

A
PILGRIM
Journey

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Dear Church Family and Friends,

This year marks the 400th Anniversary of the journey of faith our Pilgrim mothers and fathers embarked upon that brought them to the shores of New England, bringing our congregational tradition with them. The Pilgrims were not perfect people, nor did they perfect the Christian faith, but they are our people, and we are a significant part of their legacy.

While there is active debate over portions of the Pilgrim legacy, with much focus on the historicity of the Thanksgiving story, we have many facts at hand that lend insight into the motivation, faith, and resolve of the founders of our church tradition.

The Pilgrims began their life together as separatists who took issue with the belief and practice of the Anglican Church, that the King [and now Queen], was the Supreme Governor of the Church. Our faith ancestors ardently believed that Jesus Christ alone was the head of the church, and that Jesus was best revealed through the study of Scripture and the prayerful discernment of Christians gathered together in Jesus' name.

From that belief and point of departure, our pilgrim ancestors began an arduous journey that took them from Scrooby, England, to Leiden, Holland, back to Southampton, England, and then on to what has become known as Plymouth, Massachusetts. Over the course of their journey they suffered discrimination, imprisonment, they began with two boats only to find one seaworthy, they were forced to adjust their plans time and time again, after crossing the Atlantic they landed a tad north of Virginia where they were aiming, and after their first winter together half of their company died. The challenges they faced, and by the grace of God overcame, formed and re-formed their faith. Their courageous, resilient, and daring faith they have passed on to us four centuries after it was first inspired.

As we continue to grapple with pandemic, racial tensions, political division, and an increasingly marginalized church culture in our country, this may be an ideal time to lean on and learn from our faith ancestors and their congregational way of life. Our tradition might again prove to be extremely adaptable to the challenges of our day as it has been in the past. As we journey through more stories in the Bible — stories our Pilgrim ancestors claimed as their own faith heritage — we might be led in similarly remarkable and prophetic ways that will allow our Congregational way of living out our faith to thrive for the next 400 years. In our pilgrim faith journey together this year, we may discover within ourselves a greater degree of courage, resilience, and daring.

On a personal note, our family lived on the South Shore of Massachusetts for fifteen years, just a few miles up the road from the "Plimoth Plantation." Often when the congregation I was serving was facing a challenge that seemed particularly daunting, I would venture down to Plymouth Harbor and walk about the Mayflower II — the replica of the Pilgrim ship. That old wooden boat is incredibly small and cramped and claustrophobic. I couldn't imagine spending a night aboard that ship, let alone six terrifying and torturous months. My visits to Mayflower II to connect a bit more intimately with our Pilgrim mothers' and fathers' experiences always left me in awe, wondering how on earth they did it. What amazing faith! What resolve! What daring! No matter the challenges I was facing, those visits to the Mayflower filled me with a brief that, by the grace of God, our pilgrim faith can endure, overcome, and thrive even in the most difficult and demanding of situations. It proved to be true in 1620, it will prove to be true in 2020 — and I am so very excited to be on this leg of the journey with you!

Yours in Christ,
Chapin

September 6, 1620

The Speedwell and some of the passengers are left in Plymouth, and the Mayflower sails on alone.

November 9, 1620

They spot the tip of Cape Cod, north of the land authorized in their patent. They attempt to sail south, but are defeated by treacherous shoals.

November 11, 1620

The Mayflower anchors in Provincetown Harbor. The document now known as the Mayflower Compact is drawn up and signed by most of the men. This establishes a provisional governmental structure until a new patent can be obtained from the New England Company.

November 15 to December 7, 1620

Parties of men go exploring in search of a good site for settlement.

December 8, 1620

A party of explorers encounter Wampanoag for the first time on Cape Cod. Although shots are exchanged, no one is hurt in this "first encounter." In the evening the men arrive in Plymouth Harbor.

December 11, 1620

The Shallop party lands in Plymouth and explores the coast.

December 16, 1620

The Mayflower drops anchor in Plymouth Harbor.

December 20, 1620

The colonists choose an abandoned Wampanoag village called Patuxet for their new home. The former inhabitants had died or been scattered in an outbreak of European disease four years before.

December 20, 1620

The first Pilgrim worship service takes place.

December 23, 1620

Men go ashore and begin gathering building materials. Work continues as weather and health permit. During the winter, about half of the colonists die of scurvy and other diseases.

March 16, 1620/1

Samoset, a Monhegan (Maine) Native, arrives in the colony and greets them in English.

March 17, 1620/1

Samoset returns, bringing Tisquantum (Squanto) and announces the imminent arrival of the Wampanoag leader, Massasoit. Governor Carver and Massasoit conclude a treaty of peace. Squanto stays with the colonists.

April 5, 1621

The Mayflower returns to England. Mid-April, 1621. Governor Carver sickens and dies. William Bradford is elected governor.

Late September/early October, 1621

The colonists hold a harvest celebration. Massasoit and a number of Natives participate.
Initial Growth, 1621-1627

November 9, 1621

The ship Fortune arrives, bringing 35 new colonists, mostly men.

SEPTEMBER 13TH

Adam and Eve

Read: Genesis 2:4b-3:24

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."

Genesis 2:18

Takeaway: God created us for relationship.

In the story of Adam and Eve, relationship is primary. We may not know the *how* of creation, but this ancient story attempts to explain the *why* that gave birth to the world and humankind. Man was created to be with God, and woman was created to be with man. God wanted company, and God wanted us to enjoy relationships as well. We were built, birthed, and created to be in union with others and with God. That is why Adam and Eve hiding from God is such a heartbreaking scene in this story. The God who wanted nothing more than companionship is abandoned by creation itself. After eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve hid in the bushes in an attempt to avoid God. Whatever the historicity of this ancient story is, the message is undeniably true. God created us for relationship, and yet, we so often hide ourselves from God and others. It was so from the very beginning, and God has been trying to find us ever since.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Identify a person who made an impact on your faith. Describe the impact that person had.
- 4) What are the most important/sacred relationships in your life?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week

- 1) Get in touch with someone who has been special to you. Write a hand-written note to that person.
- 2) Tell someone you love them.
- 3) Try to make a new friend. Speak to someone in your youth group whom you don't know.

Notes: _____

SEPTEMBER 20TH

Provision for the Sinful

Read: Genesis 2:1–4:16

And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. . . . And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

Genesis 3:21, 4:15b

Takeaway: Our sin and shortcomings don't separate us from God's love.

Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden of Eden for eating the forbidden fruit, and Cain was forced to restlessly wander the earth because he killed his brother Abel. All three did something terribly displeasing to God, and yet, even in punishment, God made provision for each of them. God made clothes for Adam and Eve, and God put a mark on Cain to ensure his safety. This is testimony that God will not abandon even the most egregious of sinners. Even when God punishes, God continues to provide.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What is sin? What makes certain behaviors or attitudes sinful?
- 4) Why does God continue to provide for us when we turn against God's wishes?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week

- 1) Write down three sins of which you might be guilty and pray for forgiveness.
- 2) Identify someone in need of your forgiveness and reach out to that person.
- 3) Talk to a child about the Golden Rule. (Luke 6:31)

Notes: _____

SEPTEMBER 27TH

Joseph and His Brothers

Read: Genesis 37

Joseph's brothers said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

Genesis 37:19–20

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

There are so many disturbing elements to this story of Joseph and his brothers. There is a father loving one son more than the others, and a son who seemingly takes pleasure in boasting of dreams of dominion over his brothers, and brothers who plot and carry out harmful actions against their younger sibling. What is most shocking is that this is the very family the Bible tells us serves as the source of God's revelation in the world. Somehow, Jacob's dysfunctional family serves as God's ambassadors to the world. This might cause even the most faithful person to question God's better judgment.

And yet, this dark and troubling story is punctuated by a few pinpricks of light. There was Reuben, who convinced the others not to kill Joseph in the hope of rescuing him later. There was Judah, who lobbied his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery instead of letting him die in a pit. And there was Joseph himself, who fostered a belief that somehow God was still in control of the whole mess. Perhaps those little pinpricks of light in the darkness are all God needs to work powerfully in our world and in our lives.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Name things you love about your family and one thing you'd change about it.
- 4) Do you remember your dreams? Why would God speak to people in dreams?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Listen to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.
- 2) Post a photo on Facebook of a family member that has meant a lot to you.
- 3) Identify one way you can be a "pinprick of light" this week.

Notes: _____

OCTOBER 4TH

Joseph's Family Reunion

Read: Genesis 45:1-15; 50:15-20

God sent me here before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.

Genesis 45:7-8a

Takeaway: God can bring wonderful outcomes out of terrible circumstances.

God has a plan. That is what Joseph said to his brothers. Selling Joseph into slavery was not a result of his brothers' hateful intentions, rather it was God's way of ensuring that God's people found preservation in the land of Egypt. Because Joseph was taken to Egypt and rose to power there, when famine engulfed the land, Joseph could provide safe haven for his entire family. Bad intentions led to a good outcome—that may be the real truth of this story.

The idea that the unfortunate things that happen to us in life are all a part of God's plan might be a naïve way of looking at life. It is a way of holding out hope that our misfortune is just a prelude to greater blessing. It is well worth questioning whether the bad things that happen to us in life are part of God's design, but the Bible and our life experiences teach us that God certainly has the ability to bring wonderful outcomes out of the worst circumstances.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Think of a time when an unfortunate circumstance led to a great blessing.
- 4) Do you believe God has a plan?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Plan an event to reunite family members.

Notes: _____

OCTOBER 11TH

Water and Salvation

Read: Exodus 2:1–10

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child.

Exodus 2:5–6a

Takeaway: Water is spiritual, sacred, and salvific.

In the Bible there is a connection between water and the salvation of God. God cleansed the world of sin through the story of Noah and the flood. Pharaoh’s daughter drew the infant Moses out of the Nile. Moses, in turn, led the Hebrew people through the Red Sea and away from slavery in Egypt. After forty years in the wilderness, the Israelites had to cross the Jordan River to inherit the promised land. John baptized people in the Jordan River to symbolize God’s ability to wash away sins. And we engage in baptism today as a continuation of that symbolic ritual—water and salvation tend to go hand in hand in the Bible. We also know that life itself is fed by water—where there is no water there is no life, and where water exists life abounds. Is it any wonder that human beings are drawn to water as if we have some deep spiritual connection to it? Can it be a surprise that the seaside and the lakeside and the riverbed can feel like very thin places where the Spirit of God and our own spirit mingle? Water has properties that go far beyond its molecular makeup—water is spiritual, sacred, and salvific.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What is your favorite body of water, and why does it bring you happiness?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Spend time at a body of water such as the ocean, a lake, or a stream.
- 2) Be mindful not to leave the faucet or shower running unnecessarily.
- 3) Make a conscious effort to remain adequately hydrated. Notice how it feels.

Notes: _____

OCTOBER 18TH

Moses and the Burning Bush

Read: Exodus 3:1-15

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you."

Exodus 3:14

Takeaway: We are not in control, but God is.

God refused to be controlled. The mysteries of God would not be explored and exposed by Moses' turning aside to thoroughly inspect a burning bush in an attempt to explain it. Pharaoh would not keep God's people bound when God chose to set them free. God's name would not be made known just for the mere asking of it. God simply *IS*, and the only appropriate response to God's awesome presence and power is worship.

This is not a comforting reality for those of us who like to be in control. We are proud people who don't like to be told what to do. But for Moses, an alien in a foreign land, a murderer in hiding, and an unlikely leader in the making, the proclamation that God was in control must have been somewhat liberating. God *IS*, Pharaoh *is not*. The promised land was Israel's future, Egypt was not. God was in control, Moses was not.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) How do you feel about the fact that you are not always in control?
- 4) Do you prefer to lead or follow? What does it mean to allow God to lead?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Play "follow the leader."
- 2) Go for a hike in the woods.
- 3) Take a three hour break from technology.

Notes: _____

OCTOBER 25TH

Desert Provision

Read: Exodus 16

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

Exodus 16:13–14

Takeaway: Trust in God's provision.

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

Lo and behold, the Israelites discovered that there was just enough quail and manna in the desert to meet their needs. That didn't mean they had all they wanted. Unfortunately, the complaints of the wandering Hebrews would continue, but they would not starve in the desert. Even in a place of desolation, God provides.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Do you grumble about unfulfilled wants?
- 4) Do you ask God for things? If so, what are they?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Practice fasting by either skipping a meal or going one day consuming only water.
- 2) Try to refrain from complaining for an entire day.
- 3) Say a prayer before each meal thanking God for what you are about to eat.

Notes: _____

NOVEMBER 1ST

Deborah

Read: Judges 4:1-10

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.

Judges 4:4-5

Takeaway: There is no limit to what God can do with us.

A judge was a military and political leader in ancient Israel, long before the kingly leadership of the Hebrew people was established. Long before King David and King Solomon and King Hezekiah, was Deborah. Deborah was the lead arbiter and military general of her time. A woman led Israel in a day and an age when women were afforded little, if any, authority.

More than three thousand years after Deborah, our culture continues to struggle with the abilities and worth of certain individuals. We question the strength of women, we see great limitations for people with disabilities, and we malign people who appear different from ourselves. But there is no limit to what God can do with us, and who God can empower to leadership in this world. We may be slow to recognize the gifts and abilities of others, God is not. The next time you doubt your worth or ability, or the worth or ability of someone else, remember Deborah. God doesn't want you to forget.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What doubts do you have about yourself?
- 4) What special skills and abilities has God given you? How are you using them?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Learn about women of the Bible such as Miriam, Ruth, Esther, and Lydia.
- 2) Make a plan for marking Black History Month (February) and/or Women's History Month (March).

Notes: _____

NOVEMBER 8TH

Eli

Read: 1 Samuel 3:1-9

Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy.

1 Samuel 3:8

Takeaway: We all need friends skilled in hearing and recognizing God’s voice.

Samuel was a young boy when the Lord called him into service. God called one night saying, “*Samuel, Samuel.*” But Samuel thought Eli, the chief priest of the tabernacle, was calling him, so he got up and rushed to Eli’s side. Two more times God called the boy, and each time Samuel went to Eli saying, “*You called me.*” Finally, Eli perceived that the Lord God was calling Samuel, and Eli instructed the boy how to respond to this divine conversation.

God calls to us every day, and yet often we are unable to hear God’s voice. Without hearing God’s voice, we risk living our lives apart from God’s will for us. That is why it is so important for us to have an Eli—someone skilled in hearing and recognizing God’s voice in our lives. Going to church, having friends who are people of faith, and getting serious about our own faith education allows us the opportunity to be both found and led by an Eli. In time, when we have become seasoned in responding to God’s invitation in our own lives, we might find that we become an Eli for someone else.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Who might be an Eli, a guide or mentor, for you?
- 4) Does God speak to people today, and how?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) When someone is kind to you this week, find a way to “pay it forward.”
- 2) Identify a new skill you want to learn and someone that can teach you.
- 3) Meditate by simply sitting in silence and being aware of God’s presence.

Notes: _____

NOVEMBER 15TH

For Such a Time as This

Read: Esther 4:1-17

For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

Esther 4:14

Takeaway: The challenge before you might be the very reason you are where you are.

The Bible tells us that Esther was the Jewish queen of the Persian king Ahasuerus. During Ahasuerus's reign there was a plot hatched to exterminate the Jewish people from the Persian Empire. The only chance the Jews had for survival was the advocacy of Queen Esther. But no one was supposed to approach the king unless summoned. The punishment for making an unrequested advance toward the king was death—even for a queen! Therefore, for Esther to save her people, she had to risk her own life. As Esther weighed the decision before her, her uncle Mordecai encouraged her with the thought that God might have made her queen *“for just such a time as this.”*

There are moments in life when we have the opportunity to be advocates for someone or something important, but that advocacy could somehow put us in a difficult or unpleasant situation. We would like to help, but we worry that the personal cost might be too high for us to bear. It is in moments like those when we must consider, as Esther did, that the position we hold we have for the very purpose of that advocacy. The only reason we may be where we are is to step up and step forward in a particular moment of trial. The challenge before you might be the very reason you are where you are. You have been positioned not for comfort but to face an important challenge that can define your life and the lives of others. It might be for such a time as this that you have been placed right where you are.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Was there a time when only you could step up to help another or “save” a bad situation?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Perform a random act of kindness for another person.
- 2) Learn about the Jewish holiday of Purim and how it relates to Esther.

Notes: _____

NOVEMBER 22ND

Jesus Feeds 5000

Read: John 6:1-15

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

John 6:5-6

Takeaway: God will provide.

Jesus asked a trick question as a teaching technique. How do you feed thousands of people? Philip and the disciples had no idea. How can we blame them? If we found ourselves in need of feeding five thousand people, we would be at a loss to know how to do it. Where do you find all that money? How do you provide for people out of your own meager resources? Five loaves of bread and two fish cannot possibly be enough!

Jesus’ test was a method of teaching. He wasn’t expecting Philip or the other disciples to have the answer. Jesus wanted to teach something new. Where can you buy bread for five thousand people on the shores of the Sea of Galilee? The answer is, you can’t! You can’t provide for all these people. You don’t have enough to get the job done. Your resources are not sufficient. To feed the crowd, to accomplish the goal, to take care of everyone is beyond your ability. A task like that requires something more, *someone more*—God . . . and God will not disappoint. The answer to Jesus’ quiz is that to meet the demand, God will need to supply the resources. Once the disciples and Jesus began dividing up what they had, that is exactly what happened—God provided!

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What’s the best part of sharing food with others or feeding the hungry?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Serve a meal at a homeless shelter.
- 2) Invite someone to your home for dinner.
- 3) Make bread.

Notes: _____

NOVEMBER 29TH

The Promise of a Child

Read: Isaiah 9:1-7

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

Takeaway: Children change everything.

Much of ancient Israel's history was defined by war, persecution, occupation, and exile. Throughout history, the land of Israel has sat at an unfortunate intersection between major world powers. When the Egyptian Empire wanted to conquer the world, they marched troops over Israel. When the Assyrians were bent on world domination, they charged through Israel. When the Babylonians wanted to expand their empire, they plowed right over the land of Israel. The Greeks, the Romans, and the Ottomans all did the same. Israel was never the primary target of imperial aggression, it was just a frequent casualty in the continually shifting balance of world powers. Into this volatile land, a promise was made through the prophet Isaiah that a child would be born in Israel who would herald an everlasting age of peace and righteousness.

It is a wildly presumptuous promise to be sure. How can a child change the world for the better? What can an infant do to affect regional events? How can a new birth herald a new age? The answer is found in our experience with our own children. Children change everything! New parents find that the moment they see their newborn child, life becomes a more earnest endeavor. Self-interest is readily set aside in favor of taking care of another. Individual hopes and aspirations are no longer as significant as making sure that offspring have a chance to succeed. An infant born signals a new reality and new opportunities for everyone who comes in contact with that new life. How do the world and the power structures of our human family change? One life at a time, one child at a time, one new birth or rebirth at a time. Who could have ever imagined that the great Roman Empire would one day come under the authority of a religious movement focused on the life and ministry of a man who was born in a stable in the little town of Bethlehem in Judea? Roughly eight hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah prophesied just that!

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) How has an infant changed your life?
- 4) What characteristics of young children do you think Jesus was affirming?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Make time for play. Get together with friends and have a game night.
- 2) Visit a children's museum.

Notes: _____

DECEMBER 6TH

The Peaceable Realm

Read: Isaiah 11:1-10

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

Isaiah 11:6

Takeaway: Followers of Jesus strive to manifest the peace Jesus demonstrated.

There is a deep longing within us that can only be met and satisfied by God. Longing for love. Longing for peace. Longing to live with meaning. Longing for the feeling of barrenness to be quenched by holy waters. This is a longing, a sense of incompleteness, that has been witnessed for thousands of years. It is the creation longing to be reunited with its Creator. And while lions and lambs do not yet lie down together, we dare to believe that in Jesus Christ, the longing for unity and harmony and renewal in our lives and in our world can be satisfied.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What are you longing for?
- 4) In what situations do you find yourself most at peace?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Pray and ask for God's help with some challenge you are facing?
- 2) Meditate by sitting quietly for ten minutes while paying attention to your breath.
- 3) Read an article written by someone who holds a different perspective than your own.

Notes: _____

DECEMBER 13TH

The Annunciation

Read: Luke 1:26–38

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

Luke 1:38

Takeaway: You have a purpose.

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

When we are given assignments, we often accept them grudgingly, and perhaps even approach them halfheartedly. Mary was given a heavy burden to carry—a daunting chore—and the hymn of praise she sings in the following chapter lets us know she embraced her role with enthusiasm and even joy.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Can you approach the chores and work you are assigned with joy—as if the work itself was a gift from God?
- 4) Why do you think Mary would be afraid to be the mother of Jesus?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Say “yes” to an invitation you would normally decline.
- 2) Sing a Christmas carol that mentions Mary such as “O Little Town of Bethlehem” or “Silent Night.”

Notes: _____

DECEMBER 20TH

Joseph's Dream

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Matthew 1:20

Takeaway: God can be trusted. We have nothing to fear.

It is one of the most frequently offered commands in the Bible, *"Do not be afraid."* *"Do not worry."* *"Fear not!"* It is as if God is continually speaking to children saying, *"Everything will be all right, just trust me."* But we are creatures prone to worry and mistrust. And yet, we have uttered the same words to our own children countless times. When a child runs to us with tears in her eyes having skinned her knee, when our teenager experiences his first relational breakup, when the first grandparent dies—without a moment of hesitation we tell our children, *"It's all right, everything will be all right, trust me."* It is as if deep down at the very core of our being we understand and believe the deep truth God speaks to us throughout the Bible. We don't know the why or how of it, but we can't shake this feeling that in the end, everything *will* be all right. God can be trusted. We have nothing to fear.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What does it mean to trust someone? Do you trust God?
- 4) Do you believe God uses angels to communicate with people today?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Read Matthew 1:18-2:23. How many times does an angel come to Joseph in a dream?
- 2) Ask someone on a date.
- 3) Do something romantic for your significant other.

Notes: _____

DECEMBER 27TH

Simeon and Anna

Read: Luke 2:22-38

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Luke 2:28-32

Takeaway: We were born to glorify God.

Simeon took the infant Jesus in his arms and proclaimed for everyone in the temple to hear that Jesus was special—destined for greatness. In Jesus, Simeon saw glory and light and salvation. How could Simeon have known all that the moment Jesus and his family entered the temple? Unless, somehow, that is the divine hope God has for every child born into the world. We were created to be light. We were born to glorify God. And we have within us the power to be a saving presence in the world. We cannot know the exact details for certain, and the text indicates that only Jesus received this particular acknowledgment, but what if every child brought to the temple was taken up in Simeon’s arms and hailed as special? What a gift that would be . . . It would be the kind of gift God would choose to give to all children and their parents.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What was special about Jesus? Do you feel special?
- 4) Describe a time you received encouragement from someone older than you.

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Pray for the well-being of someone you know.
- 2) Make a New Year resolution to take on a constructive habit.
- 3) Memorize the names of some of the children at the church.

Notes: _____

JANUARY 3RD

The Magi

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

Then Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

Matthew 2:8

Takeaway: Those who seek, find.

According to this story, the wise men found Jesus, and Herod did not. Those who seek, find. Those who stand comfortably at a distance do not. The wise men left everything behind and followed a star, they held nothing back in their pursuit of a newborn king, and their investment was rewarded. Herod, who had evil intent, was interested in the Christ child, but unwilling to take the time to hunt for Jesus himself. We view this as good news, knowing that Herod's interest was fueled by a desire to kill the infant. However, if Herod, like the Magi, had searched diligently for the child, perhaps he too would have returned home by a different road . . . his course forever altered.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What's the difference between being curious about Jesus and desiring to find him?
- 4) What questions do you have about Jesus?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Reflect on this story while spend time looking up at the stars at night.
- 2) Pray the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."
- 3) Give someone a gift.

Notes: _____

JANUARY 10TH

Baptism of Jesus

Read: Matthew 3:13-17

And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:17

Takeaway: Who are you trying to please?

Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. At that time, the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descend upon him in the form of a dove. Then, a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Imagine how comforting that would have been to Jesus. In the weeks and months to come, the religious authorities will not always be pleased with Jesus. Demons will not be pleased with him. In his hometown of Nazareth, they tried to throw him off a cliff. Not everyone would be pleased with Jesus, but God was. That made all the difference.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) How does it feel when someone like a parent or a teacher praises you?
- 4) Why was it important for God to affirm Jesus? When would God be most pleased with you?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Recall your baptism by looking at photos and talking with about it with parents.
- 2) Ask for a copy of your church's baptism or membership vows. Are you keeping them?

Notes: _____

JANUARY 17TH

With Whom Do You Eat?

Read: Matthew 9:9-13

When the Pharisees saw this, they said to Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Matthew 9:11

Takeaway: Jesus broke down barriers.

In school there was always the "cool kids' table." Maybe you sat at it, maybe you didn't, but you remember the table. In fact, there were likely a few "cool" tables, each varying by degrees of popularity. The cool table. The *really* cool table. The *super* cool table. The rest of the tables, at which the vast majority of kids sat, were entirely forgettable. Every kid's dream was to move up to a better table, but that rarely happened. You sat where you sat. Your friends were your friends. And either you were either cool or you were not. There was little commingling between cliques.

That was the remarkable thing about Jesus. Jesus broke down barriers. He sat with people he shouldn't have. He took interest in people others had forgotten about. And he took flack for it. Jesus was the guy who was more than willing to move from the cool table to a less desirable table, and most people couldn't understand why. Jesus had a soft spot in his heart for those who found themselves on the outside of the in-group . . . and so does God.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Who is in your clique, and who do you leave out?
- 4) Why did Jesus eat with people others rejected?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Invite someone to worship on Sunday or to a Bible study during the week.
- 2) Invite someone new to sit with you in the school cafeteria.
- 3) Meet a friend for coffee or for lunch.

Notes: _____

JANUARY 24TH

The Lord's Prayer

Read: Matthew 6:5-15

Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Matthew 6:9

Takeaway: Pray simply.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray. His instructions were clear and direct. Pray in secret. Don't practice your piety before others. Don't offer wordy, effusive prayers. Pray simply. Trust that God knows what you need before you speak, but pray anyway. Always pray for forgiveness, and put your prayer into action by forgiving others. For Jesus, prayer should be intimate and concise, and prompt us to deal with others as we have requested that God deal with us. This might all be a way of saying to his disciples—and to us all—don't over think, just pray.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) How do you pray? What title do you like to use for God when you pray and why?
- 4) Recall a time when someone mistreated you. Do you find it difficult to forgive people?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Memorize the Lord's Prayer if you haven't already.
- 2) Pray either silently or out loud before each meal for one week.
- 3) Start a journal and contribute a prayer of any length each day.

Notes: _____

JANUARY 31ST

Woman at the Well

Read: John 4:1–42

Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria.

John 4:3–4

Takeaway: To follow Jesus requires crossing lines that separate people from one another.

There were two routes by which an individual could make passage between Judea and Galilee, and only one required traveling through Samaria. In fact, the Samaritan highway was notoriously dangerous, and people avoided traveling that route if at all possible. The assertion the Jesus “*had to*” go through Samaria on his way to Galilee is not geographically accurate, which suggests that it may have been theologically essential. Jesus was drawn by God to go to the land of the Samaritans, those people long despised by the Judean Jews, to demonstrate God’s all-inclusive love for people. To do the will of God, Jesus “*had to*” cross a line most Jews were unwilling to even approach.

Sitting by Jacob’s well in Samaria, Jesus broke through shocking barriers. He entered a region of Palestine viewed as ritually unclean; he spoke alone with a woman, which was socially unacceptable; and the woman with whom he spoke was of questionable moral standing. Jesus made a habit of going where others refused to go, speaking with people others walked past without taking notice, and keeping company with people with whom Jews refused to associate. To follow in Jesus’ example means to cross lines that separate people from one another so that God’s family might be united in friendship, fellowship, and love.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Are there lines separating different groups at your school? What about in our world?
- 4) Are there certain places, neighborhoods, or towns you would be afraid to visit?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Learn something about the history of black people in the United States.

Notes: _____

FEBRUARY 7TH

A Storm at Sea

Read: Matthew 8:23-27

A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep.

Matthew 8:24

Takeaway: Trust in God and do not fear the storms of life.

The disciples must have thought Jesus negligent. There was a storm. The boat was being swamped. And Jesus slept. Did he not understand the danger they were in—and not just their tiny boat but also the other boats that were with them? After spending hours by the seashore teaching the people, was Jesus going to allow the day to end in a mass drowning? Didn't Jesus care?

To be asleep at the wheel is negligent, but to be asleep in the stern is trusting. That was what the disciples failed to understand. Jesus wasn't at the helm at this perilous moment. Jesus was simply along for the ride. Jesus rested in the wind and waves of God, trusting that the God of heaven and earth and sea and storm would take care of him in this life and in the next. With faith like that, what is left to fear?

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What are some things of which you are most afraid?
- 4) What qualities give some people the ability to remain calm during a crisis? Can you?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Pick a day this week and take a nap in the middle of the afternoon.

Notes: _____

FEBRUARY 14TH

Transfiguration

Read: Mark 9:2-8

This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!

Mark 9:7b

Takeaway: Listen

Listening tends not to be a relational strength for most of us. Action, problem solving, and hard work may come naturally to us, while being silent, listening, and paying attention during conversation can be our Achilles' heel. Yet listening is the key to developing healthy, meaningful, and intimate relationships. We can't learn unless we listen. We can't really love another unless we listen. We can't effectively lead others unless we listen.

If we want strong relationships with our spouses and enduring relationships with our children, we must listen to them. Likewise, if we want a meaningful relationship with God, we must listen to Jesus. How are we to listen to Jesus? Talk less. Read the Gospels more. Pray often. Worship. If we make listening our best work, all our relationships will grow and thrive.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Whom do you need to set aside some time to listen to this week?
- 4) Are there certain places where you like to pray or where you feel closer to God?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Hike up a mountain.
- 2) Spend time listening a podcast that interests you or to music that inspires you.
- 3) Practice active listening in which you demonstrate concern, ask specific questions of the other person and reflect back what you've heard.

Notes: _____

FEBRUARY 21ST

The Sower

Read: Mark 4:1-34

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Mark 4:3-4

Takeaway: Spread good works throughout our families, our communities, and our world.

Jesus told a story of a farmer who scattered seed on the ground. The seed fell on the hardened path, on the rocky ground, and among the thorns. Most of the seed failed to grow, but some seed fell on “good soil,” and that seed increased thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold! If we follow Jesus’ example, we might choose to toss our love out into the world, and to scatter the seeds of blessing everywhere. Spread good works throughout our families, our communities, and our world—and then wait and see what takes root.

Jesus encourages this kind of diversification because you just don’t know where your next good friend will come from. You don’t know how a kind word to a self-centered teenager today can transform their life years from now. You just don’t know how the faithful ministry of one person can unlock God’s eternal blessing in the world. After all, who would have thought that an obscure Nazarene prophet who was killed after three years of ministry could change the world? Jesus teaches us that abundant blessing comes from diversification. Invest yourself everywhere you can, and you will find you win more than you lose. And when you win, you will win big—thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold!

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) With whom, or where, do you need to sow some love, care, and generosity this week?
- 4) What could you do to be more open to new ideas and new experiences?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Plant seeds and grow a plant in your home.
- 2) Teach your children about financial investment including the benefit of compounding interest.

Notes: _____

FEBRUARY 28TH

Jesus Heals Two Blind Men

Read: Matthew 20:29-34

They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

Matthew 20:33-34

Takeaway: Be careful what you ask for.

Prior to the healing of two blind men, the mother of disciples James and John asked a favor of Jesus. She asked that her two sons would have places of honor. Jesus did not warm to that request. Upon encountering two blind men, Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" They responded, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." They asked for vision. They asked for clarity. They asked for the very thing that would make it possible for them to be followers of Jesus. Unlike the first request, this request was granted. Jesus had compassion for the two men. When they regained their sight, they followed. This story indicates that Jesus had compassion for those in need. It also invites us to reflect on what it is we truly desire.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) If Jesus said, "What do you want me to do for you?" How would you answer?
- 4) What are some ways you have demonstrated compassion for other people?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Read Matthew 20:20-23 and compare the request the mother of the sons of Zebedee makes of Jesus with the request of the two blind men make of him.
- 2) Pray to Jesus and ask him for something you need or want.

Notes: _____

MARCH 7TH

Jesus Blesses the Children

Read: Mark 10:13-16

But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

Mark 10:14

Takeaway: Everyone was welcomed by Jesus.

There are so many debates about who is acceptable to God. Attempts at religious exclusion have been ongoing throughout human history. In-groups and out-groups litter the religious landscape of our world. Even Jesus’ first disciples had their own sense of who was worthy and unworthy to enter into Jesus’ presence. For those disciples, children were unwelcome. Children had no status in first century Palestine. Children were not to be heard, and preferably, not seen either!

The Bible tells us that Jesus was indignant, and he instructed his disciples to allow the little children into his presence. Everyone was welcomed by Jesus. The only thing a person needed to approach Jesus was the will to do so. With Jesus, there are no outsiders, there are no untouchables – there are no exclusions whatsoever. If you want to meet Jesus, you are more than welcome!

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Do you exclude people?
- 4) How can the church be more welcoming and inclusive of children?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Speak a word of encouragement to someone younger than you.
- 2) Plan to attend a school play, concert or child’s recital.

Notes: _____

MARCH 14TH

The Marriage Feast

Read: Matthew 22:1-14

Many are called, but few are chosen.

Matthew 22:14

Takeaway: God’s invitation to discipleship requires our response.

It is every child’s worst fear—to be picked last for a game. Kickball, touch football, soccer—whether it be on the sandlot or the school playground—kids heed the call to line up. However, standing in that line fuels insecurity. Who will be picked first? Who will be standing alone at the end as the very last to be selected? Many are called, few are chosen. We understand that reality from a young age, and it is a reality that bears out throughout our lives. We are called here and there, and sometimes we are chosen . . . and sometimes we are not.

God calls all of us to participate with him throughout our entire lives. Unlike so many of the invitations we receive in life, there are no exclusions to this call. What is required, however, is our response. Our best work is saying “yes” to that call, saying “yes” to God’s presence in our lives, and saying “yes” to doing the hard work of discipleship. Unlike the sandlots and playgrounds of our childhood, everyone who shows up *is* chosen by God. In fact, in the Gospels Jesus suggests the last will be chosen first and the first will be chosen last!

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Is God inviting you to join in some task or project?
- 4) Identify a group in which you feel like you belong. What is it about the group that makes you feel that way?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Plan a party or get together and send out special invitations.
- 2) Read the story “The Wedding at Cana” in John 2:1-11.

Notes: _____

MARCH 21ST

The Great Commandment

Read: Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near. . . . He asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

Mark 12:28

Takeaway: Love God and love your neighbor

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

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Who do you find difficult to love?
- 4) What things can you do to show your love of God and your love of neighbor?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Tell someone you love them.
- 2) Pray for the well-being of someone you don’t understand or you dislike.

Notes: _____

MARCH 28

Jesus' Triumphant Entry

Read: Mark 11:1-11

Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Mark 11:8-10

Takeaway: Jesus gives us a reason to be enthusiastic and hopeful.

This story seems to be a most imprudent display of celebration. This is the ticker-tape parade before the championship has been won, it is the victory lap before victory has been had, it is the celebratory headline printed in the paper in anticipation of an accomplishment that has not yet been achieved. The people along the road were celebrating Jesus as if he were a conquering hero, even though he had neither conquered anyone nor done anything particularly heroic. This is the kind of display of enthusiasm that most prudent people would never allow themselves to get sucked into.

Those who followed Jesus, however, were anything but prudent. They were grateful. They were hopeful. They were excited. They had an unquenchable sense that Jesus represented something new and different and wonderful entering the world. They felt that they were in the presence of a Lord, a Savior, a God who would change the course of history and establish heaven on earth. Right or wrong, they decided to celebrate the presence of Jesus in their midst.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Why is Jesus important to you?
- 4) Do you know anyone who is humble? Are you humble?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) If there is a petting zoo or stable nearby, visit a donkey.
- 2) Make a list of the people in your life that you consider a hero.

Notes: _____

APRIL 4

Mary at the Empty Tomb

Read: John 20:1-18

Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

John 20:14b & c

Takeaway: Not even death can separate us from God’s eternal love.

We are in the hunt to know and understand how the world was created. We want to know upon what foundation the world is built. We want to know how the world works and how it runs. We look deep into the created order—into the cosmic and subatomic universe. We look into a world of neutrinos that move faster than light and unwitnessed matter that we call “dark.” We desperately want to unravel the mystery of life in this world, never fully wanting to consider that the mystery has already been revealed to us.

The veil of mystery momentarily parted when Mary encountered—or was encountered by—Jesus at the tomb on Easter morning. Mary didn’t recognize all that had taken place at first. She thought Jesus was the gardener, and she thought a body had gone missing, because up until that point she had no evidence on which to base a belief in the resurrection of the dead. However, the veil of this life was parted for a moment in time, and what was revealed was *eternity*—eternal love, eternal life, and eternal relationships.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Are you comfortable with mystery?
- 4) Do you think of Jesus as a figure from the past or as mysteriously alive today?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Take a walk through a cemetery and read some of the gravestones.
- 2) Say a prayer giving thanks to God for the people in your life that mean the most to you.

Notes: _____

APRIL 11

The Road to Emmaus

Read: Luke 24:13–35

While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. . . . When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened . . . ; and he vanished from their sight.

Luke 24:15–16 & 30–31

Takeaway: Jesus is just as alive as the care and connection we share with others.

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

This would be an easy story to refute, if it were not for the fact that many people have caught glimpses of Jesus over the centuries. Most of the time we don't recognize him because he comes in a form that is unexpected. A nurse speaking tenderly to a patient, a teacher offering encouragement to a struggling student, a friend consoling another friend after a loss. Jesus is just as real and just as alive as the care and connection we share with others.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What is the best part of sharing a meal with family or friends?
- 4) Are you comfortable saying a prayer before meals?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Take a walk with a friend and talk about things with which you struggle.
- 2) Make bread.
- 3) Pray before each meal for one week.

Notes: _____

APRIL 18

The Great Commission

Read: Matthew 28:16–20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. . . . And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:19–20b

Takeaway: The Christian mission is the transformation of the entire world.

The mission of the Christian faith is nothing less than the transformation of the entire world. All nations and all people are supposed to be converted to a way of living and being that reflects the message of Jesus and the will of God. That is a grand and bold vision, and it must have seemed wildly unrealistic to that handful of fishermen, tax collectors, and women who stood with Jesus on a mountain in Galilee. However, the vision and mission came with a promise: *“I am with you always.”* The goal is the complete transformation of the world, but that is not work we will be left to do alone. Jesus will be with us. Jesus is our co-worker. Jesus will labor by our side until all that God wills is accomplished. The mission is grand, and our Savior is present!

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What would it be like to truly work with Jesus?
- 4) Do you ever talk about God or the church with your friends? What is that like?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Find a service opportunity such as serving a meal to the homeless.
- 2) Start a conversation about faith or religion with someone who is not a member of your church.

Notes: _____

APRIL 25

Demanding Proof

Read: John 20:19-29

But Thomas said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

John 20:25b & c

Takeaway: Jesus doesn't desert us because of our doubts

We understand Thomas's doubt. He needed proof like we need proof. For us, "seeing is believing," and that was all Thomas was asking for—a little evidence. Resurrection is a wildly outlandish claim, and it strains even the most robust imaginations. This incident, however, branded Thomas forever as the doubter, an unflattering title we all could be shouldered with. *Doubter* can sound a little harsh, so we refer to ourselves instead as critical or practical or rational thinkers. But Jesus wants us to be called *believers*, so he returns. Jesus didn't desert Thomas because of his lack of faith, and he won't desert us in the midst of our skepticism either. And Jesus doesn't rest until we come to believe and exclaim as Thomas did, "*My Lord and my God!*"

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Is it normal and okay to have doubts and questions about God and the stories in the Bible?
- 4) What kind of proof do you need to trust that God loves you?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Give someone a foot massage.
- 2) Read and learn about The Apostles' Creed.
- 3) If you wrote a statement of faith when you were confirmed, go back and read it. Have your beliefs changed?

Notes: _____

MAY 2

Philip and the Ethiopian

Read: Acts 8:26–40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” . . . Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to the chariot and join it.” . . . The Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; . . . Philip found himself at Azotus.

Acts 8:26, 29, 39–40

Takeaway: Trust in the Lord’s ability to lead you

The Spirit of God leads us and guides us if we are open to its movement. The Holy Spirit of God will set us on the course God wants us to be on, if we are receptive to its leading. As a man who steeped himself in prayer, in the study of scripture, and in the discipline of listening for God in his life, Philip was able to be moved by the Spirit of God. God took Philip and placed him where God wanted him to be.

We spend a lot of time envisioning the life we want to lead. What job will we do? What career path will we take? What community will we live in? These are important, and frankly, exciting questions to both ask and answer. But we often engage these questions without asking for God’s input. It is as if we do not trust in the Lord’s ability to lead us. And yet, when we defer to God’s direction, our lives are richer, more meaningful, and can have a greater impact than we could ever have imagined. When in the lead, God also has a way of taking us to very interesting and wonderfully unlikely destinations!

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Describe a time when you sensed God leading you in a particular direction.
- 4) Who are some leaders you admire? What makes them good leaders?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Play “Follow the Leader.”
- 2) Make it a point to attend a worship service this week.

Notes: _____

MAY 9

Saul To Paul

Read: Acts 9:1-19

Saul fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus.

Acts 9:4, 8

Takeaway: A breakdown can lead to a breakthrough.

Saul was a confident religious zealot, persecuting the early church with righteous indignation. Saul was successful, respected by his peers, and feared by those he opposed. His attack on the followers of Jesus ensured that he would continue to climb in the esteem of his colleagues. It wasn't until his conversion on the road to Damascus, however, that his life mission and legacy were revealed. For Saul to be converted from a relentless Jewish zealot to a passionate Christian missionary, he had to be broken.

When Jesus encountered Saul on the road to Damascus, Saul fell to the ground, he was struck blind, and, because he could not navigate on his own, he had to be led by the hand to his destination. After being broken, Saul experienced a breakthrough that would not only reorient his life but would also transform the world. Having been struck blind, Saul finally began to see. Saul became Paul, and the world has never been the same.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What's the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Describe a time when you felt defeated or broken and you came out of it having learned something important?
- 4) Have you ever realized you were wrong about something? How did it feel to learn the truth?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Learn about John Newton (1725-1807) and his hymn "Amazing Grace." Sing it!
- 2) Get up early to watch the sunrise. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for a new day.

Notes: _____

MAY 16

The Ascension

Read: Acts 1:6-11

It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But . . . you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1:7-8

Takeaway: Our call is to witness to our experiences of God.

There is a limit to what we can know about God. The disciples wanted Jesus to tell them about God’s eternal plans, but Jesus said those plans were known only to God. The cosmos is too vast, time too expansive, and the workings of creation far too mysterious for us to grasp. Our call is not to *know* but to *witness* to our experiences of God. You can stand in awe of creation even if you can’t fully understand it. Our lives can’t always revolve around what we *know*; oftentimes we have to set our course based on what we *believe*. While ignorance may be one of the great evils at work in the world, dismissing the holy mysteries of creation might be equally unwise. Life without reverence for the unknown is careless and foolish. Jesus tempered our insatiable thirst for knowledge, encouraging us instead toward a holy awe for the divine mysteries of God. You don’t have to be able to explain the beauty of the world; you just have to be able to appreciate it and celebrate it by sharing your experiences with others.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What do you like most about Jesus?
- 4) What would you offer as evidence of God’s existence?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Take a walk in a park or in a garden and notice the beauty of God’s creation.
- 2) Gaze up into the night sky either with the naked eye or with a telescope.

Notes: _____

MAY 23

Pentecost

Read: Acts 2

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

Acts 2:6

Takeaway: God’s Spirit enables disparate people to unite.

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

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

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What might be some signs or indications of the Holy Spirit’s presence?
- 4) Who do you consider the most important people to listen to?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Look up the “Fruits of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:22-23
- 2) Fly a kite or go sailing and reflect on why the wind might symbolize the Holy Spirit.

Notes: _____

MAY 30

Angels

Read: Acts 12:1-19

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly."

Acts 12:7

Takeaway: Angels are individuals that work on behalf of God.

We have an image of angels that include wings, halos, and perhaps even playful bows and arrows. We hang angels on Christmas trees, place ceramic angels on our mantels, and we have plenty of children’s story books—and even more adult versions—that feature white-winged creatures. The way we buy and sell angels would give even the most committed believer doubts about their reality.

There are no wings or cherubs or ceramic angels in this scripture. Just a man quietly entering a prison cell, with a light, and the ability to unlock chains and unbar doors. The truth is, the angel in this story could have been anyone with courage enough to act on the will of God. For in the end, that is exactly who angels are—individuals that work on behalf of God.

For Reflection and Conversation:

- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) Do you believe in angels? Why or why not?
- 4) Can you remember a time when a flesh and blood angel came to your rescue?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Be a “secret angel” this week. Secretly do something nice for someone else.
- 2) Write a handwritten note thanking someone for their assistance when you needed it.

Notes: _____

JUNE 6

Call of Abram

Read: Genesis 12:1-9

Now the Lord said to Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

Genesis 12:1

Takeaway: God calls us forth into new experiences and new adventures.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a rut. Stuck. Stagnant. We get into a certain rhythm, or a certain routine, or a certain mindset and we cease to grow. We go to the same job, we go to the same restaurants, and we hang out with the same friends . . . and in time we become bored and boring people. We become narrow-minded. We live life with blinders on, unable to see other ways of living.

God calls us forth into new experiences, new adventures, and new journeys with the intent of unfolding a world of opportunity to us. God wants to broaden, deepen, and enrich our living, so God encourages our exposure to new ideas, new places, and new people. Exposure to that which is new and unfamiliar to us is a pathway to a land and life of promise.

For Reflection and Conversation:

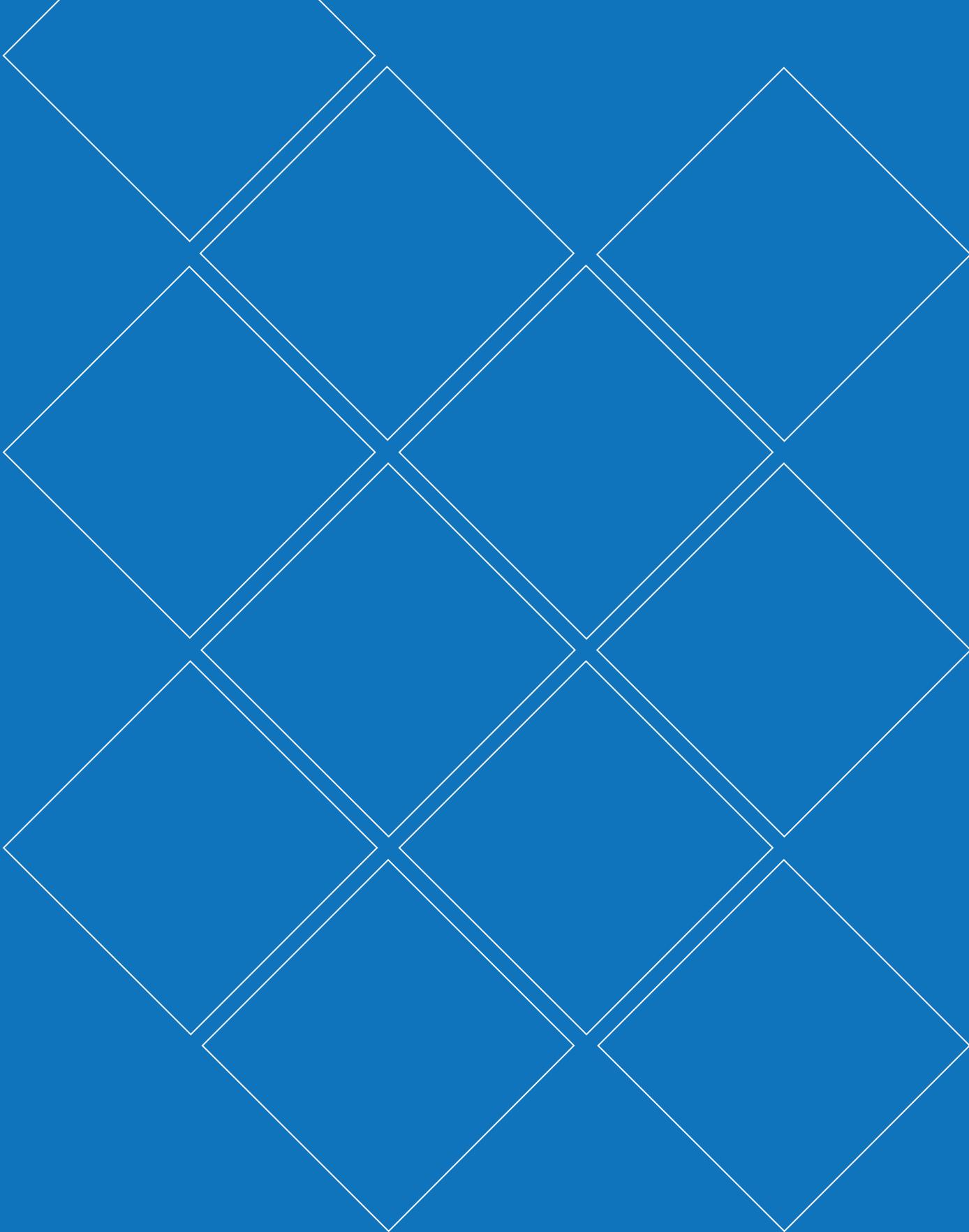
- 1) Retell the story in your own words allowing each person present to participate.
- 2) What’s the most important part of the story for you, and why?
- 3) What task might God be calling you to perform? Why did God choose you?
- 4) Did you ever have to leave something familiar like a school or a town?

Create A Prayer Based on Your Reflection: _____

Optional Practice For The Week:

- 1) Take your family or a friend to a place none of you have been before.
- 2) Read the Robert Frost poem “The Road Not Taken”

Notes: _____



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