



Today

Sept/Oct 2024

refresh, refocus, renew

YOU ARE
MY WITNESSES

ALSO: RESPONDING TO GRACE

Dear Friends:

Jesus not only loves us and gave his life for us; he also calls us to join him in sharing his love with the world and renewing his creation. While Jesus' call to join him in mission may overwhelm us, he has promised us his presence and has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us. He also calls us together as the church, his living body throughout the earth, to work together to bring his rule on earth as it is in heaven.



In September, Pastor Kevin DeRaaf, director of Resonate Global Mission, reminds us that Jesus calls some of us to serve him in faraway places while he calls many, many others to share his love at home, right where they are. And in these devotions we discover anew that wherever Jesus calls us, we have opportunities to share his love with all kinds of people around us.

In October, Pastor Marc Nabié explores the theme of gratitude, one of the most important qualities of the Christian life. Focusing on Ephesians 4-6, Pastor Nabié, director of ReFrame Ministries' French-language media ministry in Burkina Faso, West Africa, highlights practical aspects of gratitude, such as humility, graciousness, unity, and service. Exploring gratitude encourages and challenges each of us to embrace the new life offered in Christ and to let gratitude flow from our hearts because of all that Jesus has done for us.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kurt Selles'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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“You Are My Witnesses”
Kevin DeRaaf



“Responding to Grace”
Marc Nabié

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ReFrame
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You Are My Witnesses

Kevin DeRaaf

In Acts 1:8, Jesus says “You will be my witnesses. . . .” What does it mean to be a witness for Christ?

One of the amazing things about God is that he chooses to work with us. God wants us to join him on a mission to save people who don’t know him and to renew all of creation! That seems like a tall, intimidating order, but we are not alone. Jesus has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he calls us not only as individuals but also as his church.

In our work with God on this mission through the years, we have learned that we all have this call on our lives. Some of us are called to serve in God’s mission in other lands, and some of us are called to serve and share the love of God with our neighbors right where we are. Wherever God calls us, we have an opportunity to share the love of Christ with the people God has placed in our lives—and it may not be as intimidating as it seems!

Kevin DeRaaf is the director of Resonate Global Mission, the Christian Reformed mission agency working in more than 40 countries around the world. With a focus on encouraging others to join in God’s mission where they are, Kevin believes that God’s purpose for the local church is to shine as a community of love and grace, showing in tangible ways that Jesus is the hope of the world. He and his wife, Jacquie, have three children and four grandchildren and live in Burlington, Ontario.

CALLED TO BE A WITNESS

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses. . . ."
—Acts 1:8

I once served as a witness on a legal matter. The lawyers determined to make sure that my memories were clear and that the timeline of events was accurate. They also told me to share everything about the situation that I could; they would decide which details were important and which ones weren't.

It is significant that Jesus, before he ascended to heaven, commissioned his followers with these words: "You will be my witnesses. . . ." We serve as witnesses to Jesus, the Lord of the universe.

I don't know about you, but this feels like a daunting task, especially when Jesus says that our witness begins where we are and extends to the ends of the earth. Do I have what it takes to be that kind of witness?

Thankfully, we do not do this alone.

As Jesus commissions us, he promises the gift of his Holy Spirit. He also commissions us, his followers, as a community. This is our task, together.

This month, let's explore how to bear witness to Jesus. In my work with Resonate Global Mission, I see examples of faithful witness every day. The Spirit is alive and well around the world! I look forward to exploring and sharing with you what mission looks like in our lives today.

Jesus, as we explore what it means to be your witnesses, we want to open our hearts to your call. Fill us with your Spirit and teach us how we can grow as witnesses for you. Amen.

BETTER THAN BEFORE!

“See, I am doing a new thing!”

—Isaiah 43:19

Recently my wife and I replaced our old kitchen stove with a new one. The first time I used it, I put a pan of milk on the range to make oatmeal and turned it on high. I turned around briefly to get some other ingredients—and the next thing I knew, milk was running everywhere, even between the glass panes of the oven door. Would our new stove be ruined? As we removed screws to get at the glass, we wondered, “How did this happen? Will it ever be fixed?”

For many people, it seems the world is that way too. Problems in the world and in our lives can feel overwhelming. We find ourselves asking, “Will things ever be fixed”?

In Isaiah 43, God speaks to his people as they struggle with feeling that way. They are in exile, and their country

is in ruins. In despair, they are thinking it will never be fixed. But God declares, “See, I am doing a new thing! . . . Do you not perceive it?” We are reminded that God is at work doing something new, and he invites us to join him.

Our stove eventually got fixed. And God’s plan for the world is far greater. He shows us that things will not just be restored—they will be even better than before! Do we have the eyes to see?

Lord of all, thank you for the new things you are doing in our world. Please give us eyes to see what you are doing today, and help us to notice all that you are making new in our lives! In Jesus, Amen.

YOU WANT ME TO WITNESS WHERE?

“... and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” —Acts 1:8

Have you ever received a gift but were not quite sure what to do with it? I once received some freeze-dried army food. I didn't need it right away, so it sat in my closet for a long time, waiting for the right moment to be used—which never came. One day I quietly got rid of that unopened gift.

Jesus' gift to us is not like that. He gives us the Holy Spirit, and he explains what this gift is for and where we will use it. “You will be my witnesses,” he said to his followers, “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Those locations had specific meanings for Jesus' first disciples. Jerusalem was the place they were in, and the Spirit would send them to be witnesses to the people in that local area. Judea was the region around Jerusalem, where the people were a lot like them.

Samaria was a neighboring region that included people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The Holy Spirit would send them to those places and then also to “the ends of the earth,” to share the good news of Jesus with people who lived far away.

Jesus offers the same gift of the Spirit to us. Who are the people living in our “Jerusalem,” “Judea,” and “Samaria,” and in all nations to the ends of the earth? How can we support God's mission in each of those places?

Jesus, thank you for pouring out the gift of your Spirit in our lives, inviting each one of us to join you in sharing the good news in our neighborhoods and around the world. Amen.

THE COST OF WITNESSING

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted.
—2 Timothy 3:12

As we explore what it means to be witnesses for Jesus, it is important to talk about the cost of witnessing. Did you know that in the Bible the Greek word for “witnesses” is *martyres*, which also gives us the word “martyr”?

Since the beginning of the church, there has been strong opposition to the Christian faith. The New Testament includes many stories of the persecution of Christians. And persecution continues today. *Christianity Today* magazine reported that about 13 Christians worldwide are killed every day because of their faith. In addition, 12 Christian buildings or churches are attacked, and 12 Christians are unjustly arrested each day. More than 360 million Christians in the world live with some kind of persecution or oppression because of their faith. They all bear witness to

their faith and trust in Jesus as their living hope and Savior.

In 2 Timothy, Paul describes the ways he was persecuted, and he says that believers can expect persecution for living “a godly life in Christ.” But he offers hope too. Although he faced many persecutions, Paul said, “The Lord rescued me from all of them.”

Paul also reassures us that “all Scripture is God-breathed” and that it trains and equips us to face all kinds of worldly obstacles as we live “through faith in Christ Jesus.”

Lord, please protect all of your servants around the world today. Comfort them as they encounter persecution, and work through them to shine your light to people everywhere. Amen.

STANDING FIRM IN THE LORD

In all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.

—1 Thessalonians 3:7-8

Paul thanked God for his Thessalonian friends, who, despite knowing they would suffer for their faith in Jesus, were sure of the security they would find in him. What a witness they were to the Savior! The Thessalonians were persecuted, but they remained steadfast in their faith—and that is not always easy.

It can be difficult to remain faithful, especially when life presents unexpected challenges. When Paul sent Timothy to check on the Thessalonians, he was encouraged and filled with joy that their faith had remained strong. He said, “For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.”

Remaining firm in Christ is not always easy—but God tells us about the peace, comfort, and redemption he provides when we stay near to him despite

our challenges. Life can bring grief, worry, fear, and a host of other difficult and uncomfortable emotions.

It can be hard to accept circumstances that are unpredictable and far outside of our own control, especially when our hearts yearn to make things better. But when we draw near to God, he promises to give us his peace that surpasses all understanding. God’s presence strengthens our weary hearts through challenges, persecution, and unforeseen circumstances—and for that we praise him!

Lord, plant our feet firmly in you. Help us to draw nearer to you in challenging times and to trust in you. Amen.

GOD IS ALWAYS AHEAD OF US

Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith!"

—Matthew 15:28

In today's story Jesus and his disciples were in an area where most of the people did not know or worship God. The disciples were not familiar with the customs and culture and likely would have felt uncomfortable there. Then they met a woman whose daughter was "demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

Jesus' response to her sounds puzzling. Was he making a point to everyone listening? Was he testing her? He said that as a non-Jewish person, she was not the focus of his ministry. But she was determined to find help for her hurting daughter. She said, in effect, "Whatever crumbs of goodness you are willing to throw to us will be enough." And Jesus celebrated the woman's faith and healed her daughter "at that moment." Amazing!

Sometimes we think that witnessing is about bringing Jesus into our conversations and relationships. But here we are reminded that God is always ahead of us. The woman already had an emerging trust that Jesus was her one true hope. To be a witness is to discern and celebrate where God is already at work.

Where do you see God moving ahead and stirring people's faith, questions, and longings?

Dear God, give us the eyes to see where you are already at work in the places we go today and in our neighborhood. Help us respond faithfully to the good work of your Spirit. Amen.

WATCHING ON THE WALLS

I have posted watchmen on your walls, Jerusalem. . . .

—Isaiah 62:6

In this vision of hope we find a powerful call to action. In verse 6, God says: “I have posted watchmen on your walls, Jerusalem. They will never be silent day or night.” This is a powerful picture of intercessory prayer, in which people pray for others and for God’s work in their lives. In ancient times the purpose of watching on the walls of a city was to observe what was happening and to spot enemies or danger that might approach.

We don’t have literal watchmen on the walls in our culture today, but there are lots of people who do something similar. Weather forecasters tell us what weather is coming. Financial experts keep an eye on the markets. Others watch what’s going on in geopolitics.

Here, in Isaiah, God says that he has put watchmen on the walls—people who discern

what is going on in the spiritual realm and pray about it. They are like believers who pray with passion and deep conviction, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

Is there a situation stirring your heart to prayer? How might the Spirit be calling you to pray for your neighbors, co-workers, or fellow students? God invites you to be a watcher on the wall. Strong prayer for others and for the coming of God’s kingdom is a key strategy in his mission.

Thank you, God, for the power of intercessory prayer. As watchers on the wall, we pray for your kingdom to come and your will to be done on earth as in heaven. Amen.

SABBATH: STOP!

“ . . . the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God.”

—Exodus 20:10

I am not very good at resting. I have noticed that I'm becoming more distracted by my phone and more captivated by the world online. I love to learn, and the internet provides endless opportunities to keep exploring information.

I have to admit that for all of my good intentions, my life has gotten busier, not quieter. Busy seasons probably crop up in your life too, even if you are good at taking care of yourself. We live in a world that prizes busyness and ever-increasing productivity.

Well, today is Sunday. This is a reminder that we are not designed to stay busy all the time. God declared long ago that we need a good rhythm of rest and work. Then, to honor the day of Jesus' resurrection, Christians shifted the celebration of Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday.

What I like about celebrating Sabbath on the first day of the week is that it reminds us that we begin our week with rest. Whether or not you are able to rest today, I pray that you may find time in your weekly rhythm to stop, rest, and listen anew to God, taking time to worship the Lord and to rest. Give thanks and praise God for all the good things he has done in this world and in your life. Reflect, pray, and listen to his guiding Word in the Bible and in your heart. What might God be saying to you?

Lord, thank you for the Sabbath. Thank you for giving us time to rest. Help us to rest well today, and to make sure we take time in our lives to rest in your presence. Amen.

MY LIFE'S PRAYER

I want to know Christ. . . .

—Philippians 3:10

Researchers in Europe went door to door, asking people about their belief in God. One question was this: “Do you believe in a God who intervenes in human lives, who changes the course of history, and performs miracles?” A typical response to this question was “No, I don’t believe in that God. I believe in the ordinary God.”

I admit that it can be tempting to prefer “the ordinary God”—that is, a God who is there when I need him but who remains mostly quiet in the background while I go about my life.

Fortunately the Scriptures do not let us settle with that notion of an ordinary God. The Jesus we meet in the New Testament entered our world, carried our burden of sin to the cross, died in our place, and then rose from the dead and later ascended to rule with

God in heaven. This is no ordinary God.

The God of the Bible does in fact break into our lives in all kinds of surprising, beautiful, and disruptive ways. In fact, the one true God is beyond extraordinary. And all of this is conveyed in this remarkable prayer of Paul: “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings” and then to experience that resurrection as well.

What a prayer! How would my life change if this became my life’s prayer? What could happen if I prayed this for the people in my life?

Dear Jesus, I want to know you. Make me like you so that I may experience the power of your resurrection. Amen.

GIVE EAR, LORD

“Give ear, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see. . . .”
—2 Kings 19:16

I recently spent a morning with Pastor Obelto, who leads a network of Haitian church plants in Florida. I will never forget his words: “Like Hezekiah, we prayed and prayed and prayed.”

His growing church was meeting in a storefront when the owners told them they had to leave to make way for a new restaurant that was coming to town. This group of recent Haitian immigrants had very little money, and whatever money they did have they were sending back to their relatives, who were struggling in their home country. But they needed a worship place where they could meet the spiritual needs of their community as they dealt with significant trauma and a sense of displacement.

So they looked to the Bible, and they were inspired by

the story of Hezekiah. They called on God with boldness and conviction, and God answered their prayers. I had the wonderful privilege of walking through this answer to prayer with them—a fitting house of worship unique to their Haitian culture that can proudly share the ministry of Jesus.

Today their church provides a place of solace for a community that has been struck by devastation. Their story is a reminder that God hears us when we call on him. God knows all that we need, and he provides.

Lord, I confess that at times I can lose my passion for prayer. Rekindle in me a hunger to call on you like Hezekiah did, and like so many others around the world. In Jesus, Amen.

REMAIN IN ME

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

How do we "remain" in Jesus?

I think it has a lot to do with prayer. I grew up in the church, and I remember that when I was young, prayer always seemed boring. We clasped our hands, closed our eyes, and bowed our heads as the pastor prayed for what seemed a long, long time. But as I grew older and Jesus became more real to me, my prayer life started to change.

There's nothing wrong with the posture of folding your hands and closing your eyes—I still sometimes take that posture to concentrate. But as I grew in faith, prayer became much more about spending time with God. I not only learned to praise God and lift up my requests to him; I also learned to spend time reading the Bible and listening for what the Spirit had to say.

I've found that when I make sure to spend time with Jesus in prayer, I'm a much more patient person—even in the midst of life's challenges. On days when there is too much to do, I'm more likely to be kinder and slower in my responses to family and friends. I'm also more likely to take time for a conversation with a neighbor who passes by. And I'm more likely to look for and respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings.

Lord, thank you that we're able to spend time in your presence through prayer. Help us to be intentional about spending time with you so that your love and grace can transform us to become more like you. Amen.

REACHING OUT WITH PRAYER

"I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."
—John 17:20-21

Our calling—our mission—starts with prayer. God works powerfully through prayer, and you can always go to God in prayer. You can spend time with the Lord any time of the day.

In one of the best-known prayers in the Bible, Jesus prays for you and me in John 17. What a comfort it is to see him reaching out to us. And what a role model he is for us in our life of prayer.

Many Christians and churches receive prayer requests regularly. Praying for neighbors or others in your life, whether for a specific request or a general blessing, is a great way to participate in the work of the Lord. But I also want to encourage you to be a leader in prayer. Reaching out to others and asking "How can I pray for you?" can be exactly what people need to hear. Joining

God's mission doesn't necessarily mean moving to a different region or country; you can be a missionary right in your own neighborhood!

Many believers are often surprised that people who don't seem to be religious will often welcome prayer if they are asked. Being a part of prayer with others reminds them that they are seen not just by you but also by God.

Lord, you reached out to me; help me to reach out to others. Give me eyes to see my neighbors in need of prayer—that your church may grow and your people may be one. Amen.

THE POWER OF PRESENCE

"May our Lord Jesus Christ himself . . . encourage your hearts and strengthen you. . ." —2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

As we sat down for breakfast at a restaurant, Jack said to me for about the tenth time, "I love you, brother; I love you so much!" I certainly didn't feel worthy of that love because I hadn't seen Jack for years. I was there because a friend had faithfully kept up contact much better than I had done. So this breakfast meeting was long overdue.

Some years ago, I had been in contact with Jack quite a lot. He was going through a painful time with lots of personal struggles. He had a young daughter he was trying to care for, and I was one of several people who did our best to surround him with care and encouragement. He saw it all as a gift from Jesus.

But time passed, Jack moved to another area, and I hadn't seen him in a long time.

As I processed my own feelings of guilt for letting our friendship slide, I also began to see with new clarity what a gift Jack was to me. He showed me what resilient faith looks like in the midst of a hard story. Despite my long absence, he bore me no ill will—he was just overjoyed that I showed up. Another friend and I joked that we heard "I love you" that day more times from Jack than we had heard from our family members in a while. I was reminded of how powerful just being present can be.

This also helped me remember that the Lord Jesus is present with us always (Matthew 28:20).

Lord, thank you that no matter where we go, you are already there. Help us to bring your love to others. Amen.

GOD USED IT

“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”
—Acts 4:4

Have you ever landed in a difficult situation and wondered, “Why did this happen?”

Johnny is a missionary I work with who served for several years in Haiti. Because of the political struggles and increased violence there, he came back to the United States with his family. It was a difficult transition. How do you leave behind the colleagues and friends you love dearly? How do you process the trauma of living in such an unsettled environment?

But as Johnny and his wife began to settle and heal, they discovered a remarkable thing. Thousands of Haitians had also moved to where he and his family were now living, and God was creating opportunities for them to minister among the Haitian community right where they were.

So now Johnny is working with a Haitian pastor to raise up Haitian leaders and plant Haitian churches. They have a dream to launch 10 new Haitian church plants in the next few years! God took a painful situation and used it to open up new opportunities in North America!

God did something like that with the early Christians too—like Philip, who was forced to flee to Samaria. In all kinds of situations the Holy Spirit continues to spread the good news of Jesus in surprising ways around the world.

Dear God, even when we are recovering from a painful situation or heartache, you pour out your healing in your good time and provide new opportunities for us to serve you. Thank you, Lord! Amen.

SABBATH: WORSHIP!

It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High.
—Psalm 92:1

Today we pause from the regular rhythms of our daily lives to focus on the God of the universe. And he calls us to worship!

This month, as we reflect on what it means to be Jesus' witnesses wherever we go, it can be tempting to think that this work is on our shoulders. If we don't do it, who will? So the gift of Sabbath helps us remember that ultimately this is God's work, not ours.

Recently I went into the office anticipating a big pile of work that was waiting for me. When I arrived, I discovered that a generous colleague had already taken care of it. When I realized what they had done, I remember feeling both relief and gratitude. What a gift!

Psalm 92 expresses similar feelings toward God. "You make me glad by your deeds,

LORD; I sing for joy at what your hands have done. How great are your works, LORD, how profound your thoughts!" What a relief it is to know that this world sits firmly in God's capable, good hands. He has not stopped working; rather, he has prepared good works for us to do in his kingdom (Ephesians 2:10).

Sabbath gives us an opportunity to join with brothers and sisters to praise and honor the One who has already done it all for us. We have a Savior who walks with us on mission, wherever God has called us! Hallelujah!

O God, I join with the psalmist in giving thanks to you and singing your praises! Thank you for saving me and calling me to be a part of your work. Amen.

THE DAY-TO-DAY LIFE OF JESUS

Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. —John 4:6

When we try to share a brief story of Jesus with others, we often focus on his birth, his death for our sake, and his resurrection. We might also mention some of the amazing things about his teachings and miracles.

But how often do we think of what Jesus' day-to-day life was like?

Jesus was fully God and fully human, which means that he got thirsty, tired, and hungry. Several passages in the Bible describe Jesus' spending time with his followers and doing very human things: he feasts at a wedding, he travels with his disciples, and in our reading today he gets tired and sits down by a well, where he asks a Samaritan woman for a drink of water—and ends up telling her that he is the Messiah!

I wonder how many meals Jesus ate with his followers, how many walks he went on, and how many jokes he cracked over a campfire at night. I wonder if Jesus' disciples experienced God's glory as much through Jesus' everyday conversations and the way he lived each day as they did through his parables and miracles.

Maybe living a life like Jesus is not as intimidating as it sounds. He did lots of ordinary things in his day-to-day living, just as we do. How can we help to bring the presence of Jesus in ordinary ways as we spend time with the people God has placed around us?

Lord God, thank you for sending Jesus to live among us. Help us to see and share with others the ways you are working in our daily lives. Amen.

“I MUST STAY AT YOUR HOUSE TODAY”

Zacchaeus . . . said to the Lord, “. . . Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” —Luke 19:8

The story of Zacchaeus always fascinates me.

Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was coming to town. Word had spread about Jesus, and Zacchaeus wanted to get a glimpse of him. The crowds were so thick that Zacchaeus had to climb a tree in order to see Jesus pass by. But then Jesus stopped right in front of the tree Zacchaeus was in, looked up at him, and said, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”

The crowd overhearing this exchange was surprised—and not in a good way! Zacchaeus was a tax collector for the Romans, and the people saw tax collectors as greedy collaborators who took advantage of hard-working local citizens.

But then the crowd watched Zacchaeus transform. He gave generously to the poor, and

he paid back four times what he had cheated from people. This whole scene was unlike so many of Jesus’ other interactions with people. Jesus didn’t heal Zacchaeus from a physical illness. He didn’t give Zacchaeus food or water. In fact, Jesus asked Zacchaeus for something—a place to stay.

If you’re like me, you might tend to wait for an invitation from someone to spend time with them—especially when you’re busy. But is there anyone whom God might be prompting you to connect with today?

God, thank you for all of your work in the lives of the people around me. Please help me to see whom I can reach out to and connect with. Amen.

WILL YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

—John 1:14

In the neighborhood where my wife and I live, people tend to keep to themselves. Last summer, though, when we invited our neighbors for a social gathering, many of them said to each other, “I’m glad you’re my neighbor!” and, “I am so grateful to live in this kind neighborhood.” We were surprised by how much it meant for them to know who the neighbors were on our street, even if most of us were not connected socially.

Presence is a big part of our witness. Our passage today has been famously paraphrased by Eugene Peterson to say that Jesus “became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood” (*The Message*). When we reflect Jesus by showing up with an open posture, kindness, and generosity, we build trust and connection.

Recently our next-door neighbors were out of the country when a small problem came up at their house. They texted us about it, and I was able to fix the problem. It was a simple thing, but they were so grateful—and I knew they would do the same for us. We are present for each other.

As Jesus intentionally entered our world and became present with us, we have the opportunity to discern how we can bring Jesus’ presence into our neighborhood. How do we show up in a way that can give people a sense of our Savior’s heart for them?

Jesus, thank you for making your home among us. Because of your presence in our world, we are free. Please help us to be a caring presence in our community. Amen.

WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

"The time has come...the kingdom of God has come near."

—Mark 1:15

When Jesus launched his ministry, he announced: "The time has come. . . . The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" It is hard to overstate how startling and even dangerous this moment was.

In Jesus' day, people were often reminded (brutally) that there was one kingdom—Rome—and there was one king—Caesar. And whenever a new Roman emperor rose to the throne, messengers were sent throughout the empire to announce it, calling it "good news."

So here was Jesus, declaring with boldness, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" We can see why this was a radical and politically dangerous message. But for the people who heard it, it really was good news. As they would

soon discover, Jesus did not come to topple Rome but to usher in the kingdom of God, which is not of this world but nevertheless rules over it. This kingdom is characterized by love, mercy, forgiveness, new beginnings, and service. To follow Jesus is to become a citizen of God's eternal kingdom.

This good news is just as countercultural today as when Jesus first announced it. And this is the message we get to proclaim in his name: Jesus, the King, has come, bringing new life in his name! He holds this world in his hands! Come and follow him!

Lord Jesus, may I receive your good news with fresh ears today. Thank you for inviting me into your kingdom! Amen.

GOD COMES FIRST

I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.

—1 Corinthians 2:3

When I was a seminary student, our training included opportunities to preach at nearby churches, and students like me would preach and then receive feedback on our sermons. Sometimes the reviews were kind and helpful. Sometimes, not so much. One of my classmates received this response from a reviewer who was asked to comment on the main points of the sermon: "I don't know; I fell asleep." Ouch! What a humbling reminder to him and the rest of us that we had a long way to go before we spoke with wise or persuasive words.

How remarkable, then, to read Paul's testimony that he did not speak with deep wisdom or persuasive arguments. Yet Paul is considered to be one of the greatest evangelists in church history. What was his secret? Paul explained that his message

came "with a demonstration of the Spirit's power," which meant that Paul did not feel the need to put Paul on display. He put God first and shared the good news about Jesus and how he came to save us.

What a great reminder that while words are important, they are not everything. And it doesn't matter if we are preachers or if we are just sharing our faith with another person—the main thing is that we help people encounter the living God and experience his love and forgiveness. May others see and sense the Spirit's power at work in us.

Lord, thank you for the gift of your Spirit. Open our hearts so that you can work through us to help others experience your love. Amen.

WE ARE ALL INFLUENCERS NOW

Your faith in God has become known everywhere.

—1 Thessalonians 1:8

I have a soccer friend who quit his full-time job to become a social-media influencer. He focuses on differences between Canadian and American products. Did you know that Corn Pops™ cereal is almost completely different in Canada from what it is in the United States? Of course, influencers are into everything from home design to fashion to video games and parenting. There's no end. But influencing is not new to our generation.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul reflects on the powerful effects of influence in this young church. Through Paul and his companions they were introduced to Jesus and, in turn, began to reflect Jesus themselves. Listen to what Paul says in verse 7: "You became a model to all the believers in [the surrounding area]. . . . The Lord's message rang out from

you . . . your faith in God has become known everywhere." Talk about influence!

Think about your own faith journey and who has influenced you. Who made Jesus real to you?

And how about your own influence? What would it look like for the good news of Jesus to ring out from your life today?

Dear Jesus, may our lives be so open to the influence of your love and forgiveness that we bring that same influence to all the people in our lives and in all the places we go today. In your name we pray. Amen.

PROCLAIMING THE SACRIFICE

Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. —1 Corinthians 11:26

Today is Sunday, and if you attend a worship service today, you might celebrate the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion. Many churches around the world will gather and focus on the bread and cup and hear these powerful words: "This is my body, given for you. . . . This is my blood, shed for you."

In a way, the tangible elements of bread and grape juice (or wine) bear witness to the love of Jesus shown in his sacrifice on the cross. We are invited to take and eat so that we may remember and believe that in Jesus' death and resurrection we find forgiveness and new life. We are also reminded that when we participate in communion, we "proclaim the Lord's death" until he returns. Communion itself is a witness to Jesus and all he has done for us.

I remember an unusual experience of communion many

years ago. It was the week after our young family was involved in a serious car accident. No one had been hurt, but it could have been so much worse. As I held those symbols of Jesus' death in my hands, I saw with fresh eyes how his sacrifice brings life. We had experienced a close brush with death ourselves, but God had decided that our purpose here wasn't finished. In life and in death, we belong to him—the one who gave his all for us (Q&A 1, Heidelberg Catechism).

Jesus, you are the bread of life. As we worship you, may we experience close communion with you and our brothers and sisters in faith. Thank you for the gift of your life. Amen.

GOD'S BLESSINGS

"When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.'"

—Luke 10:5

A few years ago there was a social media trend in which people posted good things about themselves and tagged them with "#blessed." I did a search of "#blessed" and got 140 million results. Everything from pictures of people holding babies, to nice cars and beaches. And about 100 million selfies.

We tend to think of being blessed in terms of material blessings. But that's not what Jesus teaches. In fact, part of being a witness to Jesus is to bring his blessing of God's love and good news wherever we go. This is our mission.

We see this clearly in Luke 10. Jesus sent 72 of his followers to bring the good news of God's kingdom to the people in nearby towns and villages. And when they entered people's homes and communities, they were to declare peace on

them and say, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." The Savior has come! Salvation and hope are here!

These blessings are still what God offers us and the world today. And like those 72 followers, we are called to bring peace and to announce the good news wherever we go.

May Jesus equip us with his Spirit to be his faithful witnesses, sharing his blessings with the people we meet today.

Jesus, it can be daunting to live into the words of this passage. Thank you that we are not alone. Pour your blessings on us so that we can share them with others wherever we go today. Amen.

WHAT IS THE GOOD NEWS?

"He has anointed me to proclaim good news. . . ."

—Luke 4:18

As I sat with a group of pastors in a Central American country, I found myself deeply convicted by their stories. They had come from a tradition that focused on knowing Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. This was a good thing. But as these pastors had worked with our partners in their community, they had also begun to realize that the gospel (the "good news") is far bigger than individual transformation. The work of Jesus touches every part of our broken world: creation, relationships, justice, finance, political power, and more.

As these pastors embraced a wider Christian worldview, their ministries began to change. They invited people to wonder how Jesus might care for the poor and the oppressed people in their midst. They also spoke prophetically against political systems in their

country that treated many people unjustly.

As these pastors shared about their experiences, I could see the joy in their eyes. But they also spoke of growing persecution. Earlier, no one had cared if they just spoke about having a personal faith. Now that they were calling for the rich to share with the poor, for the powerful to care for the weak, and for the wrongly imprisoned to be set free, they were becoming a threat to the powers in their society.

To share the good news means bearing witness that Jesus came to bring peace and to right the wrongs of this hurting world.

Jesus, you care for the poor and oppressed; help us to do that as we witness for you. Amen.

THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you."

—Acts 1:8

A radio show once asked, "If you could choose between having the power of invisibility or flight, which would you choose?" Most answers were not flashy or heroic. Some people said they wanted invisibility so that they could sneak into the movies or onto airplanes. Others said they wanted to be able to fly so that they could stop taking the bus. Almost no one said they would use their power to fight crime or to help others. People weren't much interested in using their power to make the world a better place.

It seems we have a natural tendency to misuse even imaginary power! This is important to think about.

In Acts 1:8 Jesus says to us, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you." This is nothing like any other power, real or imagined. Jesus

is speaking of the very power of God himself. It is the same power that spoke creation into existence and raised Jesus from the dead. This power is what brings us from death to eternal life, and it is now at work in us and through us. Jesus gives us this power for a specific purpose: to be his witnesses.

The power of the Spirit is not for selfish gain or to make our life easier. Instead, we receive it so that others might encounter the love and forgiveness of Jesus through us. May we steward it well.

Lord God, thank you for sacrificing your Son so that your Spirit may live in us. Holy Spirit, work within us so that we can know you better and share your amazing love with others. Amen.

WAKE UP

“Young man, I say to you, ‘Get up!’”

—Luke 7:14

I am not a morning person. I wish I were. I have learned to get up early out of necessity, but it takes some time and coffee to get me going.

In our reading from Luke 7 today, we see a remarkable awakening. A young man has died. Jesus sees the funeral procession, and his heart goes out to the young man’s mother, who is also a widow. He walks up to the funeral stretcher and says, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” Jesus uses a Greek word here that literally means “wake up.” Jesus treats the young man as if he is not dead but asleep. And when he wakes up, the young man starts to talk, which seems like a funny detail to include. Maybe he is a morning person!

Later in the passage, the same word is used again. The crowd that had seen this miracle declared with awe, “A great

prophet has appeared among us.” More literally, this can be translated: “A great prophet has *awoken* among us!”—meaning that the people could see they were in the presence of someone specially sent by God. They didn’t know much about Jesus yet, but they would soon learn.

I don’t know if you are a morning person or not, but here is a helpful prayer we can offer anytime: “Jesus, please awaken me!” Ask the Lord to wake you up to see and care about the people around you.

Dear Jesus, as you worked your resurrection power in that young man, will you work the same power in my life and spirit today? Help me to serve you faithfully. Amen.

WHO IS JESUS?

Then Philip . . . told him the good news about Jesus.

—Acts 8:35

Valerie sat in my study for the first time. With excitement, she introduced herself and said, “I have met God, and he has changed my life.” But then she asked me the question that was on her heart: “But who is Jesus? I need to know.”

She went on to share how she had been set free from a long struggle with addiction through Alcoholics Anonymous, where her desperate prayers to God had been remarkably answered. A conversation with her doctor led her to realize that this was the God of the Bible. And that’s why she came with her question to me, her doctor’s pastor. God had set her free, but she was hungry to know more. So we talked.

We talked about the Bible and the good news it reveals about God’s love for a broken and rebellious world. We discussed how Jesus is the full expression

of God’s love and forgiveness. With Jesus, there can always be a brand-new start and a lifelong journey of growing in faith, hope, and love.

Wonderfully, Valerie came to embrace Jesus as her Lord and Savior. As a song puts it, we are blessed that God “is mighty to save.” This is the power of the gospel.

Who is Jesus? Whatever you might be facing today, know that Jesus is your Savior, Lord, and friend.

Dear God, reveal yourself to us today. May we experience the life-giving power of Jesus in all the broken places of our lives. Amen.

SENSING HIS POWER

She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed."

—Matthew 9:21

I am part of a group of pastors who gather each year for a retreat. Our routine is always the same: we grab breakfast in a local diner, play some pick-up hockey at the local rink, and then spend the rest of the day sharing stories and praying for each other.

This year, when we had eaten our breakfast and were preparing to leave, it was clear that our waitress had figured out from our conversation that we are Christians. She stopped us at our table and said, "Before you go, I need you to pray for me. Tomorrow, I am quitting smoking once and for all, and I know I can't do it by myself. Please ask God to help me."

So, we gathered around her and prayed fervently for her freedom. I don't know the rest of the story, but I do know that Jesus was present with her and

that he longs to set his children free.

This kind of thing was common in the ministry of Jesus. People sensed that he could help them with their day-to-day struggles. Like the woman in our Scripture passage for today, they were willing to do whatever it took to grab hold of Jesus and be healed.

May the people around us sense that same power and love of Jesus. And may we have the courage to pray for healing.

Lord, thank you for the reminder that you minister among us in powerful ways. Heal the broken places in our lives, and hear our prayers for the hurting people we encounter. Amen.

GOD'S DELIGHT

"The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there."
—Zechariah 8:5

The Sabbath day is a good time to be reminded of the importance of play. While our work and service are important in life, play is also important for the health of our body and spirit.

Awhile ago I visited a Central American country with a group of ministry leaders. We toured a number of ministry sites to see how God was at work. One site was a reclaimed sports and recreation area: a soccer pitch stood on land that had once been used as a garbage dump.

As we listened to the story about this redeemed piece of land, some young women showed up in their soccer uniforms for practice. Soon afterward, someone came over and told us in Spanish that the soccer players wanted to challenge us to a match. Game on! We didn't have the right clothes or

shoes and we couldn't speak the language, but we had a great time of fun and laughter.

We were also aware that these young women lived difficult lives, facing many obstacles from poverty to injustice in their society. But in that brief time of play, we experienced community and connection in a profound way.

Examples like this too can be an expression of our Christian faith. God delights in us and in his world. We are invited to do the same. Can you find some time to both worship and play today?

God, thank you for creating us to both work and play. Help us to be serious about both of these gifts. Grace us also with times of delight and laughter. Amen.

A MASSIVE CLOUD OF WITNESSES

We are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses. . . .

—Hebrews 12:1

This month we have focused on serving as Jesus' witnesses. Jesus ended his ministry on earth by commissioning his followers to be his witnesses in their immediate area, in the surrounding regions, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Hebrews 12 offers some helpful encouragement in this work. In the previous chapter, Hebrews 11, the writer has listed examples of faithful followers of the Lord from early times—Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, and many, many more. They all lived as faithful witnesses of God and of the ways God worked in their lives. Then in Hebrews 12 we are told that these souls make up a great cloud of witnesses who cheer us on as we serve the Lord today.

One person in that cloud is Johanna Veenstra. More than a hundred years ago, Johanna—a

woman in her twenties who was part of my church—went to serve as a missionary to the African country of Nigeria. Today there are more than 700,000 followers of Jesus in our partner church in that country. And, of course, there are even more in other Christian denominations!

We see the power of faithful witnesses all around the world. The gospel is bearing fruit on every continent. You and I, wherever we find ourselves, are invited to fix our eyes on Jesus and run the same race. May God bless and equip each one of us to be his faithful witnesses!

Jesus, thank you for the cloud of witnesses who cheer us on. Help us, we pray, to be your faithful witnesses always. Amen.

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