

2016 Lent Devotions



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Introduction

During this season of Lent, these devotions will allow us to travel with Luke in tracing the path of Jesus' life. Luke invites us to be transformed as we follow our Savior to the cross. We will meet the people Jesus met and served, listen to his teaching, and learn from his example.

This Lenten series comes from Words of Hope, an RCA mission partner. Words of Hope's mission is to build the church in the hard places through media. The Words of Hope daily devotional encourages readers to grow spiritually through daily Bible reading and prayer. To subscribe to Words of Hope's daily devotional and learn about their international ministry efforts, visit www.woh.org.

February 10, 2016: A Theophilus Near You

Luke 1

I too decided . . . to write an orderly account for you (v. 3).

Luke's Gospel is special in many ways, not the least of which is that it is the only book of the Bible written by a gentile with obvious concerns for gentiles. Right at the outset Luke introduces us to a friend named Theophilus whom he knows and will carry along in his heart as he writes. Luke also tells us why he writes—so that Theophilus “may know the truth concerning the things about which [he] has been instructed” (v. 4).

Somewhere, somehow, a gentile named Theophilus, whose name means Lover of God, came to know and love the Lord, and now Luke intends to contribute to his spiritual well-being by both informing and deepening that love.

Do you have a “Theophilus” in your life to love toward the Lord? Throughout history God has used basic kindness and concern for those outside the faith to effect a change of heart. I want you to give serious consideration to connecting with a Theophilus near you. C. S. Lewis is reported to have said, “If I had one piece of advice to give young people it would be to do all that they can to live near their friends.” As you read these devotionals, consider a friend with whom you might share them. If you do not, then who will?

Prayer: Make us available, Lord, to a Theophilus in our lives.

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February 11, 2016: Sing, Christian, Sing!

Luke 2

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude (v. 13).

Christians sing, and the five songs punctuating the opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke are a kind of pitch pipe to prompt ours. The first of the five songs is the angel's announcement to Mary of the coming birth of Jesus, known as *The Annunciation*. The second is Mary's praise-filled response, *The Magnificat*. The third is the heart-swelling song of joy sung by Zechariah, called *The Benedictus*. The fourth is the praise of a multitude of angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest," *The Gloria*. And the fifth is Simeon's satisfied song, "Lord, let now thy servant depart in peace," known as the *Nunc Dimittis*.

You may certainly forget the formal names of each of these songs, but please don't forget what they represent: the centuries-old practice of Christians to sing! Christians singing is one of the evidences of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:19), a witness to unbelievers (Acts 16:25), and the occupation of those gathered around the throne of God in glory (Revelations 5). Christians sing!

Some dear friends of the ministry of Words of Hope, and of my wife Nancy and me as well, are Stephen and Margaret Kaziimba. They live in difficult conditions in Uganda, but you would never know that by their remarkable practice of singing. Often when we are with them, they will simply break into a song of praise. I think they are living examples of this instinct of the Gospel of Luke. Christians sing!

Prayer: Give us tongues to sing your praises, Lord!

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February 12, 2016: Finding God in Unexpected Places

Luke 2:1-7

And she gave birth to her firstborn son (v. 7)...

I wonder how Mary felt when she looked at her newborn child the way mothers do—studying every hair on his little head, every crease on his wrinkled face. I wonder if she understood the enormity of what had happened. The promised Messiah had been born at last, and there he was, cradled in her arms.

God's handiwork is nowhere more difficult to see than when it occurs in your own life. Our own lives are too familiar, too common, to sense the mystery of God pulsing through them. But Mary knew that God had acted in her life, and there in the manger was the proof of it.

Mary understood that God is at work in unexpected places. And from Mary you can learn that God is at work in the most unexpected place of all—your life. Your marriage. Your job. Your family. Your church.

“She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger...” Would you ever have expected to find God in a manger—a feed box for animals? No. But you'd never expect to find God in your own life, either. Yet that is where God is.

God acts in the lives of real people. Like Mary. Like you. And Christmas is the proof of it.

Prayer: Lord, be in my life.

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February 13, 2016: Simeon and Anna

Luke 2:22-38

...salvation...which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples (vv. 30-31).

In his Gospel, Luke will later show Jesus reaching out to “all sorts and conditions of men,” to use a phrase from the Book of Common Prayer. However, first he wants to introduce two more Jewish people, Simeon and Anna. They are old, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, and like them they are steeped in the old faith of Israel, harkening back to God’s ancient promises.

But so far from being stuck in the past, these two are now looking to the future. Mary’s son, Jesus, has been born, and it is the baby Jesus that Simeon and Anna encounter on this unforgettable day.

God has given them the spirit of prophecy, both to see and to say what is really happening. God’s people have long been awaiting the “consolation of Israel” and the “redemption of Jerusalem,” and now here he is! More than that, he will be “a light for revelation to the gentiles” as well as “glory to your people Israel.”

The great hope for the nations, for the people of every kind and background whom Luke will be describing, is in this child alone. How indebted we all are to God’s Old Testament preparation for his coming.

Prayer: Thank you for this light from the past that still illuminates the path ahead of us.

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February 14, 2016: Are You Listening?

Luke 3:1-6

John the Baptist was on a mission from God. He was a prophet, a man totally consumed by the things of God. He didn't see things as others saw them; he saw things through the eyes of God. When John spoke, he spoke for God. And he could speak for God because first he listened to God. Says Luke, "the word of God came to John...in the desert." In the desert—the lonely, desolate desert where John had gone to meet with God, where John had gone to be quiet before God, where John had gone to listen for the voice of God.

In Irving Shaw's play, "Saint Joan," Joan of Arc hears voices from God. The king, who will one day condemn her to death at the stake, is irritated by this. "Oh, your voices, your voices," he says. "Why don't your voices come to me? I am the king, not you."

"They do come," replies Joan. "They do come, but you do not hear them."

What about us? Are we choosing to hear? When the voices speak today—and they do still speak—are we listening? When the prophets of God sound the alarm today, are we choosing to hear? God's usual method of speaking to us is through the Bible. We must read so we can hear him speak.

Prayer: Lord, open our eyes that we may see Jesus. Open our ears that we may hear your still, small voice speaking words of truth, comfort, and direction. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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February 15, 2016: Jesus Changes People

Luke 3:15-20

John's task was to "prepare the way." Jesus' task was to be "the way." John's task was to call people to repentance, to change on the outside. Jesus' task was to invite people to relationship with God and to change on the inside.

A little girl had been naughty. Her exasperated mother finally told her to sit in the corner until her father came home. The little girl stomped over to the corner, folded her arms defiantly across her chest, pouted angrily, and refused to sit down. At this point her mother came over and literally forced her to sit. When the father arrived home he asked his daughter what she was doing in the corner. She replied, "On the outside I'm sitting, but on the inside I'm still standing."

We can relate to that. On the outside we can make changes, but until we are changed on the inside it makes little difference. Jesus changes people from the inside out. That's what excited John the Baptist! That's why John called Jesus "the One more powerful." That's why John pointed away from himself to Jesus, the one sent from God to set people free from self-centered living. Jesus is still in the business of transforming lives from the inside out. Open your heart to the master and he will shape you into the beautiful person he knows you can be.

Prayer: Come into my heart, Lord Jesus. Come in today. Come in to stay. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus. Amen.

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February 16, 2016: Adam

Luke 3:21-38

He was the...son of Adam (vv. 23, 38)...

Simeon and Anna cherished the promises made to Israel far back in the past. But as Luke begins to describe the adult life of Jesus, he goes even further back. Matthew's Gospel traces Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham, the ancestor of the Hebrew nation; Luke's traces it right back to Adam, the ancestor of the whole human race. (John's goes even further, back to the eternity in which the divine Son was with the Father: "Before the world was created, the Word already existed.")

Even though you probably just skimmed this list of names, your eye may have caught some of them. David, Jacob, and Abraham are all real historical people. Jesus comes on the scene as an equally real person, and one who belongs, like them, in the history of Israel. But more than that, Luke wants us to see him as a member not just of the Hebrew race but of the human race. He was born as a *person*, in order to save humankind.

Out of the Jewish background (that is Matthew's emphasis) grows something intended for all nations (that is Luke's emphasis). None of us can say, "This is not for me." As Luke's friend Paul puts it, all who are in Adam die, but all who are in Christ will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22).

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February 17, 2016: Tempted

Luke 4:1-13

...for forty days he was tempted by the devil (v. 2).

When I reread the story of Jesus' temptation, two things seem obviously true and a third seems inconveniently true. The first thing that is obviously true is that we have an adversary whose intentions for us are no good. When Jesus had fasted forty days and was famished, it was just then, at that precise moment, that "the devil came to him." The devil's timing is impeccable!

The second thing that is obviously true is that Jesus has gone before us to show us what to do when we are tempted. What a kind and gracious Savior we have! So how did Jesus respond to temptation? Not once, not twice, but three times he repelled the devil with the Word. And let me remind everyone that he wasn't carrying a Bible with him. He repelled the evil one with the word hidden in his heart. The most basic of all spiritual disciplines is the discipline of scripture memorization.

The one inconveniently true thing is that the devil has a kind of steadfast devotion of his own. "He departed from him until an opportune time" (v. 13). This is why Peter counsels us in his first epistle, "Discipline yourselves, keep alert...your adversary the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Until our journey on earth is done, we must necessarily deal with this enemy at home, at work, and at play! Discipline yourselves; keep alert!

Prayer: Lord, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

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February 18, 2016: Teachers Change Lives

Luke 4:14-15

He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone (v. 15).

When my son was in elementary school he would come home from school saying, “Mrs. Johnson said...” and he would proceed to relate some insight, some nugget of truth, that his teacher had implanted into his little noggin. Often, this new truth was something I had already told him a hundred times. But I was only his father. Mrs. Johnson was his teacher.

You’d never know it by their salaries, but teachers are powerful. Teachers change lives. They open our eyes to worlds we didn’t know existed—Shakespeare, geometry, music, economics. Is there anyone, anywhere, who hasn’t been affected by a teacher?

The title most often applied to Jesus was *rabbi*, or “teacher.” Luke says that Jesus began his public ministry by going to the synagogue to teach. Shortly thereafter, Jesus went to Capernaum, and Luke says the crowds were “astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority” (4:32). Jesus was a teacher.

We all need a teacher to teach us, to impart some life-changing truth we don’t know, or did know once but forgot—that God loves us, unreservedly and completely, now and forever.

Prayer: Teach me, Lord, what I need to learn.

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February 19, 2016: Who Told You About Jesus?

Luke 4:16-21

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor (v. 18).

Who told you about Jesus? Somebody did. Maybe a parent sat at your bedside when you were a child and read Bible stories to you and prayed with you. Maybe a college roommate shared her faith with you. Maybe you heard a sermon and you felt the preacher was talking just to you, as though you were the only one in the room. And you were changed. You may not remember the day or the person. But know this: somebody, somewhere, at some time, told you about Jesus.

Whom have you told? I hope you're not keeping the good news to yourself. You may think that everybody's already heard, that there's nobody left to tell. But there are millions who haven't heard, and many who once heard have forgotten and need to hear it again.

When Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and read from the Isaiah scroll, he said: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news." Jesus was anointed to preach—to proclaim good news. For two thousand years, people have been telling other people the good news, until finally somebody told you. And now it's your turn: whom will you tell?

Prayer: Lord, make me a witness.

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February 20, 2016: Naaman

Luke 4:14-28

None of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian (v. 27).

As Jesus burst upon the local scene and quickly became famous throughout Galilee, how proud his neighbors and friends and relations were of him!

But it didn't last. He saw through their excessive praises to their hard, unbelieving hearts. In the early part of that synagogue service in Nazareth "all spoke well of him." We can imagine the approving nods, nudges, and whispers around the congregation. They were puzzled by what he said about those verses from Isaiah, but it sounded good. When, however, he turned their attention to an earlier part of their Scriptures, the stories of Elijah and Elisha, their real attitudes were exposed. For their own Bible demonstrated how often God's blessings had been rejected by his people Israel and given instead to gentile outsiders, like the Sidonian widow who fed Elijah, and the Syrian general Naaman whom Elisha healed. Likewise, Jesus' own neighbors were in danger of losing out to people they despised.

We too need to beware of enjoying the nice bits of Scripture and rejecting what makes us uncomfortable. But we can also put ourselves in Naaman's shoes rather than those of the Nazarenes, and be hugely thankful that the gospel's blessing has come to us, outsiders who had no claim on it.

Prayer: Lord, is my attitude to the good news more like Nazareth's or like Naaman's?

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February 21, 2016: Let Down the Nets!

Luke 5:1-11

What a story! Peter and the others had been fishing all night and hadn't caught one fish. They were discouraged. A hot meal and a comfortable bed would suit each of them fine. But Jesus tells them to go out into the deep water one more time and let down their nets. Without hesitation, they do it. Peter says, "We really don't see the point, Jesus, but if you say so, down go the nets!" That's obedience.

Next came the blessing. Having done what Jesus asked, they received what Jesus promised. They caught so many fish that their boats began to sink. And Peter drops to his knees before Jesus. Here is a picture of worship. Confronted by the power of the Master, Simon sees his own inadequacy. He realizes he is not worthy to be in the presence of the Son of God. But the grace of Jesus reaches out, pulls an obedient Peter to his feet, and commissions him to go forth and "catch men."

This story is our story. Jesus calls us to "put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch" (v. 4). There are people around us whom God wants on board his boat—the Church. He commands us to seek them out, to be "fishers of men." If we obey, God will bless our efforts. We, too, will be awed by the results. So, go forth and "let down the nets."

Prayer: Jesus, I know someone who needs you. Give me the courage to obey you and go fishing. Amen.

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February 22, 2016: Someone Excluded

Luke 5:12-16

In a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy (v. 12, KJV).

Within a chapter of his reference to Elisha healing a leper, Jesus is himself doing the same. Although both the sick men were “outsiders,” the point about Naaman in the Old Testament is that he was “outside” primarily because he was foreign. But the point about this man in the Gospel of Luke is that he was “outside” simply because of his leprosy.

Perhaps that is why the wording of verse 12 seems to express shocked surprise. The King James translation sticks closer to Luke’s original than most: “Behold a man full of leprosy,” as if to say, “Will you look at that, a *leper!* Here, in *town?*” Like every sufferer from such disease, this man had been shut out from his local community, his home, and his family, to live in wretched isolation. He was not supposed to be in the town. Perhaps he had crept back into it surreptitiously, desperate to find the Jesus he had heard about, the only one he believed capable of healing him.

To everyone else he was an untouchable, literally beyond the pale. But not even this man was beyond the reach of the Savior of the world. None of us is, no matter what our spiritual condition.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, that you have reached out even to me.

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February 23, 2016: Stop Sitting on Acorns

Luke 5:17-26

Some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed (v. 18).

There are two ways to get to the top of a tall oak tree:

1) Roll up your sleeves and start climbing, or 2) Sit on an acorn.

We read about four friends who bring their sick buddy to see Jesus. When the way is blocked because of the crowd, they scramble up onto the roof, tear open a hole, and lower their pal down into Jesus' lap.

Faith always finds the opening that doubt would never have guessed was there.

These guys don't sit on acorns. They are industrious, ingenious, and daring. And not too concerned with protocol. Notice that they don't ask permission. They don't form a committee to study this matter and give a report at the next congregational meeting. Their sick buddy is going to see Jesus, and that's that.

Isn't that a picture of the church at its best—a group of folks who bring the needy to Jesus? And isn't the church at its best when it emulates the resourcefulness and persistence of these four true-blue friends? If one way is blocked, try another way. If the conventional approach doesn't work, try the unconventional. Isn't the church at its best when it is more interested in results than in regulations, more concerned with redemption than with rules, and more interested in people than in property?

Prayer: Use me in your service, Lord.

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February 24, 2016: Someone Hated

Luke 5:27-32

A tax collector named Levi (v. 27).

When Hitler's armies invaded Norway in 1940, they recruited a Norwegian called Vidkun Quisling to run the country for them. Quisling's name has now come to mean anyone who turns to his own advantage the chance to betray his own people by collaborating with the enemy.

Levi was just such a collaborator—a Jew collecting taxes on behalf of the Romans who had taken over his country, and benefiting himself in the process. Paradoxically, it was precisely because he was Jewish that patriotic Jews regarded him as a rank outsider. The leper was a sad character; the tax collector was a bad one. Who of God's people would be prepared to accept such a quisling in their company?

Jesus would. For he knew that if Levi responded to his call, it would mean he had “left everything” that had made him such a bad man. In a word, he would have *repented*. Restoring the sick to health is one way of describing what Jesus came to do; bringing sinners to repentance is another way—an even more exact and necessary description.

And notice what follows. Levi is the kind of outsider we really would not want to have in our fellowship. But once Jesus brings him in, we may find he is better at outreach than we are!

Prayer: Lord, give me a penitent heart and such an evangelistic vision.

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February 25, 2016: Rules and People

Luke 6:1-11

And Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?" (v. 9)

Customs, rules, and regulations are necessary and should be obeyed. We must attend church regularly, keep the Lord's day holy, and observe the speed limits when driving.

But people are more important than regulations. That is the Lord's teaching in today's Scripture. The Jews were very good at keeping rules but poor in showing compassion to the needy. They thought it was more important to keep the temple regulations than to feed a starving man. The presence all around them of the hungry, the sick, and the spiritually bankrupt did not particularly bother them as long as no one broke the Sabbath. That same temptation confronts us. We may be so concerned about keeping our worship dignified that we shut out those who need the gospel. Jesus did not win followers by legislating to them about keeping the Sabbath day holy.

Jesus' approval of David's action in eating the holy bread despite temple regulations does not mean that we can therefore disregard completely our responsibilities toward worship, the church, or the sacraments. Likewise, his healing the sick and picking grain on the Sabbath do not mean that we can revert to a Sunday "business as usual" policy. The holy things of our religious lives must be safeguarded, but a regulation or tradition must never stand in the way of an opportunity to do good unto someone in need.

Prayer: Lord, give me a heart filled with love.

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February 26, 2016: The Cure for Hostility

Luke 6:27-28

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you (v. 27).

I remember a Mother Goose rhyme from my childhood:

I do not like thee, Dr. Fell. The reason why I cannot tell. But this I know, and know full well: I do not like thee, Dr. Fell.

That's hostility. Hostility is the settled state of being enemies. Anger, appropriately expressed and properly handled, can be a sign of good mental health. But there is no health in hostility. Hostility ruins our mental health. I once heard of a psychologist whose first question to every new patient was: "*Who* is wrong with you?"

Can hostility be cured? Not if we cover it up and pretend it doesn't exist. Jesus didn't say, "Pretend you have no enemies." He said, "Love your enemies." And how do we do that? "Do good to those who hate you," said Jesus. Try doing something good for your enemy, and see if you can still feel hostile toward him. "Bless those who curse you," said Jesus. Find something in your enemy that you can honestly praise, and then see if you can still feel hostile.

"Pray for those who abuse you," said Jesus. Pray, not once, but persistently. It is not easy to remain hostile toward someone for whom you pray on a daily basis.

Prayer: Help me to love my enemies.

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February 27, 2016: A Believing Roman

Luke 7:1-10

Not even in Israel have I found such faith (v. 9).

“When strangers discover that I’m a pastor,” observed a friend of mine, “they regularly set about telling me how good they are!”

In Luke 7 we are told how good this Roman army officer is. But the circumstances are rather different. First, this golden opinion of him is not his own, but that of others, and therefore much more trustworthy. Also, amazingly, it is the opinion of the citizens of an occupied country where he is a member of the occupying forces.

Then again, it is not merely about his virtues, the kind of “moral excellences” that can be seen in many an unbeliever and do not necessarily say anything about their spiritual state. No, in this case the leaders of the local Jewish community are speaking quite specifically of the Roman soldier’s practical friendship with them, God’s ancient people, and of his deep and generous interest in their life and religion. These things are much more significant, because they point to his own relationship with God. He turns out to have a grasp of spiritual principles that Jesus himself calls “faith”—indeed, faith such as is rare “even in Israel.”

It is commitment to this God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that brings an outsider into the kingdom.

Prayer: Lord, give us the faith that grasps spiritual truth and acts accordingly.

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February 28, 2016: Honest Doubts

Luke 7:18-35

John...sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (vv. 18-19)

John the Baptist earlier introduced Christ to the world as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But in today's Scripture, we discover that doubts have entered his mind. He sends his friends to Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who is to come; or shall we look for another?" John's question almost disillusioned us.

But notice Christ's reaction. He does not heap judgment upon John's head. Rather, in the presence of John's friends, he performed many miracles and then said, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard" (v. 22). These miracles prove that he is the one who was to come.

John's experience teaches us that there is nothing sinful about having honest doubts. John had good reason to question Jesus. He was languishing in prison and the expected revolutionary transformation had not yet taken place. John wondered whether he had been premature in his announcement of the coming of the kingdom.

In his bewilderment, he did the right thing. He went right to the source and asked Jesus, and he received the answer he was hoping for. His faith was bolstered. We need never be ashamed of the doubts and fears that creep into our hearts. If we bring them to Jesus, he will banish them with words of assurance and encouragement.

Prayer: Lord, help me to have a greater faith.

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February 29, 2016: Someone Despised

Luke 7:36-50

A woman...who was a sinner (v. 37).

Here's another lesson about the universal reach of the good news, featuring another Simon (Luke mentions at least seven different Simons or Simeons!). This one is another Pharisee with whom Jesus crosses swords.

In this case, strangely, you might almost say the Pharisee and the Savior are in agreement. The woman "who was a sinner" was probably a prostitute, and was certainly notorious in the area. But what mattered was simply "her sins, which were many," rather than what kind of sins they were. You may be a gentile, a leper, a tax collector; none of those facts will exclude you from the company of God's people. But sin will. On that, Jesus and Simon were agreed.

How wrong Simon was, though, to assume that Jesus didn't know about the woman's sins! He did know, and also knew her desire to be rid of them, her awareness that Jesus could forgive them, and the gratitude she expressed in bathing and anointing his feet.

"Follow the logic, Simon," Jesus seems to say. "What keeps people outside is sin—your kind of sin as much as hers. I am the only person who can deal with it. She knows that, and loves me for it. How about you?"

Prayer: Remind us, Lord, of how much you have forgiven us, and how much we should love you.

Today's devotional was written by Michael Wilcock, a retired pastor in the Church of England. This Lenten series comes from Words of Hope, whose mission is to build the church in the hard places through media. To learn more about the organization or subscribe to Words of Hope's daily devotions, visit www.woh.org.

March 1, 2016: Someone Feared

Luke 8:26-39

A man of the city who had demons... (v. 27)

“This thing is bigger than the both of us,” as they used to say in the old movies.

The thing that Jesus confronted in “the country of the Gerasenes”—demon possession—was not a deliberately chosen, evil way of life, like that of the tax collector, nor was it an evil disease that sensible people would try not to catch, like leprosy. It was something bigger and deeper, something that came more directly from the pit, from the source of all evil. The village council was at its wits’ end. “He’s so *strong!* We clapped him in irons, and he simply broke them. It’s frightening. Let’s just hope he stays out of town.”

Of course the Gerasenes feared this demon-possessed man. Yet, curiously, it was not while he was raving, but after he had been cured, that Luke says “they were afraid.” From Jesus’ point of view, another outsider had been transformed by the gospel and brought back in to start a new life. But from the Gerasenes’ point of view (the local hog trade having just been destroyed!), the Lord’s transforming power was a bigger threat than the demon’s destructive power. Jesus might want to transform *them!* He might disrupt business or challenge their way of life, and that would never do...would it?

Prayer: Lord, make us willing for whatever change in us will bring glory to you.

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March 2, 2016: The Five Thousand Fed

Luke 9:10-17

Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd (v. 16).

The five thousand, miraculously fed by our Lord, had been tired and hungry; they had not intended to wander so far away from home and had brought no provisions with them. This is a picture of the world today. Wandering about in a world of sin, people need the life-giving nourishment that only Christ can supply.

Notice how helpless the disciples were when faced with the situation. People today do not have satisfactory answers to the problems of the world. Assemblies and councils may be able to make some contribution, but the final solution cannot come from them.

Only Christ could feed the five thousand. Christ has the answer for the needs of men today as well. His promise is not only for life everlasting, but also for life abundant. He can take away the frustrations, fears, and anguish and replace them with a peace that the world knows nothing about.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the Bible. Please give me a clearer understanding of it.

Today's devotional was written by the late Pierce Maassen, a pastor in the RCA. It was originally published in 1967. This Lenten series comes from Words of Hope, whose mission is to build the church in the hard places through media. To learn more about the organization or subscribe to Words of Hope's daily devotions, visit www.woh.org.

March 3, 2016: Come Down from the Mountaintop

Luke 9:28-36

“Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings.” (v. 33)

A few years ago I climbed a mountain in the Grand Tetons, in Wyoming. I sat on the summit, savored the view, devoured a cheese sandwich, drank some coffee from a thermos. Then I began my descent. You don't stay long on a mountaintop. Mountaintops are inhospitable places. It's cold up there. Your body aches. Breathing is difficult. Nobody would ever want to stay on a mountaintop.

Except Peter. “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,” he says. Christ's countenance is shining like the sun. His clothes are “dazzling white.” It's a moment of holiness and majesty, and Peter doesn't want it to end. “Let us make three dwellings.” Peter wants to stay on the mountaintop. He wants to prolong the experience.

That's a bad idea. Peter made this comment, says Luke, “not knowing what he said.” Jesus, Moses, and Elijah don't need dwellings. You can't take something radiant and stuff it into a box.

The danger in our mountaintop experiences is that we try to freeze them and make them permanent. And so a life which might have been a voyage of discovery and growth instead is chained to the past. A mountaintop is a nice place to visit, but you don't want to live there.

Prayer: Lead me onward, Lord.

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March 4, 2016: A Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

“Who is my neighbor?” (v. 29)

Luke’s “universal-gospel” theme colors several of the parables of Jesus, not least of which is the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. It has not one but three stings in its tail.

First, a shock. Jewish people with a dislike of the religious establishment probably smiled sourly at the self-serving priest and Levite, and assumed that Jesus would go on to contrast these two with a Jewish layperson like themselves. But a Samaritan! I may dislike hypocritical religious leaders, but *everybody* dislikes Samaritans.

Then, a challenge. Note what the Samaritan did, for those who are to “inherit eternal life” will do the same sort of thing. But this kind of good deed is not particularly difficult, is it? Thousands of people send checks to charities and reckon they are being Good Samaritans.

The greater challenge of the parable is often missed. The question that led directly into it was not about “love” but about “neighbor”: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus turned it back on the questioner: “Who was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?” And the answer came, “The one who showed him mercy.” The man couldn’t even bring himself to utter the name. For that neighbor was the hated Samaritan, and you are to love your neighbor. Even if—especially if—you regard him as a rank outsider.

Prayer: Show us today’s opportunities both to imitate the Samaritan and to love him.

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March 5, 2016: Pray Without Ceasing (Part One)

Luke 10:38-11:1

Lord, teach us to pray (v. 1).

In the treasured verses before us, Luke provides us with a picture of how to pray (10:38-42), a pattern for our praying (11:2-4), and an encouragement to persist in our praying (11:5-12). The picture of praying is Mary quietly sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to everything he said.

I encourage you to live into the picture of Mary hanging on Jesus' every word. The reason the story of Mary and Martha immediately precedes Jesus' teaching on prayer is to give us an incentive to enter into our prayers with the counter-cultural practice of quieting down. Praying, at least in part, is listening for the voice of God. Mary shows us what that looks like; she "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" (v. 39).

Maybe this is why the psalmist echoes the voice of God, saying, "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Ps. 46:10). Maybe this is what is behind Isaiah's vision, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isa. 30:15). Or maybe it's why James, the brother of Jesus, wrote, "Be quick to listen, slow to speak" (James 1:19).

In a wired world of endless texting, tweeting, and skyping, a world never free of noise and commotion, it is a great relief to be encouraged to be quiet in the presence of the Lord. This is the first step toward praying without ceasing.

Prayer: Quiet us, Lord, that we may learn to pray.

Today's devotional was written by Tim Brown, president and Henry Bast professor of preaching at Western Theological Seminary. This Lenten series comes from Words of Hope, whose mission is to build the church in the hard places through media. To learn more about the organization or subscribe to Words of Hope's daily devotions, visit www.woh.org.

March 6, 2016: Pray Without Ceasing (Part Two)

Luke 11:1-4

Lord, teach us to pray (v. 1).

When you pray, open your Bible and pray God's words back to him. It may sound strange, but those who know most about prayer pray just this way!

The form of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, what we know as the Lord's Prayer, came from the part of the synagogue liturgy of Jesus' day known as the *Amidah*. The heart of the *Amidah* was called the *Shemoneh Esreh*, 18 blessings of God prayed three times daily. Three times a day, every day, devout Jews would lift their hands to heaven and pray, "Blessed be you, O God, ruler of the universe for..."—and then name 18 different gifts that God gave them every day. What is important for us to know here is that each blessing was taken from the Bible.

Jesus was urging his disciples to pray with the words of the Bible, just as he did on the cross when he cried out in the words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He was thereby teaching us to use the Bible when we pray. Let me say this candidly: the human heart, as important to us as it is for falling in love or writing a poem or admiring a sunset, is too narrow and shallow a thing on which to build a life of prayer. We need to pray not only from the heart but also from the Bible! The Bible is designed to give us the words to pray.

Prayer: Lord, help us use your words in our prayers.

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March 7, 2016: Pray Without Ceasing (Part Three)

Luke 11:1, 5-13

Lord, teach us to pray (v. 1).

How kind of Jesus to urge us to pray for the same thing over and over again! Following his model prayer is the parable of the persistent friend, the man who goes to his neighbor in dire need of bread only to be turned away. Apparently the old saying, “A friend in need is a friend in deed” doesn’t always apply! Jesus taught, however, that if you make a nuisance of yourself by asking over and over again, you might finally get the thing for which you’re asking. The logic is simple, and in fact Jesus’ interpretation of the parable follows. “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (v. 9).

We are given permission by Jesus to ask the Father for the same thing over and over again. We all know that some prayers seem to go unanswered, and such is the mystery of God’s providence. But it never alters both the desirability and necessity of asking! This must be why Jesus compares God the Father to a loving parent who surely would never turn away from a child in need. “Is there anyone...who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?” (Matthew 7:9).

I served as a pastor for many years and have spent endless hours with people in deep need, encouraging them to take heart in this parable. The living God is not annoyed by our persistence. He encourages!

Prayer: Create boldness in us, Lord, to pray without ceasing.

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March 8, 2016: Say Yes

Luke 11:24-26

“I will return to my house from which I came.” (v. 24)

As a youngster in Sunday school I learned a song: “Have Courage, My Boy, to Say No.” Think of all the misery we create for ourselves because we lack the courage to say “No!”

But there is more to the Christian life than saying no. People talk about how they are against this vice and against that vice, how they oppose this sin and that sin, and you can’t help but wonder what they *do* approve of. You can’t get to heaven just by criticizing other people’s sins.

In Jesus’ parable of the empty house, the unclean spirit discovers that his former haunt has been swept clean, but no righteous replacements have taken his place. So he moves back in, and invites seven cronies to join him. “And the last state of that person is worse than the first,” says Jesus.

There is an affirmative quality to the Christian life. There is a “yes” at the heart of our faith. “In him [Jesus] every one of God’s promises is a ‘yes,’” says Paul (2 Corinthians 1:20). It is not enough to say no to what is wrong; we must also say yes to Christ. It is not enough to be delivered from the power of Satan; one must pledge allegiance to the kingdom of God.

Prayer: Lord, I say “yes” to you.

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March 9, 2016: The Treadmill of Acquisition

Luke 12:13-21

“Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” (v. 15)

Take a child to a toy store for the first time, and you will not have to teach the child what to do. Thousands of hours of television advertising have already taught her that her calling in life is to consume, to possess, to amass. Take the same child to church for the first time, and she will be disoriented, confused. She will not know how to act. She will not understand the purpose of church and what it has to do with her. What does this tell us?

Greed—acquisitiveness—seems almost to be an inborn human trait. We live our lives on an endless treadmill of acquisition, frantically amassing more and more stuff. And then one day you die, and they give all your stuff away. What an odd way to live.

The rich farmer keeps racing on the treadmill, amassing more and more, oblivious to the source of all his blessings, until the voice of God comes whispering: “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (v. 20).

Get off the treadmill. It’s okay to possess things. But it’s not okay for things to possess you. It’s not okay to make accumulation the driving gear of your life.

Prayer: Father, forgive my greed.

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March 10, 2016: A Banquet for All Nations

Luke 13:22-30

From east and west, from north and south (v. 29).

Today's question ("Will only a few be saved?"), like the last ("What must I do to inherit eternal life?"), has to do with the way to heaven. Here Jesus' answer ignores the topic of "how many," and becomes an urgent plea that we should make sure we are going there, not just assume we are.

But in doing this he gives us two mind-stretching glimpses of what heaven will be like. First, we shall "eat in the kingdom of God"! In chapter 14 he will also say a lot about banquets and compare life in the kingdom to a "great dinner." Of course heaven will be pure and holy and free from all evil. Of course it will be filled with the glory and praise of God. But it will also be a *party*: the best party imaginable, "pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

Secondly, people of every kind will be there. Jesus says that heaven will be filled with "Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets," and every single Israelite believer, naturally; but also countless "outsiders," "from east and west, from north and south," the multitude "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages," that John sees in the vision of Revelation 7. What an exciting prospect!

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the joys that await us in heaven.

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March 11, 2016: The Elder Brother

Luke 15

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons" (v. 11).

One of the ways to read any story in the Bible is to ask two questions: What is God doing in the story? And, what should I be doing in light of this story? If we apply these two questions to the story of the prodigal son and his loving father, we get some remarkable results.

In this wonderful story, the living God is played by the father. The father of the prodigal son does not force his son to be obedient; he gives him his inheritance even though he knows it isn't good for him. He also graciously receives back his penitent son and restores him to full status—over the objections of the ungracious brother! This is a portrait of our gracious God, and it ought to prompt us to return to him from whatever far country we may be in. The last word from our heavenly Father is not condemnation but forgiveness. Amazing grace!

And what should we be doing in light of this story? Certainly not pouting at grace given to others like the elder brother, but rather running long and hard into the outstretched arms of a loving and forgiving Father! When Christians rise to their feet in worship to say "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," the story of the prodigal son and his gracious father is their justification for doing so.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us sinners.

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March 12, 2016: Forge Your Future

Luke 16:1-9

And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly (v. 8).

The dishonest manager isn't ethical, but he sure is shrewd. Before walking out into the cold, hard world of unemployment, this scoundrel creates for himself a lot of friends who now feel more indebted to him than to his master!

“And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.” Jesus is not praising the dishonest manager for his dishonesty. He praises the man because, when faced with a catastrophe, this rascal doesn't passively accept his fate. Rather, he rolls up his sleeves and goes to work, determined to forge for himself a better future.

When catastrophe happens—when the boss tells us to go and clean out our desk, or when we are diagnosed with a debilitating disease, or when a cherished relationship is shattered—we hang our heads, stoically accepting our fate.

But Jesus tells the story of an outrageous manager who does outrageous things because, catastrophe notwithstanding, this guy actually believes that his future is still throbbing with possibility and not at all fixed or final. Your future is in God's hands. Whatever bad news life dishes out to you, God is still in control, which means your story is not over, your future is not finished. Don't just accept your fate; forge your future!

Prayer: Lord, whatever happens to me, I trust you.

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March 13, 2016: The View from the Seesaw

Luke 16:19-31

At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus (v. 20).

One day, while riding a seesaw with my daughter when she was a small child, she got a thoughtful look on her face, and she declared: “When I am up, you are down!”

When it comes to food and resources, all the world rides a seesaw. One side is up; the other is down. One side is like the rich man; the other side is like poor Lazarus.

The seesaw runs pretty much along north-south lines, the fulcrum being the equator. With one or two exceptions, affluent countries are in the northern hemisphere—America, Europe, Japan. That’s the up side of the seesaw. Poorer countries tend to be in the southern hemisphere—Africa, Asia, the Indian subcontinent. That’s the down side.

The difference in lifestyle and consumption of resources from one end of the seesaw to the other is mind-boggling. Compared to most of the world’s peoples, Americans live like sultans.

Wealthy nations are not at fault for world hunger. It is not wrong to be prosperous. Affluence doesn’t make you bad. It makes you blessed. But there is something dreadfully wrong if those who are affluent can look at Lazarus starving at the low end of the seesaw and do nothing to help him.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to see the poor. Open my hands to help.

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March 14, 2016: The Road to Forgiveness

Luke 17:3-5

If the same person sins against you seven times a day...you must forgive (v. 4).

It's hard enough to forgive someone once. But seven times? Little wonder the disciples say, "Increase our faith!"

Of course, some injuries don't require forgiveness. I'm thinking about that parade of little hurts and humiliations that are just a part of life. A friend failed to send you a card when you were hospitalized. A coworker has idiosyncrasies that annoy you. Your neighbor's Doberman answers the call of nature on your lawn. To make every minor irritation an occasion for forgiveness is to trivialize a vital issue.

But some offenses are anything but trivial. Some wounds are deep and painful. Can we really forgive?

Forgiveness is not an event; it is a process. Think of forgiveness as a long, winding road. If you even *want* to forgive someone, you're already on the road. You haven't yet reached your destination, but you're on the road. You may wander off the road now and then. The resentment may come seeping back into your soul. But don't give up. Get back on the road.

Keep asking God to help you. Keep praying for your enemy. Keep confessing your own sins, and in the knowledge that God forgives you, you will find yourself more and more able to forgive those who hurt you.

Prayer: Lord, increase my faith.

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March 15, 2016: A Grateful Samaritan

Luke 17:11-19

“Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” (v. 18)

Satan as the great destroyer, Jesus as the universal mender: when we grasp those two facts, many puzzles in our world begin to make sense. Even so, we need also to grasp how complicated some of these puzzles are, especially when the roles seem to be reversed. Satan mending and Jesus destroying? Can that be true?

This group of lepers shows the rift between Jew and Samaritan is healed, but in a horrible way. What brings them together is the leprosy inflicted by Satan, the author of all human misery. By healing these men, Jesus exposes their hearts: one that recognizes the love and power of God in Christ, and nine that don't. By doing this, Jesus opens a new rift between believer and unbeliever. So in a sense, Jesus has destroyed the unity and solidarity of this little group, although it was only a fellowship of death. He brings not peace, but a sword.

And the incident ties in with Luke's great theme, for the true believer is the outsider, the Samaritan. The nine—some, if not all of them, Jews—enter joyfully into physical health, and go away quite uncommitted to the giver of such health.

Faith in Christ transcends all human divisions and boundaries, leaving outside only those who won't have it.

Prayer: Thank you for another Samaritan who is an example to us!

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March 16, 2016: Where Are the Nine?

Luke 17:11-19

Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” (v. 17)

My mailman says that every year, in the weeks prior to Christmas, his post office gets hundreds of letters addressed to Santa Claus, but that in the weeks after Christmas there is not a single letter addressed to Santa. So it goes. Many say “please”—few say “thank you.” Our petitions always outrun our gratitude.

You can hear disappointment in Jesus’ voice: “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” Only one man gives thanks—a Samaritan, no less.

Beyond that, only one man understands that he has done business with God, in the person of Jesus Christ. When the ex-leper falls at Jesus’ feet and praises God, he’s making the right connection. He realizes that Jesus has done for him what only God can do. Ten lepers find their healing, but only one finds the healer.

If we count our many blessings, but fail to recognize their source, then we still don’t get it. God is looking for a faith in us that will recognize the giver behind the gift. For that will be a sign that we have received the best gift of all—Jesus himself. “Get up and go on your way,” he says to us, “your faith has made you well.”

Prayer: Forgive my ingratitude.

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March 17, 2016: Don't Give Up

Luke 18:1-8

“And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?” (v. 7)

At day's end a salesman was finally admitted to see the boss, and he proceeded to make a big sale. “Consider yourself lucky,” said the boss. “Five salesmen tried to meet with me today, and I refused to see them.” With tireless enthusiasm the salesman smiled and said: “I know. I am them!” Persistence pays off.

The widow persists, sustained by a belief that she has been wronged. She refuses to accept injustice, because she knows that there is justice. She refuses to accept wrong, because she knows that there is right. She knows that she is right. She believes that what has been denied to her is also available to her, and the reality of the coming vindication helps her to endure the reality of her present poverty. The widow refuses to be defined by her present circumstances.

Don't allow your present circumstances to define you. There is a judge who will hear you. Not an unjust judge, like the one in the parable. That judge gave the woman justice, after all, not because he saw the merit of her case but because the woman wore him down. If a scoundrel like that will give the woman justice, how much more will God hear the pleas of his people!

Prayer: Lord, hear my pleas.

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March 18, 2016: Your Self-Assessment

Luke 18:9-14

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (v. 13)

Everybody you know has a self-assessment. The question is: how do we arrive at our self-assessment?

The Pharisee considers himself a virtuous man. How does he arrive at this self-assessment? By looking down. He chooses a lowly tax collector as his standard, and of course the difference between himself and this man is considerable. It’s easy to look tall when you stand next to someone short.

The tax collector views himself as a sinner. How does he arrive at his self-assessment? By looking up. God’s searing righteousness is the standard by which he measures himself. No wonder he pleads for mercy.

It is so tempting, and so easy, to find some convenient sinner, some morally short person to stand next to, and use him or her as a standard. And so we glide into pride, so involved in our spiritual primping, so busy congratulating ourselves that we are not like other people, that it doesn’t occur to us that we’re not much like Jesus, either.

When we measure ourselves by looking up—when biblical righteousness is our standard—how can we say anything other than what the tax collector said: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” And God is merciful. “I tell you,” said Jesus, “this man went down to his home justified...”

Prayer: God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

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March 19, 2016: The Things That Make for Peace

Luke 19:41-44

“If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!” (v. 41)

What makes you cry? When we cry, we get a clue as to the things that matter to us. You’re watching something, or reading something, or maybe you’re just thinking, remembering, reminiscing, when suddenly a tear streaks your cheek. If you can name what it is you’re feeling at that moment, you have some insight into what really matters to you.

Luke says Jesus wept over Jerusalem. What triggered his tears? The longing for peace, and the sense that it was not to be. “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!”

One thing that makes for peace is acceptance—a perspective that helps us come to terms with life when things don’t go our way. There is a time to struggle and fight. But there is also a time to say, “Thy will be done.”

I remember a woman who fought her cancer for years, but when it became apparent that she could not beat it, she had the faith to accept what had to be accepted. At the end her husband cried, big tears streaking his cheeks, but she patted his hand and whispered weakly from behind her oxygen mask: “It’s okay. I’m at peace. Really.”

Prayer: Lord, thy will be done.

Today’s devotional was written by Lou Lotz, the pastoral leader of Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This Lenten series comes from Words of Hope, whose mission is to build the church in the hard places through media. To learn more about the organization or subscribe to Words of Hope’s daily devotions, visit www.woh.org.

March 20, 2016: The Needs of the Lord

Luke 19:29-40

“Why are you untying the colt?”

And they said, “The Lord has need of it.” (v. 33-34, RSV)

“The Lord has need of it.” Isn’t that a curious thing? The God of all glory has needs, and in this instance, he needs the services of a lowly donkey. In order to accomplish the extraordinary, God chose to yoke himself to the ordinary. While I cannot explain the mystery, I cannot escape its implication either. If the Lord needed a donkey to fulfill his gospel work, then maybe he needs me and you to do the same thing now!

I have a friend with a lovely gift for singing and teaching. She regularly visits local nursing homes to bless the residents with her uplifting voice and keen insights into the Word. She regularly concludes her teaching with this challenge for the elderly folk seated before her: “Friends, tomorrow morning when you wake up, I want you to open your eyes and look around. If you are still in your room and haven’t yet been taken to heaven, I want you to say out loud, ‘The Lord has work for me to do today.’ And then I want you to get up and get it done!”

Her words echo Jesus on that first Palm Sunday: *The Lord has need of it.*

Prayer: Living God, give us your grace to fulfill your purposes through Jesus.

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March 21, 2016: Confronting

Luke 19:41-48

Then he entered the temple... (v. 45)

After Palm Sunday's triumphal entry, Jesus entered the temple and drove out the money changers. Why did he do this? The layout of the temple itself provides an interesting clue. The temple stood proudly on an enormous platform cantilevered over Mount Moriah on the edge of the Kidron Valley. It stretched 200 yards from east to west, and 300 yards from north to south. A series of courts surrounded the Holy of Holies, the innermost chamber of the temple: the Priest's Court, the Court of Israel, the Court of Women, and finally the Court of the Gentiles. The Court of the Gentiles was several times larger than all the other courts combined, and its size is a commentary on the heart and purposes of God. The living God longs for the nations to stream into his presence!

The money-changers were encroaching on the sacred space God had envisioned for the nations. If they changed money in the Court of the Gentiles, where would the gentiles go to seek God? So much more could be said about this occasion in the life of Jesus, but perhaps it should lead us now to one pointed question: What must the Lord confront in our lives that is blocking the way for the world to come to him?

Prayer: Overturn anything in our lives that keeps the nations from coming to you, O God!

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March 22, 2016: Teaching

Luke 20:1-8

One day as he was teaching...

Does Luke 20:1 require anything of us? A young boy I met in Lynnwood, Washington, knows the answer and is eager to share it with all of us.

In the days just before his death, Jesus taught the good news of the gospel (Luke 19); in the days just after his death he compelled his followers to do the same (Luke 24). And that is precisely what my young friend from Lynnwood wants to tell us.

Some time ago I preached in the congregation where this boy and his family are members. After church I gathered with some folks to field questions about life in the seminary where I teach. During this time a sharp little boy named Aaron raised his hand and asked, “If you really, really want to be a pastor so you can tell people about Jesus, do you have to wait until you’re grown up?”

I said to him—oh, who cares what I said to him. He had said it all! *One day, as [Jesus] was teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news...* Aaron knows what to do with that verse, and he isn’t going to wait to grow up to do it.

So what are we waiting for?

Prayer: Give us the courage and urgency, O God, to go and tell the good news of Jesus!

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March 23, 2016: Counseling

Luke 22:31-34

Simon, Simon, listen! (v. 31)

Jesus' warning to Peter that he would betray him is a commentary on a verse from Proverbs. There the wise man says, "Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy" (Proverbs 27:6). How painful it must have been for Peter to have his beloved Lord level such a terrible accusation. How hopeful it must have been for Peter to live into Jesus' promise to him of restoration.

I learn three things from the Lord Jesus that I need to bear in mind if I am ever called to speak to a friend in spiritual trouble. First, speak personally. Jesus calling out "Simon, Simon..." counteracts the evil one's dehumanizing ways. Peter was a real person, headed for a real fall, but he still belonged to the Lord.

Second, speak truthfully. Speak the truth in love, but by all means speak the truth. "Satan has demanded to sift you like wheat..." Peter would be pitted against the Prince of Darkness and Jesus told him so.

Third, speak hopefully. A world of hope must have dawned in Peter's hurting heart when Jesus said, "And when once you have turned..." Our failures, however terrible they are, are never final! Human failure is temporary; God's grace is eternal.

Is there someone you need to speak to this way?

Prayer: Lord, help us speak the truth in love!

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March 24, 2016: Feasting

Luke 22:14-23

When the hour came, he took his place at the table... (v. 14)

John Calvin, one of the spiritual fathers of Reformed Christians, once argued vehemently for the Lord's Supper to be celebrated every time Christians gathered. He felt this way because he believed that the Lord's Supper was not merely a feast of remembrance, but of communion and hope as well. He believed in Jesus' real presence at the table, and that was enough to persuade Calvin that we should eat the bread and drink the cup with the Lord every week.

Calvin meditated upon the meaning of that Last Supper scene for the longest possible time. The fruit of his deep contemplation is this moving statement:

Here at the Table Christ himself grows into one with us... There is nothing more incredible than that things severed and removed from one another by the whole space between heaven and earth should not only be connected across such a great distance but also to be united, so that souls may receive nourishment from Christ [himself].

You can find Calvin's full description of this communion experience in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (4.17.24). But more profoundly, you can receive such nourishment from Christ yourself the next time you respond in faith to your pastor's invitation, "Come, for all things are now ready."

Prayer: We come to your table hungry, O Lord; feed us until we want no more!

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March 25, 2016: Dying

Luke 23:32-49

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scripture... (1 Corinthians 15:3)

The Heidelberg Catechism, a treasured statement of faith for many Reformed Christians, contains a series of four powerful questions and answers about Christ's suffering. The first of them concerns the death of Jesus: "Why did Christ have to suffer 'death'?"

Understanding the answer ought to shield our hearts against an avalanche of guilt: "Because the righteousness and truth of God are such that nothing else could pay for our sins except the death of the Son of God."

Hear it again, friends: *Nothing else could pay for our sins except the death of the Son of God.*

But, I hasten to add, the Son of God did indeed die for our sins! Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

I once heard a preacher give tremendous counsel to a sanctuary filled with college students. He told them, "When the devil assaults you with a barrage of accusations concerning your sinfulness, don't argue with him. He has good evidence. Simply tell him you have been washed in the blood of the Lamb, and therefore his accusations are now irrelevant." The sense of relief in the room was palpable—including the sense of relief in my own soul.

Prayer: We bless you, Lord Jesus, for your saving blood!

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March 26, 2016: Buried

Luke 23:44-56

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you (John 14:18).

All four gospel writers tell us that Jesus was buried. Our most prominent creeds, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, do the same. Why? Why is it necessary to be reminded that the lifeless body of Jesus of Nazareth was buried? On one level this fact is emphasized to underscore that Jesus actually did die. Early critics of the resurrection of Jesus argued that he did not die, but instead fell into a coma from which he was later revived. His three-day burial disproves that theory.

There is another reason why his burial is an article of the Christian faith, one that brings enormous comfort for anyone who has stood at a loved one's graveside. Jesus Christ has been even there. One of the funeral prayers of the Reformed Church says: "Almighty God, by the death of your Son Jesus Christ you destroyed death; by his rest in the tomb you sanctified the graves of the saints..." Jesus was laid in Joseph's borrowed tomb, and in so doing he made even our darkest and loneliest place holy ground.

This, at least in part, is how Jesus makes good on his promise: *I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you.* (John 14:18)

Prayer: We bless you, Lord Jesus, for even going to the grave with us.

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March 27, 2016: Christ Is Risen!

Luke 24:1-12

He is not here, but has risen (v. 5).

Everything we treasure most about the Christian faith hangs on the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus rose from the grave it is proof positive of all the staggering claims he made about himself and all those that have been subsequently made about him. If he did not burst the bands of death as the gospels report, then our treasured faith is as silly as a sitcom episode, our sins are in fact the controlling reality of our sorry lives, and those whom we have loved and lost are nothing more than smudges on the window of our fading memories. All of this was the logic of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins [and] those also who have died in Christ have perished” (vv. 17-18).

Think about this for just a moment. The women who first came to the tomb finally grasped the significance of the new life that was breaking in on them when they remembered what Jesus had taught them: “Then they remembered his words” (v. 8). You might say they moved forward by looking back. Christians interpret their experiences through the word, and not the other way around. Remember that, please, the next time your personal experience is at odds with the expressed teaching of scripture. Revelation always trumps experience.

Prayer: Give us the grace to interpret our lives through the promise of your word.

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March 28, 2016: A Gospel for All Nations

Luke 24:36-52

And that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem (v. 47).

As he completes his gospel, Luke reiterates one more time where the good news comes from and where it is going.

When on Easter Day the risen Christ speaks of “all things...written...concerning me,” he means the whole Old Testament, not just the bits that obviously refer to a coming Messiah. Everything in it converges on him.

To put it another way, the message comes out of the Hebrew world of Zechariah and Mary and Simeon and Anna, and nowhere else. To Israel belong the promises; from Israel comes the Messiah (Romans 9:1-5). There’s no avoiding the Old Testament story, however much its presentation may be adapted for modern people.

Then, having come into focus in the events that the New Testament records and explains, the gospel message fans out across the world. Intended from the outset for “all the nations,” its early spread among them will be the theme of Luke’s second volume. But he has been showing us—even before the death and resurrection of Jesus—one incident after another that demonstrates why the good news is for everyone.

All that Old Testament preparation, all this New Testament outreach: deep roots and wide vision—the kind of faith to which the risen Lord challenges us today.

Prayer: Thank you for all that lies behind the resurrection story, and all that flows from it.

Today’s devotional was written by Michael Wilcock, a retired pastor in the Church of England. This Lenten series comes from Words of Hope, whose mission is to build the church in the hard places through media. To learn more about the organization or subscribe to Words of Hope’s daily devotions, visit www.woh.org.