meditate
ON MY WORD

The Congregational Church of New Canaan
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.

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**Note:** The table is a chronological list of topics and corresponding scriptures. Each entry represents a topic followed by a scripture reference. The dates are marked with the chronological order of the events in the Bible.
Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness;
Come into his presence with singing.

Know that the LORD is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
And his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the LORD is good;
His steadfast love endures for ever,
And his faithfulness to all generations.

Psalm 100
In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . . God said, “Let there be light;” and there was light. Genesis 1:1 & 3

Takeaway: Words can create life and light in our world.
In the beginning, as it is to this day, words bring forth life. The ancient and holy story of the first chapter of Genesis tells of the origins of creation. All things began with the spoken word: light and darkness, sky and sea, earth and vegetation, animals and humankind. God speaks, and life forms.

Words are powerful things. They can build up, or they can tear down. They can be used to heal or to hurt. They can bring peace or incite war. In the beginning, God spoke and goodness came into being. The same can happen with our words. A carefully timed compliment can lift spirits. A word of encouragement can give shape to a life. A loving word can lead to intimacy that literally gives birth to life. How can your words bring life to others?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What is a word that someone spoke into your life that created a new reality?
4. What is a word that you believe God has spoken into your life?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Get in touch with someone who has been special to you. Write them a hand-written note or have a conversation with them and tell them how you feel.
2. Spend time in prayer. Meditate on what words you are using in talking to God.
3. Take a walk around your neighborhood, speaking the vision you have for your community.

Notes
SEPTEMBER 19TH

Noah’s Ark

Read: Genesis 6:1–9:17

So the Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created . . . for I am sorry that I have made them.” Genesis 6:7

Takeaway: Even when God gets angry, his love creates a path of rescue.

God gets angry; the Gospels show that Jesus got angry. As in the time of Noah, there must be times when we frustrate God. We prefer to think of God as loving, nurturing, and unfailingly gracious, but even the most loving of parents get angry with their children from time to time. Just because parental love is enduring doesn’t mean the anger isn’t real.

We want God to conform to our desires, just as we wanted our parents to bend to our wishes when we were young. If we want a real relationship with God, however, we must embrace all of God–God’s love, God’s mercy, and even God’s anger. Perhaps it is time for us to stop being offended by divine anger and allow ourselves to be corrected by it. Why might God get angry with you?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Write down a time when you were angry. Were you justified? Just because you were angry, does that mean you did not still love the other person?
4. How do you think about God’s anger? Is it something you are comfortable with? Do you wrestle with it?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

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Optional Practice for the Week
1. Reach out to a person you once were angry at and have a conversation with them.
2. If you have kids, build a paper or cardboard Ark with them and see if it floats!

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The Woman at the Well

Read: John 4:5–42

*Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. John 4:3–4*

**Takeaway: Jesus crossed lines to reach out to all sorts of people.**

There were two routes by which an individual could make passage between Judea and Galilee, and only one required traveling through Samaria. The assertion the Jesus “had to” go through Samaria on his way to Galilee is not geographically accurate, which suggests that Jesus was drawn by God to go to the land of the Samaritans to demonstrate God’s all-inclusive love for people.

He entered a region of Palestine viewed as ritually unclean and he spoke alone with a woman, which was socially unacceptable. He made a habit of going where others refused to go and speaking with people others walked past without taking notice. To follow in Jesus’ example means to cross lines that separate people from one another so that God’s family might be united in friendship, fellowship, and love. What line do you need to cross today?

**For Reflection and Conversation**
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What lines have you crossed in your life? Which ones have you had trouble crossing?
4. Why do you think Jesus prioritized going to Samaria? Is there a place you are feeling drawn to pass through? Why might that be?

**Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection**

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**Optional Practice for the Week**
1. Go on a walk; take a different route than usual. What new things did you encounter?
2. Write down a list of people you have avoided in the past and why you did so.
3. Have a conversation with your family about what it means to follow in Jesus’ example.

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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 3RD

Jacob Wrestles with God

Read: Genesis 32:22–32

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”

Genesis 32:30

Takeaway: Wrestling with God brings us to a place of love and mercy.

Tucked away in the story of Jacob is a sighting of the God many of us have come to know through Jesus Christ. After Jacob came face to face with God during a night of wrestling, he encountered the older brother whom he had dealt treacherously with in the past. Esau had every right to be furious with Jacob, and Esau had even vowed to kill his brother. When they finally reunited, though, Esau embraced Jacob and offered him complete forgiveness. Receiving such a gift of grace and mercy, Jacob responded that seeing Esau was like seeing God face to face. Jacob would have known – he had spent the previous night wrestling with God. Perhaps, when we encounter love and forgiveness and mercy, we are, in fact, standing in the presence of God. What does God look like to you?

For Reflection and Conversation

1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. When have you wrestled with God? Where did that experience lead you?
4. Is there a time when you and a family member had a falling out, only for one of you to show forgiveness and mercy?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection


Optional Practice for the Week

1) Have a ‘wrestling’ competition at home.
2) Make a list of the times when it has felt like you were wrestling with God.
3) Reach out to a friend or family member and let them know that you forgive them.

Notes


OCTOBER 10TH

The Ten Commandments

Read: Exodus 20:1–7

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether it is in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” . . . Aaron took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” Exodus 20:4; 32:4

Takeaway: Our idols can stop us from following God’s laws.
Moses was up on Mount Sinai conversing with God while the Israelites were lamenting being left alone. It is a painful story: as God was giving the law, the people were already breaking it. Their only defense was that they didn’t know any better – a technicality. Once they read the stone tablets they understood their offense. Which is not to say they behaved much better . . . nor do we. We still make and worship idols, and God still does not appreciate it. We worship wealth, success, beauty, and so much more! When will we learn?

What idol do you need to grind into dust and be rid of?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Recall a time when you chose to pursue something you wanted over what God desired. What happened in that circumstance? How did you feel about it after the fact?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. See how many of the Ten Commandments you can get right – then memorize them.
2. Hike up a mountain’ and talk to God, like Moses did.
3. Take a break for an entire day from an ‘idol’ – technology, beauty standards, and much more!

Notes
The Greatest Commandment

**Read: Matthew 22:34–46**

And one of them, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Matthew 22:35–36

**Takeaway: At the end of the day, God wants us to do one thing – Love!**

Love. When all the rules and regulations of this life—as well as the rules of the Bible—are scrutinized, Jesus’ message rings true. Love fulfills the law. Love God and love your neighbor and you will never find yourself breaking any rules. While it can seem impossibly difficult to love at certain times and to love certain people, love is the simple answer to living well and righteously before God. If we loved, we would not abuse. If we loved, we would not cheat or steal. If we loved, we would not horde for ourselves. If we loved . . . God’s will would reign on earth as it is in heaven.

Why do you find it difficult to love?

**For Reflection and Conversation**

1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Has there been a time when you felt someone got bogged down by rules and practices instead of simply giving you what you wanted: love? Have you been that person?
4. When you think of God’s rules, what do you think of? Is it a long list, or this passage?

**Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection**

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**Optional Practice for the Week**

1) Write down the whole list of things Jesus says here we need to do. Hint: It is not very long!
2) Show someone that you love them.
3) Pray for the well-being of someone you think you do not love very well. How do you feel?

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John the Baptist

Read: Luke 3:1–8

John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written ... “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” Luke 3:3–4

Takeaway: Sometimes God uses us to prepare the way for others to succeed.
John the Baptist, a relative of Jesus, wandered about in the wilderness eating honey and locusts – not exactly the sort of lifestyle that you might advertise to get people interested in your profession. However, John was convinced that God had given him a mission: to go and prepare the way for the coming Savior. Now, John probably did not know who that person would be, and he likely did not consider his cousin, Jesus, a candidate at first. Despite not knowing who that savior would be, John gave up life’s luxuries to dedicate himself to the calling that he felt God had placed on his life. Such a dedication and willingness to follow the nudging of God’s is admirable. In what ways are you willing to follow the pull of God’s Spirit upon the direction of your life?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. When have you felt like God used you to prepare the way for his plan?
4. In what ways do you excel at helping other people? Is it preparing their way with opportunities? Emotional and relational support? Financial or networking help?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection __________________________________________
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Optional Practice for the Week
1. Take the time to do one thing to help ‘prepare the way’ for someone today.
2. Write down a list of people who helped prepare the way for you and where you are today.
3. Reach out to a person influential in your life and tell them ‘Thank you’ for their help.

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OCTOBER 31ST

Mary and Martha

Read: Luke 10:38–42

*But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked,*
*‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?*
*Tell her then to help me.’ Luke 10:40

**Takeaway: Sometimes we need to be still and be present.**
Martha felt neglected. She had been the one who had opened her house to Jesus and his friends, she had been the one who was serving as the hostess of this event, and it looked like she would be the one to clean up the mess when the evening drew to an end. This might not have been quite so irksome if her sister Mary were helping her out, instead of doing what Martha would have preferred to do–sitting with and listening to Jesus as he taught. Martha wondered if anyone noticed, let alone cared, about all she was doing. She let her work and her disappointment get the best of her. In the end, we learn Jesus would have preferred that Martha do less and enjoy the company of her guests more. Have you missed out on the joy of company because you were embittered by what other people were not doing to help out?

**For Reflection and Conversation**
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. When have you missed out on an opportunity or experience because you were too busy?
4. Which do you prefer in a friend: someone who gives you their attention? Or someone who is busy and running around while you are together?

**Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection**

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**Optional Practice for the Week**
1. Take 5 minutes to be still and meditate on God’s word.
2. Have a rest night with family; instead of doing work, hang out with each other for the night.

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November

thanksgiving

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 minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:5–7
NOVEMBER 7TH

Manna, Quail, and Water

Read: Exodus 16:1–18, 17:1–7

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. Exodus 16:13–14

Takeaway: God will provide for us. Will we trust him?
The Israelites were complaining that they had no food to eat in the desert. They asked Moses why he had to lead them out of Egypt so that they could die in a wasteland. Moses countered saying that their quarrel was not with him but with God. In truth, Moses might have had the same questions lurking in his own heart. How was he going to feed so great a multitude of people in the desert? The answer, of course, was that he was not. It was not Moses’ job to feed the people—that was God’s responsibility. What Moses and the Israelites needed to do was to trust that the God who had brought them out of Egypt and into freedom could provide meals for them in the desert. The wandering band of Hebrews needed to learn to trust in God’s provision. Even in a place of desolation, God provides. Do you grumble about unfulfilled wants?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Has there been a time when you felt like God had left you and things would fall apart? What happened? How did the story end?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Write down a list of your needs, then make a check beside each one that is regularly met.
2. Choose a day to pray each time you become stressed or worried about meeting a need. See if it changes your perspective or mood.

Notes
Elijah and the Widow

Read: 1 Kings 17:8–16

‘For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.’ The widow went and did as Elijah said so that her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail.

1 Kings 17:14–16

Takeaway: God can use us to work miracles in other people’s lives.

The Old Testament is filled with stories of miracles and divine providence. While some of these stories might seem distant or fantastic to us, there is a core principle at the heart of most of these stories. Usually, the purpose of the miracle is to show God’s love or protection for the least of these. In this story, the presence of the prophet Elijah helps secure food for a widow and her son. Although we might not command meal or oil to miraculously appear in somebody’s house, we have the ability to use our time and resources to be a sort of divine providence in that person’s life. How can you be a miracle from God to those around you?

For Reflection and Conversation

1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Have you ever had a ‘miracle’ happen to you?
4. How have you experienced God’s provision through other people?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week

1. Make a ‘miracle’ cake with the ingredients found in the text.
2. Go to the store and buy food to donate to those in need.

Notes
NOVEMBER 21ST

Daniel and the Lions’ Den

Read: Daniel 6:1–28

Daniel continued . . . to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. Daniel 6:10

Takeaway: When we are filled with God’s Spirit, nothing can overpower us.

It has been said in jest that the lions could not eat Daniel because he was too big a meal for them. Daniel was too big—too full of God’s Spirit—for the lions to consume him. We may not fully understand the how and why of the Daniel story, but we do know that the lions stayed away, and that Daniel was full of the Spirit of God. Daniel prayed three times a day. Daniel fasted. Daniel did not get caught up in the idolatry of his culture. Daniel is a larger than life character in the Bible, and the size and scope of his memory is directly related to his uncompromising faithfulness. The truth is, when we are full of God’s Spirit and God’s presence, nothing can devour us because we are already fully consumed with God.

How many times a day do you pray?

For Reflection and Conversation

1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. When has been a time that you felt scared or like you were surrounded by lions? How did your faith help you through?
4. What do you think being filled with God’s Spirit looks like in your life?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week

1. Try to pray three times a day this week.
2. Decide on one food/practice/technology to fast from this week or at a certain time each day.

Notes

14
Plowshares and Pruning Hooks

Read: Isaiah 2:1–5

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Isaiah 2:4

Takeaway: God has a plan to turn around the ways of the world.
Given the violence, carelessness, and greed that seem to permeate our lives and our world, it is difficult to believe that a day will come when wars will cease, abuses will end, and all wrongs will be made right. But the Bible doggedly asserts that our destructive instincts will be transformed into productive impulses. Instead of making war, we will choose to make peace. Instead of striking people down with swords, we will choose to plow fields together in anticipation of future harvests. Instead of training spears in the direction of our enemies, we will train vines and trees and flowering bushes so that they produce in abundance. Every time we choose to be productive instead of destructive, that reality begins to take shape. With every good deed and generous act, a spear is set down and sword is sheathed . . . and God’s vision for our world is further revealed.

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What behaviors do you want God to change in the world?
4. Is this passage believable? Does it challenge your faith or fuel it?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection


Optional Practice for the Week
1. Make a list of ways in which you hope God restores and redeems our world.
2. Do one thing that makes your community a more loving or beautiful place.
3. Pray for a different aspect of our community each day.

Notes


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.

Love never ends ... And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:4–8, 13
An Angel Visits Joseph

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

Takeaway: We can trust God to make everything all right.

It is one of the most frequently offered commands in the Bible, “Do not be afraid.” “Do not worry.” “Fear not!” It 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. Do you trust God?

For Reflection and Conversation

1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. How do you think Joseph was feeling? Would you have felt similarly in his circumstances?
4. When is a time that you have felt scared? How might your faith help you in those times?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week

1. Meditate on your level of trust in God’s care of you.
2. Talk with your significant other, especially about those issues that you all might worry about.
3. Make a list of times in which you have trusted God and how those circumstances turned out.

Notes
An Angel Visits Mary

Read: Luke 1:26–38

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38

Takeaway: Our work from God is a joy to accomplish.
Mary said, “I accept.” An angel of the Lord told Mary she would become an unwed pregnant woman in a culture that often condemned such women to death. The angel didn’t say she had a choice in the matter, but Mary’s willingness to play whatever role was assigned to her is impressive all the same.

When we are given assignments, we often accept them grudgingly, and perhaps even approach them halfheartedly. Mary was given a heavy burden to carry—a daunting chore—and the hymn of praise she sings in the following chapter lets us know she embraced her role with enthusiasm and even joy.
Can you approach the chores and work you are assigned with joy—as if the work itself was a gift from God?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What do you think about Mary’s willingness to be faithful? Do you think the Christmas story would be the same without her willingness?
4. Has there been a time when you have felt called to be faithful in a difficult situation?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Sing a Christmas carol that mentions Mary, such as “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”
2. Say “yes” to a Christmas invitation that you normally would decline.

Notes

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Mary Visits Elizabeth

Read: Luke 1:39–58

And Mary said, ‘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; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. Luke 1:46–49

Takeaway: When God calls us, God equips us for our ministry.
As difficult as it was for Mary to be faithful in the task that God had given her, the fruits of her labor were evident to herself and those who loved her. When Mary visits Elizabeth, Elizabeth affirms Mary’s ministry and the special role that God created for her. Elizabeth’s encouragement and affirmation of Mary, in the midst of likely social scorn toward her, surely helped Mary have the steadfastness to compose this beautiful Scripture, which became one of the most ancient hymns sung by Christians throughout the ages. How can we have the same courage and steadfastness as Mary? How can we encourage others in their difficulties as Elizabeth did?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What are the qualities of Mary that you admire most?
4. Do you have an Elizabeth in your life? How does that person affirm the calling that God has placed upon you?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Get a Christmas present for an ‘Elizabeth’ in your life.
2. Watch and sing to a version of the Magnificat. What is your favorite part of it?
3. Practice being an Elizabeth by affirming the gifts and abilities of a friend or family member.

Notes
Love Visits Us

Read: 1 John 4:7–16

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 1 John 4:16

Takeaway: Jesus is the perfect distillation of God's love in human form.

God is love. We have heard that said, and perhaps we have said it ourselves. God’s character, as revealed to us through the life and ministry and resurrection of Jesus, is ultimately loving. But that statement may be an even more profound description of what God is actually like. God is like love. Invisible, but fully present. Disembodied, but keenly felt. Inexplicable, but so very real. The experience of love might be the most dynamic proof we have of God. There is no reason for love to exist in the world. Darwin didn’t cite love as part of the evolutionary progression of life in the world. Science cannot measure love any more than scientists can locate God. We all believe in love. Love is real. If God is love, then it stands to reason that God is just as real. And in the presence of Jesus in this world, we know that the truest form of Love came to be here on Earth with us.

What does it mean that God is love? Does that change your understanding of how you love?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What do you find most remarkable about the Christmas story and God’s love for us?
4. If God is love, how does that change your idea of what love is? How you can love others?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Sing your favorite song about love.
2. Tell somebody that you love them.
3. Pray that you may have the ability to show the same sort of love to others that Jesus did.

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

Ephesians 4:31–32
JANUARY 2ND

Joseph and His Brothers

Read: Genesis 37:1–28

Joseph’s brothers said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” Genesis 37:19–20

Takeaway: God uses us for important tasks despite our imperfections.

There are so many problematic elements to the story of Joseph and his brothers. There is a father who loves one son more than the others, a son who takes pleasure in dreams of dominion over his brothers, and brothers who plot and carry out harmful actions against their younger sibling. Shockingly, this is the very family that the Bible tells us serves as the source of God’s revelation in the world. Somehow, Jacob’s dysfunctional family serves as God’s ambassadors to the world. Perhaps this little pinprick of light in the darkness is all God needs to work powerfully in our lives.

Can you identify little slivers of light that have broken into your life and allowed God to work with you in truly important ways?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Do you remember your dreams? Why do you think God spoke to people in dreams?
4. Who do you think was responsible for the problems that befell Joseph?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Name things you love about your family, as well as one thing you would change.
2. Make a post on social media about part of your family or close friends that you love.
3. Identify one way that you can be a little sliver of light in your life this week.

Notes
JANUARY 9TH

The Magi

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

Takeaway: Those who seek Jesus will find him.

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.

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

For Reflection and Conversation
1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3) Can you remember a time when you sought out Jesus?
4) In seeking after Jesus, what questions do you have about him and your faith?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Look up at the night sky and reflect on this story.
2. Give someone a gift.
3. Pray that you can seek Jesus like the Magi did.

Notes
And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. Matthew 3:16

Takeaway: God speaks to us in the extraordinary and the mundane.

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, the heavens were immediately torn open for all to see, and the voice of God bellowed forth for all to hear. There are some people for whom coming to faith is an unmistakable thunderclap experience.

But for many, many others, the experience of the divine is more subtle, mistakable, and something that requires continued faith. If Jesus was entirely certain about his connection with God, if he did not have moments of doubt, if he had conclusive proof of who he was, then he is unlike many human beings.

What thunderclap moment or subtle stirring guidance have you received in your life of faith?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. How does it feel when an authority figure praises you? How do you think Jesus felt?
4. Why was it important for God to affirm Jesus? When is God most pleased with you?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Recall your own baptism, maybe by looking at pictures and talking with your parents.
2. Ask for a copy of your church’s baptismal vows. Do you think that you are upholding them?

Notes
JANUARY 23RD

Jonah and the Big Fish

Read: Jonah 1–4

Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not
grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh,
that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who did not know their
right hand from their left, and also many animals?” Jonah 4:10–11

Takeaway: God’s salvation extends to all people.
The story of Jonah began with God’s call to go to Nineveh, in the hope that the people of Nineveh would
repent from their evil ways. God wanted to save the great city of Nineveh from itself. God’s central act in
this story, however, was an effort to save Jonah from himself. Jonah had lost his way, his perspective, and
his appreciation of God’s mercy. The story ends with Jonah wishing he were dead and God making a case
for love and mercy. When it comes to the business of saving, God’s ambition is boundless. God desires to
save both great and small alike. God works as relentlessly to rescue an ill-tempered prophet as a thriving
metropolis– even animals don’t escape God’s interest! It is as if God will not give up until everyone in the
family is saved.

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Are there times when you wished that God would not help all people?
4. Has there been a time when God tried to use you to help others, but you were obstinate?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection


Optional Practice for the Week
1. Pray that you would be willing to bring God’s love to all people.
2. Make a list of the people that you do not like very much and pray for them.
3. Do something good for your community this week.

Notes
January 30th

The Prodigal Son


Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” Luke 15:31–32

Takeaway: Jealousy clouds our judgment.
It can be difficult to be the good child. You can feel forgotten, as attention and concern is lavished on wayward siblings. When the family gathers and begins to reminisce about the past, it is the bad deeds, not the good deeds done day in and day out, that everyone remembers and laughs about.

It must have irritated the Pharisees that Jesus focused so much of his attention on sinners, tax collectors, and people of ill repute. Is there no benefit in doing what is right and trying to please God? But good sons and daughters never have to endure separation from their parent. They may not get the big homecoming party thrown in their honor, but they do get to enjoy the love and embrace of family each and every day of their lives. Whose homecoming do you begrudge?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Have there been times when you were resentful of a family member?
4. Do you think that the father treated the sons equally well?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Talk to your family about disagreements you might have.
2. Meditate on the good benefits that you enjoy with your family every day.
3. Write your own ending to the story of the Prodigal Son.

Notes
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
The Parable of the Seeds

Read: Mark 4:26–32

Jesus also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.” Mark 4:26–27

Takeaway: Sometimes faith works behind the scenes, where we cannot always see it.

The grass grows at night. We can fertilize it and water it and eliminate the weeds that invade it. We can do much good work during daylight hours. We understand the biology of growth, and we know how to harm and inhibit growth. But in the end, much growth happens without our assistance. Seeds can germinate and mature without our helping hands and watchful eyes. As the apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Christians at Corinth, we can plant and water, but in the end it is God who gives the growth. This truth can serve as a call to humility, as well as a call to sabbath. God is in charge, we are not. God gives growth, we do not. In fact, God may work best when we are off the clock! Perhaps our most faithful response at times is to rest and rejoice at all that God can do.

Can you rest and trust, or do you prefer to work and produce?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. When was a time where God worked ‘overnight’ to yield fruit?
4. How might you slow down and let God be in charge of the moment?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Plant a seed in your yard or garden.
2. Meditate on God’s word and how it might be growing in your heart.
3. Research how plants grow and when their progress becomes visible.
The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

Read: Luke 15:1–10

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So Jesus told them this parable... Luke 15:2–3

Takeaway: Every single person has worth in the sight of Jesus.
The religious leaders of Jesus’ time did not understand why he would spend so much time with society’s least valuable members. Jesus spent his time and energy with people who worked disreputable jobs, did not follow regular social conventions, and sometimes just plain made the wrong decisions. We may find that we often think like the religious authorities and wonder why we would spend time with people who might not deserve it or use it well. Jesus tells two parables to show the scribes and Pharisees that God wants to recover and restore every single person who has lost their way. Maybe that is a lesson that we can incorporate into the way that we live – how to take the time to be with each and every person that we encounter.

What lost sheep or coin is God leading you to chase after?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Have there been times when you were convinced that you were not worth the effort?
4. What might God be wanting to affirm about your own value in this story?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Go throughout your house looking for spare coins and lost items.
2. Play hide and go seek.
3. Find a way to give to those in the community who might usually be overlooked.

Notes
Do Not Worry . . . Trust!

Read: Matthew 6:24-34

Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? . . . But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matthew 6:25 and 33

Takeaway: The way to find peace is through trusting God. To follow Jesus means to dismiss anxiety. “Do not worry” is the way this command is phrased, but the implicit admonition is to trust. Don’t worry, trust God is the divine imperative for our earthly living. How do we banish our worries in favor of trust?

The end of this passage of scripture offers us an avenue forward: don’t worry, just do the right thing. Don’t live fearfully, live righteously. Don’t get anxious, just do the work of God in the world . . . and everything else will fall into place. Jesus says you can take your mind off your worries by fully engaging in God’s work. If you have ever tried it, you know it is true. The antidote to fretful anxiety is righteous activity! What worries you most?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What are the things that give you anxiety?
4. Are there godly behaviors that you have been avoiding that may help bring peace into your life?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Go on a nature walk and find a lily.
2. Pray that God would give you the ability to trust his timing in spaces of anxiety.

Notes
Read: Romans 8:31–39

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

Takeaway: Nothing can separate us from God’s love.
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. Do you get in the way of God’s love for you?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Have you had moments where you felt isolated or separated from God?
4. When have you felt the closest to God’s love?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Name the obstacles that you fear will separate you from God.
2. Meditate on this Scripture and the promise of God’s ever-present love.
3. Find a hymn about God’s love and sing it.

Notes
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
Jesus Goes to Nazareth

Read: Luke 4:16–21

Jesus ... found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ Luke 4:17–19

Takeaway: Jesus came to bring God’s kingdom to our world.
Jesus starts his ministry by going to his local synagogue and choosing to read this passage of Scripture from Isaiah. Luke says that everybody’s eyes were on Jesus as he read. This was the local carpenter, a boy whom they had known for most of his life, but something was different that day in the synagogue. When Jesus finishes the reading and tells his audience that the prophecy has come true in their day, the audience is astounded.

Even though these people knew Jesus, they are some of the first to turn against him. Later on in Luke 4 we see that the people grew angry with Jesus and attempted to throw him out of town. Sometimes we can do that to the people we know and love too. Who are the prophets in your city?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. How do you think you can support others in your faith community?
4. How do you think this experience shaped Jesus’ perception of his purpose and ministry?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Use your Bible (or Google) to find the Old Testament passage that Jesus quotes from.
2. Make a list of ways that you can support people in your faith community.
3. Write down a way that Jesus’ message connects to contemporary justice initiatives.
Jesus Feeds 5,000

Read: John 6:1–14

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for all these people to eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. John 6:5–6

Takeaway: Sometimes our needs are greater than what we can meet ourselves.

Jesus asked a trick question as a teaching technique. How do you feed thousands of people? Philip and the disciples had no idea. How can we blame them? Five loaves of bread and two fish cannot possibly be enough!

He wasn’t expecting Philip or the other disciples to have the answer. Jesus wanted to teach something new. You can’t provide for all these people. You don’t have enough to get the job done. To feed the crowd, to accomplish the goal, to take care of everyone is beyond your ability. A task like that requires something more, someone more. Once the disciples and Jesus began dividing up what they had, that is exactly what happened—God provided! What question might Jesus ask you?

For Reflection and Conversation

1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3) How do you think you would have reacted if you were a disciple that day?
4) What are the fishes and loaves that people in our community can provide?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

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Optional Practice for the Week

1) Share a meal with someone.
2) Take some bread to your local food drive.

Notes

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________________________________________________________________________
The Good Samaritan


But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. Luke 10:33

Takeaway: Jesus’ ministry breaks down boundaries.
The hero of this story is a traveling Samaritan. Samaritans were not people held in high regard by Jesus’ listening audience. Hebrew priests and Levites were the people who were granted honor and respect. However, in this familiar story, we are told that the professionally religious people could not be bothered to help someone in need.

Even today most ministry is done not by professional clergy but by lay people as they engage in their daily living. A traveling businessman offers to buy lunch for someone he meets who is in need of food. A doctor takes a few extra minutes to hear about the relational heartache one of her patients is experiencing. A teacher decides to mentor a student who is struggling with challenges at home. Ministry requires a whole host of good Samaritans. What is your ministry?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What are boundaries that separate people in your community?
4. Have there been times when you have broken down barriers in your life?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Make a list of boundaries that exist in your community.
2. Meditate on how you can be a person that transcends boundaries between people.
3. Take a walk to a part of town you do not usually visit.

Notes
MARCH 27TH

The Early Believers


All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ... No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. Acts 2:44–45, 4:32

Takeaway: Our lives are meant to be shared.
Sharing wealth for the benefit of all was a hallmark of the early church. Concern for the commonwealth of all people was a cornerstone of Christian faith. The earliest Christians understood that their lives and their resources were gifts from God–gifts they believed they did not deserve. For those first Christians, nothing was earned, all was given. Therefore, reciprocal generosity seemed the only faithful way to live.

Why do so many Christians become angry and fearful when it comes to sharing their wealth for the benefit of others? Do you place more value in what is privately held or what is publically shared?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Why do you think the early Christians gave up so much of their resources?
4. How would you rate your level of generosity?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Research charities in your community.
2. Compare how much money you spend on your household against how much you spend on other households. Are there ways that you might be able to be more of a blessing to others?

Notes
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;
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
A time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to throw away stone, and a time to gather stones together;
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to seek, and a time to lose;
A time to keep, and a time to throw away;
A time to tear, and a time to sew;
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate;
A time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8
The Transfiguration

Read: Matthew 17:1–13

Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Matthew 17:1–13

Takeaway: The divine can be right in front of our very eyes.

Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him. It was an act he had undertaken countless times before. But this time, something happened to him—he changed—he appeared to be in the company of the great luminaries of the Hebrew faith. For a moment Jesus appeared divine . . . Godlike. It was as if his true character was on display for anyone who happened to be around to see.

There must have been plenty of times when God seemed silent, Jesus felt unmoved, and there were no dazzling visions to be seen. But Jesus persisted, and in time changed so much that he didn’t even look like the same person to those who knew him best. That’s what prayer can do—it can change us, it can illuminate us, and it can make our lives dazzling! How do times of prayer affect you?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Why do you think Jesus’ appearance changed on this occasion?
4. If you saw somebody change like this, how would you react?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection


Optional Practice for the Week
1. Change your appearance one day and see how people react.
2. Meditate on how we sometimes change our appearance depending on who we are seeing.
3. Create something this week.

Notes
As Jesus was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they has seen, saying, 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!' Luke 19:37–38

Takeaway: God's timing does not always match our timing.
This is the ticker-tape parade before the championship has been won, the celebratory headline printed in the paper in anticipation of an accomplishment that has not yet been achieved. The people along the road were celebrating Jesus as if he were a conquering hero, even though he had neither conquered anyone nor done anything particularly heroic. This is the kind of display of enthusiasm that most prudent people would never allow themselves to get sucked into. Those who followed Jesus were grateful. They were hopeful. They were excited. They had an unquenchable sense that Jesus represented something new and different and wonderful entering the world. When was the last time you got really excited about Jesus’ presence in your life?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. How do you think these people felt a few days later after Good Friday?
4. How do you think Jesus felt about being celebrated in this way?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection
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Optional Practice for the Week
1. Find a palm leaf.
2. Walk through the entrance to your town.
3. Pray to be excited by Jesus’ presence in your life.
The Women at the Empty Tomb

Read: Mark 16:1–8

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Mark 16:8

Takeaway: God’s work is not always what we expect it to be.
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 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.

Sometimes the mysteries of God are terrifying and amazing all at the same moment; sometimes when we encounter them they move us to a response that we cannot fully understand. Are you comfortable with mystery? Are you frightened by the mysteries of God? Excited by them?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Why do you think that the women were silent about their experience?
4. How would you have reacted if you were there on Easter morning?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

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Optional Practice for the Week
1. Go to a garden, early in the morning if you can.
2. Think back to a time when you were terrified and amazed.
3. Write down a memory of how God worked mysteriously in your life.

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The Road to Emmaus


While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him ... When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened ... and he vanished from their sight. Luke 24:15–16 & 30–31

Takeaway: Jesus’ presence is unpredictable and wonderful.
It is an audacious claim: a country preacher, who died in the big city, appeared after his death on a lonely road that led to the town of Emmaus. What makes the story all the more remarkable—or questionable—is that the two disciples did not recognize Jesus at first. When they finally saw Jesus for who he was, he vanished from their sight.

This would be an easy story to refute, if it were not for the fact that many people have caught glimpses of Jesus over the centuries. Most of the time we don’t recognize him because he comes in a form that is unexpected. A nurse speaking tenderly to a patient, a teacher offering encouragement to a struggling student, a friend consoling another after a loss. Where have you seen Jesus at work?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What do you think prevented the disciples from recognizing Jesus?
4. Can you think of a time when you suddenly realized God was working in your life?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Share a meal and drink with somebody you do not usually share it with.
2. Take an evening off and walk as far as you can. Take note of how you feel afterwards.
3. Meditate and focus on where Jesus may be showing up in your life.

Notes
By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Galatians 5:22-24
MAY 1ST

Doubting Thomas

Read: John 20:19–31

But Thomas said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” John 20:25

Takeaway: Blessed are those who can believe without seeing.
We understand Thomas’s doubt. He needed proof like we need proof. For us, “seeing is believing,” and that was all Thomas was asking for—a little evidence. Resurrection is a wildly outlandish claim, and it strains even the most robust imaginations. This incident, however, branded Thomas forever as the doubter, an unflattering title we all could be shouldered with. Doubter can sound a little harsh, so we refer to ourselves instead as critical or practical or rational thinkers. But Jesus wants us to be called believers, so he returns. Jesus didn’t desert Thomas because of his lack of faith, and he won’t desert us in the midst of our skepticism either. And Jesus doesn’t rest until we come to believe and exclaim as Thomas did, “My Lord and my God!”

What kind of proof do you need to believe?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. In what areas of life is it easy to have faith? In what areas do you usually have doubts?
4. Do you think it is unfair that Thomas gets a bad reputation when the other disciples had already seen Jesus with their own eyes?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. List the problems you have with the Jesus of the Bible. Then list the things that you believe about him.

Notes
David and Goliath

Read: 1 Samuel 17

David said, “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” 1 Samuel 17:26

Takeaway: Our faith helps us to conquer giants.
We are told that Saul and the Israelite army were paralyzed with fear as the giant Goliath taunted them from the Philistine ranks. Goliath was huge. The Philistines’ iron swords were fearsome. However, what most saw as a daunting challenge, David saw as a wonderful opportunity. Upon seeing Goliath on the battlefield, the first thing David asked was what a man would receive if he killed Goliath. What was the reward for killing the Philistine?

So often in life, victory is claimed by people who see obstacles as opportunities. They believe that stumbling blocks are actually stepping-stones. In truth, challenges are always opportunities for growth and development. People who recognize this reality are the ones whose stories live on to inspire others. What Goliath-sized opportunity is standing in front of you right now?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What do you think the soldiers around David felt like after he took on Goliath?
4. What opportunities are you currently hesitant to pursue?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Find or make a slingshot.
2. Retell the story of David and Goliath using a contemporary story.
3. Make a list of the opportunities that you have in your life right now.

Notes

MAY 15TH

A Boy at the Temple

Read: Luke 2:41–52

Jesus said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Luke 2:49

Takeaway: Everybody, even Jesus, has things to learn in life.
The story of Jesus in the temple as a boy is fascinating, because at one moment the account conveys an image of a child far wiser than his years, while in the next it demonstrates a youth’s careless disregard for his parents. As a boy Jesus was wise, but he was still very much a boy. From a young age we are told that Jesus appeared both human and divine.

This brief story ends with a hint of repentance. It says that after disappearing from the family caravan and causing his mother and father to frantically search Jerusalem for him, Jesus become obedient. He chose to follow the instruction of his earthly parents, and he grew in age and wisdom as well as in divine and human favor. Jesus made a mistake, he frightened his parents, and he chose never to be that careless toward his family again. Jesus grew up. When did you grow up?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. How is the Jesus in this story different from the one usually seen in the Gospels?
4. What is relatable in this story to your own experience growing up?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection


Optional Practice for the Week
1. Remember a time when you ran off or disobeyed when you were a child.
2. Take a family trip for the weekend.
3. Pray for your ability to continue growing up.

Notes
MAY 22ND

The Centurion’s Faith

Read: Matthew 8:5-13

When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.” Matthew 8:10

Takeaway: What matters to Jesus is our faith, not our circumstances.

It took a lot to impress Jesus. When we consider all that Jesus has done for us, it would be beyond presumptuous to assume that any of our actions might fill Jesus with amazement. Unless, of course, we find some new way to amaze Jesus with the depths to which we are willing to sink in our relationships with others and with God!

We are told that a Roman centurion’s willingness to believe, without much evidence to support his faith, filled Jesus with awe. The Gospels tell us that believing without seeing impressed Jesus. Being able to trust God when you are filled with a world of doubt is an act of faith that is moving to Jesus.

Are you generally inclined toward doubt or faith?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. How do you think Jesus’ disciples felt whenever they heard this declaration?
4. Is it surprising to you that Jesus would be impressed?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

Optional Practice for the Week
1. Meditate on how you can impress Jesus with your faithfulness.
2. Tell somebody about a time when you were impressed by a person in your faith community.
3. Listen to somebody else’s story of being impressed.

Notes
The Fruits 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 5:19–23

Takeaway: Acting like Jesus is our choice to make.

When the choice is as black and white as the type on this page, who would choose the works of the flesh? 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 again. You don’t want to be jealous and envious, but then you see the life someone else is living. On paper we would not choose the desires of the flesh, but we live in a world full of temptation and sin. How do we live by the Spirit and not 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. How would you choose to live?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What are the easiest fruits of the Spirit for you to model? The hardest?
4. What are common temptations that keep you from acting out these behaviors?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

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Optional Practice for the Week
1. Have a bowl of fruit – with a different piece for each fruit of the Spirit.
2. Make a list of the fruits of the Spirit that you want to be better at practicing.
3. Pray with another person about living out the fruits of the Spirit.

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The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside still waters;
He restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
For his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
For you are with me;
Your rod and your staff—
They comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
In the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life,
And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
My whole life long.

Psalm 23
JUNE 5TH

Pentecost

Read: Acts 2

And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Acts 2:6

Takeaway: God's presence brings unity in a confused world.
When the Spirit of God breaks into the world, people become confused. When a successful businessperson chooses to leave their lucrative job to teach at an underperforming high school, the world doesn’t understand. When a gifted doctor decides to leave a prestigious hospital to start a practice in a developing country, the world doesn’t understand. When someone decides to cross a line of division to enter into community with a former adversary, the world does not understand. The ways of God are bewildering to those who are steeped in the ways of the world.

When God’s Spirit is at work, disparate people come together in unity, people are prompted to learn and appreciate other languages and cultures, and old divisions give way to a new and wonderfully confusing world. Where is God’s Spirit bewildering you?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. Why do you think God demonstrated his presence in this way?
4. How do you think that people speak in disparate languages today?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection


Optional Practice for the Week
1. Try learning a different language.
2. Have a conversation with somebody who made a decision that confused you.
3. Meditate on God’s presence and peace in the midst of confusion.

Notes


JUNE 12TH

At the End

Read: Revelation 21:1–7, 22–27

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them: he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” Revelation 21:3–4

Takeaway: Our world is working toward a new beginning.

God will create an entirely new heaven and earth—there will be a new world, and a new Jerusalem at the center of it all. For all the groaning and aching of creation throughout the ages, a day will dawn when our world and our lives will be made whole and God will choose to dwell in our midst.

The description of this heavenly Jerusalem that resides at the center of God’s kingdom is beyond imagining. John does his best to capture what heaven on earth might look like, but we know that we cannot truly envision it for ourselves. But, from John’s vision, it seems that the end turns out to be a new beginning. At the end of this year, how do you envision beginning anew?

For Reflection and Conversation
1. Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
2. What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
3. What aspects of your life would you like to begin anew with?
4. How might a new world be comforting? Scary? Promising?

Create a Prayer Based on Your Reflection

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Optional Practice for the Week
1. Take a walk and observe the community and how it might be renewed.
2. Listen to your favorite song about a new beginning – a new season, new job, new life, etc.
3. Choose a passage of Scripture that you want to be realized in our world and meditate on it.

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