



# *meditate*

ON MY WORD

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

*Acts 2:42*



The Congregational Church of *New Canaan*

## **Meditate on My Word**

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.  
You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and  
with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words  
that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them  
to your children and talk about them when you are at home  
and when you are away, when you lie down and when you  
rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as  
an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the  
doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

*Deuteronomy 6:4–9*

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*September*

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

*Deuteronomy 6:4-9*

**SEPTEMBER 11, 2022**

## **Love Your Lord Your God**

**Read: Deuteronomy 6:4-9**

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Deuteronomy 6:4*

This ancient Mosaic text goes on to say: “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home, when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” This is the call to remember – continually – the place and presence of God in our lives. The Hebrews understood that God alone was where their primary devotion should be placed, but they also knew that devotion to God was often fleeting and forgotten, so they were supposed to keep that most sacred connection before them at all times. Jews were to literally bind that primary relationship to their bodies and onto their doorposts!

It is possible that we are devoted to a whole host of things and people other than our God. The Lord may not hold a place of primary importance in our lives. Work, family, friends, and even certain avocations might be what we fix most of our attention on and give our best effort toward. The Hebrew people were aware that good work and meaningful and committed relationships were great blessings. But those blessings were viewed as gifts from God; therefore, reverencing God before all else was critically important. Sometimes the general goodness of life can cause us to forget, or overlook, the foundational and first goodness of God. It is time to recite and remember!

### **Question for Conversation**

How can you show you love God in all you do?

*Holy God, Press these ancient words upon my twenty-first-century heart. Call them to my mind when I wake, when I am on the way to work and school, when I talk to friends and strangers. You, God of the Hebrews so long ago, are my God, the only God, from whom all blessings flow. Don't let me forget. Amen.*

**SEPTEMBER 18, 2022**

## **Lost Sheep and Coins**

**Read: Luke 15:1-10**

*'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ... 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'* Luke 15:6&9

According to Jesus, God loves finding that which is lost. God takes great joy in searching for those who have willfully or inadvertently gone astray. One biblical scholar noted playfully in a sermon that there is a theme in the three successive stories of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son: “Lost, Found, Party!” Something is lost. That which is lost is found. A party and celebration ensue! Most of us have had moments when we felt lost – by our own doing, life circumstances or just the aimless drift of life’s inertia. We had a sense that we were a long way from anything that seemed like home. A sense of place and security alluded us – in our work, or relationships, or even geographic location. Perhaps you feel lost right now. If that is the case, know that you have a God who is searching for you. You have a Lord who is willing to look high and low until you are found. You have a divine parent that from the first sight of your return home will rush to greet you, embrace you, and welcome you back to the family.

As for the good sheep, the coins that never rolled away, and the good sons and daughters who never left their parents in the lurch – what should our response be when we have not gotten ourselves lost and caused a lot of angst and anxiety for others? What do we do when we witness the joy of those who have searched and found those that are dear to them? What are we to do if we are a little resentful of the effusive welcome given to wayward sisters, prodigal brothers, and sheep that are too darn ignorant to follow their shepherd? Simple: accept the invitation and join the party! Revel in the joy of God. Remember the times when you were lost and then found. Give thanks for the goodness and joy of a God who never gives up on us, even and especially when we go astray.

### **Question for Conversation**

How would you feel if you were lost and then found?

*Lord, sometimes I feel so lost that celebration seems impossible, and even unappealing. Take my hand, lead me to the party. Teach me how to rejoice not only that I am found but that my sister is too. Let’s party, Lord. Amen.*

**SEPTEMBER 25, 2022**

## **The Rich Man and Lazarus**

**Read: Luke 16:19–31**

*But Abraham said, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.” Luke 16:25*

Our lives carry the weight of eternal significance. How we choose to live on earth makes a difference in heaven. The choices we make in our daily lives leave an impression that is remembered for all eternity. The point of the story of the rich man and Lazarus was as a rebuke of the Pharisees, who challenged Jesus at every turn and who refused to receive his teaching. But the story also reveals Jesus’ understanding of the significance of our lives and our choices.

We often think of ourselves as small, insignificant, and unable to make a lasting impression on the world. Jesus, however, challenges that notion time and time again, asserting that every choice we make, every action we engage in, every relationship we enter into matters to God. Our lives and our living will not be forgotten. The good that we do and the injury we cause will be remembered. This is an awesome and a fearsome reality. This may make us feel uncomfortable, but it is exactly how Jesus said God works. God does not forget...God remembers – forever.

### **Question for Conversation**

Who can you help today or tomorrow?

*Lord, I don't like the prospect of judgment, particularly when it has to do with eternity. I don't like thinking of you as a punishing God. However, you must not like thinking of me as a sinner who regularly overlooks the needs of people in desperate need – especially those who are right in front of me. The flip side of this, Lord, is that my own suffering, my own loss, and my own acts of generosity are not forgotten by you. You remember and you love. Those characteristics are recounted throughout the Bible. So, thank you for being mindful of my life, and help me to live up to the responsibility that comes with eternally significant living. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.*





*October*

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and do not rely on your own insight.  
In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.*

*Proverbs 3:5-6*

**OCTOBER 2, 2022**

## **Trust in the Lord**

**Read: Proverbs 3:5-6**

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge the Lord, and he will make straight your paths.  
Proverbs 3:5-6*

We often feel that we're supposed to have all the answers. We tell ourselves that we don't need directions because we should instinctively know the way. We don't ask for help because we feel we should be able to do it on our own. Lack of knowledge and the need for direction or assistance are viewed as intolerable expressions of weakness in our culture. We would rather be wrong than unsure; we would rather be lost than ask for guidance; we would rather fall on our face than reach for a helping hand. No wonder we often feel so alone and helpless. But who can we turn to in our time of need?

Speak to Jesus – refuse to go it alone. Open your heart to the Lord. Share your frustrations and anxieties and hopes with God. Allow scripture, prayer, and worship to be the guiding light in your life. Lean on God, and the Lord will make your paths straight, the load lighter, and your life more joyous.

### **Question for Conversation**

What are the ways you can trust God?

*Lord, my life can feel overwhelming at times, and at other moments, life can be absolutely grand. But underneath – deep down – you know the constant pressure I feel. Will I succeed? Will I understand? Will I know the way? Help me to lean on you. Help me to find time to talk with you. Help me to share with you that which no one else knows. Lead, and I will follow. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.*

**OCTOBER 9, 2022**

## **Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers**

**Read: Luke 17:11-19**

*Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? – Luke 17:17*

On a road in Galilee Jesus was approached by ten lepers with their skin peeling off their bodies in the most disfiguring of ways. They were people we would likely cross to the other side of the street to avoid coming in contact with. But Jesus not only received them, he also healed them. After being healed, however, only one of the lepers returned to thank Jesus and to praise him for what he had done. Jesus asked the man, “*Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?*”

We bow head, heart, and knee when we are in need, but do we remember God when we are brought through our difficulties? We would like to picture ourselves as the one faithful leper returning to thank Jesus, but more often than not, we find ourselves among the other nine. Why is that? Why do only one in ten people respond with gratefulness to the blessings of God in their lives?

### **Question for Conversation**

What is something you are thankful to God for?

*Lord, I think of me more than I think of you. I turn to you when I am in desperate need, but when all is well and good I turn away, spoiled and ungrateful. Help me to remember to return each week to give you thanks. In your name, I pray. Amen.*

**OCTOBER 16, 2022**

## **The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge**

**Read: Luke 18:1-8**

*And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?” Luke 18:6-8*

Jesus told a story about a bad judge who did a good thing as a way of expressing what we can expect from our good God. In his parable, Jesus speaks of an elderly widow who complained and complained to a judge for justice. Even though the judge was not a particularly faithful nor respectful person, because of the widow’s persistence, he responded to her cries for justice and fulfilled her request.

Jesus encourages us to bring our concerns to God. Jesus wants us to cry out to the Lord with persistence. Jesus teaches us that if an unjust judge can respond positively to continual cries for justice, we can trust that our gracious God will be swift to respond to our needs. God does not tarry long when God’s people petition for justice – for themselves or others. But Jesus went on to wonder... will God’s goodness and responsiveness to us prompt a steadfast and ensuring faith among God’s people on earth?

### **Question for Conversation**

Where do you need God’s help?

*Lord, thank you! Thank you that you never tire of hearing my cries. Thank you that like the best parent or friend, you are always ready to listen. With you as my model, I will try to listen too, to grow the faith you would want for me. Amen.*

**OCTOBER 23, 2022**

## **Being a Good Person**

**Read: Luke 18:9-14**

*The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” Luke 18:11*

I am a good person. I don't cheat on my taxes. I don't sleep around. I am not purposefully cruel to people. I do my part. When I look at the world and all the bad actors out there, I feel fairly justified in indulging in a little self-righteous indignation.

When we feel this way, we find we are the Pharisee in this story. It's not that we are completely prideful, but there is more than a little condescension in the way we look at others. We overstate our own goodness as we look with disapproval on the lives and decisions of others. But being a good person is not just about being the least offensive creature on the planet. Jesus said no one but God alone is good. Therefore, we should be honest with ourselves and confess our sins to God. We are all sinners in need of God's grace and forgiveness. That is the truth. And it is good to admit it to ourselves, and to God.

### **Question for Conversation**

What does it mean to be “good”?

*Lord, I am a sinner. There may be certain sins that I have been able to avoid, but I have not been able to steer clear of a fair amount of pride and self-importance. I look down on others. I do not know if I do so in an attempt to feel better about myself, or because I am naturally inclined to judge others in a way that I would never want to have to endure myself. Whatever the case, Lord, I am flawed. I am as broken and as sinful as the next person. Have mercy on me. Forgive me. Love me. In your name, I pray. Amen.*

**OCTOBER 30, 2022**

## **Jesus and Zacchaeus**

**Read: Luke 19:1-10**

*Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Luke 19:8*

When we hear the word ‘repent’ we might cringe. The word conjures up images of holier-than-thou preachers who seem to be saying, “*You better change, or else.*” “*You better become like us, or else.*” The story of Zacchaeus is the story of one of the most disliked men in Jericho being recognized and befriended by Jesus. Thus, in that moment, Zacchaeus became the most popular man in Jericho. Jesus said, “I must stay at your house today,” and everything began to change for Zacchaeus – one gracious act of acceptance and the little tax collector’s life began to turn around. Zacchaeus repented.

However we might choose to respond to the idea of repentance, Zacchaeus responded to the invitation to turn his life around with unbridled generosity and joy. You can sense Zacchaeus’s exuberance. “*Look! Half my possessions, Lord. I will give to the poor!*” Zacchaeus’s life had begun anew, and he leapt into it with generosity and enthusiasm. When we are lost, it is a joy to be found. When we are headed in the wrong direction, it is a blessing to have our course corrected. When we are not living as we should, it is a gift to repent.

### **Question for Conversation**

If Jesus wants to come to dinner at your house, would you invite him in and what would your evening look like?

*Lord, God, I know I am lost. I may not like someone telling me how I am headed in the wrong direction, but perhaps that is a form of defensiveness born of truth. I am not living as I should. I want to turn around. I imagine what a profound joy it would be to turn toward you. Please call me down from my perch. Invite yourself into my life so that I might be found in you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.*



# *November*

*Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*Philippians 4:5-7*

**NOVEMBER 6, 2022**

## **Rejoice in the Lord Always**

**Read: Philippians 4:5-7**

*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Philippians 4:6*

It is one of the most common refrains of the Bible: do not worry. Living worry free appears to be an identifying characteristic of those who claim to follow Christ. Of course, it is often easier said than done. But Paul indicates that if we simply share our worries, our concern, and our anxieties with God in prayer, somehow we will find ourselves free of them. Confessing our concerns to God has a way of releasing us from the bondage of anxiety. Paul goes on to say that if you speak your concerns to God with a grateful heart, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” will settle upon you and allow you to remain calm. It doesn’t say that the source of your worry will disappear, but somehow your anxiousness will be replaced with a sense of peace from God. Confessing concerns has a way creating calm.

### **Question for Conversation**

What are you worried about?

*Lord, I do feel like I share my concerns with you, but there are times I am silent. My worries so consume me that I waste time fretting instead of spending time praying. Frankly, I am not entirely sure what it means to pray thankfully in the midst of my anxiety. Do you want me to be grateful in the midst of my concerns, and if so, how do I do that? I have so much to learn . . . I need you to teach. In your name, I pray. Amen.*



**NOVEMBER 13, 2022**

## **The Widow's Mite**

**Read: Luke 21:1-4**

*“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.” Luke 21:3-4*

There are certain gifts that leave an impression. When a gift is large enough to have a significant impact on an institution or mission activity – that is a big deal. Large gifts and generous donors are without question responsible for the livelihood and financial health of so many organizations. It is true that most donor-funded endeavors succeed through some variation of the 80–20 rule – eighty percent of the financial resources come from twenty percent of the people. And any and every successful organization of fundraising effort seeks to get the eighty percent of people who could give more, but don't do so. Large gifts and generous donors make a significant and meaningful impact on the world. Everyone knows that, and Jesus did too.

But in this story of the Widow's Mite, Jesus makes another important observation. While major gifts and donors fund many organizations and efforts, there is great blessing when someone without significant resources makes a gift that represents a significant percentage of what they have. Sacrificial giving, giving in ways that require an adjustment of living, is a deeply moving act of faith. When someone gives a gift, when we give a gift that requires an adjustment in our lives and a change in our places, that is significant. Jesus was moved by the widow's gift because it cost her more than larger gifts cost wealthier donors. When you give a gift that extends beyond what might be deemed prudent or advisable, your giving inspires others. It allows you to experience the joy of giving and living sacrificially, knowing that kind of giving was noticeable to Jesus, and appreciated by God!

### **Question for Conversation**

What are you giving to Jesus today?

*How much to give Lord? I almost certainly don't give until it hurts. I give enough to be acceptable to others, and I may even be thought generous, but you say the amount is not what matters. In giving her all, the widow showed great trust, trust I find hard to have. Help me to move a bit toward the widow's example and perhaps feel the freedom that kind of trust brings. I put my faith in you. Amen.*

**NOVEMBER 20, 2022**

## **The Lord's Supper**

**Read: Luke 22:14–23**

*When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him.  
Luke 22:14*

So much of Jesus' ministry took place at a dinner table. Meals, invitations to eat, and parables about banquets heavenly and earthly were central to Jesus' teaching. While a cross is often the symbol that first catches our eye when we enter a church sanctuary, look in the center of that sacred room and you are likely to find a table – the communion table. The communion table is where we most often remember this story of Jesus' final meal with his disciples, when he used bread and wine to express how his body would be broken and his blood shed by his people for his people. The sacrament of communion, which is often a highly ritualized act in most churches, was simply a dinner. The communion table – as fancy is it might be – is primarily a dinner table. That is worth our consideration: gathering around a table for a meal is a simple and holy act that was incredibly important to our Lord. Table fellowship. Shared meals. Breaking bread with friends, and even with enemies, is central to Christian practice and faith. Jesus believed and taught that a dinner table, shared with others, perhaps set with nothing more than some bread and drink, is an expression of the kind of hospitality and ingathering that God desires for God's people. Imagine that...and perhaps imagine your Lord and Savior, eating and drinking with friends, telling stories, joking and laughing, praying, enjoying one another's company, even, perhaps especially, on the darkest and most daunting of nights.

### **Question for Conversation**

How do we remember and follow Jesus?

*Lord, remind us that whenever we eat you are present, as eager to be in relationship with us as you were with your disciples. All things are nourished in shared meals – body, soul, spirit – and refreshed for the journey ahead whatever it brings. Keep drawing us back to the table, Lord, back to the life you freely give. In your name, Amen.*

## NOVEMBER 27, 2022 – FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

### The Hour Is Coming

**Read: Matthew 24:36–44**

*Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. Matthew 24:42–44*

Jesus warns us to live the life of faith even when we don't think anyone is watching. The warning is a bit alarming, but it alerts us to one of God's deepest desires. God wants us to live as if we were in his presence even when Jesus is out of sight. It is most pleasing when the children play nice when they aren't being watched – a parent's truest pride...and God's deepest desire.

#### **Question for Conversation**

How can you wait and watch for Jesus?

*Lord, integrity is doing what is right and pleasing to you even when no one is watching me. I pray that I can develop that kind of integrity in all my life. In Jesus' name, I pray. AMEN.*

The background of the page is a colorful, textured painting. It features large, bright red flowers with green leaves, set against a light blue sky with white, wispy clouds. The style is reminiscent of a thick application of paint or a digital brushstroke effect.

# December

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*1 Corinthians 13:4-7*

**DECEMBER 4, 2022**

## **Love Is Patient**

**Read: 1 Corinthians 13**

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 1 Corinthians 13:4–7*

Paul’s “Hymn of Love” is likely the most frequently read passage of scripture in Christian weddings. Countless adoring couples have gazed into each other’s eyes as this beautiful love poem has been read to them and for them. Enraptured in the moment, and confident that their love will last, most brides and grooms never fully hear the demands of love, believing that affection comes easily to those who are truly soul mates.

However, if love is indeed patient and kind, never insisting on its own way, then that means love is work. And it takes work not to be irritable or resentful of your partner when they don’t seem to be pulling their weight. It takes work to believe and hope that you can make it as a couple, when other couples begin splitting up. It takes work to endure the demands of life with someone who does not always see things the way you see them. Love isn’t simply a pretty collection of words spoken on a wedding day – love is a lifetime work that is worth all the effort needed to nurture and sustain it.

### **Question for Conversation**

How do you define or describe love?

*Lord, I want love to be easy...and perhaps you do too. I have no doubt that it is a chore to love me, and I am so grateful that you do. Help me to be similarly committed to the work of love that my relationships require. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.*

**DECEMBER 11, 2022**

## **Mary's Song**

**Read: Luke 1:46–56**

*“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.” Luke 1:46–48*

Mary's utterance of praise is a song of abounding and unbridled joy. Thanks to Elizabeth's confirmation that Mary's pregnancy is a gift from God, Mary rejoices. God had drawn close, and the encounter between Mary and the Lord had filled her with an uncontainable sense of blessings.

There are times when it feels as if our lives have been visited, or had a blessedly close brush, with the divine. We were convinced that a most fervent prayer had been answered. Someone unexpectedly entered our lives with angelic timing and met a pressing need. Or a word was offered to us in form that seemed as if it could be the very voice of God speaking directly to our life situation. There are moments – perhaps only a few in a lifetime – when it feels as if heaven and earth draw close enough for the Lord to sweep into our lives and set all things right. There is such joy in those moments. But those moments are also fleeting. So, like Mary, when we experience the blessings of God, we might as well sing for all we are worth a song of boundless praise!

### **Question for Conversation**

When you have exciting news to share, whom do you tell and why?

*Holy God, many would look on my life and call me blessed and so I am. I have trials but in so many ways I am blessed, and I sing your praises and give thanks for my life, my family, my church family and friends and all you will put in my path. Mary's pregnancy could not have been easy, but she saw the gift in it and rejoiced and gave thanks. It feels good to rejoice! Keep me ever grateful for the abundant goodness that flows from you. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

**DECEMBER 18, 2022**

## **Angel Visits Mary**

**Read: Matthew 1:18-25**

*An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Matthew 1:20*

It is one of the most frequently offered commands in the Bible, “*Do not be afraid.*” “*Do not worry.*” “*Fear not!*” It is as if God is continually speaking to children saying, “*Everything will be all right, just trust me.*” But we are creatures prone to worry and mistrust. And yet, we have uttered the same words to our own children countless times. When a child runs to us with tears in her eyes having skinned her knee, when our teenager experiences his first relational breakup, when the first grandparent dies – without a moment of hesitation we tell our children, “*It’s all right, everything will be all right, trust me.*” It is as if deep down at the very core of our being we understand and believe the deep truth God speaks to us throughout the Bible. We don’t know the why or how of it, but we can’t shake this feeling that in the end, everything will be all right. God can be trusted. We have nothing to fear.

### **Question for Conversation**

Do you trust God?

*Lord, I try not to show it to others, but I am a deeply fearful person. I am scared by what I know, and by that which remains unknown to me. The world you created seems a dangerous and uncertain place. Left on my own, I do not know that everything will be all right. But you do not wish me to live alone, you desire my life to be yoked to yours so that I can rest in the trust that you are in charge when I am not...and I can trust that with you all things will be well. Help me, please. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.*

**DECEMBER 25, 2022**

## **The Word Becomes Flesh**

**Read: John 1:1–14**

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. John 1:5*

Artists are wonderfully obsessed with light. They try to understand it, capture it, and perhaps even manipulate it for their work. One of the observations artists often make about the rays that illuminate their craft is that the brightest light always casts the darkest shadows. Brilliant light has an inky black shadow side to it. This turns out to be true for light and for life itself. The shiniest of stars – human and divine – have a way of flaming out and disappearing in the night sky or the limelight of our world. Too many times, we have seen darkness engulf something or someone who was so bright and promising.

This was one of the ways Jesus was different. Jesus entered a dark and dangerous world, and His divine spark allowed life to be more faithfully navigated. Jesus' teaching and preaching were like a candle lit to illuminate the dark corners of our world and our lives. And even the attempt to extinguish Jesus' life through crucifixion could not overcome his eternal luminance. There are times when our lives feel dark and foreboding. In dark moments and daunting circumstances, remember our Lord and Savior, the Light of the World, who shines so that the darkest shadows, even the Valley of the Shadow of death, will not overtake us.

### **Question for Conversation**

Are you afraid of the dark? Why or why not?

*Light an eternal flame in me oh Lord, that I might ever see your path, that your way is always illuminated even when life is dark. Shine in each of us this day and always, so that together we live in your light and shine it brightly into the future. With grateful hearts we pray in your name, Amen.*



The background of the page is a textured, painterly illustration. It features a dense field of flowers, primarily in shades of pale yellow and light pink, with some darker pink and orange tones. The flowers have dark brown or black centers. Interspersed among the flowers are green, feathery or fern-like leaves. The overall background color is a light, airy blue, suggesting a sky or a bright, open space. The style is reminiscent of a watercolor or soft oil painting, with visible brushstrokes and a soft, blended quality.

# January

*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

*Ephesians 4:31-32*

**JANUARY 1, 2023**

## **Be Kind**

**Read: Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2**

*Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Ephesians 4:26b*

Paul gives plenty of relational advice in this passage of scripture, and there is at least one note of instruction that is worth living each and every day of our lives. Don't go to sleep angry. Anger has a way of festering when the world goes dark, and we are left tossing and turning through the night, getting ever more worked up about contentious relationships and difficult encounters. What a blessing it would be to marriages if couples would commit to staying awake and working through the issues that plague them rather than going to bed on edge with one another. How much more soundly we would sleep if we made up with those with whom we are at odds! As the sun sets, we might want to remember Paul's admonition and make tracks to people who have angered us and who we have angered. Make amends, make reparations – make love – before you choose to end the day angry.

### **Question for Conversation**

What does kindness mean to you?

*Lord God, sometimes I think it would be better to end the day not giving up any ground in the arguments and disagreements I find myself embroiled in. Somehow I believe going to bed angry is preferable to making amends and sacrificing my positions. However, when the sun sets and my rage is still hot...I find I am lost already. Help me to swallow my pride – or better yet, allow my heart to enlarge so that empathy and not anger is the way I end my days. In your name, I pray. Amen.*

**JANUARY 8, 2023**

## **The Wise Men**

**Read: Matthew 2:1-12**

*Then Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." Matthew 2:8*

According to this story, the wise men found Jesus, and Herod did not. Those who seek, find. Those who stand comfortably at a distance do not. The wise men left everything behind and followed a star, they held nothing back in their pursuit of a newborn king, and their investment was rewarded. Herod, who had evil intent, was interested in the Christ child, but unwilling to take the time to hunt for Jesus himself. We view this as good news, knowing that Herod's interest was fueled by a desire to kill the infant. However, if Herod, like the Magi, had searched diligently for the child, perhaps he too would have returned home by a different road...his course forever altered.

### **Question for Conversation**

Are you merely curious about Jesus, or do you desire to find him?

*Lord, often my faith is often a mere curiosity with you that I try to satisfy only when I feel I have the time to spare. I rarely go all-in in an attempt to reach out for you. Perhaps that is why my life of faith often feels barren and unsatisfied. Show me a star this year, and give me the resolve to follow it until I find you. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.*

**JANUARY 15, 2023**

## **Lamb of God**

**Read: John 1:29–42**

*The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” John 1:29*

It was the custom of Jesus’ day, and the practice of the Hebrew faith for generations before Jesus, to offer an unblemished lamb at the Temple for the forgiveness of sins. The gift of a healthy dove, lamb, or ox to the Temple was a form of penance to God that allowed for the forgiveness of sin. The sins of an individual, or a family, or even a community were ritually passed from the offending party to parties, to the animal, and thus sin was forgiven and guilt was commuted.

We are told that John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, saw the Holy Spirit of God powerfully present in Jesus’ life, and John proclaimed that Jesus was the lamb offered to God that would allow for people to be forgiven for all their sins. Humankind is in bondage to sin – we just cannot break free on our own – and John testified that Jesus is the one with the power to release us. It has forever since been a core Christian belief, that when we confess our sins before God and one another, through the gift of Jesus, we are forgiven. We confess. We are forgiven. And we move on. Thanks to Jesus!

### **Question for Conversation**

What is a sin, misdeed, or mistake you have made that you would like to have forgiven?

*Pray for forgiveness now, trust that forgiveness has been granted thanks to Jesus’ self-sacrificing love for you, and move on.*

**JANUARY 22, 2023**

## **Division in the Church**

**Read: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18**

*Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. 1 Corinthians 1:10*

Few things are as important to God as unity between people. The human family getting along with one another and coming together is God's greatest desire. So much of Jesus' ministry, through which God's designs were revealed to us, was about breaking down barriers between people and drawing people together. Reconciliation, forgiveness, and hospitality, all the essential elements that allow community to flourish and people to be knit more closely together, were hallmarks of Jesus' ministry and teaching.

In the early church, it did not take long for unity among people to be sorely tested. While Jesus certainly said that "where two or three are together in my name, I am there among them" it also turns out to be true that when two or three people gather, there often is a healthy difference of opinion on any number of matters. It turns out that there were not only divisions but outright factions in the Corinthian church that the Apostle Paul sought to serve and guide. Paul knew, as all Christian people past and present should, that the Spirit of Jesus Christ is a Spirit of unity. If people are bound together in love and generosity, the Spirit of Jesus is alive and well. If discord and acrimony are the norm, the Spirit Jesus desired to share with his churches must be absent.

We live in an age when unity and charity are in short supply. Our world needs people who are deeply committed to unifying our human family. God needs Christian people to rise up and demonstrate that it is not only possible to come together in mind and spirit; it is absolutely essential.

### **Question for Conversation**

How can you disagree with someone and still love them?

*Lord, it's so hard sometimes to work together. We differ on politics, ownership, what it means to be faithful, and even styles of communication. How are we to live? Only your spirit among us can bring about unity in all our diversity. We pray for that. Let your spirit be our guide to seeing each other as you would, a family to love and maintain. In your name we pray, Amen*

**JANUARY 29, 2023**

## **The Beatitudes**

**Read: Matthew 5:1-12**

*Then Jesus began to speak, and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:2-3*

The message of the Beatitudes is as beautiful as it is simple. Jesus tells us that what God values and what we tend to value are often entirely different. We seek popularity, prosperity, prestige, and political power. We envy and admire people who possess such things. We want them for ourselves. Jesus lets us know that God couldn't care less about our high-profile desires. God values those who are poor and meek and hungry. God celebrates the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. God blesses those our world hardly notices. And, God's blessing lasts a whole lot longer than the world's admiration!

### **Question for Conversation**

Have you ever been left out or overlooked?

*Lord, you love the least – those people who are of little interest to us – the poor, the lowly, and the unremarkable. You remind us that those we often choose last are first in line for your kingdom. The people we think of as broken, you call beloved and blessed. Help me to learn to value what you value, to love as you love, to see as you see...and respond accordingly. In your name, I pray. Amen.*

A painting of a forest scene. In the foreground, a path of light-colored earth or sand leads from the bottom center towards the middle ground. The path is flanked by a dense line of trees with dark brown trunks and lush green foliage. The trees are rendered with visible brushstrokes, giving the scene a textured, painterly quality. In the background, a body of water is visible, reflecting the sky and the surrounding greenery. The overall color palette is dominated by greens, browns, and blues, with a soft, naturalistic lighting.

*February*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*Romans 8:37-39*

**FEBRUARY 5, 2023**

## **Nothing Separates Us From God**

**Read: Romans 8:37-39**

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Romans 8:35*

Paul eloquently asserted that there is no external power on earth that can sever us from God's love as revealed to us through Jesus Christ. Paul believed that nothing in life or death, not the powers and principalities of the world or physical distance or depth can drive a wedge between ourselves and the God who has loved us since before we were born.

The one point of separation that Paul does not mention in his litany of obstacles is ourselves. It may be true that no external force can get in the way of God's love for us, but God has allowed us the freedom to ignore or refuse that divine love. We can get in the way. We can separate ourselves from God. We can drive a wedge into that relationship. God's love abounds, but we always have the ability to deflect it.

### **Question for Conversation**

How might you get in the way of God's love for you?

*Lord, you have given me the power and freedom to reject or accept your love. I assume that is because love that is coerced is not real. That means the most significant barrier to our relationship is my unwillingness to receive you and your love into my life. I don't want to refuse...but perhaps I just don't know how to accept what you offer. Help me to receive your love so that I can live in it and share it with others. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.*



**FEBRUARY 12, 2023**

## **The Sermon on the Mount**

**Read: Matthew 5:21–37**

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;” ... “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Matthew 5:43–44*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made six different statements that began *“You have heard it said,”* followed by his own teaching that began *“But I say to you.”* Jesus took the old laws and judgments and held his followers to a much higher standard. In this passage of scripture, Jesus commanded his followers to confront the world and those in it with overflowing generosity, self-sacrifice, and heartfelt care. We are called to tend to the world and our relationships as God does, sending blessings and serving as a blessing to the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous, the faithful and the faithless alike. We are to give better than we get from others, because we have received far better than we deserve from God. That was the way of Jesus, and Jesus preached that it would become our way too.

### **Question for Conversation**

What makes you angry? Why?

*Lord, you call us to perfection – you call us to live like you...and we are not sure that is possible for us. When struck we feel empowered to fight back, when abused we get abusive, and when hurt we quickly respond in ways that allow us to collect a lot of eyes and teeth. It's not that we don't know any other way to live, it's just that we are fearful that if we do as you say, we will pay a cost too heavy to bear. You tell us to be perfect like God is perfect...and that bar seems far too high for us to clear. What are we to do? Help us with a first step. Help us to set an example of generosity that we know our world needs, even if we are reluctant to offer it. In your name, we pray. Amen.*

**FEBRUARY 19, 2023**

## **The Transfiguration**

**Read: Matthew 17:1-7**

*Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” Matthew 17:4-5*

Jesus took three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, up a mountain by themselves. During their ascent, Jesus was transfigured before them. Transfiguration is simply a fancy way of saying Jesus’ divinity was revealed for those three disciples to witness. Jesus became luminescent, and Moses and Elijah appeared and began speaking with Jesus.

Watching this, Peter, James, and John were awestruck. Not only was Jesus aglow with divine light, two of the most important luminaries of their faith miraculously appeared on the mountainside. Not knowing exactly what to do or say, Peter, as often was the case, chose to say and suggest doing something wholly inappropriate. Instead of just taking in the sacredness of the moment, Peter decided to interrupt the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah with the suggestion that the three disciples start a construction project. What followed was a rebuke of Peter by God. Peter interrupted Jesus, and then God interrupted Peter, essentially saying: “*Stop speaking, and listen!*”

### **Question for Conversation**

If God were to speak to you, what might God say?

*Holy Lord and God, Why do I forget I have ears and use only my mouth? Why do I lunge forward when you are right here right now? Not my plan, Lord, but your presence is what we need. Help me to be still and hear your voice and know you are God and that this moment is holy. Amen.*

**FEBRUARY 26, 2023**

## **The Temptation of Jesus**

**Read: Matthew 4:1-11**

*Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Matthew 4:2-3*

The tempter appeared only after Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, which means that the tempter might have chosen a time of particular weakness for Jesus. Can you imagine not eating for more than a month, only to be tempted by food? However, after forty days of fasting, Jesus wasn't weak...he was strong. Think of the alcoholic who has been sober for forty days – day forty-one is much easier than day one. The tempter should have showed up when Jesus first entered the wilderness.

When we get serious about dealing with our addictions, our bad habits, and those private sins that are known only to us, we don't get weaker as the days are added to our recovery – we get stronger. We are able to endure even more temptation than when we began. What is difficult for us on day one is more manageable by day forty.

### **Question for Conversation**

What temptation do you need to confront in your life for the next forty days?

*Lord God, it almost sounds like an infomercial for a weight loss program – lose forty pounds in forty days. But it is true that the more committed we are, the longer we face our temptations, the less tempting they become. Push me to face the temptations that rule my life so that I can turn leadership of my life over to you. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.*



# March

*"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

*Micah 6:6-8*

**MARCH 5, 2023**

## **What Does The Lord Require of You?**

**Read: Micah 6:1-8**

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?  
Micah 6:8*

What does God require of us? The answer for much of Hebrew history was sacrifice – notably, animal sacrifice. Animals were sacrificed as a way to atone for the people’s sins, as a gift of gratitude for God’s provision, or as a way to request God’s favor. People also offered the produce from their fields, the first fruits of their labor, as well as financial contributions, to support the running of the temple. There was even the tradition of offering, or dedicating, firstborn children to the Lord as a way to express gratitude for all that God had done.

However, according to many passages in the Bible, God does not desire gifts of calves or rams or rivers of oil. The best offering we can make to God is to treat others well. We can deal justly with our neighbors. We can offer kindness to strangers. We can walk humbly in the crowd – not trying set ourselves above others. Like so many parents of children, God essentially says, “If you want to do something for me, treat each other better!” God’s requirement is that we take care of each other.

### **Question for Conversation**

How can you show love to others?

*Lord, for some reason I am more willing to give you “stuff” than I am to offer care to those around me. But what you really want from me is improved treatment of others. You have made this request in many different ways in the Bible. If I want to demonstrate my love for you, all I need to do is love my neighbor. What do you require of me? Be just, kind, and humble in my dealings with other people. You ask that I treat those around me as I would like to be treated...and it will be as if that gift has been presented directly to you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.*

**MARCH 12, 2023**

## **Nicodemus**

**Read: John 3:1–10**

*Jesus answered Nicodemus, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” John 3:10*

Jesus was not a pastoral caregiver or a counselor. Jesus was not in the business of carefully listening and gently responding to the needs and questions of those who approached him. Jesus could be harsh, unflinching, and challenging. When old Nicodemus approached Jesus under the cover of darkness in order to find out more about the fiery Galilean prophet, Jesus berated him. “*You need to be reborn. You need to be moved by the Spirit. You don’t understand anything!*”

One thing we need to understand about Jesus is that he does not intend to help us on our way to a more comfortable and successful life. Jesus isn’t interested in incremental steps toward holiness and blessing. Jesus entered the world intent on radical change. People needed to repent of their sins. People needed to start aiming their lives in the right direction no matter the cost. People needed to face up to their flaws and failed understandings and make major changes to their lives. Jesus challenged people, because Jesus wanted to change people.

### **Question for Conversation**

How might Jesus challenge you to follow his ways? Name one thing you can do.

*Lord, I would like you to deal gently and lovingly with me. I do not want your harsh criticism anymore than I want anyone else’s. Perhaps that is why my life always seems the same. Day in and day out, I make the same mistakes, travel the same sinful paths, and settle for the same kind of unremarkable living I always do. Challenge me, change me, and grant me the courage to welcome your correction. In your name, I pray. Amen.*

**MARCH 19, 2023**

## **The Raising of Lazarus**

**Read: John 11:1–44**

*Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. John 11:5–6*

Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, but, according to this story, Jesus intentionally refrained from going to Lazarus's bedside when he was gravely ill. Jesus told the disciples that Lazarus's condition was to be used for God's glory. Apparently, Lazarus's death was intended as a staged display of God's power. Lazarus would die, Jesus would raise him from the dead, and God would be glorified – all according to plan!

Whatever we make of this story, there is a terrible truth we need to grapple with. Our timetables and God's timetable are different. What we want and how God responds to those desires can be wildly divergent. We don't control Jesus; Jesus – *and God* – do as they please. However, the result of divine action is always good. We cannot know when God's Spirit will move in our lives, but we can trust that when that Spirit does move we will experience blessing beyond our wildest dreams. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus had to endure delay and death, but in the end, all three experienced resurrection.

### **Question for Conversation**

What is the promise of Easter? What difference could that make in your life?

*Lord God, you will do what you will do, when you want to do it. You are in charge, I am not. My job is to try to be patient, trusting that when you do move, the dead will be raised, hope will be restored, and my sadness will be replaced with joy. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.*

**MARCH 26, 2023**

## **Jesus Washing the Disciples' Feet**

**Read: John 13:1–20**

*So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. John 13:14–15*

We are repulsed at the thought of someone having to wash us. It might be the single greatest fear of aging – that we would not be able to care for or clean ourselves! It is through this most intimate and personal act of washing that Jesus chooses to demonstrate how we are to care for one another. We are to get down on our hands and knees to help people get clean. This means that as followers of Jesus no task is beneath us when it comes to tending to others. We wouldn't have believed it unless we had seen it for ourselves – Jesus, Lord and Savior, washing the dirt off of sweaty, smelly, and misshapen feet. Leading by example, Jesus tells us to take care of people according to his example. Get down on our hands and knees, get up close and intimate with others, and do whatever we can to help people out.

### **Question for Conversation**

How can you show people you truly care for them?

*Dear Lord, truthfully, the only feet I willingly wash are my own. The thought of washing someone's feet is uncomfortable to me because it is such a personal, intimate, and culturally foreign act. But you, Lord, want me to get that close to people. You want me never to flinch at an opportunity to care for others. You want me to follow your example. You have served us all, and you call us to do the same. Help me to humble myself so that kneeling before others is a natural act for me. In your name, I pray. Amen.*



*April*



*"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord - the King of Israel!"*

*John 12:13b*

**APRIL 2, 2023**

## **Triumphant Entry**

**Read: John 12:12-19**

*“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!” John 12:13b*

The people in the region of Judea had heard that Lazarus, who had been dead and entombed, had been restored to life by Jesus. This was an extraordinary event, and as the people in and around Jerusalem heard about Jesus’ impending arrival, they went out to see this miracle worker. But something more than curiosity swelled within the crowd. Shouts of “Hosanna!” filled the air. “Hosanna” is not some first-century cheer like “Hip, Hip, Hurray!” “Hosanna” means “Save us, we pray.” The people who thronged around, who had heard he had resurrected Lazarus from the dead, hoped that Jesus could help and heal them as well. If Jesus was able to free Lazarus from death, perhaps Jesus could free the Hebrew people from bondage. Perhaps Jesus was the promised Messiah who would free the Jews from Roman rule and restore them as God’s chosen and blessed people.

Each of us can feel bound by something or someone. Relationships that have soured, work which has become oppressive, and even the state of our mental or physical health can become frustratingly limiting. The healing we seek and the freedom we long for can begin with a cry to Jesus – “Hosanna.” Wellness can begin with a request for Jesus to save us. Acknowledgment of whatever issue or situation that we struggle with is the first step toward healing. Jesus might not have provided the kind of liberation the Hebrew people were hoping for – a military ruler to take back their country from the Romans. But Jesus provided them a way toward abundant life in the midst of oppression, and a promise of eternal life to come. Miracle of miracles turns out to be that shouts of “Hosanna,” turned into calls to “Crucify,” which have been drowned out over the centuries by Easter professions that, “He is risen, He is risen indeed!”

### **Question for Conversation**

What does ‘Hosanna’ mean? What does ‘Alleluia’ mean? And ‘Amen’?

*Hosanna Lord, hosanna. Save us, all of us. Our attempts to save ourselves and each other often seem to fail. Maybe it’s how we measure success. Some would have called you a failure, a mission cut short by your death. Yet reignited in your resurrection that mission lives today, with saving power. Hosanna, Lord, hallelujah, Lord, hallelujah. Amen.*

**APRIL 9, 2023**

## **Mary at the Empty Tomb**

**Read: John 20:11–18**

*Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. John 20:14b*

We are in the hunt to know and understand how the world was created. We want to know upon what foundation the world is built. We want to know how the world works and how it runs. We look deep into the created order – into the cosmic and subatomic universe. We look into a world of neutrinos that move faster than light and unwitnessed matter that we call “dark.” We desperately want to unravel the mystery of life in this world, never fully wanting to consider that the mystery has already been revealed to us.

The veil of mystery momentarily parted when Mary encountered – or was encountered by – Jesus at the tomb on Easter morning. Mary didn’t recognize all that had taken place at first. She thought Jesus was the gardener, and she thought a body had gone missing, because up until that point she had no evidence on which to base a belief in the resurrection of the dead. However, the veil of this life was parted for a moment in time, and what was revealed was *eternity* – eternal love, eternal life, and eternal relationships.

### **Question for Conversation**

Do you believe in miracles?

*Dear Lord, I want to believe in you. I want to believe that life and love and relationships are eternal. I want to believe that when I come to my end, life is just beginning for me. But I don’t really know. And I want to know. We all want to know. We don’t like mysteries where our lives and our future hang in the balance. However, mystery is what you offer us. You offer us a glimpse of a gardener, who underneath it all, turns out to be a Savior. In your name, I pray. Amen.*

**APRIL 16, 2023**

## **Jesus and Peter**

**Read: John 21**

*“Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” . . . After this he said to him, “Follow me.” John 21:18–19*

Peter’s story ends much like it began. Peter had been a fisherman, an outspoken disciple of Jesus Christ, and an absolute failure when he denied ever knowing his teacher. The specter of the cross seemed to bring out the worst in all the disciples as they abandoned Jesus, leaving him to face his adversaries on his own. However, Peter stands alone as the disciple who boastfully promised never to leave Jesus’ side, only to entirely disavow Jesus when the going got too rough.

Most people are familiar with this story of profound forgiveness. Jesus allowed Peter a threefold opportunity to profess his love for Jesus, thus undoing the guilt and shame of Peter’s threefold denial. What we might fail to notice is that this was also a moment of new beginning. The very last command Jesus issued to Peter in this Gospel was also the very first command extended to Jesus’ disciples: *“Follow me.”* The end of this Gospel points back to the very beginning. Not only does Jesus forgive Peter, he also says, *“Okay Peter, let’s try this all over again...Start by following me.”* What a joy it is to know that our Lord doesn’t only allow us to retake the tests we have failed, but Jesus is willing to review the entire course of study – from the very first lesson!

### **Question for Conversation**

How many times can Jesus forgive us? Why?

*Dear Lord, thank you for your willingness to forgive us when we fail, and for allowing us to start all over again with the reassurance that you are still in the lead. In your name, I pray. Amen.*

**APRIL 23, 2023**

## **Call of Abram**

**Read: Genesis 11:27–12:5**

*Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” Genesis 12:1*

Many years earlier, Terah, Abraham’s father, had felt drawn to uproot his family from their home in Ur to travel to the promising land of Canaan. However, and for reasons unknown to us, Terah aborted the journey when he arrived in the town of Haran. Perhaps the journey had already taken too much of a toll on his family. Perhaps the kids complaining in the back of the caravan became too much for him. Or, it is entirely possible that Haran looked promising enough. Why risk going all the way to Canaan when it might not live up to Terah’s expectations? So Terah settled in Haran with his family, and his journey ended.

However, for Abraham, the journey was just about to begin. In the deep of the night, or from the depths of his heart – or from wherever it is that God is able to catch our attention – God began to call to Abram. *“Go. Leave Haran behind. Follow me to Canaan... You will be the father of many children. You will be blessed. And your life and legacy will be a blessing for the entire world.”* Terah settled for less than what God called him to do and be, and he became no more than a footnote to history. Abraham traveled to Canaan and became the father of three great faith traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Like Terah, we will always be tempted to settle for less than God hopes for us. But thankfully, God has a way of shaking things up and presenting us with opportunities that can provide us with more than we ever dreamed. God has a way of drawing us into an adventure of faith where settlers become travelers who are blessed in the journey. All we need is a willingness to risk our present situation in order to embrace the promise of a future that God envisions for us.

### **Question for Conversation**

How might you have settled for less than God desires for you?

*Lord, I have settling tendencies. Fill me with the vision and courage of a traveler. Help me to break from my present situation to take hold of the future you call me into. In your name, I pray. Amen.*

**APRIL 30, 2023**

## **Sign of the Covenant**

**Read: Genesis 17:1–27**

*“You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” Genesis 17:11*

What a strange and painful ritual to observe as a sign of a promise from God! Abraham and all the men in his family, and all the men in his company, had to be circumcised as a sign that they were in a relationship with the Lord. After circumcision, there was no mistaking – one was a Jew, a follower of Yahweh, a member of God’s chosen people. Once circumcised, it was a form of identification that could not be undone. One was marked for life.

The truth of circumcision is that somehow our faith and our relationship with God should show. As people of faith, our faith should be evidenced in our lives, in our relationships, in our business dealings, and perhaps even in our bodies somehow. Jesus said to his followers, *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* Simply put, our faith should show.

### **Question for Conversation**

How can people recognize your faith in your daily living?

*Lord, when people look at me, they should be able to tell that I follow you, that I love you, and that my life is offered to you. Help me to circumcise the whole of my life so that when people see me, they somehow catch a glimpse of you. In your name, I pray. Amen.*



*May*

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.*

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-2*

**MAY 7, 2023**

## **A Time for Everything**

**Read: Ecclesiastes 3:1–8**

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted. Ecclesiastes 3:1–2*

Time is possibly the greatest gift we have been given. There is a fullness to time that allows for every experience under heaven to take place. Some of those experiences will be euphoric, others will be banal, and still others will be painfully difficult. Unfortunately, we often wish away time. We look out at our daily task, or at a particularly busy stretch of time, and we say, “*If I can just get through this next week, if I can just get through this upcoming project or assignment, if I can just get through the holidays!*” Then what? Do we believe we will find ourselves in a more pleasant moment in time? Perhaps. But the next challenge will present itself to us soon enough, and we will once again be confronted with a choice: we can choose yet again to wish ourselves through the moment, or we can embrace the moment for the gift that it is. Time is a gift to be savored, not an experience to be endured – either you make the most of it or you lose it.

### **Question for Conversation**

How much time have you wasted away in your life? Why?

*Lord, I often treat the time I have been given as a chore I need to get through. Life is work – hard work at times. But time is also a gift filled with enough richness and complexity to provide a lifetime worth of discovery. Help me to receive the time I have been allotted for the gift that it is. In your name, I pray. Amen.*



**MAY 14, 2023**

## **Promise of a Son**

**Read: Genesis 18:1-15**

*Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son. And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.”  
Gen. 18:10*

One of the great challenges we face as people of faith is that we are finite creatures striving to be in relationship with an infinite God. When the finite and the infinite connect, perspectives clash and frustration can ensue. As human beings we are limited by our senses, our life experiences, and our understanding of the created order. We believe we know what is, and what is not, possible for us in life. But God has a vastly superior vision – infinite sight and insight. God can envision and imagine for us that which we can’t even begin to dream for ourselves. That reality – the disconnect, or disparity of prospective – can be frustrating for us, and likely agitating to God. We struggle to believe, and God struggles with our lack of trust.

In the story of Sarah and Abraham and the promise of a son, Abraham is told by Lord that Sarah will conceive and bear a son, and overhearing this promise, Sarah laughs the prophet off. As an elder couple, Abraham and Sarah were well aware of their physical limitations. They knew what was possible and that which was impossible. Sensing Sarah’s disbelief the Lord exclaims “*Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?*” Or phrased not as a question, but as a statement generations later when the Angel Gabriel told Mary of her own miraculous conception – “Nothing is impossible for God.” In both cases, God was able to produce an outcome beyond all human understanding or expectation. The message is clear throughout the Bible, when finite creatures seek to encounter, or are encountered by the Living God, we should trust that God can and will do more that we could ever ask or imagine.

### **Question for Conversation**

What are your wildest dreams?

*Lord, forgive my lack of imagination. Sad would be the world depending on any one of us alone for vision. I want to learn to trust you with the most that I cannot conceive. I want to be your partner. Open my mind and heart to believe and receive. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

**MAY 21, 2023**

## **Sarah and Hagar**

**Read: Genesis 16:1-15; 21:1-21**

*Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” Genesis 21:9-10*

Sarah and Hagar had behaved badly toward one another – they had history – and Sarah had held a grudge. That grudge ended in Abraham banishing his son Ishmael, and his mother Hagar, into the wilderness with nothing more than enough bread and water for a single day. The women’s animosity toward each other – while not entirely rational – was completely understandable. Before Sarah had given birth to Isaac, she had been jealous of Hagar’s fertility. When Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, she felt proud that she could accomplish something her mistress could not do for Abraham. A corrosive combination of insecurity and jealousy devolved into a careless and heartless outcome.

Of all the bad actors in this story, Abraham must be held most accountable. As the women lost their cool and their better judgment, Abraham stood by and did nothing. He watched two women mistreat one another on his account, and he failed to intervene. He was a bystander who was willing to watch, but unwilling to get involved. When people lose their better judgment – which happens to us all – those standing by must intervene for the good of all involved. Blessed are the peacemakers, not the bystanders.

### **Question for Conversation**

What situation do you need to address so that relationships are not permanently damaged?

*Lord, I don't like conflict and I don't like getting involved in other people's business. I have heard myself and others say that more times than I can remember. Perhaps it is a cop-out, a way to avoid the guilt of standing idly by while people injure themselves and others. Give me the courage to step up and into conflict when I can be a voice and presence for peace. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.*

**MAY 28, 2023**

## **Sacrifice of Isaac**

**Read: Genesis 22:1-19**

*After these things God tested Abraham. ... God said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering." Genesis 22:1a & 2*

Abraham had two sons. His first son, Ishmael, birthed by Sarah's servant Hagar, was sent away into the wilderness with Hagar because of jealousy within Abraham's household. Therefore, the sacrifice of Isaac represented the second time Abraham would lose a son. Whatever we make of God testing Abraham's faithfulness, the prospect of losing a child makes a parent's blood run cold. Our children are our most precious possessions, and we treat them as such. We don't ever want to lose them...even when they frustrate us.

However, *our* children are not our possessions, they are *God's*, and inevitably we have to turn our children over to that divine relationship. Like all things in life, we need to let go of that which is dear to us...because it is not ours. We are finite beings who are merely stewards in this life, managing the resources and relationships entrusted to our care. Whether it is handing over a set of car keys to our sixteen-year-old, dropping a newly minted college freshman off at their dorm room, or watching as a son or daughter takes the hand of another in marriage...we need to let go. We need to let go and trust that the God who has been a faithful provider for us will be so for those we love and desire to hold on to. As the religious cliché goes: Let go, let God.

### **Question for Conversation**

What do you feel you need most right now?

*Lord, I cannot imagine sacrificing my children, and yet, in a way that is exactly what we do. We tend to their needs for only a while, then offer them back to you, trusting that you will take care of them more completely than we ever could. Please strengthen that trust when it is not as durable as it could be. I pray this in the name of a Son, offered to the world by a Father, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*



*June*

*Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these....By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

*Galatians 5:19-21a, 22-23*

**JUNE 4, 2023**

## **Fruit of the Spirit**

**Read: Galatians 5:16–26**

*Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. ...By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Galatians 5:19–21a, 22–23*

When the choice is as black and white as the type on this page, who would choose the works of the flesh? We don't dream of being people who live in dissension and careless self-indulgence. We don't want to be people like that. When we read the list of the fruits of the Spirit, the spirit within us really does groan and ache to live in such ways. If we could just choose between these two lists and stick with that choice once and for all, all would be well!

But that is not what life is like. You want to stay faithful to your spouse, but then someone attractive comes into view. You don't want to have another argument with your child, but then they make the same darn mistake yet again. You don't want to be jealous and envious, but then you see the life someone else is living and you can't help feeling a bit covetous. On paper we would not choose the desires of the flesh, but we do not live on paper – we live in a world full of temptation and sin. So, how do we live by the Spirit and not be entirely dominated by the flesh? Keep the words of the Spirit before us at all times, pray to always live by them, and trust that God's Spirit within us is stronger than our desire to gratify our flesh.

### **Question for Conversation**

Which fruit of the Spirit is the easiest for you? Which is the most difficult?

*Lord, I would not want to be known as a jealous or envious person. I don't want to be a drunk or divisive or difficult person. I don't want to live out of control. I long to be known as generous, kind, and thoughtful. But the things I want and the things I do are so often in conflict with one another. It is as if I am two entirely different people – the person I am and the person I inwardly long to be. Help me to become one person in you, the loving and faithful person I dare to believe you created me to be. In your name, I pray. Amen.*

**JUNE 11, 2023**

## **Death of Abraham**

### **Read Genesis 25:7-11**

*Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. Gen. 25:8*

Abraham lived long and well and then Abraham died like all his ancestors before him. That is how the story ends for the great and first patriarch of our faith. Abraham's journey with God was legendary – full of successes and failures, moments of faithfulness followed closely by sinfulness, occasions of obedience interrupted by disobedience. Abraham's was a complicated but consequential life – a life launched when Abraham was willing to go with God to an unnamed land God promised to show him. The rest is history, and we are inheritors of the stories and the blessings that were to follow.

While it might seem unnecessarily grim, it is an ancient Christian spiritual practice to remember that we are going to die. The Christian monastic tradition in particular spent considerable time and effort contemplating mortality. The idea is that if we contemplate the inevitability of our death, it will fill us with an urgency to live our lives and live them well. Scripture attests that our life in this world is but a breath, and we want to be mindful of the fragility of life, so that we don't waste a moment in our attempt to live in ways that usher us into an eternity with God. Meditating on life and death is important – no one is too young nor too old to benefit from this mental and spiritual exercise. In fact, talking with children about the reality of death, as well as the promise of resurrection is healthy and is a good way to prepare them to grapple with loss while maintaining hope.

The goal of our lives and our faith is to live well, to serve to the best of our ability, and to enjoy this wild and wonderful adventure with God here and now, while trusting in the promise of a glorious hereafter.

### **Question for Conversation**

What are some of your goals for yourself?

*Lord at the end of my life, no matter how long, I want to have been a blessing. Like Abraham I will try to be obedient to you. Like Abraham I will try to follow the path you set before me. I know my journey will be complicated like his was. With your blessing, I will get through. On your promises I will live well. Let our adventure begin! Amen.*

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The Congregational Church  
of *New Canaan*

23 Park Street, New Canaan, CT 06840  
(203) 966-2651 [www.godsacre.org](http://www.godsacre.org)