Part Two

SCRIPTURING

Through the Major Themes
and the Radical Grace
Of the NEW TESTAMENT

Michael Roberts

Draft

1-15-2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

For an Introduction to Scripturing see Part One

The First Testament (The Hebrew Scriptures):

The New Testament:

11. Connected In Christ

Challenge: Christianity in Context

Imagine yourself as a citizen of the Roman Empire in the 1st Century, perhaps somewhere in modern day Greece or Turkey. You are interested in matters of faith but growing weary of the cultish practices that surround you. There are temples all over the place pointing to different gods and different values. Increasingly, the fertility rituals, consumerism, and sacrifices that are promoted through these places of worship seem to be immoral and destructive rather than life-honoring and life-giving. You are actively searching for something more.

While on this quest, you become acquainted with the ways of the Jews. There is something about their understanding of God that rings true. You like their sense of morality and their emphasis on both justice and mercy. You appreciate the wisdom found in a way of worship that is grounded, not in practices that "use" people to manipulate the gods, but in the power of words that communicate the wisdom of the ages, words that reveal a God of steadfast love who works towards redemptive purposes, words that bind a community together, and words that have the power to yield good fruit into the future. You begin to wonder if this is something worth giving your life to.

You also find that you are welcomed in the synagogue and befriended by these odd neighbors. And, to your great surprise, you discover that you are not alone. Many of your fellow Gentiles are on this same quest. It is a movement, perhaps of the Spirit. There is even a name for people like you: "God-fearers," or "God worshippers," sometime called "proselytes," which means "sojourners" in Greek.

A Weekly Rhythm and Key Passages

1. Read this chapter, to provide a common framework and language for engaging the text and receiving inspiration.

2. Review the Guide for Chapter 1 on different types of literature in the Bible. Peruse the New Testament and note the arrangement of books.

3. Read Colossians, among the more theological works of Paul. Read the listed passages on the title "Christ." Using a Bible App or website, explore other passages.

4. Read Ephesians 1-3, focusing on 2:1-10

5. Read Ephesians 4-6

6. Rest, Review, Reflect, Refocus – Today is for personal preparation for scripturing in community.

7. This is the day to engage with others in the rhythm of gathering, centering, and responding.

Around you, although somewhat underground, is a whole community of non-Jews who are interested in the God proclaimed by the Jews and who are striving towards the ideals of morality associated with this faith. However, many of these seekers have not converted to

Judaism because of the extraneous conditions that would be placed upon them if they were to become Jews– things like the strict dietary laws that don't work well in a different culture, and the requirement of circumcision. That's a deal breaker!

Even for the Jews in these communities, it is okay to not fully convert. Their history includes welcoming those from other cultures and allowing them to worship without the obligation of keeping the ceremonial laws – at least, it seems, in the more liberal synagogues where you are. They remembered the words calling them to love the resident alien in their midst, to treat them justly, and to be a light to them (Among many passages, see Ex 23:9, 22:21; Lev 19:33-34, Deut 10:17-19, 24:17-19, Isaiah 49:6).

Now, come back to today. The intent of this exercise in imagination was to help us move towards an understanding of what was going on in the minds of many early Christians. While all of the first followers of Jesus were Jews, the next and larger wave came from this group of Gentiles, many of whom were already attracted to a belief in the one God as proclaimed by the Hebrew Scriptures. This wave was powerful enough to break down the barriers that would keep the love of God from being shared with the whole non-Jewish world.

It was the Apostle Paul, as a chief missionary among many, who made his way into this new world. He offered a way for people to enter into relationship with God without the need to adhere to the Mosaic laws and rituals. In the religious climate at the time, and especially among the growing number of Gentiles looking for new expressions of faith, this offer was very attractive.

We must ask: What is this way? Or better, who is this way? The answer is Jesus the Christ, or as Paul usually says, "Christ Jesus." At a basic level, he is the link between Judaism and a new way to express this faith for all the world, and at a cosmic level, he is the link between God and humanity and between death and new life. Christ is proclaimed as the WAY.

Perhaps the first lesson to be learned about Christianity is that Christ is not Jesus' last name. Christ is a title, like President, or Doctor, or Pastor. The title indicates something about the person's vocation or role in the world. It is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word, Messiah, which literally means the anointed one. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures this title was used for priests, prophets, and kings, while also pointing to one who is coming who would bring deliverance in a powerful way. Today we might say that a Christ is a representative of God, one who shows us who God is and what kind of relationship God wants with us. As the early missionaries proclaimed: in Christ Jesus "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." (Col 1:19).

This was an age when people, Jews and Gentiles alike, were looking for a messiah. Many had very specific expectations, generally centering on military power and political salvation. Jesus,

as he was proclaimed as the Christ, represented something very different. He was lifted up as a servant and a spiritual savior. He represented a God who loved the whole world and who came to reconcile the whole world into this love. In a world where gods were represented in many other ways – as capricious, manipulative beings to be appeased, or as supporters of war and a giver of blessings to the powerful, or in polytheistic ways with a different god for every facet of nature – this was a new word for many. It was a new perspective on life that drew many in. Christians became those who professed that Jesus is the Christ. He is the way that we address the challenge of knowing God. We know, even today, that this profession of faith continues to transform lives.

Inspiration: Being Saved by Grace

Scholars debate over how prevalent the "God-fearers" were. Some estimate millions, while others say a few. While there is little written or archeological evident for this group outside of the Bible, what we do have matches the history in the Bible. The term "God fearer" was probably not an official designation for the synagogue, nor were detailed records of them kept. Nevertheless, from the evidence, it is clear that they were present. Some even argue that, because of their presence, Judaism was on the verge of moving away from a nationalistic religion to a world religion. Of course, this was controversial among the leadership and the doors were never completely flung open. We see this debate within the New Testament as well. There we see Paul engaged in an on-going struggle with those who believed that followers of Jesus also needed to adhere to the law. Paul felt called to fling the doors open as wide as possible.

The term "God Fearer" is used frequently in the Book of Acts. In John's Gospel, this specific word is not used, but we do see Greeks attending Passover. Likewise, the Apostle Paul does not use the term "God Fearer," but more than any other, he addresses gentiles who seem to have some knowledge and relationship with Judaism and seem to have already been struggling with the tension of keeping the law. Paul's message was directed to those whose hearts were open to God but not necessarily to some of the baggage that went along with the religion. Like the prophets before them, they were attracted to the ideas of justice and mercy, but not big on the whole sacrificial system.

As we start our conversation of major New Testament themes, it is critical that we grasp the concept of salvation and how it is given. Sometimes, Christianity is viewed as a kind of "straitjacket religion" – a confining and restrictive faith with a neat list of "do's and don'ts," with the Bible as a weapon to keep people in line. From Paul's perspective, nothing could be further from the truth. To view faith through this lens is a complete perversion.

Drawing upon the Hebrew word for "salvation," we learn that it means "to enlarge" or to "make room." One can picture being able to walk out of a prison cell and into the open world, free to run and roam. That's an image of salvation.

As the gospel was proclaimed in Greek, new dimensions were added to this understanding. The Greek term for salvation (sozo) can also be translated as "heal" or "make whole." Even today, the word "salve" describes an ointment that heals wounds. Thus, from this perspective, we are not only saved "from" something but also "for" something. To be "saved" is to receive the wholeness and healing needed to live freely and expand our lives into the very realm of God's present/future kin-dom.

In this light, salvation is much more than a "ticket to heaven," or some kind of insurance policy for the afterlife. It is a present reality, in addition to a future hope. We are "being saved," as Paul says (I Cor 1:18; 15:2; 2 Cor 2:15). We are invited to "work out our salvation" (Phil 2:2). Salvation does not just describe a single event. Salvation is God's work, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, until it is consummated in glory, to paraphrase John Wesley.

In the context of Paul's preaching, the big question before us is: "How do we get this salvation?" If you go back to the exercise in imagination where you were invited to put yourself in the place of a "God-fearer" in that culture, the question burned into your brain might be, "What must I do to earn this favor from God?" Perhaps this is a human question that transcends this particular time. Paul's earth-shaking answer is, "nothing."

John Wesley on Salvation

"By salvation I mean, not barely, according to the vulgar notion, deliverance from hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth."

The grand doctrine of Christianity, as it comes from Paul, is that salvation comes by grace through faith. The Greek word for grace (charis) literally means "gift" or "favor." The English word "charity" is a direct derivative of this word. In the Bible, this common word is used to describe a very special gift from God. It points to the unconditional, eternal, life-giving love of God for all (See especially Eph 2: 1-10).

According to the Apostle Paul, this gift is acknowledged through faith. Faith, however, is much more than consent or agreement, as if we are signing a contract. Faith is trust. When we say, "through faith," we are also invited to think of God's faithfulness. We are invited to trust in a God who is faithful to us. Our trusting does not seal the "salvation deal." Rather, it allows us to begin to live out our salvation.

When this “grand doctrine” is neglected or watered-down, faith can easily degenerate into an act of self-justification. Paul makes it clear that every time we try to justify ourselves before God and others, we nullify the grace of God (Gal 2:21; Rom 11:6). Placing the focus on ourselves and what we “need to do” is an attempt to shut out God’s grace and to claim our own control of our salvation.

Paul shares an image. Compared to the magnitude of God’s love, we will always fall short. In grace, God comes to lift us up and to guide us along by the light of grace, where those who are anxious can find peace; those who live on the surface can find depth of spirit; those who are held captive can be liberated; those who are alone can find relationship; those who are empty can be filled. In short, salvation! In this relationship, life unto death becomes life unto life. We cannot do it on our own. The journey of abundant, true, and eternal life is a gift.

Who is given this gift? The answer is everyone. Paul uses the word “all” with some frequency. “For in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order…” (I Cor 15: 22-28. See also Rom 11:25-36; II Cor 5:14f, Eph 1:10, 4:9; Phil 2:5-11; I Tim 4:10, I Pet 3:19, 4:5-6). All are invited to live in relationship with a God who is this big and to grow in this wildly extravagant grace. While our ultimate salvation and transformation is up to God, we have the privilege of participating in the gift with each and every breath we take.

As Paul moved through Jewish communities and into the Gentile world, he took up this cause. At the heart of his message was that salvation comes by grace, not works. We have been set free from the law. We have been set free for a life of grace and peace, words that Paul used to begin and end his letters, as well as shape much of the content in between. In grace and peace, we are being saved! Thanks be to God!

Connect: Christ in the Struggle

A reminder is in order. Through this resource, we are dealing with major themes, not trying to get through every word. Our focus is less on knowing the information and more on the inspiration. You are invited to enter into the conversation in a way not unlike the “God-fearers” of old, as those seeking to know God and not just to learn about God. As you read, you are invited to stop and ponder more than plow through to the end of the assignment. Most of all, you are invited into holy conversation with friends, for the sharing of insights and perspectives is a primary means by which God inspires us and showers us with grace.

The very nature of the scripture invites us into this kind of conversation. As we explored major themes in the Hebrew Scriptures, we noticed multiple perspectives and drew the conclusion that this messiness is actually a sign of inspiration. It is a blessing that those who preserved the

scriptures did not redact the story into a unison message to be followed; rather, the primary purpose was to provoke conversation which leads to transformation – to the expansion of perspective, and into a new way of living in relationship with God and God's creation. As we will see, this same kind of diversity of perspective is found in the New Testament. We continue to be invited into the conversation.

Concerning the books of the New Testament, Paul's letters were the first written and thus became the first step towards the development of a New Testament Canon. It is important to note that, while Paul knew of some of the teachings of Jesus, this is not his emphasis. Paul's focus is on the risen Christ and the salvation that the risen Christ brings to all the world. This is where Paul starts. It was the first message proclaimed to those outside the inner circles of those who followed Jesus. Within Paul's writings, we see various and changing views as he openly deals with issues and struggles with matters of faith. Through scripturing, we will take this as an invitation for us to engage in this same struggle.

The Gospels were all written after Paul's writings, and each of them brings a different perspective as well. Matthew, for example, was written around 50 years after the death of Jesus in a time and place where there was a growing divergence, and even a developing hostility, between the synagogue and the newly-formed church. His is the only gospel to mention the Church and the only gospel that calls itself a book. Matthew's Gospel is meant to be a new "Book of Teachings," from the "New Moses" who fulfills the law. Mark's Gospel gives us a different perspective, emphasizing the power of Jesus, and has much fewer teachings. Luke portrays a more universal theme and emphasizes Jesus' love for all who are hurting or marginalized. These three gospels are known as the synoptic gospels because of their similarities. Yet, at the same time, they view the story of Jesus through a different lens.

An example of these different perspectives is found in how the crucifixion of Jesus is portrayed. In Matthew, we see great crowds against Jesus, calling for his crucifixion. Matthew's purpose is to claim an identity for the church apart from the synagogue. In Luke, on the other hand, the multitudes are sympathetic to Jesus. The crowd watches from afar, feeling helpless. It is only powerful leaders who are plotting against him, and even some of them, like Joseph of Arimathea, are on his side. This is just one of many examples of how the context and theological intent colors the perspective.

In addition to Paul and the synoptic gospels, we also have the Gospel of John. It is very different from the other three and reads more like a story of what the risen Christ might say if present again in incarnate form. It is theology shared in the form of narrative.

Next, we also have letters from Peter, James, and others. Through some of these letters, along with Paul's letters, we see direct confrontations and disagreements about how we are to live in relationship with the one called the Christ and with each other.

Like with the Hebrew Scriptures, the great blessing is that this "struggle" was not cleaned up or white-washed. In terms of the Canon, we are not given one perspective on Christ Jesus, but many. As we talk about Matthew's Jesus and Paul's Jesus and John's Jesus, we can also talk about our Jesus, as revealed to us through the Scriptures and by the Holy Spirit in our unique context. The writers of the biblical words applied their relationship with Christ in different ways and with different needs in mind. The very diversity within the Canon invites us to do the same. These writings are a source for relationship more than a source for the development of a unified doctrine that details exactly how all of us are to act. (People keep trying that, and it keeps taking the "holy" out of "holy conferencing"). The perspectives within the Canon are intended to inspire, even as they give us some boundaries and guidance for understanding who Christ Jesus is.

It is worth pondering that Jesus was not a writer. He did not give us an autobiography or book of teachings penned by his hand. In one sense, this might be nice to have. In another sense, however, we can be glad that we do not have this. I believe that Jesus intentionally did not leave us such words because he does not want us to be solely confined to teachings within a particular time and place. The living Christ wants us to live in relationship with him now, developing and growing in a faith that is applicable and relevant in our own context. The various perspectives within the Canon give us a foundation upon which to grow in our faith. In an indirect manner, they also tell us that our perspective, our situation, and our needs are important as well.

As we engage in holy conversation, may we remember that our task as Christians is not to agree on everything, but to help each other grow in our relationship with God. I can learn from you, and you from me. Together we can expand our perspectives and find wholeness as we are connected in Christ. In our diversity, we can learn how to love and thus prepare ourselves for life in God's kin-dom. To get locked into the "words," or our narrow perspectives on the words, might mean that we are shutting out the Christ who speaks through them.

12. The Big "tions"

Challenge: Grasping the Resurrection

As these waves of the Spirit moved out into the Gentile world, it is worth noting that they did not have a Bible to draw upon. There was no "Canon," or standard group of texts to guide them. In fact, we know that there were many gospels, letters, and teachings being circulated about Jesus, from multiple perspectives. Decisions about which of these many possibilities would be included in the Bible would not be made for another 300 years, after much struggle.

As we begin our exploration of the New Testament themes, our hope is to receive a glimpse of what attracted these early followers to this new faith. The Christian faith started, not with a Bible Study or a list of doctrines to affirm; it started with a witness. People's spirits were captivated by a new way to view life and a new way to be in relationship with God. Witnesses to this "way" shared the "good news" with others, sometimes at great risk, and through this sharing, others came to believe that Jesus was "the Christ."

This new faith was much more than a new way of believing or a new philosophical perspective. It was a relationship with a living Lord, one who had been raised from the dead. These witnesses had come to know Christ, not just know about him. This conviction was something new and had the power to turn heads and make people want to hear more.

A Weekly Rhythm and Key Passages

1. Read this chapter to provide a common framework and language for engaging the text and receiving inspiration.

2. Start with 1 Corinthians 15, then chapters 1-2, then 2 Corinthians 5:11-20

3. Galatians 1-5, focusing on 2:15-21

4. Philippians 1-4, focusing on 2:5-11

5. I Thessalonians 1-4

6. Rest, Review, Reflect, Refocus – Today is for personal renewal.

7. This is the day to engage in scripturing in community.

In the culture, there was a vague but pervasive notion of immortality. People had a sense that even if our body is destroyed, something called a "soul" continues to live. While this idea has found its way into popular Christianity, these early Christian witnesses were claiming something very different. Eternal life, from their perspective, is not an inherent quality within us. Only God is immortal. Thus, our hope for eternal life is not found in our own human constitution, but rather in the power of God. Resurrection is different from the concept of immortality. Resurrection is a gift of God. In Christ, God chooses to give life. God is able to take our memories, thoughts, hopes, and unique gifts and bring them to life in new ways as a part of God's kin-dom. This was

new and challenging, yet so attractive. Humankind was being invited into a relationship with a God who chooses life and will not let death have the final word in creation.

One of the earliest written accounts of the resurrection is from the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15. At the beginning of this chapter, we hear that Paul is writing to remind the believers of what he preached to them and the message they had received. This is important for us to note, as we seek to put ourselves in the place of the first Christians who came to faith without a Bible or institutions of faith as we know them today. For them, the written words did not ignite an affirmation of faith; rather, they are given later to reinforce it. Paul is writing to remind them of what is at the heart of this new life.

In this chapter, Paul describes the resurrection as a spiritual event. Jesus is not simply resuscitated; rather, he is given a new "spiritual body." He becomes a "life-giving spirit." In Paul's writings there is no mention of the empty tomb, nor is there a distinction between the resurrection and the ascension. In the resurrection, Christ is given new life and is able to be present among us. He becomes the living Lord of all the world and appears to us, even as he appeared to Paul – as the light of God.

The Gospel accounts of the resurrection were written many years after these letters. Among the primary purposes of these writings was to preserve the connection between the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ. It was deemed important to remind future disciples that Jesus, the teacher, is now the living Lord and that the resurrection validates his ministry and his teachings. In these gospel accounts of the resurrection, we get highly developed stories of his appearances where he walks, talks, and eats with his disciples, while at the same time the mysterious and spiritual nature of the resurrection shines through. The risen Christ is able to appear behind locked doors. He is perceived by some yet not by others. He is described as a spirit or ghost.

The resurrection is a mystery, and it is meant to be. It is something new. At the same time, it is the cornerstone of the faith. Upon this truth, the church is built, and the gospel is written, preserved, and shared. Without this event, the whole movement would have crumbled into a minor religious movement of the ancient world. As Paul says, without this event our proclamation would be in vain and "we are of all people are most to be pitied." (I Cor 15: 14-18).

As a witness, when I think of the immense grandeur and mystery of the universe, I cannot even fathom the belief that our physical being is the ultimate expression of life. I don't believe that "what we see" is all there is. It seems to be the height of arrogance and ignorance, at the same time, to think that we are somehow the Supreme Being, and that our little lives could mark the end of the story. No, I see all of life pointing to so much more. I love the way the Apostle Paul connects it together for us. What is perishable moves into what is imperishable. What is sown

as a physical body is raised as a spiritual body. "Oh, death where is thy victory? Where is thy sting?" Thanks be to God for the victory through Christ Jesus our Lord.

We are invited to live out our days, motivated by this truth. In this world, we have the privilege and possibility to live and move into the ever-expanding embrace of God's eternal love. That's the life-giving challenge before us. This great "reminding" chapter ends with these words, "Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." That's the gospel that drew the "God-fearers" in and then sent them forth transformed.

Inspiration: Embraced in Crucifixion

The resurrection was the hook and the hope that drew these first hearers in, but it was not alone at the heart of Paul's message. That status must include the crucifixion. Using letters to remind the newly-formed church of what was shared with them, Paul says: "I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among us except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." (I Cor 2:1-2). Paul admits that this was a shocking word, to both Jews and Gentiles.

It would have been easier to focus exclusively on the resurrection, shining the spotlight on a God who is powerful enough to conquer death, but that would not have been a faithful proclamation of the whole gospel. To do so would have been to water down the message in an attempt to make it easy and attractive. Paul readily admits that this message is foolish to all who see God through a lens of omnipotent and immortal power, and is scandalous to all tempted to focus faith around our own goodness. The cross makes for a tough sell, but to neglect it is to cut out the heart of Christianity.

Crucifixion, for Paul, was so much more than a Roman form of execution. It was the means by which God chose to reveal true power. Not unlike today, Paul lived in a world enamored with power -- power that could justify violence against others, power that could build oneself up at the expense of others, or power used to control markets and people. And even then, religious systems were not immune to this temptation, and many used their "bully pulpit" as a way to gain power over others, or to manipulate others into believing their version of the truth– usually with loads of self-justification. Paul believed that God had revealed a different and infinitely more powerful way through Christ and the cross.

The cross stands as a challenge to all abuses of power. Conversely, the cross reveals the true power of God, manifested not in aggression and control but by entering into weakness, poverty, despair, and even death, and in doing so revealing the power of God's infinite,

redeeming, and sacrificial love. That's the heart of the gospel for Paul. Using metaphors of the sacrificial system, Paul tells us that Christ took the sins of the world within himself and paid all penalties for them, making it possible for us to be received into a life where forgiveness and grace rules. Using images of the slave markets, Paul says that Christ Jesus redeems us (or buys us our freedom), through the cross, and sets us free to become all that we are created to be. Using metaphors from the legal system, Paul compared the cross to an act of pardon. Through all of these metaphors and images, Paul speaks of the crucifixion as an act of God's great love.

This perspective was not without controversy. First Corinthians, for example, was written in response to a letter sent to Paul, asking for direction on several issues. (We have Paul's response, but not the original letter sent to him). We know from the response that tension revolved around several issues, including freedom from the Mosaic Law, eating food offered to idols, divorce and marriage, and the way the gospel was being proclaimed by others, including Peter and Apollos. Paul chooses to address these issues, not with attempts at profound wisdom, but with the cross. The cross reminds us that God takes the initiative for all salvation; it is not based on our ingenuity or efforts or wisdom, in any way. Our humanness and humility are laid bare at the foot of the cross, and there we are all united in love, even when we are not united in agreement. This is so important for us to grasp in a world where we are so tempted to divide ourselves into theological and political camps and then take great joy in demonizing those on the other side. For Paul, no theological or political position overrides a focus on God's love for all.

With that said, we are also confronted with Paul as he engages in a fierce theological debate with other teachers who have "bewitched" those in the newly formed church into believing that it is necessary to adhere to the Law of Moses to be saved. In the midst of this debate, Paul even confronts Peter, and as a part of his argument uses Peter's pre-Christian name, Cephas. (Can you imagine taking on "the Rock" upon whom Jesus said he would build the church?) Continuing with one of the themes of this resource, it is such a blessing (and sign of inspiration) that later redactors did not clean this up for us. We get to continue in this struggle, knowing that we are not alone. Paul's righteous indignation flows out of compassion for those who had fallen for a lie and were living as if the gospel did not really matter. From his perspective, any attempt to build ourselves up before God is to nullify the grace of God. Anytime we allow a moral or legal code to circumvent our simple trust in God we deny the power of the cross and replace God's revelation with our own finite determinations of power. When we do this, according to Paul, we proclaim that God's love is not enough; we say that God's grace, as manifested through the cross, is not at the heart of faith. Paul simply would not allow this perversion to take root in the churches that he planted. And so, we must ask: "Have we allowed these spiritual weeds to grow?"

When it comes to crucifixion, it is natural to be curious about the mechanics of it all. How did it happen? What was the process? Take note that Paul was not concerned about this at all. In fact, in his letters he never described the crucifixion or gave any account of the events on that Passover weekend. Paul was, however, very interested in the relational "how." How does God reveal himself to us? How is God's use of power different from the ways of the world? How does the cross lead to our salvation? How does this event shape and transform our lives? Keep these questions before you as you read the texts for this week.

For Paul, this theology of the cross started with personal experience. As a Jew and a Pharisee, Paul could relate to all who put their hope for salvation in their own deeds. As a Roman citizen, Paul could relate to all who found the notion of a dying God foolish, irrational, and weak. Yet, from the moment of his conversion, the heart of the message became the Crucified Christ. For Paul, to acknowledge the cross is to affirm that all salvation is by grace, and nothing else. For him, the cross became the power to reconcile all things to God, and the means by which God conquers all true enemies, even death itself. The cross is at the heart of Paul's "God-breathed" message to a diseased, enslaved, and guilty world. And this is a part of a scandalous challenge. To grasp the lengths to which God is willing to go, requires that we are able to see the world, and ourselves, in deep need of help and of grace. What is it about our culture that blinds us to this perspective?

Connect: Living the Incarnation

The suffix "tion" (or xion, in the case of crucifixion) turns verbs into nouns, actions into concepts. There are many such words in the scriptures: resurrection and crucifixion; redemption and expiation (showing mercy), which are used to describe the effects of Christ's actions. Then, we have words like adoption, transformation, and reconciliation to describe the hoped-for outcome of the empty cross.

While Paul uses all of these words, it is important to note that Paul is much more interested in the action than he is in the concept. His focus is on letting the world know that God is at work in and through Christ and in Creation. A theological word for this presence is "Incarnation," a word we can use, along with resurrection and crucifixion, to complete an important theological triad.

For Paul, Jesus is much more than a spiritual manifestation of God in the world. In Jesus, God is present in the flesh. Jesus not only represents and reveals God, he also takes on our humanity in order to reconcile and redeem all flesh. Paul, however, does not stop here. For Paul, Christ opens the way for God to work in and through all children of God. Paul's primary emphasis is on

how God's grace, through Christ, is incarnate in and through each of us. This grace does not stop in Christ.

As we read the texts, it is clear that crucifixion for Paul is not just a past event. We are to be "crucified with Christ" so that it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us. (Gal 2:19-20; 5:24). While resurrection is a future reality, it is also a present reality. "And when you were dead in trespasses…God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us…nailing it to the cross." (Col 2:13-14; Eph 2:5). We are being resurrected even now.

Among the most beautiful passages describing the incarnation is the Christ Hymn, which Paul uses in the midst of his letter to the Philippians. (Phil 2:5-11). In this "hymn," we are taken on a journey from heaven to earth and back again. It is a beautiful poetic description of how Christ, though equal to God, emptied himself taking the form of a servant. He humbled himself, became human, and allowed himself to be obedient even to death on a cross. This act leads to exaltation and to a vision of praise where "every knee bends, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord." This wonderful description of the incarnation of Christ begins with these words: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." In other words, Christ's incarnation is an opening for God to work in us in the same way, empowering us to be truly human. Paul's concern is less on teaching us what Christ did, and more on how the word of God in Christ continues in us. Paul is most interested in the fruit of God's work.

In this same vein, Paul wants us to know that all who are "in Christ" are given the same ministry that Christ was given, the ministry of reconciliation. We read, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them, and entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation." (2 Cor 5: 11-20). Once again, the incarnation is extended to us.

> "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world."
>
> Teresa of Avila

Perhaps the biggest connection between Christ's incarnation and our calling is found in the image of the body of Christ. For Paul, this is who we are as the church, the very body of Christ in the world. Together we are Christ incarnate! In a very real sense, we are the "resurrection of the body." Through our ministry of forgiveness, love, kindness, and grace, we incarnate God's blessings in the world, as well as get a glimpse of the glory that is to come.

The first letter written in the New Testament was probably First Thessalonians. It contains key themes that run throughout Paul's letter. As we have noted, Paul writes to remind his congregations of the message that was shared. Another key purpose is to hold them in prayer and to encourage them in prayer. The word that Paul uses for prayer has two parts (pro-euchomai). "Pro" means to advance or move toward. A PROfessional is one who is advanced, in terms of learning and skill in a particular area. The second part means desire, vow. So, from this Greek root, we learn that prayer is an "advanced desire," a hope beyond our current hope, a committing of our lives to something bigger than ourselves. Prayer is moving away from our human desires towards God's desires for us. Since it is anything but easy, Paul's letters are calls to courage or encouragement to engage in this discipline and devotion "without ceasing." (I Thess 5:17). Prayer is a primary means by which God's grace becomes incarnate in and through us.

When we add "tion" to these various concepts, it becomes tempting to forget the verbal root. These concepts become objects to study, thus making it easier for us to keep them at a distance. With a sense of urgency, Paul proclaims rather than explains. He wants us to know how God crucifies sin and death, and then expiates, reconciles, redeems, adopts, transforms, and resurrects. As these acts enter our hearts, we are called to receive them and do the same for others. In this way, God works in union with the body of Christ.

13. Handling Hot Buttons

Challenge: Loving Diversity

Questions surfaced. Issues arose. Tensions flared. That's the backdrop for the earliest writings of the New Testament. We do ourselves a disservice if we try to turn the text into a picture of some angelic time. From the first words of the New Testament to its grand conclusion, we see Christ involved in the mess of real life. Relationships are rarely neat and orderly; rather, they are messy and challenging. The good news is that God has chosen to dwell in real life.

While many have tried, working to create a monolithic and homogenous congregation may not be such a noble pursuit. From Paul's perspective, God does not want us to be clones of one another (I Cor 12; Eph 4; Rom 12). What God does want is for us to support one another, respect one another, and help each other grow in faith together. We do not all have to think alike. Not only would that be boring, it would also severely limit our opportunities to learn how to love. The truth is, God loves diversity and calls upon us to respect a diversity of opinions and interpretations within the Body of Christ.

Looking at the New Testament as a whole, the blessing of diversity is confirmed over and over again. In the Church at Corinth, for example, people were debating about whether to follow Paul or Apollos. Which way was the "right way?" Paul says, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted. Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." (I Cor 3:1f).

In the Book of Acts, we see several debates over how to reach out to the Gentiles. Some believed that the Gentiles needed to follow the same ritual laws as the Jewish Christians. Others believed that this requirement would be a burden rather than a blessing and would nullify God's grace. In Acts 15, a compromise is reached. Compromise! That's the example that the newly formed church gives to subsequent generations.

Weekly Rhythm and Key Passages

1. Read the Guide for Chapter 13

2. I Corinthians 3-8

3. I Corinthians 12-14

4. James 1-5

5. I Peter 1-3

6. Keep a Sabbath -- Rest, Review, Reflect, Refocus!

7. ENGAGE TOGETHER IN HOLY CONFERENCING

For other examples, Paul talks about his differences with Peter and members of the "circumcision party." (Gal 3). Paul uses words like, "in my opinion," (I Cor 7:12; 8:25; Rom 14:1), and "judge for yourself," (I Cor 11:13). Concerning one hot issue of the day, the eating of food offered to idols, Paul says it is okay, but he cautions Christians who believe they are free

from such ritual constraints to avoid being a stumbling block to those who choose to live under such laws (See 1 Cor 8 and 10). He says, "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful…whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (I Cor 10:23-31).

One of the blessings of scripture is its rich diversity of theological perspectives and insights into the ways of God. The Bible does not try to cover up such debates and disagreements. Within its pages, we learn that it is possible to disagree on many facets of faith and still maintain unity in the Spirit (See Rom 14:1-23 and Phil 2). Diversity of thought helps all of us to grow.

The virtues required for this kind of relational commitment point to our need for God's transforming grace. These virtues do not always come easily: meekness, humility, patience, kindness, gentleness, temperance, forgiveness. (Eph 4:1-6; Gal 5). These are the virtues that lead to relationships of joy, peace, and above all, love – which "if we don't have love," says Paul, "we have nothing." (I Cor 13:1-13). In another place we read, "Above all, clothe yourself with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called into the one body." (Col 3:14). That's Paul's challenge to all who want to give witness to the way God works in and through humankind. How are we doing?

Inspire: A Minority Report

There were denominational and theological choices from the beginning. We've heard a lot about Paul and his emphasis on freedom from the law and salvation by grace. His voice, however, was not the only voice. In addition to Paul's letters, we also are able to hear from Peter, James, John, and Jude (As well as from later writers who wrote in the name and tradition of Paul. This time-honored practice can be found in First and Second Timothy, and Titus, which deal with the formation of the church in a later time). Through many sources, we are given an image of a God and of God's ways that is larger than any one view.

For example, the book of James has been a source of blessed controversy for generations. Martin Luther, the first leader of the Protestant Reformation, was so disturbed by the way this book challenged Paul that he considered excluding it from the Canon. He called it an "epistle of straw" and was quick to remind the church that this letter, (along with Hebrews, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation) did not make it into the Canon with unanimous consent. Within James, the controversy revolves around his stance against Paul's insistence on justification by faith alone and his strong advocacy for the inclusion of works and good deeds as essential for salvation. Among his most famous sayings are, "Faith without works is dead" and "Be doers of the word and not hearers only."

Standing in line with the prophets, the works and actions that James has in mind are less about rituals and more about justice and mercy. He gives several scenarios to consider. For example, he asks us to imagine two people coming into our church, one in dirty clothes and obviously poor and the other well-dressed and well-off. Which one do you greet? James says, "if you give preferential treatment to the more prominent one you reveal your own sinfulness." For James, faith in Christ must translate into Christ-like actions in the world. To paraphrase Wesley, true faith manifests itself through "works of mercy" and "works of piety." Faith is so much more than "assent to certain beliefs," for even the devil believes that there is a God, and that Jesus is God's son. Such faith is not enough. Faith moves and motivate us to engage in the "perfect law, the law of liberty, and to persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act, [and thus] blessed in their doing." (1:25).

James gives a Minority Report in more ways than one. At one level, his perspective on faith has fewer advocates. At another level, however, James stands on the side of those on the margins, and in doing so keeps an important emphasis of Jesus and the Prophets alive. Holy Conferencing calls us to receive this minority report with grace and to open ourselves to God's will within it. By giving it a fair hearing, we might say that James is not speaking against Paul but against a popular misinterpretation where people felt justified to neglect matters of justice and mercy because "it was all about faith." We must acknowledge that Paul calls Christians to good works as well. His focus, however, is on the point that such works are an outcome of salvation, not the agent of it. (See Eph 2:8-10). Likewise, to be fair to James, he certainly does not negate faith, as some might say, but he wants to emphasize the point that faith is dead if it does manifest itself in acts of justice and mercy and in the keeping of the law. And he is not alone in this Jewish Christian perspective. Peter and Jude stand on this side of faith as well, writing to promote "the true grace of God" (I Peter 5:12). From their perspective God's grace is the strength to endure suffering, live holy lives, set apart from the world, and to practice God's love in and for the world. The inspiring challenge is to "walk the talk." It is to "preach the gospel and, when necessary, use words."

Having these two perspectives yields healthy tension, which yields energy, moving us forward in faith and empowering us to love. Blind acceptance of the majority report (from Paul) is not healthy, and neither is the unreflective dismissal of the minority report. Inspiration comes in the dialogue between the two. The willingness to hold different perspectives in harmony is the key to true wisdom, which as James says, is not guided by "envy and selfish ambition, leading to "disorder and wickedness," for the wisdom that comes from above is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." (James 3:13-17). This is what submission to God and God's Law through Christ looks like.

Once again, inspiration comes in the struggle to discern and decide what is right for us, even as we open our hearts to what is right for others. This is reality for faithful disciples. And unless we have missed it, scripture moves us to focus on "how" we make such decisions rather than "what" decision is made. And the big question remains: Is the decision made in love? (James 2:8, among many other passages through the Bible).

Connect: In all things love

Pick any "hot button" issue today. Can we apply the principles of scriptures to them in a way that yields blessing rather than burden, health rather than heartache? Some outside observers might say that the church is having some difficulty with this challenge. In order to connect scripture to life, let us look at a couple of issues in broad strokes.

While the issue of women in ordained ministry has been settled for years in some church tribes, it is still a major issue for many in the larger body of Christ. All seem to point to the Bible for support. Reservations concerning women in ministry stem from two passages: I Timothy 2:11 and I Corinthians 14:34, both stating that women should remain silent in worship and should not have authority over men. There are multiple ways to interpret these passages. One way is to acknowledge that the principles of scripture are often interpreted in culturally specific ways and thus reflect the customs and norms of the time. For example, very few Christians believe that women should be wearing veils in worship, even though it is stated in scripture. If we conclude that these culturally specific actions do not apply to our time, the question becomes, can we still learn from the principles of authority and orderly worship behind these statements?

Concerning the Corinthian passage, it can be said that Paul was speaking about a specific group of women who were disrupting the church. He was not making a general proclamation. This seems reasonable since he speaks favorably about women praying in church earlier in the same letter (I Cor 11:4-5). Many would argue that it is important to take context and culture into account as we engage in responsible analysis of the text.

Holy Conferencing Revisited

Holy Conferencing is more than sharing opinions. It is our shared work together to discern God's will for how we live together. In a culture that seems to thrive on a "camp" mentality, where divisiveness and demonizing rule, God calls us to a road less traveled. In our encounters with others, our role is to cultivate the virtues of Christ, including humility, compassion, and a desire for all to know God and God's love. Guidelines include listening before speaking, disagreeing without being disagreeable, focusing on issues not people, and remembering that everyone in the conversation is a child of God. Along with Prayer, Worship, and Reading Scripture, Holy Conferencing can be considered a means of grace, from where God's inspiration and transforming grace.

It is also important to look for other texts that speak to an issue. In terms of women in ministry, many point to the way Jesus considered all people worthy of God's love and gifted for ministry. In one passage Jesus spent time with a Samaritan woman, to the shock of his disciples. This woman became the first female preacher, for "many Samaritans from this city believed in him because of this woman's testimony." (John 4:39). Another story shows that Jesus encouraged women to sit and learn from him in a time when it was highly unusual, even contemptible, for a woman to be discussing religious matters with men (Luke 10:38f). In the gospels, we learn that women were among the disciples and stayed close to him even at the time of his death, while

the men fled in fear (Luke 8:2; 23:55). It was a woman who first proclaimed the resurrection (John 20:1f). In a time when women were devalued as persons, Jesus showed little sympathy for this prevailing attitude.

In other New Testament writings, we have a remarkable witness to the leadership role of women. In the Book of Acts, for example, we have the witness of women like Lydia, Dorcas, Priscilla, and the daughters of Philip. In the letter to the Romans, Paul mentions several women who were leaders in the church. He writes, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, that you may receive her in the Lord and help her in whatever she may require of you…" (Rom 16:1). He also called Prisca "a fellow worker in Christ" (Rom 16:3 and says that Euodia and Syntyche are person who have "labored side by side with me in the gospel." (Phil 4:2). Among the most important passage, Paul declares that "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28).

So, we all have decisions to make as we receive the courage to look at ourselves in our cultural mirrors and inquire about the will of God and the transformation needed to live according to this will. If, for example, we come to believe in full equality under God, can we remain in a church that works against this? Or should we remain and work towards change? Such questions are a part of the struggle to be faithful.

Moving to another "hot button" issue, homosexuality is at the forefront for many and there are very few passages that speak directly to this issue. In the Hebrew Scriptures there are a couple of passages within the Holiness Code in Leviticus, dealing primarily with the need to avoid pagan worship practices. However, this is not a code we keep, and it was even questioned by the Prophets. Other passages that some use involve rape, abusive behavior, and the devaluation of women – things that we are all against. Is it faithful or fair to associate such perversions of grace with all people who might claim this as part of their identity? Might we need to repent of such harmful connections?

In the New Testament there are a few passages that need our attention. In two places, a list of vices is given that include words that some translate in terms of homosexual activity (I Corinthians 6:9-10 and I Timothy 1:8-11). The words are obscure and defined in many ways. One of the words means "soft," and implies weakness. In the ancient world it was used as a derogatory term to describe a man who was effeminate. It is possible that Paul did not intend this to have any sexual meaning. The other word may have sexual meaning, but it is mostly seen as a reference to exploitation and abuse by a dominant male. It is sometimes translated as "sodomite," a word much misunderstood. To translate it as "homosexual" is offensive and harmful, if one believes that people who identify themselves in this way can be loving and kind rather than destructive and abusive.

In another passage, (which we will read next week) a statement about men and women engaging in "unnatural" behaviors and committing "shameless" acts is made in the larger context that deals with the dangers of idolatry, the worship of false gods. (Romans 1:18-2:1). Sexual rituals were prevalent in the culture of many gods, and it was common to see those who

"exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling other mortal creatures." The result of this idolatry, according to Paul, is lust, impurity, and degradation of their bodies. It ultimately results in exchanging the truth of God for a lie, and the worship of creatures rather than the creator. Within this context, Paul uses unnatural intercourse as an illustration along with a list of many unnatural actions that are against the will of God, including things like envy, strife, deceit, gossip, insolence, and boastfulness. These acts and attitudes point to a disorientation of life estranged from God. Paul's big point is that no one is immune and if anyone judges another, they condemn themselves (2:1).

Thus, the church is being called to engage in serious holy conferencing around this issue (and much is being written about it). In looking at these passages, we must ask: Are these passages about homosexuality as we define it today? Do they prohibit intimacy between two committed people wanting to express love in a way that is natural for them or is it more about insatiable lust that leads to excessive, dangerous, and even abusive sexual behavior, even to the point of (what we would call today) heterosexuals "exchanging" their natural proclivity for something else? How are we to treat one another? How do we promote healthy, loving relationships? With no clear affirmation, what boundaries need to be set by the church? How do we respect the views of others?

Sexuality and Sexism, Injustice in many forms, Poverty and Wealth, Racism, Prejudice, Abortion, Drugs. Faithfulness demands that we let these issues into our heart, along with the compassion needed to address them and not just think about them. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, had some helpful things to say about how we approach such issues. He says, "As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity we think and let think." In another place he says, "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, freedom; in all things love." It is up to us to work together and discern how to frame our conversations. What is essential? What is not? On any issue, if the motive behind your opinion is anything but pure love for the other, then the opinion is likely to cause more harm than good. This principle is grounded in the words of Jesus, and Paul, and James, among many others in and beyond the Bible. It is at the heart of how we deal with issues and grow as the body of Christ.

14. Grace and Peace for All (the Epistle to the Romans)

Challenge: Sin is Real

Looking at the first verse of the last chapter of Romans we read: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe…that you may receive her in the Lord." Phoebe was the one who delivered this letter to the Roman Church. Imagine her on this journey from Greece to Rome. Little did she know that she was carrying such a priceless object, a theological treasure that would have more influence on Christian history than any other single book of the Bible. The shape of Christianity would not have been the same had something happened to her on this journey.

This letter was the "majority report." It captured the theological imagination of the church from the beginning and, more than any other writing, shaped the way the church would be formed and reformed. Intuitively and intentionally, Paul knew that theology matters. He discerned the importance of rooting our actions and policies in inspired perspectives and principles. Romans gives us this foundation. In other letters, Paul spent more time dealing with practical and situational realities. In Romans, Paul spends his energy dealing with foundational questions: What are the characteristics of God? How does God relate to us? Who will be saved? What about the Jews? How are we to live as Christians? Through his answers, the church found its guidelines for how to develop and grow.

Weekly Rhythm and Key Passages

1. Read the Guide for Chapter 14. The guide is intended to help you read the text for more insight and inspiration.

2. Romans 1-4

3. Romans 5-8

4. Romans 9-12

5. Romans 13-16

6. Keep a Sabbath -- Rest, Review, Reflect, Refocus!

7. Engage together in a rhythm of gathering, centering, and responding.

It all starts with the words "grace" and "peace," two words that combine the traditional Greek and Jewish greeting. This is more, however, than Paul's way to say "hello." These words give expression to the heart of Paul's theology. "Grace" points to the gift of God's unmerited and awesome love. "Peace" or "Shalom" connotes relational harmony. It expresses the desire for reconciliation. These two words set the stage for what God wants for all creation. They help define the good news concerning God's son, "who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead (which is plural and includes us), Jesus Christ our Lord…" (Rom 1:3).

Some might be tempted to yawn at this point. "Yeah, God loves us. God does great things. We all know that. Big deal. After all, we deserve it." Paul's first challenge is to convince us of our sin. Without a recognition of our sinful nature, we will never be able to embrace the good news – not just accept it but embrace it and allow it to transform our lives. We are, by nature, under

judgment and, left on our own, the verdict is grim and the consequences dire. Apart from God, we are doomed to dis-ease, despair, and death. Paul's first challenge is to drive us to our knees in confession. Without this, we simply cannot appreciate the pardon that comes through Christ.

This may be more of a challenge for us than it was for our predecessors in Rome. Our modern mentality is to believe that we can fix all problems through our own ingenuity and technological abilities. With this mentality, there is not much need for God. Likewise, if there is any talk of sin it tends to stay on the surface. Sin is seen solely in terms of "doing bad things." With this mentality, the goal becomes to "fix it" ourselves and learn to "do better." Once again, believing that the power to overcome sin is within us leaves little need for God. All superficial priorities and desires tend to shut out God. The divine connection is always made at a deeper level.

Paul's challenge is to show just how short we all fall when it comes to overcoming sin and bringing "true life" to ourselves. Some have believed that keeping the law merits salvation. Paul argues that such an attempt only leads to self-righteousness. If we are willing to look deeper, we all, whether Jew or Greek, with the law or without law, know instinctively that we fall infinitely short of the glory of God. The gulf between where we are and the kingdom/kin-dom of God is so wide, that we could never link the two together. Our efforts are not unlike the Hebrews attempting to build a tower that they believed reached to heaven, and yet, God has to "come down" to see it (Genesis 11:1-9).

Sin is so much more than actions and attitudes. At its core, sin is our estrangement from God. This does not mean that God is distant. No, God is with us, and God's steadfast love and faithfulness is forever. Yet in our sin, we can't see it. There are forces that cause an emotional and spiritual chasm between us. We do not have it within us to overcome these forces. In Paul's language, we have all "exchanged the worship of the creator for the worship of the creature." We focus our lives around things that do not give glory to God.

This condition leads to sinful dispositions that cloud our conscience – anger/wrath, envy, greed, gluttony, lust, sloth/indifference, and pride, otherwise known as the seven deadly sins. These inward dispositions or vices manifest themselves in outward acts that bring hurt and harm. Paul lists many sinful actions in the first chapter of Romans. He wants us to know that sin is deep, real, and universal. If we think we can judge another, then we only condemn ourselves. Halting this progression of sin, (from condition to disposition to action) will not happen by our own will. If there is any hope, it is in God and God alone. And we can dare to hope, because of what God has done for us and for all people through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul's word for the way God has chosen to deal with this crisis is "grace." This grace leads to "peace" with God. In the light of this grace, we are able to face our sin. We are able to embrace the good news of God's reconciling, redeeming, transforming, life-giving grace. In this embrace, the virtues of God are planted within us and begin to grow.

Inspire: The Grandeur of Grace

"Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all." (5:18). Paul loves to compare and contrast: Wrath and Righteousness, Death and Life, Flesh and Spirit, Adam and Christ. When he talks about how sin is transmitted and overcome, he is not talking mechanically but theologically. Adam serves as a representative of all. Looking at him is like looking in a mirror where we see a spirit of disobedience, the temptation to go our own way, and the desire to be like God. The early Christian "God-fearers" would have been familiar with this Jewish story. They would have known what Adam did when he tried to use fig leaves for clothes. Paul wants us to know that sin and death are within us –within all humankind. In our natural state, left on our own, there is no hope.

But that's not the whole story. Death is not the final word. For God sent a second Adam, a new representative, to undo the effects of sin. This new representative stands before God, on our behalf, with forgiveness and grace. In Christ, we discover what true righteousness is all about.

It is worth noting the word "all" in this verse. This simple word points to the completeness of God's grace and its extension to every soul, even after death. (See also Rom 5:18; I Cor 3:16; 15:22f; Eph 2:8f, 4:9, Phil 2:9, I Tim 4:10; See also, Pet 4:6, John 6:44-45, 12:32, 44; 17:1…). Is Paul saying that everyone will be saved? A very strong case can be made that this is Paul's hope and conviction. He might stop short of saying it directly or definitely, for that would be to play God, but he might say something like, "Our salvation is in God's hands. If any of us are to be saved – you, me, the life-long church goer, or the sinner down the street – it will come as a gift of grace and an act of love." Our privilege is to trust in this grace and allow the gift to come alive in us, but our trust does not create the gift. A big question is: just how gracious, loving, forgiving, and merciful is God? Paul says, in just a few verses later, that where sin increases, grace abounds all the more (Rom 5:20).

For Paul grace is big. He goes on to explore the implications of this radical and abundant gift. Some might ask, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (6:1). Paul turns this into another question, "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" Why would we not embrace the new life we have been given? To use an analogy, grace is not a reward for sin; rather, it is like water thrown on a fire. The bigger the fire, the more water there is, and the struggle between the two is very real. Yet, in the end life wins over death, and light overcomes darkness, and love rules over all forms of hate. That's what comes to the world through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Chapter 8 of Romans has been called the greatest chapter in the most influential book of the Bible. It is a conclusion to the implications of grace, reminding us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, for the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death." (8:1-2). The word "spirit" is used 20 times in this chapter. The Spirit is the answer to "life according to the flesh," a term Paul uses, not to demean our physical nature, but to point to life focused on the creature rather than the Creator. Christ inspires us, "in-spirits" us, thereby redeeming our whole lives, physical, emotion, and spiritual. The Spirit of

Christ is there for us – to help us in our weakness, to intercede for us in our prayers, to stand with us in our suffering, and to work for good in the midst of all circumstances.

In this chapter the term "Holy Spirit" is not used at all. Instead, we hear of the Spirit of Life in Christ, the Spirit of God, and the spirit (small "s") of adoption. These spiritual realities are contrasted with the spirit of slavery and the spirit of fear. A common denominator in all of these descriptions is the word "of." And inspired questions might be: What follows the "of" for you? What animates your life? Is it a spirit of fear or the Spirit of life in Christ? Is it a spirit of slavery or the Spirit of God who calls us children and "joint heirs with Christ…"? By answering this question, we get to participate in our own spiritual growth.

Paul concludes this chapter with another great question: "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" In a beautiful and poetic way, Paul proclaims that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. I invite you to read these last few verses again, slowly. Let the spirit of these words soak into your very soul. Be truly inspired.

Connect: Our Spiritual Worship

In chapters 9-11, Paul deals with the implications for the salvation of the Jews, God's chosen people. He describes how the gentile church is like a wild olive branch grafted into the olive tree. In other words, we don't replace God's first chosen; rather, we are included into the family. From Paul's perspective, those chosen to be a light unto the nations, both Jew and Gentile, are those who have faith and who have received the circumcision of the heart (2:27). Throughout Paul's writings he shares concepts which are deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. He is very interested in making the connection between the old and the new. This movement makes more sense when we keep in mind the presence of both Jewish converts and those called God-fearers who were invested in growing from the roots of a Hebrew faith. Paul wants us to know that we are all connected together by our faith in God, both those who keep the law and those who feel that they have been set free from the law through Christ. In this context, Paul tells us that all of Israel will be saved (11:26), and that while all have been imprisoned in disobedience, God will be merciful to all (11:36). Again, it is in this grace that we are all connected.

At the end of Chapter 11 Paul gives a great Doxology to Christ, "for from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen." And then, in the first verse of Chapter 12, we see an important word: "Therefore." Up to this point Paul has told us about what God has done and is doing. Now he leads us to respond. He says, "I appeal to you therefore…to present your bodies as a living sacrifice…which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God." (12:1-2).

We respond by engaging in spiritual worship. The word translated as worship can also be translated as work or service (or liturgy, in Greek). Worship is our primary work as Christians. This is one reason we call it a "worship service." The word describes the kind of service that someone does freely, as an act of the heart. In this sense, it is different from slavery. God does not coarse our worship or our service.

When we engage in this kind of voluntary work the outcome is transformation. It's that big! We are able to move from one identity to another. We are able to become a new creation. While this might happen all at once, it can also happen from "one degree to another," as Paul says elsewhere. When we think in terms of degrees it may be hard to tell much of a difference from one degree to another, but as we continue to be transformed the difference becomes very noticeable. As we are transformed, we also conform to the image of Christ and share in his life.

Virtues and Vices

The so called seven deadly sins or vices include Anger/Wrath, Envy, Lust, Greed, Gluttony, Sloth/Indifference, and Pride. Corresponding to these are many virtues that need to be cultivated, including Forgiveness, Kindness, Charity, Temperance, Love, Courage, and Humility. While all are important, St. Augustine once argued that "Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues. In the soul in which this virtue does not exist there cannot be any other virtue expect in mere appearance."

Saint Augustine of Hippo

We are then given the marks of living as a follower of Christ in the form of "exhortations." These are statements that begin with a verb, calling us to action, and urging us to give a particular kind of witness. Here are some examples: "Let love be genuine." "Outdo one another in showing honor." "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers." "Bless those who persecute you." "Do not repay evil for evil." "Live peaceably with all. That's a few from Paul's list. By striving to live by these values and virtues we engage in our spiritual worship. This is how we connect to all that God has done for us through Christ.

15. The Power of God (The Gospel of Mark)

Challenge: Keeping Up with Mark

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic gospels because they all present a common view of Jesus' ministry. John is substantially different in order, content, and message. Of the three synoptic gospels, Mark was the first written and was used as a source for Matthew and Luke. While there is much scholarship behind this assertion, it can be illustrated in a simple formula. In these three gospels, the order of events is frequently the same, but where it is not Mathew and Luke do not agree with each other. In other words, one will follow Mark's order and the other will place the events or parable in another context. Likewise, the wording is frequently the same, but where it is not Matthew and Luke do not have the same wording. One or both have changed the wording to fit their purpose, situation, or goal. In no place, however, do Matthew and Luke agree against Mark. So here is the formula. If we see combinations of ABC, AB, BC, but never AC, it can be deduced that B (Mark) is the common factor. Mark is a common source for both Matthew and Luke.

To add to the theory, there are many cases where Matthew and Luke have similar sayings which are not found in Mark at all. The different use and arrangement of this material would suggest that neither copied the other. Thus, it is postulated that Matthew and Luke drew upon another source, a lost collection of sayings that scholars refer to as "Q." (Because the German word for Source starts with this letter). The hope is that this writing will be found someday. In addition to Mark and Q, Matthew, and Luke both have material that is unique to each of them. We will look at some of these passages in the next couple of weeks.

A Weekly Rhythm and Key Passages

1. Read this chapter, to provide a lens for understanding and inspiration.

2. Mark 1-4

3. Mark 5-8

4. Mark 9-12

5. Mark 13-16

6. Today is for sabbath and renewal.

7. Engage in Scripturing with others with others through the rhythm of gathering, centering, and responding.

Turning to Mark, we start by saying that this gospel emphasizes the power of Jesus Christ more than any other. From the very beginning we are told who Jesus is. He is the Christ, the Son of God. Knowing this, we get to watch as the characters within the story call him a troublemaker and a blasphemer. Even the disciples misunderstand and rebuke him. Jesus simply did not fit into their preconceived notions. Mark wants us to know the truth as he challenges the religious and political system, defeats evil, banishes demons, and ushers in the Kingdom of God with signs and powerful words (words that change lives). Mark wants us to remember this truth when we see Jesus taken to trial and nailed to a cross. And, to make the important transition in our minds, Mark wants to remember this truth when we are tempted to compromise our principles, when we suffer, when we feel lost and alone. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Mark starts his gospel, not with Jesus' birth, but with his baptism. And, again, the story is about the power of God. Matthew and Luke tell us that the heavens opened at this point in the life of Jesus and the Holy Spirit came down upon him. Mark's description is much more graphic. He goes beyond saying that the heavens were opened; he says they were "torn apart." It is a powerful image. To open something suggests that it can be closed as well. If something is torn apart then sealing it back up is not as possible. In Mark, we get the sense that there is no turning back. The very kin-dom of God has come to earth. Life has been changed, and it will never be the same again.

The first words of Jesus, according to Mark, are: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." First of all, the mention of time is worth noting. In the Greek, there are two words for time: Chronos and Kairos. Chronos is what "flies by," minute by minute. Kairos is what God truly wants for us. Kairos is marked by meaning, not alarms; it is measured in quality, not quantity. We still use the word "time" in this way when we say things like, "I had a great time." Jesus uses "Kairos" here. The time is right. God's kin-dom has come. We are invited to repent, or "turn," and to embrace the good news that will change our lives.

From here, Mark writes to demonstrate God's power at work through Jesus. He calls disciples and immediately they leave what they are doing and follow. He healed diseases and people were immediately made whole. Crowds were immediately overcome with awe. And the leaders of the day immediately went out and conspired to destroy him. The word "immediately" appears more in Mark than any other book in the Bible. Our challenge is to keep up. God is on the move!

Inspire: Gospel Action

Halfway through this burst of God's kin-dom coming to earth, we sense a pause in the action and a time to reflect. Jesus and the disciples find themselves in Caesarea Philippi, a Roman city with temples to many gods dotting the streets. In this environment, Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They told him how he was being compared to John the Baptist, Elijah, and other prophets. Then Jesus got personal. He asked, "Who do you say that I am?" It was Peter who answered, "You are the Messiah (or Christ)." Jesus must have been pleased, for he proceeds to teach them about what must happen to the Messiah and what it means to be a disciple. He began to teach them about how he must suffer and be rejected and be killed and then rise again. "Woah," says Peter. It was too much too fast. Peter rebukes him, tries to correct him. Jesus escalates the pace of the message by saying to Peter, "Get behind me Satan!" The term "Satan" simply means "adversary." Perhaps it is helpful to take this admonition to Peter very literally. Jesus is reminding Peter, and us all, where disciples belong, "Behind me." "Follow me," he says. (It's the same Greek term). Disciples don't lead Jesus or protect him or have authority over him; rather, disciples follow.

Jesus does not slow down. He begins to give direct instructions on discipleship, and he calls the crowd to listen as well. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." It is such a paradox. The way to fulfillment is denial. The call, however, is not to reject oneself. This is not about self-hatred. It is about the liberation of our true selves. It is about experiencing "salvation," for "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Either way, we learn that we can't possess our life. Life is found in losing ourselves in service to God and others.

Life is valuable. God honors our "selfhood" (The Greek word is "psyche"). "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life/self/soul/psyche/integrity/identity as God's child?" Nothing is worth it. And it can't be bought. Life belongs to God.

Did the disciples get it? The answer is, "No." Too much was being thrown at them at the time. It was like unwrapping big, involved, treasured gifts all at once without the time to learn how to use them and enjoy them. Understanding would have to come later. When Jesus brings this up again, we are told that, once again, "they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." (9:32). Instead, they start to talk about who among them was the greatest. Jesus continues to shower them with paradoxical blessings: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and a servant of all." When Jesus talks about how it is impossible for us to be good or how hard it is to enter the kingdom, the disciples were astounded and asked, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." (10:27). He, once again, uses the illustration of the first and the last.

The Way of Blessings

God's blessings of life, love, and light come to us on their way to someone else. We can't hoard these gifts. If we try to hold them, they will grow stale and even harmful. These gifts grow are we share them. "You are valued; go value others." "You are loved; go love others." "You have received good news, now go share it." That's our calling. God blessings come to us on their way to someone else!

Mark's gospel ends with a cliffhanger. By the time of Jesus' death, the disciples had all denied and deserted him. When some of the women went to anoint his dead body, they were met by, what they described as, a "young man in a white robe," who told them that Jesus was no longer there. He had risen. They were told to seek out the disciples and tell them to go to Galilee where they would see him. The gospel ends with these women fleeing the scene in terror and amazement. (At least that's how the original version ended. Another ending was added later).

The inspiration of Mark is meant to move us. It is a call to follow Jesus, and he is not easy to catch up with. He may be on his way to Galilee while we are still hiding in terror in Jerusalem. But he paves the way, and gives the directions, and inspires us to follow – at least after we are able to get up off the floor and stop hyperventilating from the shock of it all!

Connect: Writing Our Own Gospel

So, what really happened? In the last century, the attempt to get behind the myth and discover the "historical Jesus" has been popular. In light of such a variety of perspectives, inside and outside of the Canon, who was Jesus? What did he really do? Many would say that we will never know. As we have noted, Jesus himself did not leave an autobiography.

From a faith perspective, however, this can be seen as a good thing. The variety of perspectives gives us permission to enter into our own relationship with Jesus and, in a sense, write our own gospel. Mark led the way in this endeavor. Matthew and Luke build upon his witness. We are invited to do the same through our personal testimonies of what we have learned from Christ and through the witness of others within the Church.

Mark, like all of the gospel writers, was a theologian within a particular Christian community. He writes as a disciple to help other disciples make the connection between their faith in Christ and the man named Jesus. With our strong reliance on these written testimonies, and the church's strong belief that this is the inspired Word of God, it may seem strange to hear how revolutionary such writings were at the time. Within the early church, there were those who were suspicious of written gospels about Jesus. For them, Jesus was a living Lord. They feared that a fixed authoritative perspective would cause us to focus less on a direct relationship with the living Christ and living witnesses. This is a primary reason for more than one Gospel in the Canon of Scripture.

The writer of Mark obviously had a strong need to make the connection between Christ and Jesus. Time was passing and he did not want the stories, parables, and teachings that had been passed down to get lost to history. In many ways he had the same concern as those on a contemporary search for the historical Jesus. He was among the first to give a historical perspective on who Jesus was, although his interests were in theological meaning more than objective accuracy.

Who is Jesus? Mark's first sentence tells us who he is from the perspective of the community of faith. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. That's how the post-resurrection community of faith knew him. But what about before the crucifixion and resurrection? How did Jesus demonstrate his power? What did he teach about God? What did he do that led him to the cross? After this initial designation, we see Jesus himself distance himself for these titles. For Mark's Jesus, "Son of Man" or a modern translation, "the Human One," is his preferred self-designation. We see this term in the Hebrew Scriptures as well, sometimes as a generic term for all, sometimes to designate a prophet who is dependent on God for the message given to the world. When Jesus corrects Peter's use of the term "Christ, he changes the conversation by calling himself "the Son of Man." When others suspect that he is the Christ he emphasizes that he is the human one. He emphasizes, with humility and humanity, that he is the one who came to serve and not to be served; he came to show compassion for the lost, and as one willing to give his life as a ransom for many. He charged people to tell no one about him "until the Son of

Man has risen." The pre-resurrection Jesus is a human servant to all humanity. That's what Mark wants us to know. This is also how we are to connect to him, and his example teaches us how we are to connect to the world in our humanness.

From Mark's perspective, the notion of Jesus as the Christ was meant to be a big secret before the resurrection. Over and over again, the disciples are told not to say anything about this – until he has risen. The reason for this secrecy is the subject of much debate. There are many good reasons within the narrative, including the constant misunderstanding of what this meant, the probability that he did not want to become a "side show," and because of his need to emphasize his human nature as a servant of God.

In light of this secrecy, perhaps we need to reflect on when we need to keep our mouths shut when we are talking about our faith. How often do we hear people talking with such authority about things they don't fully understand, perhaps using God to promote their own prejudices and politics? How often do we underestimate our own humanness and thus humility? The Greek word translated as secret is "mysterion." It is not about keeping some privileged information to yourself. The real "secret" or "mystery" of the kingdom/kin-dom is to "repent and believe, to turn and trust in God. That's when the insights and inspiration come to us in our humanness. We learn that we can never know it all, at least on this side of the resurrection.

By learning from Jesus, we can, however, begin to see what it means to be truly human. We can put ourselves into positions to be transformed by compassion, sacrifice, and forgiveness; we can grow in the faith that makes us human and enables us to know God.

During a moment when Jesus and the disciples were surrounded by thousands of hungry people, Jesus told his complaining disciples to give them something to eat. They then complained all the more. As Jesus saw abundance before them, the disciples only saw scarcity. As Jesus saw a great opportunity, the disciples saw a disaster on their hands. As Jesus saw possibility, the disciples saw a problem. As Jesus saw others, the disciples were concerned about themselves. As Jesus approached the situation with faith, the disciples were consumed with the facts. This is but one example of how we can learn from the human Jesus about how to approach life with both faithfulness and fruitfulness. Mark did not want such lessons to get lost to history, or to the church, or to you. What a blessing it is to have this written account of the life of Jesus to help us through our own struggles to understand and to write our own gospel by the way we live our lives.

16. The Divine Teacher (The Gospel of Matthew)

Challenge: To Move Beyond Average

"You are the salt of the earth." In that day, salt was valued like we value gold today. In fact, our word "salary" comes from a word that means "salt money." So, Jesus is saying that you are valuable. But then there is an edge that always comes with the teachings of Jesus in Matthew. He says that when salt loses its taste, or its purpose, "it is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot." (Matthew 5:13).

"You are the light of the world." It's another wonderful affirmation. In that day, bringing light into the darkness was not as easy as flipping a switch. It took work. So, as Jesus asks, why would anyone go the trouble to light a lamp and then cover it with a basket? The implication is that we do that. Even after all that God has done to ignite the flame within us, we sometimes refuse to shine. So, Jesus says, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14). Notice that the beam is not turned towards us.

Weekly Rhythm and Key Passages

1. Read the Guide for Chapter 16

2. Matthew 1-7

3. Matthew 8-14

4. Matthew 15-21

5. Matthew 22-28

6. Keep a Sabbath -- Rest, Review, Reflect, Refocus!

7. ENGAGE TOGETHER IN HOLY CONFERENCING

In both of these sayings the indicative comes before the imperative. In other words, Jesus simply tells us who we are in God's eyes, as a statement. He doesn't say, "You should be the salt of the earth" or "You can be the light of the world if you do this or that." He says, "You are." This is how God sees you.

The old "See/Do/Get" Model is instructive. The paradigms or lens through which we "see" reality determines what we do, which in turn determines the results we get. If you don't like the results you are getting in your life, then the first thing you need to change is not what you do but how you perceive your purpose and goals. If a church, for example, sees itself in the business of equipping people to share God's transforming love, then the action of that church will be very different from the church that sees its unspoken purpose as keeping the people who are already there comfortable. If we see ourselves as a lover of new insights and knowledge, then we will approach daily life very differently from one who just wants to be entertained. The challenge before us in these passages is to see ourselves as God's sees us. The way we see ourselves has a great effect on what we do and the results of our work. Jesus says: "You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world."

Before these two examples of who we are, Jesus shares the famous beatitudes. These powerful statements are also in the indicative mood. They are not exhortations for how to live or

commands to follow more stringent laws; rather, they are statements of the way God is and how God acts. Picture Jesus looking out over his people and noticing that some are broken-hearted. He says, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." He sees others weeping and assures them that in God's presence they will be comforted. The declaration of God's favor continues for the humble, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemaker, the persecuted, and all who hunger and thirst for righteousness. To be a disciple is to learn to recognize how God's favor turns the values of the world, not upside down, but right side up, and then to give witness to this way of life. That's the challenge before us.

It is worth noting that Jesus is not talking to individuals. His words are addressed to the community. Even the word "you" is almost always plural. Matthew's gospel is a training manual for the church as a whole, as a body. In fact, this is the only gospel to use the word church. In this light, Matthew uses the term "kingdom of heaven" instead of "kingdom of God." The emphasis is not on the throne but on the virtues and values that are required to live in community around the throne. The call of heaven is to be an alternative people, a people who embody an alternative way of being in the world. This is a reason for the newer translation as "kin-dom." Both words are translations. The later emphasis the relational dimension, found in the word that Jesus is sharing.

Especially in the Protestant church, many view God's primary work in Christ as saving individual souls in a spiritual sense and providing personal "tickets to heaven." Contrary to this popular perspective, Matthew makes a strong connection between salvation and discipleship. He makes it clear that our relationship with God cannot be separated from the values and virtues that form our relationships with others – neighbors and enemies alike. Disciples are more than those "going to heaven." Disciples love their neighbors "as a part of themselves" and go the extra mile to "love their enemies" as well. Disciples lift up those who are knocked down by a competitive culture and superficial culture. Disciples work for justice and show mercy. That's what the body of Christ does as it strives to embody heaven for the world to see, constantly praying for God's kin-dom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The Sermon on the Mount is a clear challenge to rise above average. It is average to retaliate against evil. It is average to keep the laws against murder, adultery, and the like. It is average to love those who love you back. Disciples are called to a higher standard, above average. Disciples don't settle for average.

And so, we come full circle. Such a challenge would be debilitating if not for the fact that we are viewed in the same way we are called to view others. As we learn to notice and care for the broken hearted and grieving, God's favor is on us when we are in such states. As we embrace our humanness in humility, we are honored by God, not condemned. As we strive to love, we learn that we are loved with perfection, even when we are acting like enemies of God. Yes, as you read this sermon this week, don't get lost in the impossibility of it all; instead, get lost in appreciation for the One who stands with us in the impossibility of it all. In this

relationship, “all things are possible.” (Matt 19:26). In this relationship, transformation happens, if but from one degree to another.

Inspire: Parable Meant to Move Us

Between the birth narrative and the passion narrative, Matthew gives us five sections, each containing a narrative of events followed by a sermon or discourse to illuminate those events. The first of these sections culminates with the Sermon on the Mount (5-7). The next section ends with instructions on missions (10), the next teaching moment contains the parables of the kingdom (13), the fourth section ends with teachings for the church (18). This “sermon” is followed by many more parables and signs of the kin-dom as Jesus enters Jerusalem. The final section ends with a lengthy discourse on the implications and meaning of what is coming, both in Jerusalem and in the final judgment (23-25). Matthew values teaching. His gospel, above all, is designed to motivate discipleship and inspire perseverance, even in the face of great and grave challenges. His goal is to equip the church for the tensions found within the world.

In the third section, Matthew’s Jesus turns to parables as a primary means of “moving” disciples into the kin-dom of heaven. As we have seen, the word inspire comes from the word “wind” or “breath.” If something is inspiring, then it moves us like the wind; it animates our lives as breath. Likewise, to “get” a parable requires movement. As we mentioned in the very first chapter, the word “parable” combines two other words, one meaning “alongside” (para) and the other meaning to “throw” (ble). A parable is a truth or concept that is thrown, not directly at us, but alongside us. We have to move in order to catch it. Parables add a twist to the stuff of everyday life in order to open us to new ways of seeing.

For Jesus the kingdom/kin-dom of heaven is not a place but a reality, not a thing but a way of life. It is like a mustard seed that grows and grows until all the birds of the air can nest in its branches (13:31). The twist here is that a mustard seed, in nature, does not become a tree at all. It is a bush. With God, however, this tiny seed can be transformed into something new and big enough to be a home for all. What might be the meaning in this for the church? How might we need to move to receive the intended inspiration?

This parable is followed by another where Jesus uses yeast as his object lesson. This smelly, moldy substance was most often used to illustrate corruption, but Jesus twists this common analogy into a description of how the kin-dom permeates our lives.

In another shocking story, Jesus tells of someone (perhaps a worker or one gleaning the leftovers in the fields of another) who finds a buried treasure, covers it back up, and then, in his joy, sells everything he has to buy the land. We must presume that a hidden treasure could rightfully be claimed in this way, though not without some tension. The parable sparks thoughts of having something of great value, but forgetting about it, neglecting it, or being unaware. How sad this is.

Jesus then says that the kingdom is like a giant net thrown into the sea, bringing in fish of all kinds, and then once ashore, separating the good from the bad. So, it will be at the end of the age, says Jesus. All evil, all that is bad, will be thrown into the fire. Does this mean people? Is this the end for them or a purification of some kind? The parables inspire us to ponder and, especially in Matthew, also motivate us to act before it is too late.

The art of parable-telling is used in other sections as well. And as Jesus moves towards Jerusalem the stakes get higher. He wants us to know the values of the coming kin-dom. In the parable of the vineyard workers, we see the owner going out throughout the day to hire new workers and then at the end of the day all are paid the same, those who worked all day and those who only worked for an hour (20:1-16). It is meant to stir us up and even ignite our anger as we are forced to face our worldly values. In this parable, we see that there is nothing fair about grace. The grace of this ever-seeking, extravagantly generous, life-giving God, is beyond fair. Can we deal with that? Can we allow ourselves to be moved by this kind of grace?

In sharing the demands of the kin-dom and the kind of transformation that is required, the disciples finally ask, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus answers that it is impossible with us, but "with God all things are possible." In other words, salvation is possible for all. But the questions of "who" and "how" have surprising, even shocking answers. Over and over again Jesus says that the "first will be last and the last will be first." If you think you can earn a place in the kin-dom, or that you deserve it, you will likely be among the last to see it, if you are able to see it at all.

In these parables we are pointed, not only to some distance and future hope, but to a reality that manifests itself within us as we strive to be the community that gives witness to the ways of God. While these parables have an element of mystery, within them we learn that the kingdom/kin-dom of heaven is not unlocked with some secret knowledge or religious ritual; we discover God's relational presence as we engage in acts of love, especially with those whom others might see as less than the "salt of the earth" or the "light of the world."

The last thing Jesus says, before he begins to prepare for the cross, is a word about the final judgment when the king of glory will look upon his disciples and say, "Come you that are blessed…inherit the kingdom…for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me;…I was sick and you comforted me." The disciples then will ask, "When did we do this for you?" "And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"(25:31-40) We would be remiss if we failed to note that Jesus, in Matthew, also has a hard word for those who did not do such things.

By the wind of the Spirit, the teachings of Jesus are meant to move us -- and not just emotionally. These teachings are meant to literally move us into the world to live as kin-dom people. The writer of Matthew was clearly motivated by the need to simulate the teaching that the first disciples had received. He wanted to provide a resource for a new generation to sit at

the feet of Jesus and be moved. As you read Mathew's gospel, how might the Spirit move you? Are you willing to open your spiritual sails?

Connect: The Old and the New

The writer of Matthew was either a "God-fearing" Gentile, well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, or a Jewish Christian committed to the moral ethos of Judaism and loyal to the traditions found in Peter and James. More than any other gospel, Matthew makes the connection between Judaism and the Church. This link is most likely the primary reason for its place as the first book in the New Testament. Many have used the word "transition" to describe the move from one covenant to another. I would say that Matthew had something more in mind than a mere transition. His goal is to merge the two together. We know that there were those who wanted to move beyond any allegiance to the Hebrew Scriptures, hence calling it the 'old' testament. Matthew did not agree. For him, Jesus' teachings are an extension to the law of Moses. His work is a fulfillment of Hebrew prophecies. His witness brings great illumination to God's continuing grace to all the world, something that many in Israel had forgotten.

INTEGRITY

Jesus talks a lot about hypocrisy, and thus it's opposite, integrity. We are called to a faith that cultivates integrity, where intentionality and discipline are used to align actions to vision. In other words, integrity is seen when what we do is consistent with who we want to be or become. It manifests itself when creeds are put into deeds. This is not easy for us humans who have such a knack for denial, avoidance, self-justification, and external projection of fault. Jesus help us! (See Matthew 6:2,5,16; 7:1-5, 15; 15:7-9; 23:13-29; See also James 1:22-25; 3:17: I Peter 2:1; Titus 1:16; Isaiah 29:13; Psalm 55:21).

In Matthew, Jesus is portrayed as a second Moses, renewing the word of God with an expanded purpose for a new time. In the birth narrative of Matthew, Jesus is born in the midst of a king wanting to get rid of all first-born sons, a parallel to the birth of Moses. Jesus and his family flee to Egypt, so that he too could be called "out of Egypt." Matthew is the only Gospel that depicts this tension. Luke, for example, has the holy family going to Jerusalem after the birth of Jesus so that he could be dedicated in the Temple. Each of these gospel writers put their perspective on Jesus in the form of a story meant to move others to see Jesus in a particular way.

To continue the connection to Moses: in Matthew, the extension of the law, which we call the Sermon on the Mount, is given from the mountain, harkening us back to the way Moses received the law of God. Luke's version of this same sermon is given on the plains, down among the people. Again, each writer is sharing a different perspective.

Most of all, we see the skillful way that the writer of Matthew's gospel connects Jesus to texts from the Hebrew Scriptures. He says, "You have heard it said, but I say to you," over and over again, not to discount the earlier saying, but to put the words in a new context in the light of Christ, and to move us beyond what had become an "average expression of faith." In speaking

of the parable, he says “Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” The old and new go together in the household of God.

Apart from this perspective, one might conclude that Matthew contains some of the most “anti-Jewish” sentiments in the New Testament. What must be remembered is that Matthew is a critic from the inside. Standing in the line of the prophets before him, he is speaking to his sisters and brothers and calling them to faithfulness. Like the prophets, he challenges the focus on external obedience to the law and champions a deeper spiritual connection. His goal is to connect us to the true spirit of the law and thus to the infinite love of God.

Matthew’s gospel echoes the words of James to be doers of the word and not hearers only (Matt 7:24-27). Matthew is intent on connecting thoughts to action. We are to bear the fruit of repentance. We are called to take up our cross. Righteousness is demanded as the active engagement of God’s will. This is how we “build our house upon the rock.” With many of these challenges, Matthew’s Jesus adds a note of judgment that we don’t see as much in the other gospels. In being told to take up our cross, a part of Matthew’s motivation is that the risen Christ “will repay everyone for what is done.” (16:27). In one parable we are warned that blessings can be taken away and given to those who “produce the fruit of the kingdom.” (21:43). We do not want to find ourselves among the pervasive “crowd” in Matthew that was often enamored with Jesus but did not join the caravan moving into the expanse of God’s love. In fact, when things got difficult, this same crowd called for his crucifixion.

Ultimately, this teacher equips and propels us to fulfill the Great Commission, to go into all the world, and “disciple” others, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them all that has been commanded. The allusion to baptism is about more than the ritual. It is a call to be immersed, or covered, with the whole faith, and not just a part of it. It is too easy to over focus on one aspect of God and thus miss the blessings of a more complete perspective. When Jesus was baptized in Matthew’s gospel, we hear about the need to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Only Matthew includes this image of purification, healing, and clearing the way for new life to spring forth. The mission of teaching in this Great Commission is a challenge to move beyond the easy way. We are to engage in all of Christ’s teachings; not just those we happen to like. In Matthew these teachings push us beyond the limit – both inside and, literally, out into the big scary world. As we press on, both to the heart of God and in compassion for others, we receive this promise: “I am with you.” That’s good news!

17. The Lord of All (The Gospel of Luke)

Challenge: To Make the Gospel Irresistible

Babies have a way of melting our hearts. Even grown men will start talking in a high-pitched voice and say things like "How cute!" Unless we are totally preoccupied with something else or oblivious to the blessing, babies are irresistible.

And so, the Gospel of Luke begins. Luke starts his story with babies, both John and Jesus and their loving peaceful parents. In Luke, we do not see the conflict and tension found in Matthew. Here we see angels appear to Zechariah and to Mary, not to Joseph as in Matthew. Mary and Elizabeth meet together, and both are "filled with the Holy Spirit" and make grand proclamations of blessing. Mary breaks out in song, singing a version of Hannah's song found in I Samuel, where her soul magnifies a God who favors the lowly and feeds the hungry, while also "scattering the proud in the imagination of their heart." When Jesus is born, he is laid in a manger among shepherds and animals because there was no room for him on the inside. After he is born, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate and name him. There is no mention of their fleeing to Egypt. In the temple, Simeon and Anna share more testimonies about the role of this child who is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

<u>A Weekly Rhythm and Key Passages</u>

1. Read this chapter, to provide a common framework and language for engaging the texts.

2. Luke 1-6

3. Luke 7-12

4. Luke 13-18

5. Luke 19-24

6. Rest, Review, Reflect, Refocus.

7. This is the day to ENGAGE with others in the rhythm of gathering, centering, and responding.

Let's think about the shepherds in the fields on the night of Jesus' birth. Shepherds were known to be hard-living souls, rugged men of the world. They were probably not reading their bibles that night. They had probably never changed a diaper, or whatever the equivalent was back then. And yet, as they herded sheep out among the stars, a light came upon them and "an angel of the Lord" directed them to do one thing -- go see a baby. They did and it changed them. And here's the deeper truth: it is not what they saw in the manger that changed them; it was what they saw in themselves as they gazed upon this baby in the manger. In this child they saw hope, joy, love, and purpose all wrapped in the wonder of new life. This baby melted their hearts.

The angel of the Lord told the shepherds not to be afraid. That's hard for us humans, for we fear so much. We fear that we might not be lovable. We fear failure and sometimes success. We fear our human finitude. Our fears can lead us into deep darkness. Thus, the angel says,

"do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy." This good news is that God chose to enter into the world in the one way that is irresistible for us, in the one way that shows we don't have to do anything to merit God's love. "For to you is born this day a savior, who is Christ the Lord." This baby reveals God to us. Through the manager, we learn that God is with us, not against us, and that we are indeed lovable and precious in God's sight. This gift is not just for those on the "inside."

Luke hooks us with babies and then proceeds to weave his motive for writing into the twists and turns that follow. It is an ingenious way to begin his gospel, given Luke's motive for writing. Luke, more than other gospels, wants to show that Jesus is on the side of shepherds – and, as we will see, Samaritans, Centurions, and all Gentiles. In this same vain, Luke depicts Jesus as one who empowers women, advocates for the poor, and stands with the marginalized. Luke wants us to see that the kin-dom of God's universal love is coming in waves that can't be stopped. From one person to another, this love is making its way into every heart. It is irresistible. Underlying this spreading of the gospel is the more subtle message that Christianity is not the threat to Rome that some might think. In fact, it is leaven in the loaf. The virtues and values of Jesus build up rather than tear down. They bring life to the world. So, Luke invites us to give this gospel a chance, believing that it will capture our hearts.

In his prologue, we learn that many gospels had been written by this point. We know that Luke had a copy of Mark, and another resource that Matthew also used. He also includes many teachings, parables, and events that are not found in the others, perhaps drawing upon other lost sources. He felt led to write another, an "orderly account," of what has been handed down to him. The Greek word here is not the word for "history;" it is the word for story or narrative. Luke is primarily interested in communicating a theological perspective with story as the vehicle. He writes to "Theophilus," which means "lover of God." This may be an actual individual, but Luke's desire is clearly to serve a larger cause. His audience is all "lovers of God," starting with those who have some knowledge of Hebrew traditions and might be open to knowing more about the Christ who comes forth from Jerusalem. Theophilus represents all "God-fearers," all potential "lovers of God." Luke's challenge is to draw them in.

Our challenge is to put ourselves in the place of Theophilus. As we become "lovers of God," according to Luke, we will fall in love with the world and with its inhabitants who come in all shapes and sizes, creeds and colors. We will be transformed by Godly love. The Greek word is "agape" and it is used more by Luke than in all the other Gospels. This is not a love based on emotion, but instead is a virtue. It connotes an act of will, a commitment to seek what is best for the other, regardless of who they are or what they have done. Theophilus grows in this love, and thus becomes one who empowers women, defends the weak, feeds the hungry, seeks justice for the marginalized, embraces Samaritans, and sees God at work in all acts of love. In this love we also find the courage to call out those who stand on the side of self-protection and injustice for others. The challenge is immense, yet glorious beyond measure. As you read this

week, may Luke's story draw you in and be as irresistible as a baby reaching out with open arms.

Inspire: On the Move

In Matthew, we saw the crowds turn against Jesus. In Luke, Jesus seems much more popular, even irresistible to most. His opposition comes from a few, especially from those within the religious elite who are stuck in old ways, who work hard at justifying old prejudices, and are motivated to hold on to old forms of power. Jesus challenges them with great fervor, and these challenges hasten his earthly demise. It does not, however, stop the contagious spreading of the gospel.

It would be tempting to see these religious elites as hypocrites who lack integrity. Jesus certainly makes this accusation. However, before we go too far in projecting evil onto them, it is important for us to remember that these "Scribes and Pharisees" represent the "good guys" of society. They are the leaders of the religious. We might say they are the ones who would take the time to read a resource like this one. In order to "be moved" by Jesus, it might be necessary for us to put ourselves in their shoes and hear what Jesus has to say to us. As Jesus himself instructs, we need to be willing to look at the log in our own eyes before we comment on the speck in the eye of another (Luke 6:42). This can be hard for religious people to do.

In Luke, Jesus likes to party. God knows our incarnate nature does not always afford us with this possibility, so Jesus enjoys it. There is a time to have a good time, even as there will come a time to fast and mourn (5:33). In the meantime, Jesus eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners, to the point that he is called by others "a glutton and a drunkard" (7:33). To be fair, these characterizations are from those who want to discredit him, but at the same time Jesus has put himself in such situations. What does he bring to the party? He brings life. He forgives sins. He heals, even on the Sabbath. He blesses the poor, the hungry, the weeping and rejected, while at the same time, shares "woes" upon the rich, the full, and those on the inside. It is all more than the "religious" folks can take. Their grumbling gets more and more intense (15:2). The crowd of disciples, however, continues to grow – men, women, Jews, Gentiles, all sinners are welcomed.

The feast, ushering in God's kin-dom, continues with a more serious tone after Jesus "sets his face to go to Jerusalem." (9:51). It is a turning point for him and for the world. Jesus is on the move, with intentionality and purpose, sharing many teachings and parables unique to Luke. As the crowd of followers' increases, he begins to teach about the cost of discipleship and the transformation needed to live faithfully as a citizen of the kin-dom of God. Discipleship means to be in mission. It means to persevere in prayer. It means to practice humility and hospitality and to rejoice over the lost being found. To be a Christian means to be on the move, not unlike the way we defined what it means to be a Hebrew earlier. Christians are sojourners in this world. Christians don't settle. They struggle through. They refrain from judgment and learn to love. They embrace conflict knowing that there will be a lot of it in this world.

At one point on this journey, a lawyer comes to question Jesus, trying to justify or prove himself. In the midst of the conversation he asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells a story with a shocking conclusion, especially to a typical Jew at the time. It is the story of how three different people respond to a man who had been beaten by a band of robbers and left in the ditch. Three men who passed by noticed him. The Priest and a Levite stayed on the other side of the road. A Samaritan, however, stopped and went above and beyond the call of duty to help the man. Jesus then asks, "Which of these three was a neighbor to the man in need?" There is only one answer, but the lawyer could not bring himself to say the word. He says, "The one who showed mercy. "Jesus then says, "Go and do likewise." (10:25-37).

Inspiration comes as Jesus reframes the question. As disciples, we cannot decide who our neighbor is. It is not up to us to make such calculations. Our calling is to be a neighbor to all. Such inspiration is challenging indeed. It moves us into new vistas of love.

This won't be the last time Jesus uses a Samaritan to make his point. Later, on this journey, he will heal ten lepers and only one, a Samaritan -- a foreigner, a social outcast, a religious heretic -- will come back to give thanks. (17:11-19). Again, inspiration moves us to places we may not be emotionally ready to go. Jesus says to this one, "Your faith has made you well."

It is worth noting that healing came to all. While we sometimes see a correlation between faith and healing, this is not always the case. Here, faith is associated with wellness, not physical healing. Wellness or wholeness is a spiritual blessing. The verb translated "made well" is often translated as "saved." Salvation is discovered through thankful trust in the one who is able to restore us in relationship with God and make us whole. Jesus wants the religious to take note of who teaches this lesson. It came from one on the outside. Being made whole with God means a willingness to let go of artificial boundaries and barriers that keep us from connecting with others.

If you are not willing to be a sojourner through the fields where God's grace is at work, you are likely to miss it. Along the way we encounter this grace in the seventy who are sent on a mission, in Martha and Mary, in Zacchaeus, in children, widows, sinners, and many in need of healing. Along the way we also learn how easy it is for the rich and righteous to get stuck in old patterns of power and prejudices and to miss it all. May we be inspired to move, to walk with Jesus towards Jerusalem where ultimately grace is found.

Connect: With Spiritual Eyes Wide Open

Even in the midst of crucifixion, there is a crowd of faithful disciples standing close by, powerless to do anything. A deep sadness pervades the landscape. This is, however, temporary. In Luke the focus is on the glorification that comes to all through the resurrection. The power of God can't be stopped. The cross is a crossing over, opening up new possibilities for life and love for all creation.

In this temporary time, between the crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples scattered. Jesus had made a big deal about going to Jerusalem. Now they were leaving the holy city, running from the fear and heartbreak that had come upon them. Jesus had died, and with him so had their hope. As two disciples were walking along the road to Emmaus, they became aware of a stranger in their midst. They talked with him. They were inspired by his words. They did not, however, know who he was. As the sun set, they invited him to dinner, and in the breaking of the bread, their eyes were opened. They were in the presence of the living Christ. Their hearts were lifted. Yet, as quickly as he appeared to them, he also vanished. It was a fleeting act of insight, but it transformed them. Immediately, they raced back to Jerusalem.

Earlier, Jesus had said that he would not eat with them again until all was fulfilled in the kingdom of God. (22:15). Here, the risen Christ breaks bread with his disciples. It is a sign that God's presence had come in a new way. Victory has been won. Death did not, and will not, have the last word.

In Matthew and Mark, the risen Christ tells his disciples to go to Galilee. There he will meet with them. In Luke and in John, Jerusalem is at the heart of these appearances. These two disciples returned to Jerusalem and found the others huddled fearfully behind locked doors. While they were telling their story, the risen Christ appeared to all of them behind the locked doors. Initially, they were terrified, as if they had seen a ghost, but as the risen Christ revealed himself and "opened their minds to understand the scriptures," their fear turned to joy.

The gospels do not try to prove the resurrection, only proclaim it. As something new, our limited language can only give us a glimpse of this mystery. Is it physical, or spiritual, or both? Classifications escape us. The resurrection-life is a new creation, a new reality. As the disciples encounter this new form of life, something happened that empowered them to unlock the door and go out into the world with good news to share. In the midst of resurrection power, they found something worth, not only dying for, but living for as well, something that the world could not destroy.

The gospel of Luke leaves us in Jerusalem with the disciples "blessing God in the temple." This is big! Even after all that has happened, the disciples make their way to the sanctuary of the temple where they could worship God in the midst of a community of faith. This is somewhat shocking, given Jesus' strong words to the "religious" and the way he and his disciples had been treated by those on the "inside." With prophetic power, Jesus had revealed that those who revere the scriptures and traditions the most can also be the most blinded to the truth contained within. The religious can start to see themselves as guardians of faith and start to let judgment reign in their hearts. Righteousness can too quickly sour into self-righteousness. And yet, the disciples go to the temple. They continued to live in this rhythm of worship and work that was so important to Jesus. He started his ministry by opening a scroll of Isaiah and reading from the synagogue pulpit, and now the disciples find themselves in the temple, blessing God. It is the same temple where, just a week before, he caused a great disruption because those in

charge had allowed this sacred place to become a “den of thieves,” rather than a “house of prayer.” (19:45).

Like with fire, worship can be dangerous. Used selfishly, it can consume the love that needs to be shared. Paradoxically, however, worship, like fire, can be life-giving. Fire purifies, heals, empowers, enlightens. Worship yields this same light for those willing to have their eyes and ears opened and their hearts transformed. We learn from Jesus that we should not forsake worship because some use it as a way to hold on to destructive prejudices. To turn from worship because some abuse it is like shutting down all power plants because a few have used energy in careless and harmful ways. Jesus went to worship with the community of faith, even as he challenged those within. He honored consecrated places where scriptures are preserved, where the traditions of faith are passed down, where eyes and ears are opened, and where hearts are transformed. In the mystery of God’s work among us, these blessings come through the gathered community of faith in worship. As the disciples encountered the risen Christ “their “hearts burned” within them and their response was to go to the place consecrated for praise.

In Jerusalem, the disciples waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit. They waited for the “power from on high” to come that they might then fulfill their mission to proclaim “repentance and forgiveness” to all nations (24:48). This empowerment, by the way, would come as wind and as fire. We will read about that in the next chapter of Luke’s “orderly account” to Theophilus, found in the Book of Acts. From the temple in Jerusalem, the gospel would spread as a holy fire overcoming all forms of darkness even to the ends of the earth.

18. Acts of the Holy Spirit

Challenge: Embracing Spiritual Change

We are living in interesting times. No doubt, historians will look back on our time and mark it as the end of an age in history and the beginning of a new era. We are living in a time much like the shift from the Stone Age to the Iron Age, or from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. The speed of change in the areas of technology, economics, science, and culture is overwhelming.

The disciples in Acts were living in a similar time. The world was changing. Something new was happening. I want us to note their initial response to the challenges before them. Remember first that this is the group of people who had just spent three years in class, so to speak, with THE teacher. They had even witnessed the conquering of death itself. Yet after all this, and in the presence of the risen Christ, they have the gall to ask: "Lord, now will you restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They still do not get it. They have gathered in Jerusalem to wait for their marching orders, and while there, they revert back to some very old ways of thinking. Their first request of the risen Christ is to confirm their old narrow vision of how the world ought to be. Even in the light of the resurrection, they ask: "Lord, now will you validate our boundaries and borders, our customs and culture?"

Can you identify with this question? Have you ever found yourself wanting God to validate your prejudices, paradigms, and pre-conceived notions of what the world ought to be? That's where the disciples were that day.

<u>A Weekly Rhythm and Key Passages</u>

1. Read this chapter, to provide a lens for understanding and inspiration.

2. Acts 1-7

3. Acts 8-14

4. Acts 15-21

5. Acts 22-28

6. Today is for sabbath renewal.

7. This is the day for scripturing in community through the rhythm of gathering, centering, and responding.

Jesus doesn't even answer their question. Instead, he gives them a new vision, one that explodes the boundaries and borders of the kingdom of Israel. He says, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (1:8). The trajectory of the movement of God has no boundaries.

It is tempting to want the movement of God to stop at the place where we are comfortable and to turn inward upon ourselves. The disciples of Acts tried. They were trying to go back, but the risen Christ called them to break down barriers of the heart and to move forward. "You will be my witness," says Jesus, "in Jerusalem" – where you were; and "in Judea" – the surrounding area where people basically look like you; "in Samaria" – where people are racially and culturally different; and ultimately "to the ends of the earth." Picture the earth as seen from

space. I'm not sure we have grasped the theological implications of the earth being round. If we set out for the "ends of the earth" we end up in our own back yard. We don't march to some linear end. Times change; people change; generations change; cultures change. The mission that Christ gives us is cyclical and continuous.

How can we possibly think this big and act this boldly? The answer is, "We can't!" At least not if we are left on our own. When we try to do it alone, that's when we make the mission smaller, more manageable, within our control. The Holy Spirit is the key. Without the Spirit, we become overwhelmed by God's vision for us and start working "religiously" to turn God into the validator of our petty dreams.

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit did come upon these reluctant disciples. It happened on the Jewish festival of Pentecost marking the day that Moses received the law. Luke shows that the Holy Spirit has been active from the beginning, so this was a special outpouring. We have learned that the word "spirit" is the same as the word for "wind" and "breath." Sometimes the Spirit comes as a life-giving breath or as a comforting breeze, and at other times the Spirit comes with the power of a tornado. While the Spirit can't be seen or captured, we can feel the effects and be blessed by the gifts she brings. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes "like" the rush of a mighty wind. The Spirit breaks down barriers and opens the way for us to move forward.

Then, we see another metaphor. Tongues "as of" fire rests upon them and they begin to speak in the languages of the people present at the festival. The Holy Spirit ignites the disciples and gives light to the church. The Spirit empowers disciples to speak, not in the language or style that is comfortable for them, but in a way that will help others hear and receive. The Spirit gives the church the ability to connect and communicate and create a burning desire in the hearts of others as well.

The result of the Spirit's work, in and through the church, is growth. This growth is marked by a progression of numbers throughout Luke and Acts. First, Jesus calls 3 disciples then names the first 12. The next number we hear is about the 70 disciples sent out on a missionary journey. In the first chapter of Acts, we hear of 120 disciples, men and women, gathered in Jerusalem. On Pentecost, 3000 received the Holy Spirit. From this point, "day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." (2:47). The wind of the Spirit can't be controlled. The spread of the fire can't be stopped. We are invited to take our place in this glorious procession and to actively invite the Holy Spirit to work through us for continued growth. The challenge is to go with the Spirit and not to try to stop the Spirit at the place where we are comfortable.

Inspire: Blowing Down Barriers

The traditional name for this book is the "Acts of the Apostles," and yet, apart from Peter and James, we hear very little from the original twelve. While they were revered for the foundation they established, they were not the movers and shakers who would take the gospel to the ends of the earth. The word "apostle" means "one who is sent." In Acts, we learn that many of the original disciples stayed in Jerusalem. Barnabas, Stephen, Philip, Dorcas, Lydia, Aquila, Priscilla, and Paul represent those who were "sent" by God for the expansion of relationship with God.

Stephen was among those chosen to serve as deacons and thus serve others within the growing community. He did so with such power that he called attention to a Jewish Council that had passed judgment before they even heard from him. Stephen, led by the Spirit, addressed this council and moved through their shared history. He started with Abraham who was called to be a "Hebrew" or "resident alien." He then spoke of Joseph and how God was with him in the midst of persecution by this own brothers. He recounted the story of Moses and how he was challenged and rejected at times by his own people who wanted to "turn back to Egypt." He remembered those who focused on the temple as the place where God dwells and how the prophets proclaimed that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands." He ends his long and important speech by calling his accusers "stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears…forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do." (7:1-53). The consequence of this confrontation is being stoned to death. At the end, the story is moved along by telling us that "Saul approved of their killing him."

The result of this persecution was to scatter the disciples beyond Judea. Philip, another of the seven deacons, went to Samaria and had great success as he shared the gospel through various cultural barriers. Along the way Philip encounters a eunuch from Ethiopia. It is not the first-time eunuchs are mentioned in the Bible. In addition to describing a physical condition, this term was also used in the ancient world as a euphemism for men who did not have the same desires for relationship with women as other men. Jesus once used this term saying that some are born that way, some are made that way, and some choose to be that way to the glory of God. In cryptic fashion he says, "Let anyone accept this who can." (Matthew 19:12). While some might find this to be an unfortunate comparison, others would argue that Jesus was using the language of the day to allude to a more tolerant perspective. Regardless of the nuances of this argument, the point in Acts is clear. While this person could never enjoy full participation under the old covenant, he was fully included with the new covenant of Christ. Through Philip's missionary journey, all sorts of people are included into God's community – Samarians, Ethiopians, magicians, and "both men and women" were baptized. Social, Political, Racial, Economic, and Religious barriers are being broken down to make way for the gospel of Jesus Christ. (8:1-40).

Those threatened by this movement were not content to confine their efforts to Judea. Some of the more zealous pursued Christians. On his way to Damascus, a man named Saul received a

vision and heard a voice asking, “Why do you persecute me?” (9:4). Notice that the question does not say “my people” or “Christians” but “me.” When we harm another, we are bringing harm to Christ. In Christ, we are invited into life-giving relationships and to shun relationships that bring harm to others. This experience transformed Saul. Ultimately, through the help of a Christian named Ananias, who was led by the Spirit, Saul was given a new name and a new identity. He became the Apostle Paul.

At this point, the stage is set for the gospel to spread beyond Judea and Samaria. For this to happen, a change of mind and heart would be needed by at least some of the apostles. To this end the Holy Spirit connects Peter to a Gentile “God-fearer” named Cornelius by giving them a shared dream. When they meet together, Peter is moved to proclaim that “God shows no partiality.” (10:34-43). As he spoke the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles and many were baptized. Another major barrier had been blown away by the wind of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout, we see how hard this kind of personal transformation can be. The “circumcision party” of Christianity was strong. Many were skeptical about including Gentiles without requiring them to observe Jewish law. Even Peter will question his earlier revelations and find himself trying to recreate certain boundaries. In a great turning point, a compromise was reached where Gentile Christians would not be asked to be circumcised but would be asked to abstain for food sacrificed to idols, sexual infidelity, and meat with blood in it. (15:20). While Paul agreed to this plan, there is much evidence that he did not follow it. In his writing we see a different picture of this council and its results. (Gal 2:1-10).

As a sign of inspiration, Luke does not shy away from showing us this struggle. It is a realistic picture of human beings transformed by a new vision. The change comes by faith and by fire. Once again, inspiration does not eliminate the struggle; rather, it is found in the strength given to engage in the struggle. The Holy Spirit is at work to first open our hearts so that we might be the path through which the gospel might find its ways into the hearts of others.

Connect: The Church as the Embodiment of Christ

When it comes to the church, most of us suffer from an “edifice complex.” We think of the church as a building. It is a place where we either go or not go, depending on how we feel. It is hard to understand how this view became so popular. In the scriptures, the church is not a building; the church is a people. And even more than that, the church is a community, a group of people held together by a common identity and mission. Nowhere is this more evident than in Luke’s Book of Acts. The church comes together for the expressed purpose of engaging in specific, God-given practices. The church prays together, worships together, breaks bread together, and combines and shares resources for ministry and mission (2:42f). This is what the church does.

For Luke, all of these spiritual "means of grace" are meant to focus outward in mission. The church doesn't just perpetuate the mission and message of Jesus; the church is the ongoing embodiment of Christ's work in and for creation. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ incarnate through the community of faith. If we give into the temptation to turn inward upon ourselves and start asking God to affirm our petty prejudices and perspective, we become a religious club rather than the church as the body of Christ. Our first calling, as the church, is not to get others to change; our first calling is to be the church, the body of Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit. We gather, as the church, to engage in the practices that will empower us, as the church, to scatter out into a world in need.

In Acts, the work of the Spirit is less about comfort and more about conversion, less about tranquility and more about transformation. We see that salvation is not a solitary event for the individual; it is not just a personal ticket to heaven; rather, salvation is incorporation into the community of faith where we are transformed by particular virtues and practices that identify us as the body of Christ.

Christian conversion produces a distinct and recognizable character. For one example, we see Paul and Silas in prison. (16:16-34). They are there because the healing of a slave disrupted the profits of a well-connected businessperson in the community. In prison, Paul and Silas embody the church and do what the church does. They are found praying and singing hymns. Then, an earthquake comes and breaks the lock on their prison door. They are able to walk away, but they don't. Their heart goes out to the jailer who is fearful of what will happen if the prisoners escape. For his sake, they stay in jail. Because of this display of Godly character, the jailer asked: "What must I do to be saved?" Paul answers, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you and all your household will be saved." After they are all free from prison, this jailer's whole family is baptized.

Christian conversion means to move from fear to faith, from judgment to grace, from hatred to love, from prejudice to peace, from a focus on personal desires to the incorporation of talents, resources and energies into the community of God. That's what we see along the missionary journeys of Paul and his companions. Conversion, not just to an assurance of eternal life, but also to Christian character, spreads like fire.

Along the way, the challenges are many. Some challenges come from Rome, but on the whole, Luke wants us to know that Christianity is not a threat to Rome. Some challenges come from business interests in communities where the values of Christ disrupt wayward yet profitable practices. Most of the challenges, however, come from within the community of faith. The disagreements and divisions are just a part of it all, as people strive towards faithfulness and sometimes blindly use faith to protect personal prejudices and powers. This is perhaps the reason that Luke's portrayal of Judas is so different from Matthew's account. Matthew's Judas did not intend for Jesus to be crucified and even returns the money in repentance. Luke gives a somber reminder that traitors exist among disciples. (Compare Matthew 27:5 and Acts 1:18).

In the midst of the struggle that comes with human faith, sometimes we have to trust our hearts, make decisions, and then let time reveal to us if we are on the right track. In the midst of the struggle between the synagogue and the church, a Pharisee named Gamaliel concluded a speech to the Council with these words: "So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" (5:34-39). Wise words indeed! We also see that short-term pain is not an immediate sign of going in the wrong direction. Pain is a part of progress.

In Acts, Christianity is described as "the way." (19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14,22) The church is always on the move, led by the Holy Spirit. Luke affirmed the ongoing revelatory work of the Spirit in and through the church. God's word to us is not fixed in a monolithic scripture but continues to come to the church in new times and circumstances. The inspired multiple perspectives within scripture serve as a resource for discernment and direction as we put our trust in the Spirit of Christ working in our midst.

In connecting to God and God's mission, Luke inspires some key questions: Are you moving forward in faith or have you settled for something less than all that God is calling you to be? Are you a protector of the status quo or a barrier breaker? Do you go to church, or are you a part of the church? Are you "Theophilus" or a lover of self? Are you being transformed, if but by one degree at a time? How is the Holy Spirit at work in and through the church and you as a part of the church?

19. The Word Made Flesh (The Gospel of John)

Challenge: To See Through Symbols

"In the beginning…" It's not the first time we have seen those words. John's gospel starts with creation and adds a theological twist. John wants us to know that all life comes through the Word. This Word was with God in the beginning. This word was God. In him – and now it gets personal with the use of a personal pronoun– "was life and this life is the light of all people."

Almost everything in John is symbol and metaphor: Word, Wine, Water, Wind, Light, Bread, Vines, and more. John starts by calling Jesus "the Word." The Greek term is "logos," which means much more than mere "words." Logos literally means to "give order" or "create." It describes God's life-giving power. According to the first creation story in Genesis, God speaks order into chaos and brings creation into existence. John wants us to know the power of words. We should not take words lightly, for even our words have the potential of reflecting the very word of God. Words have the power to create and destroy, to heal and to harm.

Weekly Rhythm and Key Passages

1. Read the Guide for Chapter 19 to give a lens for engaging the text.

2. John 1-5

3. John 6-10

4. John 11-15

5. John 16-21

6. Keep a Sabbath -- Rest, Review, Reflect, Refocus!

7. ENGAGE TOGETHER!

Next, John tells us that this same creating God also humbled himself and came into the world in human form. In the fullness of time, the creative, life-giving, ordering power of God "became flesh and dwelt among us…full of grace and truth." (1:14). Because of this spiritual event, we are able to turn to a God who is with us, not a God "out-there" somewhere in some spiritual never-never land. God is with us as light, love, and life.

We all know about the dark side of life. In the dark, we see how hate breeds more hate. In the dark, we conjure up fearful images of both creator and creature. In the dark we focus on the things of death. In poetic verse, John wants us to know that God's light shines in darkness and no form of darkness can overcome it. When caught in the light, we discover a loving God with arms opened wide, ready to receive us as his children. This light, however, does more than make us feel good. This light reveals life and invites us into its eternal abundance.

The Gospel of John is built on the intuitive assumption that humans are wired for symbols. A green light means go; a heart stands for love; words point us to meaning beyond themselves, enabling us to create and communicate. As humans, created in the image of God, we look for meaning in everything, and symbols guide us through this quest. For us, symbols are especially necessary in matters of faith. Why? Because, as John says, "No one has ever seen God. It is

God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." (1:18). Jesus is our supreme symbol, pointing us to God.

In John, as much as any book in the Bible, symbols are the language of faith. The keys for interpreting these symbols are held within the community of faith. In other words, these symbols do not point to some secret or "gnostic" knowledge; rather, the keys are engrained within the ethos of the community and are readily available to all willing to immerse themselves within this fabric of faith. For John, the major key that unlocks the door of understanding is found in the very name of God. This master story comes as Moses asked God for his name (Ex 3:14). God says to him, "Tell them 'I Am' sent you." This mysterious name sparks a curiosity for more. How does the sentence finish? I am "what?" It is left as a mystery. God revealed God's name to Moses, and by the time of Jesus, this name was so sacred that no one uttered it casually. The notion that God could not be known or controlled was deeply engrained in the Hebrew mindset.

So, with this in mind, the original hearers of this gospel must have been shocked by how frequently and provocatively Jesus uses these words. I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. I am the bread of life. There is a double meaning here. In every one of these sayings the words "I am" are used intentionally to communicate something deeper than just who Jesus is. Jesus is not bragging here. He is teaching us who God is. He is finishing the sentence. He is telling us that God is the light of the world and the bread of life. But more than this, Jesus is claiming that he is connected to God in the most intimate of ways. He is the lens through which we see these images come to life. At one point, he simply says, "Truly I tell you, before Abraham was, 'I am.'" (John 8:58). Jesus and "I am" are one.

As human beings, created in the image of God, symbols set us apart. Symbols allow us to communicate and create; they make love, forgiveness, and grace possible. With symbols, we attempt to talk about experiences and insights that are too deep for words (Rom 8:26). We strive to understand God's ways, knowing that God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Is 55:8-9).

It is important to note that symbols are more than arbitrary signs. They "stand for" the realities they represent, and in a real sense, are one with them. A flag might be one example. Holy Communion would be another. We see this use of symbols throughout John as he tells us that Jesus represents God while, at the same time, is also one with God.

By embracing the symbolic nature of faith, the hope of scripture is that we might be led away from objective study and into subjective experience and engagement; or, in order words, into a personal relationship built upon trust and motivated by love. Our challenge is to let the symbols work in us even to the point that we become symbols of God's grace in the world. The hope is that we will come to participate in the reality that Christ has opened up to us. May we be able to say I am/God is/you are/we are/I am the light of the world, the bread of life, and the Word made flesh as the body of Christ. We are invited into this reality.

Inspire: The Gift of Eternal Life

You are being invited into a journey in a similar way to what a good movie or novel might do. The hope is that this account of Jesus' presence in the world will become a template for your journey, and that you will be able to see it's insights in your unique circumstances of life. The Gospel of John is speaking to you - you at the river Jordon seeking repentance; you are the wedding in Cana; you at the cleansing of the temple, which John places at the beginning of Jesus' ministry; and, for one more example, you have come to Jesus at night asking questions with Nicodemus.

You are invited to put yourself in the place of this Pharisee who came to Jesus at night seeking a fresh understanding of faith. It is another example of how the bible is meant to be more of a mirror than a window. We are not to look through it to see how misguided they were. In these events, we are invited to see ourselves.

Nicodemus comes at night. His quest is symbolic of darkness seeking light. Later we will see Nicodemus expressing his faith in the full light of day, but not now. At this point, Nicodemus takes the safe route. He engages Jesus in a conversation about religion. As we have noted, talking about God as an object, "out-there," may be one of the best ways to avoid an actual encounter with God. Jesus, however, is not interested in a theological study session. Jesus quickly pushes Nicodemus out of this comfort zone. He gets personal saying, "You must be born anew…to see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus tries to put up more walls and keep this whole conversation at a theoretical and objective level. He questions Jesus about this "theory." And then Jesus says, in effect, "don't take it so literally. That gets you religious types in trouble all the time. I'm talking about symbols and metaphors. I'm talking about spiritual birth."

In the first instance, the word "you" is singular. Jesus says, "…I tell you (singular); no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." (v.3). This same thought is expanded upon three times in the next few verses. In all of these instances the "you" is plural. This is how John invites us into the story. We are invited to put ourselves in the scene and receive its meaning. "You" (all who encounter this story) must be born again.

The symbol of new birth is important to John. While popular translations say, "born again," the more precise meaning is "born from above." While popular interpretations put the emphasis on what we must do to receive this blessing, John makes it clear that this new birth is a gift of God. Nicodemus, wanting to take things literally, is confused. In his religious mindset he has trouble getting beyond thinking that he must do something. He asks, "How is this possible? Can we enter our mother's womb and be born again?" We can picture Jesus laughing as he points out the difference between the physical and the spiritual. Jesus is talking about spiritual birth; and, just as we did not give birth to ourselves physically, we do not merit or earn our spiritual birth either. Our new birth is an act of God's grace. It is "from above" and beyond our control. To put any conditions on it is to nullify God's work of grace.

Jesus then uses two metaphors to emphasize this truth. The first is wind. By comparing spiritual birth to the wind, he suggests that we have no control over it. The second image is the serpent, a reference to the Hebrew Scriptures that needs further study. The serpent represented God's healing or saving power (see Numbers 21:4-9). King Hezekiah (one of the good Kings) eventually destroyed the bronze serpent because the people began to worship it rather than the One this symbol pointed to. They forgot that it was God and not the serpent who provided healing. Jesus, as the Son of Man, is this symbol. He brings eternal life.

The kingdom of God (only used here in John) is entered only by spiritual transformation from God, not by any human achievement or profession. God gives us new life, and as we receive it, we are able "to see," ever more clearly, God at work in our lives. (3:3, 5). A spiritual question for our consideration is: "Are you able to see God at work in your life, church, community, and world? Is God's reign visible to you?

After this encounter with Nicodemus, we have what may be the most popular verse in all of the scripture, John 3:16. Here are a few things that push the inspiration of this verse to new heights. First, it is important to note that "believing" is about more than intellectual affirmation of a doctrine. The word suggests dynamic and active trust in God's life-giving love. Secondly, don't fail to grasp that this love is the very reason God sent his Son. It is all about love. Thirdly, the term "eternal life" is always in the present tense in John. It is not just a future hope but a gift for us now. As we give ourselves to God's love (or believe), God's life – abundant, eternal, and complete – is opened up to us. We are invited to participate in the life of God right now.

This is big! Heaven is here! As those born into new life, we are invited to let this reality guide us through the circumstances of our earthly lives. In the midst of our journey, we can find meaning and direction through the master stories or models that John gives to us. You are invited to the wedding in Cana. You are invited to be a part of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. You may stand at the well with the Samaritan woman. You have a place at the Passover Meal. All of these master stories do more than point to heaven; instead, they bring the blessings of eternal life into the very midst of our journey. As these blessings of life are planted into our hearts, we are then able to live them out in many and manifold ways.

The verses following 3:16 add important context and illuminate God's work in the world through his Son. We learn that God did not come to condemn the world but to save it. We are then told that the condemnation we experience comes from ourselves when we do not give ourselves to God's love. God's judgment upon this condemnation is simply to turn on the light. This exposes us and our evil deeds, but it also exposes the love of God that can overcome even our self-condemnation. This becomes the inspiring theme throughout John's gospel. You are invited to stand in the light. You are invited to stand for the light of the world.

Connect: By Embracing the Work of the Spirit

John is so different that over 90% of its content cannot be found in the other gospels. It is safe to say that the Synoptic Gospels were motivated by the desire to pass down an account of Jesus' life for the next generation. John's Gospel, written a full generation after the Synoptics, was not as motivated to give an historical account. Where the synoptic gospels are descriptive, John is reflective. John's gospel is closer to a drama which shares a post-resurrection view of Jesus and brings him into a new time and culture. (See John 2:17, 2:22, 12:16, 20:9).

Here we start with the assumption that the radical differences between John and the Synoptics is a good thing. Together the gospels point to a more complete view of who Jesus was and is. The synoptics focus on the human side of Jesus; John focuses on his divinity. The synoptics reflect his concern for social ills and his compassion for the marginalized; John focuses on his spiritual nature. In the synoptics, Jesus teaches through parables and sayings; John gives us dualistic comparisons and long discourses for new theological insights (John 3, 4, 13-17). The synoptics speak of the kingdom of God and call us to live by the virtues of this kingdom/kin-dom; John speaks of eternal life. While there were those who did not want to include John in the Canon because it was so different, others felt that it would help us connect to a more complete revelation of who Jesus is. With its inclusion, we are also given permission to bring Jesus the Christ into our lives and to hear him speak to us in equally imaginative and insightful ways.

To this end, John gives more attention to the Holy Spirit than all the other gospels combined. The Spirit comforts, counsels, gives peace, bestows joy, guides us into truth, and empowers us for our mission. Among the most important functions of the Spirit is to bear witness to Christ. John wants us to know that the Holy Spirit continues to reveal God's truth to us in new times and circumstances, but always in alignment to the heart of Christ.

John devotes half of this gospel to the last week of Jesus' earthly life. During this "farewell discourse," we see many examples of misunderstanding which allow Jesus to explain more fully. With this common literary technique, John hints that we are just not capable of "getting it" all at once, and even when we do there is more to learn. In this discourse, Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure and tries to help them understand that it is to their advantage that he goes. No longer bound by body, time, and space, he would be able to prepare a place for us, send the Holy Spirit, and draw all to God (12:32; 6:44). They (we) would be able to accomplish even greater things because of this departure. It was all hard to grasp.

In the course of the conversation, a disciple questions Jesus about where he is going and expresses concern about not knowing the way to follow him. Jesus says, "I am (God is) the way, the truth and the life." He then adds, "no one comes to the Father but through me." (14:5-7). The exclusive sound of these additional words is troubling to some, and with justification since some used these words to bully people into believing. Once again, context is so important. Earlier, we heard the exact opposite, that no one can come to Christ unless drawn by the

Father." (6:44). We also hear him say that he and God are one. (10:30; 17:11). Christ has the power to give eternal life to all whom God has given him (5:21; 17:1). He is the power of God and the way we know what God is like. The disciples assumed that the "way" was a map that we must follow, as if our salvation depended on us to get there. Jesus turns this around. The primary "way" or direction of salvation is from God to us rather than us to God. It is not something that we achieve.

While people have been known to proof-text passages in John to support a conditional view of salvation, in the context of the whole we get a radically different picture. It is easy to imagine people turning against a particular perspective on Christ, especially one laden with judgment and prejudice. It is easy to see how emotional, psychological, physical, and cultural conditions could become barriers to Christ. But deep in the heart, where words and names are inadequate, can we imagine any soul not wanting to know this love? Can we imagine Christ giving up on any soul, in this life or beyond? Christ stands at the door to eternal life and has the power to decide who gets in. His decision is not based on some check list; it is based on God's eternal love and God's power to forgive and transform. We are not to make such judgments, and if we are tempted, it may be a good thing to err on the side of grace.

John was known early on as the "spiritual gospel." We must be careful, however, not to over-spiritualize these words. At the time that John was writing there was an active movement in the church promoting gnostic ideas, believing that Christ came to give "special and secret knowledge (gnos) to key insiders." The popular Gnostic movement at the time stressed the spiritual over the material. Some within this movement argued that Christ was not fully human but only "appeared" to be, because God could not have anything to do with flesh. They pointed to the evils of the material word and proclaimed that Christ is the way out. While John uses some of this language, he does so not to promote these ideas but to counter them. He makes it clear that God comes into our flesh and does so out of love for all the world.

Yes, Christ is one with God, yet John also wants us to know that Christ is one with us. He does not lead us out of the world but into it. He leads not away from the ways of flesh but embraces them with love and with the joy that life brings. Make no mistake about it. Gnosticism is still around. We see it in the religious who believe that the ways of the world should be avoided. We see it in sharp sacred/secular distinctions; we see it in those who believe that salvation comes through upholding certain doctrines or having special knowledge. To all who try to separate the spiritual from the material, John reminds us that the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. John's hope is to draw us into this big, spiritual, worldly, life-giving relationship with God.

20. To Be Revealed

Challenge: How to Interpret

We come to the end of this experience which was intended to move beyond traditional study. We have engaged the scriptures in the context of worship, prayer, and holy conferencing with the hope of coming to know God more fully and not just know more about God. We have said that it is better to pause on an insight than to race through the texts. The scriptures are a resource for relationship more than a resource for a "test."

In addition, we have engaged the scriptures with the premise that multiple perspectives are a blessing. We have seen this diversity within the scriptures themselves. Different perspectives remind us of our humanity and thus keep us humble. Perspectives teach us that we can never settle. We are Hebrews at heart and there is always more to discover on the journey. Perspectives help us learn how to love and thus prepare us for the end or purpose of it all: life in relationship with God and one another. Ultimately, that's why we engage together in this way.

A Weekly Rhythm and Key Passages

1. Read this chapter, to provide a common framework for engaging the text and receiving inspiration.

2. Revelation 1-6

3. Revelation 7-11

4. Revelation 12-17

5. Revelation 18-22

6. Today is for personal preparation.

7. Engage in Scripturing in community.

Throughout this journey we have employed important hermeneutical principles. Hermeneutics is the "thoughtful and systematic interpretation of the texts." Through the history of biblical scholarship, guidelines and principles have been developed to assist in the goal of faithful and fruitful interpretation. At the risk of oversimplifying, we can summarize principles with the words "context" and "community."

First of all, faithful interpretation of scripture requires that we take context, with its many dimensions, very seriously. We need to be aware of the literary context – what type of literature is it? We need to pay attention to the historical and cultural context – when was it written and to what end? We need to explore the theological context – what does the passage say about God and about us? And, for one more, scriptural context is very important. Here it is helpful to use the "canon within the canon" principle to discern what teachings take precedence over others and thus serve as a lens through which we interpret the significance of other scriptures. With these principles we can say that proof-texting, or using a verse out of context, to confirm our preconceived prejudices is out of bounds. This method of interpretation is disrespectful of the holiness of scripture.

The next principle involves the importance of "community." On the one hand, we have promoted the idea that all can gain personal insights and guidance by engaging the scriptures. Such a notion is grounded in the doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers." We have repeatedly asked the question, "How does the text speak to you?" Experience teaches us, however, that personal insights come most fully when we engage in holy conferencing with others, learn from the collective wisdom of the church, and listen to those uniquely gifted and devoted to the work of interpreting scripture. The light of inspiration gains its energy in community, enabling us to see through our own limited and often distorted perspectives. Scripture is meant to transform, and the kind of transformation that God wants for us happens in relationship and for the sake of our relationships.

The Book of Revelation is a great case study for these principles of interpretation. This book is full of bizarre imagery and symbolism. As such, it tends to either scare people off or spark equally bizarre fantasies about what it all means. By applying time-honored rules of interpretation, we can find many more fruitful ways to engage this book.

We start by saying that the interpretation of symbols is not an arbitrary exercise. In other words, we can't just make up stuff about what is meant. These symbols are grounded in the ethos of a community. Their meaning comes from this larger context. Understanding this combats all claims that this is a work of Gnosticism, promoting some secret message. The message was for anyone willing to immerse themselves in the language that formed the faith. In other words, it is for all willing to "engage."

Many of the symbols draw upon the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, the seven lampstands are rooted in the Jewish menorah and stand for the seven churches of Asia. The symbol of the lamb is deeply rooted in the sacrificial system and here represents Jesus. Over half of the verses in Revelation make some allusion to passages in the Hebrew Scriptures. Other symbols take only a little investigation to make the appropriate connections. Babylon, for example, represents Rome, which to this day is known as the city of seven hills (17:9-10). All of these symbols are more than signs. They participate in the reality to which they point. Attaching arbitrary meaning to them to confirm a personal view is hermeneutically criminal.

Revelation is an example of apocalyptic literature. In fact, it is "The Apocalypse." (1:1). While this word has been used to conjure up many fear-laden scenarios about the end of time, such attempts are a perversion of what the book itself says it is about. The word "apocalypse" simply means "to reveal." The purpose is not to reveal end-time scenarios, unlocked by those who claim to have special knowledge. That's Gnosticism! Instead, the revelation is actually much more direct and more profound than all sensationalized accounts. The immediate motivation was to give a word of hope to real churches enduring real persecution. Indicative of all apocalyptic literature, one reason for the overt use of symbolism was to keep persecutors from catching on. Only those fully engaged could receive the message intended. First and foremost, this writer says that this revelation is a "testimony to Jesus Christ." First and

foremost, it is not about some future time; instead, it is a testimony to the power of Christ to overcome all evil, all sin, and all death. It is a message of hope, not fear.

As with all scripture, the challenge is interpretation. While honoring the different perspectives that we bring to the texts, it is also helpful to acknowledge time-honored principles that bind us together and lead us in a common direction. Revelation, perhaps more than any other book, requires the use of disciplined imagination.

Inspire: What is Heaven Like?

Many have used this book to make sensationalized predictions about the end of time. Such interpretations make the book irrelevant for all except those at the end, and by removing any direct implications for us, the entertainment value seems to rise. It seems to be profitable to make such predictions, especially if designed to tap into our fear rather than our faith. From another angle, such interpretations can be seen as disrespectful to our forbearers who endured so much. When we take the historical context seriously, this "revelation" invites us to honor their struggle and to learn from their faithfulness.

With that said, this revelation does point us to heaven and to the end or purpose of it all. It does so in a language of images intended to touch the heart. It is meant to inspire us with the courage to trust in God enough to persevere through hard times and to not give into the temptation to avenge ourselves.

We are invited to ponder what heaven will be like. In more than one place, heaven is pictured as a sanctuary. Heaven is likened to a place of worship where "the great multitudes, which no one could number, from every nation and tongue" are all there singing praise to God (7:9). Heaven is pictured as a place where the focus is on God who has revealed his glory and provided abundant blessings.

From this vision, we can infer that our worship is meant to model heaven. In worship we come together, even in our differences, to focus on something greater than ourselves. We create harmony together, symbolized in our singing. We are shaped by the virtues of God and prepare ourselves for the eternal life that has already been given.

As we read this passage, it is worth noting who will be in heaven. Heaven will consist of a great multitude, from every nation and tribe, more than could ever be counted. In other words, heaven will be more diverse than we can fathom. From our finite perspective in the world, and with the limitations of language to express the divine, it seems easier to talk about what will not be in heaven than to talk about what will be there. We can start by saying there will be no room for hatred or prejudice or self-righteousness. There will be no bullying or demeaning, sickness or hunger, grief or tears. Again, our life here is an opportunity to prepare and give witness.

So, what will be there? The Book of Revelation gives many images. Among these are the images of a throne and a lamb. The throne represents the power of God. The lamb represents sacrifice and love. The throne by itself would be scary. We would see the power of God but know nothing of the character of God. The Lamb by itself would have no power. We would see a love that wanted to transform suffering into joy and death into life but was unable to do so. Together, however, these two images make a whole and point to a God worthy of the song of all saints: "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and forever." (v. 12). That's a "picture" of what will be there.

Revelation is full of vivid images of heaven -- streets of gold, pearly gates, scrolls, feasts and flowing fountains. Within these images of wealth and power is a subtle political statement. The palaces of heaven are not just for the rich and powerful. We will all walk on the streets of gold.

Some theories make the mistake of taking parts out of the symbolic context and trying to fit them into a literal account. For example, debates rage over when the thousand-year reign will start and end and who will be there. With a little proof-texting, imaginations can run wild and, in the process, the larger point can easily be missed. The number one thousand is used poetically on many occasions to signify abundance and completion (See Deut 7:9; Psalm 50:10; 2 Peter 3:8). It is symbolic of the reign of heaven going on now, before the coming of a "new heaven," and the conquering of all evil and death at the final judgment. The center of this part of this vision is the fact that all those who have died in faith are alive and reign with Christ. This vision is meant to be a word of encouragement in the midst of hardship and a warning to stand firm. The reward of faithfulness is to reign with Christ in a realm where evil is "bound." (See also Rom 5:17; II Tim 2:11-12). John, the recorder of this vision, wants us to know that those who endure will escape the final judgment and will reign with Christ in the interim heaven.

Within this vision, a thread of "works-righteousness" is woven through the scenes. We are told that we will all be judged by our deeds, not just our faith. We have seen this thread before. Revelation wants us all to know that there are consequences for following after the "beasts" and giving into the ways of evil. Judgment will come upon all who do not already reign with Christ, including the "cowardly, faithless, polluted, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars." (21:8). Since Jesus warns that guilt is even in those who think such things, we probably should not start pointing fingers. The hope of all before this throne is that judgment is not synonymous with condemnation. The hope is that judgment becomes an act of grace and that God's judgment is always what is best for all concerned. If any are left out, or if parts of our sinful nature are "thrown into the fire" of judgment, then that is what is best for us and for all. This is a picture of how God transforms.

At the end of this vision there is an invitation from heaven: "The Spirit and the bride say 'Come' …and let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." (22:16-17). This same image of the water of life is used in the previous chapter as well where we are told that God conquers death itself and makes all things news. All who want this are

invited to come and receive without price. That's the way the story ends – not with death but with new life, given to all as a gift.

Connect: Using the Best Lens for the Journey

Approaching this book through the lens of traditional Bible Study may be a stumbling block. While study is very important, we are also challenged to avoid the tendency of objectifying the scriptures and turning them into a specimen to be examined. When we approach scripture in this way, we are less likely to come with the expectation of being moved or changed. We fall into the temptation to let information take precedence over inspiration.

The Book of Revelation counters this objectification by telling us that this scripture is meant to be read aloud in community (1:3). This story is meant to be heard so that it might capture our imagination and move us to hope. In this sense, it is designed to be engaged more like a good novel than an academic textbook.

This type of engagement requires "disciplined imagination." This approach helps us to navigate through two polar temptations. On the one hand, with such bizarre imagery, it is tempting to allow our imagination to run wild. To counter this temptation, the writer of this vision trusts the community of faith to hear the story through the lens of faith. The vision assumes the hearers know that the symbols cannot mean just anything we might imagine them to mean. Their meaning and purpose is grounded in the scriptures and faith of the community. Thus, disciplined listening is paramount for faithful interpretation. On the other hand, it is tempting for some to go to the other extreme and to assume that this vision is to be taken literally. These words, like much of the scriptures, are not intended to give us a literal picture of heaven but to connect us to the ideas and virtues of God that are bigger than can be conveyed through our natural and mortal means. Symbols enable the perishable to put on the imperishable. In the midst of the grandeur of creation, it is so sad to live as if our little lives were the end of the journey. God's revelation, throughout the scriptures, connects our hearts with something so much more. As finite beings, symbols are the only means we have to connect us to what is beyond. Making this connection happens through disciplined imagination cultivated in the community of faith.

> ***"If you want to interpret well and confidently, set Christ before you, for He is the One to whom it all applies."***
> **Martin Luther**

What hermeneutical lens do we bring to the text? Knowing this will determine, to a large extent, what we see. One popular option is to see it through the lens of a forecast of human history. Through this lens, the symbols become an outline of western civilization moving towards the second coming of Christ, and our job is to find our place on the spectrum. Another option is the futurist view, saying that the majority of the book is all about what will happen at the end of the age, with little to say about previous generations. Next, there are those who see the book as an imaginative way to convey ideas and virtues for the church in all times. This view gives relevance for all generations, but it fails to acknowledge some important historical

connections found in the book. Finally, we come to a theological lens which asks questions like: "What was the significance of these words to the original hearers?" And "What does it say to us about how we are to live in relationship with God and with others in the world?"

From this latter perspective, it is important to acknowledge that this revelation was written for real churches and about what would happen to them "soon." (1:1-4). In the middle of a new wave of persecution, this vision was given to comfort and encourage them and to help them to trust in God through it all. Within these words there are implications for churches in all times. We hear, for example, that the church at Ephesus had "lost its first love" and needed to repent (2:1-7). We hear that the faithfulness of the church at Smyrma would lead to suffering and death (2:8-11). We are told, however, that faithfulness until death leads to the "crown of life." (2:10). For one more example, the church at Laodicea is chastised for being neither hot nor cold but lukewarm (3:14-21). They have prospered and have come to see no real need for God. They are challenged to open the door and let God come in. The writer concludes these individual messages by saying, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." Perhaps we need to read these messages with that kind of ear.

Towards the end of the vision, "Death and Hades" give up the dead that are in them. All stand before the throne where books of our deeds are opened and examined. And another book is opened as well, the "Book of Life." (20:12). Drawing upon the image of Christ as the Word of God, we can say that Christ is this Book of Life, and his words, as we have seen throughout this journey, point to the assurance of his forgiveness, mercy, and grace. Christ has the power to give life to all whom he chooses. In this judgment, Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire and destroyed. This is the second death, when death itself is destroyed.

Revelation ends with complete transformation, where there is even a "new heaven" The earlier vision comes to fruition where "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea (symbols for Hades) are all praising God." (5:13). That's the way the biblical story ends, pointing us to a new beginning for all creation. To think, for even a minute, that it all ends with our little visions of life is so misguided. The mysterious and marvelous grandeur of life beyond us invites us to faith in so much more.

May this experience of scripturing together be a resource for new beginnings in your life as well. You are invited to pause and to make or renew your commitment to continue this journey with God as a part of God's creation. Along the way, may the scriptures continue to provoke, stretch, and transform you from one degree of glory to another. May you never settle but continue to sojourn into new adventures of love and life, even into eternity.

AMEN