

## Trinity Sunday

**Genesis 1:1-2:4a** - The Creation story, like Creation itself, reveals our God. God reveals himself in Creation. His majestic name is found no less than 32 times, usually the subject of some active verb. *He speaks, makes, separates, sets the sun and stars in the heavens, and blesses.* He demonstrates His trustworthiness in the regularity of day following night, and season succeeding season. He displays His love and unselfishness by sharing His likeness with human beings. In everything we are reminded that God is a Person—vastly intelligent, but also caring and warm.

God rests from His creative work (2:1–3), and the author of all things returns to look in depth at the creation of mankind.

**2 Corinthians 13:11-13** - Paul closes with one of the greatest of the Bible benedictions, the benediction of the Trinity (v. 14). The “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” takes us back to Bethlehem, where He became poor for us (2 Cor. 8:9); “the love of God” takes us to Calvary, where God the Father gave His Son; and “the communion of the Holy Spirit” takes us to Pentecost, where the Spirit baptized all believers into the body of Christ.

How fitting this benediction was for this divided, unspiritual church! How fitting it is for each of us today.

**Matthew 28:16-20** - Even toward the end of Jesus’ life on this earth, some doubted His identity (Matt. 28:17). They questioned whether he was the One whom they should worship. Jesus proclaims his authority and his presence (28:18–20).

Matthew 28:19 could be translated, “As you are going, make disciples...” The imperative is to “make disciples.” The “going” is assumed. Jesus’ ministry was – and is – to be extended to “all the nations,” which was in keeping with the universal prospect of blessing in the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Gen. 12:2–3).

The ministries to accompany making disciples include “baptizing” (identifying believers with a local assembly) and “teaching” (laying the foundation for application). Jesus would fulfill his name “Immanuel,” meaning “God with us,” by being present with his people through the work of the Holy Spirit “even to the end of the age” (28:20; cf. Acts 1:1–8; 2:1–4).

## A Living Gospel

Notice the amount of activity in today’s readings. *Speaking. Making. Creating. Blessing.* God’s word is never passive, but alive and a regenerating force within us. As God speaks, creation occurs again and again in our own lives.

What about us? Through our words and actions, what are we speaking and creating? Are we allowing God to use our activities to bring new life into the world around us? Does our daily living cause others to better know and follow Jesus Christ?

## Prayer:

***Almighty God, strengthen my faith and worship, helping others to know and follow You; through Jesus Christ, Amen.***

\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

Proper 3 Sunday after Pentecost

*Not observed for the year 2017*

Proper 4 Sunday after Pentecost

*Not observed for the year 2017*

Proper 5 Sunday after Pentecost

*Not observed for the year 2017*

## Proper 6 Sunday after Pentecost

**Gen. 18:1-15,(21:1-7)** - Abraham and Sarah had seen God act. He led them faithfully from their home to a new land.

The faith they displayed in leaving was the same faith they must have to live in the land God led them to and to do the physically “impossible” things they did there.

Sarah and Abraham were old. Not just older, but old. They were far past child-bearing years. They may have been questioning how God was going to make Abraham a “father of many nations.” As far as they knew, it wasn’t going to happen through Sarah’s womb. Or so they thought.

When the three men appeared to Abraham, he did the expected. He cared for their needs with washing, food, and water. They did the unexpected. One of the men declared they would return when Sarah was ready to give birth to a son. The statement was so shocking that Sarah laughed. It was simply impossible; how could this be? The man said, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time, I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.”

Do you have a hard time, like Sarah, believing God will do something for you? God may not come to you in the same way he met Abraham. Even so, be encouraged, watch, and wait for the Lord. Nothing is too wonderful for him.

**Romans 5:1-8** - These are some of the most important words we can read. Paul is making the case that God acts not because of who we are, but because of who he is. The “Therefore,” refers to Romans four in which Paul is explaining that it is faith that makes us right before God.

Faith in Jesus comes to those of us who were not around when Jesus died. How many sins had you committed when Jesus died? None. You weren’t alive. Still, his death covers your sin. He didn’t wait for you to sin to die on the cross. He didn’t wait for your first breath. He made the sacrifice while you were yet waiting to be born. He did it for those before you, and those who will come after. You didn’t have to be clean enough, or righteous enough before he acted. The act of Jesus’ crucifixion shows us the totality of his love for us and that our faith is secure in that kind of love. We can trust in a God who will act on our behalf in spite of us. He will love us regardless of our actions because of his character, not ours.

The Holy Spirit is given to pour God’s love into our hearts. This amazing God is not just on our side, but he is inviting us to be on his side. God chooses us. God loves us. God accepts us. We have peace with God, and it is because of who he is, not who we were.

**Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23)** - Matthew records not only what the disciples did, but also what they had to look forward to. Jesus sent them out on behalf of the helpless crowds. They were to function as he did; to cast out demons, cure disease, cleanse the leper and raise the dead.

When their ministry begins, they will be rejected, persecuted, hated and handed over to authorities. They will need to flee for their lives. Pretty heady stuff for a rag-tag group of followers. For some reason, the kingdom of heaven drawing near brings out the worst in people in authority.

As Matthew states, it is on behalf of the helpless and harrassed. The kingdom has come to the lost and the least. In this kingdom are healing and wholeness. The coming kingdom has nothing to do with the people and everything to do with the King — and this King is for his people. He isn’t the type that is worried about politics or foreign policy. He is for everything his people need — and what they need is him.

## A Living Gospel

It is easy for us to work for things.  $A + B = C$ . We put in the effort, the results will come. Almost all of our lives are oriented this way. The pattern is true for our grades, our jobs, and our relationships. But when it comes to the Gospel we get turned upside down.

## Proper 6 Sunday after Pentecost (*continued*)

Our experiences matter little in the ways previously mentioned. God's economy is dependent upon him, not us. Faith is our requirement, not our broken efforts to earn what he has done or what he will do. In fact, we can't win God's favor, blessing or action. They are all predicated on him. If we could work for any of these things and somehow earn what God has to offer, it wouldn't amount to much. God would be like Santa or a genie; i.e., do the right things and get what you want.

Thankfully, God's work on behalf of people like Abraham and Sarah, the least and the lost, you and me, happens because of his nature. He can't help it. He doesn't want to help it.

In much the same way as the disciples, who were no more sinless than we are, we are invited to participate in his Kingdom. We get to reveal to those around us what God and his Kingdom are like. This is predicated on our faith. Do we trust God will use us and not laugh? Do we believe he would choose us to carry on the mission of Jesus to the least and the lost?

If you do, there is no telling what God will do, because nothing is too wonderful for him!

**Prayer – *God of the prophets and apostles, you greeted old Abraham and Sarah with news of wonder and life. Send us into the world to preach good news, as Jesus did, heal the sick, resist evil, and bring the outcast home. Amen.***

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 7 Sunday after Pentecost

**Gen. 21:8-21** - Perceiving a slight, Sarah now has the chance to lord her motherhood over Hagar. Sarah's jealousy was a return for the treatment she received from Hagar. It was well within her rights to ask for Hagar to leave even though Ishmael was Abraham's son.

God assures Abraham things will work out despite how they appear, so he follows through with Sarah's plan.

God intervenes again, but this time on behalf of a slave woman and her "illegitimate" son. Provision of water and food are made for them, and a promise is declared. Ishmael will be the father of a great nation. And so it goes, he grows in the wilderness, has a wife from Egypt and is great with a bow and arrow.

Despite how faithless Abraham and Sarah acted, God showed himself to be faithful to his covenant. Even to those "outside" the promise, God determines to show kindness. God's work is not thwarted by our decision making, good or bad. He will bless and show favor even in the face of our contrary behaviors.

**Romans 6:1b-11** - A new life in Christ requires a new way of thinking. Before Jesus, Paul's readers were dead in their sin. Sin encompassed their actions and their thoughts. Now, because they were united with Jesus by faith, his life and resurrection applied to them. The union between them changed everything. They were no longer dead but alive and no longer slaves but free. They were no longer sinners but saints. Paul is calling his readers to walk in these truths, namely by way of putting sin in its proper place, the grave.

Sinning in Christ is the same as acting like a zombie. Reanimating dead things is never good, and it certainly isn't resurrection. Things that bring death (sin) need to remain dead, and things that bring life, (Christ) need to be alive.

Paul has this in mind for his readers in Rome but also for Christians everywhere. What Jesus has done changes everything and this change includes his followers then and his readers now.

**Matthew 10:24-39** - Jesus' words were not any easier to hear in the first century than they are today. Talk about persecution and the loss of family relationships cut to the core. There is no playing around following Jesus; the cost is very high.

You will experience what he experienced and more. Despite these realities, he calls his hearers not to fear. This call happens to be one of the most used phrases in all the Scriptures. "Do not fear" implies there is something to fear. In Matthew's case, Jesus is talking about those who have attacked him in a variety of ways which will culminate in his crucifixion. But Jesus says fear the one who can provide eternal consequences, not the ones who can only effect the here and now.

Doing so will cause many problems for his followers, not the least of which will be the loss of family and friends. Prioritizing Jesus and his teaching will fly in the face of our closest relationships, especially when persecution is happening. Making him a priority doesn't mean we don't love or care for those closest to us. It means Jesus has the final say in how that happens. Our loved ones may not understand, and we will experience pain and loss. But we are called not to fear because as we lose our lives for him, we will find them.

## What's the Word?

Life in Christ is not easy. We needn't look any further than the call to love our enemies to know this is the narrow way. Among the most difficult things about being a Christ-follower is to believe when nothing else tells us to do so.

Our experiences can cause us to doubt. When we can see no way forward or the materials with which God may act, we doubt. We use our minds and our assessments to decide whether God is capable of doing something. When God doesn't work in our timing or the way we think, we doubt.

## Proper 7 Sunday after Pentecost (*continued*)

We can try to do it on our own, like Abraham and Sarah or we can go back to the way things were. The life of faith can be too hard for us at times.

But Jesus tells us not to fear. We are not to fear that God won't act. We are not to fear persecution when he does. We are not to fear when relationships suffer.

Having faith in the face of these things is the way to life. Not just biological life, but life in Christ. New life, the kind that changes us and those around us.

**Prayer** – *God of power, you uphold us in times of persecution and strengthen us to meet the trials of faithful witness. As you delivered us from death through our baptism in Christ and the victory of his resurrection send us forth to proclaim that glorious redemption, so that the world may claim the freedom of forgiveness and new life in you. Amen.*

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 8 Sunday after Pentecost

**Genesis 22:1-14** - God's intention was never to have Abraham sacrifice Isaac. God is interested in seeing how far Abraham was willing to go in trusting God. This story is also prophetic. God, who is too kind to take Abraham's son, was willing to surrender His only Son to win our salvation.

Abraham reflects his amazing faith by proclaiming: "We will come back to you (vs. 5). Hebrews 11:19 says Abraham "reasoned that God could raise the dead" if need be to keep His promise.

**Romans 6:12-23** - A true biblical faith "counts on" the reality of our death with Christ so that the choice we make is to reject sin and choose to do what is right. Counting on our union with Christ does not create that unity... it already exists! Faith in our union with Christ enables us to experience our alliance with Jesus, daily.

Each day we face many choices. But there are also basic, life-shaping choices each of us make. Paul asks us to consider and make one of those life-shaping choices now. We can follow our sinful human desires and live a life marked by the deadness that characterizes the unsaved. Or we can choose to commit ourselves to God, determining that we will reject sin and make His will our goal in life.

**Matthew 10:40-42** - The persecuted disciples needed to know that God was behind them (10:40). They were of the same status as the Old Testament prophets (10:41); the rewards of the people who would receive them can be compared to the rewards received by the widow of Zarephath who served Elijah (1 Kings 17:7-24). Eternal rewards would be given to all who served those of God's family, including the poor and needy, as if Jesus himself had been served (cf. Matt. 25:34-46). A summary statement in 11:1 links the preceding discourse to the narrative that follows.

## What's On Your Altar?

As we read today's Scriptures, the concept of sacrifice is presented to us in several different ways. Most obvious is the Old Testament reading about Abraham and God's command to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

Obviously, God didn't want Abraham to kill his own son! But Abraham didn't know this. He must have agonized over the thought of killing his precious child. And yet he was willing to put what was closest to his heart on the altar, entrusting his most prized possession to God.

Look carefully at the Romans passage. It's easy to dismiss Paul's words as a call to walk away from "sin," things like murder, thievery, or violence. In reality, it's a call to place upon God's altar our passions – those things that are most important to us. If we're artists, it means placing our creativity and inspiration in God's hands. For athletes, it means surrendering our talents and abilities. As parents, it means giving God control of our children. It's our unwillingness to place what is most precious to us on the altar that becomes sin – and it's our sacrifice of surrender that enables God to transform our passions into instruments of His righteousness!

Look down. What are you holding in your hands? Place it on God's altar and watch as He transforms and redeems what you most love!

**Prayer** – *Gracious Lord, accept my life as a living sacrifice to you, made perfect through Your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.*

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 9 Sunday after Pentecost

**Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67** - It was no coincidence that servant chose to identify the prospective wife for Isaac by her offer to water the camels also (24:14). Not only was it necessary for the wife of unassuming Isaac to do more than he asked of her, but it is a virtue to be desired in everyone. It is the second mile of Jesus. The person who does more than what is expected of him makes a significant contribution to life. Success comes to those who do more than is required, whether they are wives, husbands, students, teachers, or church members.

**Romans 7:15-25a** - The function of the law is to detect and condemn sin, not to deliver from it. In the life of the believer there will ever be conflict between grace and corruption in the heart, between the law of God and the law of sin. Who shall deliver us? Jesus Christ is the all-sufficient Savior and Friend, who has not only purchased our deliverance, but is our advocate in Heaven, through whom we may be made victorious.

**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30** - Jesus issued a great call to those who in faith would turn to Him. He had previously condemned that generation for their childish reactions (vv. 16-19). Here He declares that only those who come to Him in childlike faith can enjoy true discipleship.

People's weariness comes from enduring their burdens of sin and its consequences. Jesus invites us to yoke ourselves with Him. By placing our self under His yoke and learning from Him, we find rest for our souls.

## Know Rest for the Weary

You can almost hear the weariness in Saint Paul's voice. *For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* In these painfully honest words, we hear the fatigue of trying to measure up. *I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.* As he continues, we can feel the weight of his soul.

If we're honest, we can relate to Paul; which is why the words of Jesus in today's Gospel reading are at first confusing. How is His yoke light? By putting on this instrument identified with work, how do we find rest?

We find our answer – and our rest – by understanding that Jesus' yoke is one of grace. When our inability to measure up is covered by grace, we can relax. When we fully realize His grace means we are no longer condemned, we discover new resources. Like Rebekah in the Genesis reading, we can go above and beyond in meeting the needs of those we encounter. This is how the yoke of Christ brings rest for our soul.

**Prayer – Almighty God, give me grace to fulfill Your law by loving You and loving my neighbor; through Jesus Christ, Amen.**

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 10 Sunday after Pentecost

**Genesis 25:19-34** - A custom that had the force of law in the biblical world decreed that a man's first son by a lawful wife inherited the major share of tangible and intangible property. This was his "birthright." Esau's sale of his birthright for a bowl of stew reveals how little he valued his inheritance. The intangible asset associated with his birthright was the covenant promise God made to Abraham and his offspring. These promises meant nothing to Esau, a man caught up completely in the affairs of this life. We may not admire the young Jacob. But we must give him credit for valuing spiritual things.

**Romans 8:1-11** - Adopted by God, controlled by his Spirit. Our sinful nature tries to make us focus on our fleshly desires, which lead only to death. The indwelling Spirit, on the other hand, tries to take control of our sinful flesh and to lead us to life.

**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23** - Following his rejection by the Jewish leaders, Jesus taught his disciples about the Kingdom of Heaven. In the first parable, a sower (Christ) cast seed (the Word of God) upon four kinds of soil (human hearts). Jesus later explained the significance of each soil (13:18-23), showing that entrance into God's Kingdom is a matter of individual response.

## Congratulations, You're Expecting!

Imagine Rebekah's situation, as described in today's Genesis reading. She has waited a long time to conceive – and now is expecting twins. But what should be a joyful time is filled with war within her – literally! With every kick and each turn, she feels two kingdoms fighting within her.

More than we realize, we can relate to Rebekah. We, too, are expecting. Filled with a new and growing life in Christ, we also should be filled with joy. Yet two kingdoms fight within us. Like Esau, our flesh is focused on our hunger for immediate gratification. The Spirit, however, sets our sight on our spiritual inheritance and what is truly of value.

Until we are made perfect in Christ's presence, these two kingdoms will war within us. But we can learn from Jacob to value the eternal spiritual birthright we have received through Jesus, holding tightly to what has been given to us.

**Prayer – Merciful God, give me grace to understand those things I ought to do and the power to do them faithfully; through Jesus Christ, Amen..**

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 11 Sunday after Pentecost

**Genesis 28:10-19a** - God uses the vision of angels ascending and descending a stairway to heaven to reaffirm to Jacob the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. Awakening, Jacob pours oil on the rock he had used as a pillow and promises he will serve the Lord, if the Lord will meet all his needs—a selfish prayer, to say the least! God’s promise to Jacob (28:15) summarizes one of the great themes of Genesis: *God is faithful to his chosen people despite their unfaithfulness.*

**Romans 8:12-25** - Paul looked at the thorns, storms, floods, famine, sin, sickness, and death that characterize the fallen world, and declared that they aren’t even worth comparing to the glorious future awaiting God’s people. Meanwhile, however, the whole creation “groans” together with us (8:19–23) as we await our day of liberation. Our final victory over sin and death will be a victory for all creation as well. Unlike the rest of humankind and creation, however, believers have the indwelling Holy Spirit as an assurance of their future glory (8:23–25; see Eph. 1:13–14).

**Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43** - Jesus uses the example of the sower, but with a different twist. After a farmer sowed his wheat seed, an enemy came at night and sowed weeds on the same soil. As a result, the wheat and the weeds grew together and would continue to do so until the time of harvest, for removing the weeds early would result in destroying the wheat (vv. 28-29). Therefore they must grow together until the harvest when the weeds would first be gathered out and destroyed. Then ... the wheat would be gathered into the barn.

Jesus explains this parable to his disciples, pointing out: 1) the good seed is the Son of Man (the Lord Himself). 2) The field that this good seed is planted is the world. 3) The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and 4) the harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are the angels.

## A Rock Solid Foundation

When is the last time you went to sleep on a rock? Just out of curiosity, how well would you sleep using a stone for a pillow?

Following God means we sometimes find ourselves in barren places, where comforts are scarce and resources are limited. But when we rest in God, even the hard things in life serve as the foundation for our dreams! Jacob went to sleep on a rock and awoke on an altar. The stone hadn’t changed – but Jacob had!

What may seem hard and unyielding becomes a rock solid foundation when God is present.

**Prayer** – *Faithful God, have compassion on my weakness, giving me those things I don’t even know to ask of You; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 12 Sunday after Pentecost

**Genesis 29:15-28** - Laban's substitution of Leah for Rachel reminds us of Jacob's own substitution for his brother Esau! At last Jacob must have grasped how it felt to be deceived and cheated. At times God must teach us the hard way to be sensitive to others. This was not an easy lesson for Jacob to learn, but it was a vital one.

**Romans 8:26-39** - The indwelling Spirit both prays for us and helps us in our prayer life. Just as fallen nature and believers "groan" (8:22-23), even God's Holy Spirit groans as he shares our struggles. "Help" implies, however, that even as we lean on the Spirit we must do our share.

Paul asserts: "... all things work together for good." He is not suggesting that all things in and of themselves are good, only that they *work together* for good. Joseph understood this (see Gen. 50:20), though his father did not (see Gen. 42:36). This promise is not for everyone, only for those who love God and have answered his call.

**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52** - A mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, but it grows to be a large tree and a shelter for the birds. With this image, Jesus gives a glimpse of the growing power of the kingdom of God. Its beginnings are almost invisible, but it spreads dramatically. In the end it will fill the whole world.

Jesus uses other images (a man who finds treasure hidden in a field — and sells everything he has to buy the field, and a merchant who discovers the finest of pearls — and sells everything else to get it) to portray the kingdom of God. It's worth more than anything else in the world, and worthy of every sacrifice we have to make to enter it.

## God Is Great, God Is Good

It's easy to say, "all things work together for good" – until *all things* begin to happen in life. Suddenly, good seems long gone!

Today's Gospel reading reminds us that good often starts too small to see or appreciate. At times, good is hidden; buried beneath the surface. At other times, good comes about as a result of an irritant! In these moments, it's easy to throw it away – convenient not to dig down and unearth what's there. But this makes the point of Jesus' words all the more powerful.

Time and effort reveals God's kingdom. Over time, the mustard seed becomes a source of shelter. With effort, a barren field produces a hidden treasure. With time, an irritant is transformed into a pearl of great price.

If good seems to be in short supply, don't give up! God is great and the goodness of His kingdom will be revealed in His perfect timing.

**Prayer** – *Gracious God, as I weather the storms of life, help me not to lose sight of those things which are eternal in value; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 13 Sunday after Pentecost

**Genesis 32:22-31** - The Lord again appeared to Jacob, this time as a human foe, and wrestled with the patriarch through the night.

To be alone with Christ is the only way to arrive at knowledge of ourselves and our ways. Jacob was a “wrestled-with man,” and until the seat of his own strength was touched, he did not reach the place of blessing.

**Romans 9:1-5** - Paul states with great emotion his concern for the Jews, his own people. They had a special place in God’s purposes in the past. They were the recipients of adoption, glory, covenants, the law, the promises, temple worship, and the patriarchs.

Yet, despite these wonderful blessings, Paul expresses his great anguish over Israel’s rejection of the Messiah, saying he was willing himself to be forever damned if that would save his people.

**Matthew 14:13-21** - The disciples can be commended for their concern for the crowds that followed Jesus (v. 15). Caring is a necessary first step in ministry. But it’s necessary to take a second step also. We need to be willing to act, even though we’re terribly aware of how little we have to offer.

There are lessons from this miracle: (1) Christ can take our little and make it much. (2) Whatever He blesses, He breaks. Are we willing to be broken? (3) People today are in the wilderness of sin (v. 15) and need Christ. (4) Christ can overcome every difficulty and feed the multitudes. The disciples had many excuses—not enough money, the wrong place, the wrong time—but Christ took what they had and met the need.

### A Painful Need

Notice the common theme in each of today’s readings. God is not fully seen and His power is not fully known outside of intense pain or need.

Jacob wrestled for his life – and received God’s blessing only after being maimed. Paul’s great concern for his people causes him to endanger his own life as he carries to them the message of the Gospel. Only when faced with widespread hunger are the disciples challenged to exercise their faith, seeing Jesus perform a miracle.

Where is the pain in your life? What great need are you facing? Look closely. Amidst the tears – waiting in the shadows of despair – is God. In our darkest moments, our deepest fears, He stands waiting, ready to reveal Himself.

**Prayer** – *Holy God, defend me in trying times, helping me see You and Your salvation; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

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## Proper 14 Sunday after Pentecost

**Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28** - Even believers have family problems. Joseph's exaltation by his father – and the sharing of his dream of exaltation – offended his family. Although these facts were directly in line with what God had planned for Joseph, favoritism and the telling of dreams embittered the hearts of his brothers, provoking hostility.

**Romans 10:5-15** - Sincerity is not a ground of safety; self-righteousness is not a ground of salvation. The design of the law was to lead people to Christ, Who is the end of it, and the only ground for salvation is to become interested by humble faith in Christ's satisfaction of the law, and so be "justified through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

**Matthew 14:22-33** - Peter has been criticized for looking away from Jesus. Actually, we need to applaud his readiness to step out on the sea. After all, the other disciples stayed in the boat! It's true that if we step out in faith we risk failure. But only by stepping out will we personally experience Christ's power.

## Batten Down the Hatches

Being a Christian does not exempt us from problems – just ask Joseph and the disciples! What's interesting to note is that God's perfect plan does not always lead us away from difficulty. In Joseph's circumstances, it must have seemed a cruel irony to have dreams of exaltation, only to find himself sold as a slave by his brothers. And the disciples must have wondered about an all-knowing Messiah asking them to set sail straight into a storm.

It's easy to give up if we stop reading mid-story. But God didn't lead Joseph or the disciples to difficulty – He led them *through* it. Batten down the hatches and look out at the raging sea. Jesus is there, leading us by faith to a peace that is greater than the wind and the waves.

**Prayer** – *Gracious God, lead me by your spirit to think and do what is right, so I may live according to your will; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 15 Sunday after Pentecost

**Genesis 45:1-15** - Joseph's dealings with his brothers were not motivated by his desire for vengeance. Rather, His aim was twofold: (1) to obtain information about his father and brother; and (2) to discern whether or not his brothers had changed during the past twenty years. Had they had a change of heart?

**Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32** - Although unbelieving Jews were temporarily at odds with their God, they were, after all, his elect people and were loved by him "on account of the patriarchs." In accordance with his eternal plan, God continues to welcome them for the sake of their ancestors. Paul was not supporting the idea that merit is passed on from the patriarchs to their descendants. However, they were the ones who received his call (Gen 12:1-2; Deut 7:6-7), and it was to them that he first gave his gifts.

God's gifts and call are irrevocable (cf. 1 Sam 15:29; Isa 31:2). He does not change his mind regarding the nation he called and sustained with gracious acts of provision and protection.

**Matthew 15:10-20** - Jesus, in no uncertainty, makes it clear... what matters is not the state of a man's ritual observance, but the state of a man's heart. Although the "food laws" as recorded in Leviticus may stand as matters of health and hygiene, common sense and medical wisdom... they could never again stand as matters of religion. No wonder the Scribes and Pharisees were shocked!

## We Are Family

An adoptive family once told the story of overhearing their biological son describe his new brother. This blonde haired, blue-eyed little boy proudly described his African-American brother as "looking exactly like him." Laughing, the parents asked him how they could look alike. The little boy replied, "Love... love makes us look exactly alike." This child spoke words of wisdom far beyond his years.

The love of Christ makes brothers of Ethiopians and Germans, Greeks and Japanese. It can even make brothers of Southern Baptists and Anglicans, Presbyterians and Pentecostals. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, makes it clear that, through Christ, God has opened wide heaven's gates to all people. And Jesus, in today's Gospel reading, demonstrates that faith makes even the most despised welcomed into God's family. So scoot on over and make room at the table – we're family, after all!

**Prayer – Loving God, you have accepted me through the gracious gift of Your Son. Give me grace to live His example of Godly love, receiving others as You receive me; through Jesus Christ, Amen.**

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 16 Sunday after Pentecost

**Exodus 1:8-2:10** - God's providence may at times seem to thwart His promises that His peoples' faith may be tried and His power the more magnified. In their persecutions, He will sustain all who trust Him. When men are plotting the ruin of God's people, God is planning His peoples' salvation. One apparently marked for obscurity and poverty may be destined to rise before the world to show God's power. Even enemies may be used to carry out God's purposes.

**Romans 12:1-8** - Since we have been justified through grace, by faith in Christ, it is our first duty to surrender ourselves to God a living sacrifice, that there may be a saving change wrought in us and that we might be made serviceable in every way to our fellow men. We stand in relation not only to Christ, but also to one another in Christ, and we are engaged to do all the good we can one to another and to act in conjunction for the common benefit.

**Matthew 16:13-20** - At Caesarea Philippi, Simon Peter acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah. Other people may say that Jesus is merely a prophet — even one of the great prophets reappearing. But Peter believes Jesus is the One the prophets foretold: the Messiah, God's anointed king.

Peter may have a high opinion of Jesus, *but Jesus also has great praise for him*. He tells Simon how fortunate he is, because only God could have revealed this wonderful secret to him

### What's In A Name?

Say the name Normandy or Gettysburg, and we instantly think of sacrifice. Mention the name Judas or Benedict Arnold and we think of a traitor. Names have meaning, offering a glimpse into the character of a person or the history of a place.

In this context, it's revealing that today's Gospel reading finds Christ asking the question, "Who do you say that I am?" How we answer that question offers insight into our perception of God's character and His place in our lives. Is He "the man upstairs," vaguely aware of our existence? Is He "the ultimate judge," only interested in our punishment? How about "the good Lord," a kind of cosmic grandfather interested only in making us feel good?

When we, like Peter, can say, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," we present ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. It is this faith that provides a rock solid foundation for our salvation – one that can withstand even Hell itself.

**Prayer** – *Holy God, help me know you more deeply, love you more perfectly, and worship you more completely; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 17 Sunday after Pentecost

**Exodus 3:1-15** - The burning bush was a picture of God (Deut. 33:16), for it revealed His glory and power, yet it was not consumed. Moses needed to be reminded of the glory and power of God, for he was about to undertake an impossible task. Also, the bush symbolized Israel going through the fire of affliction, but not consumed. How often nations have tried to exterminate the Jews, yet have failed! Finally, the bush illustrated Moses—a humble shepherd, who with God’s help would become a fire that could not be put out!

**Romans 12:9-21** - Love in this context is recognizing one’s proper place in society and the Christian community—humility before God and people. Love must be honestly applied (12:9–16), not like that of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11).

Paul gives extensive illustrations of what real love looks like. He quotes Deuteronomy 32:35 and Proverbs 25:21–22 to demonstrate that vengeance is God’s prerogative. Kindness, like the penetrating intensity of burning coals, is the Christian’s means of conquering evil.

**Matthew 16:21-28** - The cross here does not symbolize suffering, but rather the decision to do the will of God whatever the cost. When we deny our “old man’s” drives and desire to choose God’s will for our lives, we take up our cross. By that choice we lose our old self, and we begin to become the new self that God will enable us to be. By losing our (old) life, we find our (new) life in Jesus Christ.

## Living A Life That Matters

People spend great amounts of time and money trying to figure out the meaning and purpose of life. Today’s readings offer the answers to these fundamental questions. Paradoxically, we discover it’s not in the accumulation of more – more education, money, status, or social standing. Rather, a meaningful life is found in less – less focus on self, comfort, importance, self-righteousness.

Consider the words of Paul in his letter to the Romans: “...outdo one another in showing honor. Contribute to the needs of saints, extend hospitality to strangers. Do not be haughty... do not claim to be wiser than you are. Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God.” Powerful words that will transform our lives if we take them to heart!

Christ offers us a picture of what it means to live out these concepts. He resists the temptation to put His comfort first, instead choosing to set His direction and steps toward Jerusalem and the cross. Then He encourages His disciples to do the same. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Living a life that matters begins – and ends – at the cross.

**Prayer – Merciful God, instill in me the true religion of Your love and cultivate in me the good works of Your Spirit; through Jesus Christ, Amen.**

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 18 Sunday after Pentecost

**Exodus 12:1-14** - The month God strikes the firstborn of Egypt is established as the beginning of the Hebrew religious year (12:1-2). Moses tells each Jewish family to select a year-old lamb on the 10th, care for it till the 14th, and then kill the lamb. The blood is to be sprinkled on the doorframe of the home, and the lamb roasted and eaten (vv. 3-11). That very night God will strike Egypt's firstborn, but will pass over the blood-marked homes of the Israelites (vv. 12-13). For all time Jewish families are to hold a commemorative meal on that date, as culmination of a seven-day Passover season.

**Romans 13:8-14** - Living out God's "by-faith righteousness" affects our relationships with other believers (Rom. 12). It also affects our relationship with the secular state and all our fellow human beings (Rom. 13). Christians must submit to governing authorities by obeying their rulers, paying taxes, and following established laws (13:1-5). Authorities are in fact God's (often unwitting!) servants, and our submission is a mark of respect for God (vv. 6-7). Christians must also show love to their fellow human beings (v. 8). In fact all the commandments are rooted in love: each calls us to avoid that which might harm a neighbor and so living love will in practice fulfill God's Law (vv. 9-10). This obligation is urgent, for history rushes toward its end and we must clothe ourselves with Christ rather than gratify the desires of our sinful nature (vv. 11-14).

**Matthew 18:15-20** - Believers are family as well as flock. In any family, brothers do sin against and hurt one another. Here Jesus emphasizes the necessity of reconciliation. The one who is hurt is to confront the other in an effort to win reconciliation. If the offender will not acknowledge his fault others are brought in because there can be no reconciliation without confession by the one at fault and forgiveness by the one offended. In going to another person we show our readiness to forgive. To preserve "little oneness" in the church we must insist the offender face his or her fault.

## Living By Faith

Imagine the scoffing endured by God's people as the Egyptians watched them cover their doorposts with blood. Think of the confusion and internal conflict they must have felt. *Would a swipe of lamb's blood really protect them from death and destruction?*

It's a lot like the uncertainty we feel today in living out faith in a post-modern world. *How is it godly to obey rulers who appear ungodly? Will anything really change if we confront those who hurt us? How can we live together in love in the midst of a world filled with hate and war?*

Living by faith – living in faith – is not easy. Only in "putting on Jesus" everyday, in each moment, can we lay aside darkness and put on the armor of light, shining the light of faith into a darkened world.

**Prayer** – *Merciful God, give me a heart to trust You, relying on Your great mercy and unending strength; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

## HOLY CROSS

*This devotion is available in audio format only*

## Proper 19 Sunday after Pentecost

**Exodus 14:19-31** - By means of the pillars of cloud and fire, the Lord guided Israel from Succoth to the wilderness of Etham, just west of the Red (or Reed) Sea (13:17-22). There they appeared to be boxed in by the sea to the east, the deserts to the north and south, and the advancing Egyptian armies to the west. Once more the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh so that through his defeat Egypt would know that Yahweh is God (14:1-18). For a tense night the presence of the Lord guarded Israel from the armies of Egypt (14:19-20). Then Yahweh, in the most marvelous redemptive act of Old Testament times, opened up the sea so His people could go safely through while their enemies perished (14:21-31).

**Romans 14:1-12** - Paul focuses his thoughts on the practice of faith-based righteousness in relationships within the Christian community. Believers are to accept one another without condemnation for personal convictions (14:1-2). We have no right to judge others on such issues, for they are matters of conscience, to be settled between the individual and the Lord. Believers must then “stop passing judgment on one another” (vv. 3-12).

**Matthew 18:21-35** - “Seventy times seven” means we are to extend unlimited forgiveness to others. God’s transformation of sinners takes time and can only take place in a community committed to love and forgiveness.

In modern terms the first servant owed some \$12 million—a truly un-payable debt. It is hard to forgive, but let’s remember how much God has forgiven us! God’s compassion is not won by forgiving. But it is unthinkable that those who are forgiven fail to forgive. Only the wicked that will not receive forgiveness act this way.

## Judge and Jury

In our fallen world, we cry out for justice. We want vindication – and we want it now! When we are wronged, and when we see wrong within our world, we are tempted to make things right. But doing so puts us into the position of becoming both judge and jury in a court where we do not have all the facts. We usurp God’s role – and we often cause further damage to us and to others.

If we were passing judgment on the Egyptian army, we would probably have urged the Israelites to fight – and we would have been wrong! God had other plans based on knowledge and power unavailable to us as humans. This is why Paul urges us in Romans not to pass judgment on our brothers and sisters. It’s why Jesus commands us to forgive continually. We do not have all the answers, which means we are not the ones to judge.

So what is the solution to injustice? Our answer is found in trusting God. In Him we are vindicated – in Him we are made whole. We can trust Him to both guard and protect us while He brings judgment and resolution to our circumstances in ways we cannot always see or understand.

**Prayer** – *Holy God, I humbly acknowledge my complete need for Your salvation and ask for Your strength in extending that grace to others; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 20 Sunday after Pentecost

**Exodus 16:2-15** - It is common to idealize the past when our current situation is difficult. The “pots of meat” and “all that we wanted” was an embellished, selective memory. When the Israelites “grumbled against”, it was a prevailing attitude expressed in bitterness toward God, because they failed to see God in their circumstance. Focusing on our un-pleasant circumstance encourages a negative attitude. However, trusting in God encourages optimism and hope.

**Philippians 1:21-30** - Paul has made serving Christ the central, driving purpose of his life. After such a life, death can only mean gain. You and I do not need to serve Christ in the same way Paul did, as an itinerant missionary and church planter. However, we do need to make serving the Lord in our daily life our own central purpose.

Many a Christian has come to realize that heaven is home and that no real satisfaction can be found in this life. Why then doesn't God take us home when we are converted? Paul has been shown that he will “remain”—to further help and nurture the Philippians. The Christian is to fulfill all his or her obligations as a member of a community of those who have responded to the Gospel. And the key responsibility is to stand firm in one spirit. To be worthy of the Gospel we must function harmoniously within a local community of faith.

The Christian's refusal to be intimidated by external foes was evidence that the salvation believers experienced was real—and that their enemies were doomed. Steadfastness is a compelling witness to the Gospel's trustworthiness.

**Matthew 20:1-16** - Jesus tells a parable about a third futile path which the religious take. His story of workers in a vineyard teaches that every relationship with God rests on His grace and generosity. We wrongly assume that the harder we work, the greater our reward. It is not self-effort, but responsiveness to Christ's words that count.

## Great Need

We are people in great need – of provision, purpose, salvation, and dignity. Today's readings speak to all of these needs and God's ability to meet them. Although the Israelites felt they were in need of food, their bigger need was faith. God's people needed to know that God would provide for them regardless of the circumstances. He fed not only their physical hunger but met the hunger of their soul by miraculously offering provision.

Paul's letter to the Philippians shows he discovered his purpose through serving the believers in Philippi. In doing so, he is able to instruct believers then and today to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...” And in the gospel reading, Jesus addresses our need for salvation and dignity. We need God's gracious invitation to join Him in Kingdom work. And we need the assurance that it is never too late to receive God's gift of salvation!

Whatever your need... God stands waiting to reveal Himself as the source of provision.

**Prayer** – *Gracious God, help me to see you as the Provider of both my earthly and spiritual needs, giving me a greater love for those gifts which have eternal value; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 21 Sunday after Pentecost

**Exodus 17:1-7** - The Hebrew word here, *nissah*, means to test or prove. The idea is to subject to a trial, in order to determine whether a person is loyal or trustworthy.

It is appropriate for God to test us, as He did Abraham (Gen. 22:1). Such tests strengthen us, as they confirm our loyalty to the Lord, or correct us, by showing some flaw in our commitment. It is never appropriate for us to test God. Our relationship with Him is rooted in faith's firm conviction that God is God, and the one truly trustworthy Being in the universe. It is not only a lack of faith to test God; it is also arrogance.

**Philippians 2:1-13** - Paul's joy in his fellowship with the Philippians will be even greater if they exhibit the unity to which every church is called. Achieving unity calls for an attitude of humility (2:1-4) that mimics that of Jesus (v. 5).

Paul inserts a powerful hymn or creed in celebration of the incarnation, humiliation, and obedience of Jesus—a course, which not only led Christ to the cross but ultimately exalted Him to the “highest place” (vv. 6-11). By following Jesus' example the church will be able to work out solutions to its own problems (vv. 12-13), but must do so together—without murmuring or complaining (vv. 14-18).

**Matthew 21:23-32** - The chief priests and elders claimed the right to be the final arbiters of Scripture and of God's will. Jesus raised a question they were afraid to answer—and revealed their hypocrisy. If they had any real authority they would speak boldly—as Christ had throughout His ministry. Their weak, “we don't know,” showed them for what they were: mere men, without any real spiritual authority at all.

The gloves are off now. Jesus bluntly accuses the religious leaders of being persons who say they will obey God, but then fail to do so. The prostitutes and sinners that these religious men despise... are better than themselves. They said “no” to God, but in the end they obeyed. The evidence of God's work is His transformation of sinners.

### Who's the Boss?

Today's readings show the difference between leadership and power. Moses was weary of God's people complaining. Because of his position, he was in fear of his life! In continually humbling himself before God, asking God to provide answers, Moses' leadership was affirmed.

Contrast that with the attitude of the chief priests and elders. They called themselves leaders but would not seek or obey the will of God. This refusal illustrates their true desire: power. And it was this desire that kept them from seeing and experiencing Christ as salvation.

As always, our model for leadership is Jesus Christ. And Paul's words offer a clear pattern for us to follow... “emptying himself, taking the form of a slave... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death...” This is the true calling and measure of leadership.

**Prayer** – *Almighty God, help me to follow Your example in revealing Christ by humbling myself to serve with mercy and compassion; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 22 Sunday after Pentecost

**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20** - A holy and righteous God has holy and righteous standards. Those who love God will constantly endeavor to live as He requires, enabled by the Holy Spirit. Law proposes life and righteousness as the end to be attained by keeping it, but proves at the outset that man is in a state of death (Rom. 5:20; 7:7, 13; 3:20). Life and righteousness cannot come by that which only curses, but only through the grace of God in Christ.

**Philippians 3:4b-14** - Although Paul's resume was filled with great accomplishments, one to be admired, for sure, he underscores that one's abilities or accomplishments— no matter how great they are – pale in comparison to Christ. And, no matter how great the effort one exerts to have a right relationship with God... grace is what's essential.

Paul had discovered that a right relationship with God is based not on Law but on faith in Jesus Christ. It is not *achieved* by any man but *given* by God; not won by works but accepted in trust.

**Matthew 21:33-46** - Matthew sheds light for us on the messianic implications of this parable by quoting from Psalm 118:22–23, in which builders reject the most important stone in a building. Those who have great privileges and despise them will be under greater guilt and condemnation. The application is pointed and clear: the Jewish leaders, in rejecting the teaching of Jesus (which, in Matthew's storyline, has been happening more and more), have rejected God's chosen Messiah. They have fallen on the stone (v. 44) and will be crushed as a result.

This parable reminds us of the imminent rejection of Jesus by trial and crucifixion, when the prediction of Psalm 118:22 will be fulfilled. According to Matthew, Jesus' hearers realize that the parable has a direct relevance for themselves, and only the high regard in which people hold Jesus prevents them from taking immediate action to arrest him (vv. 45–46).

## Telling the Truth

Today's Exodus readings contain The Ten Commandments, the Law of a holy and righteous God and the standard of perfection. Notice the response of God's people: "Do not let God speak to us, or we will die." The people heard Moses' words and compared their lives to them. His people knew they did not measure up.

Compare this humble response to that of the Pharisees in today's Gospel reading. When confronted with truth, they sought to silence it... hide it... kill it. For them, God's truth, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, became a source of confrontation and choice. But for the humble, the truth of the Law serves as a compass, pointing out the need for a Savior.

The truth of God's Law offers us a choice. For the proud, the Law is destruction. For those who see their failings, the Law serves as a bridge to faith and salvation.

**Prayer – Almighty God, in Your mercy, grant me Your salvation, giving me the riches of Your grace which is more than I can imagine or deserve; through Jesus Christ, Amen.**

\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

## Proper 23 Sunday after Pentecost

**Exodus 32:1-14** - Believing that Moses would not return from the mountain, the people asked Aaron for another god to lead them. Aaron fashions a golden calf, and the Israelites worship it. “After this, they celebrated with feasting and drinking, and indulged themselves in pagan revelry” (32:6).

Because they worshiped the golden calf, God was ready to destroy the whole nation and start over with just Moses. However, Moses pleads with God to forgive the people, so that other nations would not accuse him of injustice and so that the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would not be broken. So God promises not to destroy them.

**Philippians 4:1-9** - To prevent the rise of division within the church at Philippi, Paul appeals to Euodia and Syntyche to agree with each other and for the entire church to stand firm in the Lord. Paul offers them a prescription for receiving God’s peace, to rejoice in the Lord, and to let their thoughts be filled with that which is good, lovely, and true.

**Matthew 22:1-14** - Israel’s refusal (in its leaders) to respond to God’s call through Jesus would lead to the destruction of *their* city, Jerusalem, to which Jesus had come in order to be rejected and killed (16:21).

Even among the ‘new people’ there is no automatic guarantee of salvation; they include *both good and bad* (cf. the theme of 7:15–27). Even someone from the streets should have put on the clean white clothes, which were appropriate for a wedding; to fail to do so is to insult the host. So while the kingdom of heaven is open to anyone, it does make a demand: (the need to ‘produce fruit’ in 21:43). There is no place for those who will not take their privilege seriously.

## God of the Mountain

From the comfort of our 21st century couches, it’s easy to criticize the Israelites. *How can they be so faithless? Why would they choose to worship a god of their own making? What were they thinking in abandoning God when they had just seen His wonders and miracles?*

Be honest. Aren’t we often guilty of doing the same thing? Instead of looking to God, we look to a person to lead us to the Promised Land. When he or she disappears, we despair. We look for something or someone else to become our salvation. We wander in a spiritual desert. Afraid and lost, we fashion a god of our choosing – sex, career, relationships. We forget the miracles and provision of the past and settle instead for what we can see and touch in the moment.

Paul’s words to the church in Philippi offer us the answer. “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything... but the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” In the moment of fear and despair, don’t settle for the god of your own making. Prayerfully wait for the God of the mountain to consume you once again with the miracle of His provision and leading.

**Prayer – Holy God, let Your grace go before and follow behind me, preserving me in Your ways; through Jesus Christ, Amen.**

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 24 Sunday after Pentecost

**Exodus 33:12-23** - God is to be known by his name and his word. Moses can only see God's 'back'. He can only know God through what has just happened — by what God has done. An example from the world around us is that we can only see the wind by what it has just done.

When Jesus comes, he will be the perfect image of God in human life. All of God's nature and personality will be seen in him. But the full, revealed, unleashed glory of God? We would be safer standing beside an atomic explosion.

**1 Thessalonians 1:1-10** - Delighted that the new Christians in Thessalonica are surviving and flourishing (something that only the Holy Spirit could have enabled and sustained), Paul rejoices in this powerful work of God, motivated by faith, love and hope in Jesus.

Paul and his friends have shown the Thessalonians how to be like Christ, and now the Thessalonians are models of Christian faith and life in the Roman provinces of Macedonia and Achaia — which is almost the whole of modern Greece. Through their example, others are motivated to turn from their pagan idols and worship Jesus.

**Matthew 22:15-22** - Jesus knew a "loaded question" when he heard it. The question of tribute was a delicate matter. If Christ opposed tribute to Rome, then He could be arrested as a traitor; but if He favored tribute to Caesar, He would lose the hearts of the Jews who despised their Roman rulers. Christ's reply shows that the true child of God has obligations both to God and to his country.

## God Is Calling

*Psssst... God is calling you. Those words inspire questions. Doubt. Hesitation. Are you sure? Why me? What could God possibly want with me?*

If you find yourself asking those same questions, you're in good company. Moses, even while engaged in conversation with God, said: "Now if I have found favor in your sight..." Notice his use of the word *if*. Notice also the need for Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to take great pains in pointing out to the church in Thessalonica how God had chosen them; not only in the word of the gospel but in the giving of God's Holy Spirit.

God does not call us because we're worthy or ready. He calls us because we are His. His creation. His child. His image-bearer. He calls us to follow Him – and in so doing, to reflect Him to those we encounter.

God is calling. Be ready to listen and follow.

**Prayer – Almighty God, as You reveal to me Your glory, reveal also in me Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, Amen.**

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 25 Sunday after Pentecost

**Deuteronomy 34:1-12** - Having ascended Mount Nebo (or Pisgah), Moses viewed all the land of promise, a land promised to the patriarchs but denied to Moses because of his sin (see 32:51). He then died and was buried by the Lord in an unknown and unmarked grave.

With great lament the people of Israel mourned his passing. Though Joshua possessed the spirit and authority of Moses, neither he nor any man to come could compare with this giant on the earth whom God knew “face to face” and who had been the great spokesman for God.

**1 Thessalonians 2:1-8** - There has been some criticism of Paul in Thessalonica. His enemies have accused him of exploiting the new converts. They say he has taken their money in exchange for his spurious teaching. But Paul reminds them of how it really was. Paul and his companions worked hard to provide for themselves so that they wouldn't be a burden to anyone. The message they preached wasn't to play on people's pride or fear, or to trick them out of their money. It was a faithful, gentle sharing of the truth about God.

**Matthew 22:34-46** - The Pharisees tried again to entrap Jesus, asking him which was the greatest law. Jesus cited two Mosaic teachings: 1) Love God with your whole heart (see Deut. 6:5), and 2) Love your neighbor as yourself (see Lev. 19:18). Undeniably, anyone who observes these two principles keeps the whole law. Once again Christ had silenced his critics.

Jesus now asked a question of the Pharisees: They accepted Psalm 110 as a prediction of the Messiah, yet they considered that he would be a merely human descendant of David (22:42). If that were the case, asked Jesus, why did David refer to him as “Lord” (Ps. 110:1)? Both the deity and humanity of the Messiah are taught clearly in the OT (see Isa. 7:14; 9:6), but the leaders could not see it. Jesus had finally silenced his critics once and for all (22:46).

## Do You See the Promise?

La Sagrada Familia Basilica in Barcelona, Spain has been under construction since 1882. Its completion is not expected for another 50 years. Like many of those who envisioned and constructed the great cathedrals, Antonio Gaudi, its architect, and the countless unnamed laborers who have worked there knew they would die before seeing their work completed. Day after day, year after year, they labored reverently and diligently on something they would never finish.

Like Moses and Paul, they saw a vision – a promise to future generations – and they never lost sight of it. Day in and day out, they placed stone upon stone, chiseled etching after etching, knowing those who came after them would see the glory of God.

The work of building faith is similar. We need only look to Moses and Paul for this example. They labored among God's people, instilling His Word, cultivating His character, extending His comfort. And once in a great while, God gave them a glimpse of the Promised Land and the inheritance of future generations.

As you go about your daily life, what do you see – who do you see? By God's grace, may we see the faces of future generations reflected in the words and actions of today.

**Prayer** – *Merciful God, increase in me Your gifts of faith, hope, and charity, that I might both obtain and instill Your promise; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

## ALL SAINTS DAY

*This devotion is available in audio format only*

## Proper 26 Sunday after Pentecost

**Joshua 3:7-17** - Joshua ordered the people to prepare to cross the Jordan by sanctifying themselves. The priests, carrying the Ark of the Covenant, led the procession (3:1-13). The ark symbolized the presence of God. It commonly rested in the tabernacle's holy of holies where the glory of God appeared.

When the Levites who bore the ark entered the river, the waters stopped flowing. The extraordinary nature of the crossing magnified Joshua's leadership because it paralleled Moses' leadership at the Red Sea (3:7; 4:14). The crossing also proved that the LORD was alive and would drive out Israel's enemies (3:10).

**1 Thessalonians 2:9-13** - Paul reminded the Thessalonians he had been sincere and straightforward with them, working night and day at a secular job to earn his own keep (v. 9). He had been very caring and personal, like a mother or a father (vv. 7-8, 11). Paul reminds them that they are witnesses of his spiritual purity, social honesty, and how in his example, he was faultless (v.10).

**Matthew 23:1-12** - Jesus stresses the major flaws of pharisaical religion. First, the Pharisees had a false concept of righteousness (vv. 2-3). To the Pharisee, righteousness meant outward conformity to the Law of God. They ignored the inward condition of the heart. Religion consisted in obeying numerous rules that governed every detail of life, including what you did with the spices in your cupboard (Matt. 23:23-24).

Second, the Pharisees had a false concept of ministry (v. 4). To them, ministry meant handing down laws to the people and adding to their burdens. In other words, the Pharisees were harder on others than they were on themselves. Jesus came to lighten men's burdens (Matt. 11:28-30), but legalistic religion always seeks to make burdens heavier.

Finally, they had a false concept of greatness (vv. 5-12). Success meant recognition by men and praise from men. They were not concerned about the approval of God. They used their religion to attract attention and elevate their standing, but not to glorify God (Matt. 5:16). This even meant using religious ornaments to display their piety.

## Being Great for God

Being great in God's Kingdom seldom takes place through demonstrations of might or power. Today's readings show us that greatness is experienced through service – and service is both powerful and mighty.

The priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant – the “container” of God's holiness – served as a kind of door holder for God's people, holding back the waters while allowing them to cross the Jordan on dry land. Paul worked a fulltime job and acted as a surrogate father to the Thessalonians in order to demonstrate the gospel. And Jesus came, not to increase our burdens, but to lighten our load.

Do you want to do great things for God? Remember to hold a door, love a neighbor, or lift a load... for such is the Kingdom of Heaven.

**Prayer** — *Holy God, help me remember it is only through the gift of Your Son that I can offer worthy service to You and others; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## Proper 27 Sunday after Pentecost

**Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25** - Living in a multi-cultural world has many influences. Knowing that Israel was more likely to be tempted to follow pagan gods than to convert pagans, Joshua calls for the people to make a choice: Whom will you serve?

The basis for any relationship with God is found in what He has done for us: not what we supposedly can do for Him (vs. 3-13). God's intent is not for us to isolate ourselves from our culture, but to insulate ourselves by knowing – and choosing – whom we will serve. The choice is always between God and other masters: pagan gods, our sinful passions, or wealth, success, and power. Whom will you serve?

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** - Mourning the death of a loved one is to be expected. Grieving our loss is a natural and expected process. However, for those who have placed their faith and hope in Christ and have preceded us in death, the grieving process is different from those in the world who have no hope.

Certainly Christ expects us to shed tears and feel loneliness (see John 11:33–36) as we go through the valley; but in the midst of our sorrow, we treasure the testimony of the living hope we have in Christ (1 Peter 1:3).

**Matthew 25:1-13** - Despite the awareness that the bridegroom was coming, only five of the young women in Christ's story were prepared. We will either be prepared for Christ's return, or we will fail to take the Gospel message seriously.

The fact is: the rejected virgins in this story were never prepared for the coming of the bridegroom, or emergence of the kingdom of God.

## The Dignity of Choice

Today's readings remind us of the dignity God bestows on us as image bearers of His likeness. Each passage offers the gift of choice – in life, in death, and in the life to come. Joshua's words to God's people are relevant for today, reminding us of God's faithfulness and presenting a choice as to how we live – whom we serve – based on our everyday decisions. His challenge to "choose this day whom you will serve" reminds us that following God is a decision we make anew each day, in every moment.

Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, presents a choice in how we approach death. He does not tell us not to grieve. He knows full well that in the face of loss we need comfort. His words, assuring us that those who now sleep will rise to meet the Lord – fully alive – give the dignity of choice in how we mourn.

Jesus, in his parable of the 10 virgins, offers a choice in how we prepare for the life to come. His words remind us that we cannot control when or how we will enter God's eternal kingdom. This warning then gives us a choice in being watchful and ready. His words motivate us to carefully tend our spiritual lives, ensuring a life illuminated by the steady, sure presence of the Holy Spirit – an enduring light so bright it will keep us during the dark night of the soul and see us into the eternal light of God's kingdom.

**Prayer – Gracious God, give me hope to believe that I will be made like you, serving you with courage until faith is made sight; through Jesus Christ, Amen.**

\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

## Proper 28 Sunday after Pentecost

**Judges 4:1-7** - When Ehud died “*the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of Yahweh.*” Commitment that depends on some external force (e.g., Ehud) is not real commitment. Sin is a sobering repetitious act of defiance.

God chose a courageous woman named Deborah to be the judge in the land. This was an act of grace, but it was also an act of humiliation for the Jews; for they lived in a male-dominated society that wanted only mature male leadership. For God to give His people a woman judge was to treat them like little children, which is exactly what they were when it came to spiritual things (see Isaiah 3:12).

**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11** - Just as we are shocked when a thief breaks into our home or vehicle, so the coming of Christ will surprise the ungodly. For those who believe God’s Word, we are to live with anticipation of His return. This expectant attitude – whether times are troublesome or peaceful – guards us from being shocked when Christ returns.

**Matthew 25:14-30** - The point of this parable is: Good servants are responsible! They intentionally take appropriate action to use the funds entrusted to them for their master’s benefit. They work faithfully to serve their Lord.

Until Christ returns, we are to use every resource He has given us in His service. And whatever those resources may be, our reward is based on faithfulness, not the size of our achievements (cf. 25:21, 23).

## Pop Quiz!

Teachers often use a pop quiz to determine how well their students have been paying attention and learning. From a teacher’s perspective, the pop quiz is an instant assessment of where the student is in the learning process. For students who have not been diligent, the pop quiz is a source of dread – the passing of judgment on their unpreparedness.

Today’s readings remind us that life is full of “pop quizzes,” allowing us to see how we are progressing in our spiritual walk. Like the Israelites, do we find our commitment wavering when the pressure is off? Are we like the Thessalonians, in need of a reminder that God appears suddenly, without warning, to shake up and transform our lives? Do we need the words of Jesus to remind us to live boldly for God, investing our talents into His kingdom?

Wherever we’re at in our journey with Jesus, we’ll discover God’s pop quizzes come with a loving Teacher, ready to help us learn how to more fully live by faith!

**Prayer** – *Loving God, help me to hear your voice through your word, teaching me to hold fast to faith that results in everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

## THANKSGIVING DAY

*This devotion is available in audio format only*

## Reign of Christ - Proper 29

**Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24** - Israel's leaders, compared to shepherds, had not cared properly for God's flock. Consumed by self-interest, they had actually oppressed and exploited the people. The sheep were now scattered and being ravaged by wild beasts (foreign nations such as Babylon).

The Lord announced that these incompetent leaders would be eliminated and that He would take over the care of the flock. The Lord would gather His wandering and injured sheep back to Israel, where they would graze peacefully in rich pastures. God Himself would reestablish justice among His people and raise up for them a new, ideal Davidic ruler. He would make with them "a covenant of peace," which would assure them of safety from danger and of agricultural prosperity.

**Ephesians 1:15-23** - Paul's letter to the Ephesians was written within a framework of prayer. This section (1:15-23) is an extended prayer. Paul prays that his readers will have the spiritual insight to perceive the truth that is hidden in God. And that truth can only be unlocked in the experience of life and fellowship with Him.

Paul's prayer begins with thanksgiving for their faith and love (1:15-16). In 1:17-23 he makes four requests: (1) to know and experience God; (2) to know the hope of His calling; (3) to know of His glorious inheritance; and (4) to know of His great power. Paul expounded on this great power available to believers exhibited in Christ's resurrection, ascension, rule, and headship.

**Matthew 25:31-46** - When Christ returns, He will judge all humanity, separating people into one of only two categories—sheep and goats, disciples who will be rewarded with eternal life and unbelievers who will be eternally separated from God (25:31-46). The criterion for determining who goes where is how a person has responded to "the least of these brothers of [Jesus]" (vv. 40, 45).

A popular, modern interpretation is that Jesus was teaching judgment on the basis of response to the poor and needy of the world, whoever they are. But the more common view throughout the history of the church, which is supported by Matthew's uniform usage of the words "brothers" and "least" or "little ones" elsewhere, is that Jesus' brothers refer to fellow Christians.

## And the Greatest of These Is Love

The essence of today's readings can be summed up in this phrase: We are people in great need of a loving God and we live in world in great need of His love. At times, we find ourselves injured and broken; we discover we are lost and in peril. How we need the Great Shepherd to find, restore, and heal us!

When we have found this kind of love, our truest measure of worship is to then share it with others. Out of love, we feed and clothe the hungry and naked; we find and restore the lost and the broken.

In a world that grows increasingly divided and divisive, love speaks most powerfully. And it is this message Christ longs to proclaim – through us – to a world desperate to hear His voice.

**Prayer** – *Merciful God, let my heart and actions reflect your desire to gather and restore all people to you; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A