



# Words of Wisdom | Words of Faith

Congregational Devotional | January 1 – February 14, 2021

# And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Many years ago, at another church, I encouraged people to read the whole Bible in a year starting in January. With about 15 minutes per day, it can be done. Somewhere around March I realized I was reading for quantity, not quality. I finished, but on too many days my eyes simply passed over the required amount of words, and I'm not sure much really sank in.

This devotional is more about quality than quantity. One word at a time.

Each day gives us a different word to ponder, with accompanying scripture and reflections.

The idea for this devotional was planted a few years ago, when I read a wonderful book: *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, by Marilyn McEntyre. (I'm looking forward to the second edition coming out in a few months.) She also wrote a devotional called *Word by Word*, where she offers reflections on a series of verbs. In the preface she encourages readers to dwell, linger, ponder, listen, and pray—all of which she calls countercultural practices. She writes:

[These practices] slow us into a silence that has to be reclaimed, sometimes with fierce intention, from the noise and haste and forward momentum of daily life. Many of us have normalized busyness to the point of chronic overload. Staying with, being still, and coming back rather than going on are spiritual survival skills on the choppy seas of distraction.

—Marilyn McEntyre, *Word by Word*, p. ix

In 2020, we faced not only distraction, but also despair, with COVID, racial tension, and political chaos.

As a new year begins, my hope is that these words help us grow deeper and stronger and more faithful as followers of Jesus, the Word made flesh.

Grace and peace,



Charlie Berthoud, Pastor

PS: For several years now we've offered congregants an Epiphany star with a word on it to ponder over the whole year. If you haven't gotten a star yet, contact the church office and we'll send you one!

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Friday, February 12	Finish	John 17:5	Marilyn Unruh
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Sunday, February 14	Listen	Mark 9:2-9	Charlie Berthoud

We invite you to worship with us online each Sunday!

**Sunday words will be the theme of Sunday sermons.**

Find the worship videos on our [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), or [webpage](#).

If you would like to receive daily devotional emails  
or be removed from the existing daily devotional email list,  
please email Lexie Ofe (lofe@covenantmadison.org).

## Moi | Jeremiah 1: 6-8

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Barbara McCall

Friday, January 1

**“Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’”**

When God called Moses, God said, “Moses, I want you to lead my people out of Egypt .... out of bondage .... and into a new and promised land.”

And Moses responded: “Who me? Moi? Are you speaking to me, Lord?”

“Yes, I am,” said God.

“Well,” said Moses, “I’m hardly qualified for such a demanding call. Let me suggest that you call my brother Aaron. He’s more loquacious than I am, more politically acceptable in Egypt, and has more leadership skills than I have.” God replied, “I didn’t call you for a reference, Moses. I called you to respond to my request.”

Thus it was that in Exodus we read the account of Moses leading the people out of Egypt. God called Moses to respond to God’s call, not to refer God to another person. Moses turned out to be one of history’s “first responders.”

Similarly, our call in life is to respond to the call of Christ to do God’s will in serving and loving others who are in need. It is not to refer the challenge to someone else.

Surprisingly, as I was writing this devotion, a friend of mine called me asking if I would knit a dog sweater for her shivering Shih Tsu named Scooter, which she had just inherited upon her father’s unexpected death. Like Moses, my first thought was to refer her request to the church’s knitting group. They are more qualified and more gifted in their knitting skills than I am. Then I remembered that answering a call lies not in referring it to others but in acting upon it oneself. So, I went onto the internet and found a dog sweater pattern and then found just the right skein of wool in my yarn stash. I knit my first-ever dog sweater! Moi! In the photo you see a smiling dog, wearing a white sweater that was knit by a smiling responder for a friend in need .... and a smiling God in heaven who was thinking, “Yes, Barbara, that’s what I meant life to be ... responding to the needs of others through the love of Christ.”



*Help me, O Lord, not to refer the needs of others, but to respond to your call to serve them—especially for me to serve the needs of my husband who is now bound to his wheelchair. Amen.*

## Curiosity | Ecclesiastes 7:10, 13-14

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Nancy McCulley

Saturday, January 2

When I saw “curiosity” on the Epiphany star that I selected in January 2020, I wondered what God would reveal as I pondered it. Several months went by without any insight. I didn’t find the word in the Bible, and I didn’t feel especially called to study it.

On March 18, my curiosity about Covid-19 helped me decide that it was time to work from home. I was mystified by all of the conflicting information, searching for answers, interested in the daily health updates, eager to know if I was overreacting, perplexed about how to complete my work virtually, and baffled by the politicizing of the impending pandemic. All these emotions were synonymous with curiosity.

When misinformation and conflicting opinions about the pandemic raged out of control, I turned to prayer. I was curious about so many things, and drawn to my friends, neighbors, and family—all of whom were harder and harder to connect with. Would we be able to meet for dinner? Is the widower down the street okay? Will my elderly parents be afflicted? How can I help while keeping myself and others safe?

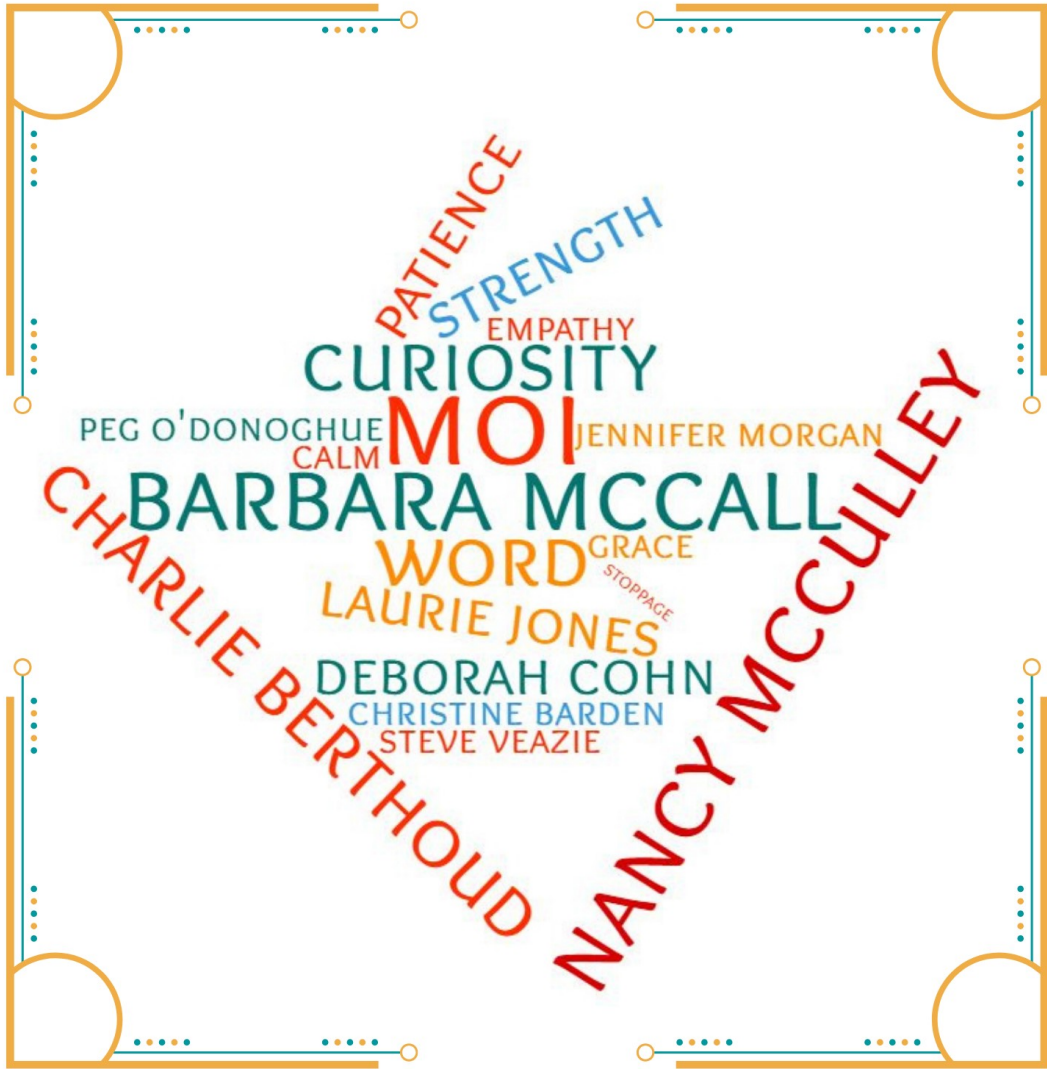
My Covenant family helped me navigate the new and strange circumstances throughout the year. Time and again, I was reminded to limit social media, pray more, reflect more, show kindness, share, express interest and concern, and think of ways to serve with all of the new limitations. God began to answer my curiosity with comfort.

We are all curious inquirers. Ecclesiastes 7:10, 13-14 reminds us to not replace curiosity with worry: **“Do not say, ‘Why were the old days better than these?’ For it is not wise to ask such questions. [...] Consider what God has done: who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future.”**

*Gracious God, thank you for your assurances. Help us replace worry with comfort that knowing you is enough. Amen.*

## Week 1

Words and writers for Jan. 1–Jan. 9 | Join us for worship to hear the reflection on today’s word!



Sunday, January 3

Charlie Berthoud

Word

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

## Patience | Romans 8:25

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Laurie Warren Jones

Monday, January 4

**“But if we hope for what we don’t see, we wait for it with patience.”**

I’m helping with school and daycare for my son’s family in Platteville every Thursday and Friday. I’ve been there every week this semester, and it seems there’s no end in sight. The road on my transition from the role of “grandma” to “teacher/disciplinarian” was a rocky one, with more bumps than smooth spots some weeks. Through this experience, the children and I are learning patience with each other and ourselves. Patience is a virtue, or so I’ve heard, but it’s still hard work. We are all tired of this situation. Tired of virtual school, tired of not going to do fun stuff, tired of this blasted pandemic, TIRED! So. Tired.

Yet, as I ponder the scripture verse from Romans, I think about the unknown—hope for what we don’t see—and the call for patience. As I write this in November 2020, I can’t imagine what January will be like when we read this, but I have hope. I imagine a successful vaccine program in progress with a supply chain that will allow multitudes of people to receive the vaccine, a peaceful political transfer of power in motion, a return to in-person school, a light at the end of the tunnel, that we might gather to worship together again.

So, we will wait with patience, we will strive to be the best we can be and work together to do whatever we need to do to keep moving forward. We will patiently fight this pandemic, staying apart so that one day we can return to life as a community of faith, worshiping and enjoying fellowship together again. May our patience be sustained and our reward be greater than anything imagined!

*Dear Lord, we know you care for us always, even in the worst of times. Grant us the patience to endure the situations we encounter, even when they are difficult. Amen.*

Deb Cohn

Tuesday, January 5

**“He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.”**

As I was sitting in the Covenant sanctuary during the worship service at the end of 2019 on Epiphany Sunday, I eagerly anticipated receiving my Epiphany Star. I hoped to receive a word that would break the heaviness of the previous three years’ words starting with “repentance” in 2016, followed by “mercy” in 2017 and finally in 2018, “forgiveness.” I was delighted when I pulled a star with the word, “tranquility” out of the offering plate for 2020. I thought that “tranquility” had a lighter feel and was a state of mind that I hoped to cultivate in my life.

Tranquility is not a word that appears in the NRSV Bible, but the word “calm” is a good substitute and it appears in Matthew’s, Mark’s, and Luke’s versions of Jesus stilling the storm. That story is an illustration of Jesus teaching the disciples about faith, but I view part of it as a metaphor for my life and perhaps for many others of my generation, experiencing retirement in 2020.

Within two months of Epiphany Sunday 2019, a deadly pandemic was spreading across the world and making its way through the United States. Suddenly, by mid-March, new feelings of anxiety emerged as tragic stories started appearing in the daily news, and we tried to adjust by curbing social activities, wearing masks, and practicing social distancing. Nearly all of my volunteer activities came to a screeching halt, and those that remained moved to Zoom. Anticipated gatherings with friends and family were suddenly off the calendar. Regretfully, we cancelled a summer trip to Cape Cod with our adult children. Certainly the pandemic precipitated new stresses, including the omnipresence of Zoom.

However, along with the grim realities of life in a pandemic, a sort of calm descended upon my life, creating a window of time and space to enjoy favorite pastimes, to appreciate long walks in the Arboretum, and at times, to experience a greater sense of tranquility. While, for a number of reasons, I will remember 2020 as a tragic year in our history, I hope to hold onto the feeling of calm after the storm.

*Loving God, thank you for the calm that descends even in the darkest times. Amen.*

## Strength | Psalm 46:1

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Christine Rew Barden

Wednesday, January 6

This bit of verse is a mantra, suitable for repeating: **“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”**

There it is. Perfect in its simplicity. A touchstone as relevant to the Psalmist as to us today. God is both our place of shelter and our source of strength. The two things critical to our very survival when we are in trouble—a place of safety and our supporting pillar, giving us the strength we need to address the trouble effectively, whatever it may be, from our place here on earth.

We are in a place of trouble: raging pandemic, racial unrest, political division. I cannot remember a time in my 53 years of life where I have felt so unmoored from the societal rules and “truths” on which my orderly life has been based. My view of the world has been colored by racism of which I was previously unaware. There are an almost equal number of fellow US citizens who tolerate and support continued racist policies as who will not. And I am raising teenagers in this tumult. How to explain and not lose hope as they ask the tough questions that I myself ask?

Hold fast to the knowledge that God is our strength. Sing it! Hum it. It is in these trying times that God is most there for us. God will give us the strength to continue the fight for justice and equality. For inclusion. For kindness. God gives us the strength to continue to look for ways to love our neighbor, even when we may not agree with our neighbor.

*Dear God, thank you for being my refuge and strength. Especially now, when my moorings are loose. Help me be strong for the continued fight for justice, equality, inclusion, and kindness. With your strength, we will prevail. Amen.*

**“Rejoice with those who rejoice;  
mourn with those who mourn.”**

I did not realize, when choosing the word “empathy” for my devotional, that the word does not actually appear in the Bible! However, there is no doubt that empathy pervades the New Testament.

The Greeks thought that the Gods could not empathize with mortals. Their gods’ lives were perfection, and they could not begin to understand the struggle in ordinary lives. But our God of the New Testament sent Christ to Earth to live among us mortals. Jesus ate, laughed, suffered and cried with us. Jesus was God empathizing with God’s Creation!

As followers of Christ, then, we are taught “clothe yourselves in compassion” (Colossians 3:12). We need to be able to enter into the experience of another. The person with which we participate in their experience of rejoicing or mourning greatly appreciates and benefits from our empathy.

Christians who become activists are grounded in empathy—that is the source of their need to make a difference in the lives of others. When we can truly empathize with the poor, the ill, the hungry, the disenfranchised and anyone who is suffering, we can’t help but act.

The early Christian theologian Ireneaus sums it up beautifully: “Jesus became what we are, in order that we might become what he is.”

*Our Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Jesus to us. Help us to feel empathy for others, just as Jesus showed us. Let that empathy kindle in us a desire to be your hands of compassion in this world. Amen.*

**“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”**

For my reflection, I draw heavily from an opinion piece on the pandemic written by Pope Francis published in the New York Times on November 26. In it he talks about how each of us have had some “stoppage” in our life, and if we choose to learn from that time, what will be revealed will be what we need to change. Stoppage might be the result of any number of circumstances: some serious illness like COVID or accident; a divorce; the loss of a loved one; a financial setback, etc. In an ironic twist one can imagine this time of stoppage as a journey. We do not need to be passive travelers on the journey.

Often we think of darkness as a time to stop traveling, a “stoppage.” But as John writes so eloquently about Jesus, the light of Jesus will always shine through the darkness. We are challenged to examine how we are living, who or what we are idolizing, and the relationships we have and the care we give to them. Rearranging our priorities is likely.

*Dear God, help us to see the light and to be the light.*

When I hear or think about the word “grace,” a lot of different things come to mind. I think of someone who is “graceful” when their physical movements are smooth, refined, or even beautiful. A person who shows “grace” is someone who is courteous and kind, sometimes in difficult situations. There is also a “grace period,” where something is owed but the time is kindly extended without penalty. Of course, before a meal, Christians say “grace,” which are prayers of thanks and expressions of gratitude for the food which the Lord has provided, for the people who are gathered, and for other blessings.

The word “grace” as used in the New Testament was derived from the Greek word “charis,” which means favor, blessing or kindness. It is a word that was used frequently by Paul in his letters throughout the New Testament.

I partly selected a passage from a letter which Paul sent to Titus because Titus was my grandfather’s name. Paul tells Titus in chapter 2 verse 11: **“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.”** Paul went on to explain that the grace of God teaches us to renounce ungodliness and worldly possessions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives. Later in his letter to Titus, Paul explained that through the kindness and love of God, he saved us, not because of any righteous things we have done, but because of God’s mercy.

The different meanings of grace as we use that term today are actually quite similar and relevant to the teachings of Paul. We should be graceful—full of grace. We should act kindly and be helpful to others. We don’t need to be enslaved by worldly passions and pleasures. We have been given a “grace period”—not because we are entitled to it, but by the kindness, mercy and love of God.

*Dear God, help us understand and spread your grace through kindness and love. Amen.*

## Week 2

Words and writers for Jan. 10–Jan. 16 | Join us for worship to hear the reflection on today's word!



Sunday, January 10  
Brad Brown  
**Abandoned**

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

1 Cor. 16:13-14

## Serenity | John 14:27; James 3:17-18; Isaiah 32:17

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Nan Schaefer

Monday, January 11

**“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” —John 14:27**

**“But the wisdom from above is in the first place pure, and then peace-loving, considerate, and open to reason; it is straightforward and sincere, rich in mercy and in the kindly deeds that are its fruit. True justice is the harvest reaped by peacemakers from seeds sewn in a spirit of peace.” —James 3:17-18**

**“And the work of righteousness will be peace, and the service of righteousness, quietness and confidence forever.” —Isaiah 32:17**

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

Serenity is defined by Wikipedia as remaining calm and true to yourself, regardless of what else is going on. It was thought to be written by St. Francis of Assisi, but is now known to have been written by Reinhold Niebuhr. It began to be used by AA in 1941 and is often used in various 12-Step programs now.

I chose this word because serenity is something that most often eludes me. I forget to turn to the words of scripture to find calm and peace in my inner being, although most nights now before going to sleep, I recite in my head the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and I find that since I started that, I sleep more peacefully.

With the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and the continuing saga of the election and succession of the presidency, I am often angry and sad and rather torn apart emotionally, and I don't like that feeling. I researched online to find Bible verses that used the word “serenity” and found not a single one! Many verses refer to being strong in the Lord, having courage because God will defend us against our enemies, putting on the clothing of Christ, and so on.

*O God, give us the wisdom to seek your guidance when we are not at peace within ourselves. Let us listen to and hear your words, so that we may indeed find serenity. Amen.*

## Overcome | Romans 12:21

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Monica Mark

Tuesday, January 12

**“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

I have always loved grammar and language—not just the words themselves (though I admit to having read the dictionary and studiously maintaining a notebook of my favorite words growing up), but the way that word choice, sentence structure, and phrasing can create deeper layers of meaning.

I found myself coming back to Romans 12:21 for that reason. On the surface, it’s a teaching that I believe to be at the core of who we are as Christians—a reminder to love our enemies, to spread good in the world. But mulling it over, I felt like I saw a second layer there, thanks to the two uses of the word “overcome.”

The first half of the verse, “evil” is technically the acting party, the force trying to overcome *us*. In contrast, in the second half, *we’re* the ones taking action to overcome evil with good. Being overcome is a passive thing, but overcoming is an active one. To put it a little more simply: for good to prevail over evil, we need to take action, to *work* toward God’s kingdom on earth.

The prospect of fighting against evil is daunting to contemplate. But the other thing Romans 12:21 tells us is that it’s in our power to act. With God at our side, working together to do what is right, evil can overcome us only if we let it.

*God, give us the strength each day to work toward your kingdom here on Earth—to take action to overcome evil with good. Amen.*

**“And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”**

James 3:18 concludes a section, vv. 13-18, that contrasts worldly and heavenly wisdom. Earthly wisdom is unspiritual and of the devil, and it leads to disorder and wickedness of every kind. Those with envy and selfish ambition are guided by this wisdom from below (vv. 14-16). Heavenly wisdom, that from above, is “pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality and hypocrisy” (v. 17). “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (v. 18, NIV).

The Scriptures have much to say about righteousness. Dan 4.27 equates it with mercy to the poor, and in Amos 5.24 we learn that righteousness and justice are very close. Hos 10.12 tells us that if one sows righteousness, he will reap steadfast love (mercy, KJV). Paul in Eph. 6.14 equates righteousness with truth, and in Php 1.11 he says that the fruits of righteousness come from Jesus to glorify and praise God. In 1 Cor 15.34 we are told that righteousness is equivalent to the knowledge of God. Our Lord tells us in his Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5.20) that righteousness leads us into the kingdom of heaven.

I think of Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech at the Lincoln Monument in Washington D.C. in 1963. In his message of peaceful resistance, freedom, justice, and brotherhood, he referred to Amos 5.24.

And so, James takes the second of his list of traits of heavenly wisdom and says that peacemakers may expect to harvest righteousness. It will not grow in a climate of bitterness and self-centered ambition, but only where there are those who love peace and work for it. Walking closely with Jesus along the straight and narrow way will make it possible for us to sow peace and harvest righteousness.

*Dearest Lord Jesus, may we strive always to be close to you and sow peace and harvest righteousness at all times and in all places. Amen.*

**“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”**

It's a new year! Every January, I look forward to the months ahead with hope and positivity. I'm grateful for my family and friends, for my church and for the good life that I have. And I wonder, what can I do differently this year to try to make it better than the year before?

For 2021, one of the things I want to focus on is finding a sense of renewal. My goal is to think about how I can accept the opportunities this new year presents and channel them into being a better person and a better Christian with a renewed sense of God's love. Questions I want to think about are: How can I listen to God's voice and really hear what He wants from me and then act to serve His will? How can I renew my heart and spirit, as the scripture says?

I know that to achieve this goal will take a plan. So here's what I am going to do. First, I'll read the Bible more. A Covenant friend shared a daily plan for reading the Bible in one year. I've tried to read the Bible start to finish in the past and haven't been able to stick with it. But this plan breaks it into manageable chunks which feels more realistic. I've already started and so far, so good. The other action I'll be taking is to spend more time in prayer.

I realize this is a pretty simple plan—read the Bible and pray, but I know it's one I can stick with and I have a feeling I'll gain more than renewal. I'll also be more focused on God's word every day.

So what will you do to find renewal in 2021? However you answer that question, I wish you success and peace.

*Loving God, please give us courage and resilience in 2021 to face whatever joys and challenges may come our way. Help us to renew our faith and faithfulness so we may live your Word. Amen.*

## Patience | Luke 8:15

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Corinne Hollar

Friday, January 15

**“But that [seed] on the good ground are they, which in honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it and bring forth fruit with patience.”**

To me, this passage means that as Christians we are to practice patience. What is patience? We often hear that patience is a virtue. In other words, it is an admirable quality. The dictionary defines patience as the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, trouble or suffering without getting angry or upset. Other definitions are the ability to wait without agitation or the capacity for forbearance and endurance.

These are qualities that we can apply to our faith as well as to our daily lives. The Bible tells us, “Love is patient and kind” (1 Corinthians 13:4). When we practice patience, we show mercy and compassion. Although some might say I am not a patient person, I strive to be. Thankfully practicing patience applies to myself as well as to others. My goals, such as being patient, losing weight and saving money, are sometimes hard to attain. I can practice patience with myself as I try to meet my goals and challenges. I often pray to God for help and try to wait patiently for the answer. Sometimes, no answer is the answer I receive. I am grateful for the Covenant Church community that supports my struggle to patiently practice my faith.

Even more difficult is to practice patience toward others. Taking care of an elderly parent, teaching a young child, forgiving someone who hurt you, loving a friend or family member who disagrees with you or being with someone who is grieving all require patience. On a personal note, I have difficulty being patient with a friend, who is like a sister to me, who has early onset Alzheimer’s. As her guardian, it is an ongoing challenge for me to be patient and stay in the moment with her. I pray daily to show her compassion and kindness as we continue on this journey.

Currently, all of us are having to practice forbearance and endurance as we struggle with the pandemic. We have had to forgo many of the interactions and activities that sustain us. Some are suffering physical and economic hardships. I gain comfort and strength from my faith.

A recent example of tolerating delay was waiting for the presidential election results. I also had to practice patience with others whose views were different from mine. Patience is definitely necessary as our country confronts the challenges of the pandemic, racial injustice, divisiveness and violence. I hold out hope that love and kindness will prevail.

*Dear Lord, I pray that having heard your word I can keep it and practice it with patience. I pray for compassion and kindness for myself and others. Help me to accept the things I cannot control. Thank you for all that you have given me. I am especially grateful for my family, my friends, my church and my health. Amen.*

## Intention | Romans 12:1-21

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Stephen Sauer

Saturday, January 16

Some of my favorite Bible verses are Paul's description of the marks of the true Christian. I am taken by the depth of their simplicity. How they are simultaneously aspirational yet reachable, and directly applicable to my daily experience. It's the New Testament in real life, in real time. What's not to like?

Well, it's difficult to put these ideals into practice. Not always, of course. I can give love freely and abhor evil readily when it is convenient. My intentions notwithstanding, however, my foibles, imperfections, and biases can make it difficult for me to embody these ideals and make the difficult choices that are authentically Christian.

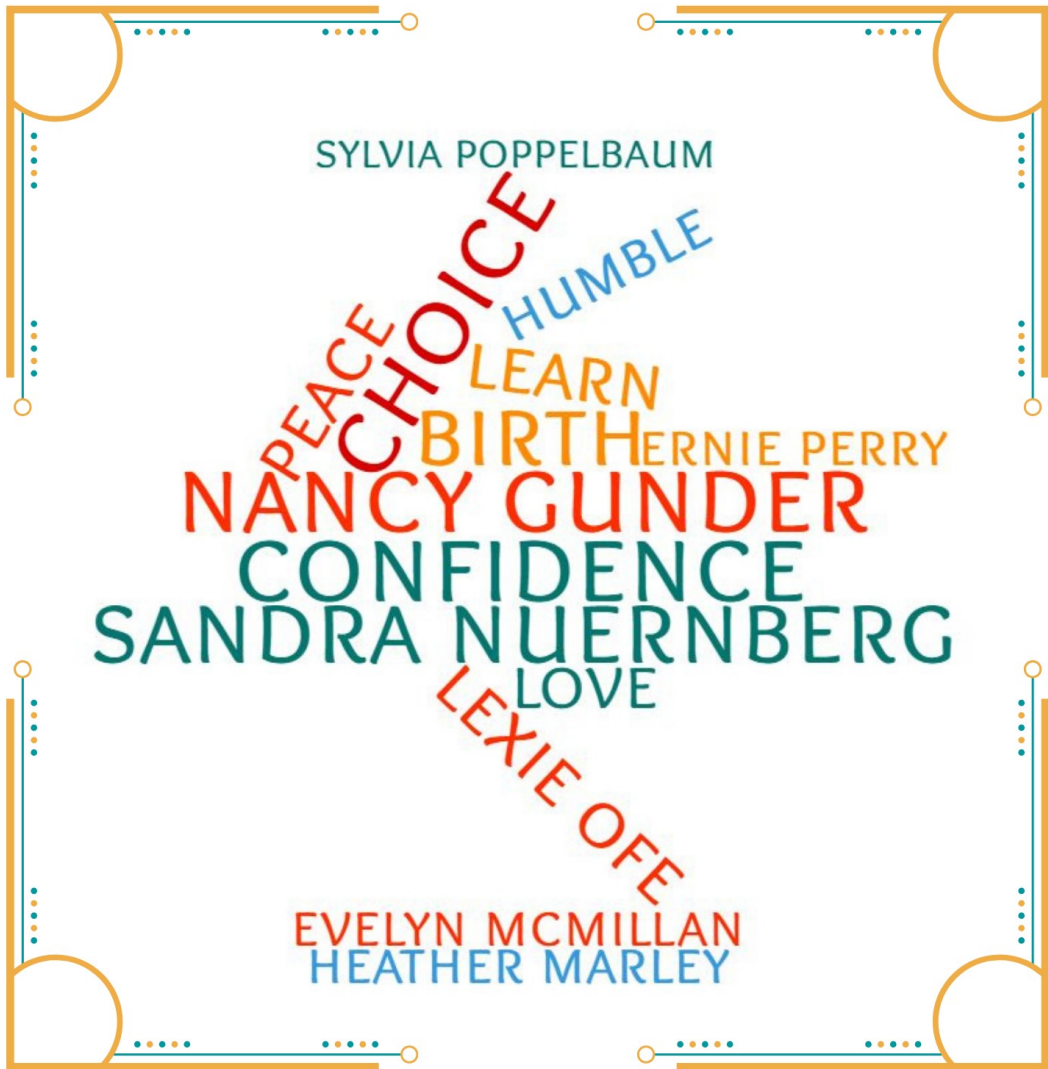
I am comforted, though, by Paul's appeal to be a living sacrifice, **“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”** Paul reminds me that I am on a journey of transformation that is an ongoing process. My “failures” are just as important as my “successes”—each is a gift and an affirmation of my Christian identity. Paul also reminds me that I am part of a Christian community that celebrates the grace of humility, diversity, and faithfulness, which make me a part of something much bigger than my immediate needs, desires, and surroundings.

The great challenges of our time will require “sober judgement” and the gifts of many, acting “as one body in Christ” to discern and embrace the solutions that will lead us toward God's kingdom on earth. Advent reminds me that celebrating the birth of the Savior is to celebrate hope, peace, joy, and love. My intention to embody an authentic Christian life is the first step toward this transformation.

*God, may my intentions continually lead me to love genuinely, abhor evil, and hold fast to what is good.  
Amen.*

### Week 3

Words and writers for Jan. 17–Jan. 23 | Join us for worship to hear the reflection on today's word!



Sunday, January 17

Lexie Ofe

Learn

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Mark 13:28–29

**“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”**

Is there is a word more powerful and soothing? Affecting everything or felt by only you. Its presence is PEACE; its absence is horrible.

As I was reflecting on “peace,” it seems we are often sent to one of two ends of a continuum. We often think of our inner peace, a personal peace, in our personal space. And at the other end, we talk about an actionable, more global “peace.” We talk of the absence of war, or contentment. Better yet, shouldn’t we pursue Peace as an active global consciousness, where communities, people and the planet live and love in harmony? A Peace we can share one-to-one, or globally. A Peace we cherish across the Covenant Sanctuary and in our hearts.

This Peace is in our hearts, and in the absence of our Sunday habit of sharing the Peace, we look fondly to the future when we can share our Peace and our hearts again.

Peace is indeed a big word. It is so subtle yet penetrating. We should pursue Peace at every level of consciousness, personal or global. May God Bless our community with PEACE; that it comes to us in and through every definition and all circumstances, personal or global.

Thank you God for Peace.

*Dear God, we pray to You in the name of Jesus, and pray You forgive us of our sins. We do not always take the peaceful, loving way. Oh Lord forgive us that we hurt others, and ourselves. Help us find Peace Lord, and then help us share Your love so that the Peace of Christ is known by all.*

# God's Steadfast Love | Psalm 136

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Sandra Nuernberg

Tuesday, January 19

**“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.”**

It's hard to imagine our giving thanks in this new season, this new year of 2021, isn't it? It's very hard, and specifically in this surreal time of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have to stretch ourselves, often to the limits, to realize that our God of creation could leave us in peril (exposed to danger) when millions have tested positive and hundreds of thousands have died from such a dangerous, contagious virus. How can it be?

I read the Psalms often for respite, and I especially enjoy Psalm 136 because it keeps reminding me of God's steadfast love that endures forever (yes, every verse, and there are 26)! It also helps me remember all the works of God for/to me in these times, so that I can praise God and be grateful and thankful for all my blessings.

For the Israelites, God is shown clearly in these characterizations of God's work. The Psalmist is telling about God's covenantal faithfulness to us, God's (Yahweh) great wonders and the loyalty of God's covenant with the Israelites and with us, AND our loyalty needed to live faithful lives in our covenant with God. In this Psalm, there are a robust selection of verbs (action) describing God's faithfulness, loyalty, and support in God's work; God does make the heavens, spreads out the earth, brings light (sun) to rule over the day, and the stars (moon) to rule over the night. Now that's protection for us! God also rescues, leads, gives and forgives in so many ways, continuously.

These are God's works of steadfast love for us; the Hebrew word is *hesed*, ongoing and never-faltering love for us all. God's steadfast love forever is mentioned a few less than 200 (196 in my Bible) times in the O.T., and more than 125 (127 in mine) in all of the Psalms alone! Check these memorable verses out: In Exodus 34:6-7, (the Lord is) “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,” and in Job 10:12, when in pity, Job was loathing his own life: “You (Lord) have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit.” Another O.T. gem is in Isaiah 54:10, where God assures God's covenant with Jerusalem: “But my steadfast love shall not depart from you, my covenant of peace shall not be moved.”

In conclusion, it is astounding to us, the depth and richness of God's love for God's people. And yet it is God's redeeming love through God's works of salvation for us all, as well.

*O Lord, we praise you, we thank you for our faith in trusting fully that you love us. We thank you for your awesome gift of divine life and divine steadfast love shared with us and with all people. Amen.*

**“Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.”**

“Don’t worry about it.” How many times have we told ourselves or other people those simple words? As if it was a switch we could just turn off. So often we find ourselves caught on the hamster wheel of worry, going around and around, yet accomplishing nothing. Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about food or clothes because God will provide for them. It seems like the exact same thing we have been telling ourselves, but when Jesus issues the command He gives us a choice: We can continue to spin our wheel, or we can turn to God.

Not worrying about food and shelter can seem like a humongous ask, especially during uncertain times. Yet, Jesus reminds us that God feeds even the ravens. He wants to emphasize how valuable we are to God. If He will feed the lowly raven, He will take care of us.

Jesus’s teaching about an attitude which shuns worry and turns to trust in God is only realistic for those who have faith in God. While those with no faith will relentlessly pursue what to eat and drink, those who have faith have no need because God will provide it for them. Just as we provide for our children, God will provide for us. Our priority is not the things of this world and obtaining as much as we can for ourselves. Rather, our priority should be putting God and his kingdom above all else. And so, we must pivot our pursuits to the Kingdom.

Somedays it feels like everything around us is out of our control. We can’t control the weather, we can’t control the traffic, and we certainly can’t control the actions of others, but what we do have control over is what we *choose* to focus on. Instead of worrying about a promotion or a missed email, choose to focus your energy on Christ and his mission.

*Dear Lord, our lives are filled with so many things to worry about. With all of the things going on in the world around us, we find it hard not to worry. Please draw us close to you. Allow us to trust in You to make our lives lasting, our treasures to be in heaven, and our satisfaction to be in living our lives with You. Amen.*

## Birth | Psalm 139:13-16

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Evelyn McMillan

Thursday, January 21

When I chose a date, the earliest was January 21. This is the birthday of our son Stephen. He was born 50 years ago! I got out my concordance. Under “birthday,” there were two stories: Genesis 40:20, Pharaoh’s birthday celebration, and Matthew 14:6 and Mark 6:21, Herod’s birthday party. In each of these stories someone was beheaded.

When Adam and Eve are thrown out of Eden, Eve is told she will have pain in giving birth. But Isaiah 66:7-8 says, “Before she was in labor, she gave birth; before her pain came upon her, she delivered a son... as soon as Zion was in labor, she delivered her children.” The “she” here is Jerusalem (*The Women’s Bible Commentary* calls this a return to paradise—a new Eden).

The story of Hannah, wife of Elkanah: Samuel is born to them after years of bitter barrenness. Hannah has promised she will give him to the Lord for his entire life (1 Samuel 1:9-20).

My Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV) says “The story of a formerly barren woman who bears unusual offspring late in life as a special favor from God appears several times in the Bible. Besides Hannah, note Sarah (Gen. 17:16-19), Rebekah (Gen. 25:21-26), Rachel (Gen. 29:31, 30:22-24), the mother of Samson (Judges 13:2-5) and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-17).

I chose the scripture Psalm 139:13-16 because it describes so beautifully how the baby was created by the Lord. Look at different translations. *The Message* ends this part: **“Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth; all the stages of my life were spread out before you. The days of my life all prepared before I’d even lived one day.”**

Donna Monson reminded me of the hymn “I was there to hear your borning cry” (Hymn 488 in our Hymnal). Hymn 308 will be my closing prayer: “O God in whom all life begins, / who births the seed to fruit, / bestow your blessings on our lives; / here let your love find root. / Bring forth in us the Spirit’s gifts of patience, joy, and peace; / deliver us from numbing fear, and grant our faith increase.”

## Confidence | Proverbs 3:26

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Sylvia Poppelbaum

Friday, January 22

**“...The Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.”**

Have you noticed that words are taking on a new significance in these times we are living? I know I have. Challenged to make a choice for my devotion, I turned to my Covenant 2020 star word, *confidence*. It may have sounded like a command at first, but as I lived with it I learned it was so much more.

*Confidence* is a popular word in the Bible, including Paul's letter in 2 Corinthians 3:4-5, "Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God."

Proverbs, the text I chose, says it more simply, "The Lord will BE your confidence..."

Whether it is expressed during Sunday confession, on a paper nailed to the Ash Wednesday cross, or in my daily prayers, trusting God continues to be an ongoing challenge for me. I think I can do it all myself...carry the load, make the plans, be in charge ... until I can't. Living with the word *confidence* through a pandemic, fear, political turmoil, and Larry's and my move to Minnesota in February has taught me again and again that it is only by trusting God that I can live my life right now with confidence.

Now what about the second phrase in Proverbs 3:26—keeping my foot from being caught? I like to walk outdoors and try to remember to look for tripping hazards so I don't fall and maybe break a bone. Of course, then a squirrel runs up a tree and I am no longer looking down. It is after such moments that I realize that it is not my vigilance but God's grace that keeps me safe. There, always, is God, already walking with me.

*God of my days and of eternity, I am so grateful for life and for the many gifts I receive from you. Thank you for always being with me, even when I forget to look for you. In these days of isolation, sadness, anger and fear, grant us your people confidence in you, and peace. Amen.*

## Humble | Philippians 2:3-4

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Nancy Gunder

Saturday, January 23

Music has always helped me to better assimilate my thoughts and emotions, and Tim McGraw's song "Humble and Kind" (written by Lori McKenna) has stuck in my mind and heart over these many months. This song was from his 2015 album and earned him a No. 1 hit in June 2016. The words feel to me even more urgent and relevant today after an exhausting four years of a presidency where the tone and behavior was the opposite of "humble and kind." According to *Psychology Today*, "Humble people do not expect special treatment as a person no matter how outstanding their accomplishments or personal characteristics may be."

And sadly, it seems to me that many "Christians" have embraced what I will call a win/lose mentality and forgotten about what God asks of us: **"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interest of others"** (Philippians 2:3-4). I'm not suggesting that we can't be successful, feel pride, and have strong views and beliefs, but rather, we need to trust God and "open our hearts and withdraw from the arrogance of our ego" so that we can discern what is needed and all work together for the common good.

*Dear Lord, may I learn to walk humbly with you, trusting that you will guide me to where I need to be in this life.*

## Week 4

Words and writers for Jan. 24–Jan. 30 | Join us for worship to hear the reflection on today's word!



Sunday, January 24  
Lorie Raihala  
**Forgive** |

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."

Matthew 18:21-22

## Hope | 1 Timothy 6:17

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Polly Guequierre

Monday, January 25

**“As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”**

“Wishes for a happy birthday.” “Wishing you a speedy recovery.” How often have you expressed these sincere sentiments? Merriam Webster defines a wish as a desire or want. I wish for a sunny day, or to find a good book, or to quit burning dinner. These, for me, are everyday desires and wants.

Hope, for me, is much more than an everyday desire. It dwells deep in my heart and is part of who I am. I believe that without hope I have nothing. Merriam Webster defines hope as “to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want something to happen or be true.”

Through my twenties I hoped fervently for children. Praying, waiting, and praying more. And God answered those prayers, gifting me with children on His time, not mine. Romans 12:12 says, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” Will our hopes always be realized? No, and I understood that fact, but Psalms 39:7 tells us, “And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in You.” God is faithful in His love for us, on that we can depend. Scripture reminds us never to give up hope because God is always with us, and He knows the desires of our hearts.

*Lord, I know that you are with us, and you hear our hopes for family, friends, our community, and our world. We know that “hope springs eternal” and that the eternal is You. Amen.*

## Simple | Luke 18:17

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Heather Schroeder

Tuesday, January 26

Life is complicated. Life is ten times more complicated during the pandemic. I have always found simple things to be comforting. Simple meals like chicken and rice, or plain pepperoni pizza appeal to me. Short sentences are easy for me to understand. I like doing children's time lessons with my husband, taking a complicated topic and distilling it to its simplest form. That's how I learn best. I like doing yoga to clear my head, and just thinking about my breath and my body.

Growing up I liked Bible verses about having a childlike faith: **“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it”** (Luke 18:17). I like that I could just believe in God and trust in His will. Scripture can be nuanced and complicated. It can require a lifetime of study to grow ever closer to God, which is good. But it doesn't *always* need to be complicated.

To me, doing mission work can also be simple. In Matthew 22:39, Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself. The Bible also says that “Anyone who has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise” (Luke 3:11). Okay, I can do that. God sees the whole picture for the whole world for all of time. I don't. I can't. We can simply trust God's perfect grace and seek His will. Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still and know that I am God.” This is a wonderful verse to meditate on.

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Okay, God. I can be still with you. Psalm 46:10 is the ultimate comfort verse. It feels like pepperoni pizza tastes.

*Dear God, thank you for this day. Thanks for making your love simple. Thanks for grace. Thanks for all the blessings in my life. Please be with me when life gets hard. Amen.*

Sally Lorenz

Wednesday, January 27

**“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”**

As a young child, my parents modeled servanthood for me regularly. They volunteered at our Presbyterian church as Elder, Deacon, and youth advisors and in our town on school committees and community organizations. My Dad volunteered in medical organizations locally, statewide, and nationwide. And when I was a high school junior, they took a daring (in 1961) eight-week medical mission trip to India where they taught doctors and medical professionals in a Presbyterian mission hospital in Miraj how to do heart catheterizations. They taught me by example the importance of serving God.

When I met Bob Lorenz in graduate school, I was intrigued by his experiences of serving others— teaching Spanish to illiterate Mexicans during a junior year abroad, serving his church in his youth, helping his grandparents on their farm. This aspect of his personality, along with his big, warm smile was part of what drew me to him and ultimately to marry him. He continued to be a wonderful example to me of ongoing servanthood, hammering away at Habitat for Humanity, volunteering for over 40 years with the Presbyterian Medical Benevolence Foundation, serving as Elder and Clerk of Session, supporting Covenant’s Guatemala mission on many trips where his fluent Spanish was a huge asset. In his professional life, he nurtured hundreds of students with his knowledge, enthusiasm and caring and encouraged them to be valuable engineers. In his personal life, his teaching extended to his children and grandchildren where he was renowned for reading stories dramatically, teaching useful skills, and having fun while learning.

*Loving God, I thank You that my life has been enriched by family and friends who continue to provide examples of how Jesus encouraged us to use our gifts to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, provide drink for the thirsty. Thank you for their love, their teaching and their service. Amen.*

## Remember | Psalm 25:4-7

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Barb Eikenberry

Thursday, January 28

Surprisingly, there are not many times in the Bible where we actually read the word “remember.” Who knew? This seems especially surprising when we consider that there are so many teachings and events that we would do well to remember. But verses 4-7 in Psalm 25 call to me to learn and remember God’s teachings, while they also petition God to grant me grace and forgiveness as I learn to walk His paths and sometimes fail. And the beauty of our Christian faith is that we know that if we acknowledge our failures and try anew to keep learning God’s paths, He will forgive us. I saved a quote from the front of one of our Sunday morning church programs years ago that I still have. The quote is by Brian McLaren from his book *We Make the Road by Walking*:

“You are not finished yet.  
You are ‘in the making.’  
You have the capacity to learn, mature, think, change, and grow.  
You also have the freedom to stagnate, regress, constrict, and lose your way.  
Which road will you take?”

PSALM 25

<sup>4</sup> **Show me your ways, LORD,  
teach me your paths.**  
<sup>5</sup> **Guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are God my Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long.**  
<sup>6</sup> **Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love,  
for they are from of old.**  
<sup>7</sup> **Do not remember the sins of my youth  
and my rebellious ways;  
according to your love remember me,  
for you, LORD, are good.**

What a wonderful prayer! Each new day, we have the freedom to keep learning, keep changing, and keep on the good paths. This is for all of us to remember and share.

## Infused | 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

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Marcia Lund

Friday, January 29

**“And may the Master pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you, just as it does from us to you. May you be infused with strength and purity, filled with confidence in the presence of God our Father when our Master arrives with all his followers.”** (*The Message*)

One of the most comical experiences I have had in a church service was during a baptism.

The church I attended had a baptismal font in the back of the church that looked like a mini Niagara Falls. The holy water flowed from the font to the floor. The guest minister that Sunday was baptizing his own grandchild. He invited all the kids in the congregation to witness it, and about 12 to 15 kids scooted up close to the “falls” to see the action.

Within seconds, I knew what was about to happen. Those kids would not be able to resist playing in the flowing water. And sure enough, as the pastor started, the kids played and splashed water on themselves and the other kids. There was no way to stop this child-like behavior. At the same time it was sacred and profound. They were spreading the holy water, spreading the love of Christ literally!

It refreshed my image of baptism. Baptism is about rebirth, belonging in a community, being alive in Christ. The water is blessed with the Holy Spirit, and the baby becomes a new member in the Kingdom of God.

Paul’s words to the Thessalonians are three blessings. They sound like a benediction with his repetition of the word “may.” In his book *To Bless the Space Between Us*, John O’Donohue writes, “The word blessing evokes a sense of warmth and protection; it suggests that no life is alone or unreachable.”

Paul’s blessing, these verses he wrote, infused his readers with encouragement to remember their connections to him and to the Christian faith. He was separated from them. He had to be smuggled out of the city. He wants them to know, despite the separation, that love is tangible, like water, something so common, yet so essential to life; and that love is an invisible force of God’s Holy Spirit, present always—infused in our hearts to strengthen our Christian faith. *To infuse is to give an animating or motivating impulse.* Paul’s words do this—they sprinkle and splash water on the seeds of Christianity he planted in Thessalonica.

Paul’s words, like the water in baptism, blessed and infused his readers with the energy of the Holy Spirit to be a blessing to others and to share the love of Christ.

*May you be infused with strength and purity and may your Christian love fill your lives and splash over on everyone around you. Amen.*

## Healing | Matthew 4:12-17; Acts 28:26-27

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Judy Von Bergen

Saturday, January 30

**“Go to this people and say, You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.” —Acts 28:26-27**

I picked “healing” because of all the wounding in our world right now. Many of us are torn and tattered. I went to the *The New Interpreters Study Bible* to see what it said about healing. I was looking for specific instructions!

First, what does healing mean? In Matthew 4:12-17 Jesus started his active ministry of teaching and healing. People brought anybody with a sickness, whether mental, emotional, or physical. Jesus healed them one and all.

Healing has a broad meaning, not just physical.

I found some instruction stated in the negative in Acts 28:26-27. When Paul was preaching to the local leaders of the Jews in Rome, he quoted the prophet Isaiah, who listed obstacles to healing. People had closed themselves off to God; they could not see or hear God’s message. God was lamenting that if they could “understand with their heart and turn—I would heal them.”

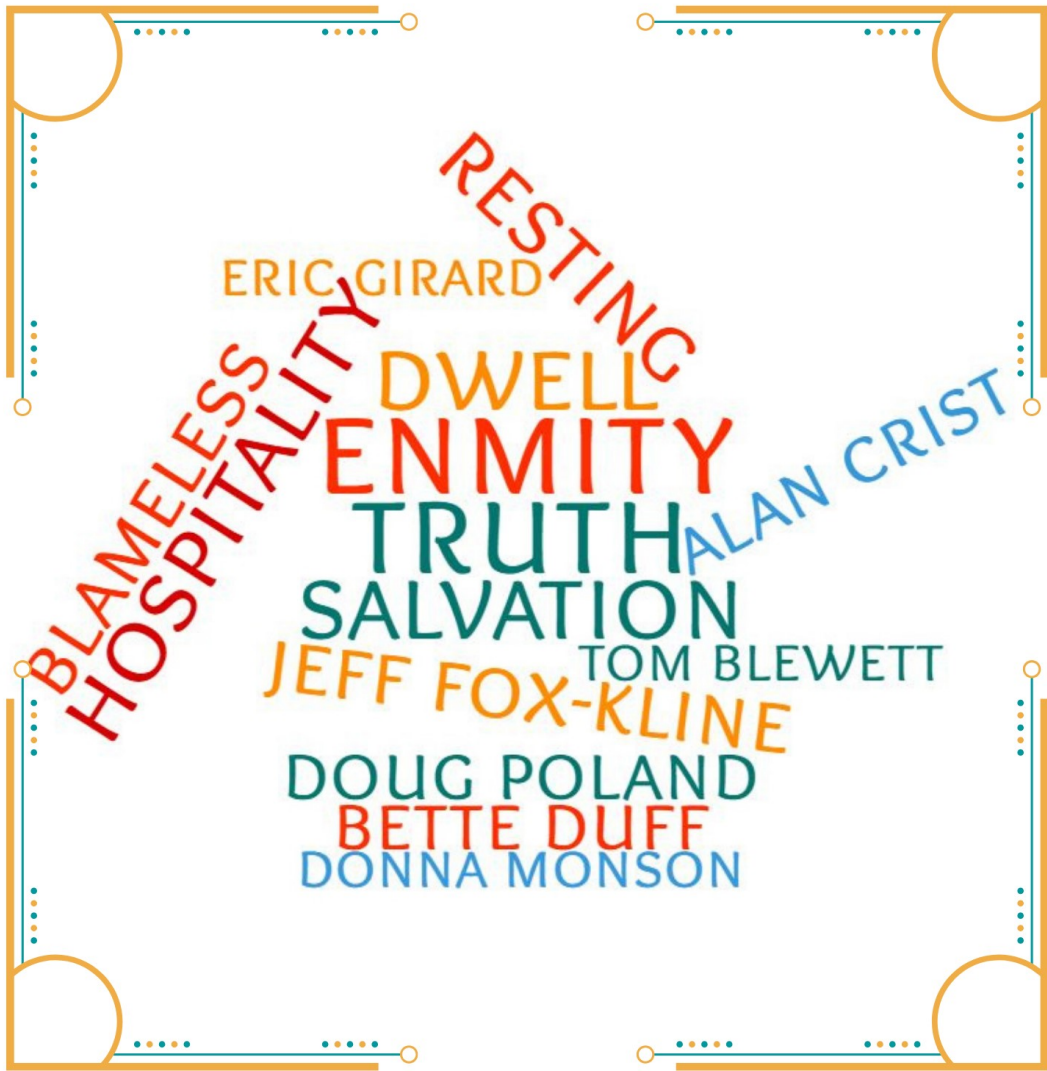
I believe this is an active constant process, this turning toward God. The song “Day by Day” from Godspell comes to mind. *Oh Dear God, These things I pray: To see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.* I find week by week isn’t enough to encourage my turning toward God. Week by week brings in glimmers of healing and hope, but they slip away.

I am asking myself, with God’s help, to make my turning toward God a more urgent priority. I want to nurture life as a lived prayer where my eyes can see and my ears can hear through Jesus’s perspective. This is much more consistent than my Crisis Prayers! I want to keep praying for crisis management, too, of course.

*Gracious God, help us live life as a prayer, where our eyes can see and our ears can hear God’s guidance. May we accept the healing that comes from that relationship, day by day.*

## Week 5

Words and writers for Jan. 31–Feb. 6 | Join us for worship to hear the reflection on today's word!



Sunday, January 31

Jeff Fox-Kline

# Enmity

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Mathew 5:43-45

## Truth | Proverbs 6:16-19; Ephesians 4:29-32 & 6:10-18

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Alan Crist

Monday, February 1

**“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” —Ephesians 4: 29-32**

When I was the director of freshman admissions at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, one of the tasks that I supervised was the determination of an applicant’s meeting the admission requirements. Four years of high school English was one of the requirements. High schools in the 70’s became creative in the naming of courses, moving away from English I, II, III, and IV. One such course at a public school was “The Search of Truth and the Presence of Evil.” I often wondered how a public high school approached this topic given that it most certainly would raise questions of faith and religious beliefs. Is truth the opposite of evil, or is good the opposite of evil? Does evil stand in the way of truth? Whose truth are we talking about?

In my view, truth is that which sets you free but not without the need for reconciliation. Truth respects relationships. If the “truth” you share causes great pain or harm to another, it is not the “truth.” Statements that are made that have no useful purpose are not truthful, and basic to every useful purpose is the search for truth. Speaking the truth means saying how something really is while showing respect for secrecy, intimacy, and concealment. Betrayal, for example, is not truth any more than are flippancy and cynicism. To truly be leaders in this world, we must set an example through respect, understanding, caring, and fairness in our actions and interactions with one another. We must seek first to understand and then and only then to be understood. How difficult can that be? It is just that simple and yet that complicated.

*Lord please give us the wisdom to know your truth for us during these difficult times and the courage to act on this knowledge as Christ would have us do. Amen.*

## Salvation | 2 Corinthians 6:2

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Doug Poland

Tuesday, February 2

**“See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!”**

For many Christians, the word “salvation” evokes the promise of an afterlife, an eschatological “heaven” into which we will enter individually after we die if we believe the right things. This conception of salvation goes hand-in-hand with the belief that it is our faith that Jesus Christ died to save us from, our sin that reconciles us with God and will allow us to live with God in heaven when we die. This understanding of “salvation” has three components: 1) it is about an afterlife; 2) it applies to individuals; and 3) it is tied to the idea that Jesus saves us from our sins through his death.

But this understanding of salvation is alien to the use of the word in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, the word salvation refers to, for example, Israel’s deliverance from bondage in Egypt (Exodus 15:1-2), return from exile (Isaiah 49:6), and rescue from peril (Psalm 51:14). It doesn’t concern an afterlife; it concerns the here and now. Nor does it relate just to individual deliverance; rather, it involves an entire community.

In the New Testament, the term “salvation” appears most often in Paul’s letters. Again, it refers not to an afterlife but to God’s vision for peace and justice on this earth, and to how our imitation of Jesus in his living reconciles the entire world—not just our individual selves—to God. Take, for example, the passage above. It is preceded by Paul’s writing that God “reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” Paul follows that with the exhortation “now is the day of salvation!” which is lived out through a ministry of “purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, [and] truthful speech.”

*God of grace and deliverance, bless us in our ministry of love, kindness, patience, truth, and holiness, serving as instruments of your reconciliation of this world to you.*

**“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.**

**Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”**

All is not well with the Colossian Christians. False teachers calling themselves “Christians” have been teaching varieties of nature worship, Iranian astrological speculation, and wisdom teaching drawn from mystery cults. Word reaches Paul and this letter to the Colossians is the result. The letter reaches out in love and reminds the people that they are “God’s chosen ones.” Paul and his followers want to let the Colossian Christians know that God’s true presence is found not in the words of false teachers, but only in the words of Jesus Christ.

I like the word “dwell.” It is an old-fashioned word, a cozy word, a word suggesting safety and caring. It appears many times in scripture. In Psalm 84 the word “dwell” is used in an especially tender way:

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! ... Even the sparrow  
finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself where she may lay her young  
at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

When I take some quiet time to pray and read scripture, I usually think that I am “studying” scripture. However, if I consider that quiet time a time when I am asking for God’s guidance or care, I now see that I am inviting the word of Jesus to “dwell” with me. I can look forward to the word of God inhabiting my thoughts, of being with me, and of changing me “richly.” For me that would mean new peace, more awareness of other peoples’ needs, less worry, and more joy (like the sparrow and the swallow in Psalm 84).

Goodness knows what else it might mean, if we sincerely invite the word of Jesus to dwell with us. Adventure upon adventure I suspect. Thanks be to God.

*May your word dwell richly within us, Oh God.*

## Hospitality | Romans 12:13

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Donna Monson

Thursday, February 4

**“Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.”**  
*(The Message)*

My absolute favorite image of hospitality is Jim Spilburg and Dick Lovell welcoming and opening Covenant’s front doors to everyone—strangers and members—on Sunday mornings. This one act of Christian hospitality is exactly what the Apostle Paul meant when writing to the Romans in 57 CE about the marks of a true Christian. Because of the pandemic, Covenant’s front doors remain closed, but new doors of Christian hospitality are opening in the Covenant community in original and inventive ways and empowering us to grow and learn outwardly and inwardly.

Technology doors open with social media, virtual small group gatherings, and video chats which allow us to meet new people, reconnect with old friends, and practice hospitality in unique ways. Outreach doors open with children and adults snail-mailing drawings and notes, assisting neighbors with meals and shopping, sharing puzzles, and donating food, money, and blood. Phone calls are back in style with new understandings of listening, compassion, and patience. Social distancing doors open with ‘air hugs,’ smiling eyes behind face masks, car parades for celebrations, and window waves. Creativity abounds with chalk drawings on sidewalks and driveways. When walking in neighborhoods, strangers greet each other at a proper distance. As children watch their parents and grandparents, they are learning and living what genuine Christian hospitality means.

While the physical doors of the church are closed, the church’s hospitality ministry continues to open doors in generous and inventive ways. What doors of hospitality will you open today?

*Dear God, thank you for teaching and guiding us to practice hospitality to everyone even in pandemic times. May we remember to listen, smile behind our masks, and be kind to all. Give us hearts full of love for friends and strangers. Amen.*

## Resting | Hebrews 4:9-10

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Eric Girard

Friday, February 5

**“So you see that a sabbath rest is left open for God’s people. The one who entered God’s rest also rested from his works, just as God rested from his own.”**

In the beginning of Hebrews the author is talking a lot about obedience to God. Have you ever associated the word obedience with the word rest? My guess is that working is more likely the word that comes to mind. Obediently doing your chores, maybe? What if we told ourselves that God was asking us to rest? Maybe that would help us be more obedient.

Let us take a different angle. We read the bible and understand that we need to take a break from our plow, or in today’s world, our laptop. What if we also considered giving ourselves a sabbath from our worry? What if we just gave ourselves a day of rest from our troubles and just simply remembered that we are loved by God and allowed to experience his Grace?

There is a lot to worry about these days. Will I get the virus? Will my child fall behind developmentally during online learning? Can I keep my job during the recession? Am I doing enough for my Church? Is my faith strong enough? All these are legitimate questions, but what if we allowed ourselves to rest from our worries?

When discussing what we should offer to God, the prophet Micah ended Micah 6: 6-8 with the simple phrase “walk humbly with your God.” What if for a moment, maybe a day, we focused on the simplicity of God’s love and humbly and obediently took a rest from our work and our worries?

*Dear Lord, please help us to slow down, give our worries a break, and rest in the knowledge that we have your love and your grace.*

## Blameless | Psalm 101: 2-7

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Tom Blewett

Saturday, February 6

**“No one who practices deceit  
shall remain in my house;  
no one who utters lies  
shall continue in my presence.”**

Are we blameless in the eyes of the Lord? Our scripture reading of the wisdom Psalm 101 seems to set a very high standard if read literally and in our context today. We have just come away from a very contentious election season that has been full of discord and misinformation. In the midst of the election battles I suspect many of us have had less than generous thoughts towards some of our neighbors. Our lifestyles may not always fulfill the expectations of the Psalmist or the teachings of Christ. We too often take for granted the Lord's gift of the natural world into which we were born. We may come up short in our efforts to be compassionate towards others. Our faithfulness may not always be steadfast. The list of potential failures to be “blameless” goes on.

The Psalmist appears to be self-righteous and setting a difficult standard for everyone else, but if this reading is understood as a teaching model, then we can see the expectations as standards towards which we strive in our lives. And if we take the time to look past differences and to talk with our neighbors, we learn more about what we share in our values and our hopes in life. We may have disagreements, but we can agree on the value of faithfulness towards the Lord. Therein lies hope that we can be more compassionate and understanding towards our neighbors and the fragile world that we share together. There is the hope that we are forgiven of our sins (and our blame) as the Lord promised us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

*Lord, fill our hearts with compassion and open our eyes that we may see the needs of our neighbors, support health and dignity for all people, and accept our role as stewards of life on this earth. Amen.*

Words and writers for Feb. 7–Feb. 14 | **Join us for worship to hear the reflection on today's word!**

KATIE AND JACK BARDEN  
GRADY BROWN  
JOHN STRIKWERDA  
CALM  
CONSTANT  
EQUANIMITY  
CHARLIE BERTHOUD  
GIANNA FUSSELL  
MICHAEL WHITLEY JENN SAUER  
LISTEN TRUST  
FINISH  
FUTURE  
MARILYN UNRUH

## Sunday, February 7

## Jenn Sauer

# Equanimity

**Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**

## Philippians 4:11-13

Grady Brown

Monday, February 8

**“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”**

I like mathematical equations... it's kinda an occupational hazard. If you look at a linear equation, you'll see a constant value that is, well, constant. Values outside the constant will change and shift the equation, but the constant remains the same. For me, that's what this passage is all about.

I'm writing this as we all near the end of an unprecedented and profoundly challenging year. It has felt that the variables of life have changed rapidly, sometimes daily. That can be hard. That can be difficult. That can be scary. When life presents us with adversity, I think we sometimes crave familiarity; we covet something constant. It can be easy to forget and to overlook the constancy of Jesus and the constancy of God's enduring love for us. I will be the first to admit that during challenging times, I've neglected this fundamental truth. But in challenging and trying times, it's important and comforting to know God's love is steadfast.

I am thankful for this passage. I appreciate how it has reminded me of an important tenet of my faith—the constancy of Jesus in my journey. The variables of life have always sporadically changed and they will continue to do so. When we feel pain; when we experience joy; when the rain pours; and when the sun shines, God's presence is unwavering. Our daily lives will always be variable, many times beyond our control. But through all life's changes we will always have the warmth of God's love; we'll always have a constant.

*God, be our constant, in good times and in bad times, and help us continue to embrace the comfort and calmness of your love.*

Two years ago I taught an Adult Education class looking at Jesus' parables from a contrary perspective—that is, they don't mean what we're taught they mean. They're edgier than our usual interpretations.

I tried convincing those bothering to listen that the parable known as The Prodigal Son should be called The Dysfunctional Family. It's about giving and not giving, rather than forgiveness. I may not have convinced anyone else, but I remain steadfast in this. And I frequently ponder the message and word that's repeated throughout.

The story begins with the key word delivered with insolence. "Give me," says the child. Instead of correcting this rudeness, the parent capitulates, giving money, with disappointing consequences. The child returns home when no one gives them anything. The child asks for a job. Rather than give that, the parent says nothing to the child (that's right, no word of forgiveness) but bestows things: a ring, a robe, and a party; and he makes an odd speech denying the child's role in their return.

The other child reacts angrily. "You never gave me a party." The parent responds with tone deafness: "If it's parties you want, why didn't you say so?" and repeats the odd speech.

I see a parent estranged from both children, and clueless about why.

This story forces me to ponder how and what I give, or don't give, to those around me, and the consequences of the deed or neglect.

I write this while facing a holiday season during the pandemic. What gifts should I give to family whom I see only via Zoom? Shopping via the Internet can be too easy, lacking personal involvement. I want to give something I touch.

How do I give to my church and community when we're all restricted to our homes? Are my financial donations enough? I tutor students via Zoom but wonder if I'm effective or only an electronic talking head.

Through all this, The Dysfunctional Family reminds me to give to others mindfully and generously.

*God, help me to give from my heart.*

**“Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end.”**

During the pandemic I have experienced more moments of feeling powerless than at any other time in my life.

Every decision, even things we used to take for granted like going to the store or seeing friends, suddenly have taken on so much more weight. Nothing has been simple or easy or normal. It has been exhausting. And along with that exhaustion came a new temptation: giving in to my own outrage.

I have said, in anger, the words "can you believe that..." more this year than any other. I said it about actions by people near and far I disagreed with. I said it about opinions I read that I found faulty. That outside noise grew louder and louder, and I would make my own voice loud, even if there was no one but my family inside my house to hear it.

I let the actions of others wind me up and compound the sense of powerlessness I was feeling. My outrage was not making my life or the life of anyone else better. Because it was outrage for its own sake—it was not connected to action.

Proverbs 29:10 reminded me I am not powerless. I have power over myself. And what I need is calm.

The dictionary defines calm as "free from agitation, excitement, or disturbance." Calm brings with it more clarity, and more time to reflect. I can see those I disagree with through a lens of compassion, not judgment. And I am able to consider how I might make a difference rather than just add to the noise.

My prayer for 2021 is that we all have more moments of calm, and all the good that can come from it.

*Dear Lord, I pray you give us the clarity to see the things in the world we can make better, the strength to turn away from our own outrage at the words and actions of others, and the calm to be wise on our path as we try to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Amen.*

## Trust | Deuteronomy 2:7

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Katie & Jack Barden

Thursday, February 11

**“For the Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He knows you're going through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing.”**

Trusting is something we do, sometimes without knowing it. It is a powerful connection between people that we need to constantly reconsider. It is something that is broken more easily than it is created.

Throughout the Bible, there are many instances where people put their trust in God. An example of people trusting in God and following His guidance is in Deuteronomy 2:7: “For the Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He knows you're going through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing.”

Moses believed in God’s word that there would be a promised land, even though he and the Israelites lived in the wilderness for 40 years. Moses trusted his and every Israelite’s life to God during that time. God delivered his people from fear and death, and he has done that yet again.

God is saving us by helping scientists develop a vaccine, freeing us from COVID. During these times, we have gone to God more than ever, praying, trusting, that a vaccine would come. In November 2020, we are going on 9 months of quarantine, and God has shown us light at the end of the tunnel. During quarantine, there have been countless hardships, but throughout all of quarantine, we have trusted in God to help get us out of this rough time. Like with the Israelites, God is helping us out of a bad situation by helping scientists develop a vaccine, freeing us from COVID.

*Dear God, thank you for this beautiful day, and thank you for watching over those we love. During this time, please be with those who are grieving. Please ease their burdens and their loneliness; open our hearts to trust one another as we trust in you. Thank you for leading the Israelites out of Egypt and into the promised land as you shall lead us out of COVID. God, thank you for helping scientists to discover a vaccine that will help save lives all across the globe. Amen.*

## Finish | John 17:5; John 19:30; Genesis 2:1-2

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Marilyn Unruh

Friday, February 12

**“I have finished the work thou gavest me to do.”** —John 17:5

**“It is finished.”** —John 19:30

**“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and on the seventh day God ended his work.”** —Genesis 2:1-2

What was finished? Jesus’ work on earth of healing and teaching, and, as he told Pilate: “To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth” (John 18:37). This end culminated in the cross.

Jesus came into a world of inhabitants in bondage to a deception and took on our incomplete and corruptible human nature in order to lead us into the truth that makes us free. He had a clear vision of two contrasting kingdoms, the earthly kingdom and the Kingdom of God. Before beginning his ministry, Jesus, in the wilderness, was tempted by Satan offering earthly power. Here and throughout his life on earth Jesus rejected earthly power. Choosing the Kingdom of God over the earthly kingdom was completed in his telling Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom was of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews, but now is my kingdom not from hence.”

Contrast this with Adam and Eve, i.e., humanity, i.e., us, blinded by Satan’s deception and living under the reign of earthly power. Central to Jesus’ work on earth was opening the eyes of the blind, both physically and metaphorically. Following Jesus requires being able to clearly discern the source of our choices. Which tree are we choosing? Which kingdom are we serving?

Choosing the tree of life necessitates death to our incomplete self, our self in bondage to the earthly kingdom. Out of that death comes transformation into our new nature, the human God intends us to be. In finishing his work and purpose, Jesus opens the way that leads to the seventh day, the completion of creation in the completion of the human being.

“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made.”

“It is finished.”

*Lord, make us to see. Amen.*

Lots of my friends know exactly what they want to do having declared their majors, but I'm not close to that at all. I think anyone would be stressed out when surrounded by a majority of people doing one "thing" when you are not sure about "the thing" and its impact on your future.

Future is a powerful word. It can bring peace knowing that the future will resolve itself like it should, but it also brings anxiousness about how to get to a place of peace that you will someday arrive at. As a society we've really been living more in the future than in the now. In April, we were living in the future wondering if the pandemic would be over by now. On November 1st, I was wishing it was December 1st so I could know who the winner of the election was. I wish I knew what my career will be. Focusing on the future only makes a person more anxious. Isaiah 55:8-9 says:

**"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," says the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."**

Only the Lord knows what's our future and how we're going to get there. He is the one in charge, the one who has the power, and we cannot control what the future is. So whether you're worrying if you're going to contract the virus in the next week or if you are a college student trying to figure out what classes to take, know that the Lord is fully in control. He has already worried and created your future for you, so you don't have to do anything but trust in him and continue on your journey.

*Dear Lord, thank you for allowing me to release my worries and fears about the future unto you in grace knowing that you carry me fully and safely to my future. Amen.*

Join us for worship to hear the reflection on today's word!

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.


As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Mark 9:2-9

Sunday, February 14

Charlie Berthoud

Listen



**In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.**

**-John 1:1**



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