

March/April 2012

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

FOLLOWING THE CRUCIFIED AND RISEN LORD



ALSO: LENT: A SEASON OF HOPE

Friends,

Spring is coming, and it can be a time of contrasts—warm days and cool days, sunshine and mud, the freshness of a new year and a season of repentance as we remember Christ's death and resurrection. The rusty nails on our cover remind us that even in this season of renewal, a deep and cruel price was paid for our new life.



Our devotions begin with a month of reflection on why we need a Savior. We remember why Easter was necessary, yet we do so in an eager sense of hope as we look forward to the glory of Easter. Even Lent is a season of hope.

Then, in the month of April, as we follow Jesus through the final week of his suffering, through his death, resurrection, and beyond, we ask what it means to continue following the crucified and risen Lord today.

This spring, may we live out both our aching hope and our glorious call to serve Christ as his disciples.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Koster".

Steven Koster

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**“Lent: A Season of Hope”
Dale Vander Veen**



**“Following the Crucified
and Risen Lord”
John Van Schepen**

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re FRAME MEDIA

this month

Lent: A Season of Hope

Dale Vander Veen

Lent, a period of forty weekdays before Easter, is a time to reflect on our need for a Savior. This year the traditional Lenten season began on Ash Wednesday, February 22, and will conclude on Saturday, April 7, the day before Easter, when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Lent is marked by prayer, repentance, and self-denial. However, a number of Christian churches celebrate the six Sundays during Lent as “mini-Easters,” focusing on the joy that God brings even during self-examination, and recognizing the joy of new life that our Savior gives because he has already risen from the dead.

The word *Lent* derives from old English and German words referring to spring. It looks forward to the lengthening of days after winter has passed. Lent is sobering, but not severe. The emphasis remains on grace, not gloom. Some Christians call Lent the season of “bright sadness.”

Knowing that Christ has died and risen once for all doesn't take away our suspense. It takes away our despair—and gives us hope. This month we will walk the path of hope as we anticipate commemorating the death and resurrection of our Lord.

Rev. Dale Vander Veen is a retired pastor, who, with his wife, Edith, has ministered in California, Washington, and Michigan. They have three married children and six grandchildren. He currently writes a daily e-mail series of devotions.

HOW DOES THE GOOD NEWS BEGIN?

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God

—Mark 1:1

The first six words of Mark's gospel prompt the question "How does the good news begin?"

John the Baptist comes "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," and many respond by "confessing their sins."

We soon read of Jesus' being baptized, receiving the Father's blessing, and then being sent to the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Jesus resists the devil so effectively that Satan leaves him (Matthew 4:11).

Then Jesus begins preaching that "the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

The gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is that our Creator so loves us that he provides a way out of our miserable life of sin—through belief in Jesus. Before we can be saved, we

have to admit we have been sinful. And when Jesus calls us to follow him, we have to leave our old life of sin behind. So he tells us, "Repent" (which means "turn around"), and "believe the good news" that God has made salvation possible. Then he says, "Come, follow me."

Lent is a good time to go back to "the beginning of the good news," recognizing that we are still capable of sin even though we believe in and follow Jesus. His Spirit is working in us, but (in this life) we are not yet made perfect.

Are there any sins you need to repent of today, so that you can follow Jesus more faithfully?

Father, in your love convict us of our sin—and assure us of your forgiveness. In Jesus, Amen.

THE UNSEEN SEES

"Your Father, who is unseen . . . sees what is done in secret."

—Matthew 6:6

Jesus instructs us not to make a spectacle of praying to our Father, "who is unseen." And he adds, "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

We don't see our Father, but our Father sees us. If you were given the choice between seeing God or having God see you, which would you choose?

Hagar, pregnant with Ishmael and fleeing from Sarai's mistreatment, encounters God in the wilderness. "She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.'" Hagar did not see God himself, but his angel, who represented God. But God, through his angel, saw Hagar and spoke with her. God may hide his face, but he does not close his mouth.

God in his grace sees us in our wilderness. God in his glory sees us in our dishonor. God in his strength sees us in our weakness.

And the Word, who encourages us to pray, "became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). With that much sight we can rest content until we "see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Lent is a good time to remember that we are seen by our unseen Father. Is this a comfort to you?

Father, in this Lenten season teach us to pray with confidence, knowing that you see us as we are and hear us as we call. In Christ our hope, Amen.

HIDDEN FAULTS, SECRET SINS

You have set . . . our secret sins in the light of your presence.

—Psalm 90:8

English pastor Thomas Watson (1620-1686) warned, “God can neither be deceived by our subtlety, nor excluded by our secrecy.”

Hidden faults and secret sins are not an isolated theme in the Scriptures.

The psalmist admits, “You have set . . . our secret sins in the light of your presence.”

The teacher concludes, “God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing” (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

The senseless are asked, “Does he who fashioned the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see?” (Psalm 94:9).

No wonder David pleads, “Forgive my hidden faults.”

Thomas Watson also said, “All will not sin on a balcony, but

perhaps they will sin behind the curtain.” Praise God that our balcony sins and our curtain sins are fully cleansed.

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure,” sealed by “Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 6:19; 12:2).

Lent is a good time to be honest about our secret sins, humble about our hidden faults, and hopeful about the finished work of Jesus on our behalf.

Father, in this season may the Holy Spirit point us to our sins, and point us sinners to Jesus. In his name we hope. Amen.

FORMED FOR PRAISE

I formed [my people] for myself that they may proclaim my praise.
—Isaiah 43:21

“Why are we here?” The question is not limited to philosophers and theologians. And it’s not only “Why are *we* (humanity) here?” The question is more personal: “Why am *I* here?”

Through Isaiah and Peter, God gives the same answer. God says he formed his people for himself, that we may proclaim his praise, and we “are a chosen people . . . God’s special possession,” that we may “declare [his] praises.” The truth stands today for all God’s people. And each one who believes is a valued part of this people (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

We have been formed for God’s praise, informed about Christ for his praise, and conformed to Christ for his praise. We are also being transformed by Christ for his praise. Anything that falls short of his praise must be labeled deformed or, at

best, unformed or uninformed. There are no exceptions. Every thought, every action and attitude, every glance, every memory and desire, every plan and hope—all are to be for his praise and only for his praise.

And here is an amazing truth. Though our sin brings sorrow and detracts from praising God, it is forgiven so that we may give God praise. “In [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins . . . for the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:7, 12).

Lent is a good time to live up to why we are here—each one of us.

Father, may our worship and our lives be filled with your praise. In Christ our hope, Amen.

COME CLOSER

You have come to God . . . to Jesus

—Hebrews 12:23-24

As Moses approached the burning bush, God warned, “Do not come any closer.”

God restrained Moses with good reason. God knew that an unholy man approaching him would face death. So his words that seem to reject are actually words of love, not unlike a parent’s warning to a child to be careful near a fire.

While the words speak compassion, they also remind us of the contrast between God’s law and God’s grace.

Law says, “Do not come any closer. You are not worthy.”

But grace declares, “I have made you worthy, through Jesus.”

God’s grace calls us to come. Four times in one verse in Isaiah, the Lord urges, “Come” (Isaiah 55:1). Jesus calls, “Come to me” (Matthew 11:28). The

writer to the Hebrews rejoices, “You have come to God.” James summons, “Come near to God” (James 4:8). The Bible’s final chapter adds three more invitations: “Come” (Revelation 22:17).

Let us praise God for his law that somberly warns, and for his grace that softly welcomes.

Come, for all is well. Jesus has come to earth so that we might come to God.

Lent is a good time to come closer to God.

Jesus, in this Lenten season we praise you that all is well between you and us. We hear your invitation, and we come to you. In your name we hope. Amen.

THE LORD'S CLASSROOM

He instructs sinners in his ways.

—Psalm 25:8

“Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs _____ in his ways.” What might fill in the blank?

“The righteous” would fill the blank nicely. The righteous are so teachable. They listen to the instructor and do as they are told.

But the psalmist says, “He instructs *sinners* in his ways.”

Sinners? The Lord must specialize in difficult students.

Actually, this teaching is very encouraging. We are all sinners, so we are all welcome in the Lord's classroom.

Let's take a look at our class schedules. What? No electives? No vacations? Classes meet 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year?

What's more, if we skip class, the Lord comes looking for us!

And when we don't get the assignment right, we must do it over till we get it right!

Actually, none of us gets a perfect score. As sinners, we can never be perfect.

But God counts us righteous because of Christ, who gave his perfect life for us. That keeps us humble. “He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.” And when we do stray into pride, we can pray, “Forgive my iniquity, though it is great.”

Lent is a good time to enroll in Grace 101.

Lord, in this Lenten season we thank you for teaching us your ways, especially in and through the work of Jesus, in whose name we hope. Amen.

“FOLLOWERSHIP”

“Come, follow me.”

—Mark 1:17

The importance of leadership is neither doubted nor debated—in government, education, business, or church.

Elisha, like most leaders, begins as a follower. Elijah finds him plowing in his family’s field and summons Elisha to follow him, just as God has directed (1 Kings 19:16).

Elijah throws his cloak over Elisha, a symbol of anointing him for leadership.

Then, after literally burning his “bridge” (a yoke is a bridge between two oxen) behind him, Elisha sets out to follow Elijah and become his servant.

When Jesus calls his disciples, the recurring word is not *“Lead for me”* but *“Follow me.”*

To Peter he says, *“Feed my sheep,”* not *“Lead my sheep.”* And when he examines Peter,

Jesus examines Peter’s love for him, not his leadership skills (see John 21:15-17).

Pastors are gifted, commissioned leaders in Jesus’ church. So they are called to lead people—first to faith in Christ, and then to maturity in faith. And the heart of that maturity is simply to follow Christ. There is no better way to lead for Christ than to follow hard after Christ.

Lent is a good time to ask, “Am I following Christ wholeheartedly?”

Father, in this season, grip our hearts so that we may willingly and faithfully follow Jesus. In his name we hope and pray. Amen.

HANDS

I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.

—Isaiah 49:16

Today's verse is often misquoted as "I have engraved *your name* on the palms of my hands."

Actually the word picture in Isaiah 49 indicates that God has engraved not our names, but our very selves, on his hands. The point is to show that God loves us, cares for us, and will never forget us.

Occasionally my grandchildren work hard to pry open my fingers, searching for something I have hidden in my hand. Sometimes I move the prized object to my other hand, eliciting an exasperated "Grandpa!" It's a playful game that always ends in their victory and a hug.

Life is not a mere playful game, but it will end with Jesus' victory—his hands still holding us securely. Those hands were scarred by the nails of the cross, but he has promised that he will

never let go of his loved ones. All who believe in him as Lord and Savior are safe and secure in the palms of his hands.

As Jesus promised, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:28-29).

Lent is a good time to reflect on God's powerful hands—and to see ourselves engraved there.

Jesus, in this Lenten season we rejoice in the secure grip of your nail-scarred hands. In your name we hope. Amen.

TASTE AND SEE

I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.
—Psalm 116:13

Enjoying a cup of Earl Grey tea reminds me of my mother-in-law's distaste for any tea besides her traditional orange pekoe and pekoe black. With unusual force she would comment that Earl Grey tea "tastes like dishwater."

Earl Charles Grey, England's 19th-century prime minister, would have disagreed. What Mom referred to was the taste of oil of bergamot, an acidic orange that is actually a cross between the sweet or pear lemon and the Seville or sour orange.

For Mom, variety in tea-drinking came from the choice of bone china cups rather than a selection of fine teas. Occasionally we use her heirloom cups and find ourselves saying, "Tea does taste better in a china cup." Taste, I guess, is indisputable.

The taste of the Lord is also indisputable. The psalmist invites

us to "taste and see that the LORD is good."

I have tasted, and I agree. The Lord is good. He is very good. He is superlatively good. He is unfailingly and eternally good.

The song is right: "God is good—all the time." And Mom, now living in the Lord's presence, would agree—for surely she is tasting the Lord's goodness at this very moment.

Lent is a good time to "lift up the cup of salvation" and say, "The LORD is good."

Father, in this Lenten season we thankfully lift the cup of our Lord and joyfully taste his goodness. In his name we hope. Amen.

GOD'S WAY, NOT OURS

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways."
—Isaiah 55:8

Christians often quote Isaiah 55:8 when life takes a surprising twist. We say something like "Well, God's ways certainly are not our ways."

But here is the context: "Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon."

After those words, our verse for today begins with "For." Our way is not to extend mercy and pardon to people who wrong us. We tend to nurse grudges, harbor bits of bitterness, and avoid offenders.

But God's way is totally unlike ours. In effect, God says, "When you sin, seek me out, and I will pardon you—freely, immediately. I know that's not the way you think. You put your offenders

on hold before you reluctantly forgive them, but that's not my way. Come on, talk to me about it. You'll be surprised at how quickly I will forgive you. And when we're back together, 'You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace.'"

What a new way of thinking! Who would have imagined that the holy Lord Almighty (see Isaiah 6:3) would think and act that way toward people like us!

Lent is a good time to be surprised by God's way of thinking about sin and forgiveness.

Father, thank you for surprising us with your amazing way of responding to our sin. Through Jesus Christ our hope, Amen.

SPENDING A DAY WITH JESUS

They went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him.
—John 1:39

On a recent trip we noticed that many gas station names highlight how quickly we can fill up and scurry on our way: “On the Run,” “QuikTrip,” “QuikStop.” And where do my wife and I buy most of our gas? At the local Speedway station.

I remember (long ago) leaning against the fender of my 1953 Ford, chatting with my neighborhood service station friend as he pumped my car’s gas, checked the oil, adjusted the tire pressure, washed the windshield, and asked how my seminary studies were going. He might have taken my blood pressure and pulse if I had asked!

When John the Baptist pointed out Jesus to two of his own disciples, they followed Jesus and asked him, “Where are you staying?”

When Jesus invited them to come and see, “they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him.”

For the disciples and Jesus, there was no “On the Run” or “QuikStop” that day.

And what began with an awkward, sandal-shuffling question ended up as one of the richest days of their lives.

Lent is a good time to slow down and spend some time with “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Jesus, in this season, slow us down, teach us to refresh, refocus, and renew. In your name we hope. Amen.

GOOD, SIMPLE, STRONG WORDS

Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.
—Psalm 37:8

We find many quiet but powerful words in the early verses of Psalm 37—“trust,” “do good,” “dwell,” “enjoy,” “delight,” “commit,” “be still,” “wait.”

And all these words are used in reference to the Lord. The psalmist calls us to “trust in the LORD”; “take delight in the LORD”; “commit your way to the LORD”; “be still before the LORD”; “wait patiently for him.” And we can only “do good” in the strength of the Lord. We can only “dwell in the land” that God gives us. We can only “enjoy safe pasture” that the Lord promises and provides for us.

Fretting is discouraged three times in these verses. It doesn't take long to figure out why. When we fret, we do not trust in the Lord, we do not delight in the Lord, we do not commit our way to the Lord, we are not still before the Lord, and

we do not wait patiently for the Lord. When we fret, we do not do good, we do not dwell with God, and we do not enjoy the Lord's safe pasture.

Fretting, like a termite, nibbles at the trusses of trust. Fretting dehydrates our delight into the dryness of despair. Fretting babbles and gabbles away our stillness.

Trusting in the Lord and fretting are incompatible.

Lent is a good time to turn aside from fretting and be filled with faith.

Lord, release us from fretting—for the glory of your name, for the good of others, and for our own peace. In your name we hope. Amen.

IN THE MIDST OF STORM

Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion.

—Mark 4:38

After a busy day, Jesus suggested an evening boat trip across the lake. Soon he was napping while the disciples handled the oars. But then a sudden squall came upon them.

Where was Jesus? “Jesus was in the stern”—that is, in the back of the boat—and in the midst of this squall he was “sleeping on a cushion.”

This startling story reminds us that Jesus is present in the stormy times of our lives—the severe, harsh, hard times. And when he rebukes the storm—“Quiet! Be still!”—the disciples know that he cares for them in their times of severe struggle and even fear and terror.

Some time later the disciples were alone in a boat on that same lake, “straining at the oars, because the wind was against them.” Jesus “went out to them, walking on the lake” (Mark

6:48). Again he was present in a severe time.

Sheldon Vanauken’s book *A Severe Mercy* relates the conversions of his wife and himself under the influence of C. S. Lewis, and his wife’s subsequent death in the prime of her life. His sequel, *Under the Mercy*, details his dark pilgrimage after her death. Both books convey the theme that in the most difficult and severe times of life there is mercy. In this merciful care, the Lord is with us always.

Lent helps us remember that Jesus endured the most difficult suffering of all so that we might live in hope under his mercy.

Jesus, please remind us that even in severe, stormy times you are with us in your mercy. In your name we hope. Amen.

GLORIFYING GOD IN DEATH

Jesus said . . . to . . . Peter . . . "Follow me!"

—John 21:19

After his resurrection, Jesus met with Peter and several of the other disciples for breakfast by the Sea of Galilee.

Later Jesus said (more privately) to Peter, "When you are old . . . someone else will . . . lead you where you do not want to go." Then we read, "Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God."

Believers in Christ aim to glorify God in all they do—with admittedly varying degrees of intensity and success. But the Bible's words about Peter prompt us to ask, "How will my *death* glorify God?"

I know of a woman who, when diagnosed with a terminal illness, said to her daughter, "I have taught you how to live. Now I will teach you how to die." Weighty words!

We have no control over when or how we will die, and it does little good (and perhaps some harm) to fantasize about details. Yet it is wise and good to reflect on how such a significant event as our death might honor God, who has planned the timing and the method of our entrance into his presence.

Still, lest Peter (or we) expend too much mental energy on death, Jesus says to Peter (and to us), "Follow me."

Lent is a good time to follow the Lord in life, that we might glorify him in death.

Lord, keep us faithfully following you in life, that we might faithfully glorify you in death. In your name we hope. Amen.

IN THE DITCH

He lifted me . . . out of the mud and mire . . . and gave me a firm place to stand.
—Psalm 40:2

One day in winter while we were driving through Illinois, a blizzard closed our route. Heroic road crews enabled us to continue our journey home the next day.

Along the way that day, we saw vehicles of every description that were still stuck in ditches along the highway. Just when we wondered how the big semi-trailer trucks—upright, jack-knifed, or flipped on their sides—would be pulled out, we saw the removal of one in progress. Two large tow trucks, carefully positioned on the road, had attached cables to the trucks and were winching them to safety.

The comparison to our spiritual lives was inescapable. We are severely mired in sin and troubles. Some of us may seem upright; others are obviously bent; still others seem irreparably

damaged. Our sin has different faces, yet we all need help.

But here is the telling difference. Jesus Christ did not stay on the high, dry, safe ground of heaven (Philippians 2:6-8). He took the greatest risk and plunged into the deepest ditch to rescue us. He did not merely extend a long arm that we could grab on to. He came down, slipped underneath us, lifted us up, carried us to safety, and sent us on our (his) way.

Lent is a good time to thank Jesus for lifting us out of the mud and giving us a firm place to stand.

Lord Jesus, in this Lenten season we thank you for lifting us up, carrying us to safety, and sending us on your way. In your name we hope. Amen.

SINNER AND SAVIOR

Where sin increased, grace increased all the more.

—Romans 5:20

The film *Amazing Grace* masterfully portrays the long campaign of William Wilberforce (1759-1833) to abolish the slave trade throughout the British Empire. When Wilberforce seeks counsel from converted slave trader John Newton, Newton summarizes his life, my life, and the gospel in one sentence: “I am a great sinner; Christ is a great Savior.”

These are surely the most important ten words any of us could say—unless we might alter them slightly to read, “I am a great sinner; Christ is a *greater* Savior.” Five words of repentance, five of redemption. Humility and hope in one sentence. The words echo those of Newton’s own hymn: “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

Another hymn celebrating grace puts it this way: “Grace,

God’s grace, grace that is greater than all our sin.”

And Paul, the apostle who celebrates salvation by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8), writes eloquently, “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more.”

Someone has said, “You cannot out-sin the grace of God.” God forbid that anyone should try (see Romans 6:1-2), but it is so. “I am a great sinner; Christ is a *greater* Savior.”

Lent is a good time to fall in grateful repentance before our great and only Savior.

Father, in this season we thankfully confess with believers past and present, “I am a great sinner; Christ is a *greater* Savior.” Through Jesus Christ our hope, Amen.

PROMISES MADE—AND KEPT

No matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ.
—2 Corinthians 1:20

The body shop promised that our car would be ready the day before we planned to begin a long trip. The workers were cordial and sounded competent, but I did check their progress a week ahead of time. And we made a contingency plan.

Was the body shop's promise sincere? Probably. Were they trustworthy? Hopefully. Would they finish on time? Maybe. But anything could happen: delays beyond their control, unavailable parts, damage initially undetected, difficulty in matching paint. Reality can interfere with the best of human promises.

Is God cordial? Yes. Competent, sincere, and trustworthy? Yes. Is God in full control? Yes. Is everything available to him? Yes. Does he know how damaged we are? Yes. Every question is answered with a definite “Yes.” With God, there's not a single

“hopefully,” “maybe,” “probably,” or “I don't know.” And the final result always matches his promise.

We celebrate Lent because God makes reliable promises and keeps them. He promised to send the Messiah for our salvation, and he delivered. If God kept his greatest promise to us at the cost of his Son, will he not keep every other promise he has made?

Lent is a good time to review our faith and renew our hope in the promises of God.

Father, in this Lenten season, strengthen our faith to trust your unbroken and unbreakable promises. Through Jesus Christ our hope, Amen.

PLEASANT AND FITTING

How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!
—Psalm 147:1

Not everything that is fitting is pleasant.

Forgiving an offender is fitting, but it may not be pleasant, particularly if the offense is oft-repeated (see Matthew 18:21-22). Giving and receiving discipline is fitting, but it may not be pleasant (see Hebrews 12:11).

Ultimately, both forgiving and discipline are pleasant, for forgiving overcomes our bitterness and often restores the offender, and discipline produces righteousness and peace. But it may take time to see the pleasant results.

Psalm 147 tells us that praise is both pleasant and fitting as soon as we do it. "How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!"

Praise lifts our spirit. Praise restores our hope. Praise dispels

our uncertainty and celebrates God's victories. Praise glorifies our God and magnifies our Savior. Praise is the lifeblood of our souls. Praise is the language of heaven. No wonder praise is pleasant!

God declares that praise is fitting as well. Shall we not then do what is pleasant and fitting more often, more spontaneously, more exuberantly, more reverently, more sincerely?

Lent is a fitting time to praise God—and that is pleasant.

Father, in this season, fill our hearts with pleasant and fitting praise that overflows from our hearts to honor you. Through Jesus Christ our hope, Amen.

THINKING ABOUT GOD'S KINDNESS

God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance.

—Romans 2:4

Within one week I met kindness at least four times.

A colleague commented that Plato urged, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

I read that playwright Douglas Jerrold (1803-1857) described a man so kind that "he would have held an umbrella over a duck in a shower of rain."

Someone remembered a sermon in which I had said, "Perhaps the most important thing to look for in a potential spouse is kindness."

And in *The New World*, a film about the Native American princess Pocahontas, she asks John Rolfe, "Are you kind?"

Human kindness is a dim reflection of God's kindness. In a lengthy discourse on our sin and God's wrath, Paul wrote,

"Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness . . . not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"

We have lost hard battles with sin. But Christ's umbrella is cross-shaped, protecting us from a deluge of God's just wrath. God, our Father, is kind beyond measure. Why? "In order that . . . he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."

Lent is a good time to reflect on God's kindness.

Jesus, thank you for holding the umbrella of your grace over us. Thank you for your everlasting kindness and faithfulness. In your name we hope. Amen.

THE TENT OF DISCONTENT

They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the LORD.

—Psalm 106:25

I don't like the sensation in my spirit when I read the words of today's verse. The unpleasant feeling is *conviction*, as in conviction of sin.

I can grumble at the gas station (high prices), at the library (the book I want isn't available), at the grocery store (not enough checkout lanes open), in the car (no one is working in the construction zone), in the living room (my eyes get dry when I read at night), in the kitchen (emptying the dishwasher), on the driveway (the inside of the windshield smears when I clean it). Good grief—my tent of discontent is huge!

No wonder Jeremiah Burroughs' 1648 classic is titled *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. And what he wrote in the book is true: "Murmuring is below the spirit of a Christian."

No wonder Jesus had to die on the cross—our sins include even our grumbling, murmuring, complaining, and discontent. And he died without grumbling about our grumbling!

Jesus didn't grumble; "he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" We, then, should "have the same mindset as Christ Jesus."

Lent is a good time to work on our attitude and give up our grumbling.

Father, in this season, work in us the attitude of Christ Jesus. Help us to honor you as he did, in humble obedience. In his name we hope. Amen.

VIGOROUS ACTION, SWEET QUIET

LORD Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

—Psalm 84:12

Action and quiet—both are necessary for a well-rounded life. We might tend toward one or the other, with action perhaps more to our liking in our fast-paced world today. Yet I also sense that a longing for quiet asserts itself at times. Some speed bumps are now called “calming strips.”

Psalm 84 bears the imprint of quiet. “My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD.” The swallow nests quietly with her young near God’s altar. Yet caring for the young is also about action. Psalm 84 pictures a balance of both quiet and action.

“Ever praising you” is an example of continual action while enjoying the quiet blessing of dwelling with God. “Blessed are those . . . whose hearts are set on pilgrimage”; they move from quiet reflection to action, going “from

strength to strength” till they appear before God. Being “a doorkeeper in the house of my God” sounds like a quiet responsibility, and yet one “whose walk is blameless” leads a life of action.

Vigorous action and sweet quiet. We need both, and we need them in the proportion God ordains for us. As the psalmist puts it, “Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.”

Lent is a good time to trust God—in our action and our quiet.

Father, in this Lenten season, may we find your strength in times of quiet, that we may actively walk with you. Through Jesus Christ our hope, Amen.

ENDURANCE

Let us . . . [fix] our eyes on Jesus For the joy set before him he endured the cross.
—Hebrews 12:1-2

In rapid succession Paul illustrates Christian living by comparing it to the life of a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer. I have never served in the military, I am not an athlete, and I was not raised on a farm. But I get the point of Paul's examples. He brackets his images with the words "Join with me in suffering I endure everything for the sake of the elect."

Soldiers endure discipline, separation, combat, and at times a seemingly arbitrary commanding officer. Athletes endure training, sweat, sore muscles, and at times defeat, which can be heartbreaking and humiliating. Farmers endure uncertain weather, cantankerous animals, balky machinery, and at times devastating loss.

But endurance is not limited to three professions. Plumbers, accountants, teachers, students,

parents, nurses—all endure. Add your own occupation to the list.

Being human requires endurance. And endurance requires grace. That's why Paul prefaces his call to endurance with these words: "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."

No one endured more than Jesus. He endured the cross as he took on himself the penalty for all our sin—that we might have life. So we fix our eyes on him, who focused on the joy of winning that victory for us.

Lent is a good time to fix our eyes on Jesus—to ponder his grace and his endurance.

Father, may the endurance of Jesus enable us to endure for him. In his name we hope. Amen.

THE GRAND GUIDE

God . . . will be our guide even to the end.

—Psalm 48:14

Our newspaper included a supplement called the *Grand Guide: Your Guide to Living*. Performance centers, ticket outlets, galleries, restaurants, fairs, festivals, recreation, and more were highlighted.

I thought about the words *Your Guide to Living*. Part of my “living” in this North American culture includes some of these opportunities. But my day-to-day living revolves around questions like “Where can I get my car repaired? What grocery store has good fruits and vegetables? Where is the nearest hardware store? Where can I buy clothes at a reasonable price? What church can I call home? When I need a funeral home, where will I go?” Churches and funeral directors were included in some of the *Grand Guide* advertising space. But, as far as I could tell, no one needed an oil change,

fresh broccoli, a stepladder, or shoes.

I wondered, “If God produced something called *Your Guide to Living*, what would it look like?” Then it dawned on me. He already has produced the definitive *Guide to Living*: his Word, the Bible. It says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching . . . and training in righteousness.” What a privilege to read our *Guide to Living* every day—to seek and find both guidance and the Guide himself.

Lent is a good time to read the guide for living and grow closer to our Lord and Guide.

Jesus, in this Lenten season, may we come to you, for “you have the words of eternal life.” In your name we hope. Amen.

OPEN, ILLUMINATED

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened . . . that you may know the hope to which he has called you . . .

—Ephesians 1:18

What a blessing it is to read this prayer of the apostle Paul! He asks that God will open, or enlighten, the eyes of our hearts. Why? That we may “know him better,” have “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation,” and know the hope of all that God promises to us. With hearts open to the wonder of all that God has done, we are empowered by his Spirit to live faithfully for him, as Jesus did.

When we are open to God’s working in and through our lives, we are like a blank page on which he writes his poetry, an empty canvas on which he works his artistry, softened clay with which he molds his vessel.

Perhaps the right combination is openheartedness and singlemindedness—our heart and mind equally devoted to the God of infinite wisdom.

William Henry Temple Gairdner (1873-1928), a missionary to Cairo, Egypt, prayed as a young student, “Come in Jesus, and make me brave, retiring, humble, hardy, large-hearted, strenuous, pure, loving.” And then at home briefly in Scotland, he stood on a windswept seawall and asked God to make him “calm, pure, fresh, fragrant, open, and spacious as the sea.”

Lent is a good time to have hearts open and illuminated to all that our Lord has done, all that he can do in our lives, and all that we can look forward to in sure hope.

Jesus, encourage us in the singleminded pursuit of being open to your wisdom and your working in our lives. In your name we hope. Amen.

WORDS

All the people hung on his words.

—Luke 19:48

On Palm Sunday Jesus entered Jerusalem to the shouts of the crowd, celebrating him as their promised King. On Monday and Tuesday he taught in the temple, frustrating the religious leaders, who wanted to kill him but were unable to “because all the people hung on his words.”

Within five days he hung on the cross because of their words. By that time the people didn’t want him anymore. “The whole crowd shouted, ‘Away with this man!’ . . . They kept shouting, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ . . . With loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed” (Luke 23:18-23).

My words also bear responsibility for Jesus’ death. Have my conversations always been “full of grace” (Colossians 4:6)? Am I consistently “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians

4:15)? Is what I say “helpful for building others up according to their needs” (Ephesians 4:29)? Does my “gentle answer” turn away wrath—or does my “harsh word” stir up anger (Proverbs 15:1)?

Our silent and gracious Savior took our sins on himself, and we are healed by his saving work, in which he declared once for all, “It is finished.” May we be finished with words that hurt, and may we give our tongues to words that heal.

Lent is a good time to review how we use our tongues, and in our reviewing, to repent.

Jesus, as we approach the week of your passion, speak to our hearts about what our mouths speak to others. In your name we hope. Amen.

LOVING GOD

"Love the Lord your God . . ."

—Mark 12:30

Jesus taught that loving God is the greatest commandment, and that the second greatest command is to love our neighbor as ourself.

Then one of the greatest questions must be "What is love?" In 1 Corinthians 13 we find a beautiful answer. Paul's words in that chapter guide our understanding of love on the basis of God's love for us. And we can apply that to our love for God as well as for our neighbor.

Are we ever impatient with God? Are we unkind to God? Do we envy God in any way? Are we ever boastful, taking credit for what God enables us to do?

Are we rude to God? Are we self-seeking, forgetting to love God first? Are we easily angered by God? Do we keep a mental record of the ways we

think God has wronged us? Do we delight secretly in evil that breaks God's heart? Or do we trust, hope, and persevere in doing what is right, to honor God? (See 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.)

How much we have to grow in love! Remember, though, that God first loved us. He is infinitely patient and eternally kind. And God's love "never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:8).

Lent is a good time to examine our love—for God as well as others—and to thank God for his love.

Lord, we confess that we often fall short of showing your love—to you as well as others. Forgive us, and help us to love the way you do. Amen.

THE TOWEL

[Jesus] wrapped a towel around his waist . . . and began to wash his disciples' feet.
—John 13:4-5

When Jesus was transfigured, Peter wanted to build three shelters. Luke comments, "He did not know what he was saying." Though the disciples spent time with Jesus, witnessed many miracles, and heard his amazing teaching, they often did not grasp what it meant to follow him. Later in that same chapter, for example, Luke writes, "They did not understand" (9:45).

Humanly speaking, Jesus would have had good reason to impatiently "throw in the towel" as he worked with these disciples. Throughout his entire teaching and preaching ministry they often showed that they had barely learned anything.

But it's a cynic who throws in the towel, not a servant.

The Savior, on the night before his death, wrapped a towel around his waist and proceed-

ed to show his disciples that life in the kingdom of God is about humbly serving others.

"I have set you an example," Jesus says (John 13:15). Shall we follow it?

Serving others in Jesus' name can be uncomfortable, humbling, and even painful. It can be costly. Bringing glory to God can be inglorious to ourselves. Will we "throw in the towel" or use the resources we have to serve others? To serve God?

Lent is a good time to lay down our pride and serve others for Jesus' sake.

Jesus, humble us with your humility and move us with your servanthood. In your name we hope. Amen.

FRAGMENTS

He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them.

—Luke 22:19

We often have a 1,000-piece puzzle spread out on our counter. Our artistry is minimal, but our patience is long, and our reward is beautiful.

I read of a fine cathedral window that was fashioned out of discarded glass fragments. The stained-glass artist had greater skill and worked harder than we do, but the principle is the same—turning fragments into beauty.

The Bible mirrors the continuous fragmentation of life and relationships—Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and his sons, Abraham and Lot, Sarah and Hagar, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers (all these in Genesis!), and then Miriam and Moses, David and Absalom, Jew and Gentile, and even Paul and Barnabas.

Next week the Christian world will remember the brokenness that brought Jesus to the cross, so that we could be freed from our wretched slavery to sin (John 8:34-36). “This is my body given for you,” he said; “this . . . is . . . my blood . . . poured out for you.”

Jesus’ followers will break bread into fragments and call it “celebration.” And yet that will help “bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Ephesians 1:10).

Lent is a good time to mourn our brokenness and find our wholeness in Christ.

Jesus, as we approach the week of your passion, unite us and bind us together in yourself. In your name we hope. Amen.

WATCHING HIS STEPS

They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, hoping to take my life.
—Psalm 56:6

David lamented that his enemies were constantly conspiring, lurking, and watching his steps, hoping to take his life.

In the coming week Christians around the world will watch the steps of Jesus, many of which were watched gleefully by his enemies. From Bethany, to the upper room, to the garden, to the house of the high priest, to Pilate the governor, to King Herod's palace, to the city gates, to Golgotha—we will watch his steps. (See Matt. 26-27; Luke 22-23.)

Some would say that Jesus was hounded every step of the way. Isaiah says he was led, taken away, cut off, assigned a grave. But the prophet also says, "It was the LORD'S will to crush him and cause him to suffer" (see Isaiah 53:7-10).

When we weep for him, he will say, "Do not weep for me" (Luke 23:28). And we will be comforted, for each of his steps brought our salvation closer. Our hope will be strengthened, for he whose steps we watch is always watching our steps. He whose foot slipped under his cross will not let our feet slip (Psalm 121:3). He who suffered great harm at the willing hands of people blinded by sin will keep us from eternal harm. Nothing can snatch us out of his hand (John 10:28-29).

Lent is a good time to say with the psalmist, "I put my trust in you, 'God, whose word I praise.'"

Jesus, as we approach the week of your passion, keep us watching and walking in your steps. In your name we hope, Amen.

SCORNING SCORN

I endure scorn for your sake

—Psalm 69:7

Several psalms describe the scorn Jesus endured at his death. Psalm 22:6: "I am. . . scorned by everyone, despised by the people." Psalm 69:20: "Scorn has broken my heart." Psalm 89:41: "He has become the scorn of his neighbors." Psalm 109:25: "I am an object of scorn to my accusers."

The gospels bear out those predictions. "The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking . . . him" (Luke 22:63). "Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him" (23:11). "The rulers even sneered at him. . . . One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him" (Luke 23:35, 39).

Scorn wounds, scars, and even kills. But in this case it also saved. David, prophesying about Jesus, wrote, "I endure scorn for your sake." Jesus endured scorn for the sake of God's plan of salva-

tion. "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners" (Hebrews 12:2-3). Jesus died as our substitute, the atonement for all the times we scorned him by ignoring, opposing, and rejecting him.

Lent is a good time to confess our scorn and thank Jesus for scorning the scorn heaped on him.

Jesus, as we approach the week of your passion, we fix our eyes on you, and our hearts stir with gratitude that you endured such scorn on our behalf. In your name we hope. Amen.

ALL-SUFFICIENT SAVIOR

He is able to save completely those who come to God through him.
—Hebrews 7:25

As the month of March closes today and we anticipate the week of Jesus' suffering next week, let's look through today's reading from Hebrews one phrase at a time. Here is what we read about Jesus.

Though "there have been many . . . priests," Jesus is the one Savior. He is the living, eternal Savior, for he "lives forever." Jesus is the permanent Savior—"he has a permanent priesthood."

Jesus is a complete Savior—"he is able to save completely." He is a welcoming Savior—he saves "those who come to God through him." He is an unfailing, praying Savior—"he always lives to intercede" for us.

Jesus is a fitting Savior—he "truly meets our need." He is a righteous, unimpeachable, unblemished Savior—he is "blameless,

pure." He is a "holy" Savior—"set apart from sinners." He is an ascended Savior—"exalted above the heavens."

Jesus' atoning work is finished—"he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day . . . he sacrificed for [our] sins once for all." And he is a willing Savior—"he offered himself."

Again, Jesus is the only Savior (John 14:6). And we may call him "our Savior."

Lent is a good time to meditate deeply on our one, all-sufficient Savior.

Lord Jesus, as we approach the week of your passion, we who are all-deficient, adore you, our all-sufficient Savior. In your name we hope forever. Amen.

this month

Following the Crucified and Risen Lord

John Van Schepen

Palm Sunday. Good Friday. Easter. These are very important days in the life of the Christian church and for individual Christians. On Palm Sunday we see Jesus on the move to Jerusalem. The crowds are following him. However, by the end of the week Jesus has died on the cross. It looks like the journey is over. But Easter changes everything—Christ is risen!

Our call today is to continue the celebration and joy of Easter as we follow our risen Savior and Lord. It is our prayer that as we look to a variety of Scripture passages this month, we will learn from Jesus what it means to follow him today.

Dr. John Van Schepen pastors a church in Lynden, Washington. He has also served churches in Wisconsin, Indiana, Oregon, and California. He and his wife, Willie, have been blessed with five children and eight grandchildren.

A KING ON A DONKEY?

"See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey. . . ."

—Matthew 21:5

The picture would have been perfect if Jesus had been riding a white horse, used in those days by warrior kings to symbolize power and victory. But Jesus rode a donkey. Why?

Long ago, the prophet Zechariah had said the Messiah would come in righteousness, riding on a donkey, a symbol of humility and peace (Zechariah 9:9). Though the people saw Jesus fulfilling this prophecy as their Messiah (see also Psalm 118:25-26), they expected him to announce war against their Roman oppressors. But he didn't. Perhaps that's why the chanting crowds changed their tune from "Hosanna" to "Crucify him!" five days later (see Matthew 27:22-23).

Things haven't changed much, have they? People are still willing to rally around the banner of Christ if it goes along with their own interests. We also desire to

maintain a good Christian confession while trying to avoid the cross. But Jesus, the King who rode on a donkey, calls us to examine our walk with him as we come to the cross this Friday. Dig deep and ask, "Am I just going along for the ride? If I have to decide between God and my job, my reputation, or something else in my life—will I also change my tune?"

Palm Sunday is about King Jesus riding to the cross in total obedience to his Father. His grace and peace come by way of the cross. Will you receive him?

Lord, may we willingly obey you and joyfully follow you, the King of kings, in whose name we pray. Amen.

A LAVISH GIFT

"She has done a beautiful thing to me. . . . What she has done will also be told, in memory of her."
—Mark 14:6, 9

Simon the Leper, who had probably been healed by Jesus, was having a dinner party for Jesus, his disciples, and some friends.

A woman slipped in and stood behind Jesus. No one noticed her until she poured a bottle of perfume on his head.

Nearly everyone was shocked. Unbelievable! Smell it! It's the real thing! It must have cost a year's wages!

We are not told whether she was old or young, rich or poor, married or single. It makes no difference. Jesus said, "She has done a beautiful thing to me."

Why did she do it? If she was looking for the praise of the crowd, she didn't receive that. Nor does the Bible suggest she was trying to win favors from Jesus. This beautiful thing was an act of pure love and devotion to

the Lord. Though she might not have known Jesus would soon die, he said, "She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial."

What if we were totally broken open for Jesus and we poured out our love extravagantly in our community? What must we lay aside so that a new freshness to love others can come into our lives? We may say, "Tomorrow I will go to my neighbor; tomorrow I will be kind to my enemies."

Will you give lavishly of your love for Jesus in this broken world? It's a beautiful thing.

Dear Lord, it's easy to say we love you but hard to pour ourselves out for others. Thank you for this beautiful example. In your name we pray. Amen.

FRAGRANCE

A woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume.

—Mark 14:3

When someone wears a strong fragrance, it can be quite noticeable. Some may find it pleasant, but others may find it offensive.

Paul intends for us to be aware that our “fragrance” as followers of Jesus Christ ought to be noticeable to those with whom we come into contact. In fact, our aroma as Christ-followers should be so obvious that no one even needs to ask, “Are you a Christian?”

Further, says Paul, the aroma of Christ can be so powerful that it makes a life and death difference to people. That’s more than a subtle distinction.

Sad to say, we must confess that often our aroma is not pleasant. Too often foul language comes from our mouths, we have a foul temper, or people avoid us because we are in a foul mood. May our heart’s desire be that af-

ter we have left a room, people will say, “A Christ follower was here.”

“Who is equal to such a task?” asks Paul.

Let’s thank God that our situation is not hopeless. He “always leads us . . . in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.”

Stay focused on following in his footsteps. Then people will sense his presence wherever you go. Thanks be to God, indeed!

Thank you, Lord, that in Christ you cleanse us of the stink of sin and make us like a sweet-smelling aroma. There is victory in Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

SPOILSPORT

Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them.
—Mark 14:10

Some people were looking for a way to get rid of Jesus, fearing that if he became king they would lose their power and prestige (see John 11:48). They needed the right time and the right person to betray him. They were delighted to have Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' closest followers, come forward to betray him.

Like the religious leaders, we too dislike others who rock our boat or undermine our status. Like Judas, we too betray the lordship of Jesus in subtle ways and try to sugarcoat our actions with nice-sounding words.

"It's not my fault," says the angry child; "he hit me first." "Don't blame me," says the teenager; "my parents are poor examples." "It might look like cutting corners," we say to our co-worker, "but it's just business."

Judas probably tried to justify his actions when he betrayed Jesus. But the truth is that no excuse we give for our actions can justify us. If we hold on to our excuses or keep trying to justify ourselves, we betray or deny Jesus. Only the grace of God through the cross of Christ can blot out our sins.

Today God is inviting us to his party. Come and receive the joy of being right with God because of what Jesus has done for us.

Dear Lord, forgive us for the many subtle ways we commit the sin of betraying you. Thank you for the grace that is greater than all our sin. Amen.

JESUS' NEW COMMAND

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
—John 13:35

Jesus and his disciples were eating the Passover meal: lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread. As they shared this time together, only Jesus knew this would be his last night with his followers. Only he knew he would soon be arrested and killed.

Suddenly Jesus got up, wrapped a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin and began washing his disciples' feet: their rough heels, hammertoes, bunions, and blisters. We read only of Peter's stuttering objections, but no doubt all the disciples were confused as Jesus performed this servant work.

Setting aside the basin of dirty water, Jesus returned to his place at the table. Then he explained, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet." Later he added,

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Today is Maundy Thursday. The name comes from the Latin word "mandatum," meaning "command." On this night Jesus gave his disciples the "new command" to love one another as servants.

Is that difficult? Absolutely!

But Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Dear Teacher, you came to earth and became an example for us. Through your words and deeds come wisdom. Grant us the wisdom to be who you call us to be. Amen.

“IT IS FINISHED”

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.”

—John 19:30

“Are you finished with your chores yet?” a mother asks her teenager. Parents know their children are pulled in many directions by their friends, jobs, sports, and other activities. Following through on chores while we’re young can help us learn to meet goals and complete important tasks in life.

Often as adults, though, we may find that we have regrets. Middle-aged parents may wish they’d spent more time with their children. People who become crippled by disease may wish they’d spent less time building a career and more time traveling with friends and building relationships. But some difficulties can’t be avoided. Life has struggles and setbacks. Still, we do well to make the most of the opportunities we have each day.

Jesus, the Son of God, died one day long ago with the sat-

isfaction of having completed his life’s purpose. He came to seek and save the lost, and he accomplished everything needed for our redemption. Jesus meant it when he said, “It is finished.” He made forgiveness and eternal life a reality for all who trust in him. “There is no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). That’s why today is *Good Friday*.

As you look to the cross today, be sure to receive him as your Lord and Savior. And if you have received him, love him with your whole being every day. Make today a great day as you joyfully serve the Lord!

Lord Jesus, thank you for this Good Friday, for making our salvation possible. Hallelujah! Amen.

FOLLOWING BOLDLY

Joseph . . . who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. —Mark 15:43

Funerals are sad times. Often our grief is made greater by our regrets. "Why didn't I make that phone call to Dad?" "Why didn't I tell Mom more often that I loved her?"

Today's Scripture verses that describe Jesus' burial are important because they are solid evidence that Jesus truly died. He was neither unconscious nor in a coma. Both the centurion and Pilate would want proof positive that he was dead. Our salvation rests on this. "Christ . . . suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death . . ." (1 Peter 3:18).

Joseph was a prominent member of the religious leaders' council who had not consented to their decision to have Jesus crucified (Luke 23:50-51). But the deed was done. Many would have thrown up their

hands and said, "I did what I could," and gone on with life.

But Joseph resolved to do more. He "went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body." He sought permission to bury Jesus, and he buried him in the grave he had prepared for himself (Matthew 27:60).

Dear friends, it is true that Jesus died, but it is also true that he rose again. It's not too late to come boldly to Jesus and trust him as the only one who can remove your sins and give you new life. Follow the living Lord, and make every day the best day of your life.

Lord, even as we stand in the shadow of the cross, we already rejoice in the hope that today can be the best day of our life. Thanks be to God! Amen.

FREEDOM

Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.
—Romans 6:4

My wife and I traveled to Greece to retrace the footsteps of the apostle Paul. Near Philippi our guide pointed out a *tumulus*—a burial mound disguised to look like a hill. After years of effort the archaeologist Manolis Andronikos discovered the tumulus of Phillip II, ruler of Macedon in that region from 360-336 B.C. As he held the golden chest containing the bones of that famous king, he said, “I can hardly believe it!”

You could spend ten lifetimes trying to find Jesus’ bones, but you would never succeed. Jesus was crucified and buried, but he did not stay in the grave. He arose! By his resurrection he frees us from the guilt of sin and even from the power of death. Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

After months in a prison during World War II, Joe Moser recalled how a tank roared toward the main gate and tore through barbed wire on the day of his liberation. He writes, “There was a stunned moment . . . then a roar went up from the camp that rolled through the acres down the narrow muddy corridor.” Only those who have been set free can know that roar of relief, joy, and exhilaration.

On this Easter Day let the roar of freedom fill your heart and home and all the corridors of your community. Let it wash over the sin and brokenness of life with healing and restoration. Christ the Lord is risen!

Lord Jesus, may the joy we have received through your gift of free life be evident to all! Amen.

HE IS RISEN INDEED

"He has risen! He is not here."

—Mark 16:6

Soon after that first resurrection day followers of Jesus began greeting one another by saying, "Christ is risen; he is risen indeed!" The whole message of the gospel can be summed up in these few words: "Jesus is risen!"

The world is filled with religions built on various philosophies or personalities. But only the Christian faith claims its founder was raised from the dead and is alive today. "He is not here. See the place where they laid him." This is the heartbeat of the good news.

The cross and the grave are not the end! Following Jesus is not a dead-end street. The angel seated at the tomb not only invited the women to see the empty tomb. He also gave instructions for a new way into the future. "Go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into

Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."

Today, in all the world, Jesus the living Lord is on the move: in our churches and in our schools, in our workplaces and our marketplaces. We are called to follow in his footsteps, bringing the good news of Jesus' victory over sin, death, and destruction in our words and by our actions. We have been given the privilege of telling others so that they may know Jesus, the risen Savior of the world.

Lord, thank you that you not only rose from the grave but are on the move, changing the world as you go. May we follow you, our living Lord, with joy and courage. Amen.

WHY ARE YOU CRYING?

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

—John 20:13

There's a lot of crying in the world today. On the Internet, I searched "songs about crying" and got thousands of results. That's a lot of tears! Tears over lost love, or over loved ones who have died. Tears of regret. Tears of pain. Right now many who are reading these words have eyes filled with tears.

I have heard people say, "Big boys don't cry." The truth is they do—and so do big girls. There is nothing wrong with crying. Even Jesus cried (see John 11:35). The question is, "Amid tears, how can we have hope to carry on?"

The angels did not tell Mary, "Don't cry." They asked her, "Why are you crying?" Blinded by her sorrow, Mary did not recognize Jesus; not even the sound of his voice awakened her hope. Then he called her name, "Mary," and her eyes

were opened to his life-giving presence.

Do you think all your dreams and past efforts have been buried by your losses or by the hurts and injustices heaped on you? Whoever you are, Jesus knows your name (see John 10:3-4).

When we respond to his gentle call and trust him as Savior, we have this life-giving hope: one day God will wipe away every tear from our eyes; "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

Loving Lord, thank you for understanding us when our eyes fill with tears. Thank you for calling us by name. May our eyes be opened to your life-giving presence. In your name, Amen.

HIS PRESENCE AND HIS PEACE

Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"
—John 20:19

Let's say your high school team just lost the state championship. All the players stare at the floor, thinking about what they could have done differently. For a moment you think you will never get over it.

That night in Jerusalem was much worse. Black clouds of failure filled the room. How could the disciples succeed at anything now?

We can sum up the solution in two words: "Jesus came." And Jesus didn't come empty-handed. He brought with him some very significant gifts—and these are for us also.

First of all, Jesus gave the gift of his presence. "The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord." Jesus was right there with them! His word is true that says, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

Young man, Mom, Grandpa, never forget it! He is not dead. He is alive, and he is here. As Betsy Ten Boom said from inside a prison, "There is no pit so deep but God's love is deeper still."

Jesus also gives his peace. To the disciples he said, "Peace be with you." If we look back on our lives, we see the footprints of sin. But because of the cross, our shame, guilt, and failure are gone. The risen Lord offers you his peace: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. . . . I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:1, 6).

Risen Lord Jesus, thank you for being with us every moment and for offering us your peace. May our lives today be filled to overflowing with joy because of you. Amen.

HIS POWER AND A NEW PURPOSE

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

—John 19:29

We return today to the disciples who were "overjoyed when they saw the Lord" on the evening of the first Easter (John 20:20).

Jesus gave his followers his power. He breathed on them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The same creating Spirit who shaped the world at the beginning of time is now given to Jesus' disciples. The Spirit enabled them to say, "I can do all . . . through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13). That is how this motley crew of followers went out and turned the world upside down!

Have you ever run when you should have stood firm? Have you ever kept silent when you should have spoken out? God gives his Spirit to empower us with "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-

control" (Galatians 5:22-23) as we live in his service.

Jesus gives us a new purpose. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Jesus sends us out into the world with his authority and with his message of healing and renewal. He sends you and me into the world to minister to its needs with our love.

Jesus is alive, and he desires to pour out his gifts on the world. Believe it, and be overjoyed as his followers to share the good news of Jesus with others.

Gracious Spirit, thank you for coming into the world to live the life of Christ in us and through us. Pour out your gifts on our lives so that we may minister in Jesus' name. Amen.

FROM FAITH TO FAITH: PETER

Peter . . . went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

—Luke 24:12

Good Friday and Easter are over. And life goes on. Maybe you wonder, “Did Good Friday and Easter really happen? Does our faith make any difference? Is my life different because of Jesus’ resurrection?”

When Peter and John heard that the tomb was empty, they sprang into action. John outran Peter to the tomb, but Peter was the first to go inside. The Bible describes in detail what Peter saw in the tomb. Perhaps he wondered whether Joseph, the owner of the tomb, had decided not to put Jesus’ body there. Or maybe the Jewish leaders had taken the body somewhere else.

Luke 24 tells us that Peter “went away, wondering to himself what had happened.” He could not immediately grasp that Jesus was alive. He needed time to sort things out. Perhaps you need time to wonder about Jesus too.

Later that day, Peter and the other disciples saw Jesus alive again. Can you imagine the thoughts that raced through their minds?

On another occasion, Peter and some others were fishing, and they again met the risen Lord. Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, and Peter said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you” (John 21:17).

Jesus wants us all to take him seriously. Because he loved you enough to die for you, I pray that you too will say, “Lord, you know that I love you.”

Lord, sometimes we wonder about your claims and promises. Thank you for your patience. Fill us with faith in you. Amen.

FROM FAITH TO FAITH: JOHN

Finally the other disciple . . . also went inside. He saw and believed.
—John 20:8

John had outrun Peter to the tomb. As he stopped at the entryway, Peter went past him into the tomb. When John finally did go inside, “he saw and believed.” Unlike Peter, who wasn’t sure what had happened, John was sure: he believed.

Both Peter and John had been among Jesus’ closest disciples. Both had heard the report of the women that first Easter morning (Luke 24:10). Both saw that the tomb was empty. And yet they had different reactions. Peter went away wondering what had happened (Luke 24:12), while John recalled what Jesus had said, and believed (18:31-33; 24:7-8).

Note, however, that the Bible says, “They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.” Both Peter and John had a long way to go in their faith. We quickly

forget that just three years earlier they had been called to leave their fishing boats and follow Jesus (Luke 5). They had very little education and were ordinary, hardworking people like most of us.

Today I encourage you to take the first step of faith; believe that Jesus has truly risen from the dead and sealed your salvation. Know that his Spirit will deepen your faith as you seek him with all your heart. Then the day will come when you too will say, “Lord . . . you know that I love you” (John 21:17).

Thank you, Lord, for the leeway you give us as our faith develops. May we be equally gracious to one another as we struggle with questions while we follow you. Amen.

FROM FAITH TO FAITH: THE EMMAUS ROAD

He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.
—Luke 24:27

Two people trudged from Jerusalem to Emmaus. One was Cleopas; the other is unnamed. They had heard the reports of Jesus' resurrection but were skeptical.

Can you identify with their being downhearted? Have you hoped Jesus would fix your problems, but perhaps the miracle you prayed for didn't happen? Don't lose heart; Jesus is near (Philippians 4:5).

Jesus joined the two travelers, though they didn't recognize him. "What are you discussing?" he asked. Cleopas replied, in effect, "You're coming from Jerusalem and you don't know what has happened these past few days?" I wonder if Jesus smiled or stifled a chuckle, since he alone knew what had really happened.

"What things?" asked Jesus. Then it all came tumbling out,

as they shared the story about Jesus' death. They "had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel."

Then, beginning with Moses, Jesus interpreted the Scriptures to them. He gently pried open their expectations with his words. Their eyes were opened, and they believed Jesus was the risen Lord who offered them new life.

Today, whether you may be doubting or firm in faith, open God's Word and let the Holy Spirit fire you up for a life of joy in Jesus, the risen Lord.

Thank you, Lord, for giving us your Word in the Bible. As we read it, open our hearts so that our trust in you will be renewed daily. Amen.

“FOLLOW ME!”

The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!”

—John 21:7

It’s Monday, and the routine of another week has begun. You may be reading this before you head off to work or at the end of the day before going to bed.

Some of Jesus’ followers had gone from Jerusalem to Galilee to meet him (Matthew 28:10). While waiting for Jesus there, Peter decided to go fishing, and the others joined him. But no matter how hard they tried, they caught nothing that night.

Jesus met them the next morning and reminded them of some important life lessons. These lessons apply to us as well.

First, in giving them fish, Jesus reminds us that all our abilities are a gift from God. Second, of all the things we have in life—such as our friends, family, jobs, or possessions—nothing is as important as our relationship with Jesus. Third, in our every-

day normal ways of life we are called to follow Jesus. Nothing and no one should distract us from that pursuit.

How can we keep our focus on Jesus in the normal routine of life?

Begin by knowing that Jesus loves you. He made us and died to heal our brokenness.

Then turn to Jesus and say, as Peter did, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you” (John 21:17).

Finally, trust Jesus to fill up the nets of your life. Let the “new normal” in your life begin!

Lord of our life, fill our nets to overflowing so that we may serve you with joy as we serve those around us. In your name, Amen.

REVISITING OLD HURTS

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"
—John 21:15

Can you smell the aroma of outdoor cooking as you read these verses? The mention of burning coals with fish on the fire is not a random detail. John 18:18 says that Peter warmed himself by a fire the night he denied his Lord three times. As the aroma wafted toward him, surely it brought back bitter memories of his past failure.

When Jesus asked for some fish, Peter quickly rushed off to supply it. Was he eager to get away briefly, or was he trying to show he could be helpful?

Jesus knows our past failures can seriously impede our future efforts and sap the daily joy from the lives of his followers. I think Jesus was intentionally recreating the scene in order to help Peter face his past and be renewed in his service.

I do not know what past failures may be harming your present pursuits or what unhealed hurts may be hindering you from following Jesus. Probing deeply into a badly infected wound can be very painful, but it's the only way to begin the healing process.

Know this truth: being imperfect does not disqualify us from serving Jesus. That's what his unfailing love for us is all about. Look at the scars in his hands. He understands our hurts and knows how to heal them. Run to him and say, "Thank you, Lord; I do love you."

Gracious Lord, thank you for your unfailing love. Help us to confidently come to you in our weakness to find healing and renewal in you. In your name we pray. Amen.

WHOSE VOICE ARE YOU FOLLOWING?

"His sheep follow him because they know his voice."

—John 10:4

Internet, iPad, iPod—the "I"s certainly have it today! At the beach, in the department store, on the college campus, everywhere people have listening devices in their ears. While both technology and music are gifts of God, I hope we also take time to listen to the springtime chatter of robins or the shrill cry of a red-tailed hawk.

What we listen to makes a difference in our lives. Jesus is the good shepherd. He laid down his life for us on the Good Friday cross. If we are to follow Jesus and avoid imposters, we must recognize his voice clearly and quickly in every situation we encounter. To do that, we must spend time listening to his Word in the Bible.

One day I was walking along a road in Uganda when a car pulled over behind me. A man called out, "Do you want

a ride?" I thought it might be a taxi, so I kept walking without looking back. Then a horn beeped and a voice called out, "It's Tuki. Don't you recognize my voice?" Since I had only recently become acquainted with Tuki, I did not quickly recognize his voice. But when I saw who it was, I gratefully accepted the ride he offered.

Jesus, the good shepherd, says, "Listen, listen to me . . . that you may live" (Isaiah 55:2-3).

He invites you to "ride" with him.

Are you listening to his voice?

Dear Lord, help me to listen closely to your voice as I read your Word so that the pathway I follow is yours and yours alone. In your name, Amen.

WHEREVER YOU GO! REALLY?

A teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."
—Matthew 8:19

Jesus' ministry was flourishing. He had healed many people of their diseases and had driven evil spirits out of many others. The crowds were amazed and followed him.

Before Jesus left that day, two would-be followers came running up to him. One said, without any excuses, "I will follow you wherever you go." The other offered to follow as well, but said, "First let me go and bury my father."

Jesus knew their hearts (see Luke 6:8). The first, a teacher of the law, was probably too eager. Maybe he figured that being with Jesus would be good for his résumé. Jesus' answer indicates that we should not expect earthly gain from following him. We must count the cost.

The second would-be follower was too hesitant or just lying.

Could he really expect Jesus to wait for him till after a funeral? And if his father had died, what was the man doing here? Perhaps he thought Jesus would give him a pat on the back for his pious efforts. Jesus' answer was not unkind but straightforward. We must be fully committed.

Jesus' answers here boil down to this: Jesus alone must have first place in the lives of his followers, everywhere and any-time. On the cross he gave up everything for us. He deserves the right to ask everything of us—and he does.

Lord, forgive us for forgetting about your cross at times and thinking we can find easier ways to follow you. Thank you for your promise to be with us always. Amen.

ARE YOU TIRED OUT?

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."
—Matthew 11:28

Whew! What a week it has been! Exams at school, big changes at work, scrambling to pay the bills—it's no wonder people say "TGIF!"—"Thank 'Goodness' It's Friday!"

Jesus had been busy teaching, healing people, answering questions, and mentoring his followers. Yet in spite of all his efforts, challenges remained. There was not enough help to get the work done (see Matthew 9:37). Even John the Baptist began to have doubts about him (see Matthew 11:3), and in those places where Jesus had done most of his miracles, people refused to repent of their sins (Matthew 11:20).

It has been said, "It's not what life throws at you; it's how you deal with it that makes all the difference."

How did Jesus deal with discouragement? He drew close to God. He praised God for his goodness and grace.

Jesus, whom the Bible says is "the exact representation of [God's] being" (Hebrews 1:3), clearly knows the pressures and frustrations of our lives. He invites us to come to him and learn from him, so that we too may have rest for our souls.

Life is not easy, but God is good. Let him lead you and give you the rest you need today.

Lord, thank you for the reminder from your Word that life was certainly not always smooth sailing for you. Thank you for the reminder to center ourselves on the will of God, just as you did. May we find rest for our souls today. Amen.

FOLLOWING JESUS AT WORK

"The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."

—2 Thessalonians 3:10

Children, do you know that following Jesus has as much to do with your Saturday chores as with going to worship on Sunday? Unfortunately, sometimes it is said that Christians are "so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." That happened to some Christ followers in Thessalonica. They became so focused on Jesus' coming again that they forgot their calling to be God's people in the world every day.

The apostle Paul was a bi-vocational pastor who worked as a tentmaker. He was not afraid to use himself as a role model of a diligent worker. In effect, he said, "If you are unwilling to work, you will not eat."

This does not mean the Bible wants us to be workaholics or to disrespect people who cannot work. God told Adam and Eve to care for the garden he

had made (Genesis 1:28-30), and he showed by example the good rhythm of work and rest (2:2) to help us have a healthy view of work.

Do you have some chores to do? Do them without complaining. Thank the Lord for the opportunity to serve others and to glorify God by using his gifts. And tomorrow, as God gives you the opportunity to rest, thank and praise him for the opportunity to worship him and be reenergized for the work you have to do next week.

Thank you, Father, for the rhythm of work and rest in our lives. May we praise you on Saturday as we do our chores and on Sunday as we gather with fellow believers to worship you. Amen.

WALKING IN THE LIGHT

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." —John 8:12

By boldly declaring, "I am the light of the world," Jesus establishes without question that he is the very presence of God with us. He is the light of the world, for he and he alone knows the Father.

The Pharisees immediately objected to Jesus' self-assessment and mounted a campaign to try to ruin his reputation. First they challenged his lineage. Then they twisted his words to suggest he was suicidal. But if he could not be trusted, why would they react so strongly to what he said?

The saying is true, "Darkness does not like to be reminded by the light." Because Jesus knew their hearts were darkened by sin, he replied, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." It all comes back to the call to follow Jesus, the true light giver.

Our lives are often muddled by the fear of being known or exposed, so we stay hidden in the darkness. Jesus resists such cover-ups. He floods our lives with the spotlight of his Word and challenges us today to forfeit our own plans for his.

The psalmist says it well: "In your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9). The secret of being guided by Jesus is to commit ourselves to his life-giving Word. Trust him and let his Word speak to you today.

Lord, thank you for the privilege many of us have today to gather and hear your Word. We pray especially for all who are persecuted for following you. Flood them with your light and love. Amen.

“COME . . .”

The King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance.” —Matt. 25:34

There are many challenging adventures to which Jesus calls us. When the seed of God’s Word takes root in our hearts, we follow its leading, inspired by God’s Spirit, and the Lord will grow the fruit of his kingdom through us (Matthew 13:23).

Our Lord leads us to do many kinds of things we would not usually do, and some of those can be uncomfortable. But comfort (or lack of it) is not the issue; the point is to bring God’s love to people in this hurting world, following Jesus’ example.

Jesus came to reveal God to the world (John 5:19-29; 14:6-21), showing his love and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry is filled with examples of showing God’s love and pointing the way to eternal life, through him. In Matthew

25, for example, he calls us to feed the poor, show hospitality, care for the sick, clothe the naked, and visit prisoners. And he says, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these . . . you did for me.”

To follow Jesus, let’s use our time wisely with the challenges he has given us throughout Scripture. Then we will not only hear our Lord say, “Come,” but we will also hear the rest of his words: “Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”

Lord, too often we focus on things that distract us from serving you wholeheartedly. Forgive us and let us hear again your voice calling, “Come.” Amen.

JESUS IS CALLING: ARE WE LISTENING?

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."
—Matthew 4:19

Jesus was consistent about his own calling, just as he is about the call he gives each of us: "Follow me," and "make disciples." He calls us to take the good news of God's salvation to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). God's great purpose, as the last book of the Bible indicates, is that people from every tribe, nation, people, and language will one day praise him (see Revelation 5:9-10; 7:9).

We are often tempted to exempt ourselves from God's great plan by saying, "I'm not called to be a missionary," as if that excuses us from being fishers of people. Why are we willing to claim God's promise of abundant life (John 10:10) but not his promise to become his witnesses who make disciples?

Perhaps God has given you a heart for a ministry near your home that blesses your neigh-

bors. Fantastic! But approximately two thirds of the world's population does not follow Jesus. Children, young people, and adults, will you ask God if he is calling you to be a missionary for him? Must not we give our all to enable people around the world to know him?

Remember, we have these radical promises from Jesus: "All authority . . . has been given to me." "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Let's be radically occupied with ways to make his glory known at home and around the world.

Lord, you never wavered from your calling, to bring salvation to the whole world. May we be faithful as we hear your call. Amen.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"
—Matthew 19:27

Following Jesus may be difficult when we face setbacks in life: perhaps the college of our choice has not chosen us, the economy has erased our job, or death has stolen away our spouse. We might begin to wonder, "Is it all worthwhile?"

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, he knew he would soon complete his God-given mission. While the disciples had been following Jesus for three years and had seen him perform exceptional miracles, their future was still a huge puzzle. When Jesus told a rich young man to sell all his possessions to gain eternal life, Peter couldn't hold back from saying bluntly, "What do we get out of following you?"

Jesus' response indicates a special place of honor for the disciples. He reminds us of some other fundamentals as well. In God's economy it is always true that

the one who shares the cross of Christ will also wear the crown. Our chief reward is not material possessions but a new fellowship with God's people. Nothing can ever "separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

We must willingly abandon the trinkets of this world to discover the infinite treasure of knowing him. There will be a world of surprises as God, who alone judges our hearts, sets things right according to his justice and righteousness. Because of that, we will find that following Jesus is more than worthwhile!

Dear Lord, like the disciples, we sometimes struggle with following you. May your Word to us today encourage us to follow joyfully. Amen.

FOLLOW THE LAMB

They follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

—Revelation 14:4

Many children know the nursery rhyme about Mary and the little lamb that followed her to school. Well, our Bible reading today is about a lamb—but not that little lamb. It is about Jesus, the Lamb of God; Mary's baby born long ago in Bethlehem. Jesus, the Lamb of God who died on a cross, was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven. He is the ruling Lord who is coming again one day.

Children and adults often ask, "What will heaven be like?" Will there be streets paved with gold? Will there be a sun? Will we know each other? Will we keep making discoveries there? Many books have been written about this subject, and they give a great diversity of answers. But no one really has all the answers.

Our Scripture today gives a rare glimpse of being in God's

presence. Believers stand on Mt. Zion with the Lamb, Jesus. Songs are sung before the throne that sound like a mixture of rushing waters, thunder, and harp music. And the people? "They follow the Lamb wherever he goes."

Though we can't answer many of our questions about heaven, we know one thing for sure: we will be completely devoted followers of Jesus. Now, let me ask, "If you have surrendered your life to Jesus Christ, are you following him as the Lord of your life? Are you following in the footsteps of the Lamb?"

Lamb of God, Lord Jesus Christ, you have given your life for us. With joy and with songs of thanksgiving we surrender our lives to you. Amen.

ON COMING TO THE WEDDING FEAST

"Come, for everything is now ready."

—Luke 14:17

Last April the eyes of the world were on the wedding of Prince William of England and Katherine Middleton. One of the most closely guarded secrets was the invitation list. Stories abounded regarding people who felt rebuffed for not being invited.

In our Scripture story for today, the opposite is true. A man prepared a great banquet to which many guests were invited. The invitations went out in advance, and firm commitments were made.

Finally the great day came, and the servants went out with the final announcement: "Come, for everything is now ready." But in a rude affront to the host at the very last moment, all the guests made excuses.

God invites us to participate in his kingdom, pictured here as a

banquet feast. His kingdom offers us the greatest gifts: full and eternal life (John 10:10).

But we must not imagine this great feast is like a take-out meal from a fast-food restaurant, something we might enjoy briefly while busying ourselves with other things.

Following Jesus calls for loyalty and wholehearted devotion to him. Those who wish to enjoy it must come.

What are you doing with Jesus' invitation?

Gracious God, search our hearts, remove our excuses, and enable us to accept your offer of salvation through Jesus today. We pray in his name. Amen.

FOLLOWING FAITHFULLY

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” —Matthew 16:24

What is faith?

A simple definition is that faith is belief and trust in Jesus—as your Savior from sin and as the Lord over all things.

Some people describe it using the acronym FAITH: “Forsaking All, I Trust Him.”

Many believers have memorized the description in Hebrews 11:1: “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

At a crucial point in Jesus’ ministry, Peter declared faith in Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

But Jesus makes clear that we must also show our faith by following him. He says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” That is utterly shocking, when we

stop to think about it. Jesus is saying, “If you want to follow me, you must be ready to be crucified.”

In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes a similarly startling statement: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

Do we really believe that following Jesus is worth giving up everything else? If so, we must strive to follow him faithfully.

Jesus, we confess that often we are glad to call you Savior, but we do not always count the cost of your claim on our entire lives. May we understand daily that it is in dying to ourselves that we truly live for you. Amen.

TAKING A BREAK

"Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

—Mark 6:31

Most children are quick to let you know that their favorite subject at school is recess. And adults may find that the daily grind of going to work or preparing meals, or both, can be tiring.

We all need a break from time to time.

Jesus had sent his disciples out on their first mission trip (Mark 6:7-13). No doubt they were tired when they returned, yet excited to share with him what had happened.

But there was no time. More needy people kept coming.

Jesus had a solution: "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

Following Jesus is not an easy task. It calls us to self sacrifice, humility, and even suffering. There will be times for us to

"leave it all behind" as we serve God, but there are also times when we need to step back and take time alone with Jesus.

A group retreat or a day of solitude can be a great time to hear him say, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

God graciously gives us a weekly reminder on the traditional Christian day of worship, Sunday, to come with him for some rest.

Make it a great day as you begin this new week.

Gracious God, thank you for understanding how needy we are and for providing a day of rest for us. May we find a way to quiet ourselves in your presence today as we prepare to follow you this week. Amen.

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?

The LORD is my Shepherd . . . I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.
—Psalm 23:1, 6

I read of two men who went to sleep on a houseboat. During the night the boat broke away from its moorings and drifted off to sea. The first man got up and looked around but could see no land. He ran to his friend and called out, “Get up quickly. We aren’t here anymore!”

I laughed when I read that story. But it got me to thinking, “How many people are there today who don’t know where they are in life?”

Perhaps difficulties in your life have made you ready to give up. Perhaps you are so busy that you have not taken time to ask, “Where am I going?”

Psalm 23 is one of the sweetest portions of the Bible. It speaks to us in helpful ways about the journey of life. David, the psalmist, declares boldly, in effect, “The LORD is my shep-

herd’ who leads me and guides me. In good times and in hard times, whether facing enemies or seated at a table overflowing with goodness—even in the face of death—I know where I am going. Because I am following the Lord, my shepherd, ‘I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.’”

You may not know where you are, but God does. He also knows that wherever we are, we need Jesus, the good shepherd—and that’s all that matters. Are you following him?

Good Shepherd, may I follow you joyfully every day of my life. Thank you that because of your love, revealed in Jesus Christ, I may “dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” Amen.



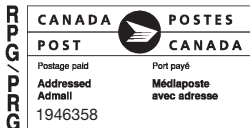
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