

Nov/Dec 2012

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



Great Joy
and Light

ALSO: SQUINTING

Friends:

I recall driving my car in a blizzard, being unable to see. The blowing snow in my headlights created a glaring whiteout, while off to the sides was only blackness. All the landmarks and signposts had disappeared into the snow. I was probably driving too fast, especially because I couldn't really see the roadway—the road, shoulder, and ditch were all just a blur of white. But I could see the taillights of the car ahead of me. If I squinted, I could follow those lights at a safe distance.



In November, we explore spiritual squinting. Sometimes it's hard to see God, or to know up from down. Sometimes we feel dangerously lost. How can we find our way? Is squinting for God a mistake? Or evidence that we're not doing it right? We long for God in the gloom, which is a good theme for beginning Advent. Come, Lord Jesus!

In December, we celebrate glad tidings of great joy and light. The coming of Christ is good news indeed, and it will not leave us unchanged. How will these tidings change you once you have seen light in the darkness?

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

—Steven Koster

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**“Squinting”
Ron Vanderwell**



**“Great Joy and Light”
Morris Greidanus**

Managing Editor: Eleanor Lamsma
Executive Editor: Steven Koster

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re FRAME MEDIA

this month

SQUINTING

Ron Vanderwell

Though we may not like to admit it, most Christians struggle with faith. For example, what does it mean to have faith? How do we get, or find, faith in God and in the Savior, Jesus Christ? How do we know it's real? How do we live by it? How do we share it?

In our devotions for November, Ron Vanderwell explores these questions and more, often with helpful illustrations and practical ideas on trusting God and learning to follow his way in this world. Most of the time our pathway in life can be uncertain, and it can be hard to see the road ahead, as if we're wandering in fog. But in faith, and with God's help, we can squint in the fog and see the Lord working, calling us and guiding us to work with him on what he wants to do next.

Ron Vanderwell recently became the senior pastor of New Life Church in New Lenox, Illinois. He has been a pastor for 22 years, serving as a church planter for the previous 12 years at The Gathering in Sacramento, California, and before that as a pastor in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Ron and his wife, Deb, have three sons: John, Adam, and Jake. Ron shares more of his reflections on "squinting" for God in his blog at www.squintforgod.com.

THOUGHTS ABOUT FAITH

As it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

—Romans 1:17

How do you feel about faith?

Many people think faith may be a helpful protection in case they need it—like a spare tire for their car. Many turn to faith when facing struggles, but then turn back to something more “reliable” when a crisis passes.

In the beginning it may have been easier to have faith in God. Adam and Eve spent time in person with God, and they could ask him anything. But when they disobeyed God and fell into sin, everything changed. (See Genesis 2-3.) They lost their full relationship with God and became stuck in their own sin. Then they could only catch glimpses of God’s presence and his work in this world as if by squinting with blurred vision or in cloudy darkness. They needed God to reveal himself—and he often did that in the following ages—to Abraham and his

descendants and ultimately in Jesus, who became the Savior from sin. But many people turned away from God and put their faith only in things they could see, like the moon and stars, or idols that they made.

For thousands of years faith was common in human history, until the Age of Reason (Enlightenment) swept through Europe in the 18th century. Then many people figured they could be faithless. In the name of science and logic, modern thinkers stopped believing in anything they could not see. So having faith became harder.

Do you have faith? Would you like to learn more about what faith really is?

Lord, please help us to understand faith and to know you. Amen.

IS FAITH A VERB?

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"
—Mark 9:24

We can easily misunderstand faith. Sometimes we make it all about us, as if it were something that we have to do.

Imagine if you had an exercise bike hooked up to a generator to keep the lights on in your home. The system would work fine as long as you continued to pedal. But as you got tired, the lights would gradually dim and then shut off, leaving you stuck in the dark.

Many people look at faith in much the same way. Somewhere they got the idea that our faith is like an exercise we have to keep up in order to get the lights of heaven to shine on us. They worry that if we were to grow tired and slow down, the lights of heaven would begin to dim on us. However, if we can somehow keep "*faith-ing*" hard enough, God will still provide what we need from him.

That kind of faith can be a lot of work. Just talk to the woman who has learned to lower her hopes for God's blessings because she knows she doesn't really deserve his care. Or talk to the man who has come to see himself as a second-class believer because of some mistakes he's made over the years. Both of these people mistakenly assume that if they don't exercise their faith hard enough, God will not keep on blessing them. And they grow afraid, knowing they can't.

Fortunately, that's not how the Bible presents faith.

Lord God, I can so easily make my faith all about me. Please turn my struggling eyes toward you. In your name, Amen.

SEEING WHAT WAS THERE ALL ALONG

Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.
—Hebrews 11:1

Faith is not something we have to *do* to cause God to bless us. In Hebrews 11 we find a different perspective. Faith is presented not as an effort but as an “assurance about what we do not see.” Through “eyes of faith” we can see something that was already there, whether we’d noticed it or not.

I used to live near the coast of northern California, where there is a lot of fog. When that happens, things seem to change quickly. San Francisco can suddenly vanish: drivers crossing the Golden Gate Bridge may start off with no visible proof that the other half of the bridge even exists. But people who live in this area have learned not to panic simply because they cannot see the whole bridge. People know the bridge is still there; it’s just hidden. Fog doesn’t change our landmarks;

it changes our *visibility* of those landmarks.

With faith, the situation is similar: we have assurance of God’s trustworthiness that was there all along.

There are days when God’s work can be clearly seen in our lives. But other days may not be like that at all. A fog of doubt or a haze of shame may creep in, and suddenly all the clear spiritual realities we have enjoyed can seem to vanish.

Having faith is often like squinting into fog. But that doesn’t mean the realities and trustworthiness of God are not there.

What can you see?

God, we often can’t see you at work. Please help us see by faith what is not visible to us. Amen.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SQUINTING

In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last. . . . —Romans 1:17

I sometimes wish that God would be more obvious in my life. I get tired of squinting for him: frankly, I'd much rather *notice* him than have to squint and stretch to try to *find* him in the haze of life.

That's why most of us would really prefer to avoid faith if we could. But in Romans the apostle Paul reminds us that our gospel (good news) is based on faith "from first to last." That can sound a bit unsettling for anyone who might hope there's a way around having to rely on faith.

The more I explore the life of faith, the more I discover that squinting plays a central role in it. Squinting requires a choice on my part, instead of waiting until I notice God. Squinting requires focusing my eyes in order to penetrate the impenetrable.

It takes a special kind of courage to drive across a bridge when you can't see the other side. It takes a similar kind of courage to continue loving a difficult spouse or child, or to continue resisting chronic temptation on those days when the effort might not seem worthwhile.

Let's face it: there are days when it can be hard to see why things like that are so important.

That's when it's time to squint.

Lord, sometimes we wish you would be more obvious. That would save us from having to look so hard to find you. Please draw us closer to you, even when we can't see where you are leading us. Amen.

WHY GOD LIKES FAITH

John . . . sent his disciples to ask [Jesus], "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

—Matthew 11:2-3

God seems to enjoy playing hard-to-get. Instead of making his presence obvious to his people, God seems to prefer working behind the scenes in ordinary events, yielding only occasional hints of his glory.

Over the centuries God's hide-and-seek game has made for some challenges for people who believed in him. Think of the Israelites' difficulty in following their invisible God. Or think of the New Testament heroes of faith. In today's verses John the Baptist asks his followers to check with Jesus: Is he really the one God promised to send? Sometimes I think that if God were a lot more obvious, he could expect us to be a lot more "faith-full."

And yet—is that true? One of God's biggest decisions was to allow us to make our own decisions. Granted, this can have

troubling results—look what happened to Adam and Eve! But you can't have a relationship without some freedom of will. If I forced someone into my car, I wouldn't have a companion—I'd have a hostage. And as much as God abhors the disastrous choices his people have made, his deepest desire is to call us friends (see John 15:15).

This is why it takes some squinting to find God. While he sometimes miraculously calms our storms, he more often hints his presence to us—just enough to make us squint and see that he's really there. If we seek, we're told, we will find. Have you seen him lately?

Lord, help us to seek you, for we know we will find you and you will calm our anxious spirits. Amen.

LEARNING TO SQUINT

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.
—Hebrews 11:6

Following God often means squinting to find him. But learning to squint involves being *willing* to squint, and sometimes that can be the hardest part. After all, if God didn't play so hard-to-get, he wouldn't seem, well, so *hard-to-get!*

What we want is a co-dependent God. The term *co-dependent* is used to describe someone who takes responsibility for things that someone else should really do on their own. Sometimes people instinctively seek out others who are willing to help them hide their dysfunctions: to cover their drinking or pay their credit card bills or soothe the hurt feelings in the wake of their temper tantrums. At one level, it makes sense: who needs to grow up when friends will cover your immaturity?

I'd like God to be just co-dependent enough to save me from having to squint for him. After all, it's hard to see my way in the fog. It would be nice just to be able to throw up my hands when the doubts or frustrations start to build.

In freeway fog, drivers who quit squinting will inevitably crash. The same is true of our search for God. Hebrews 11 reminds us that God "rewards those who earnestly seek him." If I am to grow in my experience of God, I need to be willing to keep squinting and straining to look ahead.

Lord, forgive us when we want to follow you on our own terms. Help us to look to you to lead and guide us. Amen.

WANTING TO SQUINT

We live by faith, not by sight.

—2 Corinthians 5:7

If faith requires squinting for God into the fog of life, how exactly does God lead someone to squint?

The answer is simple: God makes us *need* to squint.

More precisely, God sometimes leads us into situations in which our need for faith can become very obvious.

God lays out a carefully designed plan intended to help us sharpen our ability to spot his presence in the dense fog that can come up in life.

Most of the time, these experiences seem like problems. Whether we like it or not, the comfortable, relaxed times in our lives don't usually change us on a very deep level.

Most of the psalms, for instance, were not written in a setting of comfort and ease. Even the

familiar words of Psalm 23 were set against the backdrop of enemies and "the valley of the shadow of death."

Are you willing to let God help you learn to squint?

Before answering that question, make sure you realize what you are committing to.

We generally don't squint for God until we need to. (See Jeremiah 29:13; Matthew 7:7; 1 John 5:14.)

Lord, we're discovering that we need to find you even more than we need to avoid suffering or other difficulties. Please draw us to you. We pray in your name. Amen.

CRISIS FAITH

Surely they intend to topple me. . . . Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him.
—Psalm 62:4-5

Faith can seem vague and theoretical—until a crisis hits.

Then, like the spare tire in your trunk when you have a flat, your faith suddenly becomes very important. In fact, it may be the only way out of the mess you're in.

In the middle of a crisis, all we usually hope for is some way to get the situation straightened out so that we can move on. No one likes to *need* faith.

As with the little spare tire that comes with most cars today (you know, the little “donut” spare that’s designed to go just a few miles), most of us are willing to rely on our faith for a little while, only as long as we need it. But just as you’ll want to get a real tire back on your car as soon as you can, so also most of us want to move past our faith reliance and find a *real*

reason for confidence. At least that’s how it can seem.

No one likes crises, but it’s not hard to see how God can use our crises to reach us in ways that he might not reach us otherwise. Most of us pray differently—more earnestly—in times of crisis. Our fear can prod us to squint for God through the fog of our uncertainty. And the more we squint, the more we begin to see God.

How has God used crises in your life to deepen your awareness of his presence?

Lord God, when crises hit, help us to turn to you. But also help us turn to you every day of our lives. In your name, Amen.

CONNECTING IN A CRISIS

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.
—John 15:5

Crises can be tough. In the fog of a crisis it can be hard to see anything good that God might be doing. Whether your finances are at risk through a job loss, or you have a relationship that's threatening to implode, or you're experiencing some other devastating event, it's heart-breaking to see your world turned upside down. Eventually you wonder whether God might be punishing you for something.

But the fact is, we often seek to connect with God in our crises in ways that we wouldn't ordinarily consider. One rumor of lay-offs or one unexplained result on a medical test can change everything. Suddenly life isn't about you anymore, it's about God. A major crisis can persuade us to negotiate anything with God.

Is that really so bad? Obviously, suffering is painful. But Jesus' point in John 15 is that the only way we can thrive in life is by being naturally connected to him, like branches to a vine. That means our lives will be far richer connected to him in a crisis than if we are drifting off on our own.

The point is not that crises aren't bad; it's that being connected to Jesus Christ is good. Sometimes God uses the blinding fog of a crisis to help us find him.

Has he ever done that with you?

Lord, you know what we really need in order to thrive. Please connect us deeply to you, no matter what that may take. In your name, Amen.

GOOD THINGS DURING BAD TIMES

All kinds of trials . . . have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith . . . may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

—1 Peter 1:6-7

Why might God want to use a crisis in our lives? We naturally consider crises to be bad, but God often does some very good things through these bad experiences. There are things that God teach in a crisis that are much harder for us to learn at other times.

For instance, in a crisis we begin to discover just how little control we really have over our lives. Humbled, we begin to pray more sincerely and worship more deeply.

We may also begin to realize what really matters most to us. Our crisis experiences usually leave us more appreciative of people and less obsessed with possessions.

Crises have a way of making us very unhappy—which isn't all bad, either. As our happiness is stripped away, God can help

us discover a kind of peace that can be richer than we would ever have imagined our happiness could be.

And through it all we get some good practice at sniffing out God's presence in the middle of a situation that often just stinks. When we resist this kind of faith, we miss the point entirely. When we cooperate with God, we can begin to discover a richness that lasts long after the crisis has passed.

What kinds of blessings has God brought to you during a crisis in your life?

Lord, please use our sufferings to lead us closer to you. Amen.

DIRECTIONAL FAITH

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

—James 1:5

God has a way of changing us deeply through various crisis points in our lives.

But what happens when God strings together a long series of crisis points? Eventually the trail of change-points will lead somewhere, like stepping-stones crossing a river. As we realize this, our collection of snapshot crises starts to become a movie with a story line.

But how does one tell where the story is supposed to be going? That's not easy. God assures us that he has plans for our lives, but it can be hard to tell where those plans might lead. Sometimes it would be nice to have a burning-bush episode like Moses had—something concrete you could see through the fog of life's busyness (see Exodus 3).

Why is it so difficult to determine God's direction for our lives? Sometimes it's simply because we forget to ask. It's surprisingly easy to charge into the events of a day without bothering to ask God what he wants from us that day. Sometimes that can prompt God to allow a minor crisis to pop up as a wake-up call to pull our attention back to him.

When was the last time you asked God to show you his plans for your day?

How about asking him right now?

God, you have promised that your plan for our lives is good, but sometimes that's hard to believe. Help us surrender our plans for your review. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ASKING FOR GUIDANCE

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives. . . .”
—James 4:3

It shouldn't be difficult to ask for God's guidance, should it? The Bible tells us we simply have to ask. And yet it's amazing how often we end up feeling lost in the fog as we search for God's direction.

James explains that not every prayer gets the same response from God. Sometimes we might ask and not receive because we ask with wrong motives. After all, how can we expect God to grant our requests if our motives are sinful?

For example, it would be foolish to ask for God's help in robbing a bank. But if our motives are wrong, they're usually a lot more subtle than that.

James's warning about asking "with wrong motives" raises an important question. When we pray, we need to ask, "Just *why* am I making these requests?"

Speaking personally, I know that some of my requests come from a desire to see God's work grow in my life. But often I may ask for those same things because I want to look good or I want to avoid some of the challenging faith-building experiences he can put before me.

All too often our requests are motivated by things like pride or revenge. For example, maybe you want your sister to see that you can be successful, or maybe you want to show your ex-spouse that you can still have a life.

Why are you asking what you are asking of God?

Lord, help us to ask for the things you long to give to us. We pray this in your name. Amen.

FINDING GOD'S DIRECTION

When you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

—James 1:6

As a child I often played a game with friends in which one player would be trying to find someone or something. The rest of us would try to guide the “seeker” by saying how “warm” or “cold” they were getting. The closer they got to the target, the “warmer” they would be; but when they started to stray in the wrong direction, we’d warn them that they were getting “colder.”

Sometimes we try to play that game with God. We pray for guidance, but what we really want is God’s support for something we already have in mind. When it seems God is helping us toward our desired outcome, we cheer him on: “*Warmer . . . warmer!*” But when it seems he is veering away from the goal we want, we warn, “*Colder . . . COLDER!*”

When it comes to praying for guidance, prayers like that are

just plain backwards. We’re not really asking God to guide us; we’re asking God to let *us* guide *him*. Instead of looking to serve God, we’re really trying to get him to serve us.

James warns against this role reversal. When we ask for God’s guidance, we must have his goals in mind, not ours. And we must ask and believe that God will answer. We must steer straight to avoid being tossed about by the wind.

When you ask God to guide you, are you looking in his direction?

God, what we need is for *you* to lead *us*. Please help us to get that straight. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

ASKING BETTER

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

—Romans 8:28

God says the motives behind our prayers are important. So, what does it take to ask with better motives?

Traditionally, many Christians have found that a good “motive check” is to see if we can pray openly in any of the possible directions in which God might lead.

For example, if you are a student, you might pray that God will help you get a good grade on a project, but you might pray also that he helps you grow as a student if your score is low.

Or, if you are married and your relationship is not going well, you might pray that your marriage will revive, but you might also ask for the grace to be Christlike to your spouse if the struggles continue.

I’ve generally found that when my motives are selfish, I often

have a lot of trouble even mentioning the other options to God. I’d rather make one simple demand: God, I *need* this!

In situations like that, I’m probably showing that I need help with my heart even more than with my circumstances.

Generally what I need is for God to reassure me of his goodness, reminding me that he will give me what I would ask for if I knew what he knew.

I can’t ask for more than that, right?

Lord, it’s a lot easier to ask for your help than to ask for your will. Please open my mind to pray for your best plans for me. In your name, Amen.

SUSTAINING FAITH

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water. . . .

—Psalm 1:3

God often grows our faith amid crises. Through the crises of life he can help us see his direction through the fog. As we grow in directional faith, we begin to discover how abundantly God wants to bless us. Eventually we begin to suspect that we often ask not too much of God, but too little.

Psalm 1 demonstrates this idea using the image of a tree flourishing by streams of water.

Where I grew up, rain was a common occurrence. While it wouldn't rain every day, we generally had enough water around to keep things green. When I moved to northern California, I learned there was usually no rain for about nine months of the year. Once the winter rains stopped, any vacant lots quickly turned brown and stayed that way for months.

Yet there were many places in the community that were vibrant and green, with tall shade trees and lush lawns. The secret: those places had an underground water supply. Many trees, for example, grew naturally along rivers where they could siphon water directly from a stream. And in more recent years, underground sprinkling systems made landscaping possible. (It's the only way I had a green yard.)

Psalm 1 assures us God wants to sustain us in a way like that, if we will only let him. We can call this sustaining faith, and it's here that we really begin to see God's hand in our lives.

God, guide us to the nourishment we need from you. Satisfy us with what you know we need. In Jesus' name, Amen.

IN SEARCH OF COMFORT

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers.
—Psalm 1:1

According to the Bible, God wants to keep us richly sustained even in the harshest conditions, like trees planted by streams of water.

So what does it take to be sustained by God like those trees? To begin with, Psalm 1 explains that there are plenty of things that *won't* sustain us. The psalmist refers to these as the ways of the wicked, the sinners, and the mockers.

Sometimes we are tempted to turn to sinful alternatives to sustain us. Giving in to our closet temptations or addictions is obviously wrong. But other times our alternative sources aren't necessarily wrong, they're just insufficient. It may be good to pour yourself into your career or your education or even the health of your family, but none of those things are sufficient to sustain you during times of

drought. You'll still find yourself parched.

Try this test: think back to a recent hard day in your life and how you responded to the stress. Could an atheist have used the same coping strategies as you did? If so, it probably wasn't your faith connection with God that sustained you through that day. On the other hand, if the comforts you turned to all eventually traced back to the God whom you knew had given them to you, then your faith relationship with God was probably a big part of how you dealt with that difficult day.

Heavenly Father, during times of hardship, sustain us with your living waters. Help us to trust fully in you. Amen.

WHAT DOES SUSTAIN US

Blessed is the one . . . whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. —Psalm 1:1-2

Psalm 1 doesn't simply warn us of the things that will leave us dry; it points us toward the hidden waters for which we thirst. It points toward finding our delight "in the law of the LORD."

As a child, I always found this verse puzzling. From my Christian training I knew of the many strange law requirements found in the Old Testament books like Leviticus. I couldn't imagine anything more frustrating than trying to meditate on all those regulations, much less finding any decent source of life from them.

What I missed was this: in the Bible, living by "the law of the LORD" means living God's way, or in line with God's will. Delighting in God's law means embracing God's way as good, and drawing from it everything we need in order to thrive.

In John 4 Jesus surprised a woman by offering her a permanent supply of living water. You and I need that water just as badly as she did. Psalm 1 challenges me to be clear on just where I'm looking to provide what I'll need.

When the drought of a recession threatens to dry up my world, or when the drain of serving others begins to wither me—where will I turn?

There's only one good way to answer that question, and it's God.

Lord, we know where we should turn when we face droughts in our lives. Give us a desire for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE NEED FOR FOG

That person is like a tree . . . whose leaf does not wither. . . .

—Psalm 1:3

In theory, Psalm 1 shouldn't have to be in the Bible. The unsatisfying things it warns against are all so . . . unsatisfying! Who would want to rely on something unreliable? And God's promises are so rich and deep and lasting, like underground rivers. Choosing to rely on God should be a no-brainer for people like us—right?

And yet it's not. Psalm 1 is badly needed. I know that when the fog of busyness or stress creeps in, I can suddenly find myself surprised and confused about where I need to turn to get what I need. That leaves me open to distractions and temptations.

But why the fog? If life weren't so foggy, God wouldn't be so hard to find, right?

Interestingly, there are trees that *require* fog in order to sur-

vive. The coastal redwoods in California thrive in environments with very little rain but regular times of dense fog. When fog hits, water drips off the tree needles, which point down to the ground. If the fog stopped coming, those majestic trees would have a hard time. The cold mist of the coastal fog is necessary for them to thrive.

In our lives, we need to stay constantly connected to God in order to thrive. Rooted in the Lord, we will flourish. Challenges and confusion may come, and we need to stay in touch with God, but we can trust that he will continue to provide for and guide us also.

Lord, you know what kind of weather we need to thrive. Schedule the forecast we need. We pray this in your name. Amen.

SAVING FAITH

A Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus . . . came to Jesus at night. . . .
—John 3:1-2

God has a way of using the fog-giness of daily life to lead us to surrender more fully to him. He often connects with us through our need for faith when a crisis hits, and he leads us through our need for direction. Along the way we simply need to be sustained, which requires yet another step of faith toward him. Each step of faith involves a kind of mini-surrender, leading us closer to the God we can sometimes barely see through our fog.

At some point along this path of surrender our mini-surrenders add up to one big mega-surrender. We reach a tipping point where we not only surrender part of our life; we *totally* surrender our life to God's direction.

We realize that, fog or not, there are things in life that we just can't fix or control.

We realize we need to be saved.

One night a Pharisee came to see Jesus. Though he may not have realized it at the time, he was being drawn toward his tipping point. Nicodemus met with Jesus secretly because he was uneasy about connecting with Jesus in a more public way. But Jesus still listened and reached out to him, saying he needed to be saved—to be born again.

Nicodemus squinted at Jesus through the shadows of that nighttime encounter. He just couldn't see the truth at that time. But eventually he would. (See John 7:50-51; 19:38-39.)

Lord, sometimes we are blind to your will in our lives. Open our eyes to what we might otherwise never choose to see. Amen.

“I’M GOOD!”

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

—Acts 16:30

“I’m good.” We use this expression a lot these days.

I trip over a curb. Someone asks if I need help. “No, thanks,” I reply, limping away; “I’m good.” I may be a little bruised, but I’m OK enough to walk and keep going.

The jailer in today’s story was in a real dilemma. An earthquake had set his prisoners free, and he knew that it would be his life or theirs. (In those days, jailers were usually killed if their prisoners escaped.) This was certainly not an “I’m good” moment. So he asked Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?”

Was this a theology question—now? In this crisis, was the jailer calling a “time-out” to talk about faith? Though he was probably more concerned about avoiding a death sentence, the jailer heard from Paul and Silas about

the Lord Jesus—and he believed.

Something happens when you discover that you can’t make your life “good.” Whether in a jailer’s crisis or in slow motion over time, it eventually brings a total surrender to the One who really can make things good.

There will come a day when every stumble I’ve ever made will be available for public display. I wonder how long that list will be. But just when everyone looks, Someone else will hold up nail-scarred hands on my behalf—and he’ll say, “It’s OK; he’s good.”

Lord, we’re not good. But you are. Your nail-scarred hands and death on the cross finished the work needed for our salvation. Thank you! Amen.

NOT QUITE SAVED?

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved. . . .”

—Acts 16:31

The fact that you’re reading these devotions suggests that you probably have some idea of what it means to be *saved*.

Saved is a familiar word, and yet it can mean different things to people in different places along the journey of faith.

For some, it can mean going back to church.

For others, it may mean agreeing with certain ideas in Christianity.

For yet others, being saved may mean being willing to feel guilty over sins they used to take pride in.

As God leads us, each faith-growing experience inevitably involves some kind of minor surrender—as when you face a crisis and seek direction, looking to God to sustain you along the way.

If you let God lead you along a series of surrenders, you’re eventually going reach a “tipping point” where something inside you realizes that you simply need to hand *everything* over to the God who’s been guiding you through the fog.

You can tell this has happened when you start worrying less about getting God’s help for what *you* want and instead start to wonder what *he* really wants for you. Instead of wanting God to find your way, you’re seeking his way.

Have you been saved like that?

Lord, it’s easy for us to follow you without surrendering to you. Please claim us for yourself. We ask this in your name. Amen.

FORMS OF SURRENDER

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. —Ephesians 2:4-5

A person's surrender into saving faith may happen in a number of ways.

For some, it can hit like a tsunami as they hear an altar call and are swept down the aisle into a whole new life. Resistance suddenly cracks, or a thick layer of numbness begins to part, and for the first time they can see far enough into the fog to discover what they really need.

For others, the sense of surrender may seep in slowly through the fabric of a lifetime of churchgoing until the stuff that's collected deep inside begins to spill all over the stuff worn on the outside. After years of doing the right things, a person is suddenly surprised to find that going through the motions has led to a sudden rush of emotions.

I used to think God was pretty orderly in his way of growing

us. He would save people and then grow them and then eventually start to use them.

I can now see that it's not always that simple. I know people who have believed in God for years, serving him faithfully while still refusing to pray the sinner's prayer until a much later point in their story.

Where in your story did (or will) this happen to you?

Lord, thank you for drawing us to the death that brings us life. Bring us to the point of total surrender to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FINDING THE FAMILIAR IN THE FOG

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together . . . but encouraging one another. . . .
—Hebrews 10:24-25

Fog can make it hard to identify the landmarks around us. But there is something that can really help: familiarity.

When I lived in Sacramento and encountered fog on the freeway near my house, I rarely had trouble finding the exit where I got off to go home. That's because the area was familiar to me. But if I were to find myself shrouded in the same kind of fog in another town, I might have had a lot of trouble getting where I needed to go.

Something similar happens in the spiritual fog that can surround our lives. When clouds of doubt or shame or weariness threaten to blind us to God's love for us, it can be easier to find our way back to God's peace and guidance if it's not the first time we've tried to find him.

That's why spiritual disciplines can be so important for our faith. Habits such as prayer, Bible reading, serving, meeting together for worship, and more can help us become familiar with the spiritual territory through which we'll someday need to travel in the fog.

Struggling for God through the fog of life can seem like a lot of work. But then—so does feeling lost.

God is out there in your fog. Keep squinting.

Lord, help us as we seek you. May we develop healthy spiritual habits so that we become familiar with you. Amen.

HABITS OF FAITH

When Daniel learned that the decree had been published . . . he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

—Daniel 6:10

Spiritual disciplines can be an important part of our finding God through the fog of our lives. That's what helped sustain Daniel in his faith.

A spiritual discipline is a habit that people develop to deepen their relationship with God. Personal devotions may combine one or more disciplines into a daily routine: prayer, Bible reading, and perhaps meditation or journaling. Other spiritual disciplines may include joining together for worship or studying the Bible in a small group. Fasting can help us rediscover what really feeds us, and tithing can help us recall who really pays our bills.

Spiritual disciplines help us to practice finding God during times when the fog has cleared. It's hard to find God in a moment of panic, but it's much easier if we've already devel-

oped a daily pattern of centering ourselves in him. It's easier to release our worries to God at the end of a tough day if we've learned to release every other day to him in an evening prayer. And it's a lot less difficult to remain steadfast to God's call when you've been serving him in a deliberate way for months or years.

When you encounter a sudden fog bank in life, it can be almost impossible to figure out how to find God in the midst of it all. Spiritual disciplines help to reorient us so we can find God's strength and peace, even in the thickest fog.

God, help us to practice finding you. May our day begin and end with you. Amen.

LIVING LARGE

He began to teach them. . . . "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
—Matthew 5:2-3

Sometimes we “squint” without even knowing it. Often, in fact.

Probably even daily, we find ourselves looking for ways to deal with the frustrations of life. We rummage around, mentally looking for something to help a hard day feel better. Many of our most common temptations creep in at such times. Whether we realize it or not, we’re shopping for comforts.

If you want an interesting spiritual exercise, read the book of Ecclesiastes and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) together. They fit like a matched set. While Ecclesiastes walks us through the false comforts we might naturally turn to, the Sermon on the Mount points us toward the sources through which God intends to nourish us into real life.

Ecclesiastes helps me notice the false comforts I might be fooled into trusting—money, success, sensual pleasures. The Sermon on the Mount helps me find what really satisfies. Together they lead me away from my illusions into realities I can trust. Pruned by the challenge of Ecclesiastes, I can more easily let go of the worries, lusts, and grudges that can seem so urgent. And I can cling to the forgiveness and healing through which God wants to make me whole.

If it wasn’t for Ecclesiastes, we might settle for so little. If it wasn’t for the Sermon on the Mount, we might miss so much.

Lord, we could settle for so little. Teach us to want what only you can provide. Amen.

SHARING OUR FAITH

One generation commends your works to another. . . . They tell of the power of your awesome works—and I will proclaim your great deeds.
—Psalm 145:4-6

As we grow in faith, it's only natural to want to share it with others. Most of us have at least several people in our lives with whom we would love to share God's grace.

That's a normal response when we experience something that makes our lives better. Think of the last time you discovered a delightful new restaurant or a new TV show or an Internet video that made you laugh. It's a joy to share those discoveries with others.

Unfortunately, sharing the good news of Jesus may not be so easy. Even though it's good news about being saved from sin and death, people resist the idea that they need a Savior, and some find it offensive to be invited to talk about faith. And with so many religions in the world, many people are

skeptical about having faith in anything.

Ultimately we can't force someone to listen to our faith stories. When people listen, it's because God has been at work in their hearts, moving them to a place in their life where they are ready to start doing some squinting of their own.

That's why it's so important to be praying about people with whom we'd like to share our faith. In prayer, we can ask God to work in people's lives and to help us be open to his prompting as to when and how to share the good news that brings new life.

Lord, as you lead us, draw us into the saving work you are doing in the lives of people all around us. In your name, Amen.

TWO WAYS TO SHARE OUR FAITH

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. —1 Peter 3:15

It's normal for most Christians to want to share their faith. And I've learned that there are two ways to do that: *prescriptively* and *descriptively*.

Prescriptive sharing of faith involves offering advice about what people should do to deal with difficulties they may be having. This is similar to what a doctor does when writing a prescription for medication to help with a problem. Prescriptive sharing usually sounds something like "Here's what you should do about your situation." It often results in a lot of defensiveness because, frankly, most people don't want to be told what to do.

Descriptive sharing of faith can often be more helpful. It involves telling someone what worked for *you*. Instead of saying, "Here's what you should

do," you're simply saying, "Here's what helped me."

Most people find it less threatening to hear you describe your own faith experience. Instead of sounding like a salesperson, you're more like a friend with a story. No one can argue with your experience about how God is working in your life.

Do you know anyone who might want to hear about how God has worked in your life? Ask God to help you sense an opportunity to do so. Can you share your story? Ask God to help you say the right words at the right time.

Lord, show us people who need to hear what you are doing in our lives, and help us to share honestly and with your love. We ask this for your sake. Amen.

SECOND-HAND FAITH

[God's mercies] are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

—Lamentations 3:23

Many people who are not yet Christians may have a hard time imagining themselves accepting Christ.

Maybe they have had some bad experiences with Christians in the past and can't imagine themselves being one of "them."

Perhaps they carry hurts or shame and they can't imagine letting go of what happened a long time ago.

In situations like that, it can be helpful to provide someone with chances to "borrow" your faith for a while to try it on.

For instance, offering to pray for someone can be a great way to let people embrace your faith without strings attached.

You could say something like, "When I'm feeling stressed, I find that prayer (just talking to God) really helps. Would you

like me to pray for you?" Most people are fairly open to being prayed for by someone else, even if they haven't prayed much or aren't sure what they believe about God or prayer.

Each situation of prayer and conversation about God registers in a person's mind as a little faith experience. Every time someone hears a good rumor of things God has done, or every time God's Word influences their own life story, they begin to imagine what God might do in their life. And that's a step in the right direction.

Lord, make our faith contagious. And use us where you will to bring faith to others, for your sake. Amen.

WATCHING FAITH GROW

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.
—1 Corinthians 3:6

If you've ever walked with someone on their journey to faith, you know how long it can take. While some people have dramatic conversions as sudden as turning on a light bulb, most do not. For most people it is a gradual process.

Coming to faith often involves progress toward a tipping point, like on a seesaw. Have you ever walked up on a seesaw? Picture one end of the seesaw representing a position apart from Christ, and the other end representing firm belief in Christ. As you walk up from the end apart from Christ, you gradually reach a tipping point where you are leaning toward firm belief.

In this scenario, I imagine a spiritually interested person needing, say, ten ratcheting "clicks" to get from the one position to the other. Instead of pressuring someone to accept Christ, I've

found it helpful to listen for the "clicks."

I hear a "click" when someone makes a comment about their spiritual experience or allows me to pray for them. I hear another when someone tells me they'll come to worship on Sunday, even if it turns out that they "couldn't make it." Each of these minor breakthroughs represents another "click."

Most "clicks" are not dramatic, but as they happen, the person approaches a point where their seesaw begins to tip the other way. Then a quietly advancing process brings them from unbelief to faith. Whose next "click" are you praying for?

Lord, help us notice the ways you are working in the people around us. And use us to help bring others to faith. Amen.

SQUINTING INTO THE STORM

"Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

—Mark 4:40

Imagine Jesus' disciples on the open water, rowing feverishly to keep their boat afloat—no small task when everything is pitching like a rodeo bull. Quite a night!

Mark indicates that this trip was Jesus' idea in the first place. He'd suggested it; then he had curled up and gone to sleep. Why would Jesus lead his disciples into a crisis like that?

This was no accident. While the disciples were following Jesus in his teaching ministry, Jesus was a step ahead, preparing them for continuing his work later. They could not have imagined Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension (Mark 15-16; Acts 1), or the coming of his Holy Spirit, who would lead them to bring the gospel across the Roman Empire (Acts 2-28). No, at this point they just wanted to survive the storm and see

their families again. Little did they know

Jesus' followers had a lot to learn: the kinds of things they could discover only in storms. It's one thing to tell a group of fishermen about Christ's power; it's another to *show* them. What seemed at first to be just a really bad night was actually an opportunity to experience something about Christ that no one could have explained with mere words.

Jesus led them into a storm so that they could squint and see him like never before.

What has the Lord shown you about himself in stormy times?

Lord, show us what you want us to see, even if we too have to go into a storm. Draw us closer to you today. Amen.

this month

Great Joy and Light

Morris Greidanus

As we enter the season of Advent and Christmas this year, let's ponder the joy and light we receive in Christ.

When we're filled with joy, it's virtually impossible not to share it with others. We overflow with smiles and happiness and laughter, prompting us to celebrate and to bless others so that they may share our joy and spread its infectious delight to even more people.

When we have a light that cannot be put out, it gives us confidence and strength to penetrate blinding darkness, see the way we are going, bring comfort and hope to others, and invite them to come along.

God's gift of Jesus, the one and only Savior, fills us with great joy and light as we aim to celebrate his coming, look ahead to his coming again, and live by the law of love each day in this world that he came to save. May God be praised in all we say and do, for Jesus' sake!

Since 1964, Morris Greidanus has served churches in Alberta, Ontario, and Michigan. He was campus pastor at the University of Toronto from 1968 to 1974. After retiring in 2002, he served on various interim tasks in churches and educational institutions. Morris and his wife, Alice, enjoy their bi-national family of three children and five grandchildren.

THE BABY LEAPED FOR JOY

“As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”
—Luke 1:44

In our Western culture it seems that pregnancies are celebrated publicly and proudly. Young fathers-to-be declare, “We are pregnant!” Mothers-to-be proudly show their “baby bump”—not just to family and friends, but even at work and to strangers on the elevator.

And everyone seems excited. Why? Because a new life has begun; a baby is on the way!

Tomorrow we begin the season of Advent, getting ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. This is such a momentous event that, as Luke tells us, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb jumped for joy. That baby was John, who later became John the Baptist and prepared the way for Jesus’ ministry when they became adults.

Even as their mothers were pregnant with Jesus and John, the promise of new life was

being fulfilled after many centuries. The impact of this new life brought great joy to many—and we share that joy still today. It offers new life and hope to a world of oppression, depression, and recession.

A carol that we may sing this season speaks of “tidings of comfort and joy.” Baby John was way ahead of us; he jumped for joy even before being born, for the Savior’s birth is a word of joy and comfort for people everywhere.

Let’s explore that joy together this month!

Father in heaven, thank you for keeping your promises and bringing the joy of new life in Christ. Wake us up, wherever we need it, so that we may believe and rejoice. Amen.

GOD'S PATIENCE

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise. . . . He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish. . . .
—2 Peter 3:9

The season of Advent begins today. This is more than a time to turn on Christmas lights, check our gift list twice, and remember the birth of Jesus. In this season the church has traditionally looked beyond the first coming of Jesus to his second coming as well. The Bible offers many sobering reminders of a coming judgment on sin and injustice.

When is Christ going to return? There have been many Christmases since the birth of Jesus. And there have been many Advent seasons that speak of his return. But why doesn't Christ return now? Does God not see the mess the world is in? Why does he not end it all and make a new start with people who listen to him?

Peter has two answers. First, God's timing is beyond us. And, second, God is patient.

Which would you rather have: a God that you and I can figure out and who is in a hurry to punish? Or a God beyond our understanding, but patient—patient enough to wait for me, and you, and for that person you pray for each day, to repent and receive his salvation?

I like the way Peter describes God. He says that time is different for God, indicating that the Lord has all kinds of time to make sure no one misses their time to turn around and be saved.

"Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are my God and Savior, and my hope is in you all day long" (Psalm 25:4-5). Amen.

WAITING FOR HIS SON

Wait for his Son from heaven . . . Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.
—1 Thessalonians 1:10

The Greek believers who first read this letter may have been more eager for God's judgment than many of us are. They lived under severe persecution and wanted God to come to deal with it. His "coming wrath" was good news for them, as it still is for persecuted believers in many parts of this world.

Recently we saw Greek citizens riot because they resisted measures to restore their economy to health. In ancient Greece, unsafe conditions and persecution were facts of daily life for the believers in Thessalonica. However, they lived "in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." They were able to look ahead in hope and to move forward because they trusted Jesus to rescue them.

God's Son is coming to give us much more than a "Merry

Christmas!"—whatever we may mean by that. He comes to set wrong things right, to comfort those who mourn, and to give hope to the weak who are trampled by the strong.

How do you picture the "wrath" from which Jesus rescues us? For starters, I think Jesus rescues us from the notion that God is constantly angry with us. We can live with the joy of knowing that God, like any loving parent, has good plans for us—even though we may not see those good plans each day or right away.

Holy Spirit, let me be known by work produced by faith, by labor prompted by love, and by endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

CALLED IN

Live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.
—1 Thessalonians 2:12

When I was a child, I spent a summer vacation at my uncle's farm near a lake in the Netherlands. Sailboats cruising the lakes and canals would tie up near the sheep pen. Campers often slept in the barn. There was so much going on that I missed the call to supper one day. When I came in late, my uncle grumbled that "if a calf missed the feed pail, it went hungry." But my aunt fed me anyway, and my cousins made sure I did not miss the call to supper again.

Did you notice that the apostle Paul sees his job as making sure that we do not miss God's call?

God calls us "into his kingdom and glory." That means full, new life in God's presence forever: a new earth and heaven to enjoy with all of God's people!

Paul worked "night and day" to urge believers to live a life fit for the King. And here he invites believers to consider who is calling them, and to what they are being called.

Today, the church still urges us to be ready for what is coming and to prepare for where we are going. In the Christmas season we make all kinds of preparations, but preparing for Jesus' second coming involves much more than house cleaning and festive decorating.

What shape does a life "worthy of God" take for you and me?

Lord, help us listen to your Word. You promise peace to all your people, your faithful servants. May we not turn away but listen to your call. Amen.

OUR GLORY AND JOY

Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

—1 Thessalonians 2:20

Brutus, our son's aging dog, was lost in the inner-city neighborhood where our son's family lives. We searched in the dark—but it's hard to try to find a black dog at night. At morning light, we scoured the nearby yards again. Then we drove toward the animal shelter to see if Brutus had been found. Five blocks from home John saw Brutus in a vacant lot, wearily resting in a muddy puddle. He picked Brutus up to put him in the car. "Watch out for the seats with that mud," I said. "Who cares about mud on the seats?!" John said as he happily gathered his dog in. Who cares, indeed! We were too happy to have found him.

Paul expects to be happy when the Lord returns, because the people he has worked with and has prayed for will be there: they are his glory and joy.

Some people do not like Paul; they find him too theological and blame him for some biblical teachings they do not care for. But they overlook Paul's tender concern for the eternal well-being of people who have a hard time finding Jesus. Paul sounds just like the good shepherd here. And he acts like the angels who rejoice when a sinner comes to repentance. (See Luke 15.)

We rejoiced that we found Brutus. Paul joins with heaven in rejoicing over lost sinners who are found—and that gives me an encouraging image of the Lord's return.

Lord Jesus, I marvel at your concern for each of us. Thank you for missionaries and neighbors who work and pray so that no one may miss the joy of salvation. Amen.

STRONG HEARTS

May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy . . . when our Lord Jesus comes. —1 Thessalonians 3:13

What does it mean when you hear that someone's "heart is in the right place"? Usually it means you can count on that person to do what's right, in line with living God's way.

When Paul writes about our hearts, he's talking about the core of our being, our real character, our true self. And he longs for believers to have a heart that is "blameless and holy" before God. That is a tall order!

How do we get a heart like that?

Not with delicate surgery in a hospital. We need hearts changed by the Spirit of God. We need moral, ethical change. We need thoughts that think about God first, and others second. We need help to do what we should do, but instead we often skip over and forget.

Paul's letter offers a way to get that help. We can read the

Bible, learn what God expects, and look for his Spirit to guide us. A person praying for us, as Paul did, can also help. A caring visit by someone like Timothy—to remind us of grace and forgiveness—would be encouraging also.

I find it most encouraging that we can ask God each day to "strengthen [our] hearts." God is not a cruel teacher who throws a mysterious final exam at us. He is our Father, who loves us and wants us to have full life, now and forever.

"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. . . . Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me" (Psalm 51:10-12). Amen.

GOD-TAUGHT

You yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.

—1 Thessalonians 4:9

How do you go on living when you think the end of the world is near? Though only God knows the day and the hour (Mark 13:32), many false teachers have claimed to know too.

They lead some people to go into a panic-mode, sell all their goods, and gather to await “the final day.” Others go into a survival mode, stocking food and building shelters, hoping to outlast a disaster.

Paul advises that we live as normally as possible while waiting for Jesus to return. He says, “Mind your own business. Work with your hands. Live quietly. Be independent.”

Paul is telling Christians to keep busy at being a loving community that works. No one should get too nosy. No one should take advantage of the generosity of others. In these ways

everyone will honor God’s teaching to love one another.

Further, Paul is reminding believers they are all God-taught. God writes the basic stuff of living on our hearts (see Romans 2:14-15). This means that in many cases we know very well what we should do and not do. Should we goof off and lip off, or work lovingly and quietly?

It is a delicate balancing act to live in community. If we were not God-taught, we could never manage it.

Lord Jesus, you saw how your own disciples struggled to get along at times. But they learned from you. Please forgive us, and teach us too, through your Spirit. Amen.

HOPEFUL GRIEVING

Do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.

—1 Thessalonians 4:13

Can you identify with the sorrow outlined in this verse?

The believers in Thessalonica were eager for the return of the Lord, and Paul wanted them to understand that if any fellow believers had already died, that didn't mean they would miss out on the blessing of eternal life with Christ.

Paul wrote this to assure believers that they did not have to grieve without hope, as other people do.

All who believe in Christ can trust that others who have "fallen asleep in him" are now with Christ and that God will bring them with Christ when he comes again.

After describing amazing things that will happen as Jesus comes back to earth, Paul concludes, "And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encour-

age one another with these words."

There is hope in every grief. There is hope for the suffering church in Thessalonica, and there is hope for us in our different sorrows.

Jesus came to earth to show us that God is with us and will always be with us. Death cannot wiggle in between Jesus and us; death can never separate us from God! (See Romans 8:31-39; 1 Corinthians 15.)

Father God, thank you for the comfort of Romans 8, that "neither death nor life . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen.

WHERE RIGHTEOUSNESS DWELLS

In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

—2 Peter 3:13

If you read the obituaries in your local news, you will notice that they often contain down-to-earth notions of the future. Many mention singing and reunions in heaven, others mention fishing or hunting, and one that I read recently imagined a departed golfer reserving a tee-time for his friends. But have you ever seen an obituary that rejoices in finally being in a place where everything lines up with God's righteousness, the mysterious way things are really supposed to be?

It seems we imagine future blessing as only an extension of what we enjoy best now. Why not think of the future as an end to all that is wrong in the world around us, and beyond our imagining?

Next time you are frustrated by unfairness, by a co-worker who pushes you around, by a

car that will not start on a cold morning, and especially by sin, pain, illness, and wrong, think of Peter's words. There is a place in our future with God, "a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells."

Peter sums up rich, comforting promises that stretch from the words of Genesis to Revelation. Sorrow and suffering will end, tears will be wiped away, people and their situations will be aligned with true righteousness and justice forever.

That day, when things will indeed be all right, is a day to long for eagerly.

Father in heaven, you are a just and loving God. Thank you that we can trust you to deal with the unfair stuff, and that one day all will be right. Amen.

CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT

You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. —1 Thessalonians 5:5

Once the busyness of Christmas is over, many people take time to reflect on the old year and look ahead to forecasts about the new year. The time is ripe for someone to predict the end and to warn us sternly. Who will it be this year?

Not Paul! He restates what Jesus told his disciples. No one knows the day or the hour of the Lord's return (Mark 13:32).

Paul joyfully assumes that those who read this letter are "children of the light." We are going to walk in the light; we are not going to walk in the dark deeds of evil.

Who would be foolish enough to drive a car at night without turning on the lights?

Who would stumble around in a dark basement if they could use a flashlight to see by?

Our toolkit for living as children of the light is faith, love, and hope. With those tools we take on what each year brings, and we figure out what can stand the light of God's day and what belongs to the darkness.

And, please, let us not get anxious. Read today's verses again, and take heart.

What do you hear? Does this make you anxious, or do you feel some joy?

Lord Jesus, I thank you that I do not have to fear your return, and that I may already walk in your light. Even hard days are brighter with you. I praise your name. Amen.

REJOICE ALWAYS

Rejoice always . . . for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

—1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

“What does God want *from* me, and what does he want *for* me?” These two big questions nag us throughout life. We try to decide on a career, a school, a partner—or even smaller things, like what book to read, film to see, or game to play. And we may wonder, “What does God want?”

Well, one thing is clear: he wants us to rejoice—always!

The adverb “always” trips us up. How is it possible to rejoice always? How can we give thanks when we are sick or in a recession, or when we get a poor grade or lose a friend?

It must be possible, or God would not “will” it for us.

Moreover, Paul makes it plain enough, even adding that we are to “give thanks in all circumstances.” A preacher may point out to us in a sermon sometime

that “rejoice” and “give thanks” are related in the Greek language in which Paul was writing. Both words have *grace* as their root.

I wonder if it helps to ponder the last words of verse 18: “in Christ Jesus.”

I may have lost my job or wrecked my car, but God wills me to rejoice anyway “in Christ Jesus.” This will take some pondering, but there is a way to joy there. (*Hint: Giving thanks in all circumstances is not the same as giving thanks for all circumstances.*)

Lord, help us to see the possibility of joy “always” in connection with having peace in Christ, for we know you are always with us and our souls are secure in your hand. Amen.

BLOCKED HEALING

“Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

—Isaiah 6:10

In the Old Testament we see that the prophet Isaiah speaks of God’s coming judgment. God tires of his people’s disobedience and sends Isaiah with the harsh message: “You have a choice: Go on not seeing and hearing, or turn from your wicked ways and be healed.”

Israel’s blindness blocked their healing and led to their exile to a distant land. However, there was a glimmer of hope: “the holy seed will be the stump in the land.” If you cut down a tree and leave the stump, new growth can sprout from it. God does not give up on his people.

Jesus quotes Isaiah’s mysterious words as he explains why he teaches in parables (Matthew 13:15). But such disappointing words are not the end of God’s mercy. Jesus sees new growth on the stump and says to his disciples, “Blessed are your eyes

because they see, and your ears because they hear” (13:16).

Paul also refers to Isaiah’s words when he meets resistance from Jewish leaders in Rome and they reject the good news of salvation through Jesus (Acts 28:23-27). Paul then concludes, “God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” (Acts 28:28).

It may seem, at first, that God blocks the healing. But as we follow these words through Scripture, we see that God longs for his people to “turn and be healed.”

Open our eyes and ears,
Lord, that we may see and
hear. Give us understand-
ing of your good news,
and guide us to prepare
for your coming. Amen.

AN ENCOURAGING WORD

“Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘It will not take place, it will not happen. . . .’
—Isaiah 7:7

In the Old Testament, prophets often gave discouraging messages, because the people had rebelled against God for a long time and were ripe for punishment.

But today’s verses show that Isaiah had an encouraging word here. There were political troubles in the land, and military threats from the outside were increasing. King Ahaz and his people were shaking with fear.

God sends Isaiah and his son to speak to these anxious people. Isaiah’s son, with a name that means “a remnant will return,” is a walking message that God will not abandon his people. Further, Isaiah encourages the king by telling him from the Lord that the forces allied against him will not succeed.

But the king must trust in the Lord, not in his political deals.

“If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”

This is an encouraging word that takes courage to follow—courage to stick to the right path. That is hard for a king, a president, and for any believer.

When you read accounts of the persecuted church today, or of a whistleblower in a large firm who cannot be part of its deceit any longer, don’t you admire their courage?

We all need courage between the first coming and the second coming of Jesus. Isaiah assures us that courage is available from the Lord.

Thank you, Lord, for your promise to stick with us. Holy Spirit, help us to stand firm in our faith in you. In Jesus, Amen.

A MYSTERIOUS SIGN

"The LORD . . . will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

—Isaiah 7:14

We often hear this passage about a virgin in readings and songs at Christmastime. It had meaning for Isaiah's audience many years before the first Christmas. And its ultimate fulfillment came when Jesus was born (see Matthew 1:22-23).

But what did it mean in the days of wheeling, dealing King Ahaz?

The king had made power deals with other nations and had worn out God's patience with his false piety. But still some of God's people remained faithful. Isaiah said there would be a young woman who would bravely name her son Immanuel ("God with us"). The sign in Isaiah's day was not a virgin birth but a young mother's faith in the midst of war and rumors of war. Her faith would shame the king. He trusted in deals, but she trusted in God.

Many years later, when Jesus, the Son of God, came to live among us, Matthew explained, "All this took place to fulfill" the words of Isaiah (Matthew 1:22; see also John 1:9-14). "Immanuel" is a cry of faith come true. God is bodily *with us* in Jesus.

This presence changes but never stops, for when Jesus leaves the earth, he assures us, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20; see Acts 1-2). "Immanuel" ("God with us") becomes a promise and a reality in hard times, at Christmas, and every other day as well.

Lord, give me faith, that I may trust in your presence even in hard times. Holy Spirit, help me to rejoice that Immanuel has come. Amen.

WAITING WHILE GOD HIDES

I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face. . . . I will put my trust in him.
—Isaiah 8:17

Having to wait is frustrating. We dislike waiting in the doctor's office, in traffic, or in school. Many of us have also learned that waiting for God can be difficult, especially after praying for help or healing.

Isaiah speaks to our impatience. He knows that for various reasons God may "hide his face," or withhold some of his favor, usually because his people have been rebellious. Isaiah also testifies that we can put our trust in God. Any of the people who thought Isaiah's warnings were treasonous or who thought the Lord should meet all their demands would soon see that Isaiah was right.

People in every generation will come up with complaints about the God who hides. Stumbling over God's hidden ways is a recurring problem that faces us in every season—and perhaps es-

pecially in Advent: God comes as a baby!

What could it mean that the Son of God would do this (see Philippians 2:5-8) and then live in obscurity for about 30 years before launching his ministry as the Savior? (See Luke 2; 3:23.)

Do we also take offense at the God who hides? When facing a disaster or disappointment, have you ever wondered, "Where is God? Why doesn't he do something?"

What are our options here? Isaiah recommends, "I will put my trust in him." Is that what you do?

Lord, it is often difficult to wait while we cannot see what you are doing. How could we ever guess your amazing plans? Please forgive us, and accept our praise. Amen.

JOHN'S JOY

"The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete."
—John 3:29

What is your idea of John the Baptist? Do you see a fun-loving, entertaining speaker? Or does he seem more like a fierce, gloomy prophet?

We might expect John to be gloomy because his career was going down the river. His cousin Jesus was taking over. Jesus had begun teaching and baptizing, and his disciples reported in alarm, "Everyone is going to him."

But John was "full of joy." Why? Because he knew his place in God's coming salvation. He saw himself as a "best man" at a wedding. His job was to focus on the "bridegroom," not on himself. The "friend who attends the bridegroom" was delighted if things went well and the bridal couple were enjoying their special day.

John, who jumped for joy in his mother's womb when Elizabeth met Mary, pregnant with Jesus (Luke 1:44), sensed joy again as Jesus' ministry began to grow. It was never about John, but about the one who came after him. So John said, with amazing humility, "He must become greater; I must become less."

John wanted the ministry of Jesus to advance. That was his purpose and his complete joy.

Can you and I find such joy if we remember who and what is central?

Lord Jesus, this Advent season should be about you. There are so many distractions this month and year-round. Help us to keep you front and center. Amen.

GOOD THINGS FROM GALILEE

There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. . . . In the future he will honor Galilee of the nations. —Isaiah 9:1

Every country seems to have a state, province, or town that has a reputation for being less than upscale. Galilee, in the northern part of Palestine, was a place like that. When Jesus began his ministry, people said things like “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46).

It is good that God does not follow some magazine’s list of “10 Best Places to Live.” Through Isaiah, God promises that light will come from the “backwoods” region of Galilee. About 700 years later that light did come when Jesus lived in Galilee and began his ministry near Capernaum. As Matthew 4:12-17 describes the start of Jesus’ ministry, it also quotes Isaiah, saying, “On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

That was a long time to wait, and even then the light was

“dawning”—just beginning. Anyone living there could have missed the light if they were expecting something flashier or from a more prominent place, like Jerusalem.

When Christmas comes next week, we could also stumble at the sputtering of a light in a stable, expecting something more flashy or sophisticated. Jesus’ very humanness remains part of his humility and hiddenness. Surprisingly, Galilee, where different nations meet, is part of his glory.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, for showing me that it takes time to keep a promise, and time to know it was kept. Help me to celebrate the dawning of the light in faith and hope, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

"IT ONLY TAKES ONE CHRISTMAS!"

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

—John 3:16

Many people readily complain that department stores and radio stations play Christmas music far ahead of the season: "The 'world' has kidnapped Christmas!" But since it is the feast of God's love for the world, shouldn't the whole world celebrate?

We might wonder if the message of Christ, broadcast through so much Christmas music, makes a difference to anyone who is not a believer. But it can. The Spirit of God works in many different ways to bring people to faith in Jesus. And for some people, as a friend of mine once said, "It only takes one Christmas!"

Does our Christmas celebration tell the whole good-news story? John 3:16 certainly touches all the main points: God's love, for the world, shown in the gift of the Son, so that whoever believes has eternal life.

This year, let's have the kind of Christmas that tells the whole story. How? That's a good question to ponder.

A friend told his family one year that they would be getting smaller presents, because he was handing out cash to homeless people. Some families skip their big dinner on Christmas to serve a meal at a shelter. Another person may finally smile at that lonely classmate or neighbor and break the ice to begin a friendship.

There must be a world of ways to show God's cosmic love.

Father, forgive us for holding back; help us share your love as you lead us. In Jesus, Amen.

WHO IS JESUS?

“John . . . testified to the truth. . . . I mention it that you may be saved.”
—John 5:33-34

A stranger to our Christmas culture could well wonder, “Who is this Jesus who causes so much celebration?”

People already wondered about this Bethlehem baby at his birth. Then they questioned even more when he began to preach, and feed, and heal. Who was Jesus, that he could do and say these things?

When Jesus received hostile questions, he took the time to answer. He even produced five witnesses: himself, John, his works, the Father, and the Scriptures.

Perhaps John’s clearest testimony came when he and Jesus met as adults. John said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Soon afterward he added, “I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One”

(John 1:34). That testimony was John’s “light,” and it pointed to Jesus, whose testimony was even “weightier than that of John.” The religious leaders to whom Jesus was speaking, however, refused “to come to [him] to have life.”

Jesus clearly fulfills God’s great promise of help and hope. He is the one sent by God to save his people, to “bring justice to the nations” (Isaiah 42:1).

We also have heard the testimony about Jesus. Are we choosing to enjoy him? Are we committing to him for life?

Holy Spirit, help me to see and believe who Jesus really is—the Son of God who brings salvation. In your mercy, remove anything that would lead me to refuse to come to you. Amen.

GETTING READY

“He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” —Luke 1:17

Is it time to panic? Gifts to buy, meals to prepare, concerts to hear, cards to send—can it all be wrapped up in the remaining days before Christmas?

John the Baptist can help. His message of repentance and seeking to live as God calls us to is as vital for us today as for his listeners two thousand years ago. John speaks out plainly and with urgency to get people ready for Jesus’ coming.

When I listen to John speak, I see a man with practical answers for everyone: tax accountants, law enforcement officers, people who buy and sell in the marketplace, people who have more than they need. John tells them to do right: give away that extra food; be honest; don’t take advantage of the weak or the poor; don’t accuse people falsely; be content. John applies the command to “love your

neighbor” in practical ways that are open to everyone. “And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.”

John went ahead of Jesus to say that there is forgiveness for all who earnestly seek to live God’s way. Jesus opens a gift of grace and love that is big enough for a world full of sinners. Even if you have nothing baked or bought for Christmas, that gift is wrapped and ready for you!

“O Lord, how shall I meet you, how welcome you aright? Your people long to greet you, my hope, my heart’s delight! Oh, kindle, Lord most holy, your lamp within my breast, to do in spirit lowly, all that may please you best.” Amen.

“HOW WILL THIS BE?”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

—Luke 1:34

As we get nearer to the celebration we’ve been waiting for, Mary’s question becomes more urgent. Is the story of Christmas just a story to make us feel good? Or did these things really happen? As Mary herself asked, how would God become human and be born of a virgin?

Luke, the writer of this account, was a doctor. He knew about babies. Perhaps that is why he gave the most details on the birth of Jesus. He wanted his readers to understand that this birth was extraordinary, supernatural. Something like this simply did not happen—it was impossible.

But wait! Impossible things are possible with God!

A long string of near-impossible birth stories foreshadowed this birth: Isaac (Genesis 18:10-14; 21:1-7), Samuel (1 Samuel 1),

John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-18)—all born in situations that biology and common sense considered impossible. Except that the Creator decided it was good and necessary.

Mary’s question is one we need to ponder as we get closer to Christmas.

And we need to rejoice that the impossible did happen—that Jesus was born into our sinful world, and that he brings life to all who believe in him.

Father God, we are so grateful that with you all things are possible, and that Jesus did come to earth. May we truly celebrate your glory and majesty this week. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

MARY SINGS!

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful. . . ." —Luke 1:46-48

Why does Mary sing?

She rejoices for good reason, as did Hannah, the mother of Samuel, when she received a child (1 Samuel 2). Both women sing of God's mercy for the humble. They rejoice that God is not impressed by pride, riches, or power. They shout with joy that God keeps his promises; he makes mercy the currency of his kingdom—always.

Luke includes songs to sum up the events in which people take part in the story of Christ's birth. He includes songs by elderly men like Zechariah (1:67-79) and Simeon (2:29-32). There's also a song-summary of the angels' message at Christ's birth (2:14).

If your Bible has cross-references, you will notice that Mary's words in her song are adapted from other songs, mostly Hannah's

prayer and the Psalms. This makes Mary a clever arranger. Or, better, it shows that Mary's song echoes the timeless voice of believers everywhere who hang on to God, believing in his great power to save and to rule in righteousness and mercy. They may not be on *Time* magazine's list of 100 influential people, and the world may not notice their need or poverty, but God pays attention. And God acts!

We remember at Christmas that God's mercy is at work in our world, and that it may be hidden—like the baby in Bethlehem.

Father in heaven, may we echo Mary's words. May we glorify and rejoice in you, because you are mindful of our situation and have chosen us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SHARED JOY

Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. —Luke 1:58

There was no Internet service in the hill country of Judea in those days, but news certainly got around. Neighbors and relatives shared in Elizabeth's joy when her child was born. And when Zechariah wrote, "His name is John," everyone marveled that he could speak again.

With the first words he spoke as a new father, Zechariah praised God. Soon everyone was talking about the "great mercy" shown in the surprise birth of this baby, the naming of this child, and the return of Zechariah's speech. "What then is this child going to be?" they wondered.

Luke cites a reason for this wondering joy: "For the Lord's hand was with [the child]." God was with John as he grew up before their eyes. We know little about John's early years, but we sense here that John's birth and youth

fill the neighbors with anticipation. They understand that God is at work doing great things.

We know about anticipation in this season. Christmas comes in a few days. What are you expecting?

Are family and friends coming over to celebrate with you? Will you share presents? Will you worship together? Will there be peace on earth?

We may "have it all," or we may only get to rejoice as these neighbors did because of God's great mercy. But even that will be more than enough, right?

*"Come, thou long-expected
Jesus, born to set thy people
free; from our fears
and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee."
Amen.*

THE RISING SUN

"Because of the tender mercy of our God . . . the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. . . ."

—Luke 1:78-79

Today's Scripture recites the Spirit-led song of Zechariah. As he reflects on the role that his son, John, will have in preparing the way for our promised salvation, Zechariah includes images and phrases from the Psalms and Prophets.

Our verse contains the hopeful phrase found also in Isaiah 9:2 about light shining on people lost in the dark.

Darkness itself is hard enough to take. That is why we have nightlights and flashlights. But darkness is a metaphor for all that troubles us: despair, loneliness, sin, worry, depression.

Zechariah sings that John will go before Jesus to get people ready for his coming, announcing that help is on the way. The day is dawning. God will rescue his people and help them to live as they were meant to live. Just as

our Christmas carols and lights remind us, Jesus is the "light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5).

This image of "the rising sun" is especially hopeful because it indicates that God's new day is just beginning. Many people feel that things wind down after Christmas. But isn't the opposite true? After Christmas, we can begin to use and enjoy our gifts.

Let's remember that on Christmas Day. This is just the beginning—Jesus is "the rising sun"!

Spirit of Jesus, guide us to walk in the light, to breathe in hope-filled air, to steer toward ways of peace. Thank you! Amen.

A DAY FOR SINGING

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”
—Luke 2:14

I grew up in a sober, psalm-singing church that allowed a few hymns if their words were straight from the Bible. This angels’ song was the trickiest, fanciest, and most moving hymn we had. We sang its phrases in parts, softly, then loudly—and when we reached the end, we did them over again, closing with a series of amens. Even though we now have hundreds of hymns available in books or on projection screens, I still cannot sing the words of that song without choking up a little.

And why not?

As the angels make the heavens ring with their song, they say it all, don’t they? This is, indeed, “good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” The angels bring glory to God in heaven for his mercy and love. They also assure us here on earth that peace and favor

come to us from God. The angels’ song nicely unwraps God’s Christmas present.

Though the words make a perfect summary of the Christmas story, it’s odd that we do not sing them more often.

The shepherds caught on, however. They ran to the stable, saw the Christ child, and went back to work, “glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.” I imagine they may have sung a few bars of the angels’ chorus along the way.

Father in heaven, we join the angels and shepherds in praising you today for the gift of your Son. We bring glory to you, “in the highest heaven and on earth.” In Jesus, Amen.

JESUS

And he gave him the name Jesus.

—Matthew 1:25

Here another piece is added to the Christmas story. The angel tells Joseph that the child should be called Jesus. Matthew sees that this birth is a fulfillment of the Isaiah 7:14 prophecy: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’).”

But Matthew does not mention Isaiah. The angel had already covered that when he told Joseph, “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Obedient to this word from the Lord, Joseph takes Mary as his wife, the baby arrives, and Joseph names the child “Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

What are we hearing from Matthew that we did not hear from Luke?

We hear that our troubles are greater than the darkness and problems that come to us from the outside. We have added to the mess we are in by our own sins and failures, and we need to be saved from our sins.

Is it not true that the warm and giving spirit of Christmas wears down quickly as it meets the realities of living in a harsh world? Our children have likely already fought over new toys. And what about you—have you already had an argument, or said a harsh word?

The angel has good news for us: God is with us in Jesus, who came to save us from our sins.

Lord Jesus, thank you for loving me despite my sins, and for renewing love and life for me and for your world. Glory to God in the highest! Amen.

A SEASON FOR CHRISTMAS?

This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands.

—1 John 5:2

The rustic town of Frankenmuth, Michigan, is known for savory German cooking and Bronner's Christmas Wonderland. Bronner's is always decorated for Christmas and sells ornaments, bows, and trees year-round. Since Michigan usually has snow at Christmastime, it is jarring to see the store on a hot July afternoon, but it fits the alpine look of the town.

In a way like Bronner's, we do not need seasonal snow and icicles to celebrate Christmas. The birth of Jesus is a life- and world-changing event, so it should be possible to celebrate it anytime and anyplace. It should be possible to stretch the generosity and goodwill of the season into spring, summer, and fall.

John's letter gives us clues on how to stretch the season. We celebrate Christmas all year when we stick to the basics of

"loving God and carrying out his commands."

And these "commands" are not complicated. The central command is to love God and neighbor. For example, says John, "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar."

So, as we take down the Christmas tree and store the lights and decorations, we should keep celebrating the birth of Jesus by loving others as he loves us. "Peace and goodwill to all" must be a year-round labor of love.

Spirit of God, help me to carry the warmth of Christmas into the next weeks and months. Thank you for the love I receive in Jesus' birth; help me to pass it on. Amen.

LITTLE ONES

"In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish."
—Matthew 18:14

A good place to start our labor of loving our neighbor is with our little neighbors: children—abused, bullied, orphaned, trampled-in-war-zones, failing-in-school children. There are many places where we can help—schools, libraries, hospitals, social agencies, churches, and more. We can also help as we do our daily work.

One day I saw a family anxiously gathered at the library counter as the librarian told them their outstanding fine was past the limit where they could take out more books. The father did not have enough money; the children looked disappointed that they could not take out books. Then the librarian found a solution: "Pay what you can now to get below the fine limit, and you may borrow the books." Joy returned and learning continued because of a loving use of the rules.

Our idea of loving our neighbors expands when we remember that "these little ones" are all who humbly follow Jesus like a child. Jesus explains the reverse math of his kingdom with his story of the lost sheep. We could rationalize that one percent loss on a hundred sheep is not bad, but the Good Shepherd risks all to go after one lonely, lost sheep. That logic could get us into some hard, hopeless situations, but today's verse provides hope, for our "Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish."

Father in heaven, please help us to be humble and to see the needs of little ones and others overlooked by our world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THIRSTY FOR THE SPIRIT

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”
—John 7:37-38

The end of the year nears. Soon Christmas will be only a memory. Who knows what we will face in the new year? Do we have enough trust in God’s care to face the uncertainties of the coming year?

We thirst for assurance. That is the reason newspapers and broadcasts feature forecasts and predictions. Economists, politicians, and health care experts tell us what to expect and what to prevent.

Jesus invites us to believe in him. He tells us that when we believe, we will be equipped for the future. Jesus uses the image of “living water” that he had used earlier when he spoke to a woman at a well (John 4:10). The prophet Isaiah used water as a picture of joyful, renewed living, guided and satisfied by “the Lord . . . always,” “like a spring whose waters never fail”

(Isaiah 58:11). John explains that the living water Jesus spoke of is “the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.”

Things of the Spirit are difficult to understand. Does the image of living water help? For the woman at the well (John 4), it meant new life beyond the shame of broken relationships. To Isaiah it meant God’s presence and daily blessing.

For us, soon after Christmas and before another year, it can mean that God, Jesus, Immanuel, stays with us and in us—by his Holy Spirit!

Lord, guide us always, satisfy our needs in a sun-scorched land, and make us “a well-watered garden” for your sake. Amen.

HE GIVES US SPACE

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."
—John 8:11

Newer translations of the Bible include a footnote with this story, saying that it is not found in the earliest manuscripts. I hope this "messiness" of the Bible does not trouble you. It shouldn't. Rather, we can recognize that the perfect Word of God entered a messy world and picked up some scars, but still tells us plainly that while no one is perfect, Jesus gives us space.

Jesus gave space for this crowd to go home shame-faced. They expected to jeer and throw stones at a "fallen woman." He challenged them to look into their own hearts to see if they were sinless before throwing the first stone. Then he drew in the sand while they all slinked away, now seeing their own faults a little more clearly.

Jesus gave space to the woman too. The officials had dragged

her before him to test his ability to judge, not realizing that he would one day be the Judge over all. But Jesus does not rush to judge this woman. He does not condone her actions, but he gives her space to change: "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Jesus gives us space to realize that sin does not have us trapped. We can, by his grace and Spirit, leave our sinning behind—big and small.

There is some space before the new year begins. Is this not a great idea for 2013: "Leave your life of sin"?

Father in heaven, as I reflect on the past year and move to the new year, help me leave my old sins behind—and the guilt that goes with them. In your mercy, Lord. Amen.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "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

We decorate our house modestly for Christmas: white electric candles in most windows, a net of white lights on the corner shrubs, and two small spiral trees near the front door. We keep them up through January for the Epiphany season to celebrate that Jesus is "the light of the world."

On cold, snowy nights the lights are a happy reminder of the comfort and joy of Christmas. The light keeps shining in the gloomy (and sometimes depressing) months of the year.

Jesus promises that we will not be in the dark when we follow him. Believing that promise can be challenging at times. Perhaps it helps to recall then that even the first disciples did not find faith easy. On one occasion, a number of followers gave up on him, but Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have

the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

What does it mean to follow Jesus today?

The place to start is to listen, watch, and learn what Jesus says, does, and finds important. Jesus reached out to the hungry, the poor, the blind, and the unfairly treated. He also obeyed the deep truth of the law. And he told his disciples—and us—"You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

Lord Jesus Christ, help me to shine your light in all that I say and do, that our Father may be praised. Amen.

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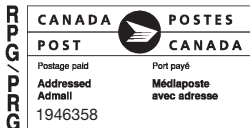
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