

Today

Jan/Feb 2015

refresh, refocus, renew

All Things Made New



ALSO: NAMES AND TITLES OF JESUS

Friends:

Trees grow around their edges. The wood just inside the bark is the layer that transports nutrients from root to branch and allows the tree to grow ever wider. The center of the tree is really just dead wood. It's good for keeping the tree strong and upright, but it doesn't grow. If a tree stump ever sprouts, it sprouts from the outside edge, not the center.



So our cover image seems wrong. You would never see a sprout like this in nature. But that's what makes it a spiritual metaphor—we are dead in our sins, as lifeless as a dried-up stump. But by God's grace in Christ we are made new.

In January we explore with Joel Vande Werken how God brings life from death, like a living shoot from a dead stump. God himself affirms his good creation, forgives our sins, and renews all things with new life in Christ.

Then in February we'll study with Kurt Selles what the Bible teaches about Christ himself through the names and titles it uses to describe him. What does it mean to call Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior and good shepherd?

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

—Steven Koster

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**“All Things Made New”
Joel Vande Werken**



**“Names and Titles
of Jesus”
Kurt Selles**

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re FRAME MEDIA

january

All Things Made New

Joel Vande Werken

January is a month of new beginnings. This month we explore together how God renews our lives through the work of Jesus Christ. We examine the sweep of the biblical story through creation, the fall into sin, the redemptive work of Jesus, and the hope of the new creation to which followers of Christ look forward. Although the hopes and resolutions of a new year often meet up against the hard reality of sin and brokenness in this world, we serve a God who makes “all things new” for all who have faith and hope in Jesus.

Joel Vande Werken has served as the pastor of a church in northern New Jersey since 2007. Prior to attending seminary, he worked in the plumbing industry. He and his wife, Brandie, have four young children.

WHEN EVERYTHING WAS NEW

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

—Genesis 1:1

Today marks the beginning of a new year. The turn of the year is a time for new things: hopes, dreams, and resolutions about how we'll live differently now that we've turned the page on the calendar.

Once, the whole world was new. Out of nothing, God created the heavens and the earth. The Bible describes the process of creation: God spoke, and the world came into being. And what God made was good. It shone with delightful diversity, reflecting the richness of God's character.

We do not always see the goodness and brilliance of God's creation because sin and brokenness obscure our vision and bring decay to what was once brand-new. Our delight in the newness of God's work wears off. So we need our attention called back to the character of

the Creator. Genesis tells us that God can bring goodness out of chaos, and in this way God assures us that the world is firmly in his control.

In the coming year, we will face times when the newness of our January goals wears off, when the brokenness of our lives keeps us from receiving each day as a gift. When that happens, let's remember that God made all things good, and let's trust that he has the power to make all things new and good again.

Thank you, God, for your good creation. Open our eyes to see the brilliance and beauty of everything you have made, and to rest in the knowledge of your care for the world you created. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE JOY OF NEW BEGINNINGS

The earth is full of his unfailing love.

—Psalm 33:5

New beginnings often give us a sense of hope and joy. Newly married couples radiate happiness on their wedding day. Choosing a new place to live is often an exciting adventure. There's a certain energy that accompanies the start of a new school year. And we celebrate the new year with parties, cheers, and even fireworks.

God designed creation to give us a similar sense of hope and joy. Before sin entered the world, creation radiated God's justice, faithfulness, and love. God's word, by which the heavens and the earth were created, gave structure and meaning to all created things.

At times, we still catch glimpses of this beauty and joy in creation. We marvel at the smooth sand on our favorite beach. We watch the sun set over the water. We wonder at

the complex patterns of frost etched on our window panes in winter. We admire the fresh snow blanketing trees in our yard or neighborhood. And when spring comes, we are delighted with the first blade of grass or the first blooming flower.

Too often, though, in our hurry through life we miss the creative majesty of God at work. What's new soon becomes old, and we feel no reason to offer praise or even take notice. As you enter this new year, ask God to help you instead to observe something new each day about his unfailing love in creation.

Creator God, the stars and the seas declare your goodness and love. By your Holy Spirit, help us do the same. Amen.

MORE TO SAY

The heavens declare the glory of God

—Psalm 19:1

Things have changed since the beginning of creation. When all things were new, the earth shone and sparkled with unspoiled beauty. The water and air were unpolluted. The landscape bore few scars from human activity. Now city dwellers face days of smog and haze. Light pollution obscures our view of the stars. Roads and buildings have replaced forests and grasslands.

One thing, however, has not changed. The creation has a story to tell. In the beginning, creation declared the glory of God, singing his praises. And today, even with the marks of human progress and the scars of human sin, the creation still tells of God's handiwork.

But there is more to say than creation can tell. God created us to respond to the divine Word. We can catch glimpses of God's glory on a starlit night and in a

magnificent sunrise, but God also calls us to see beauty in the instructions he gives us, showing us how to live. The creation may declare God's glory, but God's law refreshes the soul. God's commands show us how we are called to live well and how limits are set for our good.

Creation still speaks of God's glory. But by itself, creation's voice cannot save us. Only God's Word can speak forgiveness and new life to a broken world.

The heavens declare your glory, Almighty God. Speak your Word into our hearts so that our words and thoughts are also pleasing to you. In the name of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

WHEN ALL THINGS WERE NEW, GOD SPOKE

In the beginning was the Word

—John 1:1

It's fun to imagine what the world must have been like in the beginning. Perhaps we picture expanses of unspoiled wilderness like those in national parks today. Tourists marvel from the windows of a bus or car, while wildlife are seemingly oblivious to the human presence around them.

Or we may reflect on the wonder of new human life. When all is safe and well, little children run and play and imagine and learn as if there's not a care in the world. Maybe the creation was something like that when it was new. There was nothing fearful to spoil the joyful play of God's creatures.

But the Bible also tells us the reason for the delight and joy that seem built into creation, when we see it at its best: "In the beginning was the Word." Creation did not spring into

being on its own. In the beginning, God was there. In the beginning, God was speaking to his creatures, sharing with them the joy of full life.

God still speaks today. People who know Jesus, the Word, not only see creation's beauty but also hear the Creator speaking with grace and truth. God wants his creatures to live with him. He wants us to enjoy the unspoiled beauty of his presence.

Can you hear that Word?

Word of God, speak to us. Thank you for being there in the beginning, and thank you for speaking still today. Help us to hear your voice of grace and truth. Amen.

A DIFFERENT, DANGEROUS VOICE

"I was afraid . . . so I hid."

—Genesis 3:10

The third chapter of the Bible introduces a different voice to the created world. A dangerous enemy comes to sow seeds of doubt and temptation. And now God and humanity no longer live in perfect fellowship.

Perhaps you know the struggle that occurs when doubts and temptations enter in. Perhaps you face temptations right now, wondering, as Adam and Eve did, "Did God really say . . . ?" Maybe you know the guilt and shame that can make you hide from God and others.

The voice of temptation promises new knowledge and power. This newness is "pleasing to the eye" and "desirable." But sin is unable to deliver what we need most.

We greedily pursue new wealth but discover that our wants are never satisfied. We lust after

new relationships but find that adultery and divorce destroy the relationships that are most precious to us.

God's voice is firm but gentle in addressing wayward humanity. In effect, he says to us, "Have you done what I commanded you not to do?" The curse of sin is real. But God also makes a promise: one day, the woman's offspring will destroy the tempter. Jesus will come, and the power of temptation will be replaced with the joy of new life.

Father, our sin has broken our world and our relationship with you. We long for something new, yet we hide from you. Let us hear your voice and know again the joy of fellowship with you. Amen.

NEW IS NOT ALWAYS BETTER

“My people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols.”
—Jeremiah 2:11

Sometimes we discover that new is not always better. We seek out a new job, only to find that more hours and better pay do not satisfy in the way we had hoped. We long to leave our singleness behind, but then we learn that married life has difficulties too. We save for years to buy a new home, only to realize that the higher taxes and maintenance costs add pressure to our lives. We look forward to retirement, only to find that idle hours aren't the best use of our time.

After just two chapters in the Bible, the goodness of creation is replaced by the pain of something new: the human fall into sin. And much of the rest of the Bible portrays our struggle to return to paradise. Few resources help us understand that struggle as clearly as the words of Jeremiah 2. Sin, the prophet

explains, involves turning our backs on God. Sin causes us to set up new idols in place of the living God. We no longer see the goodness of God but only the dry deserts and seasons of drought that come when our idols of wealth and pleasure fail to satisfy.

Change is not always good. Have things like sports or sex or work or possessions become “new gods” taking over your life? Look today for the “broken cisterns” in your life, and ask God to remove the novelties that keep you from seeing his glory.

Father, forgive my rebellion. Take away my idols. Keep me from wandering and exchanging you for so much less. Capture my attention with your glory and love, through Jesus. Amen.

ARE YOU ALONE?

There was a man all alone.

—Ecclesiastes 4:8

Loneliness is common in our world today. Whether it comes from a divorce, a broken friendship, travel for our job, a prison sentence, or something else, loneliness can leave us feeling as if life is empty and futile. With the author of Ecclesiastes, we might find ourselves wondering about our purpose. Even the so-called “good things in life”—wealth, power, pleasure—have only a limited ability to satisfy us.

This was not always the case. In the beginning, God saw that Adam needed companionship, so God created Eve, a “helper suitable for him” (see Genesis 2:18). In the beginning, our relationships with each other and with God were good and fully satisfying.

Sin, however, introduced envy and competition into human relationships. Now husbands

and wives, family members, coworkers, neighbors—people from all places and backgrounds—find themselves at odds. Human cooperation and friendship require new risks that were not present in the original creation. Sin leads us away from the voice of God. But no new relationships with others can be as dependable as the faithfulness of God.

God knows our loneliness. And despite our unfaithfulness to him, God promises his people protection, help, and security from the destruction of sin. Are you seeking the Savior’s companionship today?

Father, when we are lonely, let us seek your presence through Jesus Christ. Remind us that when you are with us, we are never alone. Amen.

A NEW STRUGGLE WITH NEED

"The poor you will always have with you."

—Matthew 26:11

These are common situations: Families living paycheck to paycheck. Single mothers trying to stretch their resources farther and farther. Homeless men on street corners holding signs that say, "Will work for food." Children with swollen bellies because they don't have food.

In place of the rich provision given by God in Eden, we now find poverty and material need. Sometimes poverty is the result of injustice and oppression. Other times it stems from bad choices made by people in need. Still other times it comes from circumstances beyond people's control: injury, disability, corporate downsizing.

As societies, we struggle to know how to respond to inequality. We assign blame, often in simplistic ways.

Jesus' words in Matthew 26 about the poor have sometimes been used as an excuse to avoid helping people in need. But he was simply describing the brokenness in which we live. He also taught that in caring for needy people on his behalf, we will serve Jesus himself (Matthew 25:37-40). The woman who anointed Jesus was weak and broken. He protected her dignity and honored her struggle.

The poor are with us. Perhaps in this new year our love for Jesus will yield a new willingness to care for the weak and oppressed.

Lord Jesus, you left heaven to become poor for our sake. May we also be willing to enter the struggles of the poor in our midst and to serve them with the riches of the gospel. Amen.

OVERBURDENED

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

—Matthew 9:36

Are you too busy? It is hard to imagine many people answering “no” to that question today. Our lives are filled with things to do, places to go, people to meet. The distraction of all these things can overwhelm us.

We were created with a clear purpose in life: to care for the world and for one another. But then sin came in and distorted our sense of purpose.

Life comes at us quickly, and we often respond by just trying to keep up. Whether it’s the “rat race” at work, extracurricular activities with our kids, or other commitments, there are always more distractions and demands on our time.

The harassment of all this is not new to our generation, though. Jesus walked among people who were overburdened with the stresses of life; they needed

comfort, help, and rest. And “he had compassion on them, because they were . . . like sheep without a shepherd.”

Jesus pays attention to people’s needs. And like a good shepherd, he tends, provides, guides, heals, and shares his love with all. He also points his followers to God’s work in restoring purpose to tired lives. He urges us to pray for all whom God wants to raise up as workers to share his good news of salvation and new life. Are you refocused and engaged in this empowering adventure?

Compassionate God, we are often worn and weary. We need your help and hope. Restore us through the good news of Jesus, and guide us and others to share his message. Amen.

NOTHING NEW?

Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"?
—Ecclesiastes 1:10

A young man spoke in distress about his marriage: "Nothing ever changes! Every day it's the same mess. We have the same conflicts all the time!" His voice was full of hopelessness and despair.

Have you ever felt that way? Whether it's a failing marriage, a dead-end job, a betrayed friendship, or some other discouraging situation, sin damages every part of our existence. Despite the attraction of temptation, our sin soon locks us into patterns of disappointment and hurt.

The book of Ecclesiastes summarizes the brokenness of the human condition. Even when things seem to be going well in our lives, each day brings new reminders of brokenness, sickness, and war in someone's life. Every grand plan to construct a new and better future eventually gives way to the reality

that all of our attempts to build something new are doomed to failure. It's a vicious cycle of meaninglessness, according to the writer.

Yet as we realize that, we begin to discover the source of true hope and change. The writer of Ecclesiastes shows with brilliant clarity how only a new Word, spoken from God, can break us out of our sin and offer something new (see John 1:1-5, 14). In admitting the hopelessness of our own situation, we admit that only a gracious gift from God can change our lives.

Heavenly Father, we are stuck without you. Every day brings new evidence that nothing in us really changes. We are broken people in a broken world. Help us. Change us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
—Isaiah 40:29

For the past several days we have reviewed some of the ways in which sin introduces challenges into our lives. It is understandable, when faced with these challenges, to wonder where God is. Is God listening? Does he care?

The prophet Isaiah spoke to a people facing conquest and exile. They constantly faced new challenges and new fears that could lead them to anxiety and despair. Over time, people grew hopeless, saying, "My cause is disregarded by my God."

The Bible answers the question of human sin and misery by pointing to the eternal God. In response to our problems, it reminds us of something we have known from the beginning but often forget in the midst of our struggles: the eternal faithfulness of God, revealed most fully in Jesus. Our God, the prophet

says, will not forget the world he made. Sin and brokenness may have their moment in our lives. But these things remain within the control of the Lord.

God exerts his power not in distant and impersonal ways. Instead, he extends the promise of strength to his people. The Christian faith does not deny the reality of our weariness but offers hope to weary souls. Our need to trust God never grows old. God's strength remains ever new.

Lord, so often we grow weary. Pick us up and renew our strength, we pray, so that we may put our hope in you, with whom there is no equal. Amen.

SOMETHING NEW: HOPE

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant . . ."
—Jeremiah 31:31

The change of a calendar often brings with it a new sense of hope. This year, we think, things will be different. This year our situation will change. This year we will get that job we have longed for.

But when it comes to the human condition, we need more than the change of a calendar to give us hope. The Bible makes clear that the brokenness we experience in this world is not just a problem brought on by circumstances outside ourselves. Every one of us has a sin problem. We have hearts that take us away from God. We prefer to live our own way instead of following God's way for full, abundant living. We do not honor God's commands.

Sin has a way of sinking its teeth deep into our hearts. Childhood temper tantrums may morph into the sophisticated road rage

of an adult, but the same sinful anger underlies both behaviors. We need more than simple maturity. We need a new heart. We need a new hope.

Long ago God promised that his people would one day know him, deep down in their hearts. By God's power they would understand how he called them to live. By sending Jesus into the world, God fulfilled that promise.

Jesus shows us how to live, and his Spirit now guides our hearts. Do you have the new hope that comes from knowing Christ?

A new heart, a new hope—what a promise, Lord! Set within us hearts that know you and serve you, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

SOMETHING NEW: AUTHORITY

"What is this? A new teaching—and with authority!"

—Mark 1:27

When Jesus comes on the scene, something new happens. Our hope, our longing for change, takes on a different shape. Hurting people, sinful temptations, human brokenness, and disease are confronted with authority.

The people in this story recognized Jesus' authority in regard to two specific things: his teaching and his power over impure spirits (demons). There was something about Jesus that made him different from the other religious teachers of his day. In fact, this is the first thing mentioned in Mark's gospel about Jesus' public ministry: it was a ministry of authority.

We often long to witness the authority of Christ confronting diseases, financial hardships, broken friendships, and injustices of all kinds today. But we do not pause as often to

consider the spiritual dimensions of our suffering. The apostle Paul reminds us that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood" (Ephesians 6:12). Rather, we contend with demonic powers that want us to think that our circumstances, not our hearts, are the problem.

It's worth noting that Jesus' teaching, not just his healing, triggered a reaction from the crowds. But "being amazed," by itself, is not a response to authority. Jesus' teaching demands either submission or rebellion. He calls us to bring our hurts, our diseases, and our hearts under his authority. How will you respond?

Jesus, you rule over all things by your Word and Spirit. Enter our lives with your authority today, we pray. Amen.

SOMETHING NEW: JOY

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory.
—John 2:11

Jesus' first miracle has often grabbed my attention because it seems unnecessary from a purely human point of view. Yes, we can understand that Jesus saved the wedding host from embarrassment, especially in a culture that was concerned about providing the best possible hospitality. But this miracle reveals that Jesus came not only to help us with our greatest problem—the curse of sin and death—but also to spread the joy of full, abundant living with God.

When Jesus was born, angels proclaimed that this was “good news that will cause great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10). We might experience flashes of happiness sometimes, but true joy is something new and different, something deeper. Happiness depends on circumstances, but joy is a gift of God.

Through his life and death, Jesus redeems believers from the weight of sin in their lives and in the world. When this burden is removed from us, we can see the true character of God and all the blessing he wants for us in life. And just as all creation once rejoiced at its Maker's goodness, we can find delight in God's gift of redemption and new life in Christ.

The gospel of John reports that as a result of this first miracle, Jesus “revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” May the joy of Jesus' presence capture our hearts this year as well.

Fill us with joy, heavenly Father. Let us see your glory, find delight in you, and put our faith in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

SOMETHING NEW: LOVE

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”
—John 13:34

It may seem odd to refer to love as something new because we live in a world saturated with references to love. “Love” features prominently in books, music, and movies. It is a part of countless myths and fairy tales of ages past. It seems anything but new.

But the love we speak of in this world is a love that wears out. Friendships crumble. Arguments and apathy tear marriages apart. Quarrels divide families. Perhaps you are living in the reality of a tired love even as you read this.

When Jesus came into this world, he came to show us the full extent of God’s love. The disciples, rushing to get the best seats as they came to share a meal with Jesus (see Luke 22:24), had overlooked the courtesy of washing their feet on the way in. That was

dirty work, slave’s work. They judged it to be beneath them—but it was not beneath the Son of God.

God’s love has the power to endure our insults, our rebellion, and all the rest of our sin. He does not turn away from us, but goes all the way to the cross for us. Jesus cleanses our souls as well as our bodies. We are clean! God has poured his love out for us in a new way, a way that does not quit, and he empowers us to do the same.

Have you experienced God’s love?

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for showing us love in a new way. Thank you for dying so that we can be cleansed from sin. Help us to love others as you have loved us. Amen.

SOMETHING NEW: MEMORY

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." —1 Corinthians 11:25

The celebration of the Lord's Supper is one of the most significant things Christians do together. Whether they gather around the Lord's table weekly or every few months, followers of Christ proclaim that only in Jesus can we hope to receive forgiveness and grace to live as he did. We do this to remember all that Christ has done for us.

Thinking about the past, of course, is nothing new. But in the Lord's Supper, Jesus gives his people a gift that does more than let us look back and remember. By proclaiming Jesus' death each time we celebrate the Supper, we also look forward and upward as we declare the ongoing power of Jesus' death for his people today and forever.

Jesus offers his people a new kind of memory. Our salvation begins in the past, at the cross.

But Christ continues to nourish believers with his crucified body and shed blood. Just as a daily meal gives us strength for our physical life, so also the regular celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection nourishes the spiritual lives of all who have faith in Christ. This is the "new covenant" (Jeremiah 31:31-34): the promise of God to strengthen believers with himself so that they can serve him faithfully.

Will this memory of Christ's death nourish you for worship and service in this new year?

Lord, I remember; I believe that you died for me. You gave up your perfect life so that I could live. May your death renew me for life with you today. Amen.

SOMETHING NEW: RESURRECTION

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.
—1 Corinthians 15:20

The new year is a time when many of us resolve to start living differently. We seek to break old habits, build new relationships, change our outlook on life.

The gospel reveals that a truly new thing we experience in Christ is new life. The earliest Christians proclaimed this message again and again: “Christ is risen from the dead!” And because he conquered death and rose to new life, we can have new life in him. All who believe in Christ receive the promise of eternal life, and our new life begins right away, by the power of Christ’s Spirit living in us.

When we have faith in Jesus, our life here takes on a new character. We realize that what we do here in this life matters—and that the Spirit of Christ guides us to live God’s way. Christ takes our faltering efforts

and uses them to accomplish good, now and for eternity.

We hope in Christ not simply to have a better way to live now. Because Jesus is alive, we know that he has the power to fix us too: our sins, our failings, even our physical bodies. Though our bodies may die, we know that our souls go to live with him until the day when he will raise our bodies from the grave, just as he was raised. Repentance and faith bring something truly new: resurrection and new life through Jesus Christ!

Thank you, God! You have given us the victory through Jesus Christ so that death no longer has power over us. Show us the strength to live through you today, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

SOMETHING NEW: HOPE

He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

—1 Peter 1:3

Are you without hope?

It's easy to lose hope in our everyday lives. Months of unemployment, years of dealing with disease, constant bickering in the family, a lengthy prison sentence—any of these situations will quickly sap our hope and leave us despairing about our future.

In the midst of such circumstances, the apostle Peter writes of hope. Jesus has risen from the dead! This new reality does not mean all of our suffering will disappear. But just as Jesus' sufferings gave way to resurrection, so also our trials will be followed by glory.

Through Jesus, God has given believers "a *living* hope." So often we place our hope in something lifeless: a new job, a better education, a new year. But Jesus is not lifeless: he is

alive! In him, we have an inheritance, a constant source of strength and life, because our hope comes not from someone who is dead but someone who is alive.

The greatest good news of all is that God has given us hope. We do not remain victims of our sins or of our circumstances. Jesus has the power to redeem every dying expectation and replace it with living hope.

Do you live with hope in Christ? In his strength, you can!

Living God, we praise you for the gift of hope. May the life of the risen Christ inspire us to hope and confidence today, even in the midst of our struggles. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SOMETHING NEW: POWER IN WEAKNESS

To keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh
—2 Corinthians 12:7

No one likes unpleasant surprises and struggles, but in Christ we find strength to deal with such things.

The apostle Paul had spiritual high points, receiving amazing visions of heaven, but he also had earthly struggles that wouldn't go away. We don't know what his "thorn in the flesh" was, but we do know that Paul thought he could serve God better without the struggles his "thorn" gave him.

The devil often tries to put stumbling blocks in our way to suggest that God is not caring for us. For example, our business may seem poised for the best year ever, but then suddenly we may face a huge setback: a major client goes bankrupt and leaves us with a mountain of bills. Or we may be approaching retirement, anticipating the opportunities it will bring, only

to be stopped short by a debilitating disease. "Why doesn't God prevent this?" we wonder.

Paul records the answer he heard from Jesus: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." No matter how unpleasant his "thorn" was, Paul could find delight in knowing that Christ could work more effectively through him because of this affliction he had.

Whatever struggles we may face this year, our Lord promises to give sufficient strength and grace for each day and to work through us, remaining with us always.

Lord Jesus, grant us the grace and strength we need for each day, and may we show your love to all who struggle. Amen.

THE JOY OF FORGETTING

"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!"
—Isaiah 43:18-19

Do you like new stuff? Many of us do. Part of the excitement for kids as they open presents at Christmas or on their birthday is that they're getting something new. Older family members may get excited about new clothing, a new vehicle, or even the fresh smell of new carpet in their home.

Yes, we like new things. But it's also possible to get stuck in the past. Some of us may have a nostalgic hope that we can recover the "good old days," and others of us may be locked face to face with a past we can't escape. Maybe we feel stuck by the circumstances of a broken home, or of sins we now regret, or of injustice that has been done to us.

Though Christians do not ignore the past, faith in Christ always challenges us to look forward. Our goal is not "change for the

sake of change," as if new things by themselves could give us hope and fulfillment. But Isaiah reminds us of the only One who brings lasting change: "I am doing a new thing!" God says.

We can find joy in forgetting our past only when our future rests on the change Christ works in us. Because of the cross, we can experience the joy of forgetting our sinful past (Philippians 3:13-14) and pressing on as new people in Jesus Christ.

God of new beginnings, thank you for a fresh start in Christ. Help us to leave behind our sin and to live joyfully for him. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

GOD GIVES A NEW SONG

He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.

—Psalm 40:3

Music has a powerful influence on our lives. Many of us have favorite musical groups and can recite lyrics from memory. Older believers can recite the words of songs they learned as young children, even in a different language. Rhythm and rhyme can leave powerful impressions on our minds.

The creation that once resonated with the sound of God's glory is now out of tune as we find ourselves in the mud and mire of life. We can all recite our litany of troubles, and if we're honest, we know the powerful impressions that sin has left on our minds.

But this is not the end of humanity's song. The psalmist has heard another melody that drowns out the off-key notes of sin and brokenness. God has provided redemption from sin. The Lord has given his people a firm place

to stand. He rewards those who trust in him. God is pleased to help those who turn to him.

This is a song of grace. And today we hear the same song that God gives to all who come to him in Jesus Christ to look for salvation and deliverance from sin: "He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand." May this new song also impress its words on our minds: Jesus has saved me! Can you sing this salvation song?

Father, thank you for the words and music that express your greatest gift—the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. Put the song of salvation in our mouths as well. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LIVING A NEW LIFE

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

Standing at the grave of a loved one, we feel the weight of death. Conversations fall silent. Hopes and dreams meet up against the hard reality of mortality.

Death separates.

Anyone who has lost a close friend or family member has felt the weight of this separation. Death leaves an aching hole, an empty space wherever that loved one used to be.

But through the gospel, even something as terrible as death can speak a word of hope. The death of Jesus separates us from the power of sin in our lives. And the death of a believer separates that person from the struggle with sin and brokenness in this life.

Nor does death have the final word. In God's redemptive plan, resurrection follows death.

Believers will live with Christ. What's more, all who believe in Jesus do not need to wait for physical death in order to begin living the new life in Christ. The power of sin is broken in our lives, and like Jesus, we begin to live for God. Baptism reminds us that we live as different people: not as those forever left in the clutches of sin and death, but as those destined for a life of God's glory.

How do you see yourself? By God's grace, the weight of sin and death give way to the new life in Christ, giving hope even over the grave.

Lord, I believe that you suffered death for my sake and rose again to give eternal life. Break the power of sin in me. Give me hope even in the face of the grave. Amen.

NEWLY CREATED

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!
—2 Corinthians 5:17

Do you ever wish you could have a “do-over,” a chance to go back and do something differently, to avoid a big mistake you made? Most of us can recall times when we did something foolish or sinful. We wish we could take back that one conversation or email, that one deed that remains imprinted on our minds. Perhaps some of us wonder whether God could ever accept us with such a blemish in our past.

The good news of Jesus is that God makes us new. He not only wipes away our past sins; he creates a new person by reconciling us to himself through Jesus. When we confess our fall from the goodness of God’s created intent for us, God offers us the gift of redemption in Jesus. When we trust in Christ, God does not count our sins against us. What a gracious gift!

This awesome truth gives us new freedom as we live. God knows that we are sinners, but our status at the judgment is not “sinner.” Instead, we are redeemed and newly created in Christ. God sees in us the perfect love of Jesus. He calls us to live for Jesus and to share the good news of his love with other sinners who are in need of the same grace.

God has given us something better than a do-over. He forgives us and makes us new in Jesus.

Father, I praise you! You know every weakness and sin in me, yet for Jesus’ sake you see me as righteous. Deepen my trust in Jesus, so that I may live as an ambassador for him. In his name, Amen.

A NEW SELF

*You were taught . . . to be made new in the attitude of your minds;
and to put on the new self. . . .* —Ephesians 4:22-24

In a new year, many people resolve to live differently. We promise to lose weight, find a new job, quit smoking, care better for our husband or wife, or change in some other way.

But then the cold reality hits: change is not easy. After a few weeks (or days) into a new year, old and destructive habits return.

Our change to new life in Christ is much different. It doesn't depend on our willpower. God does not just forgive our sins and then say, "Now try hard to do things differently." In Christ, God makes us into new people.

"Be made new," the apostle instructs. It's an odd command, if we stop to think about it. We are told to do something that happens to us, something we don't have the power to do.

The Bible is telling us something important here. We can

see changes in our lives, but, more importantly, we learn to see God at work, the one who is making us new. It is not enough to simply watch our language, let go of our anger at a friend, work more diligently, or treat our spouse kindly. Our minds change too, as we come to know Christ better.

Living differently is not just a goal for a new year. It is God's work of making us new in Christ. Can you see his work in you?

Holy Spirit, show me my new self. Help me to see how you are making me new. Make me more like Christ in this new year. Amen.

A NEW COMPETENCE

He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant.

—2 Corinthians 3:6

I like to think I have lots of competencies. I used to work for a plumbing supply store, so I know a few things about the building trades. I spend a lot of time with computers, so I know a little about installing programs and watching for viruses.

We often base our worth on our competencies. If we're good at a lot of things, we feel good about ourselves. We avoid things we're not good at.

But when we live as new creatures in Christ, we realize that our worth is not dependent on our competence, but on his victory over sin and death. Paul did not look to commend himself on the basis of what others thought of him, but on the work of Christ that had changed his heart and the hearts of his readers.

The truth is, there are plenty of things we are not competent to do. I can't fix a car. I can't sink a basketball jump shot consistently. My limited knowledge of computers won't help me fix yours.

Many people feel the same way about teaching others to follow Christ. We know how inadequate we are to offer hope to suffering people. It's easy to do nothing. But God promises his new creatures competence: we are ministers, not of ourselves, but of Christ. We proclaim his competence, his worth, not ours. What a freeing truth!

Lord Jesus, give us confidence. Help us to face the needs and problems around us with the hope of our Savior's competence. In your name, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.

JESUS: FIRST AND ENOUGH

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
—Colossians 1:15

A high school girl heads to her locker, fearful of the note she will probably find there: “You’re fat. You’re ugly.” A businessman goes hesitantly to the mailbox, his heart heavy about bills that will make him think, “I’m a failure. I’ll never get out of debt.”

Often the first thing we think in response to our struggles is “If only I had enough friends, or if only I had more money, then Jesus would be enough.” But the message of the gospel is that Jesus is always enough.

When Paul wrote these words, Rome had great power. The empire proclaimed that only things connected to Rome mattered. The gospel tells a different story: the crucified Savior, Jesus Christ, makes us “established and firm.” What matters is our connection to him.

Jesus, the gospel proclaims, is always first. His death and resurrection rearranged the priorities of history. The Roman Empire lost its sway long ago. The struggles of our daily lives, as difficult and painful as they are now, will someday be history. Yet Jesus will still be over all creation.

What are your priorities? In Jesus, the messages of our world are replaced with a new story. We are a new creation. We live “without blemish and free from accusation.” May this saving story be first in your life this year.

Give us a vision, Father, of the glory of Jesus Christ. Show us the awesome grace of our connection to him by faith. Make the story of his victory first in our lives. Amen.

A NEW NAME

You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.
—Isaiah 62:2

I often refer to this passage when I meet with a couple for premarital counseling. Isaiah's words may not immediately seem to speak of marriage, but they address themes that remind us of the work God does in marriage. God brings a husband and wife together to reflect God's righteousness, to delight in one another's love, and to protect the peace of their home. Marriage changes their identity to the point where they are no longer individuals but one, each belonging to the other.

Not everyone gets married, and even good marriages occasionally lack joy. But at its best, marriage pictures something of the relationship between Christ and his people (Ephesians 5:21-32). Jesus and his people are one: he takes the sin and weakness we bring to the relationship, and

we receive his righteousness and the joy of heaven.

Something new happens in salvation. God gives us a new name, a new identity: we are joined together with Christ. Isaiah pictures God publicly declaring his delight in us. Christ doesn't just help us make the best of this life; he offers the promise of eternal life, when his people will be "the praise of the earth."

Married couples keep learning what it means to be joined together; Christians grow in their relationship with Christ. May you grow in that way this year.

Thank you, Father, for delighting in us. Remind us of the new name that is ours by grace, and help us to rest in your unceasing work to make us objects of your praise. Amen.

NO MORE GROANING

We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.
—Romans 8:23

On occasion, I'll ask a person how they are doing, and they will say, jokingly, "I can't complain. But, then again, no one would listen anyhow!"

Sometimes, even people who are Christians feel like groaning. We live in a world still broken and corrupted by sin. Lives redeemed by Christ can still feel the effects of sin, death, and decay: marriages struggle, classmates argue, customers complain, friends get injured, communities suffer natural disasters. The creation groans, and we groan too.

Yet the gospel reminds us that our world is not just fallen; it is also being remade. Even in our sufferings God reveals our need for Christ, our need for the Spirit to sustain us. God is teaching us that no matter how much we may feel like groaning, Christ has also given us a

new way of speaking. We can see aches and pains as growing pains, transitional discomforts through which God is renewing all things.

Salvation brings the redemption of not only our souls but also our bodies, and of creation as well. The Holy Spirit shapes even everyday challenges in work, school, relationships, and sickness into areas of God's transforming work in us.

Are you in a complaining way today? Let God's Spirit take that groaning and turn it into a new word of praise.

Holy Spirit, show me how Christ's life is being revealed in me right now. Hear my complaints, and turn them into praise. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THEY SANG A NEW SONG

They sang a new song

—Revelation 5:9

She had Alzheimer's disease. Her memory had ceased to function meaningfully years earlier. My visits to her were brief; she didn't recognize me, and she would forget our visit before I reached the door. But she remembered the hymns she had learned in her younger days. When I would start to sing, her face would light up. Some days, she would even join in.

Music has a strong influence on our minds and souls. It accompanies our celebrations and frames our longings and sorrows. Just a few notes can remind us of an event from years ago or of someone we have loved.

The Bible is full of music. The Old Testament contains repeated calls to sing to the Lord, to praise God for his marvelous works. And in the vision recorded in Revelation we see

God's people joining in "a new song" of unparalleled celebration for God's finished work. Jesus, the Lamb, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll representing God's plan for history and salvation. The song is "new" because the full scope of Jesus' work is finally visible.

Old songs about God's past goodness leave a good, deep impression. But God's work of renewing creation will prompt us to sing anew long after memories of other things fade.

Lord Jesus, you are worthy. You are the Living One. Your resurrection has brought new life to a dying creation. Give me words, too, to join in the chorus of praise to you. In your powerful name, Amen.

NEW HEAVENS AND A NEW EARTH

“See, I will create new heavens and a new earth.”

—Isaiah 65:17

The story of our journey with God begins with creation. God made the world, “and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

Sin colors our experience of this present world; it surrounds us with harm and destruction. Even those of us who know the gift of salvation in Christ still experience sorrow, mourn lives seemingly cut short, and invest in projects we may never enjoy in this life.

So God calls attention to his work of renewing the creation: “See!” Isaiah’s words deliberately echo the creation story of Genesis, but they also move us beyond that story. The ongoing work brings “the kingdom of God” that Jesus preached (Mark 1:15) into ever-greater reality around us.

Our journey with God begins with creation, but it always takes us through the mission of Jesus.

And in him, the Spirit helps us see the renewal that God has already begun—not just renewed gifts of health or prosperity, but a peace so complete that all creation is included. This is symbolized by pictures like that of the wolf and the lamb feeding together. As you look for signs of renewal, ask, “How is the creation being cared for? How are the poor and helpless spared from harm? How are the devil’s schemes stopped or held at bay?”

Take time this year in your journey with God to look around, marvel at this new creation, and rejoice in the full work of Christ’s salvation.

Father, show us where you are renewing both us and our world by the work of Jesus. Amen.

ALL THINGS MADE NEW

"I am making everything new!"

—Revelation 21:5

For the past month, we have studied together God's work of renewing his people and all of creation. We have seen how sin introduced struggles and pains into the human experience, and how God in grace gives new life to all who trust in Christ's finished work of salvation.

In the closing chapters of the Bible, God gives us a glimpse of the rest of the story. *All* things are made new. God's new creation is better because of what we won't experience anymore: death, mourning, crying, pain, deception, shame. Even the threat of the sea, the source of much evil in the Revelation visions (see Revelation 13), is no more.

Eternity is better too because of what we will experience. The new creation is a place full of life and energy: heaven is pictured as a city that is not "up there" but "coming down" here.

Most important, God is there. For all who follow Jesus and trust in him, nothing could possibly be better. We don't simply long for a reunion with loved ones or for an eternal vacation, but for the opportunity to live forever in the presence of our Creator and Redeemer.

God is making all things new. And in Christ we can be included in that process. Follow him, and live in the joy of God's new creation!

God of creation and eternity, let me glimpse your finished work. Fill my heart with excitement as I see your new creation. And in your grace make me, too, new in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

february

Names and Titles of Jesus

Kurt Selles

“What is your only comfort in life and in death?” This is the first question asked in the Heidelberg Catechism, a teaching document that dates back to the Reformation. The answer to this opening question lists the vital ways in which Jesus provides comfort for his followers. This month we reflect on Jesus’ mighty comfort spelled out in the various names and titles he is given throughout the Bible. As *Messiah*, he fulfills God’s promises. As *Savior*, he spares us from the curse of sin and death and makes us right with God. As the *good shepherd*, he cares for us in life and in death. As the *cornerstone* of the church, he brings us together to build up his church, his body, as one fellowship including all his followers around the world. These are just a few of the rich themes we discover in studying Jesus’ names and titles. As you ponder these this month, may you gain comfort and strength for your daily life, as well as opportunities to share this comfort with a world that needs to know Jesus.

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PRINCE OF PEACE

To us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. —Isaiah 9:6

Since the dawn of history, people have longed for lives of quiet fruitfulness, enjoying peace and prosperity, surrounded by family and friends. Some have enjoyed peace in some ways, but far too many lives have been marred by conflict, violence, greed, and hate in this broken world.

The longing of every human heart is for *shalom*. *Shalom*, the Hebrew word used in the Old Testament for “peace,” consists of far more than the absence of conflict. *Shalom* entails human flourishing in right relationship with the Creator God, with our fellow creatures, and with all of God’s creation. With the words “To us a child is born,” we glimpse in our reading from Isaiah both the hope for *shalom* and the promise of *shalom* realized.

In this child, God doesn’t promise Israel (or the world) paradise under the rule of an ideal king

on this earth as we know it. Because of the indelible stain of sin our first parents passed on to us all, no earthly ruler could ever bring about such a blissful state. Isaiah proclaims the arrival not of an ideal earthly king but of the “Prince of Peace,” Jesus Christ, God himself.

Give thanks that our “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” has come, and serve him today as you anticipate his coming again, when God’s kingdom will be all in all.

Jesus, Prince of Peace, fill us with peace as we serve you and anticipate your coming again to reign in *shalom* forever. Amen.

SON OF DAVID

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the Son of David, the son of Abraham. . . .
—Matthew 1:1

When you see a Bible genealogy, do you skim through it quickly or maybe just skip over it and go to the next story? Many of us are tempted to do that when we encounter a long list of names, as in our reading for today. But genealogies are in the Bible for a reason. And this one at the beginning of the New Testament is especially important.

The word “genealogy” in our English Bible comes from the Greek word *genesis*, which means “origin, beginning, coming into being.” Here Matthew introduces a new beginning in revelation history, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. In addition, as he links fourteen generations in three groupings, Matthew shows his Jewish audience that Jesus is a descendant of some of the most important people in their history. The connection to King

David is especially important because God promised that a descendant of David would sit on the throne of Israel forever (2 Samuel 7).

Through this genealogy Matthew is showing that the long-promised Messiah, the greatest deliverer of God’s people, has come to fulfill all of God’s promises.

Do you sometimes wonder if God keeps his promises? This genealogy shows that he does, and in the power of Jesus the Messiah we can live and serve today with confidence.

O Lord, you are the God of our spiritual ancestors. Through them we see the continuing promise of your love, fulfilled in your Son, Jesus, the Son of David. Amen.

IMMANUEL: “GOD WITH US”

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). —Matthew 1:23

Just six weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas. What is your favorite Christmas memory? Certainly there are lots of traditions to cherish, but many people enjoy rehearsing the story and meaning of Jesus’ birth in hymns and carols. I always look forward to singing, “O Come, O Come, Immanuel,” because of the deep longing and hope it expresses for Jesus’ coming. *Immanuel* means “God with us.”

Looking back to Isaiah’s prophecy, Matthew saw a dual fulfillment of God’s promise. He understood that God delivered his people in a time of great need in Isaiah’s day, and Matthew also saw the fulfillment of all of God’s promises in the birth of Jesus, the Messiah. As God promised, he comes to be with us in his Son and will continue to be with us.

Further, even though we can know God in Christ now, we also long for his peace to be complete in our lives and in our world. We wait for Jesus to come again. While we wait and long, however, we have Jesus’ words of assurance to his followers: “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

With these words we can be comforted and strengthened today—comforted in knowing Jesus’ continuing presence “with us” and strengthened to carry on the mission God has given us to do. In what ways are you involved in his mission?

Jesus, Immanuel, we take comfort in your presence in our lives and our world today. Even so, we pray, come again and make all things right. Amen.

JESUS: “THE LORD SAVES”

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

—Matthew 1:21

Do you know the meaning of your name? My name *Kurt* derives from the German name *Konrad*, which means “brave counsel; bold advice.” I’m not sure, though, if my parents were thinking that name would describe me later in life!

Jesus, however, was named for what he would do for God’s people. The Greek name *Jesus* is a translation of the Hebrew name *Joshua*, which can mean “the LORD is salvation,” “the LORD saves,” or “the LORD is my help.” (*The LORD* also refers to God’s special covenant name *Yahweh*, meaning “I AM WHO I AM,” signifying that God keeps his promises.)

Joseph and Mary named their son *Jesus* not because they had some inkling of who he would become, but because they were instructed to give him this name. Speaking on behalf

of *Yahweh* himself, the angel of the Lord told Joseph that the child conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit and was to be named *Jesus*, because he would “save his people from their sins.”

This name *Jesus* was not only a fine sounding name but also a revelation of who he was and is. Let the name *Jesus* resonate in your heart today, and remember God’s faithfulness. How would you describe the ways God has worked in your life?

○ Jesus, your name and your life proclaim that “the LORD saves”! Thank you for your redeeming, transforming love, and help us to bring that love into the world today. Amen.

JESUS OF NAZARETH

“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathaniel asked.
—John 1:46

If anyone ever came from a Podunk town, it was Jesus. Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, sat on a hillside in a remote valley southwest of the Sea of Galilee. Along one of its dusty alleyways, lined with sunbaked mud walls, Jesus’ father ran a carpenter’s shop. Certainly there were no bragging rights about being from Nazareth.

Nazareth was such a backwater town that when Nathaniel first heard that Jesus was from there, he exclaimed, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” But after meeting Jesus, Nathaniel changed his mind. In Jesus of Nazareth, he met the one who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, the one for whom the people of Israel had been waiting and longing. He had met the Son of God and Son of Man.

Not only had Jesus of Nazareth come to fulfill God’s promises

to the people of Israel, but as the Son of Man, Jesus said, he would open the gates of heaven and be the way for all humanity to find peace and full life with God.

The invitation to know Jesus of Nazareth began with a simple invitation from Nathaniel’s friend Philip: “Come and see.”

Won’t you offer your family and friends today the opportunity to come and see Jesus? Then they too may know his presence in their lives and worship the Son of Man.

Jesus of Nazareth, forgive us when we fail to see who you really are. Help us to recognize you today as King of kings and Lord of lords, and to share you with the world. Amen.

MESSIAH (CHRIST): “ANOINTED ONE”

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. . . .
 —Mark 1:1

One of our neighbors in Beijing some years ago occasionally smeared melted butter on his hair. He claimed that after washing, the oils added luster to his hair.

In ancient times, anointing someone’s head with perfumed olive oil or some other oily substance was a symbolic act of consecration. For example, after God had chosen Saul to be Israel’s first king, the prophet Samuel anointed Saul’s head with oil (see 1 Samuel 10:1). For Israel, the terms “the LORD’s anointed” and “Anointed One” (see 1 Samuel 24:6, 10; Daniel 9:25) came to refer to God’s chosen one, the servant God had selected for a special task. The Hebrew term for “Anointed One” is *Messiah*, and in Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word for this same title is *Christ*.

God consecrated his Son, Jesus—the Messiah, the Christ—as his servant for the sacred task of rescuing and redeeming sinful humanity. All who trust in Christ experience living fellowship with God himself.

Tragically, though, as the prophet Isaiah foretold, the Messiah was “despised and rejected by mankind” (Isaiah 53:3). The people he had come to save found him repulsive. But as Isaiah goes on to say, by the Messiah’s wounds we have been healed. What a Savior!

How will you honor Jesus the Messiah today?

Lord Jesus, Messiah, you are the one chosen by God to be our Savior. Help us today to live in gratitude and trust for all you have done for us. In your name, Amen.

KING OF THE JEWS

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

—Matthew 2:2

The Magi came a long way seeking the new "king of the Jews." This seems ironic because the Magi, or "wise men," were subject to their own king, the ruler of Persia. But they followed a star to honor the birth of a foreign ruler, the newly born "king of the Jews." When they finally found the newborn king, the Magi worshiped him.

Herod's jealousy revealed a second irony. Herod was anxious and jealous because he thought anyone looking for the "king of the Jews" should be seeking him. So, to protect his throne, Herod went on a murderous rampage (see Matthew 2:16).

These ironies point out some significant truths about Jesus, the "king of the Jews." As Matthew later reveals, Jesus claims to be King not only of the Jews but also of Iraqis,

Chinese, Americans, and all other peoples.

And this is not the last time Jesus is called "king of the Jews." When Jesus hangs on the cross, the Roman governor Pilate hangs a sign above his head, proclaiming him "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS" (John 19:19). This King of all humankind suffered and died for you and me.

How will you worship him today with your thoughts, words, and deeds?

Jesus, King of the Jews and of all peoples, we bow down before you like the Magi did. By your mercy and grace, help us to worship you in every area of our lives. Amen.

BELOVED SON

A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."
—Matthew 3:17

In a muddy little river in the desert, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John. To the Mediterranean world at that time, this was an insignificant, unnoticed event. But this scene along an isolated bend of the Jordan River portrayed a key moment in God's plan of salvation for our fallen world.

Jesus didn't need John's baptism of repentance. Unlike those gathered at the Jordan—and us—Jesus was not conceived and born in sin. John must have known this, because he hesitated to baptize Jesus.

So why did Jesus insist on receiving John's baptism?

In this baptism at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus acknowledges John as the final prophet of the Old Testament preparing the way for the Messiah. And although Jesus was without sin,

he identified with the sin and shame each of us face apart from God, shame that ultimately resulted in his death on the cross for our sake.

Because he accepted the shame of our sin, we hear the Father's voice as Jesus came out of the water: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Because Jesus took on the shame of our rebellion against God, now God says to you and to me, "You are my child." Keep this in mind today as you seek to please God!

Jesus, God's beloved Son, by taking on the shame of our sin, you have made us God's children. Help us today to please you and the Father, to your glory. Amen.

SON OF GOD

*The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."
—Matthew 4:3*

The first time we hear Jesus called by the title "Son of God," he is being addressed by the devil in the desert. While tempting Jesus, the devil calls him twice by that name.

At first, it seems that the tempter is questioning Jesus' divinity. But we've already heard at Jesus' baptism that God announced, "This is my Son" (Matthew 3:17). What the tempter means is "Since you are the Son of God, use your power to turn these stones into bread." In other words, the tempter is trying to lure Jesus into using his divine power for his own purposes.

Why is Jesus tempted? By being tempted, Jesus shows that he is human like us. And by overcoming temptation, he shows his ability to carry out his Father's will. Through his perfect obedience, Jesus will rescue us from the devil. Jesus' rejection of the

devil's temptations also provides us the perfect model for enduring temptation. Jesus used words of Scripture to stand firm against the devil. We too must let God's holy Word resonate in us so that when we are tempted, the echo of his voice will guide our hearts, our desires, and our actions.

When you face temptation today, listen for God's voice and turn to Jesus, because he is able to help all who are tempted. And if you fail, get up and be assured that you are forgiven, because Jesus did not fail in rescuing us from sin.

Son of God, pioneer and perfecter of our faith, help us to hear the Father's voice and to trust you in resisting the temptations we face today and every day. Amen.

SON OF MAN

Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." —Matthew 8:20

In today's reading we find the first use of the title "Son of Man" in the New Testament. This is Jesus' favorite title for himself. (He uses it 81 times in the gospel accounts of his life and ministry.)

Why does Jesus use this title? By calling himself the Son of Man, Jesus identifies with each of us: he is like us in all of our humanity, except that he is without sin. This title also identifies Jesus as chosen by God to represent humanity. In other words, this title points to Jesus' humanity—as the Son of Man who is also the Son of God, only he can carry out the task God has given him to stand in our place.

In today's verses we also see the burden of the Son of Man. Though he is God himself, Lord of the heavens and the earth—more powerful than all other powers—Jesus humbles himself.

He doesn't even have a place to call his own; no place to lay his head on a pillow to sleep, one of life's most basic needs. In Jesus' humility, we witness his profound commitment to the will of the Father as well as his commitment to us.

Surely such humility, commitment, and love demand our all. What will you do for the Son of Man today?

Lord Jesus, you have given your all for us. Help us by your Spirit's power to give our all for you. We ask this not because we are worthy but because of your love for us. In your precious name we pray. Amen.

SAVIOR

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."
—Luke 2:11

When our daughter was small, her nickname for a time was Augie. I couldn't tell you why, except that her baby sister started calling her that. Sometimes, however, nicknames reveal something about a person, like "Tiny" or "Eagle-Eye." In the ancient world, some leaders had exaggerated nicknames or titles describing their accomplishments, such as "Alexander the Great" and "William the Conqueror."

Jesus has a title that describes his accomplishments. In several places he is called "Jesus the Savior." But this title is no exaggeration. When heaven's angels appeared to a group of shepherds watching over their flocks in a field near Bethlehem, they were bringing good news. They were announcing the birth of the One who really would save us, by dying in our place, restoring our relationship with

God, conquering death, and bringing *shalom* (peace) into the world.

Why should we accept the claim about Jesus as Savior? Now only eyes of faith can see Jesus for who he is. But one day, as the apostle Paul declares, when Jesus returns, all of creation will recognize this Savior for who he is and finally bow before him as the King of kings and Lord of lords (see Philippians 2:9-11).

How will you worship him today?

Dearest Lord Jesus, in your humble state we often fail to see you for who you are, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Savior. Help us to see you in all of your glory and mercy. Amen.

THE WORD

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
—John 1:1

Pitching a tent is one of the first challenges of camping: spreading the tent out, attaching the poles, pounding the stakes into the ground, and finally raising the structure. John uses this picture to describe Jesus' coming to become one of us and live with us.

John's introduction to his gospel account is one of the most beautiful and important passages in the New Testament. John begins by calling Jesus the "*Logos*," or "Word." By means of this mysterious title, John not only acknowledges Jesus' existence before the creation of the world but also declares Jesus' role in creating the world. From the very start, John is letting us know that Jesus is one with God the Father and that Jesus himself is God.

Later in these opening verses, the description of Jesus as "the

Word" gets personal. John says, "The Word became flesh." Literally, the Son of God took on all that is involved in being human. Then John adds that the Word "made his dwelling among us." The Greek word John uses here can be translated more literally to say that Jesus "pitched his tent" among us. He couldn't get any closer than that.

What a comfort to know how close God comes to be with us! Because Jesus knows us so well, we can go to him with every need. Have you shared your needs with him today?

Jesus, the Word, we thank you for pitching your tent right where we are. You have shown how much you love us. Help us to love and serve you in all we do. Amen.

THE BREAD OF LIFE

Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

—John 6:35

When our family lived in Taiwan some years ago, we didn't like the taste of the canned butter used in making the local bread. So once a week, I made several loaves of bread. Except for occasional leavening difficulties and the irregular shapes of those loaves, I loved making and eating homemade bread.

The crowds following Jesus loved bread too. Jesus had just provided a miracle feast for more than 5,000 people by multiplying five loaves and two fish, and the people followed after him, hoping for more bread. Their hunger for physical bread provided Jesus with a teaching moment to talk about spiritual bread.

In the first of seven "I am" statements in John's gospel account, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." In their eagerness for free food, the crowds had missed

the main point of Jesus' banquet in the wilderness. They had forgotten that God had provided the ancient people of Israel with bread from heaven (manna) in the wilderness (see Exodus 16). And the physical bread Jesus had provided pointed to the spiritual bread of his body, the bread of life. Through his death, Jesus provided the bread of life for all God's people.

Homemade bread is wonderful, but eventually it runs out. Only those who feast spiritually on Jesus' body will be satisfied. On what are you feasting today?

Jesus, bread of life, feed us till we want no more, that we may do your will today and every day. Amen.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

"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

Are you familiar with electromagnetic energy? That's the technical term for something very basic to life: *light*. In his second "I am" statement in John's gospel, Jesus claims, "I am the light of the world."

Jesus makes this claim during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles celebrated at the temple in Jerusalem. During this feast, four giant candelabras or lampstands (possibly 75 feet high) were lit in one of the temple courts. Because of the temple's prominent place, the light of these candles could be seen throughout Jerusalem. While the light radiated, crowds of people danced in the streets celebrating God's deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt.

With these candles burning brightly, Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world." Notice that he wasn't claiming to be

Israel's national savior. He was making a global claim to deliver sinners from the darkness of rebellion against God, a darkness that infects us individually and plagues our world with hatred and violence. Jesus' salvation is for all who believe in him, since he is the light for all nations.

Do you know this "light of the world"? If you do, let him shine in your life today and bring you into closer fellowship with the Father and with those around you.

Jesus, light of the world, shine your radiant light in the dark corners of our lives. Draw us closer to yourself and our Father in heaven. Let us shine in this dark world for you. Amen.

THE GATE

"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture." —John 10:9

Facing south in the massive square at the center of Beijing, China, stand the massive red walls and gate of Tiananmen, which means, "the gate of heavenly peace." It remains one of the grandest entrances in the world.

In making his third "I am" statement, Jesus talks about being like a gate for sheep. A gateway for sheep isn't nearly as imposing as palace gates. A sheep gate usually consists of a simple, wooden entrance through which sheep pass to and from grazing fields.

As humble as the image of a gate for sheep may seem, Jesus uses it to make an audacious claim about himself: "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." Though other gateways may offer a kind of salvation to a more meaningful life—whether they are ideolo-

gies, philosophies, or religions—ultimately they prove to be a dead end, leading nowhere.

Only Jesus can truly save. Through him we pass from death to life. He is the gate, the portal, the way to knowing God the Father as the creator of heaven and earth. Entering from death to life, submitting to God as our creator and sustainer, we find abundant life.

Don't let the simplicity of this gate fool you; Jesus truly is the gate of heavenly peace. Do you hear his voice? How will you follow him today?

O Jesus, gate to heavenly peace, by your Spirit's power, lead us to abundant life in God our Father, and make us into a gateway by which others can know you. Amen.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me."
—John 10:14

Traveling with students in Jordan some years ago, I spotted a shepherd in a field with a flock of sheep scattered around him. He sat in a lawn chair, legs crossed, reading a newspaper.

The Old Testament shepherd image was much different, often representing major leaders in Israel, like Moses and David. Even more significant, the ancient biblical imagery of the Lord as our shepherd portrayed God's tending, nurture, protection, and care for his people (see Psalm 23).

In his fourth "I am" statement, Jesus calls himself "the good shepherd." In doing so, he not only asserts his divinity but also claims to be the good and noble shepherd of God's people. This is in contrast with examples of bad shepherds, corrupt and selfish rulers and religious leaders among God's people. In call-

ing himself the good shepherd, Jesus contrasts his care of God's flock with that of corrupt leaders. He compares them to hired hands, who don't fully care for the flock even while they are being paid.

In times of danger, when a wolf would come or there was a blinding snowstorm, hired hands might give up and run, thinking only of his own well-being. The good shepherd, however, protects and cares for his flock in any situation.

Jesus, the good shepherd, stayed with us even at the cost of his life. Take comfort in that truth today, and listen for the voice of your good shepherd!

Jesus, thank you for being our good shepherd. Help us to listen and respond to your voice and your leading today. Amen.

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

“Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.” —John 11:25

After giving a talk about Jesus’ resurrection to some Chinese university students, I was asked, “Do you mean that if I don’t believe in the resurrection, I can’t be a Christian?” When I said that believing in the resurrection is at the heart of Christianity, the student turned away disappointed.

In his fifth “I am” statement, Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” According to science, it’s easy to reject Jesus’ claim, because people have not observed anyone coming back to life. Nevertheless, Christians believe that on the third day following his crucifixion, Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus’ resurrection sealed the victory over sin and death. The resurrection is so essential, Paul says, that if God didn’t raise Jesus from the dead, our faith is useless and

“we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19).

By faith, however, through the Holy Spirit’s work in our hearts, we believe that God did raise Jesus from the dead. And we enjoy new life in Jesus and look forward to life with him forever. This is no myth or fanciful escape from the present; it is simply the truth at the heart of being a Christian.

Do you believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life? In what ways can Jesus’ resurrection shape how you live today?

Jesus, you are the resurrection and the life, and in you we have new life and the hope of eternal life. Work in our hearts and lives today as we serve you and look forward to spending eternity with you. Amen.

THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." —John 14:6

After a military victory, Julius Caesar boasted, "I came, I saw, I conquered." In the sixth of his "I am" statements, Jesus says something even more outrageous, except that it's true: "I am the way and the truth and the life."

On the eve of his betrayal, Jesus told his disciples that he would soon be leaving them. We can sense the disciples' deep fear. They had given up everything to follow him, believing he was the Messiah who would deliver God's people. At one point, Thomas interrupted Jesus and asked, "We don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Condensing his teaching into one phrase, Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Here Jesus claims beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is the only way to know God the Father. No other path can bring us to the throne of the King of creation. Only in and through Jesus can we know the spiritual truth about our lives and our world—and have abundant life.

Do you accept Jesus' outrageous claim to be "the way and the truth and the life"? Live today with the blessing and confidence of knowing God's truth deep in your heart and enjoying full life in him.

Holy Spirit, work in our hearts today. Help us to trust in Jesus as "the way and the truth and the life." Help us to live with confidence because of who he is. Amen.

THE TRUE VINE

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. . . . I am the vine; you are the branches."
—John 15:1, 5

Sometimes after a summer storm, I notice downed branches along the sidewalks in our neighborhood. If they lie there for several days, the leaves on those fallen branches fade from green to brown. Separated from the tree, branches die.

Jesus uses the image of a vine and its branches to describe life in him. In this seventh "I am" statement, Jesus declares, "I am the true vine." Like branches that depend on a tree or vine, we only have true life when we are connected to Jesus. Only when we are attached to him are we "tapped into" God. Jesus provides our sustenance for the daily challenges of living.

But being connected to Jesus is not merely an end in itself. Branches produce leaves and fruit. Only by remaining connected to him, as a branch is connected to a tree or vine, can

we bear the fruit of Christlike living. By the power of God's Spirit in us, we can bear the spiritual fruit of "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). When we are connected to the true vine, to Jesus himself, we produce fruit, glorifying God and drawing others to his love and mercy.

Like a branch attached to the vine, are you connected to Jesus and bearing fruit?

Jesus, you are the true vine, and we are your branches. By your grace and through the Holy Spirit, keep us connected to you so that we produce fruit that glorifies your Father. Amen.

CONSOLATION OF ISRAEL

Simeon, who was righteous and devout . . . was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

—Luke 2:25

In our passage today we meet Simeon, a righteous, devout man waiting for the “consolation of Israel.” Isaiah 40:1-2 speaks about this consolation with these words, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for.” Isaiah indicated that this would be the work of the Messiah, the promised deliverer of God’s people.

Now, the Holy Spirit had promised Simeon that he would see “the Lord’s Messiah” before he died. And when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple, the Spirit moved Simeon to go there. Simeon recognized Israel’s consolation in the baby Jesus, and he praised God, announcing that the comfort of Israel had come as “a light for

revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of [God’s] people Israel.” This child, Jesus, would save God’s people everywhere from their sins.

In Jesus, we have God’s consolation, his comfort, that we have been forgiven. Let the consolation of Jesus dwell in your heart today as you bring his comfort to the world around you.

Jesus, our consolation, only you can provide true comfort. Through your life and death, you have made us alive. Help us to live in such way that we draw the world to you. In your name, Amen.

ADVOCATE

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

—1 John 2:1

Anyone who finds themselves in a tight legal spot wants the best available lawyer to represent them.

In today's verses, John uses the Greek word *parakletos* to call Jesus our lawyer. In the ancient world, a *parakletos* was an advocate who pleaded a defendant's cause before a judge. In his gospel account, John uses this word often to describe the Holy Spirit's role in the believer's life (see John 14-16). John uses it here, however, to describe Jesus as the counsel for our defense, our legal representative, our advocate before God the Father, judge of all humankind.

Because each of us has broken God's holy law, we stand guilty and condemned. But God loved us so much that he provided an advocate for us. Jesus, our advocate, is not swayed by personal interests. He is right-

teous and blameless and has made us right with the Judge of the universe.

Because of what our righteous advocate has accomplished for us—through his death, resurrection, and ascension—we are now credited with his righteousness before God. Jesus will ceaselessly continue to advocate for us.

When you stumble today, take comfort in your advocate, the Lord Jesus, and in his mercy that never fails.

Jesus, our advocate before the Father, help us in gratitude and in humility to bend to your will today. Help us to honor you in a world that needs to receive your grace. Amen.

CORNERSTONE

You are . . . members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ himself as the chief cornerstone.
—Ephesians 2:19-20

Christian churches around the world are built using a wide variety of materials. Construction materials may be of stone, wood, metal, mud, and straw—to name just a few examples. But all Christian churches have one thing in common: Jesus is the key building component of the church.

Paul calls Jesus Christ the cornerstone of the church. In constructing ancient buildings, the cornerstone was the principle stone placed at the corner of a building, and all other stones were set in reference to it. The cornerstone set the direction so that the structure would be straight and true.

Jesus Christ is the cornerstone on which the whole church depends and to which the whole church aligns. And as the apostle Peter describes it, all who believe in Christ are “like

living stones . . . being built into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5), which holds together as the one edifice of God’s people spread throughout the earth.

What is your church made of? Let this imagery remind you that the church is not a building but the gathering of God’s people established on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ.

Let us all give thanks for Christ’s mercy in joining us with his followers around the world!

Jesus, in and through you as our cornerstone, we belong to your church here at home and around the world. By your grace, help us to be your presence wherever we are. Amen.

ROCK

They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. —1 Corinthians 10:3-4

On a shelf in our home, we have a bowl of rocks collected from around the world. They vary in shape and size and color and texture. Though they mean something to us, they probably would not mean much to anyone else.

Paul's image of Jesus as a rock may seem a bit confusing at first. We can understand Jesus as a rock of dependability, but as a "spiritual rock"?

In calling Jesus a spiritual rock, Paul reminds believers that just as God provided water from the rock for his people in the wilderness (see Exodus 17), God continues to provide for his people today. Just as the sustenance in the wilderness came through Jesus, the spiritual rock, so Jesus sustains us today.

Jesus as our spiritual rock is a great comfort indeed. But

there's also a challenge in this image of the spiritual rock. Despite the food and drink provided in the wilderness, the Israelites failed to trust and obey God. Paul uses their failure as a warning and a challenge to the Corinthians and to us. God provides, but we must trust and obey.

Today, as you go about your life, keep your mind and heart focused on the spiritual food and drink that Jesus provides, and then, step by step, trust and obey.

Lord Jesus, our spiritual rock, help us to trust you as our only source of strength and to follow you in loving service today and always. Amen.

HEAD OF THE BODY

Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

—Ephesian 4:15

It goes without saying that the head is the most important part of the body. A body can keep living and functioning without many parts, but not without its head.

Paul uses the image of a body to describe Jesus Christ as the head of the church. Christ provides the direction and the coordination of his body. Most significant in this imagery, though, is Christ's authority over his church.

Paul's purpose here is to help us see the nature of our relationship to Jesus and what that means for our relationship with others as parts of Christ's body. The image of the head and the body vividly shows that in a way like flesh and bone, joined together by supporting ligaments, we are growing and being built up in love, under Jesus, the head of the body.

As we can see from this image of Christ as the head of the body, his church, the names and titles of Jesus are not mere abstract images but vivid descriptions of spiritual truth. And with this vivid image, Paul reminds us that we are under Christ's authority and that we belong to each other.

What will you do today to build up Jesus' body in love?

Dear Jesus, you are the head of your body, the church. Help each of us, wherever we are, scattered throughout the earth, to submit to your authority and to cherish and support all of your parts, our brothers and sisters in Christ. In your name, Amen.

PIONEER AND PERFECTER OF FAITH

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

—Hebrews 12:1-2

Do you know what it means to “tartle”? It’s a Scottish word used when, after being introduced to someone, you promptly forget that person’s name. In embarrassment, Scottish people say, “Pardon my tartle!”

Some words are hard to translate from one language to another. We have a case of this with Jesus’ title “pioneer and perfecter of faith.” The author uses the Greek word *archegos* to describe Jesus’s relation to our faith. The word originally meant “hero or founder of a city.” Since the Greek word doesn’t neatly translate into English, it is translated variously as “pioneer,” “author,” “originator,” “guide,” “initiator,” or “source.”

The same difficulty in translation is found with the Greek *teleiotes*, the second title for Jesus in relation to our faith. This

word originally meant “to carry through or complete,” and it is translated as “perfecter,” “completer,” or “finisher.”

Despite the complexity of translating this title of Jesus, the truth is simple and profound: Jesus, who initiated our faith through the power of the Holy Spirit, will remain with us until we see him face to face. He is the founder and finisher of our faith. So let’s take comfort in this truth and run the good race of faith by following Jesus.

Lord Jesus, we take great comfort and confidence in you as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Help us to follow you courageously today in obedience and loving service. Amen.

MORNING STAR

"I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."
—Revelation 22:16

In the last chapter of the Bible, Jesus calls himself an unusual name, "the bright Morning Star."

At first glance, this image may seem puzzling. Today we know that what ancient people called the morning star, shining brightly before dawn, is the planet Venus. And because the Romans referred to the morning star as Lucifer, and Bible translators used this as a name for the devil, Jesus' self-description seems confusing. Our Scripture reading for today, however, helps shed light on this image.

King Balak of Moab had hired the prophet Balaam to curse Israel. Compelled to speak for God, however, Balaam could only *bless* the Israelites. In the blessing we have read today, Balaam prophesies, "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter

will rise out of Israel." By calling himself the "bright Morning Star," Jesus links himself with Balaam's prophecy, declaring that he is the Messiah from the line of David. Jesus will one day defeat all of God's enemies.

Jesus has ushered in the kingdom of God, but we still wait for the kingdom to come fully when he returns. Then God's peace—*shalom*—will reign in the new heavens and earth.

As you watch and wait for Jesus' return, take comfort *and* act to bring the glory of the Morning Star to all that God has given you to do today.

Jesus, bright Morning Star, shine in our lives. By your Spirit's power, help us to shine for you in the world till you come again. Amen.

FAITHFUL WITNESS

Jesus Christ . . . is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. —Revelation 1:5

Witnesses play an important role in our legal system. They verify the details of an event as they see it. Their testimony has the power to convince a jury to convict or acquit. In our passage today John calls Jesus “the faithful witness.”

As God’s faithful witness, Jesus reveals his relationship to the Father. He also bears witness to the Father’s plan to save all who believe in him as Lord and Savior. In addition, he testifies about what it means to live in righteous submission to the Father’s will.

But Jesus’ witness doesn’t end with explaining God’s truth. The Greek word for “witness” is *martyrs*, the root of our English word “martyr.” Jesus has not only testified about God’s truth; he has verified his verbal witness by giving his life—for us.

Jesus is the witness par excellence. John uses the term “faithful witness” here to remind his first readers, who were experiencing doubt in the midst of persecution for their faith, that Jesus is the faithful witness in speaking truth and in giving his life.

As Jesus’ followers, we too are called to be his witnesses, both with our words and with our lives.

Following the example of Jesus, how will you be a faithful witness today in speaking and living out God’s truth?

Jesus, you are the faithful witness of God’s truth, both in your words and in the gift of your life. Help us also to be your faithful witnesses today with our words and our lives. In your name, Amen.

ALPHA AND OMEGA

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."
—Revelation 22:13

"From start to finish," "from top to bottom," "from first to last"—each of these phrases expresses completeness, thoroughness, totality. In our passage today, Jesus asserts his totality using the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet: "I am the Alpha and the Omega." And then, to make sure we get it, he adds, ". . . the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." Jesus uses this name for himself nine times in the book of Revelation.

As "the Alpha and the Omega," Jesus declares his divinity, being one with God the Father; he announces his preexistence for all time and eternity; and he asserts his sovereignty as Lord of heaven and earth, the Creator and the final Judge to whom every knee shall bow.

Jesus also links the claim "I am the Alpha and the Omega"

with his declaration "I am coming soon." With pain and suffering so rampant in our world, the promise of his return to make all things right is a great comfort. As with many of Jesus' words, however, his coming again presents challenges too.

Will the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, find us faithful when he returns? Be comforted but also challenged today, as you serve the Lord of the ages.

Jesus, we worship and adore you as Alpha and Omega. By your Spirit's power, help us to lay our lives before you and serve you today and every day. Amen.

NOTES

NOTES

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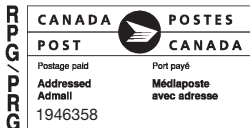
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