

COMPILATION OF DEVOTIONALS: 3/16-7/26

Lenten Devotional in a Season of “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” Each day focuses on one of the “Psalms of Ascent” (Psalm 120-134), which traditionally were sung or read before the great Passover celebrations in Jerusalem. Join your FCC family in authentically drawing closer to God through the Word as we approach the pinnacle of our faith, Holy Week. Just like the pilgrims of old, we may sing these psalms together, from our own journeys, joining our voices to the great chorus of faith, even while we are “apart.”

Consider the following format for each devotion: Begin with centering yourself (and others) in prayer. Read the assigned Scripture for the day. Listen to the text, ask questions, think through its images and words. Consider the reflection, but, don’t let it dictate your own understanding. These words are meant to guide, not control. Close in prayer, trusting in God’s goodness to sustain you, in this moment, and in life’s continued journey.

Week 1

Monday, March 16

Read: Psalm 120

Reflection:

These words offer a prayer from someone no longer “at home” in their land, and while we may all start experiencing *too much* of our homes in the next several days, I relate to the feeling. The preventative measures and environment of anxiety in this age of coronavirus make us all feel like strangers, longing desperately for the familiar.

There’s an obvious tension in this psalm of being a peacemaker in a world at war. While there’s no call to arms going off for us, I do feel the pressure of social media and other communications’ channels in maintaining a healthy balance of education and caution. There’s a lot of talking down to those who are either reacting too “strongly” to fears or those who are making light of all this “social distancing.” As we all wrestle with the anxiety and fears of our community, can we strive to speak “peace?” Can we offer the Word of God, also known as “grace” to those around us when tensions feel so high?

It’s certainly costly - but perhaps that kind of attitude is closest to the One we claim as the Prince of Peace.

Prayer: *As I call to You, O God, may Your Spirit help me follow Your Living Word to speak and show love to my neighbors.*

Tuesday, March 17

Read: Psalm 121

Reflection:

Today is Saint Patrick's Day, but it probably doesn't feel like it. And yet, this holiday did not originate with excess libations and wearing too much green. It began as recognition for the legacy of Patrick of Ireland, a Christian who devoted his life to serving those who had chained him in his youth. Patrick helped embolden the faith of a people and culture that in turn, helped preserve the Christian tradition as well as much of Western civilization.

This psalm is a powerful tribute to recognizing God's faithful presence in the "hills" of life. The journey to Jerusalem was not always easy - it was a steady climb through country that wasn't always safe. The psalmist's cry that God "protects your going out and coming in" is a reminder that God journeys *with us*. Patrick testified to this, with his life and subsequent writings: "*Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me...Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.*"

No one need journey alone, and in this season, we can hold to the God who "neither slumbers nor sleep" (v.4).

Prayer: *For all of us pilgrims, walking up and down these hills towards Jesus, help us know Your journey with us, too. Amen.*

Wednesday, March 18

Read: Psalm 123

Reflection:

It may be hard for us to care for "Jerusalem" when we're on the other end of the world, but for the Jewish people, Jerusalem was home to God's special Presence via the Temple. This city held the tent God chose to pitch among Israel - and so the people felt ownership of its territory. As Christians, we may still feel special affinity towards Jerusalem, but God's Presence is housed in *all of us!* We are living "temples" - so how do we take ownership of one another?

We may start by praying for our friends and family by name, then moving into co-workers or neighbors - maybe even praying for those we *don't* know. Perhaps praying for the "peace of Jerusalem" includes our own communities - seeking actively the welfare of our towns, neighborhoods, and counties. That may go without saying, but you might surprise yourself by deepening our spiritual focus locally. What we pray for, we should then live out.

"For the sake of the house [my neighbor] of the LORD our God, I will seek your [my community] good" (v. 9, reimagined).

Prayer: *May we always see Your face in Your living temples, LORD.*

Thursday, March 19

Read: Psalm 123

Reflection:

My dog has a way of looking at me that screams: “FEED ME.” The thing is, I feed that dog faithfully and without fail - so why is he always so desperate? Maybe that’s how we come off sometime in our prayers - we pray so earnestly for things we desire/need, without recognizing that our Maker provides for us faithfully and without fail. Maybe we need help seeing past our “stomach love” and open up our viewpoints to include those around us.

This psalm is beautiful in that it is voiced *by* the community: “have mercy on *us*” (v.3). Israelite faith was unique in that it upheld the importance of individuals while also calling attention to the corporate body. We are a *community* - not just a gathering of individuals, but truly, bound together by God’s love and Spirit. I love my dog dearly, but he provided a helpful reminder that God has a whole lot of children, and as special as I may be, I am but one piece of that picture.

May we all look longingly to God in such a way, that we are reminded that it’s not our eyes alone looking up to the hand of the Almighty.

Prayer: *LORD, listen to Your children praying - give us love, give us power, give us grace. Amen.*

Friday, March 20

Read: Psalm 124

Reflection:

When was the last time you said “thank God,” and really meant it? I’m recalling the previous times I’ve said it, they served more like a reflexive phrase than a response of praise. Yet this psalm makes the bold claim that without God’s help, there would be no reason for praise - there would be no victory, help, or life itself. This is about as authentic a “thank God” as you’ll find.

As is often the case in Scripture, God’s works led the writers to tell the story to the next generation. Can we follow that tradition and not just authentically “thank God,” but tell the story to the next generation? What will we say to people about this point in history? Will we claim that “if it had not been the LORD who was on our side” (v. 1)...all would have been lost? More importantly, will our praise of God show up in how we live?

We can really only claim victory once the storm has passed - so wait actively, our help is in the Name of the LORD.

Prayer: *You are our help, O God - may none of our actions fail to witness that. Amen.*

Saturday, March 21

There are no texts for today. Rather, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that you are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

“The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, March 22

Join us for “virtual worship” through tuning into the website: www.fccstjoseph.org/sermons-3/ either during our live-stream at 10:30 AM, or on your own at a later time.

Whether you “join in” into this virtual worship or not, use this day as a time for praise, reflection, and strengthening of your discipleship for the daily journey of following Christ. May God’s Spirit go with you, guiding and empowering you, and reminding you that even in “social distancing” we are a *community*. We are family of God, bound through Christ’s love and presence, and we never journey alone.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you, now and forever. Amen.

Lenten Devotional in a Season of “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” Each day focuses on one of the “Psalms of Ascent” (Psalm 120-134), which traditionally were sung or read before the great Passover celebrations in Jerusalem. Join your FCC family in authentically drawing closer to God through the Word as we approach the pinnacle of our faith, Holy Week. Just like the pilgrims of old, we may sing these psalms together, from our own journeys, joining our voices to the great chorus of faith, even while we are “apart.”

Consider the following format for each devotion: Begin with centering yourself (and others) in prayer. Read the assigned Scripture for the day. Listen to the text, ask questions, think through its images and words. Consider the reflection, but, don’t let it dictate your own understanding. These words are meant to guide, not control. Close in prayer, trusting in God’s goodness to sustain you, in this moment, and in life’s continued journey.

Week 2

Monday, March 23

Read: Psalm 125

Reflection:

By now I’m sure it feels like we’ve all had enough, and we’ve only just begun this “shut-down.” Maybe some of us were ready to throw in the towel on Day 1. And that’s okay! This psalm offers: “Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which...abides forever” (v. 1). I’m sure none of us feel immovable in this moment – what’s worse, I’m certain the only thing any of us want to do *is* move!

Yet the focus of these words directs our attention to that “Immovable Mover” who comes *to us* for relationship. It’s this great cosmic Mystery that stoops to my level to “surround” me (v. 2). We might all be ready to tear our hair out, but God is still God. When we’re restricted from our physical contact with each other, we have yet this God who seeks to hold onto us.

Maybe that’s enough to get us through today. Maybe by grounding ourselves in the LORD, we can face the challenge afresh, at least, for another day. And today is enough for any of us.

Prayer: *It’s not always easy to “see” You surrounding me, O God. But help me feel Your Presence just enough to do some good for others, and make it through another day. Amen.*

Tuesday, March 24

Read: Psalm 126

Reflection:

These words speak from Israel's own experience of exile and isolation. When the people returned to Jerusalem after their Babylonian captivity, it felt as if awakening from a dream – has it really happened? Is this true? God was faithful to God's promises and had brought about restoration...*and yet*, the picture was *not* complete.

The Jewish people would continue to suffer loss. The Temple was restored but only to a fraction of its former glory. Their limited freedom would again be co-opted by imperial control, this time by the Romans. The Temple would again be destroyed and the Jewish people further scattered.

Yet this psalm remains hopeful. The Bible presents us with *more* than mere optimism – this psalm like many others centers on hope in *God's* future. As Christians, we believe that future has already broken into our present in Jesus. This leads us to proclaim, no matter the circumstances, “God has done great things for us” (v. 3). Jesus presents us not with a dream, but a whole new reality – it's up to us to embrace it each and every day.

Prayer: *May Your upside-down Kingdom become more apparent each day, O God – turn our tears to laughter, our grief to joy. Help us to live Your future today. Amen.*

Wednesday, March 25

Read: Psalm 127

Reflection:

Have you ever started a project, without making sure you had all the necessary preparations? Consider trying to plan a meal without asking how many people are coming over. This psalm raises the question – unless God's involved in our projects, will they truly “succeed?”

I don't think this means that we have to make sure everything we do gets the “God stamp,” but I wonder if the psalmist is calling our attention to making sure we are prepared for life's adventure. Are we ready and willing for where following Jesus might lead us? Especially in this season of social distancing, are we prepared to face the challenges that ministry amid such limitations may pose.

The psalmist assures us that worrying about it will do little – rather, we're called to open our ears to God's Voice and be ready for the Spirit's leading. “Unless the LORD” directs our ministries, they may not “succeed” on the Kingdom level.

Prayer: *God, our plans may mean little to Your sight, but may we commit ourselves to Your Kingdom mission, trusting You to seal the deal. Amen.*

Thursday, March 26

Read: Psalm 128

Reflection:

The problem with this psalm is that it seems like the believer is “guaranteed” a perfect life. I doubt any of us have had that picture-perfect an existence, even if we have experienced our fair share of blessings. The biblical writers did not equate bliss with blessing (think the Book of Job!) – rather they understood blessing as “contentment.”

Those who walk in God’s ways, the psalmist says, will find themselves exactly where they need to be. Bearing God’s Image means we will work, have relationships, enjoy *and* grieve – all the intricacies of life – because that’s where God’s Kingdom is. God cares about us and how we live. That may not equal a care-free or “perfect” life, but perhaps we’ll find contentment being the people God made us to be.

While this psalm seems to paint a “Leave It to Beaver” scenario, may our voices sing the praises of the LORD wherever and whenever we follow God’s path.

Prayer: *I don’t know if I need or want a “perfect” life, O God. But may the life I have flow from the life You call me to lead. Amen.*

Friday, March 27

Read: Psalm 129

Reflection:

What I love about the psalms, honestly, is *their honesty*. When you read the Psalter, you are reading the entire breadth of human experience. Psalm 129 is certainly no exception. These are words for the angry, the bitter, the attacked. In this season, we certainly don’t have an “enemy” to call God to oppose, but I think we’re all a more than a little upset and anxious.

Perhaps we do have an opponent – but it is *not* a nation or people; it is an attitude, a perspective. During the COVID outbreak, will we succumb to nihilism and negativity? Or, will we have a “righteous” anger that leads us into greater love for our neighbors, into renewed service for our communities? Will we combat spiritual isolation and social deterioration by uplifting one another and seeking to place others before ourselves, in the Way of Jesus?

There is much to cause us bitterness and anger in this season – but our fellow human is not one of them. May our prayers to God be for strength against our greatest foe: Failure to love.

Prayer: *God, I toss my hands up in frustration at this crisis, but in reaching to You, may that anger give way to Your peace. May Your love calm my heart and steady my hands for service, and not war. Amen.*

Saturday, March 28

There are no texts for today. Rather, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that you are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

“The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, March 29

Join us for “virtual worship” through tuning into the website: www.fccstjoseph.org/sermons-3/ either during our live-stream at 10:30 AM, or on your own at a later time.

Whether you “join in” into this virtual worship or not, use this day as a time for praise, reflection, and strengthening of your discipleship for the daily journey of following Christ. May God’s Spirit go with you, guiding and empowering you, and reminding you that even in “social distancing” we are a *community*. We are family of God, bound through Christ’s love and presence, and we never journey alone.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you, now and forever. Amen.

Lenten Devotional in a Season of “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” Each day focuses on one of the “Psalms of Ascent” (Psalm 120-134), which traditionally were sung or read before the great Passover celebrations in Jerusalem. Join your FCC family in authentically drawing closer to God through the Word as we approach the pinnacle of our faith, Holy Week. Just like the pilgrims of old, we may sing these psalms together, from our own journeys, joining our voices to the great chorus of faith, even while we are “apart.”

Consider the following format for each devotion: Begin with centering yourself (and others) in prayer. Read the assigned Scripture for the day. Listen to the text, ask questions, think through its images and words. Consider the reflection, but, don’t let it dictate your own understanding. These words are meant to guide, not control. Close in prayer, trusting in God’s goodness to sustain you, in this moment, and in life’s continued journey.

Week 3

Monday, March 30

Read: Psalm 130

Reflection:

I consider this to be perhaps one of the most powerful portions of the entire Bible:

“If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered” (v.3-4)

There’s so much unknowing in this season; plenty of fear and frustration. Not only in the midst of COVID-19, but *all* of life – premature deaths, broken relationships, war, slavery, hate speech – so many things that we can’t answer for or explain. Yet, in the face of indescribable tragedy or pain stands the God who *forgives*. There is a God who refuses to allow the injustices of time to simply be forgotten. There is a God who sees the suffering of the universe and has chosen to meet it in God’s own person.

This God calls out to us in our anxiety and chaos – this God holds us while we weep and wonder. This God created the world and refused to see it perish in rebellion. This is the God in whom our hope is found, and in whom our souls may wait.

Prayer: *Forgiving One, there’s much in my head and heart these days I can’t put words to. Yet with the Psalmist, I wait for You – out the depths, we cry out for Your redeeming Presence. Amen.*

Tuesday, March 31

Read: Psalm 131

Reflection:

I know it is spring (or supposed to be) but reading this psalm makes me think of Christmas. Not the snow or decorations – but the actual *story*. When Mary is told she is to bear the Messiah of God in her womb, she responds not with fear or doubt but *willingness*: “Here am I – let it be with me according to Your word” (Luke 1:38).

These words share in the humble spirit of Mary, opening ourselves to the God of Possibility. *Who knows what the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe is capable of?* Sometimes we try and categorize away God’s power and presence in our lives to the degree where *we* are in control until God becomes just another “tool” in our box of positivity.

Yet if we follow the example not only of Mary, but of Jesus himself then we will recognize just how *out* of “control” we are. Our eyes are not “raised too high;” we can look around us and see this creating and redeeming God in our midst, always up to something extraordinary through our (truthfully) quite ordinary existence.

Prayer: *It’s easy to make ourselves into the Masters of our fate, especially when we’re meeting God at eye-level. If we can take a “step down,” perhaps we’ll discover afresh a whole new world of love and possibility in You, O LORD. Amen.*

Wednesday, April 1

Read: Psalm 132

Reflection:

It’s strange to think of God having a “place” – when we so emphasize God’s Spirit “inhabiting” us, we tend to de-emphasize location. In this moment with social distancing, there’s comfort in that – God can dwell with us wherever we are! Yet the psalmist’s insistence on God’s relationship to the Temple should not be overlooked.

The Temple was a visible symbol of God’s relationship with the people. Even though God’s promises were not always visible, the Temple reminded them that God had given this tribe of nomads a home, a king, and a purpose.

Living next to the church building reminds me that God has given *us* a “home” in God’s own heart. Even as the building sits empty during social distance, the bricks and mortar act as a symbol of *our* call – a reminder of our discipleship. Just like the Temple, you may take the building away, but God’s promises will stand firmer than any cornerstone.

Prayer: *Rise up, O LORD, and go to Your place in every person’s heart, to keep us grounded in Your love. Amen.*

Thursday, April 2

Read: Psalm 133

Reflection:

Finally! A text about *beards*. You know I've been waiting all Lent for this one! The "beard of Aaron" aside, what is most meaningful in this text to me is its very first words: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"

Israel would sing this song as they ascended the hills to Jerusalem – recognizing their shared identity as God's people across tribe, class and story. When God's people come *together*, it is cause for rejoicing – for God did not save any one person alone; God saved a *people*. God did not just create persons; God created a *community*.

As much as we long for our "togetherness" in this season, may we not lose sight of our connection. May we not forget the "ties that bind" – those promises of God uniting us across time and space in the power of the Holy Spirit. We may be distanced today, but tomorrow may come a day when we can gather together once again. Just think how beautiful and wonderful that day shall be!

Prayer: *LORD, though we are often so easily divided, may we relish this longing for unity, so that when the opportunity comes, we do not miss celebrating for the gift community is. Amen.*

Friday, April 3

Read: Psalm 134

Reflection:

We don't often think about praising God at nightfall, beyond those "bedtime" prayers, perhaps. When we come to the end of the day, we're exhausted, hungry, ready to do anything else than "pray" – or at least that's often my excuse!

Yet this psalm shows us the reverse rhythm to the Hebrew day: night "begins" the cycle. In Genesis 1:5 we read: "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." For Jews, Sabbath is always sundown *to* sundown.

It's an interesting way to view God's activity in our lives. Just because our "day" has ended, doesn't mean God's work is done; nor, perhaps, our discipleship. Darkness is no barrier to God's light – the evening has just as much opportunities for faith, hope and love as the daytime. Perhaps Lent is the "night" of the Christian year to remind us that God calls us to relationship beyond the 9-5 existence, and wants us from sundown *to* sundown.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, O God, for whether it is night or day, You are at work. Help us to be so faithful. Amen.*

Saturday, April 4

There are no texts for today. Rather, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that you are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, April 5 – Palm Sunday

Join us for “virtual worship” through the livestream at 10:30 AM:

<https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-576144> or www.facebook.com/FCCStJoseph/

You can also view service videos past and present on our website:

www.fccstjoseph.org/sermons-3/

Whether you “join in” this virtual worship or not, use this day for praise, reflection, and strengthening of your discipleship for the daily journey of following Christ. Since it is Palm Sunday and the entrance into Holy Week, consider using the below format as a guided meditation to enhance your worship experience.

Call to Worship

Leader: Blessed is the One who comes in the Name of the Lord!

All: Hosanna in the highest! Praise the LORD!

Scripture: Zechariah 9:9-17; Matthew 21:1-11

Reflection

- How does the writer of Matthew connect Zechariah’s vision to Jesus?
- What about this episode of Jesus seems “triumphant?” What victory has Jesus accomplished?
- What does it mean that in the span of one week, people go from celebrating Jesus, to calling for his crucifixion?

Lord’s Prayer (*or free prayer if you choose*)

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you, now and forever. Amen.

Holy Week Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we’ve entered the pinnacle of our faith, Holy Week, may these readings draw us closer to the Reason for our being, Jesus the Christ. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into Christ’s passion, his final exhortations to his disciples, and his ultimate acts of self-giving love and faithfulness. Let the Spirit of the Risen One lead you into God’s own heart, that we may live out Easter’s victory now and always.

Monday, April 6

Read: John 12:1-11

Reflection:

Has another person’s devotion or discipleship ever made us uncomfortable or envious? I imagine I’m not alone in sharing in Judas’ questioning of Mary’s anointing of Jesus. I think too much is made of Judas’ betrayal, when he is perhaps one of the most accurate portrayals of humanity. We measure ourselves by the expressions of others, to our own detriment.

When someone raises their hands during worship, do our hands itch at our sides? When someone utters an “amen” after a preacher’s words, do our tongues click in our mouths? Instead of being so conscious as to how others are expressing themselves, maybe we should focus more on *our discipleship*. When Jesus told the disciples that they’d always have the poor with them, I don’t think he was making a statement on social policy. I think he was reminding them that their faith was centered on *him* – not what others do or don’t do.

In this season of social distance, we don’t have a lot else to look at other than ourselves. Maybe we’ll discover anew our discipleship, and how we can fill our lives with the “fragrance” of renewed faith in Jesus.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, turn my eyes from longing gazes toward others and turn them ever longingly to You. Amen.*

Tuesday, April 7

Read: John 12:20-36

Reflection:

This section of John’s Gospel marks a key revealing of God’s self-giving love in Jesus: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (v. 24). We rarely think of dying or death as victory, yet the paradox of our faith is that *through* death, we actually find life. Jesus was willing to face the wrath of the Roman

Empire for his declaration of God's Kingdom – and God made his life such that death would not be the “end” of that proclamation. Through the Cross, Resurrection is found.

This season has certainly presented a “cross” to the world – everyone is dealing with the burden of the coronavirus pandemic. Yet as Jesus showed us God's love in his sacrifice, are we able to “give up” for that same Kingdom? Are we willing to risk our comforts, our routines, our “normalcy” to preserve life, protect it in the most vulnerable, and reveal God's love?

It's a real loss not to have our holiest celebrations together; to have school, jobs, and plans simply thrown into the air without any certainty. Yet such loss does not have to be defeat – if we *embrace* the difficulty, stay home, isolate and practice social distance – we can do as Jesus did. We can love our neighbors, save lives, and *beat* this virus. What a “resurrection” that would be – imagine the “new life” God will produce from such victory.

Prayer: Risen One, help us to be willing to “lose” so that Your victory may win out over all darkness. In Your light, may we be light. Amen.

Wednesday, April 8

Read: Hebrews 12:1-3

Reflection:

As “distanced” as we are from one another right now, we can never lose sight of the “great cloud of witnesses” (v. 1) – the “communion of saints” surrounds God's people, not only in worship, but in life. As we draw close to the height of our holy remembrance, we walk in the footsteps of countless saints who have gone before us. From theological giants and ministry leaders to the everyday servants who followed Christ in the simplicity of loving God and neighbor “behind the scenes.” The Church never journeys alone.

I take such comfort from thinking about the grandparents who raised me, who taught me who Jesus was, walking with me. As we approach the Cross, I'm humbled by sisters and brothers around the world and throughout time, kneeling in its shadow together. Beyond this “cloud” stands the One who connects us all with His blood and Spirit. And that may be the greatest comfort, that our Savior and Lord is no stranger to trial, to the sorrows and joys of human life.

“The pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (v. 2) – Jesus has gone before us to show us the Way, and he continues to stay by our sides to lead us in discipleship. Truly, we are never alone.

Prayer: Stay by my side, Jesus, so that I may not grow weary and lose heart. Amen.

Thursday, April 9 - “Maundy Thursday” – Virtual Worship: 7 p.m.

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual service celebrating Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples: <https://boxcast.tv/view/maundy-thursday-154728>

Call to Worship

Leader: Holy God, we worship in the gathering shadows of Jesus’ suffering and death, joining with disciples from every generation and place, to live again this story of service and love.

All: We come in weakness, looking to Christ to sustain us through darkness with light and love. We come with courage, longing to witness God’s promise become life. Amen.

Reflection: John 13:1-5, 12-17, 31b-35

The Lord’s Supper

The Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, he was with the disciples. And he took a loaf of bread, and after giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, broken for you.” In the same manner, after they had supped, he took the cup, and after blessing it, he gave it to them, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink of it, in remembrance of me.”

The bread that we break is our communion with the Body of Christ. The cup of blessing which we drink is our communion with the Blood of Christ. These are the gifts of God for the people of God.

Closing Prayer

God of love, we see Your glory in the face of Jesus, who offered himself in humble service to his disciples, even on the night he was betrayed. Shine now in our hearts, as we love one another, in Christlike acts of service and fellowship. We are eager to reflect the glory of Christ, our source of hope and life, our Teacher and Lord, who laid down his life so that we might truly live. Amen.

Friday, April 10 - “Good Friday” – Virtual Worship: Noon

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual service reflecting on Jesus’ final hours: <https://boxcast.tv/view/good-friday-872648>

Call to Worship

Leader: Today the carpenter’s hands are nailed to a cross; the King of kings is crowned with thorns. Today Jesus wears the purple robe of mockery; His dying breath is ridiculed by crowds.

All: Yet we believe Jesus sets us free, though he himself was tried as a criminal. His death will not be defeat; God’s victory is on the horizon.

Reflection: John 19:1-6, 15-18, 28-30

Closing Prayer: *Merciful God, we meet each other at the foot of the cross. We wait together, in shared brokenness and hope, leaning into the vast mystery of God’s love. Though darkness may shroud our hearts this day, we look to the coming dawn. We are waiting for the LORD. Amen.*

Saturday, April 11 - “Holy Saturday”

Today is a “silent” holy day – the space between Good Friday and Easter. Sit with the disciples in their unknowing and uncertainty: they had *no* idea Jesus would rise again. They believed God had abandoned them – that all was lost. In sitting with these feelings, we open ourselves to the reality that God *is* working, even when we know it not. God is doing something “behind the tomb.” Holy Saturday’s silence reminds us that God’s power is revealed not only in the whirlwind and mighty flame, but the still, small voice. Practice a true “Sabbath” today and rest in the knowledge that you are loved by the God of the universe, even though all we may experience is “silence.” Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else. Easter *is* coming.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, April 12 – “Easter Sunday” – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m.

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual service celebrating the Resurrection of our Lord: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-517047>

Call to Worship

Leader: Alleluia! Christ is risen! Praise God for this gift of new life and hope, for in raising Jesus from death, God has claimed us as God’s own. Christ is Lord today and forever!

All: Alleluia! God has brought us from darkness to light. Alleluia! Christ is risen indeed!

Reflection: Matthew 28:1-10

Easter Prayer

Leader: As Christ burst forth from the tomb, may new life burst forth from us and show itself in acts of love and healing to a hurting world.

All: May that same Christ, who lives forever, keep our hearts rejoicing always. Amen.

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Easter Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we’ve entered the Season of Easter, may these readings draw us closer to the Reason for our being, Jesus the Christ. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ our King has won for us. Let the Spirit of the Risen One lead you into God’s own heart, that we may live out Easter’s victory now and always.

First Week of Easter

Monday, April 13

Read: Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Reflection:

The Resurrection reminds us that God alone has final say over the endings to our stories. Everyone thought Jesus’ story had ended on Good Friday, but Easter Sunday signaled a whole new world, a new creation, not only for Jesus, but for all of us. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” (v. 22). This pandemic we’re weathering has thrown all certainties up in the air – any control we may have believed in now seems lost. Yet Resurrection is always God’s final word – *life, and not death*.

As we live out our daily stories, let’s write them on Christ our Cornerstone – trusting that his life will narrate our own. No virus, no pain, no loss can ever have the last word on our stories. Easter Sunday may be over, but now it’s Easter Monday – the gift of life that Jesus brings us is available *every day*. Yet it is to us to embrace that gift, and declare: “This *is* the day that the LORD has made; let us *rejoice* and be *glad* in it” (v. 24).

Prayer: *Giver of Life, my story may have many triumphs and trials, twists and turns; no matter what chapter I’m in, may Jesus’ life transform my own. Amen.*

Tuesday, April 14

Read: Colossians 3:12-17

Reflection:

You know the feeling of freshly-cleaned clothes? That warm, fresh scent and texture almost makes the *wearer* feel “brand new.” The writer of Colossians exhorts us to “clothe” ourselves with the marks of God’s Kingdom: “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (v. 12). In other words, put on your “Easter clothes” – put on the new life Jesus has given us!

In the same way wearing clean clothes (or maybe a brand-new outfit) makes us feel confident and fresh, when we live out the attitude and actions of Jesus, we are *living* Easter. We are *living* the gift of eternal life *now*. Notice how such “internal” transformation takes shape externally – what Jesus has done for us can’t be kept in our “closets.” It has to be worn, lived, exhibited.

Don’t let those “Easter clothes” hang unused on the rack. Take them off the laundry line, put them on, and live Easter *now*. Live in the love and forgiveness Jesus showed us in his living and dying, and, through our own acts of mercy and compassion, we shall “rise” to Jesus’ new life.

Prayer: *God, You’ve made me clean through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Help me wear that gift daily in how I live – how I love others and give thanks to You. Amen.*

Wednesday, April 15

Read: Joshua 3:1-17

Reflection:

One may think that the Old Testament has very little to do with “Easter” – but the God that led Israel from Egypt is the *same God* that led Jesus to Jerusalem and through the tomb. What I like about “looking back” on Israel’s adventures with God is that it brings up the “mobility” of the LORD. God rarely “stays put” – and God’s people are called to follow suit.

God swore to lead Israel into the “promised land,” but to do that, they had to cross some boundaries – first the Red Sea, then the wilderness, and now the Jordan River. At this boundary, Israel had to put their feet in “first” before God’s power would be revealed. I think that’s true of following Jesus today. New life *is* always available, but there are times when we have to take the first step. God doesn’t stay put, and neither can we. Even in isolation and social distance, the journey of discipleship remains for us to follow. *We* may be comfortable standing at the borders of “promise,” but *God* has a whole lot more to offer on the other side.

This kind of faith is certainly risky, but it’s the only one Jesus called us to.

Prayer: *Onwards we journey after You, O God – whether we have to dip our toes in the water before Your wonders take place, or You’re already leading us by the hand in grace – we are grateful to belong to You. Amen.*

Thursday, April 16

Read: Colossians 4:2-5

Reflection:

What would it look like to devote ourselves to prayer in this season? What would it mean for us to commit ourselves to praying, not only for our own concerns, but the welfare of others, the whole world? What if we prayed not only in words, but in action – we were so committed to joining God’s Spirit at work in the world that we opened ourselves up to being conduits of grace.

There’s a reason that the writer to the Colossians exhorts their readers to pray. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, one of the very first lines was: “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven*” (Matthew 6:10). We are praying for God to work *in* us, *through* us – for God’s presence to take up residence in our lives and make something happen!

There can be no greater door-opener than asking God to *use us* for the Kingdom. We just have to be prepared for whatever adventure may unfold.

Prayer: *LORD, Your Spirit is a wonderful mystery, but I’m willing to let this mystery have its way in my life if it means I can be of use to Your Good News. Amen.*

Friday, April 17

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Reflection:

Paul knows the Gospel not just because of some second-hand accounts, but because the Risen Jesus actually appeared to him and gave him this mission personally. I’m sure in these times all of us would love the Risen Jesus to appear and bolster us for this season.

Yet the beautiful thing about this passage is that Paul reflects on why *he* was chosen – “the grace of God” (v. 10). It’s *not* because Paul had such fantastic learning – it’s *not* because he was adept at language or travel. He wasn’t chosen because he had a wealth of resources at his disposal. It was God’s grace *alone* that Paul was called to carry Good News to the world.

All of us are chosen – not for any outstanding qualities that we may have, but simply because God intends to use *us* to transform the world. That’s humbling. Especially now when we’re so reduced as to what we can do in terms of work, recreation, even service. Perhaps it’s enough that *by* grace each of us is part of Jesus’ new life. Each of us has a role in the great proclamation of Jesus to the world. We don’t have to be “superhuman” right now – we just have to be “us.”

Prayer: *By grace, You bring us life, O God. By grace, we can be who You make us to be, and live this Good News. Amen.*

Saturday, April 18

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, April 19 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m. – “Second Sunday of Easter”

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-955487> Or, use this for your own discipleship.

Call to Worship

Leader: By God’s great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Help us to live this new life, proclaiming boldly the Risen King.

All: May we go forth in the strength and love of God, the grace of Jesus the Son, and the eternal communion of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 16; Matthew 28:16-20

- What do you think about Scripture intentionally pointing out that while some disciples worshiped the Risen Jesus, others doubted right then and there?
- Jesus immediately sets the disciples to action – does following Jesus involve a “mobile” life – can our discipleship ever be considered “passive?”
- What kind of a message is Jesus’ final charge to the disciples that he ends with reminding them of his presence? Are we “alone” in our discipleship?

Lord’s Prayer *(or free prayer if you choose)*

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Easter Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Easter, may these readings draw us closer to the Reason for our being, Jesus the Christ. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ our King has won for us. Let the Spirit of the Risen One lead you into God’s own heart, that we may live out Easter’s victory now and always.

Second Week of Easter

Monday, April 20

Read: Psalm 114

Reflection:

The Exodus serves as the foundation to the collective memory of Israel because it revealed God’s salvation being rooted *in* history and *within* the socio-political settings of those being acted upon. Salvation for Israel was not an “other-worldly” experience – God’s grace *met* them in their surroundings. The same can be said for the Resurrection.

Though we often give Jesus’ Resurrection an “end of time” or “end of life” value – like the Exodus, God has acted *in* time *for* humanity. The Resurrection was not thought of immediately as a future-oriented event; rather, the disciples understood it being God’s power revealed in their *present* – the gift of God’s future new creation breaking *into* the current time.

Easter has the power to transform our current circumstances with God’s future new creation. The Risen Jesus still bears his scars of crucifixion, but they no longer have power over him. How can God’s power transform our current scars where they no longer have power over us? How does the “exodus” of Jesus’ life reshape ours where *we* become “God’s sanctuary” (v. 2)?

Prayer: *Victorious God, as You liberated Israel from Egypt, You have rescued humanity from death’s curse in Jesus. May this new creation transform our present and empower us to proclaim Your power. Amen.*

Tuesday, April 21

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:19-28

Reflection:

Why should we care about the earth? Why strive so hard to make sure people are afforded a living wage? What does it matter if people have access to basic human needs? The Resurrection answers all of these concerns. In the beginning, God made life and called it “good” (Genesis 1:31). For the sake of that same life, that same creation, God has created a future where all things shall be “re-made” – where “God may be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Because of the Resurrection, our care for the earth *matters*. Because of the Resurrection, basic human dignity and self-worth *matter*. Because of the Resurrection, facing the difficult realities of food security, healthcare, war and peace – all the big *and* little questions of life *matter*. When God raised Jesus from death, God signaled to all creation that God would not allow the world to spiral off into oblivion. God would deal with it personally; had, in fact, already begun the process on Easter morning.

So why should the Church be involved in social justice – why should the Church strive for ministries of human need and welfare at all? Because such work is *not* in vain. Such work *is* God’s work – what started with the Resurrection continues on in *us* until God’s Kingdom fully comes. Let’s keep working until all creation “be made alive in Christ” (v. 22).

Prayer: *There are days when it’s hard to keep at the pursuit of Your Kingdom, O God; but, what we do is not in vain. Life matters, because of the New Life You revealed in Christ. Amen.*

Wednesday, April 22

Read: Jonah 2

Reflection:

Early Christian commentators found eerie parallels between the story of Jonah in the belly of the great fish and Christ in the tomb. God is able to draw us from the tomb, from the darkness of our sin, even that “fish belly” of our own pride and selfishness. “You brought my life from the Pit, O LORD my God” (v. 6).

Jonah ran from his call to proclaim repentance to a people he believed to be his enemies. Jesus, however, *succeeded* where Jonah failed. Jesus never shied away from God’s call to proclaim repentance, even to the ones who put him to death. Whether we find ourselves in a pit of despair or a vault of suffering made by our own darkness or the world’s, God can find us and set us free.

What we do “after” being rescued is up to us – may God’s faithfulness sustain us, even if we stumble into a pit now and then.

Prayer: *What I have vowed, I will pay, O God. Deliverance belongs to You, and You alone. Amen.*

Thursday, April 23

Read: 1 Peter 1:8-12

Reflection:

It is certainly difficult to love something or someone we have never “seen” with our own eyes. The writer to this early Christian community understood this issue, addressing people who had never personally experienced Jesus in life, only stories of him *after* his death and resurrection.

Yet what the writer accounted for was people’s experience of Jesus *in* the Christian community. When people shared what they had with those less fortunate, that was the Risen Jesus extending his hand. When people tore down walls of social division and classism, that was Jesus creating a new human family. What the prophets of old had spoken of was taking place *in* the lives of the disciples through the exhibition of Jesus’ love and mercy.

I will testify to “seeing” the Risen Jesus in the countless people who commit themselves to social distancing and tireless efforts in industry and healthcare for the sake of others. We may not see Jesus with our own eyes, but perhaps we can see Him in the ministry of the Church and the goodness of the world. Perhaps through our lived proclamation of Jesus, we can be the cause of “indescribable and glorious joy” (v. 8).

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, may we announce the Good News in our daily service to one another and reveal Jesus in the community Your love creates. Amen.*

Friday, April 24

Read: Isaiah 26:1-4

Reflection:

Often when the prophets spoke of Jerusalem, they were referencing God – the “city” was a symbol of God’s presence. The relationship was symbiotic – when Jerusalem prevailed, God prevailed. Judah’s victory *was* God’s victory. This view became precarious, however, when Judah *lost* – what had happened? Did they do something wrong – was God angry? What happened when the city was under attack and God was nowhere to be found?

Perhaps we’re having similar thoughts during this pandemic. What is God up to? Why is the Church suffering? If you read the prophets more thoroughly, you’ll actually encounter their thought process. They realized that though God did have a special relationship with the people and the city, faithfulness had to run *both* ways. They could not expect their “chosen-ness” to remove them from foolish blunders or immoral behavior. God expected trust and obedience.

The Church is called to discipleship, no matter the circumstances. To “trust in the LORD forever” (v. 4) perhaps means living in a way where that trust is modeled in daily life.

Prayer: *You are our Rock, O God – help us to stand on You instead of our own ways. Amen.*

Saturday, April 25

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, April 26 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m. – “Third Sunday of Easter”

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday service: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-756618> Or, use this for your own at-home worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: Living God, for whom no door is closed, no heart is locked, draw us beyond our doubts till we see Christ in one another. Open our eyes to Your Presence and life in this world.

All: Keep us reaching for the Risen One in our neighbors, and may our discipleship proclaim Good News to all. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; Luke 24:36-49

Consider Pastor Jeffrey’s sermon, or use the following questions for your own study:

- What do you think about Jesus appearing to the ones who abandoned him?
- Do you feel that Jesus’ message is still “repentance and forgiveness of sins?”
- Are there links between discipleship and “witnessing?” Is being a witness merely reporting experience, or are there further calls to “action?”

Lord’s Prayer (or free prayer)

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Easter Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Easter, may these readings draw us closer to the Reason for our being, Jesus the Christ. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ our King has won for us. Let the Spirit of the Risen One lead you into God’s own heart, that we may live out Easter’s victory now and always.

Third Week of Easter

Monday, April 27

Read: Genesis 18:1-14

Reflection:

Are we ever “too old” for God’s promises to take shape in our lives? Is there ever a point where we’re no longer “useful” for ministry? I think the narrative of Abraham and Sarah answers these questions with a resounding “no!” There may be seasons of “reassignment” as physical, emotional and social changes come upon us – but God’s *never* done with us.

The Season of Easter reminds us that not even death, now, halts God’s work in our lives. Death is simply the end of one chapter and the beginning of a far more mysterious and wondrous one. When the Spirit knocks on our door, what is our response going to be? Will our wonder become disbelief and therefore disinterest? Or can God’s Holy Surprise open us to joyful reception of new creation right in the middle of the old?

We may laugh and shake our heads, but let’s not close ourselves off to God’s continual power forever. God always gets the last word – and we can trust it’s Resurrection, and not the Cross.

Prayer: When Your Spirit calls, O God, may my disbelief and awe not become fearful distancing, but open my heart to receive Your promises. Amen.

Tuesday, April 28

Read: 1 Peter 1:23-25

Reflection:

I think the pandemic has brought our mortality into a renewed perspective. Seeing our society stumble to a halt in order to protect lives certainly makes one consider how precious and fragile human life really is. Though creation is finite, the One who holds it all together is *not*.

“God’s words create the world,” Tom Boogaart, my professor of Hebrew and Old Testament, would often say to me. In Jesus, God has spoken the ultimate word – the Living Word, God “made flesh” for us. Creation may ebb and flow, but this Word of God that has come to deliver us will stand firm. What precious hope that is, even in the wake of this pandemic, that we are part of that everlasting Word.

As our text reads, *we* “have been born anew, not of perishable but imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (v. 23). God’s Living Word has created a new world – where creation shall live on in God’s everlasting light. Through Jesus, we’ve been born into that future.

Prayer: *Word of God, as You have created me anew, may Your future shine through my life into the present to remind all creation of its great hope. Amen.*

Wednesday, April 29

Read: Exodus 24:1-11

Reflection:

In the Old Testament world, blood was a sign of life – it was sacred. Covenants, or promises, were sealed by animal sacrifice to bind persons together through commitment over *life*. As violent a scene as it depicts, there’s beauty in it, too, I think. Moses dashes blood upon the people reminding them their commitment to God must be *total*, because that is what God was committing to them. Though the whole earth belongs to God, God would be *their* King.

It’s no surprise early Christians came back to these texts and stories and found in them similarities to what had happened with Jesus. Jesus’ blood upon the cross was understood through the lens of blood of the covenant. When Jesus told the disciples, “This cup...is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20), they now realized Jesus was reclaiming God’s covenant with Israel and offering a new promise of God’s presence and power with them.

Our commitment to God remains total, because in Jesus, we see what complete self-giving and offering of life truly look like. “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Exodus 24:7).

Prayer: *May the Lamb of God’s blood on the Cross seal Your promises upon my life forever, and commit me to total service in light of Your love. Amen.*

Thursday, April 30

Read: Psalm 23

Reflection:

What *can't* I say about this psalm – it is one of the most well-known, well-loved portions of text, not only in the Bible, but perhaps all of literature. The comfort it breathes for believers and nonbelievers – the image of “The Good Shepherd” is overpowering.

Here's what I'm taking away in this season of pandemic – God is *with* us. God is with us *in* the presence of our “enemies” – God is *with us* in the darkest valley. God is with us, calling to us, leading us, working perhaps “out of sight,” but never out of our minds and hearts. The psalmist portrays God as a shepherd leading us “sheep” into goodness.

God's shepherding doesn't mean we will avoid life's pitfalls – but God walks with us *through* them. This season may be our “valley of the shadow of death,” but God is with us, and for me, that is comfort enough.

Prayer: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me as I follow You, O LORD. May life's trials not diminish my thanksgiving for the overflowing of my cup. Amen.*

Friday, May 1

Read: 1 Peter 2:9-12

Reflection:

We all want to be “special,” right? We want to be valued and appreciated – perhaps not in a way that puts others down, but certainly lifts *us* up. This isn't necessarily bad – so long as we're honest that such longing exists. What I like about this portion of text is that it reminds the Church what being “special” actually entails: *mission*.

“You are a chosen race...*in order that* you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (v. 9). God's “election” of Israel, and subsequently, the Church, is not a matter of choosing some and not others. It's choosing some *for* others – it's a *responsibility*. Our number has been called up and we've been drafted into God's Kingdom community to make the gift of that communion known to all the world.

The Church's “value” does not come from *us*, but from God, so that we may serve others and welcome them into that same value. Especially during a season where everyone is watching one another so carefully, we need to make sure our actions highlight God's light and mercy that “they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God” (v. 12)

Prayer: *Use Your Church, O God, to point the way to Your hope. May we be instruments of peace, symbols of love, and messengers of joy. Amen.*

Saturday, May 2

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, May 3 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m. – “Fourth Sunday of Easter”

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-646682> Or, use this for your own at-home worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: Gracious God, Your Son made himself known to the disciples in the breaking of bread. Open the eyes of our faith that we may see Christ in his redeeming work in us and in the world.

All: Reveal Your love in our discipleship that our worship may proclaim Your Good News with joy and thanksgiving. Amen.

Reflection: Luke 24:13-35

The Lord’s Supper (Feel free to use the elements available in your own home, bread and grape juice [or wine] – and follow along in the words of Institution)

The Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, he was with the disciples. And he took a loaf of bread, and after giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, broken for you.” In the same manner, after they had supped, he took the cup, and after blessing it, he gave it to them, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink of it, in remembrance of me.”

The bread that we break is our communion with the Body of Christ. The cup of blessing which we drink is our communion with the Blood of Christ. These are the gifts of God for the people of God.

Lord’s Prayer (or free prayer if you choose)

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Easter Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Easter, may these readings draw us closer to the Reason for our being, Jesus the Christ. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ our King has won for us. Let the Spirit of the Risen One lead you into God’s own heart, that we may live out Easter’s victory now and always.

Fourth Week of Easter

Monday, May 4

Read: Psalm 100

Reflection:

Is it possible to make a “joyful noise” during this season? Who’s going to hear it, anyway? Notice that the psalmist directs praise *to* God – *not* to our neighbors. Our praise is *for* God; our *love* is for our neighbors. In this time of continuing physical distance, our call to praise has not lessened – rather, the impulse for gratitude should *increase*!

Our thanksgiving does not have to flow from our circumstances, especially when it’s centered on our identity as God’s people, “the sheep of his pasture” (v. 3). We give thanks to God because this virus does not separate us from God’s love. We give thanks because God’s promises over us cannot be defeated by disease and disaster.

When the Bible calls for us to “know” something, that’s more than just a factual knowledge – it is an *intimate, embodied knowledge* that affects the way we live. When the Church gives thanks in the midst of difficult times, we’re proclaiming God’s reality over the world’s: “For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations” (v. 5).

Prayer: *My voice may be weak from lack of use, and my arms unpracticed from raising them in worship, but help me to live gratefully for Your love and faithfulness today and forever. Amen.*

Tuesday, May 5

Read: Ezekiel 34:23-31

Reflection:

We’re not always comfortable having someone “over” us. As Americans, there’s a strong independent streak that’s implicit in our social and cultural DNA. However, what this prophet

speaks of is the leadership of God's Anointed – the Messiah, a true *shepherd king*. This is not tyranny; this is the hope of Christ who *gives us his life*, leading us into God's Kingdom through his own self-giving love.

The promise of Ezekiel that takes on flesh in Jesus is the transformational relationship we are invited into – where God's future steadily breaks into our present. Peace, flourishing, and living hope – these are the gifts of God that our Good Shepherd leads us into. It's not always apparent, because the Kingdom has not fully come, and so we live with the tension of God's final promises, and those promises becoming reality through Christ.

Yet as the “sheep” we're depicted as, we have to follow God in Christ *into* that future, even as God's Spirit makes it more and more a part of our life now. It's difficult to give up our own plans and visions for our life, but that kind of “giving up” is how we more fully enter the pasture of God's Kingdom.

Prayer: *Faithful Shepherd, lead me by Your grace into the peace of Your Kingdom; and when I stray to my own paths, help me to hear Your voice of love calling me back. Amen.*

Wednesday, May 6

Read: Matthew 20:20-28

Reflection:

As our world becomes more accessible through our screens, it's easy to compare and contrast each other and how we are coping with COVID-19. I, for one, look for those persons and groups who seem to be *thriving*. The creative posts, the thoughtful articles, the innovative outreach ideas – I see what other people are doing and, like the disciples, start to *grumble*.

This small episode should carry a mighty weight, not only for the Church as a whole, but for every disciple. “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant” (v. 26). Seems like Jesus wanted to give people a new way to measure themselves. It's not about your output during this season – it's not all the items you can check off on your to-do list. Rather, the “great” thing is the simple thing: *Show love*.

Practicing social distance, doing our part to “flatten the curve” and prevent unnecessary exposure – that's service right now. That's love for our neighbors. That's the “greatness” of God's Kingdom – not sitting at the right or left hand of God, but offering yourself up for those around you. Instead of concerning yourself with how your profile looks to the outside world, just be comfortable in your status as a child of God and focus on the simple things.

Prayer: *Make me a servant, LORD, because the only “king” in my life, should be You. Amen.*

Thursday, May 7

Read: Genesis 12:1-3

Reflection:

If God were to call us to “go” today, I’m sure we’d be more than happy to oblige, especially in this season! Our current circumstances aside, God’s call *remains* for people of faith, though it may not be a journey of “physical” proportions.

None of us have ever faced anything like this pandemic before, but God is faithfully leading us to be agents of blessing to all the world, regardless. It may require us to leave behind former ways of discipleship – it might mean participating in worship in ways as yet untried. Yet that does not mean God won’t be true to God’s promises to bless us and use us to bless others.

Although there’s no space on the “page” between God’s call and Abram’s response, that doesn’t mean that Abram didn’t hesitate. It doesn’t mean that Abram didn’t think things through or have doubts or even struggled to move his feet. The “good news” is that God seems to wait. God may wait, but what about others who are just itching for blessing?

Prayer: *Patient God, there’s so much “unknowing” right now. Help me to see Your promises, and follow them in service to Your world. Amen.*

Friday, May 8

Read: Exodus 3:1-12

Reflection:

Have you ever noticed that Moses had to “turn aside” to really *see* the burning bush? It wasn’t directly in his path – it was off to the side, partially out of sight and mind. Sometimes, God’s revelations may be like that – not always right in front of us, but “hidden” around the corner, off the beaten-path. And it seems God leaves us the initiative to venture out in “holy curiosity.”

I think the real surprise for Moses is *not* that this bush “burns” but is not consumed, but that the God of his ancestors *cares*. This deity of perhaps unknown character to Moses, at the time, shows up in the midst of his life to proclaim: “I have observed the misery of my people...I have heard their cry...I know their sufferings, and I have come to deliver them” (v. 7-8).

In such a season as this, maybe we need to look for more of those “holy surprises” that God *sees*, *hears*, and *acts*. God *knows* our struggles and plans to do something about them. Perhaps those signs aren’t always in front of us, but if we allow ourselves a little curiosity, maybe we’ll discover just how much God wants to save us.

Prayer: *God of our mothers and fathers, the One who holds us fast through all generations – keep surprising me and reminding me that You do hear and see and act in my life. Amen.*

Saturday, May 9

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, May 10 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m. – “Fifth Sunday of Easter”

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship:
<https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-111315> *Or, use this for your own at-home worship.*

Call to Worship

Leader: God of hope, Your gift of new life enables us for service, no matter the season. Your Presence can sustain us, even when trial threatens to overwhelm.

All: Help us love Your Way and desire Your promises, that, amid all the changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed where true joy is found. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 1:1-9

Consider Pastor Jeffrey’s sermon, or use the following questions for your own study:

- What signs do you see of “new life” through relationship with Christ?
- Do you think Resurrection hope has power and meaning now or is it only important at life’s end?
- How can discipleship “grow” during difficulty?

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Easter Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Easter, may these readings draw us closer to the Reason for our being, Jesus the Christ. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ our King has won for us. Let the Spirit of the Risen One lead you into God’s own heart, that we may live out Easter’s victory now and always.

Fifth Week of Easter

Monday, May 11

Read: Psalm 102:1-17

Reflection:

What I appreciate most about the psalms is their honesty – sometimes to the point of our own discomfort when reading them. The psalmist here is honest about their *frailty* – their situation is so dire they feel themselves wasting away. That kind of honest reflection is humbling – we don’t often feel comfortable being that vulnerable, that “weak” in the context of a society that prides itself on strength and independence.

Yet the lesson I’m taking from this prayer is the complete offering of “self” to God. The psalmist cries out to the LORD because they trust that God “will regard the prayer of the destitute and will not despise their prayer” (v. 17). Do we have such confidence in God’s love for us that we can be that brutally honest? Do we have faith in the compassion of our worshiping community that we can turn to our neighbors with our own dire straits?

When we’re closing in on the second month of this closure, perhaps it’s worth opening up to the Almighty with our “true” selves. Maybe we need not fear trying to be strong, when God is more than willing to embrace our wounded hearts and weary spirits.

Prayer: My days may pass away like smoke, but You are forever, O God, and Your love is strong enough to carry me through. In Your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

Tuesday, May 12

Read: Proverbs 3:5-12

Reflection:

When I was a teenager, my mother gave me a bookmark with verse 6 from this text inscribed upon it: “In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths.” I thought that such wisdom meant I needed to “clear” things with God first before pursuing them, especially if I wanted to succeed in them.

This process, while well-meaning, quickly shifted into making God into the scapegoat for my own poor decisions – if God had given me the “pass” to do something, wasn’t God at fault if it went awry? You don’t have to learn Hebrew to read these verses in light of their larger context: this wisdom for faithful living is not about permissibility but *relationship*.

“Knowledge” in Scripture is rarely about facts or figures, but a kind of relational knowing – that by “knowing” God, you would know the kind of paths that would lead to faithful discipleship. Instead of trying to roll some “God-dice” and figure out the right moves, perhaps what’s more fulfilling is seeking to be drawn deeper into God’s life and Kingdom, rather than trying to sustain some pristine moral high-ground of your own.

Prayer: *May Your paths be the ones I would walk, in humility, patience and grace – and when course corrections come, help me to receive them with joy and not disdain. Amen.*

Wednesday, May 13

Read: John 8:31-38

Reflection:

Jesus often saw what others could not – the “chains” of sin holding us down, especially those who assumed they had “special standing” with God. It’s easy to assume as “church-going people” that “sin” is a problem “other people” have to deal with. From the Bible’s perspective, sin is a human problem, no matter what, no matter who – it’s individual *and* communal.

We need not envision a list of rules we break, but rather, through our actions (and inactions) how we fail to love God and our neighbors. And those failures enslave us, whether we realize it or not. We become slaves to our selfishness, pride, anger, jealousy, gossip, prejudice – again, this is not a list of vices for lists’ sake, but to think critically about all those minor and major ways we do not love God’s Image in ourselves and those around us.

But the Good News is that Jesus *sets us free*. And not just “free” – but “free *indeed*.” That means that we can trust Jesus really has the power to break us from those “chains” – that whatever guilt or shame the world throws our way for our mistakes, Jesus can remove them fully. Those failings don’t hold power over us – the love of God exhibited in Christ does. What we do with that freedom – that’s the true test of discipleship.

Prayer: *Liberating God, thank You for releasing me from bondage. Help me to honor that freedom by living Your Kingdom more fully each and every day. Amen.*

Thursday, May 14

Read: Psalm 66:8-20

Reflection:

There's always the risk of a theological mire when we speak of God "leading" us *into* testing. Though we may have a healthy view of God's power over all things, it can become a slippery slope when we begin debating on whether or not God has placed this hardship before us. If we consider carefully not only this text, but the variety of voices in Scripture, we may appreciate their nuance of God's presence *in the midst* of testing.

When we do face hardship, we have the opportunity for growth – no one comes out of a difficult experience *unchanged*. Perhaps the more impactful sentiment would be to share in this psalm's celebration of God's ability to use those experiences to shape us for good. Not only can God overcome difficulty with redemption, but that redemption looks like "a spacious place" (v. 12).

When we experience God's victory over our pain, what else can we do but "tell what he has done for me" (v. 16)? Our worship and discipleship are always responding to God's triumph in us.

Prayer: *O LORD, how marvelous it is that You hear my cries of distress, and never fail to be present in times of trouble! With that love in view, I sing to You each and every day. Amen.*

Friday, May 15

Read: Acts 27:1-12

Reflection:

I used to skip over pieces of the Bible like this, finding very little interest in these narratives that seemed void of the miraculous or the overtly-religious. Yet the early Christian community saw value in these texts that they felt led to include them in their sacred library – they named such mundane travel itinerary as "scripture."

What bits and piece of our lives do we think has little "religious" or "spiritual" value because it lacks the "luster" of miracle and adventure? Just because our lives don't appear on the Hollywood screen doesn't mean that God doesn't use them as blueprints for discipleship. Just as following along the travel log of the Apostle Paul sketches the map for the spread of the Good News in the ancient world, so might listening to the winds of the Spirit blow in our daily ventures uncover God's Kingdom *in* our midst.

The great "scandal" of the Gospel is that it takes the "ordinary" of human life and points it toward the extraordinary love of God Almighty.

Prayer: *Whether I'm driving along Niles Ave or I-94, or if I'm walking down main street St. Joseph or Bridgman, use my story, O God, to proclaim Your glory. Amen.*

Saturday, May 16

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, May 17 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m. – “Sixth Sunday of Easter”

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-997406> Or, use this for your own at-home worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: Great and loving God, we praise You for the peace in Jesus the world cannot give; Your abiding Presence in the Spirit promised. Calm our troubled hearts, and dispel every fear.

All: Keep us steadfast in Your love and faithful to Your Word, that we may always be Your dwelling place. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 66; 1 Peter 2:1-10

Whether you join for virtual worship or study on your own, consider these questions:

- What would it look like for God to “build up” your life as a “house” for worship – what kinds of things are needed for such spiritual renovation?
- Do you think being “chosen” by God means missional responsibility or special privileges?
- Do you feel there really is a change in identity – from “not a people” to “God’s people” in the Christian life?

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Easter Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Easter, may these readings draw us closer to the Reason for our being, Jesus the Christ. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ our King has won for us. Let the Spirit of the Risen One lead you into God’s own heart, that we may live out Easter’s victory now and always.

Sixth Week of Easter

Monday, May 18

Read: Psalm 93

Reflection:

It can feel strange calling God “king” when none of us have any experience as to what that title means. Our democratic context gives us dislike for such absolutist terms – nobody rules us but our own consciences and inalienable rights. Yet if we take a step back for a moment and think about the writers’ context – their experiences with kings was no kinder than our own experience with cruel world leaders today.

But to say “God is king” was an affirmation that in God, Israel had a true *leader* – One who cared for the people in a way no earthly ruler ever could. This Divine LORD was not only master over *all* the peoples of the world, but the universe itself! The greatest marvel was not in God’s “all-powerful” being, but that this King *loved* their people. This King loves *us*.

At a time when we may disagree or disapprove of our own leaders, let’s remember that beyond our human institutions stands One whose power is focused on *us*. The Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of all things stands eternally *for us*, and that kind of “king” deserves our praise daily.

Prayer: *To You, O Holy One, we sing – not because You demand it, but because Your love gives us life. Amen.*

Tuesday, May 19

Read: Genesis 9:8-17

Reflection:

Our Jewish siblings in faith elaborated on this passage in that through this “Noahic Covenant,” God established a universal relationship of goodwill with *all* creation. Christian commentators

followed suit and developed several theologies of the kind from this promise, but what I focus on is God's maintenance of memory. There're many storybook versions of this text where we lift up the rainbow as a sign that God will never again destroy the earth – but the text actually points to it reminding *God* of God's promise.

“This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth” (v. 17). It's quite easy for us to forget God made a promise with *everyone and everything* – maybe that's why God established a sign of remembrance. If God can “forget” that God's promises extend to all creation, then certainly *we*'ll have difficulty remembering that our “neighbor” across lines of race, politics, gender, religion, etc. *share* in that covenant.

Perhaps this pandemic is a “rainbow” moment – we need to remember God has not only promised to never again “destroy,” but God has made that promise with *all*. The “new creation” of Easter, therefore, is a gift that can be shared with everyone and everything – no physical distancing or human category can keep out that hope for restoration.

Prayer: *God of promise, as You remember Your boundless love, may my actions share in that maintenance of memory, to the glory of Your Name. Amen.*

Wednesday, May 20

Read: Deuteronomy 31:1-8

Reflection:

Are we actively preparing for those who will “come after” us? Not only in the sense of our congregation but those who will live in this *community*? What about future generations who will inhabit the planet? Moses, the great leader of Israel, had a *limit* on his ministry. None of us are called to serve in the same capacity for *all* time. As we live out our own faith journeys, we help pass the baton of leadership onto others, preparing the next generation for the future.

This text shows us one example of such preparation done in “courageous compassion.” Moses encourages the people that God will be with them, even when one leader steps aside. It can be fearful when we've seen gaps in generational ministry – when congregations look far older than they do younger. Yet Moses' charge to Joshua was to “be courageous” – to remember that God was *with* them, ages notwithstanding.

In light of such courageous compassion concerning the future, maybe we need to continue raising up leaders by encouraging them to take “the reins” of the Church for *God's* future, and not ours. Especially when we take notice of our “limits,” we'll realize it was never “our” future anyway – it belongs solely to the God of all generations.

Prayer: *God, sometimes we've held onto the leadership baton for so long, we don't expect anyone to be there if our grip loosens. Yet You are always there – help us to trust in that, and loosen the reins on Your future. Amen.*

Thursday, May 21

Read: Acts 1:1-11

Reflection:

Today is “Ascension Day” – traditionally celebrating Jesus’ ascension into heaven six weeks’ after His Resurrection. The Ascension provides some confusion for modern Christians – often Jesus’ Resurrection gets mixed in with “ascending into heaven” as if His defeat of death was a straight shot into “the clouds.” Yet the early Church made sure the two events were *distinct*.

The Ascension is *not* the Risen Jesus’ “escape” from earth – it is the shift of focus from Christ *to* His Body, the Church, *us*. Jesus “ascends” into heaven, or the space of God, because heaven was “over” the physical creation. Because heaven was God’s space, it was the “true reality” – that’s why Jesus prayed “Your Kingdom come *on earth as it is in heaven*” – essentially saying: may the true picture take shape *here and now*. For Jesus to “ascend” meant He had taken his rightful place as the Lord of *all* creation.

Like the beauty of gravity, “what goes up, must come down” – the Risen Jesus is coming back, bringing heaven *to* earth in that final picture of the Kingdom fully come. So, while we stand between Resurrection and Return, we’ve got work to do. “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you...will come in the same way” (v. 11).

Prayer: *LORD of all, keep our eyes on the ground in front of us and the world around us, because You are coming back. What You created, You will restore – and You’ve called us to be part of the project. Amen.*

Friday, May 22

Read: Ephesians 2:1-7

Reflection:

The journey with Christ is always one from death to life – it is a continual movement from sin and darkness to light and freedom in God’s Kingdom. This definition of grace that “God, who is rich in mercy...even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (v. 4-5) may be a *daily* experience.

When we wake each day, God is already there reaching out to us in love – we did not have to earn it; it was not extended because of any human quantifiers or categories of merit. It is God’s *gift*. Viewed through the lens of gratitude, grace becomes the great activator of discipleship. We were once considered “dead,” but God has brought us *life* – let’s *truly* live that gift!

If there was ever a season where “new life” needed to be exhibited to the world, it’s now.

Prayer: *The grave is no bar to Your call, O LORD. Today is Your day, and we rejoice! Amen.*

Saturday, May 23

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, May 24 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m. – “Seventh Sunday of Easter”

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship:
<https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-973167> Or, use this for your own at-home worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: O God, Your Son, Jesus, prayed for His disciples, and sent them into the world to proclaim Your Kingdom. By Your Spirit, hold Your Church in unity to Christ’s witness.

All: Keep us faithful to Your Word, that our discipleship may be true, giving of ourselves as Christ gave, in faith, service and love. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 68:1-10; 1 Peter 3:8-16

Whether you join for virtual worship or study on your own, consider these questions:

- Does not repaying “evil for evil” seem like a “sacrifice?”
- What kind of a witness is the “gentleness and reverence” of living according to Jesus?
- How does love “bless” those with whom we may disagree or struggle against? Is such a form of discipleship possible in our world?

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Easter Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Easter, may these readings draw us closer to the Reason for our being, Jesus the Christ. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ our King has won for us. Let the Spirit of the Risen One lead you into God’s own heart, that we may live out Easter’s victory now and always.

Seventh Week of Easter

Monday, May 25

Read: Leviticus 9

Reflection:

Animal sacrifice was a violent act for a violent world – but some 2,000 years later, our world really hasn’t become any *less* violent. World wars, prison camps, terrorist acts, genocide – so many horrific things that the people of the Bible would’ve been as shocked as much as animal sacrifice now shocks us. But even then, such acts of ceremony were also signs pointing to something “more” – a hidden world behind the Law and the religious rites.

The Kingdom of God was symbolized by the offering of life – that in shedding the blood of bulls and goats, the people of God were to offer *their* lives to God’s glory, as God had rescued them from bondage. Human life is *sacred* – God’s commands to the people always centered on preserving and stewarding that life. Memorial Day reminds us of this in a very somber way: the lives lost to those in armed service to protect human life should serve as a symbol that protecting others is *costly*.

We may not all be called to wear a uniform, but we can honor those who have by “raising our hands in blessing” (v. 22) and preserving life. Instead of working so hard to preserve our own, perhaps our energy is better spent in the Way of God’s Kingdom and lifting up others.

Prayer: *The life You have given is a gift – help us to honor those who have offered up that gift for others, and for us to do the same in our own ways of discipleship. Amen.*

Tuesday, May 26

Read: Numbers 16:41-50 (consider whole chapter for context)

Reflection:

Whether or not you read this text as historical narrative or teaching fable (or both), there's a beautiful reminder that God provides the means to "stand in the gap." The judgment on rebellion was not pronounced without redemption – though our actions rightfully have consequences, there's always a "wideness" to God's mercy.

Please don't read this as a parallel to our current pandemic – COVID-19 is *not* a divine plague. Yet perhaps we can draw lines to wanting to take matters into our *own* hands – maybe we can relate to the feeling of wanting power and control over our fates because no one else but *us* deserves to be in the driver's seat. This season has humbled me in such a way where such delusions about power and control have diminished.

Reading this text anew helps me see a God willing to stand between "life and death" for us – even in the ways I rebel against God's Kingdom, God's promises to be with me overcome. Israel survived the revolt of Korah, and countless other failings – still God remained *with* them. The same can be said for the Church. Thanks be to God.

Prayer: *I want to be in the driver's seat, God; but how often do I end up careening off the road? Keep me in Your Way, and strengthen me by Your commitment to grace. Amen.*

Wednesday, May 27

Read: 1 Kings 8:54-61

Reflection:

Solomon's prayer after completing the Temple (1 Kings 8:22-53) is beautiful, but it's these words of blessing that hold our interest today. What words of blessing are we offering to one another in this season? Notice how Solomon's blessing stems *from* God *to* the people where it circulates before *returning* to God?

That's the route a blessing should take – God's gifts flow to creation, where they percolate and simmer, growing and changing like a storm front, showering moisture on weary souls to bring life, and then, when their work is accomplished, returning to the Maker of such gifts in *praise*. Sometimes, there's obstacles in that path – sometimes, we get so used to "receiving" gifts that we fail to return them – in kindness, generosity, and forgiveness.

Perhaps this is what Solomon meant by "devoting yourself completely to the LORD" (v. 61) – making sure that the blessings of God do not return to God "empty-handed." Especially in a season like this, maybe it's part of our discipleship to keep the path of blessing going smoothly.

Prayer: *Praise God from whom all blessings flow – may we join in that continuous flow from heaven to earth and back again. Amen.*

Thursday, May 28

Read: Psalm 33:12-22

Reflection:

As much as it might seem like it, this psalm is *not* describing the “Divine Watchmaker” – the god who just creates and then steps away to watch life play out dispassionately. This text affirms the God of Israel – the God who creates and *remains present* to that creation, passionately working towards redemption.

The eye God directs to the world is like one who watches their family at play – that kind of sight is one of immense love and consideration. This is good news for those who think that their life is “hidden” to the great and powerful Creator – who believe as if God watches but does nothing. God’s eye is on the world “to deliver” (v. 19).

In this season where so much is “visible” through our screens yet we might feel “hidden” away in our homes – remember that God *is* watching, and God is also *working*.

Prayer: *Let Your steadfast love be upon us, O LORD, even as we hope in You. Amen.*

Friday, May 29

Read: Romans 8:1-17

Reflection:

There’s a false dichotomy between “spirit” and “flesh” often perceived when reading texts like this *without* proper understanding of context. When *we* read “flesh” – we think “physical” / “material.” When we read “spirit” we think of the *non*-physical. However, the biblical writers never separated “spiritual” from “physical” – it was all about *motivation* and *output*.

To live in the “spirit” was to be motivated by the Spirit of God, and thus, through right relationship (discipleship) produce the kind of “Kingdom life” God calls us to. This did *not* mean that one no longer cared about the material world or sought to distance themselves from a physical existence. Instead, the idea was to no longer allow the “flesh” (sinful inclinations towards “self” over others) to continue producing fruits *unworthy* of God’s Kingdom (lying, cheating, murder, etc.)

Through Christ, we have a whole new way of embracing God’s good creation – which *includes* the physical realm. This is the “life” the Spirit leads us toward. An important reminder when our sense of physicality may feel uncertain, and our being feels compromised.

Prayer: *Spirit, keep me living God’s Kingdom – even in physical distance. Body and soul. Amen.*

Saturday, May 30

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, May 31 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m. – “Pentecost Sunday”

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship:
<https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-505877> *Or, use this for your own at-home worship.*

Call to Worship

Leader: Spirit of the Living God, You make us the body of Christ – Your power unites us across language and culture, birth and blood. Your breath brings new life in us and in our world.

All: God of power, may the boldness of Your Spirit transform us, may the gentleness of Your Spirit lead us, and may the gifts of Your Spirit be our goal and strength. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 104:24-34; Acts 2:1-21

Whether you join for virtual worship or study on your own, consider these questions:

- How does the Holy Spirit cross “boundary lines?”
- What about the Spirit connecting people has ramifications for our discipleship?
- What does it say about God that God’s power is made known in the creation of community – that God’s Spirit “unites?”

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Pentecost Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Pentecost, may these readings draw us closer to the Spirit of the Living God, who dwells with us always. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ has brought us and the Holy Spirit continually imparts to us. Now is the season for the Church to come “alive” with the Spirit’s power at home and in our daily lives.

First Week of Pentecost

Monday, June 1

Read: Joel 2:18-29

Reflection:

This word was originally spoken when the Jewish people were at their lowest: their land had been decimated by foreign powers, their sense of identity stripped from them – even their physical being had been transported to strange lands far from the normalcy of the Temple.

Yet the prophet Joel offered *hope* – hope that God had a future that would bring restoration where the world’s evils had only brought destruction. God would bring justice to those who had been denied it – God would transform the earth from brokenness to wholeness. The early Christians believed this future had broken into the world in Jesus. They saw this transformation begin to take place with the Resurrection.

They believed Christ had given his followers the Spirit to continue that restoration and healing until God’s Kingdom finally came. What better time is there for a reminder that God’s work is not done? What began in Christ’s life will continue in our own – and no earthly power, no army or disease or threat can ever dismantle that hope! The Spirit is our token of promise – it’s the bridge linking our present to God’s wondrous future.

Prayer: Hope lives in every believer, O God, because through Your Spirit, You’ve chosen to live in us. May we carry on with Resurrection hope in our Spirit-filled discipleship. Amen.

Tuesday, June 2

Read: Ezekiel 39:21-29

Reflection:

No matter how many times there are experiences of loss or brokenness, the final word from God is always one of restoration. It's easy to miss because so much of the Old Testament (and the New) come from contexts and cultures foreign to our own – but it's important to read these narratives in light of the great drama of redemption that is the Bible.

Any one of us can retell a story of sadness or pain – each of us has loss; during this pandemic, that truth only becomes clearer. Yet our stories are *not* done – not until God's final word of promise is spoken. Even what we believe may be an ending – God's future will continue our narratives in the promise of life everlasting.

Ezekiel's vision connected the disciples to their experience of Pentecost – of God's Spirit “filling” them in such a way that they could embrace Jesus' story in and through their own. Can we allow hope to be embodied in our discipleship during this season that we remain open to God's possibilities? Can we open ourselves to God's future that places a “comma” where we only believed a “period” belonged?

Prayer: *You're never done with me, LORD, not until Your Kingdom fully comes. Until then, keep me engaged in Your Spirit and holy possibility. Amen.*

Wednesday, June 3

Read: John 7:37-52

Reflection:

What do “rivers of living water” (v. 38) look like? The text makes the connection to the Holy Spirit – does this mean acts of power? Miraculous healings? Wonders that will testify to Jesus present *in* us “ordinary” disciples? Perhaps. Perhaps it could also mean those everyday “miracles” of kindness and goodwill, service and gentleness.

Perhaps in this season of disruption, it might look like patient endurance – the self-sacrificial love of Christ-followers putting the needs of the vulnerable and “at-risk” before our own comforts. As much as we long for our former normalcy, perhaps the wellsprings of the Spirit look like solidarity with the least in such a way that a “new normal” is fashioned where every life matters, no matter the economic impact.

Few believed in Jesus' authority because he spoke from the most ordinary and common of settings – yet that is exactly where God's Kingdom is needed the most. Not in the ivory towers of society – but the everyday lives of disciples willing to open the floodgates of Spirit-led love.

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, flow through my life in the self-giving love of God in the simple miracles of daily discipleship. Amen.*

Thursday, June 4

Read: Job 38:1-11

Reflection:

When God “shows up” in the Bible, it’s generally to put us human beings in our place. We believe *we*’re the center of the universe, until the actual Center of the universe knocks us down a few pegs. During this pandemic, I’m sure many of us have had “Job” moments – where we’re crying out to the tempest around us: “where are you, God? Don’t you care? Aren’t you supposed to be in control?”

We should consider ourselves lucky that this scene is not God’s automatic reply for whenever those questions are asked – I think it’d be more terrifying than gratifying. Yet the text humbly reminds us that life really isn’t a matter of our control – there are many questions that will go unanswered in the face of the whirlwind, or as my grandmother would say: “this side of heaven.” As important as the choices we make are, and the manner in which we live our lives says much – God’s world is always *bigger* than our own. In the scheme of the universe, our problems are quite small.

Yet how marvelous is it that the same One who creates is also One who redeems? That this true Center of the universe would “stoop” to pay such attention to us miniscule human beings.

Prayer: *I have many questions, LORD. As much as I may demand an answer, gently remind me that rather than respond, You remain by my side instead. Your grace is enough. Amen.*

Friday, June 5

Read: 2 Timothy 1:8-12

Reflection:

Shame has little place in the life of a disciple. It rears its ugly head often, but that does not come from the Gospel. The “good news” of Jesus sets us free from guilt and shame – it transforms us from seeing the world through broken lenses and living renewed as God’s beloved. Even when we misstep, we should not allow shame a place at the table – as if God would “disprove” of our journey *towards* God’s Kingdom.

Discipleship concerns both justification (being saved) and sanctification (being made “holy”) – God’s Spirit makes both possible in our lives. We feel shame because our world still utilizes an ancient system of “honor-shame” – that “good” actions bring honor, and “bad” actions bring shame. Life is a balancing act between the two poles. Yet Jesus’ saving work in us tips the scales eternally in our favor. God doesn’t see a guilty people – God sees God’s own children.

Because of that grace, there’s only one way to truly live – and that is “free” – the freedom of being made whole, and thus, *able and willing* to live in gratitude for God’s gifts. That kind of gracious posture can face trials without fear – because shame is *not* Good News.

Prayer: *Life-giving Spirit, help me to embrace freedom, and to live truly redeemed. Amen.*

Saturday, June 6

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, June 7 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m. – “Trinity Sunday”

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-518508> Or, use this for your own at-home worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: O God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer; come to us and be with us, as the wind to inspire us, the fire to cleanse us, the dew to refresh us. Come, O Three in One, unite us and bind us in love, unity in diversity, forever bound and eternally blessed.

All: Come, O God, unite Your people that we may respond to Your call for mission. Amen.

Reflection: Genesis 1-2:3; Acts 2:32-42

Whether you join for virtual worship or study on your own, consider these questions:

- The Church celebrates God’s identity as “Triune” – or Three Persons in One God, One in Three – a statement on how God chooses to relate to the world, through a relationship of “persons:” in light of this, how does our discipleship concern relationships?
- God’s Image is all about “relationship” – that God is not a set of beliefs or statements, but a *living* relationship to encounter and pursue: how does Peter’s charge to the Pentecost crowd commit to this?
- How does the Gospel move from Resurrection hope to Spirit-driven action?

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Pentecost Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Pentecost, may these readings draw us closer to the Spirit of the Living God, who dwells with us always. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ has brought us and the Holy Spirit continually imparts to us. Now is the season for the Church to come “alive” with the Spirit’s power at home and in our daily lives.

Second Week of Pentecost

Monday, June 8

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:4-13

Reflection:

“It takes a village” – truer words were never spoken, especially when it concerns Christian community. No one has *all* the gifts – *no one* has all the ability or resources. We *need* each other. It’s not just that we all have *different* gifts, but it’s the *same* Spirit at work in each of us, providing those gifts.

During this moment when we are limited physically at how we connect, it’s so important to recognize that we need one another’s different gifts to provide for the *whole*. Some excel at communication, others are better at manual tasks, still others utilize the arts or are able to express themselves through charitable donations – *whatever* the gift, it is needed if we are to remain connected and equipped to *be* the Church.

No matter the gift or the ability, the Spirit of the LORD is behind it, revealing blessing through every single life, for the benefit of the whole world.

Prayer: *May Your Spirit be unleashed upon the world through Your Church, O LORD. May we be willing to serve as instruments of Your Kingdom. Amen.*

Tuesday, June 9

Read: Hebrews 3:1-6

Reflection:

The Bible is filled with wonderful leaders – ordinary women and men who opened themselves to God’s call and thus helped “build-up” God’s Kingdom. Moses is often the MVP of biblical heroes, and so everyone else is compared to him, much like our modern sports comparisons to

Michael Jordan or Serena Williams. However, this text makes clear that even Moses was just “a servant” (v. 5) – it was Jesus who came as “a son” (v. 6)

This is a powerful reminder that God did not extend the call for a universal savior from any mere human being, but rather, God answered the call on God’s own and *joined us* “out on the court.” It’s like the owner of a company responding to a crisis in the warehouse saying: “I didn’t make this mess, but I’ll clean it up, once and for all.”

Because God joins us in the restoration project of all creation *as* a human being, we actually are part of God’s “house,” God’s “team” in Jesus, forever. Because of Christ, every single one of us is an MVP in God’s sight. There’s no mess in this “warehouse” of earth that God is not committed to partnering with us to clean up and redeem.

Prayer: Builder of the House, You alone are worth more than any building – help us to feel confidence in being part of Your restoration team, through Christ our brother, Amen.

Wednesday, June 10

Read: Psalm 102:25-28

Reflection:

It’s strangely comforting to think about expiration dates: *nothing lasts forever*. That’s our hope with this virus, isn’t it? It is *not* eternal – it will *not* last forever; COVID-19 has an expiration date. The problem is, *no one* knows when that will be. On the other side of this difficult reality stands this assurance of faith: “You are the same, and your years have no end” (v. 27).

God *is* everlasting – God was in the beginning, and God will be at the end – in fact, we testify that God is *the* “beginning and the end” (Revelations 22:13). We may take comfort in God’s endurance over the tumult of creation – indeed, God has committed to triumphing over our brokenness with God’s own everlasting love.

Our God is not only the loving Creator, but also, the faithful Redeemer. And that king of faithfulness has *zero* expiration dates.

Prayer: Thank You, LORD, that Your love will go on and on and on and on. Amen.

Thursday, June 11

Read: Mark 7:1-13

Reflection:

In a season where our routines are for better or worse denied us, perhaps it leaves us room to analyze them more closely. Do the systems of belief or routine we uphold as “tradition” miss the

point in our relationship with God, with one another? This confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees concerned exactly that – a practice of piety that was more focused on the “self” than on one’s neighbor, and therefore, on God’s Image in “the other.”

Like the Pharisees, it’s easy for us to become so absorbed in our rituals and practices, that we stop seeing the *people* these traditions should be leading us towards. We can study Scripture all day long, but if we don’t actually *engage* these words in a way where we are showing love and justice to our neighbors, then we make “void the word of God” (v. 13).

Perhaps this season is just the time to re-evaluate our traditions to see if they are actually helping us *be* disciples and disciple one another, or if they were just “motions” we go through to validate our own sense of piety and spirituality.

Prayer: *Holy One, help me live Your Word in the way that truly honors my neighbor, and thus, honors You. Amen.*

Friday, June 12

Read: Exodus 4:27-31

Reflection:

It’s important to remember that Moses did not lead “alone” – he had his brother, Aaron, and his sister, Miriam. In fact, Moses was so terrified to actually speak to the people, God used Aaron to be Moses’ “mouthpiece” to aid him in his fear of public speech. Aaron even performs wonders like Moses to aid in gaining the support of the leaders of Israel for the upcoming deliverance from Egypt.

The Church is a community filled with Moses’, Aaron’s, and Miriam’s – we are a *family* of faith that serves together, making up for where each of us falls short. We *need* each other – because not even the Moses’ among us have “all” the gifts or personhood necessary for God’s redemption work. Without Aaron and Miriam, there would be no Exodus.

As we continue to labor “apart” during this pandemic, what are ways we can assist one another, even with physical distance? How can we help make up for one another’s shortcomings – instead of a “weakness,” maybe it’s better to think of what we lack as an opportunity for someone else to step up, *partnering* in the work of God’s Kingdom. No disciple has to be “Moses” alone. No disciple is ever *alone*.

Prayer: *Gracious God, remind me of all the siblings in faith You provide – all the different parts of Christ’s Body that make up for where I stand in need. Amen.*

Saturday, June 13

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, June 14 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m.

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-424500> Or, use this for your own at-home worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: LORD God Almighty, You have poured out Your Spirit on all flesh to empower us to be a people for Your Kingdom, to offer lives of service and love.

All: May we hear and do what You command, that the power of darkness may be overcome by the power of Your light, through Your Spirit in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Reflection: Matthew 9:35-10:4; Romans 5:1-5

Whether you join for virtual worship or study on your own, consider these questions:

- How might we see our vocations as “labor” for the harvest of God’s Kingdom?
- Jesus drew people to himself in order to send them out again; how do we as the Church function in this model?
- How does hope sustain us for our work in God’s harvest?

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Pentecost Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Pentecost, may these readings draw us closer to the Spirit of the Living God, who dwells with us always. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ has brought us and the Holy Spirit continually imparts to us. Now is the season for the Church to come “alive” with the Spirit’s power at home and in our daily lives.

Third Week of Pentecost

Monday, June 15

Read: 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Reflection:

What does it take for us to “reach out?” At what point do we realize we cannot do this ministry work alone? For the Apostle Paul, there was no solely individual endeavor – it was always intertwined with the whole community. Paul kept in touch with the people he visited and had helped established gatherings of believers – in some ways, Paul saw these communities as his own “children.” He prayerfully sought their welfare throughout his journeys.

As limitations and restrictions lessen, and in-person gatherings begin to take place – there will remain the element of disconnect. Even with lowering restrictions, the risk of the virus is still present, particularly for direct physical contact and poorly-ventilated indoor spaces. How do we use both caution and the prayerful intent of Paul to keep connected and offer care? This season has done a lot of damage – physically, economically, emotionally, spiritually – how do we help build one another up, strengthening the ties that bind us?

Trial is part of the journey of discipleship, because the Way of Jesus seeks to continually give up self *for* others. That kind of costly self-offering is difficult, but it’s “what we are destined for” (v. 3). Don’t let fear or doubt keep at bay the power of community.

Prayer: Like Paul sending Timothy, God, You send Your Spirit to make certain no one is shaken. Remind us that, through Your love eternal, we belong to a community that can never be broken. Amen.

Tuesday, June 16

Read: Genesis 25:7-11

Reflection:

There are likely many moments like this we miss in Scripture, because of how “ordinary” they appear. “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age” (v. 8) – that’s the kind of simplistic ending many of us may hope for in our own lives, and so it’s easy just to “skip ahead.” Yet to do so misses the true beauty of this narrative. At the end of his life, Abraham’s sons – Ishmael and Isaac, come together to bury their father.

If you know the larger story, then you know these two brothers had very difficult relationships – Ishmael, the child of Abraham’s slave girl; Isaac, the child of promise, and yet, brought forth as a potential sacrifice. We are not told of their relationships with Abraham – but we can imagine that after the events of their upbringing, Abraham was not the “father of the year.” Nonetheless, Ishmael and Isaac stand side by side to grant him the dignity of burial.

There are other ways to read this little footnote, but what I hear is that God’s last word is always reconciliation. Between families, nations, neighbors, sinners – God’s love offers peace, even in the face of final breath. No matter how broken a narrative may seem, God alone holds the bigger story in God’s own heart.

Prayer: Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers – there’s a long line of family reunions that may be telling more than just happy endings: Your love unites us. Amen.

Wednesday, June 17

Read: Luke 6:12-19

Reflection:

When I read the names of the apostles, I think about how everyone has a name, even if the rest of the world doesn’t know them. Names give us a social location – they function as windows into our identity. Even if people change their names, they still go by *something*, in order to be known. When the Bible “names” someone, it’s a way of establishing links in the story – of connecting the dots and highlighting that this person’s story is *also* part of God’s grand narrative.

There are also many people in the Bible who aren’t named – but that does not mean they are not part of God’s story. Jesus had many disciples, and though they are not “named” – they are no less “apostles.” Apostle means “sent one” – the twelve chosen by Jesus are like the first sets of dominos, that from their movement the others in the line will fall.

Our names may not be written in the newspaper or listed in the church bulletin, but God knows who we are. God knows *whose* we are – and if we follow Jesus, then we *are* “sent ones” every much as those first twelve. It’s through our lives that other names and faces will be shown their place in God’s story. *No one* gets left out of God’s list.

Prayer: You know our names, O God; help us love one another by sharing the Name of Christ. Amen.

Thursday, June 18

Read: Psalm 69:7-10, 16-18

Reflection:

The Gospel writers liked to use Scripture to express their understanding of who Jesus is and what he did. One such example was when Jesus overthrew the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, they referenced these words. Taken as a whole, this is a psalm of lament – a prayerful cry to God for deliverance against persecution as one dedicated wholly to God.

Jesus lived a life wholly dedicated to God, and that kind of singular devotion scared people. It frightened religious authorities because the Kingdom Jesus embodied cared little for their secular and sacred distinctions; it made civic authorities nervous because Jesus embraced pauper and prince alike. The disciples were captivated by Jesus' love and its manifestation in prophetic action – when they reread the Scriptures, they saw these words take on new life.

The prayers of God's people do not have a life expectancy – they are timeless, but we must do the work of utilizing them in a manner that bridges the contexts faithfully. We can cry out to God for deliverance, but perhaps, in the way of Christ, we can also embody these words through prophetic action. We can care for the most vulnerable and dismantle those forms of religious hypocrisy that demean the glory of God.

Prayer: *LORD, draw near to us, and in return, help us draw near to You, and through You, our neighbor. Amen.*

Friday, June 19

Read: Acts 5:17-26

Reflection:

This text reveals what costly discipleship is all about. The apostles faced willingly the threat of imprisonment for proclamation of the Gospel. Our own context is free from that threat due to our constitutional rights. However, if we take the way of Jesus seriously, our discipleship may bring us into the discomfort of public scrutiny and perhaps, the threat of violence.

We live in a time of great upheaval – not only due to the pandemic, but to the greater divides of politics and racial injustice. The Gospel may bring us into conflict with those forces, and though our religion is protected, the way we practice may not be free from harsh response. Following Jesus may mean standing with those who suffer from broken systems and oppressive powers – it may look like putting our lives at risk to show Gospel love to our neighbors.

God calls: “Go...tell the people the whole message about this life” (v. 20). We must *answer*.

Prayer: *Grace is free, but our response is costly. Be with us, O LORD. Amen.*

Saturday, June 20

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, June 21 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m.

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-982601> Or, use this for your own at-home worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: Holy One, this Way You call us to is not easy, but it’s who we were created to be. Thank You for abiding with Your people, building us up into our true selves.

All: Guide us with every step, reminding us that we are not alone, but part of Your heart through the power of Your Spirit and the life of Your Son. Amen.

Reflection: Matthew 10:24-39; Romans 6:1-11

Whether you join for virtual worship or study on your own, consider these questions:

- Jesus presents both hardship and fear as part of the path for disciples, but also offers assurance of God’s love and power in the midst of said journey. What fears do *we* have, and how does Christ assure us to face them?
- How does grace challenge our mistakes and help change the narrative from “failure” to “victory?”
- Does Jesus saying he brings a “sword” mean that unity is not an option, or that the Gospel will bring conflict to the “peace” based on oppression and false control?

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Pentecost Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Pentecost, may these readings draw us closer to the Spirit of the Living God, who dwells with us always. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ has brought us and the Holy Spirit continually imparts to us. Now is the season for the Church to come “alive” with the Spirit’s power at home and in our daily lives.

Fourth Week of Pentecost

Monday, June 22

Read: Psalm 86:11-17

Reflection:

What does an “undivided heart” look like when it comes to our relationship with God? Is it equated with our devotional life or the number of religious commitments on our calendars? Can it be reflected in our years of attending worship services or how many leadership roles we’ve served in the congregation?

Perhaps what this psalm is hinting at, is not so much the “what” – but the “how.” The writer prays for an undivided heart, because they wish to have such communion with God, that even in the face of life’s hardships, their identity as a child of God will outshine all else. The sense of grounded-ness in *God’s* love, *God’s* faithfulness, may produce in us a life thoroughly shaped by that goodness to the extent that we share those gifts with others.

Maybe what this prayer amounts to is the awareness that God’s compassion is not merely a principle or a belief – it’s a lived reality we can enter into daily.

Prayer: Great is Your love, O God – may I live always in light of that grace, that when I run up against difficulty, I will trust even there Your compassion is unfailing. Amen.

Tuesday, June 23

Read: Psalm 6

Reflection:

I take great comfort in that the writers of the Bible were not shy with their emotions. So much of Scripture, particularly the psalms, are a product of *raw*, human expression. Sometimes, we may

feel like “church” is a place for picture-perfect lives – that because God is so good, we’re not allowed to reflect any “bad” if we’re faithful disciples.

Yet again and again, we read such laments like this one – an honest cry of pain and hardship, a reaching out to God with weak arms and feeble knees, just inching towards the hope that God may hear and act. The vast spectrum of human experience that the Bible references should be a comfort to us that no emotion, no expression, is “off limits” to God. Our God sees and hears *all*.

Though there’s no “roadmap” for living in light of a global pandemic – there is the gift of writers like the psalmist to show us that God does not turn away from our deepest pain.

Prayer: *LORD, I’m sure many of us have reached our breaking points over this season – we’ve wanted to scream and shout, broken down in tears – reacted strongly over the Internet or with our neighbors. Yet You abide with us, and remain open to all that we are and do. Thank You. Amen.*

Wednesday, June 24

Read: Matthew 10:5-23

Reflection:

It’s interesting to think of Jesus sending out The Twelve in such a state of *dependence*. They were to rely on the hospitality of strangers, and when it came to proclaiming the Kingdom of God – it was not *their* power or presence, but the Spirit of the LORD. Maybe you’re like me and think that God needs me to be “put together” before I can *really* serve – but if that wasn’t the case with the disciples, why should it be any different with us?

Who told or taught us that only when we are “able” to serve *can* we serve – it doesn’t look like it was Jesus, and it certainly never seems to stop God’s call. Perhaps the only prerequisite is the *sending* itself – and if we consider ourselves disciples, then we *are* those who are being “sent.” There is risk involved in this calling, but again, Jesus told the disciples that their dependence was not on themselves, but the One who sent them.

There’s another aspect to this call – the Twelve were sent *together* – not only could they depend on their faithful master, Jesus, but they would have to be willing to depend on one another. Faith is not a solitary mission: Church is a *community*.

Prayer: *It’s scary to be a sheep in the midst of wolves, LORD, but help me remember that I belong to the Gracious Shepherd. Amen.*

Thursday, June 25

Read: Micah 7:18-20

Reflection:

The prophets, for all their supposed “doom and gloom,” had incredible insight into the heart of God: “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives...transgression” (v. 18). At a time when the greatest sin of the people was apathy, the prophets portrayed the divine *empathy* – that though Israel neglected its Creator and Redeemer, God was incapable of returning such ignorance. God’s *love* was always greater than God’s anger.

Perhaps in a season of such continual tension and difficulty – when it feels as if life has become hopeless and filled with only pain, it may be helpful to remember God’s promise: “You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (v. 18). God does not *cause* our pain – but God will certainly *remedy* it. God will answer our pain with God’s own love – made known most fully in the Cross, and answered eternally with Resurrection.

May we not turn off our hearts just because life is difficult – may we not scorn our neighbors just because they’re tough to love. God’s love is greater, and for that, we too can try and try again.

Prayer: *You are not the God of second chances, but the LORD of everlasting grace – so when I stumble, remind me to look to You as I rise and try to love once more. Amen.*

Friday, June 26

Read: Luke 17:1-4

Reflection:

I think forgiveness truly becomes “real” with repentance. Saying sorry is an important first step, but the greater step may be what comes *after*. Living differently *after* wrongdoing is the purpose of repentance – to have turned *from* brokenness and *towards* the Kingdom of God. God is gracious and forgiving – calling us into that same sort of redeeming transformation.

The real power in forgiveness is that we are not only forgiven *from* our wrongdoing – but forgiven *for* new life. We are called out of our sin into the new creation of God – to live in this new way, having been freed from the chains of our brokenness. I think that’s why Jesus calls his disciples to be accountable to one another. When we misstep, it’s not the end of the world – grace *can* and *does* abound. But it’s up to us to make forgiveness “count” with repentance.

Saying sorry *matters* – but living like we are sorry, that’s where God’s power takes hold.

Prayer: *No matter how many wrongs I make, God, You are there to forgive. Help make this grace take shape in my life, by leading me to walk in the Way of Your redemption. Help Your Church to show grace to one another, so that we can be true disciples of Your love. Amen.*

Saturday, June 27

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, June 28 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m.

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship:
<https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-887828> *Or, use this for your own at-home worship.*

Call to Worship

Leader: God, You have welcomed all the world into Your heart through Christ in the power of Your Spirit. With such extravagant welcome like that, may we seek to model the invitation to new creation.

All: Pour upon us, O God, the wisdom of Your Spirit, that we may walk with Christ the Way of Love, ready to offer even the gift of our lives, to show forth the hope of Your Kingdom. Amen.

Reflection: Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

Whether you join for virtual worship or study on your own, consider these questions:

- Do you think Abraham believed that God would “provide” or that he truly was prepared to offer up Isaac in sacrifice?
- What does it mean for us to “welcome” in the Name of Jesus? Is it an absolute commitment to open our lives to God’s doing, much like Abraham with Isaac?
- What does radical hospitality look like in this current season? What does radical hospitality look like for FCC?

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Pentecost Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Pentecost, may these readings draw us closer to the Spirit of the Living God, who dwells with us always. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ has brought us and the Holy Spirit continually imparts to us. Now is the season for the Church to come “alive” with the Spirit’s power at home and in our daily lives.

Fifth Week of Pentecost

Monday, June 29

Read: 1 Kings 21:1-16

Reflection:

Scripture has many narratives like this reminding us of the power of greed. Ahab had no need of Naboth’s vineyard – but he *wanted* it. The prophet Samuel had warned Israel what a king would do to them: “he will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards...” (1 Samuel 8:14). Ahab became the exact archetype of what a king *opposed* to the Way of God would do.

The reality is that you do not need to be a king to act out of greed. It can happen to any of us – but what this text especially reminds us of what happens when *our* power gets used *wrongly*. We may not think it, but for most of us, we *do* have “power.” America is the richest nation in the world, and though it contains only 5% of the world’s population, it uses 24% of the world’s resources. Though our own economic situations may vary, the truth is – if we have a bank account, we’re head and shoulders above the rest of the world.

Instead of feeling guilty, let’s remember to use our power and privilege wisely and justly. When we see what our neighbors do and do not have, let’s not allow comparison to become a contest for acquisition. Let’s follow the way of our *true king*, Jesus, who did not use his power for selfish gain, but for selfless love: “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but *emptied* himself” (Philippians 2:6-7).

Prayer: *I may not be a king or a CEO, but I have power to do good for others. Help me to do so, and truly love my neighbor as myself. Amen.*

Tuesday, June 30

Read: 1 John 4:1-6

Reflection:

“Testing of the spirits” is an important practice for the Church in seeking to discern proper direction from God. Contextually, these words were offered to reinforce that Jesus really did live *and* die as a human being – he was flesh and blood, and he really did rise again, *in* the flesh. There were those who through the influence of Greek culture wanted to reject that the Messiah had ever been truly human at all, but only “disguised” as one.

This was a complete distortion of the biblical narrative, however – because God had always dealt with “the flesh.” Matter *matters* to God, and the Resurrection is about physicality – a renewed and *restored* physicality, but the world of creation nonetheless. The Greek mind separated flesh and spirit, but the Gospel affirmed that the Kingdom concerned *both*.

To “test the spirits” now might be to help combat against the false dualism of dividing “religious” or “spiritual” things from the world of flesh and blood. Some people may comment to keep things like politics and social issues “out” of the Church – but to do so rejects the Good News Jesus brought that placed *all things* under the sovereignty of God’s Kingdom.

Prayer: *Your life is in all things, O God – help me live in such a way where the only category of my life is labeled: “God’s Kingdom.” Amen.*

Wednesday, July 1

Read: Matthew 11:20-24

Reflection:

Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum were Jesus’ “home turf” – these were the local villages where he and his disciples spent a lot of their time and ministry. They were largely Jewish centers – fishing towns along the Galilee that also housed religious establishments. If anyone should’ve been quick to join in on the message Jesus was embodying, it should have been *these* communities. However, as we see from the text, they “did not repent” (v. 20).

Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom were the cities of *foreigners* – much of the Jewish perception of these places was negative, due to their heavily Greek and Roman influence. However, Jesus makes the point of distinguishing locations such as these as “more tolerable” in terms of the coming judgment. This is part of Jesus’ habit of changing the familiar divisions of “insider/outsider.”

Sometimes, those of us on the “inside” of “religion” can miss the point of God’s Kingdom happening before our very eyes, simply because it’s all “too familiar.” We need the help of outsiders to shake us from complacency and open up a greater understanding of grace and transformation. Perhaps by listening closely to Jesus, we can see that the divisions of “insider/outsider” are not part of God’s Kingdom at all.

Prayer: *LORD, help me to never miss the extraordinary things You do, even within the familiar settings of the “inside” – by being open to grace, remind me that no one is “outside” Your love. Amen.*

Thursday, July 2

Read: Zechariah 1:1-6

Reflection:

Do we ever feel like we're stuck in the endless cycles of our forebearers? The mistakes we've made in the past, wrong turns our families may have taken, even sins that our communities have committed through the generations continue to play out in our present lives. It's easy to allow such history to become burdens that chain us to the past and feel like our futures are denied any hope from real change.

Yet we belong to a God who can change our wayward narratives. We belong to the Lord of the future and the Forgiver of our past. We don't have to feel trapped by what we have done and by what we have left undone. Confession is an embodiment of our leaning into the grace of God in such a way as to "name" those missteps where they no longer have power over us. God's new creation frees us from the past and opens to us a future of possibility.

History is an opportunity to learn *from* the past and to *grow* in the present towards a new future. We don't have to keep making the same mistakes – God can lead us into something *new*.

Prayer: *Forgive me of my past and guide me into Your future, O LORD. May I not be chained to my sin, but set free to live redeemed by Your love. Amen.*

Friday, July 3

Read: Zechariah 2:6-13

Reflection:

The Bible's "ending" is not with humanity escaping off to some fantasy land, but the Creator and Redeemer of the universe coming *to* us to dwell *with* us in renewed and restored creation. Throughout the biblical narrative, there are images of this final redemption in which heaven (God's space) and earth (our space) are united in everlasting communion.

This future hope is never divorced from the present – it is a powerful reassurance meant to equip the community of faith to press on, even amidst difficult circumstances. These words, like many of the other prophetic utterances, are shared with those who are smack dab in the middle of really trying and stressful times. In Zechariah's instance, a community fresh from exile, still wondering when their homeland would truly be "home" again.

Reminders of God's future are important for our work and worship. It can be difficult to sustain our continual pursuits of justice and peace in the present, but God's faithfulness will one day complete what we enact.

Prayer: *Sing and rejoice, O Church – for God's future is coming for our present. Amen.*

Saturday, July 4

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, July 5 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m.

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-555467> Or, use this for your own at-home worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: Sovereign God, ruler of all hearts, You call us to follow You and experience true freedom in Your Kingdom.

All: Keep us faithful to the ways of Your Son, that, leaving behind all that hinders, we may fix our eyes on Christ and live boldly our redemption. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 145:8-18; Matthew 11:2-6, 28-30

Whether you join for virtual worship or study on your own, consider these questions:

- Instead of answering the question of John the Baptist’s disciples, Jesus points to his actions as confirmation of his identity: In what way is our discipleship the same?
- Jesus’ ministry is a matter of reconciliation, yet as we strive for that work, there is always the invitation to come to *Him* to receive what we need to be “whole.” Must we come to Jesus *first* before we can offer wholeness to the world?
- The words of the psalmist affirm what Jesus shows in his life: God “upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are owed down” (145:14). How does Jesus “raise up” your life and the lives of others?

The Lord’s Supper *(feel free to use whatever for the “bread” and “cup”)*

The Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, he was with the disciples. And he took a loaf of bread, and after giving thanks, broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, broken for you.” In the same manner, after they had supped, he took the cup, and after blessing it, he gave it to them, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink of it, in remembrance of me.”

The bread that we break is our communion with the Body of Christ. The cup of blessing which we drink is our communion with the Blood of Christ. These are the gifts of God for the people of God.

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology: *Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

Blessing: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. **Amen.**

Pentecost Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Pentecost, may these readings draw us closer to the Spirit of the Living God, who dwells with us always. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ has brought us and the Holy Spirit continually imparts to us. Now is the season for the Church to come “alive” with the Spirit’s power at home and in our daily lives.

Sixth Week of Pentecost

Monday, July 6

Read: Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Reflection:

When was the last time you actually read *through* the Song of Solomon? They don’t talk about *this* in Sunday School very often, do they? Yet here it is – such *sensual* and ecstatic love poetry that when we consider through ancient language what the writers are talking about, we might blush, if we weren’t so indoctrinated to modern media. You have to be careful, even for a marriage ceremony, which verses you select from this love song, lest you want giggles from the bridal party.

Yet ancient communities of Jews *and* Christians maintained this literature in their sacred libraries for the very same way we may read it today: God *loves* us. Wholly and entirely – God is a fierce lover, committed to abiding with us and pursuing us into eternal communion. That’s a love song we should rejoice in – and it is Good News for those of us who feel as if our bodies aren’t “holy” enough for God.

Bodies, and what we do with them, are very holy to God – and so as sensual as these depictions are, they remind us that God is no “snob.” Our physical lives are important vessels for the Kingdom: as passionately as God pursues us, *we* do the same *for* God.

Prayer: *Arise, my Love, and come to me – be part of my life forever as I am part of You. Amen.*

Tuesday, July 7

Read: Jeremiah 27

Reflection:

The prophets, as in tuned to God's heart as they were, also were called to present *difficult* words from time to time. Especially when the community of faith was so entrenched in a rebellious spirit that any "good news" had to be cracked over their heads like a hammer, God used the prophets as a mean to show them that actions had consequences.

Jeremiah is called to place a yoke upon himself to portray the "yoke" that the people of Israel had willingly placed upon themselves in rejecting God's promises and pursuing their own way. It's an important reminder that as much as we like to think we know better, sometimes our decisions only lead us deeper into bondage. The things that weigh us down in life we may believe we can free ourselves by our own methods; there's whole sections of bookstores devoted to "self-help."

There are some chains that *only* God can free us from – and it's the part of the prophetic call of the Church to commit ourselves to that liberation against the world's forms of escapism. Repentance is not easy – but the freedom of God's heart is lighter than sin's yoke.

Prayer: *LORD, we so often think we can fix any problem that comes our way – but my own brokenness often just digs a worse hole. Help me to follow Your way – even when it leads down strange paths. At the end of repentance always comes restoration in You. Amen.*

Wednesday, July 8

Read: John 13:1-17

Reflection:

I find it poetic that when Jesus knew his "hour had come" (v. 1) he chose to bless his disciples with an act of humble service. He could have done many things in that moment: The Messiah could have revealed some articulate plan of action or shared the great wisdom of the Spirit. Instead, he knelt before them and washed their feet.

For all our talk of Bible study and Sunday School, maybe Christians could stand to learn the most from just following Jesus' lead and offering ourselves to our neighbors. Maybe foot-washing is not what we're being asked to repeat, but the act of "dealing with our neighbor's dirt" – entering into a vulnerable enough position where our power and privilege are not "above" our neighbors. When Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he set aside his authority as a teacher and shared in the mundaneness that is common to all humanity: to journey anywhere, we all have to take the first step.

There are a lot of people with dusty and sore feet from this difficult season. Maybe the Church could shrug off some of its "authority," and simply take a knee before its neighbors and offer to wash away some weariness.

Prayer: *The greatest teaching You have offered, O LORD, may simply be that we have everything we need to love each other. We just need reminders to kneel and serve. Amen.*

Thursday, July 9

Read: Psalm 119:105-112

Reflection:

A lamp is a useful tool, especially when you're trying to find your way. It's interesting to note this label – that God's words are like a light but *not* the path. What is the path then, we might ask? Psalm 37:5 in the Hebrew says, "Roll your way *upon* the LORD" – it is *God* who is the Way. God's Word acts like a light to reveal for us more closely who God is and what God does.

Using Scripture to find our way through God's Kingdom is important, but only in the Word Made Flesh may we truly grasp God *in* our humanity. In Jesus' life, death and resurrection we see when the path of God stretches through the fullness of human existence. Jesus shows us what happens when the light reveals God most clearly – Jesus takes Scripture and puts it to flesh.

Knowing God's commands and God's Story is vital, but knowing what all these words mean when they are embodied in a human life of faithful discipleship is even greater.

Prayer: *Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, O God, and Thy Son is the light that illumines Your Kingdom in us all. Amen.*

Friday, July 10

Read: Deuteronomy 32:1-10

Reflection:

Before the new generation of Israel can enter the promised land, Moses declares to them their own history, reminding them of their identity as God's people. This is where the title "Deuteronomy" comes from – "2nd Law" meaning the re-iteration of God's commands given at Mount Sinai to the newly-liberated slaves from Egypt, now provided to their offspring forty years later.

This proclamation of story/testimony is a model for what most worship gatherings entail: it's an opportunity to hear again the words of our faith. Every gathering constitutes a "new generation" – another chance before setting out to seek the "promised land" of Kingdom discipleship. Worship invites us into our own story to reclaim our pasts, present, and futures for God. Worship is really about sustaining our identity as God's people – through word and deed we know *who* we are and *Whose* we are.

Even though this season feels like we're stuck in the wilderness, every opportunity – whether virtual, indoors or outdoors, alone or together – is a chance to hear again our story and proclaim: "Greatness to our God!" (v. 3)

Prayer: *Faithful are You, O God, the Rock of each and every generation. Amen.*

Saturday, July 11

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, July 12 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m.

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-191389> Or, use this for your own at-home worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: Almighty God, we thank You for planting in us the seeds of Your Kingdom. By Your Spirit, help us receive it with joy and work to produce fruits of grace for Your world.

All: May we live in Christ’s Way, that we may grow in faith, hope and love to the glory of Your Name – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 65:9-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Whether you join for virtual worship or study on your own, consider these questions:

- God’s Spirit empowers creation to “produce” fruits of God’s Kingdom – how do we see the ebb and flow of the seasons in our own discipleship?
- What kinds of “fruit” are we producing from our discipleship? Are we tilling a communal soil that is open to healthy growth?
- What are the “weeds” that choke out discipleship for God’s Kingdom in your life?

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Pentecost Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” As we celebrate the Season of Pentecost, may these readings draw us closer to the Spirit of the Living God, who dwells with us always. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ has brought us and the Holy Spirit continually imparts to us. Now is the season for the Church to come “alive” with the Spirit’s power at home and in our daily lives.

Seventh Week of Pentecost

Monday, July 13

Read: Psalm 142

Reflection:

There are many attestations in Scripture that affirm when *we* face weakness and vulnerability, God’s presence and power overcome. In other words, God’s ability to redeem is not dependent on our spiritual endurance. Particularly, the words of the psalmist remind us that God works *in spite* of our own (often) faulty actions.

In this historic moment where we may feel like there’s always *more* we can do – to combat this virus, societal ills, our own forms of prejudice and misunderstanding – we are going to run up against our own *insufficiency*. We are not “all-powerful” or “all-knowing.” We are beautifully, *limited* human beings. But as limited as we are, God remains open to our cries.

“When my spirit is faint, you know my way” (v. 3). Whether it’s exhaustion or defeat, we need not believe ourselves a “lost cause” to God. Such recognizable dependence may be exactly what God was inviting us into in the first place.

Prayer: *LORD, this season has made so many of us overwhelmed and feeling stuck in our limited-ness. Remind us and restore us through Your limitless love and power. Amen.*

Tuesday, July 14

Read: Micah 1:1-5

Reflection:

It’s strange to think that prophetic utterances like Micah’s were actually intended as “good news.” This declaration seems more like doomsday-sign-waving than gospel, but Micah was pointing Israel toward remembering God’s *redemptive* promises for all the world. Evil did not

have free reign over the earth – wickedness, cruelty, and greed would be met one day by God’s reconciling and *just* love. The prophets were called into this vision of God’s justice and declared it boldly to the people, particularly those who held the roles of leadership.

We can and should focus on individual actions and consequences, but the far more effective and wide-reaching work may be in *systemic* change and *corporate* responsibility. All of us can live in light of God’s love, but it is *together* that we will live as the Kingdom *community* God formed us to be. And lest we should think that God’s grace means we’re “off the hook,” then we should take a closer look at Cross and Resurrection.

God chose to meet the world’s evil with God’s own heart – God faced cruelty with love, and love won over worldly death through Resurrection. It’s not “fire and brimstone,” but it’s the first sign that our evil will *not* go unanswered. God has begun judgment through Jesus Christ, and God’s justice will continue until all the world has been restored.

Prayer: *Your grace abounds, O LORD, but help us not to be on the wrong side of justice. We already stood once on the wrong side of the Cross – help us live through Resurrection. Amen.*

Wednesday, July 15

Read: Matthew 13:10-17

Reflection:

Isn’t it frustrating that Jesus’ “answers” to the disciples’ questions, just make us ask *more* questions? Why is Jesus so elusive – why doesn’t he just come on out and say what God’s Kingdom is all about and how we “get in?” Jesus pulled from the prophets often to help illustrate his point, and this text from Isaiah only reinforces that the “easy way” is *not* God’s Way. In fact, those who thought that because they were supposedly on the “inside” of the community should’ve had it easier than those “outside,” ended up even *further* from the truth.

Perhaps faith isn’t supposed to be such a clear-cut answer – maybe the questions and the searching is *part* of the process of discipleship. A disciple is a student, after all. If that might cause us to slink in our chairs, then hear again how Jesus ends his lesson: “Blessed are *your* eyes, for they see” (v. 16).

As important as it is for us to journey, Jesus makes it known that what we are encountering on the path *is* the Kingdom of God. God *wants* to be found, so much so that God actually comes *to* us. It’s definitely not easy to search, but Jesus said that was the way to God: “Everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7:8).

Prayer: *May we not grow tired of knocking, LORD, for we trust You are just as eager to open the door to us in welcome. Amen.*

Thursday, July 16

Read: Isaiah 44:1-5

Reflection:

People often get stuck in the “violence” of the Old Testament, thus skipping to the “good stuff” in the New. Yet to do so misses the *same* God who gave us Jesus. The God of the New Testament is the *same* God who *remained* with Israel, who were as rebellious and violent as any of the nations we see *today*, all the while dealing with their sin by promising restoration. To separate the Old Testament from the New is to attempt to separate grace from real life.

The world and story Jesus inhabited was the continuing testament of Israel, on behalf of all humanity, to bring about God’s promises from texts like Isaiah, offering true healing and redemption. “I will pour water on the thirsty land...I would pour my spirit upon your descendants” (v. 3). It is this resilient and faithful love we see God enacted with Israel that is later claimed by Jesus for all the world to experience.

We need to hold onto the *whole* narrative of Scripture, because in its beautiful complexity we see the complexity of the human race exhibited. And abiding in and through that complexity, is a God of grace and love. The God of the Old *and* the New Testament.

Prayer: *You are our rock, O LORD, You alone and no other. May we listen to this proclamation from the whole of Your story – Genesis through Revelation. Amen.*

Friday, July 17

Read: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Reflection:

One of the biggest objections to Christianity is its own hypocrisy: how can a tradition so intent on “policing” purity in the world at the same time have such distortion within its own community? At different points in time, the Christian faith focused on different aspects of purity – bodily, spiritually, socially, individually.

Perhaps we should start with the very first line: “in the Lord Jesus” (v. 1) – Jesus shows us that holiness is singular dedication to God and neighbor. People called Jesus a glutton because he spent all his time with the supposed *impure* – he drank wine and spent time with tax collectors! Yet he loved his neighbors and loved God absolutely.

Perhaps our purity is in our abstaining from hate and violence – holiness comes from our devotion to Christ exhibited in our care and treatment of our neighbors. We cease being “me first” kind of people and seek to be Christlike in living “other-centered.”

Prayer: *May we ground ourselves in You, O Christ, that through You we may love God purely. Amen.*

Saturday, July 18

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, July 19 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m.

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-482405> Or, use this for your own at-home worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: God of Wonder, though we may struggle to see Your work in the world or acknowledge Your Presence among us, do not cease revealing Your grace to us, especially where we least expect it.

All: Surprise us with Your love, O LORD, that we may respond to such care with gratitude and offer ourselves humbly in the work of Your Kingdom. Amen.

Reflection: Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

Whether you join for virtual worship or study on your own, consider these questions:

- The angels “ascending and descending” shows how “porous” God’s space (heaven) and our space really are – how might they make us aware of God’s ability to “touch” our lives, no matter “where” we are?
- God’s Presence is often “before” us in most places, but we must become “aware” of it – what are things we can do to grow our awareness of God?
- Does Jesus invite us to cease our “hiding” from God and live fully in the “house” of God?

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.

Daily Devotional During “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” Following the Spirit of the Living God into the world, we live in the period known as “Ordinary Time” – the growing space between Pentecost and Advent. Though we worship “apart,” may we journey “together” into the new life that Christ has brought us and the Holy Spirit continually imparts to us. May the Church grow ever deeper into the love and hope of God.

“Ordinary Time” (Growing Season)

Monday, July 20

Read: Genesis 32:3-21

Reflection:

Have you ever tried to delay the inevitable – trying to throw everything you could in front of a problem in order to put off having to become involved *yourself*? It seems as if this is what Jacob is doing in our text: he sends his entire family and company ahead of him, offering gifts and tributes to his brother, hoping that such a show of deference will sate Esau’s vengeance. In desperation, Jacob prays to God, holding in tension God’s promise of faithfulness and the reality of this coming and potentially-threatening encounter.

If you read on in this narrative, it seems as if God *doesn’t* answer Jacob’s prayer, as Jacob *does* have to face Esau himself, alone and without any further delays of encounter. However, Esau does *not* destroy Jacob as he fears, but *embraces* him. The inevitable that Jacob feared did not come to pass, but rather, the inevitable of God’s *reconciliation* did.

Forgiveness is not easy, and can be painful – but we should not try and prolong or delay its inevitability in our lives. We should trust that God will deliver us from evil, but God will also be with us *through* situations that transform us for “good.”

Prayer: *LORD, there are things that scare me, of which I try and run from and avoid with all my might...but when the time for encounter comes, may I trust that You will be there, too. Amen.*

Tuesday, July 21

Read: Psalm 75

Reflection:

The psalms continually uplift God's judgment as something to be *praised* – that with all the injustice in this world, the only true remedy is the rule of the LORD. While much of Scripture testifies to this being part of the Kingdom of God *fully* come, there is also room for God's "present" reign of justice.

For God's Name to be "near" means God's presence is *not* "far" from people's experiences or understanding. God "sees" the hurt and longing of the world, and works through the Spirit to bring transformation even now. Some of that transformation may simply be in the acts of repentance that are possible for any of us: to acknowledge our sin and turn *towards* God. Some of it may be in how *we* work for goodness and righteousness now.

We can praise God that, in spite of all our efforts, *God* will one day bring true judgment to all the earth. Every wrong, every sorrow, every shred of brokenness – God will fully and finally reconcile. Indeed, our participation in this restoration now will be made "complete" in that glorious future. The Resurrection is the foretaste of justice God unleashed upon creation.

Prayer: *I will rejoice forever, O God, because You do and will judge this world with love and justice – and the work of Your Church gets to share in that present and future work. Amen.*

Wednesday, July 22

Read: Matthew 12:15-21

Reflection:

People who experienced Jesus, believed they experienced what the prophets had foretold through their sacred scriptures. In other words, Jesus embodied the deep longing of God's people to be answered with God's presence and power. People saw their history come to life in Jesus, transforming their present with hope for the future.

Is this part of what the Church is called to do in its *own* life? When people experience the Church, that is, the people of God, living into their call to be disciples of Christ – do they encounter the *embodiment* of God's presence and power? Notice that the words Jesus affirmed through Isaiah centered on humble workings of God's justice – Jesus lived the expression of love and faithfulness that Israel believed to be God *with* them.

Can the Church point to Jesus in its awareness and interaction with the community? When people see the Church can they see in our words and deeds the *living* God – the God that Jesus offered in his own life, death and resurrection? Jesus was dedicated totally to revealing God for people to encounter – do we share that level of commitment towards revealing Christ?

Prayer: *It's not about "us," LORD, even as we talk about the Church. Remind us to point to You, in everything that we do, so people may encounter the love and wholeness Your Word has proclaimed to be found in You alone. Amen.*

Thursday, July 23

Read: Zephaniah 3:8-13

Reflection:

God is in the business of transformation – not just in the “future,” but *right now* in the daily venture of growing and changing us to *be* God’s people. What we were meant for in the beginning – to be Image-bearers of God – we squander through our rebellion of sin. Yet God has not ceased God’s commitment to us, thus our history has been one long journey of God working on us to be true to that identity and vocation.

It gives me great hope to think of myself (and all humankind) as a work “in progress.” That God would be so willing to form and shape us in the ways of love and grace is more a testament to *God’s* patience than our own. It may help us to consider faith as a journey rather than a single point on a timeline or scale. It’s okay not to be “there” when thinking about our knowledge of God or practice of discipleship, because by God’s grace, we will *grow*.

God promises restoration to a broken world: *we* are part of that restoration, because *we* are part of that brokenness. Yet God remains faithfully patient in loving us into wholeness – maybe this allows us to be more patient with each other (and ourselves) in our redemption, too.

Prayer: *On that day, we will no longer be beautiful and broken, just beautiful. Until that day, may we live by hope in You, and give grace with one another. Amen.*

Friday, July 24

Read: Acts 7:44-53

Reflection:

Stephen, a newfound convert to Jesus, is brought before the religious authorities because he will *not* cease his testimony for Christ. When he is put on trial, Stephen *continues* his testimony, utilizing the whole of biblical history to remind the authorities that *no one* “owns” God.

Part of the power (and disruption) of Jesus the Messiah was in his opening up access to God’s presence *beyond* any human authority. Jesus revealed God’s Kingdom *in* and *through* human life and invited *all* people to encounter that holy possibility. When confronted by those same authorities, Stephen reminded them of that which their own history had testified to: “The Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands” (v. 48).

Sometimes the only thing keeping us “from” God is our *own* refusal to see the Spirit of Jesus before our very eyes. May we be like Stephen and learn from our history that God is always drawing us into communion and that Jesus was the fulfillment of this love and invitation.

Prayer: *Open the eyes of my heart, LORD, I want to see what Jesus saw: You. Amen.*

Saturday, July 25

There are no texts for today. Instead, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that You are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, July 26 – Virtual Worship: 10:30 a.m.

Consider the guided meditation and join Pastor Jeffrey for a virtual Sunday worship: <https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-345477> Or, use this for your own at-home worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: LORD, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life – You are the very life that we long for.

All: May we seek in faith to discover daily the treasures of Your Kingdom among us, uncovering Your loving Presence in and through our discipleship. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 105:1-11; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Whether you join for virtual worship or study on your own, consider these questions:

- In what ways may the “seeds” of discipleship grow to lengths that surprise us with their blessing? What are the “mustard seeds” of your own journey?
- Does the blessing come from the *searching* itself or from what the search uncovers?
- Do you think Jesus is trying to reveal the accessibility of God’s Kingdom or direct our discipleship to focus on the realm of God in and through the “ordinary” of life? Does there have to be a single answer?

Lord’s Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you now and forever. Amen.