

Reflections

Daily Devotional Guide

September–December 2016

NextSunday Resources

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 SMYTH & HELWYS An imprint of Smyth & Helwys Publishing.

Reflections

Daily Devotional Guide

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Visit*

From the Editor

As we start the autumn season, you hold in your hands the new leaf that *Reflections* is turning over. Our new leaf is more than another page with a fresh devotion, or a pun based on our cover picture.

Much of the feedback we hear from readers and writers asks how we choose our scripture texts. Some Bible passages lend themselves to stronger devotional writing than others. Reflecting on the parable of the prodigal son usually moves readers more deeply than focusing on a section of the Levitical laws, for example. This makes it tempting for us to only focus on some familiar sections of Scripture, and neglect the rest. Since biblical illiteracy is on the rise, though, narrowing the scope of our Scripture reading, while popular, seems unwise. So how do we branch out in our daily reading and still find those texts that we most need to hear this day, or this week?

Fortunately two professors from Luther Seminary found a way to address such a challenge. Rolf Jacobson and Craig Koester created a Narrative Lectionary that gives churches a four-year cycle of readings that move through the stories in Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. Each year also focuses on one of the four gospels.

The yearly Narrative Lectionary cycle begins in September and ends in May. Bible readings during the summer months focus on topics such as the Lord's Prayer, or cover a particular book of Scripture. With this issue of *Reflections* we will begin using this NL as a guide for choosing our daily texts. We will read the NL's Sunday passages over the course of the week, along with other scriptures that fit that week's theme or follow its story.

You will find a list of weekly themes in every issue. Reflecting on the story of Scripture in this way can help us see how God moves through the Bible, calling its characters and all of us to live as God's people.

Carol Davis Younger

About the Writers

Carol and Brett Younger (Sept 1, 3, 5, 7, 9) are partners in marriage, ministry, and writing. Carol edits *Reflections* while Brett teaches preaching and worship at McAfee School of Theology. They enjoy time with their grown sons, Graham and Caleb.

Jim Holladay (Sept 2, 4, 6, 8, 10) serves as pastor of Lyndon Baptist Church in Louisville, KY. He is also an adjunct theology professor at Bellarmine University. Racial justice and reconciliation, along with the pursuit of Christian unity, are life-long passions for him.

The **Praying with Pens and Keyboards** class at the **First Baptist Church of Asheville, NC** wrote the following devotions for September: 11—**Kara Kelley**; 12—**Tommy Bratton**; 13—**Tara Pratt**; 14—**Wade Hampton**; 15—**April Nance**; 16—**Dixie Fisher**; 17—**Dearing Davis**; 18—**Martha Ann Callahan**; 19—**Buffy Fowler**; 20, 22, 24—**Brett Younger**; 21—**Catherine Wilson**; 23—**Carolyn Penley**.

Tyler Tankersley (Sept 25–Oct 1) serves as the pastor of First Baptist Church in Cape Girardeau, MO. He and his wife Jess, an early childhood educator, stay busy raising their two energetic sons, Henry and Owen.

Nikki Finkelstein-Blair (Oct 2–8) is a military spouse who has participated in ministry across the U.S. and across denominations. She and her family presently live in South Carolina, where she enjoys crafting everything from sweaters and paintings to blog posts and sermons.

Scott Claybrook (Oct 9–15) is minister with young adults at First Baptist Church of Knoxville, TN. He is passionate about making the gospel accessible and understandable to people of his generation, the Millennials. Scott loves working and living with his wife, Joy, in his home state of Tennessee.

Mary Oliver (Oct 16–22) cares deeply about public education and serves as the instructional partner for Bob Jones High School in Madison, AL. She and Mike, her husband and best friend who is a pastor, are raising four wonderful sons. She enjoys church, reading, spending time with family, and cooking. While writing about Hannah she felt the kinship of God's people across time and place once again.

Daniel Glaze (Oct 23–29) has served as pastor of First Baptist Church in Ahoskie, NC for ten years. He is married to Andrea, a psychologist, and together they have the great privilege of raising two beautiful daughters, who in turn are raising a frisbee-loving Australian Shepherd.

LeAnn Gunter Johns (Oct 30–Nov 5) lives in Macon, GA with her husband, Barry, and two sons, Parker and Patrick. When she's not acting out a scene from Star Wars with her boys, she enjoys writing and running.

Greg Pope (Nov 6–12) is pastor of First Baptist Church in Jasper, Georgia. He has been married to Cindy for 24 years. Their oldest daughter is a student at McAfee School of Theology. Their youngest daughter is a freshman at Georgia College. Their son is a fifth grader.

Catherine Thiel Lee (Nov 13–19) is a chaplain, preacher, and writer who serves University of North Carolina Hospitals and the Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship congregation. She has an MDiv from Regent College and worked with refugee claimants in Vancouver, BC. Catherine lives, plays, reads, and lovingly tends a really scrappy garden in Chapel Hill with her husband, Michael, and two sons.

Tim S. Willis (Nov 20–26) is chaplain of a large retirement community in Columbus, NC. This writing opportunity gave him a chance to reflect on his 31 years of college ministry and his five years as an intentional interim pastor, along with his current ministry experiences.

Mallory Monroe (Nov 27–Dec 3) is a part-time minister to children in North Carolina and a teacher's assistant in a local elementary school. She is a graduate of the School of Divinity at Gardner-Webb University and enjoys being newly married to her husband, Ben.

Emmanuel McCall (Dec 4–10) is a retired pastor. He has taught in theological seminaries in Kentucky, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, West Africa, and Georgia, where he continues to teach as an adjunct professor at McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta.

Emily Ellis (Dec 11–17) is an editor at LifeWay. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her family, reading, hiking, and traveling.

Bill Coates (Dec 18–24) is a native South Carolinian who has become very much at home in Georgia over the past 18 years. He loves rocks, waterfalls, gardening, and reading. He and his wife Claire are in love with Hunter, their 5-year old (grand) son whom they are raising. They are determined to live to at least 95 just to get him through college!

Monica Citty Hix (Dec 25–31) is passionate about listening and being a companion to others on the spiritual journey. She's currently hanging out with a wonderful group of Quaker Friends who are teaching her much about listening to the Spirit of God.

Saturday, October 1

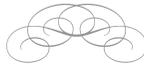
Luke 6:39-42

I get frustrated when I watch any sort of political news. I tire of seeing people I consider dim-witted and judgmental running for public office. I once considered a representative in my state the worst possible politician; I thought of him as arrogant, rude, and a bag of hot air.

Then one day as I was leading a Bible Study in a local coffee shop, I walked this state representative. He sat down and joined our circle. He flipped his Bible open to our passage and offered insightful, deep, and helpful comments. He was so engaged in the study that I asked him to offer our closing prayer. Afterwards, we made an appointment to grab coffee. Through that encounter, he quickly became a trusted mentor and loyal friend.

A few months after our friendship blossomed, it struck me that I had been judging this man without any real knowledge of his motives, heart, or passions. I saw him as a stereotype, characterizing him as a bloodthirsty, ignorant politician. I grew to see him as humble, gentle, and kind. I understood him to be someone who truly sought to do what was socially just and good for his community.

Jesus does not let us get away with our preconceived notions of other human beings. *Why do you see the splinter in your brother's or sister's eye but don't notice the log in your own eye?* (v. 41). We need Jesus' words, especially in a political season when pointing out splinters becomes a civic sport. Perhaps the best response to our judgmental, stereotyping tendencies is to recognize our own shortcomings first and to work on those. We may find that the people we so quickly dismiss could become the friends we need to help us remove the logs from our eyes.



Life Questions

When have I focused on someone else's flaws and ignored my own? What happens to my relationships when I recognize my own shortcomings?

Prayer

Lord, give me the wisdom to examine my own life before writing off others for the faults I think I perceive in them. Amen.

Sunday, October 2

Exodus 12:1-13

When nothing yet has worked to free God's people—no plague of water turned to blood, no frogs, lice, or insect swarms, no fields of dead flocks, no skin disease or hailstorm, no locusts or all-encompassing darkness—God tells Moses the final plan for their freedom. Every first-born child in the land of Egypt will be killed. Even Pharaoh will grieve the loss of his heir. God will provide for the Hebrew people, though; if they paint the blood of a lamb on their doorposts, their children will be spared. When Pharaoh finally concedes to God's power, they must be ready to escape to freedom.

This is the first Passover. God gives Moses instructions so he can help the people prepare for their moving day. Before they start the long road trip out of slavery, they must eat roasted lamb, with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. They need to be fully dressed, with their shoes on and their walking sticks in hand. They must be ready to get on the road when the moment comes: no time to save leftovers, wait for bread to rise, or even lace up their sandals.

The people don't realize that this will be the last home-cooked meal they will have for many years—or generations. But this will not be a meal to savor, to linger over comfortably with coffee and dessert. Their last supper is itself the beginning of a new road, their way out, the first steps in a difficult journey toward God's promise. They have to be ready to begin.



Life Question

What preparations do you need to make right now so that you will be ready to follow when God leads you to newfound freedom?

Prayer

God, show us where we are holding too tightly to life as we know it. Teach us how to live with our shoes on, ready to follow wherever you lead. Amen.

Monday, October 3

Exodus 13:1-8

The Passover is a singular experience: God's saving action demonstrates God's power to the enemy and protects God's children. God instructs the people how to prepare for their escape—and gives instructions to help them remember the event for generations to come. In the middle of the miracle, during their deliverance, God is building a tradition.

Remember this day (v. 3), Moses tells them. But don't just think about it fondly; don't just flip through your hazy photo albums recalling what God did way back when. Instead, build a tradition of remembrance. Dedicate your first child to God, to remind your heart of God's powerful hand. Eat unleavened bread, to remind your taste buds of the flavors that were part of that journey. Tell your children what God did for you, to remind your ears what freedom's story sounds like.

A Haggadah, a sacred Jewish book that tells the Exodus story and guides the Passover service, focuses on the commandment in verse 8: *You should explain to your child on that day, 'It's because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.'* One contemporary Haggadah reads, "When I came out of Egypt. The remembrance of Passover, the story of Passover, isn't once-upon-a-time, long-ago-and-far-away. The story of Passover is here-and-now. It is a story—a history—of ready faith, of freedom for all. It is a community's history, shaped by sensory memories and told through the generations by those who understand that "this is what the Lord did for me."

The Passover Haggadah, compiled by Rabbi Morris Silverman, (Bridgeport CT: The Prayer Book Press of Media Judaica, Inc., 1952/1987).



Life Question

What traditions help you remember and proclaim, "this is what the Lord did for me?"

Prayer

God, help us remember your mighty acts not just as "once upon a time" tales, but as powerful, personal testimonies. Make us living stories of your faithfulness. Amen.

Tuesday, October 4

Luke 22:14-20

The Passover observance is full of contradictions. To remember the Hebrews' hurried escape, the Passover menu includes only flat breads (matzo), but to celebrate their newfound freedom, table guests are invited to recline, linger, and relax. The blessings spoken over cups of wine joyfully acknowledge God's power and provision, but the blood-like drops solemnly spilled as the ten plagues are named aloud are a reminder that sorrows mar this celebration, even sorrows of the enemy.

As he observes the Passover with his disciples and friends, Jesus follows God's commandment to remember this particular story of freedom. He follows God's commandment to eat the bread of their journey, bless the cups of wine, and tell the story as his own.

This *is* Jesus' story. Even as he eats the travelers' bread, he knows he is heading down a road of pain and promise. He knows that freedom—eternal freedom—awaits the children of God, as the kingdom comes.

Even as he speaks the traditional blessings over the wine, he knows that the joy he feels in being with his beloved friends will be marred by sorrow as his body is broken and his blood poured out.

The first Passover was a singular event, and so is this last Passover Jesus celebrates. As Jewish tradition has carried the story of "what God did for me" through generations of Passovers, Christian tradition has carried the story of "what God did for us" through generations of communions. In the bread, we travel together, faithfully following God toward freedom in Christ. In the cup, we share Jesus' blessing, joy, and tears together. As we retell and re-experience the story, we find the hand of God, we find the heart of Jesus, and we find ourselves.



Life Question

How do the bread and cup of communion lead you to bless, rejoice, and grieve?

Prayer

As we gather at your table, prepare us to follow the paths you would have us go. May your bread and cup nourish us so we too may serve. Amen.

Wednesday, October 5

Psalm 4

If you're inclined to believe the headlines, or the evening news, or your Facebook feed, there's plenty to be upset about these days.

Some things, it seems, never change.

Even during the Psalmist's lifetime—thousands of years before the printing press or fiber optic cable or Wi-Fi—people are striving after worthless rewards, following liars, and mocking God. In the middle of such chaos, God's people declare their dismay over what they are hearing and seeing in the world. God seems to have abandoned them: *Many people say, "We can't find goodness anywhere. The light of your face has left us, LORD!"* (v. 6).

In the difficult world (which the world has always been), the Psalmist cries out to God, not in depression or desperation, but in complete trust, even amazingly with rejoicing. Though the world strives, deceives, and insults, God remains true. God's faithfulness is not diminished: *Know this: the LORD takes personal care of the faithful. The LORD will hear me when I cry out to him* (v. 3)

Though the world strives, and deceives, and insults, the Psalmist's own response to God is not swayed: *But you have filled my heart with more joy than when their wheat and wine are everywhere!* (v. 7).

Though the world strives, deceives, and insults, let the people of God be unafraid. Let them resist sin. Let them bring offerings. Let them trust the Lord. Let them be filled with God's goodness, and let them sleep peacefully.

Let them rest, assured that some things—like the love of God—never change.



Life Question

What reminds you of God's constant care, even in an overwhelming world?

Prayer

God, protect us from our tendencies to be angry, afraid, or defensive. Help us see beyond the dramas and troubles of the world, so we can rest in your love. Amen.

Thursday, October 6

Philippians 1:27-30

Many languages have different words for singular “you” and plural “you.” English doesn’t. When we read “you” in our English Bibles, we may hear it as singular: you, sitting there reading in your living room; you at your desk; you in your personal space. So if Paul had been writing to the American South, he might fill his letter with “y’all”: y’all gathered to worship; y’all sitting in a church business meeting; y’all living together. For Paul, the life of faith is not just an individual pursuit; faith is an act of community. *Most important, live together in a manner worthy of Christ’s gospel* (v. 27). This *most important* act, Paul says, isn’t just for you, but for y’all.

The way we live together in faith is a testimony. In our life together, we show a word-weary world what the gospel is: good news for those who hunger for connection, good news for those who can disagree with love and respect, good news for those who yearn for peace, not drama.

The way we live together in faith is a scaffold on which we lean. In our life together, we show an individualized world what the gospel is: good news for those who feel alone in their pain; good news for those who need support in their struggles; good news for those who have strength to share.

The way we live together in faith is a sign. In our life together, we show a self-indulgent world what the gospel is: good news for those who are tired of the trendy and the fleeting; good news for those who seek a home in eternity as well as here and now; good news for those who belong in the Kingdom of God. And that is good news for us all.



Life Questions

What is the “good news” of your faith community? What testimony are you sharing?

Prayer

God, remind us that faith is not only a private pursuit, but a community expression. Form your church in Christ’s image: humbling ourselves and serving together. Amen.

Friday, October 7

Philippians 2:1-11

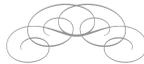
Paul makes life together sound so easy: *Complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other* (v. 2). We wonder whether the Apostle had any experience with church committees, or business meetings, or even family reunions.

But Paul certainly understands that Christ himself must be the unique model any gospel community needs to become a visual testimony to God, a strong structure on which believers lean, and a sign of the Kingdom. The Messiah, the Son, the Light, the Word who was with God “in the beginning,” did not strive for status, or use his God-given life for gain. He let go. He stepped back. He knelt down. The High Priest became humble. The King of Kings became a slave. The One most worthy of being obeyed chose to become obedient, even to the laws of a society that would condemn him, even to the laws of mortality that would end his human life.

This is our example for our life together: we can live as Christ. We can let go of our perfectionism that strives for status. We can step back from our soapboxes and our high horses. Instead we can kneel down to serve. We can pick up the slack, or help each other pick up the pieces when that is what the community needs.

We can put aside our well-thought-out agendas and well-deserved reputations, and consider the needs, wants, and ideas of others to be as valuable as our own.

We can become the form of Christ: a testimony to his life-giving service, a living scaffold supporting his work in the world, a sign of his presence and coming Kingdom. We can be Christ’s church.



Life Question

How can we follow Christ’s example as members of families, committees, groups and churches?

Prayer

Forgive us, God, when we succumb to pride and pettiness. Help us make the good news of unity in your self-giving love visible to the world. Amen.

Saturday, October 8

Psalm 5

At every point in the story of God's people, God prepares and leads. God sends Moses to get the people ready for their exodus from Egypt. They prepare, eat, escape, and walk into freedom as a community. God sends Paul to tell the Philippian church to *live together in the manner of Christ's gospel* (Phil 1:27). As a church they stand, struggle, and share themselves, serving in obedience and unity. God uses the Psalmist's prayer that cries for mercy and pleads for direction to move God's people from desperation to praise. Their lyrics of *Make your way clear, right in front of me* (v. 8) lead them to sing *let all who take refuge in you celebrate. Let them sing out loud forever!* (v. 11).

At every juncture of our story, God is there. In slavery, God teaches us to prepare for freedom and leads us in its path. In community, God shows us how to kneel in humility to one another. In prayer, God leads us from fear and desperation to repentance and praise.

As our story continues, God is still showing us the way out of slavery, and calling us to take up the journey. Together we anticipate the taste of freedom and strengthen each other for the difficult road. God still models for us what serving looks like, and calls us to live humbly. Together we practice Christ-like giving as we act out Jesus' selfless love. God is listening to our cries for help and calling us to pray expectantly. Together we bow our heads, lift our voices, and raise our hands. Through deliverance, service, and worship, God keeps preparing, teaching, and leading us all.



Life Question

How do stories of the Exodus event, the early church, and the Psalmist's worship help you understand your own testimony of God's presence?

Prayer

God, you prepare me for the road and you lead me to freedom. You surround me with fellow travelers and give yourself as our model and guide. You listen to our prayers and care for us on the way. I praise you! Amen.

Sunday, October 9

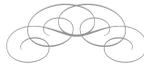
Exodus 32:1-14

At a critical moment in Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*, the Secretary of State asks the President why he insists on passing legislation to abolish slavery during such a difficult time. How could the country, not yet finished with the trauma of civil war, handle such a change? "Time is a great thickener of things," Lincoln says. "Actually," replies Secretary Seward, "I have no idea what you mean by that." The Secretary sees time as a container to fill with pain or peace; Lincoln sees time as a transforming ingredient, changing everything else.

As the Israelites continue their journey through the desert, they take the Secretary's view of time. *The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come on! Make us gods who can lead us'* (vv. 1-2). The Israelites' days have grown stale. They live from one moment with God to the next. With Moses' absence, they feel empty and want something new to fill their time.

So they circle around Aaron and urge him to craft a god who will sit among them, always present and visible. How ironic that as they grow tired of waiting on God, God is working with Moses on their behalf. If only they had understood time as "a great thickener of things," transforming life even when we don't see its work.

Which view of time do we choose? Do we crave the immediate, resist the slow, and find ourselves ordering some golden calf? Exodus shows that God works on a different timescale than our own. God's Kingdom moves at a different pace. Time is a transforming agent in God's work. May we learn to wait for God with hopeful anticipation.



Life Question

When do you grow impatient with God and what God is doing?

Prayer

Lord, give me the strength to wait. Remind me that even when you seem silent, you are working in the world. Help me listen, learn, and grow in the seasons of waiting. Amen.

Monday, October 10

Exodus 32:15-25

Two empty-nesters were selling their home. As the couple and their two adult sons packed up the last boxes, the mother discovered a small box hidden in a closet. The three men looked at each other nervously as she opened it. The box held a 20-year collection of broken frames, shattered ornaments, and other “sins of the past.” They all laughed as the men described storing things in this “mistake box” so she would never know. Wouldn’t you love having a mistake box of your own?

When Moses returns from the mountaintop and enters the camp with his anger rising, wouldn’t Aaron long for a mistake box in which to hide the Golden Calf? Instead Aaron stubbornly refuses to call this fiasco his mistake. Was it shame or embarrassment that keeps him from owning his part in the debacle? Is it fear that makes him distance himself from any accountability? For whatever reason, after Moses confronts Aaron about his wayward leadership, Aaron shifts the blame onto the people: *Don’t get angry with me, sir. You know yourself that these people are out of control* (v. 22). His attempt to disclaim his responsibility is almost comical. After the people gave him their gold, he tells Moses, *I threw it into the fire, and out came this bull calf!* (v. 24). (He doesn’t realize that a description of his making the metal image would one day appear twenty-two verses earlier.)

Aaron’s account fools no one. *Moses saw that the people were out of control because Aaron had let them get out of control* (v. 25). Though Aaron’s attempt to pass blame is painfully familiar, Moses knows that when sin occurs within communities, every leader and member shares responsibility.



Life Questions

What is God calling you to confess? How are you taking responsibility for the problems of the communities to which you belong?

Prayer

O God, I confess the mistakes I have tried to hide and the mistakes in my community which I have ignored. I know the path to healing begins with honesty. Help me trust you as I seek your guidance and forgiveness. Amen.

Tuesday, October 11

Exodus 32:26-35

What a tremendously difficult text. Verses 27-29 are excruciating. *Each of you, kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor*—how could they do it? How could this be called for, then blessed? Perhaps the verses underscore the Levites' fervor. Perhaps they assume this is the equitable consequence of grave sin in the eyes of an angry God. Perhaps this is Moses' interpretation of how God wants them punished, since Scripture does not describe direct communication between God and Moses on this matter. However we interpret why this happened, we understand that the peoples' offense to God is severe.

Even more striking are the verses that follow as Moses attempts to atone for the sins of the people. Robert Alter suggests that verse 32, midway through Moses' appeal, contains a pregnant pause: "And now, if You would bear their offense... and if not, wipe me out, pray, from Your book which You have written." As Moses begs for God to bear the people's offense, he seems to hesitate, as if he is unsure of what to say next. After the text pauses, Moses offers the only thing he can conjure as an alternative: himself. But this is a sacrifice that God will not accept. All are to be held accountable for their own actions.

I struggle to accept these verses. They smack of cruelty and hatred, starved of any hint of grace or mercy. And yet, there they stand—a part of our Scripture and our story. What can we hope to make of it?

Fortunately the week is not over, and the story is not done. This text calls us to account for our sins. Consequences must come. But our Scriptures do not leave us hopeless. Our story is not over. A new Moses, Jesus Christ, stands ready to bear the burden Moses could not.

Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), 499.



Life Questions

Why do we resist owning our sin? What lies at the heart of our resistance?

Prayer

Lord, we struggle to acknowledge your anger. We ask for your help in understanding hard passages. Help us always remember our need for you. Amen.

Wednesday, October 12

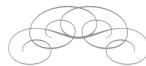
Psalm 6

With typical teenage abandon, I rushed into the garage, hopped into my hand-me-down sedan, and threw the car in reverse. In a matter of seconds, I felt the car tilt slightly to the left while a horrible screech came from the right side. I had unwittingly reversed the car too closely to our parked minivan and was scraping it with the passenger-side mirror.

Terror seized me. I hopped out of the car, admired the thin white line across the length of the van, then quickly decided that fleeing the country, though desirable, was impractical. All I could do was wait. For the next four hours, I waited breathlessly for my dad to return home.

In the end, I survived. But that sense of terror, more than a dozen years old, remains vivid. We don't know the source of David's anxiety in Psalm 6, or the intricate details of the horrors faced by those in the Israelite camp in Exodus, but we can connect with the fearful emotions they experienced. Most of us have had moments when we want to cry, *Heal me, LORD, because my bones are shaking in terror!* (v. 2).

For David, and for us, terror is not the end of the story: *The LORD has listened to my request. The LORD accepts my prayer* (v. 9). Grace will come, but the psalmist suggests that terror plays a role in our story. David's brutal honesty and heartfelt pleas remind us that when we acknowledge our need for grace, we learn to recognize and appreciate it. We are broken people, who separate ourselves from God and others. The good news is that God does not leave us. Our vision fails, but God sees clearly and listens to us. We falter, but we can recognize our need and live in the strength of God's love.



Life Question

In what area of your life do you need God's grace today?

Prayer

Lord, we're thankful for your grace. We confess our need for it and for you. Help us to give grace freely, as you have given it to us. Amen.

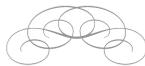
Thursday, October 13

Luke 23:32-43

God moves in unexpected ways. In the story of Exodus, the desert-dwelling Israelites are surprised by how many calendars they go through in the wilderness. Throughout the gospels Jesus constantly challenges the expectations of those who thought he would be a different kind of Messiah. At the crucifixion, the contrast between the Christ that people expected and the Christ who is alive in the world is remarkably clear. Maybe some think that after all Jesus has endured, he will surely reveal his power now and bring justice. One criminal hanging next to Jesus insults him, saying, *Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!* (v. 39). He speaks for those who expect Jesus' story to end with this chapter. Others may hope and expect that Jesus will prove he is the Christ by revealing his power and bringing justice. Readers of Luke know that Jesus is the Christ, but we also know that Christ still challenges our expectations about how God works in our lives.

The second criminal's confession in the passage is startling: *We are rightly condemned ... But this man has done nothing wrong... Remember me when you come into your Kingdom* (vv. 41-42). As he dies on a cross next to Jesus, God works in an unexpected way in this man's life. Though he sees Jesus dying on the cross, he does not lose faith in Christ or the Kingdom. His faith opens the way to his joining Jesus in paradise.

Luke's gospel reminds us that God moves among us in surprising ways. In moments of doubt, when hope seems lost, we find Christ at our side. He stands with us in pain and heartache, waiting to usher us into the Kingdom. Believers are not promised lives free from pain or loss. What we receive when we stand with Christ is his surprising, amazing presence.



Life Question

In what surprising ways is God at work in your life?

Prayer

God, give me the courage I need to seek you when I struggle with doubt and pain. Help me be honest and true with you. For in our relationship, I find paradise. Amen.

Friday, October 14

John 5:13-21

This passage of John's gospel brims with hope and it flows from Jesus' simple declaration: *My Father is still working, and I am working too* (v. 17). This week, as we read Scripture that stretched from Exodus to the Psalms to the gospels, God's work has been a constant theme rising through it all. God is working. God is *still* working. What great hope we have in a God who continues to work!

A friend of mine paints large-scale landscapes. I once asked her how she knows when a painting is finished. "Oh they're never done," she said, "Paintings simply tell you when they are ready for a rest." What she meant by this was that she always tries to leave the door open for surprise. My friend knows that there is always the possibility that a painting needs to grow or transform, either by adding a new piece to it or by removing an old portion. Painting is a living art for her, even after the paint dries.

Followers of Christ sometimes forget that we too are works-in-progress. Even after seasons of missteps, doubts, or disappointments, God continues to pursue us. Christ still longs to transform us. In the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus calls the first disciples, the author says that he *appointed* twelve. The Greek word 'appoint' was used to describe the work of a craftsman, like a potter handling clay or a carpenter working with wood. Rather than becoming disciples in this single moment in time—as if the disciples were ordinary people one moment and apostles the next—Scriptures suggests that Jesus 'fashioned' his apostles over time. So take heart! God is still working in and through us. May we have the courage to join God in that work.



Life Question

What is one area of your life in which God is fashioning you for discipleship?

Prayer

God, thank you for continuing to work in me. Help me discern how I can join you in that work. Amen.

Saturday, October 15

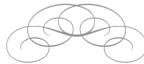
Psalm 7

When we feel angry, parts of this psalm are deeply attractive. David cries: *Get up, LORD; get angry! God is a righteous judge, a God who is angry at evil every single day...God has deadly weapons in store for those who won't change* (vv. 6, 11, 13). We read this and think that David read our minds. We long for God to get angry and do something about the same people and concerns that stir our anger. But the broader story of Scripture issues a strong warning: be careful what you wish.

The story of God's people reminds us that no one is always on the 'right side' of things. Over a period of mere weeks, the Israelites forget their call in the desert. The thieves on the cross, two men in one moment, see Christ from opposite perspectives. Scripture time and again reminds us that the 'right side' of a matter is often difficult to discern.

As we read David's words, we should be cautious. There's a place for justice and a time for consequence. But we should not be so quick to presume that we are not the ones who need correction and transformation. Even in his frustration, David remembers as much: *God is my shield; he saves those whose heart is right* (v. 10). God saves those whose heart is right, not those who feel righteous.

It is no coincidence that David will later write, *Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!* (Ps 51:10). The call to justice is ultimately a call to inner transformation for us all. The goal of justice is not punishment but restoration, not inequality but equity. As we seek justice, may we walk humbly and love mercy, remembering that mercy is something we need, too.



Life Question

In difficult situations, do you find yourself more likely to offer mercy or condemnation to those involved? Reflect on how and why you do this.

Prayer

Lord, we humbly recognize our own potential for great good and great harm. Thank you for your grace freely given. We need it and you. Amen.

Sunday, October 16

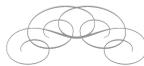
1 Samuel 1:9-11

Longing for a child, Hannah travels to Shiloh with her family once again to bring sacrifices to Yahweh. This is supposed to be a time of celebration and feasting, but Hannah's frustration and grief keep her from enjoying herself. How many times has she entered the temple praying similar prayers only to be disappointed?

We learn a great deal about Hannah and about God through this passage. Despite what seems to be a hopeless situation, Hannah chooses to remain hopeful, even faithful. Though Hannah believes God has kept her from being able to have children, she continues to show up year after year. She seems to view God as approachable, and she audaciously offers her prayers directly to God, bypassing the help of her husband and the priest who sits in the doorway of the temple. Hannah's prayer is a lament that recognizes God's power and her own lowliness. She pours herself out honestly and completely before God; she makes a sacred, unconditional promise. If God will give her a son, she will give him back to God. Is it improper for Hannah to suggest such a deal?

Hannah recognizes something about God that is good news for us all. She understands that God knows her pain and can handle her honesty. Hannah believes that God wants to be involved in her situation and will see through her negotiations into her deepest self.

The same assurance in which Hannah rests is true for us today. There is no need for us to hide behind pretenses when we pray. God can take our questions, fears, doubts, and requests, whatever they are, and see into our deepest selves.



Life Question

What does your soul long to say to God?

Prayer

O God of our deepest longings, no words can convey our gratitude for your hearing our prayers. We are overwhelmed that you draw near to us to offer hope, comfort, and everlasting life. Amen.

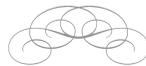
Monday, October 17

1 Samuel 1:19-20

When I make a request of God, I often discover a tension between what I want to happen and what is in God's plan. I believe that God has the power to answer my prayer, but will that really occur? In 1:18, Hannah leaves the temple after she prays so fervently and talks with Eli. She seems to be at peace with her situation. When she gets up the next morning, Hannah worships the Lord and heads back home. We know that Hannah's prayer is answered when she becomes pregnant and gives birth to Samuel. But what if things had turned out differently?

One meaning of the name "Samuel" is "heard by God." We have all been part of conversations in which we felt that the other party was not listening at all. We likely found ourselves irritated and annoyed after such encounters. If we continue interacting with someone who does not hear us, resentment and alienation occur in our relationship. By choosing to name her son Samuel, Hannah acknowledges that God has heard her.

We do not know exactly how long she prayed for her son, but *year after year* of Peninnah's insults (1:7) makes it safe to assume that God did not answer Hannah's prayer as quickly as she'd hoped. God sustained Hannah while she waited, so that she remained faithful and continued to pray. My prayers may not result in what I initially want, but connecting with God through prayer often changes my heart so I can see and trust what God envisions for me.



Life Question

How does prayer change my heart?

Prayer

Help me continue to trust and connect with you, Lord, knowing that you hear all of my prayers. Change my heart to keep me attuned to your vision for my life. Amen.

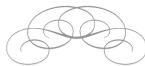
Tuesday, October 18

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Hannah and the other women in the Bible who experienced infertility were made to feel lesser. Unfortunately, they were called “barren”, a word that should never be used to describe a person. In that ancient culture, women had little control over their lives. The number of children they bore, especially the sons they birthed, determined their value. Hannah endured cruel criticism because she did not have a child of her own. Yet she remembered to do something that made all the difference for her; she remained connected to God through faithful prayer.

Centuries later we still struggle with the cruelty of human assumptions and societal expectations. Every human being wants to matter, and to know that he or she has value and meaning. Hannah teaches us so much through her prayer. She recognizes that her truest identity is found in God. God takes human assumptions and society’s expectations and turns them upside down. God is the source of all life and help.

God answers Hannah’s prayer for a child. She fulfills her vow to give her son back to God, leaving Samuel at the temple for a life of service. It would be wonderful if every prayer were answered as Hannah’s was, but that is not always the case. This song that Hannah prays, and so many others like it in Scripture, remind us that God’s faithfulness remains and will sustain us, even through the ambiguities of our lives.



Life Question

How can a faithful prayer life help me find my true identity in God?

Prayer

Please remind us, Lord, that you created us for a relationship with you, and that through it we find our true identity. Amen.

Wednesday, October 19

Psalm 8

This psalm celebrates the wonders of the world and God's awesome creativity. It also praises God's majesty and power to silence enemies. Looking at any aspect of God's creation reminds us of the small part that humans play in it. The psalmist voices this awareness for all of us: *When I look up at your skies, at what your fingers made—the moon and the stars that you set firmly in place—what are human beings that you think about them; what are human beings that you pay attention to them?* (vv. 3-4).

Yet remembering that God does not see us as an insignificant part of creation is vital to the psalmist and to those who read these verses: *You've made them only slightly less than divine, crowning them with glory and grandeur. You've let them rule over your handiwork, putting everything under their feet* (vv. 5-6).

Within the order God established in the universe, we each have a place. Within the rhythm of the moon's phases and the ocean's tides, God includes a person like Hannah. She matters as a part of God's story. God is greatly concerned with her pain and longing. God hears her as she cries out to God in prayer. By creating us in God's image, God chooses to be involved in each of our lives. In our broken, messy humanity, God makes us God's children.

From Hannah's time to ours, each of us has a place in God's story. God fills our lives with genuine love, salvation, and meaning when we trust God and develop the relationship God longs to have with each of us.



Life Question

How might my life be more meaningful if I open my heart to God more fully?

Prayer

Creator of all, thank you for including us in your creation, making us your children, and being a personal God, concerned about each part of our lives. Amen.

Thursday, October 20

Luke 1:39-45

Waiting and trusting are hard to do. Waiting and trusting for several hours or for a few days is a real challenge. Imagine waiting and trusting for generations! Envision all those years when God's people were longing for the Messiah to come. Prophets foretold the coming of one who would redeem the world and offer salvation. Imagine what it would be like to spend generations trusting that this promise would come true.

All of that longing, waiting, and trusting comes to fruition today. God's long-awaited promise is being fulfilled. Elizabeth is experienced in longing, waiting, and trusting. She has done her share of all three. Finally in her old age, when it seems impossible that she might know the joys of motherhood, she and Zechariah learn that they will be parents.

Elizabeth's cousin, Mary, comes to visit and shares her own unbelievable news of an unexpected pregnancy. Together they celebrate their surprising roles in God's amazing story. The words Elizabeth offers at the end of this passage are meant as a blessing to Mary: *Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her* (v. 45). But what she says is also a blessing for her own life, and for all who trust God's promises. Just as God was faithful to send the long-awaited Savior, we can depend on God to be faithful as we wait and trust today.



Life Question

How does remembering God's acts of faithfulness in Scripture help me as I wait and trust God?

Prayer

Lord, waiting and trusting are difficult. Help me remember the many ways you have been faithful in my life. Amen.

Friday, October 21

Luke 1:46-55

Jade and Shelah Acker minister to refugees in Uganda who have fled their homelands because of war or political strife. Through the Center of Hope, these Cooperative Baptist Fellowship field personnel help people put their lives back together. The Ackers teach them to read or develop computer skills, which moves them beyond their painful pasts into new futures. Many of those with whom the Ackers work find their hope for a new life in Jesus. The Ackers's stories describe how God provides healing and unexpected blessing to those who have experienced oppression and overwhelming loss. They echo the truth that Mary sings about in Luke 1.

Mary and Hannah are not the only women in Scripture who raise their voices to God through song. Miriam and Deborah also sing praise for God's goodness, mercy, and power. These songs exalt God's desire to hear the cries of the poor and oppressed, and to redeem their lives. *He has filled the hungry with good things* (v. 13), Mary sings. God's blessings far exceed expectations. Mary celebrates the way God *has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors* (vv. 34-35). God's mercy and blessing will extend from generation to generation. These are hopeful words to hear.

When I consider the transformation that occurs in the lives of refugees through the Center of Hope, I wonder how many generations will be blessed by God's work through people like the Ackers. Mary's prayer challenges me to act, joining with those through whom God brings hope and help.



Life Questions

In what ways do I proclaim the truth of Mary's song? How could I praise God's powerful goodness and mercy by aiding the poor and oppressed in my world?

Prayer

Our God, Mary's prayer gives me hope and challenges me to act. Help me bring hope and help to the poor and oppressed. Amen.

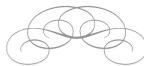
Saturday, October 22

2 Timothy 1:1-7

Growing up in a home that celebrates faith and nurtures it can be a priceless gift. Family members who model grace, who pray, who live by their faith, and who belong to Christ's body of believers build a foundation that sustains those they love when difficulties come. Being raised in a healthy Christian home does not mean that life is perfect. But when mistakes occur, families understand that God's grace, mercy, and love cover us all. A family of faith offers us an identity, a place to serve and grow in our gifts, a community in which we find ourselves loved and not alone, and a connection to the much larger family of Christ's world-wide church.

Paul recognizes this foundation of faith in Timothy's life. He knows that Timothy's grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice, have modeled genuine faith for him throughout his lifetime. While authentic faith must become a first-hand experience, Paul is sure that these women of faith have kindled this faith in Timothy. Paul also knows that faith is not something we keep to ourselves. Faith must be shared. Just as Lois and Eunice nurtured Timothy's faith, Timothy is called to share his faith with a world that needs it. Paul sees his gifts for ministry and encourages him in this work. Paul understands that authentic faith lives in Timothy and writes, *Because of this, I'm reminding you to revive God's gift that is in you through the laying on of my hands* (v. 5).

Paul may also recognize the tendency that families and communities often have to keep their faith to themselves. Perhaps that's why he adds this reminder: *God didn't give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled* (v. 7). We rekindle our faith when we share our light with someone else.



Life Question

How am I sharing my faith boldly?

Prayer

Lord, help me remember that faith is not something we are meant to keep to ourselves. Help me find good ways to offer your gift of life to others. Amen.

Sunday, October 23

2 Samuel 7:1-17

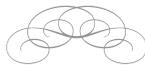
When I was in college, my parents divorced. It was an incredibly difficult time for me and especially for my siblings still living at home. There were trips to court to sort out the dissolution of the marriage and to decide custody. There were heated arguments followed by silence. Although my parents were the ones divorcing, we all felt the pain.

It took me years to get to the point where I could express gratitude about the divorce. Let me be clear—I am not thankful for the pain, or the fear, or the tears we shed together. But I am thankful that through it all, God showed us that second chances are possible. I am grateful that I have come to experience the joy of a loving step-mother. I am grateful that my parents were able to find love in new relationships. I am thankful that through it all, God never left us.

While I am grateful for these things *now*, I can't say I was grateful *then*. Sometimes it's only on the other side of pain and tragedy that we come to understand that, even through that dark valley, God was walking beside us the entire way.

In this Scripture lesson, God tells Nathan to remind David that God called him as a shepherd to lead Israel and that God was with him during the entire journey. What's more, God will be with David's descendants for generations to come.

As you read and meditate upon the promise God made to David, hear the same words of promise and blessing over your own life: I will never take my faithful love away from you.



Life Questions

Where along life's journey have you felt alone in your grief? Did you come to realize later that God was with you all along?

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the great blessing and gift of your constant presence in my life. Amen.

Monday, October 24

2 Samuel 7:18-29

Like many of you, my wife and I first taught our children to pray at the supper table. Seated in their high chairs at the end of the table, our toddlers would clasp their little hands in a prayerful pose. Even before they could talk themselves, our daughters understood that the word “Amen” meant, “We’re about to eat!”

If you were teaching children (or adults, for that matter) how to pray, would you want to use this prayer of David’s as a model? While David is respectful of God in this prayer, and gives God rightful praise, David proceeds to make some clear demands of God. In a nutshell, David says, “Who am I, Lord, that you should look upon me? You are so great and no one can compare to you. Now, knowing how trustworthy you are, I implore you to do as you have promised and bless me.”

Such a prayer strikes most of us, I imagine, as irreverent. Who are we to *demand* anything from God?

But there is another way of looking at this. Biblical prayers (especially the psalms) are straightforward and honest. They often include expressions of anger, requests for victory over enemies, and even laments about God’s silence or inaction. While we modern believers often feel these same emotions, we can be hesitant to pray about them.

David, in honestly expressing the desires of his heart, remembers aloud the promises God made with him about his lineage. Refraining from divine disrespect, he courageously implores God to make good on those promises. Like Jacob before him, wrestling with God at the Jabbok, David holds fast to God until he receives a blessing for himself and his people. Are we as courageous?



Life Question

When in your faith journey have you been compelled to pray honestly and courageously, imploring God to bless you, a family member, or a situation?

Prayer

God, give us the courage to pray to you honestly and openly, sharing the desires of our heart. Amen.

Tuesday, October 25

Psalm 9

Anne Lamott is one of my favorite writers. She is funny, honest, and sometimes a bit raw as she recounts her joys and struggles. In her delightful book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, she writes: “Here are the two best prayers I know: ‘Help me, help me, help me,’ and ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’”

Psalm 9 begins with a *thank you* prayer. David is grateful for God’s wonderful deeds of grace and mercy in his life. As he reflects on them, he recognizes God’s hand in providing and protecting him. For God’s great faithfulness, David can only offer his highest praise and thanksgiving. What’s more, he invites those of us reading this prayer to sing our praises to God as well.

In verse 13, David’s prayer takes on a *help me* tone. The gratitude David feels for God’s steadfast love and care seems less absolute, as he directly appeals to God for mercy in the midst of his suffering.

As I reflect on my prayer life, I can say that, like Lamott and the psalmist, I’ve prayed my share of *Help me, help me, help me* and *Thank you, thank you, thank you* prayers. I suppose that’s because, in the end, life is neither all good nor all bad, but a decent mixture of both. In some circumstances, we find ourselves praying for deliverance. Other times, by God’s grace, our prayers bubble over with gratitude.

The good news of the Gospel is that whether we face the highs or the lows of life, we can count on God to be present through it all. This, for me, is the greatest gift God gives us: Emmanuel, God with us. Good times and bad—no matter what—God is with us.

Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 82.



Life Question

When have you prayed a “help me” prayer, then experienced God’s deliverance?

Prayer

God, when storms gather, help us. When days are sunny, thank you. Amen.

Wednesday, October 26

Luke 1:30-33

Imagine that your child, or your spouse, or a dear friend approached you and the first thing she or he said was, “Now don’t be afraid, but...”. If someone did that to me, I would go from zero to petrified in two seconds (half that time if the person in question is an angel).

The angel Gabriel is sent to Mary, a young girl engaged to Joseph, to tell her to rejoice because God is with her. Apparently this sends shivers down her spine, because she is very troubled. At this point the angel says, “Mary, there is no need to fear. You will become pregnant with a child. This will be God’s doing, so God will be with you all the way.”

Perhaps to further assuage her fear, the angel conveys promises to Mary that reflect the ones God made to David. In 2 Samuel 7, the Scripture we read a few days ago, Nathan quotes God’s words to David: *I will make your name great* while the angel says to Mary that Jesus *will be great*. Through Nathan God promises that the throne of David’s kingdom will be established forever, while the angel promises Mary that *there will be no end to [Jesus’] kingdom* (v. 33).

God also makes promises to you and me—promises of grace, guidance, constant presence, generous forgiveness, and much more. Are our lives marked more by fear, or by our trust that God will make good on these promises? Our challenge, today and always, is to be like Mary—to live out the belief that God’s promises are real and trustworthy. May our lives echo the words of Thomas Chisholm’s great hymn: “Thy compassions they fail not; as Thou hast been, Thou forever wilt be. Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!”



Life Question

In times of uncertainty and fear, how do we trust God’s eternal promise of goodness and grace?

Prayer

Believing in your promises, Lord, give us strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. Amen.

Thursday, October 27

Luke 1:34-38

This scene from Luke's story of the angel visiting Mary is a favorite of artists. There's no telling how many visual interpretations of this story exist. We've all seen them, right? Mary is portrayed as a woman in her twenties, clothed as if she's wealthy, piously bowing in prayer.

As beautiful as the artists often depict this scene, these usual details are quite the embellishment. Mary was not wealthy; she was poor—and from the poorest part of the country. And she wasn't a young woman; she was a girl. In fact, most scholars agree that when the angel visited her, Mary would have been twelve to fourteen years of age. As the father of a twelve-year-old, this gives me cold sweats.

The angel explains that Mary will become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, then declares how wonderful all this will be. Naturally, Mary has a few more questions. (Who wouldn't?) The angel answers them, and then remains with her until she accepts her future and her spirit begins to settle.

As amazing as Mary's story is (becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit, giving birth to and raising the Savior of the universe), what amazes me most is that this young girl says yes. When presented with this incredible scenario, Mary replies, *Let it be with me* (v. 38).

If God can call a poor, young girl named Mary to bear the Messiah, what can God call you to do? I know what you're thinking: "Oh, no—you must have the wrong person. God couldn't use me." Respectfully, you're wrong. God has selected you to bring the love of Christ into this world. God always chooses regular people to do great things when they are willing to say, "Let it be with me."



Life Questions

How is God calling you to bear Christ's light in this world? Will you say yes?

Prayer

God, give us courage like Mary's to respond to your great call to embody Christ's love and grace within us, and to answer "yes." Amen.

Friday, October 28

Acts 13:26-37

Eleven months ago, Kelly Gissendaner was put to death by the state of Georgia for arranging the murder of her husband. By all accounts, Kelly accepted responsibility for the crime, expressed remorse, turned her life around during her nearly 20 years in prison, became a mentor and a source of encouragement and joy to her fellow inmates, and fervently studied the Scriptures. Kelly's personal study drove her to complete a Certificate in Theological Studies while incarcerated.

Kelly's life and witness behind bars was noticed by faith leaders and faith communities in Georgia and around the world. Those opposed to the death penalty pointed to her case as evidence of the cruelty of state execution. And many of those who supported capitol punishment considered her transformation worthy of having her sentence reduced to life in prison. Pleas to spare her life were numerous, yet ultimately unsuccessful.

In this section of Acts, Paul is making a speech in which he says that the Jewish religious leaders asked Pilate to execute Jesus, even though they had no evidence or legal standing. These leaders who arranged Jesus' death thought they were done with this radical prophet when he drew his last breath upon the cross. Little did they know that God would soon raise him from the dead!

While I am not comparing Kelly and Christ, it is important to understand that the resurrection God gave to Jesus is the resurrection God gave to Kelly, and it is the resurrection God gives to you and me. The God who loves us every day of our lives is the same God who welcomes us to our heavenly, eternal homes. Our entire existence is not over when our earthly life comes to an end; God raises us to new life!



Life Question

Do we live our lives with the belief and trust that God, who will care for us in death, also cares for us in every aspect of life?

Prayer

Lord, thank you for giving us abundant life on earth and in heaven. Amen.

Saturday, October 29

Acts 15:15-17

Churches fight about anything and everything. They always have. We disagree about theology, money, buildings, race, politics, sexuality, gender roles—you name it.

About 25 years ago, a congregation to which I belonged had a fight. The quarrel was not over the color of the sanctuary carpet or how often the pastor preached past noon. The details I remember involved a new African-American church in the neighborhood that was doing great ministry and needed office space for their pastor. Since we had space to spare, a rental agreement was drawn up and presented to the church.

People I hadn't seen in years (or ever) came for the business meeting to argue against inviting another church's staff to have an office in an unused portion of our building. I don't remember all of the bogus objections, but I'm certain no one admitted that their real motivation was race. They didn't want African-American people in their church.

Today's reading from Acts recounts a church fight. One group learned that Gentiles were being baptized and welcomed into the church without being circumcised. They raised a stink, saying, *unless you are circumcised according to the custom we've received from Moses, you can't be saved* (15:1). Then James, Jesus' brother, stands up to speak.

James says that eliminating barriers to fellowship and receiving all people gracefully is what God intends. He quotes Amos (9:11-12) and envisions the rebuilt tent of David as a symbol of Christ's bringing *all* peoples to himself. Last time I checked, there are no exceptions to *all*.

The lesson here is simple, but profound. Being one with Christ means being one with all kinds of folks. Christ followers welcome all people with the same grace that Jesus and his brother James show.



Life Question

How am I proclaiming the welcoming, accepting grace of Jesus Christ?

Prayer

God, thank you for your Spirit and Word that challenge us to open our hearts, lives, and fellowship to all people. Amen.

Sunday, October 30

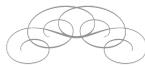
1 Kings 17:1-6

There is no magic in preparing a casserole, but creating food for someone else can soothe a hurting soul. A friend from church lost two family members within days of each other. Our church rallied in response by starting a meal train, a series of meals made by our members so our friend's family would have one less thing to think about as they grieved.

As I prepared my casserole, I prayed for the ones who would share this meal. I remembered times when others fed my family, and thought about the meals they brought. Was it the particular food that eased my pain? No, but the gift of those meals provided the healing power that comes from knowing you are loved and remembered by the gift giver.

Elijah is alone in a land that is experiencing a great drought. Food is scarce. Yet even in his isolation, he is not isolated from God, who remembers him and provides. It's not a fancy meal served in a great temple that Elijah receives. It's a simple meal brought to him by the birds of the air. God soothes his throat not with bottles of rich wine but by the water of a babbling brook.

Life events can make us feel isolated and lonely. Being fed by another brings comfort that reminds us we are not alone. As God uses ravens to remind Elijah of God's provision, God uses us to provide care and compassion. A friend cooks once a month for a homeless men's shelter in Atlanta. A woman in my town delivers fresh baked bread just to remind the recipients that they were on her mind. These are not gourmet chefs, but they are people who feel God leading them to share the soothing gift of a meal.



Life Question

Reflect on a time when you received ministry through the gift of a meal. Who is someone you could share this gift with this week?

Prayer

God, open my eyes and heart to those in need of a thoughtful meal and help me respond. Amen.

Monday, October 31

1 Kings 17:17-24

I've nicknamed her the protesting widow. She's already experienced great loss and she refuses to lose her son without a fight. Like any mother watching her child wither away, she agonizes over what she could do.

When she was in a hopeless place once before, speaking up brought provisions.

She remembers that day well, when a stranger named Elijah came to her door asking for water. She spared a drink, but when he asked for bread, she refused. She was already using the only ingredients left in her cupboard to make one last meal for two. Elijah reassured her that if she would feed him, she and her son would have enough. He conveyed God's promise that if she shared, she would never run out of ingredients. So she shared, and God's promise remained true.

Now this protesting widow faces another dire situation. She confronts the foreigner who is staying in her house about his God. *What's gone wrong between us, man of God? Have you come to me to call attention to my sin and kill my son?* (v. 18). Hear the pain in her questions. Like many of her day, she fears that her son's illness is a punishment for her sins. Once again, her protest moves Elijah to act. He takes her son and cries for God to save his life.

We know this widow not by name, but by actions. She uses her voice fiercely to question her desperate situation. Her protests urge Elijah to fight for them. Because she dares to speak up, her story changes. Her boldness invites God's transformation into her life. *Now I know that you really are a man of God,* this Sidonian widow tells Elijah, *and that the Lord's word is truly in your mouth* (v. 24).



Life Questions

Who is protesting around you? How do they move you to act on their behalf?

Prayer

God of hope and resurrection, move me to a place of action on behalf of those whose voices are rarely heard, or whose lives are seldom seen. Amen.