



UNMASKING OUR

# SUPERHERO

## Connect 7 Daily Devotions

January 13-March 3, 2019



**Bethlehem**

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## UNMASKING OUR

# SUPERHERO

Will Superman's true identity as mild manner reporter Clark Kent be exposed and endanger Lois Lane? Will Spiderman be exposed as Peter Parker? What will happen if multi-millionaire Bruce Wayne is discovered to be Batman? Can Captain America keep fighting the forces of evil if it is revealed he is Steve Rogers? Whether you are a fan of DC

Comics or Marvel Superhero movies, almost all of the heroes wear masks or hide their identities.

Why do super heroes wear masks? If you know anything about comics this is a very simple question. They wear masks to conceal their identity. If no one knows who they really are so they can't be hurt. They hide their weaknesses, their desires, their hopes, their dreams, the things that expose them, that make them human. If the world knew who they really were they would become vulnerable. They could be hurt. Their weaknesses would be exposed; the one's they love would be exploited and used against them.

The season of Epiphany is a time in the church year when the true identity of Jesus is exposed. In fact "epiphany" means to make know, to reveal, to manifest. During this time after the celebration of Christmas, the birth of Jesus and before the beginning of Lent, when we focus on the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross, we will turn our attention to who this Jesus really is. It is an extremely important question for us to answer.

Unlike the comic book and superhero movies our hero Jesus becomes less vulnerable and more amazing as He is unmasked. In fact because we know the true identity of our superhero Jesus his seeming defeat and death on the cross become our ultimate victory. Over the course of the next eight weeks we are going to be unmasking Jesus. We are going to reveal Jesus' real identity, as the very Son of God sent to save a fallen, sinful world.

### January 13

**Theme:** *God's Beloved Son*, Luke 3:21-22

**Readings:** Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29, Romans 6:1-11, Luke 3:15-22

### January 20

**Theme:** *Do Whatever He Says*, John 2:1-5

**Readings:** Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 128, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11

### January 27

**Theme:** *A Hometown Prophet*, Luke 4:25

**Readings:** Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Psalm 19:7-14, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Luke 4:16-30

### February 3

**Theme:** *The Holy One of God*, Luke 4:34

**Readings:** Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 7:1-6, 1 Corinthians 12:3-13:3, Luke 4:31-44

### February 10

**Theme:** *Someone to Follow*, Luke 5:10-11

**Readings:** Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 138, 1 Corinthians 14:12-20, Luke 5:1-11

### February 17

**Theme:** *Blessings & Woes*, Luke 6:22-23

**Readings:** Jeremiah 17:5-8, Psalm 1, 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, Luke 6:17-26

### February 24

**Theme:** *Love Your Enemies*, Luke 6:35-36

**Readings:** Genesis 45:3-15, Psalm 103:1-13, 1 Corinthians 15:21-26, 20-42, Luke 6:27-38

### March 3

**Theme:** *In the Presence of God*, Luke 9:33

**Readings:** Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 99, Hebrews 3:1-6, Luke 9:28-36

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## Connecting to Worship: January 13

**Theme:** *God's Beloved Son*, Luke 3:21-22 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

**Readings:** Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29, Romans 6:1-11, Luke 3:15-22

### Monday, January 7 *Being Useful*

A voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." —Luke 3:22

Jesus emerged from obscurity and was baptized by John the Baptist. When He came out of the water, He heard His Father say, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22).

What had Jesus been doing that merited such unqualified acceptance? He had not yet performed one miracle; He had not preached a single sermon; He had not cleansed one leper. In fact, He had not yet done anything that we normally associate with greatness. What had He been doing in Nazareth during those 30 silent years? He was growing "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (2:52). What's done in the silent place with God is what matters. It's in the quiet hours of fellowship with God that we're shaped and molded and made into men and women He can use—people with whom He can be well-pleased. You might be thinking, *I'm in a place where I can't be useful*. You may feel limited and frustrated by the cramping restrictions of age, an illness, a difficult child, an uncooperative spouse. But your place, wherever it is, is a place to grow. Spend time in God's Word and in prayer. Grow and bloom where you are, and your Father will be pleased with you.

*You'll go forth a little stronger  
With a fresh supply of grace,  
If each day you meet the Savior  
In a secret, quiet place. —Adams*

**Fruitful service grows in the soil of faithful worship.**

### Tuesday, January 8 *A Christmas Letter*

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father. John 1:14

Every Christmas, a friend of mine writes a long letter to his wife, reviewing the events of the year and dreaming about the future. He always tells her how much he loves her, and why. He also writes a letter to each of his daughters. His words of love make an unforgettable Christmas present.

We could say that the original Christmas love letter was Jesus, the Word made flesh. John highlights this truth in his gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In ancient philosophy, the Greek for Word, *logos*, suggested a divine mind or order that unites reality, but John expands the definition to reveal the Word as a *person*: Jesus, the Son of God who was "with God in the beginning" (v. 2). This Word, the Father's "one and only Son," "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (v. 14).

Through Jesus the Word, God reveals Himself perfectly. Theologians have grappled with this beautiful mystery for centuries. However much we may not understand, we can be certain that Jesus as the Word gives light to our dark world (v. 9). If we believe in Him, we can experience the gift of being God's beloved children (v. 12).

Jesus, God's love letter to us, has come and made His home among us. Now that's an amazing Christmas gift!

*Lord Jesus Christ, You are the Word of God, and You bring light into my life. May I shine forth Your goodness and grace and bring You honor.*

**How can you share the amazing gift of Jesus with others today?**

## Wednesday, January 9

### *Just a Messenger*

I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming. —Luke 3:16

Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy's restaurants, appeared in more than 800 television commercials. He offered his homespun humor and "old-fashioned hamburgers" to a worldwide audience. Viewers saw him as friendly, funny, believable, and caring. In spite of his popularity, though, Thomas always said he was "the messenger, not the message."

That's a good word to remember as we speak about Christ to our friends and family. While our behavior should always be consistent with what we say, our goal is to point others to Jesus and not to ourselves. The apostle Paul said, "We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bond servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5).

John the Baptist knew that his role was to be a messenger for Christ. When people flocked to hear John preach, and to be baptized as a sign of their repentance, many wondered if he was the promised Messiah. John told them, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose" (Luke 3:16).

Through our words and actions, we testify of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We are His messengers, but He is the message.

**We witness best for Christ when we say the least about ourselves.**

## Thursday, January 10

### *Dad at the Dentist*

My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will. Matthew 26:39

I didn't expect a profound lesson about the Father's heart at the dentist's office—but I got one. I was there with my ten-year-old son. He had an adult tooth coming in under a baby tooth that hadn't fallen out yet. It had to come out. There was no other way.

My son, in tears, pleaded with me: "Dad, isn't there another way? Can't we just wait and see? Please, Dad, I don't *want* to have this tooth pulled!" It just about broke my heart, but I told him, "Son, it's got to come out. I'm sorry. There's no other way." And I held his hand as he wriggled and writhed while the dentist removed that stubborn molar, tears in my eyes too. I couldn't take his pain away; the best I could offer was to be present with him in it.

In that moment, I remembered Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, asking His Father for a different way. How it must have broken the Father's heart to see His beloved Son in such agony! Yet there was no other way to save His people.

In our lives, we sometimes face unavoidable yet painful moments—just like my son did. But because of Jesus's work for us through His Spirit, even in our darkest moments our loving heavenly Father is always present with us (Matthew 28:20).

*Father, thank You for loving us so much that You sent Your beloved Son to save us, even though it must have broken Your heart to do so. In our times of joy or pain, thank You for Your Spirit holding and carrying us.*

**Our loving heavenly Father promises He is always present with us, even in our darkest moments.**

## Friday, January 11

### *A Hard Goodbye*

A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy habitation. —Psalm 68:5

When our youngest son joined the Army, we knew that challenges lay ahead. We knew that he would face danger and be tested physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We also knew that in some ways our home would never fully be his home again. In the months leading up to his departure, my wife and I steeled ourselves for these challenges.

Then the day came when Mark had to report. We hugged and said our goodbyes, and then he walked into the recruiting station, leaving me with a moment for which I was decidedly unprepared. The pain of that hard goodbye felt unbearable. At the risk of sounding overly dramatic, I can't remember when I have wept as hard as I did that day. The hard goodbye, and the sense of loss it delivered, cut me to the heart.

In such moments, I am thankful to have a heavenly Father who knows what it is to be separated from a beloved Son. I am thankful to have a God who is described as "a father of the fatherless, a defender of widows" (Ps. 68:5). I believe that if He cares for the orphaned and the widows in their loneliness, He will also care for me and comfort me—even in those moments when I face the struggles that accompany hard goodbyes.

*When our loved ones say goodbye And we have to  
be apart, God can fill our loneliness With His  
presence in our heart. —Sper*

**Loneliness comes when we forget about the One  
who is always with us.**

## Connecting to Worship, January 13

**Theme:** *God's Beloved Son*, Luke 3:21-22 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

**Readings:** Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29, Romans 6:1-11, Luke 3:15-22

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## Connecting to Worship: January 20

**Theme:** *Do Whatever He Says*, John 2:1-5 On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

**Readings:** Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 128, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11

### Monday, January 14 *The Servants Knew*

(Jesus'] mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." —John 2:5

Few weddings are matters of life and death, but they often feel that way to the people involved. After giving three daughters in marriage, I can appreciate the concern parents have over proper arrangements for their guests. So whenever I read about the wedding in Cana in John 2:1-11, I find myself smiling at every turn. Although the events strike me as lighthearted, Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine had the serious purpose of revealing Himself as the Son of God to His disciples. Many people may have seen the large stone jars being filled with water. But it was the servants, who had poured every gallon, to whom the Lord said, "Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast" (v.8). The Bible says simply, "And they took it." Their unhesitating obedience is a model for us in our daily God-given tasks. The master praised the bridegroom, saying, "You have kept the good wine until now!" He didn't know its origin (v.10), "but the servants who had drawn the water knew" (v.9). Like them, we recognize that whenever God uses our meager efforts to help others, it's a miracle of His power. The servants at Cana who drew the water knew that the praise belonged to Jesus. And so do we.

*I can always count on God, my heavenly Father,  
For He changes not; He always is the same—  
Yesterday, today, forever, He is faithful, And I know  
He loves me, praise His holy name. —Felten*

**God's great power deserves our grateful praise.**

### Tuesday, January 15 *Lessons of Obedience*

This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. —1 John 5:3

When young Kofi came home after Sunday school, his mother asked him what he had learned that morning. His quick reply spoke volumes:

*"Obedience . . . again!"*

Although I'm many years older than Kofi, I agree that obedience to God is a lesson that we must, sometimes reluctantly, learn over and over again. Oswald Chambers wrote: "The Lord does not give me rules, but He makes His standard very clear. If my relationship to Him is that of love, I will do what He says . . . If I hesitate, it is because I love someone I have placed in competition with Him, namely, myself."

When we are obedient, we show God that we love Him and have more faith in Him than we do in ourselves. Arthur W. Pink said that love is "a principle of action, and it expresses itself . . . by deeds which please the object loved." To obey God means to relinquish what we want and to choose to do what *He* asks.

God requires the obedience of His followers, and Jesus placed great importance on it. He asked, "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46). And He issued this challenge: "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15).

*To say we follow Jesus Christ, Without attempting  
to obey, Reveals our lack of faith that He  
Will lead us right in every way. —Sper*

**Obedience to God is an expression of our love for God.**

## Wednesday, January 16

### *What Simon Said*

Simon answered, . . . “But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” Luke 5:5

A man named Refuge Rabindranath has been a youth worker in Sri Lanka for more than ten years. He often interacts with the youth late into the night—playing with them, listening to them, counseling and teaching them. He enjoys working with the young people, but it can be disheartening when promising students sometimes walk away from the faith. Some days he feels a bit like Simon Peter in Luke 5. Simon had been working hard all night but caught no fish (v. 5). He felt discouraged and tired. Yet when Jesus told him to “put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch” (v. 4), Simon replied, “Because you say so, I will let down the nets” (v. 5).

Simon’s obedience is remarkable. As a seasoned fisherman, he knew that fish move to the bottom of the lake when the sun is up, and the dragnets they used could not go deep enough to catch those fish. His willingness to trust Jesus was rewarded. Not only did Simon catch a large number of fish, he gained a deeper understanding of who Jesus is. He moved from calling Jesus “Master” (v. 5) to calling Him “Lord” (v. 8). Indeed, “listening” often allows us to see the works of God firsthand and draw closer to Him.

Perhaps God is calling you to “let down your nets again.” May we reply to the Lord as Simon did: “Because You say so, I will.”

*Father, it is our great privilege to call You “Lord.”  
Help us to obey and trust You, and to learn more of  
what it means to walk closely with You.*

**Our obedience to God will guide us through the  
unknown and draw us closer to Him.**

## Thursday, January 17

### *Enough*

They ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord. 2 Kings 4:44

When my husband and I were first asked to host a small group in our home, my immediate reaction was to decline. I felt inadequate. We didn’t have seats for everyone; our home was small and couldn’t hold many people. I didn’t know whether we had the skills to facilitate the discussion. I worried that I’d be asked to prepare food, something for which I lacked both passion and funds. I didn’t feel like we had “enough” to do it. I didn’t feel I was “enough” to do it. But we wanted to give to God and our community, so despite our fears, we agreed. Over the next five years we found great joy in welcoming the group into our living room. I observe similar reluctance and doubt in the man who brought bread to God’s servant, Elisha. Elisha had instructed him to give it to the people, but the man questioned whether twenty loaves could feed so many—one hundred men. He seems to have been tempted to withhold the food because—in his human understanding—it wouldn’t be sufficient. Yet it was *more* than enough (2 Kings 4:44), because God took his gift, given in obedience, and made it enough.

When we feel inadequate, or think what we have to offer isn’t sufficient, let’s remember that God asks us to give what we have in faithful obedience. He is the one who makes it “enough.”

*Lord, when I fear what I have to give is insufficient,  
help me to give to You anyway and trust You to  
make it “enough.”*

**An offering given in faithful obedience is just  
right.**

## Friday, January 18

### *Doing What He Says*

Walk in obedience to all that the Lord your God has commanded you. Deuteronomy 5:33

I needed an underground water tank and knew precisely how I wanted it constructed, so I gave clear instructions to the builder. The next day when I inspected the project, I was annoyed when I realized that he had failed to carry out my instructions. He had changed the plan and therefore the effect. The excuse he gave was as irritating as his failure to follow my directives.

As I watched him redo the concrete work, and as my frustration diminished, a guilty conviction swept over me: How many times have I needed to redo things in my life in obedience to the Lord?

Like the ancient Israelites who frequently failed to do what God asked them to do, we too often go our own way. Yet obedience is a desired result of our deepening relationship with God. Moses told the people, “Be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you . . . Walk in obedience to all that [he] has commanded you” (Deut. 5:32–33).

Long after Moses, Jesus urged His disciples to trust Him and to love one another.

This is still the kind of surrender of our hearts that leads to our well-being. As the Spirit helps us to obey, it is good to remember that He “works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil. 2:13).

*Lord, thank You for second and third chances. Please help us to want to follow Your ways and to follow through in obedience.*

**The closer we walk with God, the clearer we see His guidance.**

## Connecting to Worship: January 20

**Theme:** *Do Whatever He Says*, John 2:1-5 On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

**Readings:** Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 128, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11

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## Connecting to Worship: January 27

**Theme:** *A Hometown Prophet*, Luke 4:25 But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land

**Readings:** Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Psalm 19:7-14, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Luke 4:16-30

### Monday, January 21

#### *Always Accepted*

He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. —John 1:11

Financial expert Warren Buffet, one of the richest people in the world, was rejected by Harvard's Business School at age 19. After a failed admissions interview, he recalls a "feeling of dread," along with concern over his father's reaction to the news. In retrospect, Buffet says, "[Everything] in my life . . . that I thought was a crushing event at the time has turned out for the better."

Rejection, though undeniably painful, does not have to hold us back from accomplishing what God wants us to do. The citizens of Jesus' hometown denied that He was the Messiah (John 1:11), and many of His followers later rejected Him (6:66). Just as Jesus' rejection was part of God's plan for His Son (Isa. 53:3), so was Jesus' continued ministry. Enduring earthly rejection and knowing that the Father would turn away from Him at Calvary (Matt. 27:46), Jesus went on to cure the sick, cast out demons, and preach good news to the masses. Before His crucifixion, Jesus said, "[Father], I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4).

If rejection has become a hindrance to the work God has given you to do, don't give up. Remember that Jesus understands, and those who come to Him will always be accepted by Him (6:37).

**No one understands like Jesus.**

### Tuesday, January 22

#### *Seeing Well*

You are my friends if you do what I command. John 15:14

Raleigh looks like a powerful dog—he is large and muscular and has a thick coat of fur. And he weighs over 100 pounds! Despite his appearance, Raleigh connects well with people. His owner takes him to nursing homes and hospitals to bring people a smile. Once, a four-year-old girl spotted Raleigh across a room. She wanted to pet him, but was afraid to get close. Eventually, her curiosity overcame her sense of caution and she spent several minutes talking to him and petting him. She discovered that he is a gentle creature, even though he is powerful.

The combination of these qualities reminds me of what we read about Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus was approachable—He welcomed little children (Matt. 19:13–15). He was kind to an adulterous woman in a desperate situation (John 8:1–11). Compassion motivated Him to teach crowds (Mark 6:34). At the same time, Jesus's power was astounding. Heads turned and jaws dropped as He subdued demons, calmed violent storms, and resurrected dead people! (Mark 1:21–34; 4:35–41; John 11).

The way we see Jesus determines how we relate to Him. If we focus only on His power, we may treat Him with the detached worship we'd give a comic book superhero. Yet, if we overemphasize His kindness, we risk treating Him too casually. The truth is that Jesus is both at once—great enough to deserve our obedience yet humble enough to call us friends.

*Jesus, thank You for the privilege of knowing You. I acknowledge Your gentle power. I worship You as the Son of God—full of grace and glory.*

**What we think of Jesus shows in how we relate with Him.**

## Wednesday, January 23

### *A Sweet Fragrance*

We are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. —2 Corinthians 2:15

Some scents are unforgettable. Recently, my husband mentioned he was running low on shaving cream. “I’ll pick some up,” I offered. “Can you get this kind?” he asked, showing me the can. “I love the smell—it’s the kind my dad always used.” I smiled, recalling the time I had been momentarily taken back to my childhood when I got a whiff of the same shampoo my mom used to wash my hair. For both Tom and me, the fragrances had brought an emotional response and pleasant memory of people we loved who were no longer around. Oliver Wendell Holmes said, “Memories, imagination, old sentiments, and associations are more readily reached through the sense of smell than through any other channel.” So, what if our lives were a fragrance that attracted people to God? Second Corinthians 2:15 says that “we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.” Our fragrance is pleasing to God, but it also attracts others to Him or repels them. We who understand the sacrifice of Jesus have the opportunity to be the “fragrance of Christ”—a reminder of Him—to others.

The sweet scent of the likeness of Christ can be an irresistible pull toward the Savior.

*Let my hands perform His bidding,  
Let my feet run in His ways,  
Let my eyes see Jesus only,  
Let my lips speak forth His praise. —James*

**When we walk with God, we leave behind a sweet fragrance that can inspire others to follow.**

## Thursday, January 24

### *Service and Witness*

We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake. —2 Corinthians 4:5

While serving as a maid in London, England, in the early part of the 20th century, Gladys Aylward had other dreams. Her goal was to be a missionary to China. Having been rejected by a Christian missionary organization as “unqualified,” Gladys decided to go there on her own. At the age of 28, she used her life savings to purchase a one-way ticket to Yangcheng, a remote village in China. There she established an inn for trade caravans where she shared Bible stories. Gladys served in other villages as well and became known as *Ai-weh-deh*, Chinese for “virtuous one.”

The apostle Paul also spread the gospel to distant regions of the world. He extended himself as a servant to meet the needs of others (2 Cor. 11:16-29). He wrote this about serving: “We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake” (4:5).

Not all of us are called to endure hardship to spread the gospel in distant lands. But each of us is responsible as a servant of God to share Christ with people in our sphere of influence. It’s our privilege to help our neighbors, friends, and relatives. Ask God for openings to serve and to talk about Jesus who gave Himself for us.

*My life is a painting created by God,  
And as such I’ve nothing to boast;  
Reflecting the image of Christ to the world  
Is what I desire the most. —Sper*

**We serve God by sharing His Word with others.**

## Friday, January 25

### *Cross the Divide*

As [Jesus] was dining in Levi's house,...many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus.  
—Mark 2:15

Two young men with mischief on their minds approached a missionary's outreach bus parked in a downtown area of a German city.

The missionaries were there to offer refreshments as a way to open up conversations about Christ. The two visitors, wearing skull-and-crossbones bandannas, were there to offer trouble.

But the missionaries didn't respond to the ruffians as they expected. The Christians welcomed them warmly and engaged them in discussion. Surprised, the guys hung around long enough to hear the gospel. One trusted Jesus that day. The other, the next day. Those two young men and the missionaries who reached them were light-years apart culturally. The guys were German; the missionaries, American. The guys were involved in a culture of darkness and death; the missionaries were shining the light. The cultural divide was crossed with cookies and nonjudgmental love. Look at the people around you. How can you show those on the other side of the cultural fence unconditional, unquestioning love? How can you cross the divide and help them see that Jesus' love knows no boundaries?

Cross the divide. Take Christ to the culture—even if it doesn't look anything like yours.

*To cross a cultural divide Takes love that shows we really care; And once the door is open wide, Christ's saving gospel we can share. —Sper*

**Our witness for Christ is a light for a world in darkness.**

## Connecting to Worship: January 27

**Theme:** *A Hometown Prophet*, Luke 4:25 But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land

**Readings:** Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Psalm 19:7-14, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Luke 4:16-30

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## Connecting to Worship: February 3

**Theme:** *The Holy One of God*, Luke 4:34 “Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.”

**Readings:** Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 7:1-6, 1 Corinthians 12:3-13:3, Luke 4:31-44

### Monday, January 28

#### *Fame and Humility*

He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Philippians 2:8

Many of us are obsessed with fame—either with being famous ourselves or with following every detail of famous people’s lives. International book or film tours. Late-night show appearances. Millions of followers on Twitter. In a recent study in the US, researchers ranked the names of famous individuals using a specially developed algorithm that scoured the Internet. Jesus topped the list as the most famous person in history. Yet Jesus was never concerned about obtaining celebrity status. When He was here on earth, He never sought fame (Matt. 9:30; John 6:15)—although fame found Him all the same as news about Him quickly traveled throughout the region of Galilee (Mark 1:28; Luke 4:37).

Wherever Jesus went, crowds soon gathered. The miracles He performed drew people to Him. But when they tried to make Him a king by force, He slipped away by Himself (John 6:15). United in purpose with His Father, He repeatedly deferred to the Father’s will and timing (4:34; 8:29; 12:23). “He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

Fame was never Jesus’s goal. His purpose was simple. As the Son of God, He humbly, obediently, and voluntarily offered Himself as the sacrifice for our sins.

*You are to be celebrated, Lord, above all others. You have been highly exalted and given a name that is above every name. One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that You are Lord.*

**Jesus came not to be famous, but to humbly offer Himself as the sacrifice for our sins.**

### Tuesday, January 29

#### *Jesus is Greater*

He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. —1 John 4:4

Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and some villages in China celebrate the month-long Ghosts Festival. It is believed that during this time the spirits of the dead return to earth to roam among the living. So people burn joss sticks (incense) and phony money, prepare feasts, and perform in street theaters—all to keep the spirits happy. As a child growing up in Singapore, I was taught to fear those ghosts. One year I had a fever during the festival, and I was told that I must have bumped into some and offended them.

Now that I know what the Bible says about Jesus’ power over the real spirit world of Satan and his demons, I have been freed from my former fears. Because I have placed my faith in Christ as my Lord and Savior, I realize that I don’t need to try to appease or fight evil spirits by myself. Jesus showed His power over the spirit world as He cast out demons (Luke 11:14-23). When He died on the cross for us and rose from the grave, Jesus triumphed over Satan and sealed his doom (Colossians 2:15; Revelation 20:10). The Bible assures followers of Christ, “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

We need not fear the devil or demons. Our Lord Jesus is greater!

*And though this world, with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God has willed,  
His truth to triumph through us. —Luther*

**The power of Satan is no match for the power of Jesus.**

## Wednesday, January 30

### *Beyond Time*

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.” John 6:68–69

During 2016, theater companies in Britain and around the world have staged special productions to mark the 400th anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare. Concerts, lectures, and festivals have drawn crowds who celebrate the enduring work of the man widely considered to be the greatest playwright in the English language. Ben Jonson, one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, wrote of him, “He was not of an age, but for all time.” While the influence of some artists, writers, and thinkers may last for centuries, Jesus Christ is the only person whose life and work will endure beyond time. He claimed to be “the bread that came down from heaven . . . whoever feeds on this bread will live forever” (v. 58).

When many people who heard Jesus’s teaching were offended by His words and stopped following Him (John 6:61–66), the Lord asked His disciples if they also wanted to leave (v. 67). Peter replied, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (vv. 68–69).

When we invite Jesus to come into our lives as our Lord and Savior, we join His first disciples and all those who have followed Him in a new life that will last forever—beyond time.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for the gift of eternal life in fellowship with You today and forever.*

**Jesus is the Son of God, the Man beyond time, who gives us eternal life.**

## Thursday, January 31

### *What Are Our Options?*

Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” —John 6:68

In a pre-election newspaper column, William Safire posed the question, “What do you do when the candidate you support takes a position you don’t like [or when] the candidate you oppose takes a stand that you admire?”

Safire suggested three options:

1. Switch candidates.
2. Stay with your original choice and put on a button that says, “Nobody’s perfect.”
3. Be like the proverbial old woman who says, “I never vote. It only encourages them.”

Now think about the spiritual parallel. What are our choices when Jesus, our Leader, takes a position we don’t like, or when the enemy we oppose takes a stand more to our liking? Some will switch and walk with Christ no more (John 6:66). But that’s not a valid option for those who know Him (v.68). Neither can we wear a button that says, “Nobody’s perfect.” Jesus is the Holy One of God. He is perfect. If we disagree with Him, it is because we are wrong. Furthermore, we can’t be like the person who never votes. Our Lord didn’t give us that option. We must choose whom we will follow. Today, we need to be as wise as Peter and the other disciples. We must follow the Lord even when His ways are contrary to ours.

*Some people  
follow Jesus Christ,  
And then they turn and walk away;  
But Jesus gives eternal life  
To those who trust Him and obey. —Sper*

**No one can be neutral about Jesus.**

## Friday, February 1

### *Meekness and Majesty*

[Jesus] began to wash the disciples' feet. —John 13:5

Can meekness and majesty exist together in the same person? Amazingly, these wonderful virtues coexisted in the God-man, Jesus. First, He was humble and meek. He didn't insist on luxury nor seek for the possession of material things. In fact, He didn't own or possess any property except for the clothes He wore. Compared to our day of investment portfolios, luxury homes, and Platinum Visa cards, Jesus was "dirt poor."

In terms of pursuing fame and glory, He walked away from more crowds than He called together. He was the leader, but He knelt to wash the feet of His disciples (Jn. 13). In all things He humbly submitted to the Father's will.

Yet, with such beautiful humility, there was also an awesome majesty about Jesus. One word or look from Jesus could quiet a crowd, calm a storm, or make a disciple weep. Thousands followed Him as He lived and taught with unequaled power and authority. Although He died bearing our sin and shame, He rose from the grave in glory. One day He will return in majesty as King of kings and Lord of lords, vanquishing His foes and judging the nations.

How are we to respond? Worship Him. Honor Him. Love Him. Obey Him. For He alone is worthy of all our devotion and all our praise.

*Meekness and majesty—perfect description  
Of Jesus our wonderful Lord;  
Humbling Himself to obtain our redemption,  
Our Savior forever adored. —Hess*

**The high and holy One became the meek and lowly One.**

## Connecting to Worship: February 3

**Theme:** *The Holy One of God*, Luke 4:34 "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God."

**Readings:** Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 7:1-6, 1 Corinthians 12:3-13:3, Luke 4:31-44

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## Connecting to Worship: February 10

**Theme:** *Someone to Follow*, Luke 5:10-11 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

**Readings:** Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 138, 1 Corinthians 14:12-20, Luke 5:1-11

### Monday, February 4

#### *Free to Follow*

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Matthew 11:29

My high school cross-country coach once advised me before a race, “Don’t try to be in the lead. The leaders almost always burn out too quickly.” Instead, he suggested I stay close behind the fastest runners. By letting them set the pace, I could conserve the mental and physical strength I’d need to finish the race well. Leading can be exhausting; following can be freeing. Knowing this improved my running, but it took me a lot longer to realize how this applies to Christian discipleship. In my own life, I was prone to think being a believer in Jesus meant trying *really hard*. By pursuing my own exhausting expectations for what a Christian should be, I was inadvertently missing the joy and freedom found in simply following Him (John 8:32, 36).

But we weren’t meant to direct our own lives, and Jesus didn’t start a self-improvement program. Instead, He promised that in seeking Him we will find the rest we long for (Matthew 11:25–28). Unlike many other religious teachers’ emphasis on rigorous study of Scripture or an elaborate set of rules, Jesus taught that it’s simply through knowing Him that we know God (v. 27). In seeking Him, we find our heavy burdens lifted (vv. 28–30) and our lives transformed. Because following Him, our gentle and humble Leader (v. 29), is never burdensome—it’s the way of hope and healing. Resting in His love, we are free.

*Lord, I’m so thankful I don’t have to be in charge of my own life. Help me rest in You.*

**True freedom is found in following Christ.**

### Tuesday, February 5

#### *The Honor of Following*

Then [Jesus] said to them, “Follow Me.” —Matthew 4:19

While visiting Jerusalem, a friend of mine saw an old rabbi walking past the Wailing Wall. The interesting thing about the aged rabbi was the five young men walking behind him. They too were walking bent over, limping—just like their rabbi. An Orthodox Jew watching them would know exactly why they were imitating their teacher. They were “followers.”

Throughout the history of Judaism, one of the most honored positions for a Jewish man was the privilege of becoming a “follower” of the local rabbi.

Followers sat at the rabbi’s feet as he taught. They would study his words and watch how he acted and reacted to life and others. A follower would count it the highest honor to serve his rabbi in even the most menial tasks. And, because they admired their rabbi, they were determined to become like him.

When Jesus called His disciples to follow Him (Matt. 4:19), it was an invitation to be changed by Him, to become like Him, and to share His passion for those who need a Savior. The high honor of being His follower should show in our lives as well. We too have been called to catch the attention of the watching world as we talk, think, and act just like Jesus—the rabbi, the teacher, of our souls.

*Thank You, Lord, for the high honor of being called to follow You. May my life so imitate You that others will know that You are the pursuit of my life and the rabbi of my soul.*

**Follow Jesus and let the world know He is your rabbi.**

## Wednesday, February 6

### *Follow Me*

Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. — Mark 8:34

During World War II, B-17 bombers made long flights from the US mainland to the Pacific island of Saipan. When they landed there, the planes were met by a jeep bearing the sign: “Follow Me!” That little vehicle guided the giant planes to their assigned places in the parking area.

One pilot, who by his own admission was not a religious man, made an insightful comment: “That little jeep with its quaint sign always reminds me of Jesus. He was [a lowly] peasant, but the giant men and women of our time would be lost without His direction.”

Centuries after our Savior walked the streets and hills of Israel, the world with all its advances still needs His example and instruction. When His ways aren’t followed, numerous problems and evils arise in our world—including immorality, crime, and greed.

How do we follow Jesus’ ways? First of all, we turn from our sin and entrust our lives to Him as our Savior and Lord. Then, we seek His will in His Word each day and put it into practice by the power of the Holy Spirit within us. We learn to deny our selfish desires and give ourselves completely to following Jesus (Mark 8:34-35).

If you want to get in line with the purposes of God, respond to Jesus’ invitation: “Follow Me!”

**To find your way through life, follow Jesus.**

## Thursday, February 7

### *Responding to God’s Leading*

At once they left their nets and followed him. Matthew 4:20

In August 2015, when I was preparing to attend a university a couple of hours from home, I realized I probably wouldn’t move back home after graduation. My mind raced. *How can I leave home? My family? My church? What if God later calls me to another state or country?*

Like Moses, when God told him to go “to Pharaoh to bring [His] people the Israelites out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:10), I was afraid. I didn’t want to leave my comfort zone. Yes, Moses obeyed and followed God, but not before questioning Him and requesting that someone else go instead (vv. 11–13; 4:13).

In Moses’s example, we can see what we shouldn’t do when we sense a clear calling. We can instead strive to be more like the disciples. When Jesus called them, they left everything and followed Him (Matthew 4:20–22; Luke 5:28). Fear is natural, but we can trust God’s plan.

Being so far from home is still difficult. But as I continually seek God, He opens doors for me that confirm I am where I’m supposed to be.

When we are led out of our comfort zone, we can either go reluctantly, like Moses, or willingly like the disciples—who followed Jesus wherever He led them. Sometimes this means leaving our comfortable life hundreds or even thousands of miles behind us. But no matter how difficult it may be, following Jesus is worth it.

*Lord, help me to follow You wherever You lead.*

**We are not called to be comfortable.**

## Friday, February 8

### *Life to the Full*

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10

When I stopped by to visit my sister's family, my nephews eagerly showed me their new chore system, a set of *Choropoly* boards. Each colorful electronic board keeps track of their chores. A job well done means the kids can hit a green button, which adds points to their "spending" account. A misdeed like leaving the back door open results in a fine being deducted from the total. Since a high-points total leads to exciting rewards such as computer time—and misdeeds deduct from that total—my nephews are now unusually motivated to do their work and to keep the door closed!

The ingenious system had me joking that I wished I had such an exciting motivational tool! But of course God *has* given us motivation. Rather than simply commanding obedience, Jesus has promised that a life of following Him, while costly, is also a life of abundance, "life . . . to the full" (John 10:10). Experiencing life in His kingdom is worth "one hundred times" the cost—now and eternally (Mark 10:29–30).

We can rejoice in the fact that we serve a generous God, One who does not reward and punish as we deserve. He generously accepts our weakest efforts—even welcoming and rewarding latecomers to His kingdom as generously as old-timers (see Matt. 20:1–16). In light of this reality, let us joyfully serve Him today.

*Lord, help us to remember there is great meaning in following You and that it is all so worth it.*

**Following Jesus is the way to a rich and satisfying life.**

## Connecting to Worship: February 10

**Theme:** *Someone to Follow*, Luke 5:10-11 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

**Readings:** Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 138, 1 Corinthians 14:12-20, Luke 5:1-11

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## Connecting to Worship: February 17

**Theme:** *Blessings & Woes*, Luke 6:22-23 “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

**Readings:** Jeremiah 17:5-8, Psalm 1, 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, Luke 6:17-26

### Monday, February 11

#### *I'll Pay You Later*

You shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just. — Luke 14:14

Suppose a boss were to say to an employee, “We really appreciate what you’re doing around here, but we’ve decided to change the way we pay you. Starting today, we’re going to pay you later—after you retire.” Would the employee jump for joy? Of course not. That’s not the way things work in this world. We like our payment now—or at least every payday.

Did you know that God promises to “pay” us later—much later? And He asks us to be happy about it! Jesus suggested that our ultimate reward for the good things we do in His name comes after we die. In Luke 14, Jesus said that if we care for the poor, the lame, and the blind, our reward for such kindness will come at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:14). He also said that if we are persecuted, we should “rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed [our] reward is great in heaven” (6:22-23). Surely, the Lord gives us comfort, love, and guidance today, but what wonderful things He has planned for us in the future! This may not be the way we would have planned it; we don’t enjoy waiting for things. But imagine how glorious it will be when we receive our rewards in Jesus’ presence. What a grand time we’ll have as we enjoy what God has reserved for later.

*Beyond earth's sorrows, the joys of heaven,  
Eternal blessings with Christ my Lord;  
Earth's weeping ended, earth's trials over,  
Sweet rest in Jesus, O blest reward! —Gilmore*

**What is done for Christ in this life will be rewarded  
in the life to come.**

### Tuesday, February 12

#### *Sacrificial Faith*

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:10

It’s Sunday afternoon, and I’m sitting in the garden of our home, which is near the church where my husband is the minister. I hear wafts of praise and worship music floating through the air in the Farsi language. Our church in London hosts a vibrant Iranian congregation, and we feel humbled by their passion for Christ as they share some of their stories of persecution and tell of those, such as the senior pastor’s brother, who have been martyred for their faith. These faithful believers are following in the footsteps of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Stephen, one of the first appointed leaders in the early church, garnered attention in Jerusalem when he performed “great wonders and signs” (Acts 6:8) and was brought before the Jewish authorities to defend his actions. He gave an impassioned defense of the faith before describing the hard-heartedness of his accusers. But instead of repenting, they were “furious and gnashed their teeth at him” (7:54). They dragged him from the city and stoned him to death—even as he prayed for their forgiveness. The stories of Stephen and modern martyrs remind us that the message of Christ can be met with brutality. If we have never faced persecution for our faith, let’s pray for the persecuted church around the world. And may we, if and when tested, find grace to be found faithful to the One who suffered so much more for us.

*Lord God, we believe You weep at the pain and anguish some of Your children experience because they love You. We pray that You will strengthen them in the midst of their suffering and send them Your grace.*

**May we find grace to walk in the Master’s steps.**

## Wednesday, February 13

### *Great is Your Reward*

Your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly. —Matthew 6:4

Many businesses have “points programs” that offer rewards to loyal customers. You can stack up these rewards by using their companies’ services, like eating at local restaurants, staying at certain hotels, or flying on particular airlines. Choosing to spend your money this way makes a lot of sense.

God has a rewards program as well. Jesus often spoke of His desire to reward us for loyally serving Him. When we are persecuted for His sake, for example, He says to “rejoice . . . for great is your reward in heaven” (Matt. 5:12). In contrast to the Pharisees’ pious habit of giving, praying, and fasting in public, Jesus instructed us to do these things privately, because “your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly” (6:4,6,18). When it comes to living for Jesus, faithfulness never ultimately puts your life in a deficit position, regardless of what it costs.

But we don’t serve Jesus for the rewards. When He died for us on the cross, He did far more for us than we deserve. Loyalty to Him is an act of worship that expresses our loving gratitude for His love toward us. In return, He delights to encourage us with the assurance that ultimately His rewards will outweigh whatever we have given up for Him.

Live for Jesus—regardless of the cost.

**What is done for Christ in this life will be rewarded in the life to come.**

## Thursday, February 14

### *A Word for the Struggler*

Do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. —Hebrews 10:35

There is an old adage that says, “Don’t bite off more than you can chew.” It’s wise not to take on more responsibilities than we can handle. At some time, however, we will likely feel overwhelmed by the size and difficulty of a task we have agreed to do.

This can happen even in our walk of faith in Christ when our commitment to God seems too much to bear. But the Lord has an encouraging word for us when our confidence wavers.

The writer of Hebrews urged his readers to recall the courage they demonstrated during the early days of their faith (10:32-33). Despite public insults and persecution, they aided believers in prison, and they joyfully accepted the confiscation of their own property (vv.33-34). With that in mind, he says, “Therefore, do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise” (vv.35-36). Our confidence is not in ourselves but in Jesus and His promise to return at just the right time (v.37).

It is God’s power that enables us to continue in our journey of faith. Recalling the Lord’s faithfulness in days past stirs our confidence in Him today.

*When life becomes a heavy load,  
An upward climb, a winding road,  
In daily tasks, Lord, let me see  
That with me You will always be. —D. DeHaan*

**Trusting God’s faithfulness stirs up our confidence.**

**Friday, February 15**

***I Am With You***

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you. Jeremiah 1:8

When I served as an intern for a Christian magazine, I wrote a story about a person who had become a Christian. In a dramatic change, he said goodbye to his former life and embraced his new Master: Jesus. A few days after the magazine hit the street, an anonymous caller threatened, "Be careful, Darmani. We are watching you! Your life is in danger in this country if you write such stories."

That was not the only time I have been threatened for pointing people to Christ. On one occasion a man told me to vanish with the tract I was giving him or else! In both cases, I cowered. But these were only verbal threats. Many Christians have had threats carried out against them. In some cases simply living a godly lifestyle attracts mistreatment from people.

The Lord told Jeremiah, "You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you" (Jer. 1:7), and Jesus told His disciples, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves" (Matt. 10:16). Yes, we may encounter threats, hardships, and even pain. But God assures us of His presence. "I am with you," He told Jeremiah (Jer. 1:8), and Jesus assured His followers, "I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20).

Whatever struggles we face in our attempt to live for the Lord, we can trust in the Lord's presence.

*Lord, we're grateful that You are near to us in everything we face. Please protect Your people around the world.*

**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**Matthew 5:10**

**Connecting to Worship: February 17**

**Theme:** *Blessings & Woes*, Luke 6:22-23 "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

**Readings:** Jeremiah 17:5-8, Psalm 1, 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, Luke 6:17-26

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## Connecting to Worship: February 24

**Theme:** *Love Your Enemies*, Luke 6:35-36 But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. 36Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

**Readings:** Genesis 45:3-15, Psalm 103:1-13, 1 Corinthians 15:21-26, 20-42, Luke 6:27-38

### Monday, February 18

#### *Changing Enemies Into Friends*

But I say to you, love your enemies . . . do good to those who hate you. —Matthew 5:44

During the US Civil War, hatred became entrenched between the North and South. In one instance, President Abraham Lincoln was criticized for speaking of benevolent treatment for the Southern rebels. The critic reminded Lincoln that there was a war going on, the Confederates were the enemy, and they should be destroyed. But Lincoln wisely responded, “I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends.” Lincoln’s comment is insightful. In many ways it reflects Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: “I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:44-45).

We will encounter difficult people in our lives—some on whom we will need to set limits. But to give in to the temptation to undermine or hurt them in any way is not God’s way. Instead, we should pray for them, show consideration, look out for their best interests, and emphasize the positive. This may result in changing an enemy into a friend. Not everyone will respond positively to us, but we can pray and plan for a more harmonious relationship. What difficult person can you start befriending?

*Lord, some people in my life are difficult to love.*

*I am tempted not even to try to care. But You showed love to me even when I was Your enemy. Please direct me into ways to love with Your power and grace.*

**It’s hard to hate someone when you’re doing something good for him.**

### Tuesday, February 19

#### *Enemy Love*

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Luke 6:32

When war broke out in 1950, fifteen-year-old Kim Chin-Kyung joined the South Korean army to defend his homeland. He soon found, however, that he wasn’t ready for the horrors of combat. As young friends died around him, he begged God for his life and promised that, if allowed to live, he would learn to love his enemies.

Sixty-five years later, Dr. Kim reflected on that answered prayer. Through decades of caring for orphans and assisting in the education of North Korean and Chinese young people, he has won many friends among those he once regarded as enemies. Today he shuns political labels. Instead he calls himself a *loveist* as an expression of his faith in Jesus. The prophet Jonah left a different kind of legacy. Even a dramatic rescue from the belly of a big fish didn’t transform his heart. Although he eventually obeyed God, Jonah said he’d rather die than watch the Lord show mercy to his enemies (Jonah 4:1–2, 8).

We can only guess as to whether Jonah ever learned to care for the people of Nineveh. Instead we are left to wonder about ourselves. Will we settle for his attitude toward those we fear and hate? Or will we ask God for the ability to love our enemies as He has shown mercy to us?

*Father in heaven, like Your reluctant prophet, we are inclined to love only those who love us. Yet You loved us even when we cared only for ourselves. Please give us the grace to be more like Jesus than Jonah.*

**Love conquers all.**

## Wednesday, February 20

### *Upside Down*

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies. —Matthew 5:43-44

If you were to ask me who I am, I’d tell you that I’m a follower of Jesus. But I have to admit, at times following Him is a real challenge. He tells me to do things like rejoice when I’m persecuted (Matt. 5:11-12); to turn the other cheek (vv.38-39); to give to someone who wants to take from me (vv.40-42); to love my enemies, bless those who curse me, and do good to those who hate me (vv.43-44). This kind of lifestyle seems very upside down to me.

But I’ve come to realize that He’s not upside down—I am. We have all been born fallen and broken. Being twisted by sin, our first instincts are often wrong, which inevitably leaves a big mess.

We’re like toast slathered with jelly that has fallen upside down on the kitchen floor. Left to ourselves, we can make a pretty big mess of things. Then Jesus comes along, like a divine spatula, scrapes us off the floor of our sinful ways, and turns us right side up. And as we follow His right-side-up ways, we discover that turning the other cheek keeps us from getting caught in a brawl, that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and that dying to self is life at its best.

After all, His ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8), and I’ve come to realize that His ways are always best!

*When we’re transformed and made brand-new We see things differently; What once seemed right we now abhor, And wrong we clearly see. —Sper*

**What may seem upside down to us is right side up to God.**

## Thursday, February 21

### *A Prayer of Forgiveness*

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Luke 6:27–28

In 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges was the first African-American child to integrate an all-white public elementary school in the American South. Every day for months, federal marshals escorted Ruby past a mob of angry parents shouting curses, threats, and insults at her. Safely inside, she sat in a classroom alone with Barbara Henry, the only teacher willing to instruct her while parents kept their children from attending school with Ruby. Noted child psychiatrist Robert Coles met with Ruby for several months to help her cope with the fear and stress she experienced. He was amazed by the prayer Ruby said every day as she walked to school and back home. “Please, God, forgive them because they don’t know what they’re doing” (see Luke 23:34).

The words of Jesus spoken from the cross were stronger than the hatred and insults hurled at Him. In the most agonizing hours of His life, our Lord demonstrated the radical response He taught His followers: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you . . . Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:27–28, 36).

This remarkable approach is possible only as we consider the powerful love Jesus has given us—love stronger than even the deepest hatred. Ruby Bridges helped show us the way.

*Father, You have so graciously forgiven us. Help us today to forgive others who have wronged us.*

**Bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you.**

## Friday, February 22

### *When Not to Rejoice*

Do not gloat when your enemy falls. Proverbs 24:17

The Akan people of Ghana have a proverb: “The lizard is not as mad with the boys who threw stones at it as with the boys who stood by and rejoiced over its fate!” Rejoicing at someone’s downfall is like participating in the cause of that downfall or even wishing more evil on the person.

That was the attitude of the Ammonites who maliciously rejoiced when the temple in Jerusalem “was desecrated and over the land of Israel when it was laid waste and over the people of Judah when they went into exile” (Ezek. 25:3). For spitefully celebrating Israel’s misfortunes, the Ammonites experienced God’s displeasure, which resulted in grim consequences (vv. 4-7).

How do we react when disaster befalls our neighbor or when our neighbor gets into trouble? If she is a nice and friendly neighbor, then, of course, we will sympathize with her and go to her aid. But what if he is an unfriendly, trouble-making neighbor? Our natural tendency may be to ignore him or even secretly rejoice at his downfall. Proverbs warns us: “Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when they stumble, do not let your heart rejoice” (24:17). Instead, Jesus tells us that we show His love in action when we “love [our] enemies and pray for those who persecute [us]” (Matt. 5:44). By so doing, we imitate the perfect love of our Lord (5:48).

*Lord, open my eyes and my heart to be honest about my attitude toward those who are unkind or unfair to me. Fill my heart with Your love, Lord, and help me pray for them.*

**Love your neighbor as yourself.**

## Connecting to Worship: February 24

**Theme:** *Love Your Enemies*, Luke 6:35-36 But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. 36Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

**Readings:** Genesis 45:3-15, Psalm 103:1-13, 1 Corinthians 15:21-26, 20-42, Luke 6:27-38

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## Connecting to Worship: March 3

**Theme:** *In the Presence of God*, Luke 9:33 And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said.

**Readings:** Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 99, Hebrews 3:1-6, Luke 9:28-36

### Monday, February 25

#### *Out of Focus*

Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here.” —Matthew 17:4

On the back of the pulpit in the church I used to attend were printed these words: “Sir, we would see Jesus!” They were a reminder to the minister that he must never allow anything—no matter how good or interesting—to distract him from focusing on the Savior. Peter, James, and John needed this reminder too when they witnessed Jesus’ transfiguration and the appearance of Moses and Elijah. Commenting on this account, J. B. Nicholson suggests that when Peter said, “Lord, it is good for us,” he was focusing on the wonderful experience. Nicholson then says, “Peter was sidetracked, and the Father had to open heaven and speak to him. He said, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear Him.’” God put the focus where it belonged, on Christ. Sin diverts some believers from focusing on Jesus. Too much study and feverish activity distracts others. Such things as doctrines and church attendance, good as they are, must not become our main concerns. We are to keep Jesus at the center of our spiritual attention.

Is the Lord Jesus Christ the primary object of your love and devotion?

*I could never live without Him,  
Live without His love and grace;  
I could never find another  
Who could ever take His place. —Anon.*

**Unless Christ is the center of interest, your life will be out of focus.**

### Tuesday, February 26

#### *Who Is This?*

They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” Mark 4:41

“Remove everything from your desks, take out a piece of paper and pencil.” When I was a student these dreaded words announced that “test time” had come.

In Mark 4, we read that Jesus’s day, which started with teaching by the seaside (v. 1), ended with a time of testing on the sea (v. 35). The boat that had been used as a teaching platform was used to transport Jesus and a handful of His followers to the other side of the sea. During the journey (while an exhausted Jesus slept in the back of the boat), they encountered a swirling storm (v. 37). Drenched disciples woke Jesus with the words, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” (v. 38). Then it happened. The One who had exhorted the crowds to “Listen!” earlier in the day (v. 3), uttered a simple, powerful command to the winds of nature—“Quiet! Be still!” (v. 39).

The wind obeyed and the wonder of fear-filled disciples was displayed with the words, “Who is this?” (v. 41). The question was a good one but it would take them a while to honestly and correctly conclude that Jesus was God’s Son. Sincere, honest, open-hearted questions and experience lead people to the same conclusion today. He is more than a teacher to listen to; He is the God to be worshiped. *Father, thank You for Your Word that helps us to see Jesus as Your Son. Please help me to listen to You and to trust that You are in control.*

**“Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”  
Matthew 8:19**

## Wednesday, February 27

### *True Greatness*

Now it happened on the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, that a great multitude met Him. —Luke 9:37

On the 50th anniversary of Sir Edmund Hillary's historic ascent of Mt. Everest, a television newsman said that much of Hillary's status as a hero in Nepal was "not about what he did when he stood on top of the world, but what he did when he came back down." After conquering the world's highest mountain with his climbing companion Tenzing Norgay in 1953, Edmund spent the next five decades helping to build schools, hospitals, and bridges for the Sherpa community.

The contrast between Edmund Hillary's moment on the mountain and his service in the valley brought to mind Jesus' experience on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). It was a pinnacle of blessing when our Lord's appearance became radiant and the Father said, "This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!" (v.35). But Jesus didn't stay on the mountain. He came down to the crowd, where He freed a boy from an evil spirit. He was determined to go to Jerusalem and fulfill His mission, where He would willingly die on the cross for our sins.

Jesus told His disciples, "He who is least among you all will be great" (v.48). Our Lord's life shows us that true greatness is found in humbly serving God and others in the valley of need.

*Whether on the mountaintop  
Or the valley down below,  
True greatness is in serving  
Wherever we may go. —D. De Haan*

**In God's eyes, true greatness is serving others.**

## Thursday, February 28

### *Life's Darkest Moments*

An angel touched [Elijah], and said to him, "Arise and eat." —1 Kings 19:5

Charles Whittlesey was a hero's hero. Leader of the so-called "Lost Battalion" in World War I, he was awarded the Medal of Honor for his bravery when his unit was trapped behind enemy lines. When the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was dedicated, Charles was chosen to serve as pallbearer for the first soldier laid to rest there. Two weeks later, it is presumed that he ended his own life by stepping off a cruise ship in the middle of the ocean.

Like Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-7), Charles was publicly strong, but in the quiet, post-public moments, his feelings of despair set in. People today frequently face situations bigger than they can handle. Sometimes it's temporary despair brought on by fatigue, as in Elijah's case. He had been part of a great victory over the prophets of Baal (18:20-40), but then he feared for his life and ran into the wilderness (19:1-3). But often, it's more than despair and it's more than temporary. That's why it is imperative that we talk about depression openly and compassionately.

God offers His presence to us in life's darkest moments, which enables us, in turn, to be His presence to the hurting. Crying out for help—from others and from God—may be the strongest moment of our lives.

*Father, grant us the candor to admit to each other that sometimes life overwhelms us. And grant us the courage to help others find help—and to seek it when we need it.*

**Hope comes with help from God and others.**

**Friday, March 1**  
***Punxsutawney Phil***

We have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed. —2 Peter 1:19

Punxsutawney Phil is a groundhog that comes out of his burrow on Gobbler’s Knob, Pennsylvania, each February 2 to predict the weather. According to legend, if Phil sees his shadow, there will be 6 more weeks of cold weather. If he doesn’t see his shadow, spring will come early. This is all humbug and good humor, of course. No one to my knowledge takes Phil’s predictions seriously. Furthermore, he’s unreliable—more often wrong than right, I’m told.

There is One, however, who is always right and whom we must take seriously. Peter writes of Him, “We have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19).

Peter was thinking of that day on the Mount of Transfiguration with James and John when he saw Jesus standing with the two great prophets of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. In that august company of true prophets the Father pointed to the Son and said: “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!” (Luke 9:35). Jesus’ word is a “prophetic word” that is certain!

There is One who is never wrong and who will never lead us astray: our Lord Jesus. We must hear Him!

*At the name of Jesus bowing, Falling prostrate at His feet, King of kings in heaven we’ll crown Him When our journey is complete. —Baxter*

**In a world full of speculation, only God’s Word is certain.**

**Connecting to Worship: March 3**

**Theme:** *In the Presence of God*, Luke 9:33 And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said.

**Readings:** Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 99, Hebrews 3:1-6, Luke 9:28-36