of thy hired servants"* (Luke 15:17–19)—the prodigal son's words.

When you're retired everyday is Saturday. You have lots of time to read, meditate and pray. Now in my late 70s I think a lot about God's house. In a recent sermon Gabe outlined reasons for being a Christian. First the evidence for God is pretty compelling; second, the historicity of the resurrection is pretty compelling (C. S. Lewis in *Surprised By Joy* describes his own encounter with this discovery: "Early in 1926 the hardest boiled of all the atheists I ever knew sat in my room on the other side of the fire and remarked that the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was really surprisingly good. 'Rum thing,' he went on. 'All that stuff of Frazer's about the dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it had really happened once.'" Third, Jesus and the Gospels are beautiful. Tear jerking is beautiful I would add.

Earlier I said that when you're retired every day is Saturday. Every day except Sunday. On Sunday one still has somewhere to go. I love going to church—yes for the preaching and sacraments—but I especially love ULC because of all the young people. The students remind me of the students I had when I was still gainfully employed. I also love the young families. There is nothing quite as beautiful as a child trusting her parents without reserve. Of a mother soothing her child's tears or of a father (her daddy) giving a hand to hold as they walk to communion. These bring tears.

This surely is a vision of God's house. This is why I'd rather be an employee in such a house than to be master of my own. But this is probably not what awaits us. The prodigal was quite content to be a servant in his father's house. *"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate"* (Luke 15:22–23). So it was for the prodigal. Probably for us as well. But being there is all that matters.

Reflection: What do you most look forward to as you enter God's house?

Isaiah 7:10-16

Holy Snark | Tony Creeden

Have you ever thought of God as snarky? For most people, the image of God tends to conjure notions of prim and proper. We tend to see God as incapable of things like sarcasm or snark. Yet, He speaks to Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah in an exasperated tone saying, *"Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also?"* That, my friends, is snark: well-deserved snark at that.

Ahaz was not a good king. He welcomed idolatry, he lacked faith, he often made fear-based decisions, and to top it all off, he did all these under the guise of false piety. He claimed to be a man of God, but nothing about his life or governance as king of Judah supported such a boast. So, when Isaiah shows up to promise him deliverance and to ask him for a sign to validate that promise, Ahaz does what Ahaz does. *"I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test."* That is when Isaiah (and God) gets snarky.

I have to admit, most days I, too, would be well deserving of some holy snark. Like Ahaz, I find myself struggling in my faith, placing things before God, and being quite prone to fear-based decision-making. And while I wouldn't go as far to say I present a false piety, I also wouldn't say I am the most bold in my faith either. Yet, during this Christmas season here is God before me, daring me to trust in Him as He once again recounts the history of that time the people of God needed a sign, and He gave them one and so much more. He gave us a Savior.

It must have seemed preposterous that a virgin would bear a son and He would be named *"God with us"* (because God was actually with us). It was, however, precisely what happened. And though many today scoff at that same prophecy and respond with some snark of their own, it still reminds us that despite our Ahaz tendencies, God's promise of deliverance is real.

Whatever you are struggling with, whatever you are afraid of, God is with you. For those times you feel like not enough, God is with you. And for those times when you deserve a little holy snark, God is still with you. Always.

Reflection: Are there areas of your life where God's promise of presence would bring hope to a difficult situation?

Romans 8:31–39

Who Shall Separate Us From the Love of Christ? | Pat Carlson

Some time ago I served with a mission team to Guatemala to conduct workshops for pastors and teachers on curriculum for teaching Bible studies and Sunday school. These workshops were held in four different locations. At the last location, Antigua, the participants traveled 7.5 to 10 hours over mountainous winding roads for the two-day workshop. These rural highlanders had little formal education, often were bi-vocational, spoke Quetzal as their primary language, and served in villages where Mayan spirituality is still widely practiced and often blended with the dominant Catholic religion. Their congregations were small with limited resources.

The workshop started with introductory questions, such as what their typical days entailed and what prayer requests they wished to share. Responses included prayers for unity in their church, family, and community. As the team invited more discussion, the tears began to pour out. The participants described how isolated and difficult it is to be so far away without pastor support. They also indicated the presence of spiritual warfare, as some village members complained that what the Christians prayed and taught deviated from their traditional, age-old practices.

Our team was taken aback with this exchange and felt the need to immediately share in a communion service in support of one another. There was so much joy in Word, sacrament and prayer that was shared that day that I will never forget it. It also made me appreciate the suffering others have experienced because of isolation, loneliness, or different beliefs that polarize relationships.

Reflection: How might Romans 8:31–39 apply to this narrative? Do you recognize any of these situations around you? Romans 8 says, *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (Nothing) can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Nothing.

Genesis 49:8-12

Devoted Time | Robert Schlosser III

How often in life do we rush and hurry about? With everything that we have to get done in day-to-day life, it's easy to forget when we should slow down, or even take a moment to rest. I know that there have been many times for my friends and me when we were hurrying and missed a key detail; at times, that small detail would have led to far better outcomes.

In today's reading, among the blessings of the sons of Jacob, we find that Judah's blessing is one of the longest. Lists like these can be easy for the reader to skim through, waiting for the next part of the story in the historical narrative. However, if we take a moment to look, Judah's blessing reveals a prophetic message: When the blessing describes Judah's brothers one day bowing down to him and praising him, not only can we see King David, but we can see Jesus being spoken about here. God delivered the enemies of Israel into their hands, but we also know that Jesus conquered sin and death on the cross.

After Jacob prophesied that Judah's brothers will give honor to him, in verse 10 he continues, saying that *"the scepter will not depart from Judah...until tribute comes to him."* This last line can also be translated as *"until he comes to whom it belongs."* We know that it belongs to Jesus, a descendant of Judah, who also rode on the donkey's colt.

Reading through this verse, if we simply glance at what it says, some of the wonder and marvel of God's Word can slip past us. A foretelling of things that were to come can be easily mistaken as only a list of blessings. Many things in life demand our attention, and it is not easy to make time for everything, but God calls us to be in a relationship with Him and asks that we listen to His Word.

Reflection: When was a time that the Word of God stayed with you? How did it make a change in your understanding and life?

Luke 1:46-56

Mary's Song of Praise: The Magnificat | Larry Frank

What song do you sing—into your heart? Into the world?

"In Joana Klink's Poem Processional (Kenyon Review May/June 2015) it opens with a vivid provisional, perhaps even a prayer: 'If there is a world, let me be in it.' But how are we to be in the world? Is our passive presence sufficient? If we are concerned or alarmed, or in despair, or hopeful about the world, our being in the world must include our active presence—our language, engagement, deeds. If we are to witness to the world, our witness means more than seeing the world; it means we must add our testimony to our seeing. And if we are poets, that testimony takes the form of singing about the world." (David Baker Kenyon Review Summer 2023)

Read the whole Luke passage—now sing it *—out loud!

Especially the first two verses, do you feel a blessing
as your spirit rises up in joy? Can you feel the love?

Can you feel the joy you have been wanting to share with a friend right now? Is there a burden you need to talk about, questions you need to ask about your faith? Are there words to describe your feeling about your spiritual life—like rejoicing, blessed, lifted-up or are they words like hungry or empty? Of the attributes of God celebrated in Mary's Song, which do you appreciate the most? What challenges you the most, is there a purpose to that contemporary challenge?

Mary rejoices and glorifies God for His power, holiness, and mercy—she looks forward to God transforming the world through Jesus. Mary's response is to sing this poem. During this Advent season, this joy is celebrated, shared with each other in our worship and with our close friends—like an Elizabeth!

Reflection: What song (a poem of joy) do you sing (a poem of joy) into your heart? Into the world? And then, does Jesus, your Savior, appear to sing praise with you? Your spirit then mirrors your soul! The Magnificat of rejoicing! Of hope!

*Footnote: Lutheran Service Book 2006, Canticles p248-249

John 3:11-21

Truth and Light | Nate Zuellig

"This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God." John 3:19-21

Sometimes the consistency throughout the entirety of Scripture astounds me. All of the language here about light immediately brings the opening of Genesis to mind. In the beginning, God says, "Let there be light," and in the beginning of John's Gospel, he makes a direct connection to that miraculous cosmos-creating event by clarifying exactly who this Word and Light is.

But in this portion of the Gospel of John there is another amazing connection to Genesis: "But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that what they have done has been done in the sight of God." What was Adam and Eve's first act after they fell? They hid from His sight "for fear that their deeds [would] be exposed." Right from the beginning, this habit of hiding from God and the truth that He embodies takes root. And why? It could be that we believe, or have experienced, the fact that often truth hurts. Our hearts are tender, and opening them to God and to one another can feel like ... well, opening our hearts.

This disastrous game of deception that began in the Fall is gripping us just the same today. My roommate has been watching a murder mystery show and, as I watched, I realized the suspense was driven by the fact that the audience (including us) eagerly awaited the moment that the cunning, wicked deceiver was finally undone and all his plans fell apart. We prayed for it, really. And when it finally happened after 10 episodes, whew. It was incredibly cathartic. He ran but he couldn't hide from the hammer of justice.

That's why we celebrate Christmas. Because Christ is the Light of the World who came and lives now to send the Deceiver spiraling back into the abyss that he came from. And because of what He has done, we can live more and more like the way Adam and Eve did before the Fall, immersed in His truth and light, and walking in the everlasting freedom and catharsis that only He can give, free from all deception.

Reflection: Are there any places you go habitually where you feel like God is a nonfactor? How can you invite Him into those parts of your life, and share His light with others?



Week 4

O come, thou Rod of Jesse's stem,
From every foe deliver them
That trust thy mighty power to save,
And give them vict'ry o'er the grave.

Luke 2:1-20

The God of the Ordinary | Pastor Gabe Kasper

These first few verses of the second chapter of Luke's Gospel are a pretty straightforward piece of writing. Luke just sort of lays out the facts: there was a census, Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, while they were there Mary gave birth to a baby ... moving along ...

Where's the fireworks!? Where's the special effects!? Where's the Brad Pitt cameo!? I mean this is the story of the Son of God being born as a human! This incredible culmination of history! God had been promising for centuries that one day he would send his Savior, he would send the Messiah, and here in this chapter we have it. He's here! But, there are no trumpets blaring, no great parade. It's a simple list of historical realities ... and yet there's something powerful about the account, isn't there?

Scholar William F. Arndt puts it like this, "The account is devoid of all ornamentation; it is artless, simple, matter-of-fact, and yet it represents the highest art. How can human rhetoric ever adequately extol the birth of the Savior of the world!" In other words, Arndt asks, how could we ever put into the right words the incredible truth that the Son of God came to earth? How could we properly record how incredible God's love is that he would come as a little baby to save us from our sins!?

We can't. And that's ok, because this story is all about a God who comes to us. We can't reach him, so he comes to us. He comes to us humbly. He comes in a way that we can actually relate to.

Because everyone's been born. Everyone's been a kid. And here the God who created everything shares in that experience. It's simple and yet profound.

You see, when it comes to our relationship with God we can all too often make the mistake of expecting this grandiose other-worldly sort of experience. And there are certainly times when God acts in that way. The reality is, however, most often God acts in the ordinary.

May we celebrate the God who meets us in the ordinary this Christmas.

Reflection: Where do you see God at work in the ordinary?

About the Writers in alphabetical order

Todd Baker is married to Carley and in his free time he enjoys watching movies made before you were born (yes even you), swing dancing, and drinking chocolate milk.

Will Cannon is a mission director for University Christian Outreach and a member of the Servants of the Word, an international brotherhood of lay missionaries. He serves as an elder for ULC as well as on the member of the music team.

Pat Carlson is a retired RN, ESL teacher, and short-term missionary leader; married to David; mother of 2 grown children and 2 granddaughters; loves to play pickleball and quilt.

David Carlson has been married to Pat for 55 years. In his retirement he enjoys his bride's company, spending time with his children and grandchildren, reading anything he wants, and playing guitar and singing with friends.

Alison Doerr is a Sophomore at Concordia University studying to become a nurse. She is on their Cross Country and Track teams and enjoys spending time outside, and with her family.

Amanda Fogo is a Sophomore at Concordia University studying Elementary Education and Special Education. She is involved in their Cross Country and Track teams, and loves to spend time with friends and family.

Larry Frank. Baptized October 1937–

Those strong words said then, protecting me in Grace–forever!

Monica Heissenbuettel is a life-long Lutheran, happily married to Bruce, and the mother of two grown daughters. She loves teaching preschool and piano lessons, playing the church organ, hosting gatherings, visiting her daughters, and taking the family Corgi for long walks at various parks throughout the Ann Arbor area.

Rob Kasemeyer is a quality manager for an automotive company that remanufactures automatic transmissions. He is married to Heather. They have one daughter, Rachel. Rob loves to learn and visit with friends and family.

Pastor Gabe Kasper is Lead Pastor at ULC. Husband to Melissa. Dad to Titus, Lila, and Levi. Fan to Packers. Friend to all.

Pastor Marcus Lane serves as the Campus Pastor at ULC. He is married to Vanessa and has two children: Della and Jude. When not working at the Chapel or spending time with family, you can find Marcus reading or watching the Timberwolves.

Zach Marotzke is a senior at the University of Michigan, majoring in economics with a minor in history and helps with student outreach for ULC.

Deaconess Norma Polk has been in love with Jesus for over 30 years, coming out of a Muslim background. She grew up in Indonesia, is married to Thad Polk, has three adult children, three cats, and a dog. She loves live theater, designs the set for Concordia University Ann Arbor and costumes the actors at the Dio Dining and Entertainment in Pinckney. She loves to golf. She also loves to travel to every corner of the world. She is currently the Director of International Student Ministry at ULC.

Kris Palmer is a former film and television writer/producer and business owner who fell in love with teaching elementary school students while in semi-retirement. Kris and her husband, Dave have been married for 39 years and have two adult children, Michaela and Tyler.

Thad Polk is a psychology professor at Michigan who does research on the aging brain. He's married to Norma, his college sweetheart, has 3 children, and loves to golf and play guitar.

Amy Robson is married to Brian. She and Brian met in the choir at St. Luke and have been married for 37 years. They have three adult children and one tiny grandson. Besides hanging out with family and friends, Amy enjoys reading, staying active, thrifting, and playing games.

Robert Schlosser III. Greetings, I'm Nick, a theologian with a passion for missions. My wife, Rosetta, has similar passion and is working towards becoming a social worker. A few things I enjoy are reading, games, and food!

Monica Schneggenburger is a mother of three adult sons, a business owner, and a member of Lutherans for Racial Justice.

Rachel Thoms is a staff member at ULC. In her free time she enjoys decorating, reading, tending to her plants, FaceTiming her parents and siblings, and hanging out with her husband, Kyle, and her toddler, Elliot.

Pastor Chris Troxel is on a team planting a church (Emmaus). He likes things and people.

Nate Zuellig is a music guy and is very grateful to be helping with worship at ULC, as well as sharing some original poetry and music along the way. His poems are available at: substack@Johnfour24. For music, just search "Nate Zuellig" on Spotify.