

Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6:1-8 - Isaiah has revealed how his people had rejected the “Holy One” (chapters 1-5). Now he tells of his face-to-face encounter with this Holy God. In the year of King Uzziah’s death (740 B.C.) Isaiah receives a vision of the real King, the Lord, seated on His heavenly throne. Seraphs surround Him, chanting “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty.” Overwhelmed by God’s splendor, Isaiah acknowledges his and his people’s sinful condition.

After Isaiah is symbolically purified, the Lord commissions him as a messenger to His spiritually insensitive people. He was to preach until judgment swept through the land and the people were carried into exile, leaving only a remnant.

Romans 8:12-17 - As believers (followers of Christ), we have been released from the law and sin because we have become sons and daughters of God (8:13-14). As His adopted children, we are no longer slaves to the fear of God’s punishment for our sins.

Being “adopted” (8:15) was a very significant matter in Roman law and culture. The adoptee was taken out of his previous state and placed in a new relationship as son to a new father. As such, all his former debts were cancelled and he was able to start a new life. As adoptees of God the Father, we are freed from our debt of sin and receive the full rights, privileges, and responsibilities of God’s own children.

John 3:1-17 - A Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, seeking deeper spiritual truth from this miracle worker. Jesus cut short any philosophical discussion by declaring that salvation required being “born again” (3:3). Nicodemus seems confused and speaks of physical birth. Jesus explains that this new birth is spiritual in nature (3:4-7). To the human understanding it is like the wind, whose origin and destination are mystery (3:8).

Jesus continues to bring clarification to Nicodemus by using an Old Testament reference of when Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness as a means of salvation for the people. Jesus presents the gospel by clarifying that the source of this good news is God’s love, demonstrated in the giving of his only Son to die on the cross, and all who believe in Him (Jesus) will live forever!

Living Out Loud

Mental healthcare experts often encourage patients to “speak their truth.” This truth speaking involves more than facts – it encompasses our emotions and senses, allowing the entirety of our being to give voice to the truth as we have experienced it.

Jesus’s words in today’s Gospel reading bring to mind this same concept: “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen...” Jesus makes it clear that believers speak and live what they have seen. This statement means faith is more than a series of abstract concepts. Faith is experienced in what we see, touch, and encounter. It involves our heads, hearts, words, and actions.

A full and vibrant faith is one that is both articulated and lived. Faith fully alive is a faith that lives out loud, “speaking truth” to a watching world.

Prayer:

Almighty God, help me confess my faith through a life of steadfast worship; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 3 Sunday after Pentecost
(*Not observed for the year 2018*)

Hosea 2:14-20 - Hosea is called to share with the people of God how God feels about them and their behavior. At first, he proclaims God's wrath at their unfaithfulness and likens it to a wayward bride. Israel has pursued other God's and the intimate relationship between Yahweh, and his people are violated. This violation is akin to adultery.

After the severe chastisement, God comes back to his bride and "speaks tenderly to her." He promises abundance and instead of trouble, "Achor," he gives hope. Despite her unfaithfulness, God vows to be faithful to her and provide her with peace. One is reminded of Psalm 30.5 that says, "For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."

2 Corinthians 3:1-6 - Qualifications are always necessary for whatever job you may seek. Those who are trying to hire, want to know if the person applying for the job is capable and skilled enough to do the work. This happens especially when the character of the leader or applicant is called into question.

Rebuffed by those seeking to discredit his ministry, Paul's credentials were called into question, and many tried to uproot what he had planted. He had a difficult time in Corinth with the people but wanted to make sure they didn't think he was puffing himself up, refreshing his resume and explaining his qualifications.

The people of Corinth are his letter. They are his qualifications. How they walk with Jesus is what Paul would point to as the fruit and reason to see Christ at work in and through him. It is the Spirit at work, not the law so that no one can claim growth from elsewhere. This begs the question; do you reflect your leaders? Are you living in such a way that your spiritual mentors would want to use you as a reference?

Mark 2:13-22 - The invitation for Levi to eat with Jesus stands in stark contrast to Jewish norms. Levi was likely a hated tax collector, the puppet of Herod Antipas and thereby a puppet of Rome. No one would have been happy to give their money to him let alone eat with him! Jesus not only ate with him but other tax collectors and "sinners." This confounded the Jewish leaders. It was a new thing Jesus was doing, eating with sinners.

This new thing was revealing what the kingdom of God is like. It presses the old in ways that create tension. New wine can't be held in old wineskins, the skin breaks as the wine ferments and both the skin and wine are wasted. The new cloth will only rip the old cloth making things worse. Old and new don't mix well and Jesus, by his actions, was making it clear. It is time to celebrate. The bridegroom is here, and it is time to eat, drink, celebrate and be merry. God is doing a new thing that includes the "sinner" and the "sick." If we have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to understand, we can celebrate because we have been included, invited to the supper and despite our status as the "sick," are accepted into the new thing God is doing!

Prone to Wander

It doesn't take long in your Christian walk to realize you stray from where you began. "Prone to wander Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the one I love." says one hymn. We are easily distracted and wayward. It was no different for people in ancient Israel or the 1st Century. God has chosen to love, pursue and rescue individuals who are sick and likely to turn their backs on him. We will face the consequences of walking away from him not the least of which is the loss of peace and joy. However, God is determined to win us back. His deep love and compassion surface every time our feet find a different path.

Overtime, as we surrender to his wooing, our lives are changed. His grace and mercy win our hearts and minds over, making our wandering less long and less frequent. As this happens, we become something different. We still understand our illness and our deep need for a doctor, but we slowly start to look like the people of God, loved, cherished, treasured, accepted and worthy of His great affection.

Proper 3 Sunday after Pentecost (Cont'd.)
(Not observed for the year 2018)

As this becomes apparent, we offer hope, not just in our words, but in our lives, that somehow, somehow, those who are sick and in need may find what we have. Namely, a love that knows no limit and a savior who will never walk away.

Prayer:

Almighty God, help me to stay on course, and to be changed. Though prone to wander, set my feet on the right way that I may glorify You and lead others to the truth and the life in Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

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

Proper 4 Sunday after Pentecost

1 Samuel 3:1-10, 11-20 - It was very unusual for the word of the Lord to come to Eli, Samuel or anyone else. When it did, they were confused and unsure of what was happening. Especially Samuel. Eli catches on and gives him instruction. The fact that it happens three times is to ensure both the characters and the reader that God is doing something. Samuels call is solidified.

His first prophetic work is to tell Eli what God has spoken. It is a promise from God to do what he said he would do, namely judge Eli and his family for the sins they have committed. Eli said, "He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes." Which is a remarkable response given the message would ensure calamity will come upon him. Further, Samuel's words are confirmed every time he prophesied causing his recognition as a prophet to grow.

The contrast between Samuels's faithfulness and Eli's acceptance of judgment is stark. Both are willing to be used by God and accept his work in their lives, but it is in very different trajectories.

2 Corinthians 4:5-12 - The unremarkable nature of Paul has led some to believe the message he carries is of no or little value. They have looked at the exterior, blinded to what God is doing through seemingly ordinary items; like clay jars. Despite their transient and delicate nature, these vessels have been made alive by the light of Christ.

It is both life and death at work in these jars, so that the life of Christ may shine more clearly. If the vessel takes precedence, the message gets lost. Paul is keen to remind the Corinthians it is necessary for the jars to function to bring that light and life to them.

It was all too easy for them to miss the message because they focused on the messenger. Are we any different?

Mark 2:23-3:6 - The Pharisees desperately wanted to bring about God's Kingdom. They get a bad rap because they went about it with such stringency. To keep the Law, they made other "laws" to make sure the original Law wasn't broken. Like making you stop 30 feet before a stop sign to ensure you stopped, the Pharisees were keen to follow everything to the letter. When Jesus and his followers appeared to flaunt these laws, whether the "laws" they established or the Law given to Moses, they were indignant.

Picking heads of grain doesn't seem like work, but it was to the Pharisees. Jesus and his followers picked the grains because they were hungry, like David. Jesus willingly healed a man on the Sabbath, which again, wasn't lawful. Is healing ok? Is eating ok? Both represent abundance. They are designed to show what God's kingdom is like. It won't be brought about by following laws but by walking in the way of Jesus and experiencing the abundance God provides in Christ.

The Pharisees couldn't see past the law to the life God provided. Jesus was showing them and his followers a new way, the way it was supposed to be. Set apart for God's purposes, not to follow the Law, but to live it is such a way to bring freedom.

In Motion, Not Commotion

Many of us willingly recognize that God is at work in us and the world around us. At times, this work can be difficult to spot. The obvious sky splitting, withered limb fixing, dead men rising work of God we see in the Scriptures doesn't appear to happen as much today. God's work seems behind the scenes and elusive, over the long course of time vs. a moment of obvious action. To be sure, God still moves in the ways mentioned above. However, the majority of us don't experience them often.

How do you spot God's work? It likely doesn't come in a flashy package. Maybe it is a whisper or a quiet call, confirmed by others. Perhaps in the witness of fruit born over time? Maybe as someone embodies Christ and the Gospel in ways we don't expect?

Proper 4 Sunday after Pentecost (Cont'd.)

Western culture celebrates celebrity, bright lights, and massive impact. As you live your life for Christ, pay attention to the opposite of these. Watch for God to move the way he always has, not in the enormous displays, but in the quiet change of your heart and mind as you allow him to work in and through you.

Prayer:

Faithful Father, I'm listening. Speak to Your servant and give me courage to follow your voice. Help me to recognize You in the subtleties of life. Increase my desire to seek and find You in unexpected ways. Amen.

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

Proper 5 Sunday after Pentecost

1 Samuel 8:4-11 - The people requested a king because Samuel's judgeship had begun to fail. He was old; and his sons, like Eli's, were wicked men who perverted justice. Also the people wanted the benefits of a central authority like the other nations had (8:1-5). Although Samuel resisted, God graciously permitted Israel to have a king (8:6-9). Samuel warned the people of the troubles of kingship, but they persisted; so God granted their request (8:10-22).

When God's people will not accept His best for them, they will get the best they can be persuaded to take and, with the answer to their selfish prayers, will receive also an added judgment.

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1 - The only power in the gospel is God's power. The contrast between weakness and power was characterized by Paul's ministry modeled on the sufferings of Jesus that flowed to others (4:7-15). Yet the ministry was a continuation of renewal. Even in the midst of suffering, Paul exemplifies courage. This was possible because he looked beyond the decay of the outer person to the renewal of the new person.

Mark 3:20-35 - Religious leaders of the day were trying to brand Jesus' ministry as being the work of Beelzebub, "the prince of devils." Jesus refutes their charges, showing his adversaries the absurdity their underlying assumption that suggested that Satan acts against himself (vv. 20-27). In light of the charges of Jesus' opponents, He issues a stern warning.

While all sins and blasphemies (derogatory words of men against God) are open to God's forgiveness, blasphemies against the Holy Spirit are not. An attitude of hostile defiance toward God that rejects His saving power toward men and women, expressed in the Spirit-empowered person and work of Jesus... will not be forgiven. Such a persistent attitude of willful unbelief can harden into a condition in which repentance and forgiveness, both mediated by God's Spirit, become impossible (vv. 28-30).

Finally, Jesus reminds us that Kingdom citizenship does not depend upon flesh and blood, but rather upon a kindred spirit we possess in seeking to accomplish God's purpose through faith in Jesus Christ (vv. 31-35).

Put On Your Glasses

We often fail to realize how bad our eyesight has become until a doctor prescribes a new pair of glasses. Suddenly, we see what was there all along – things that had previously been invisible. Today's readings remind us that we often need corrective action to adjust our spiritual vision.

Samuel's abilities were failing, yet God's people could not see that a king would not help. Blinded by their desire to mirror the ruling structures of the surrounding nations, they willingly traded their freedoms for slavery to a king. Conversely, Paul is able to look beyond the deterioration of the temporal to see the lasting beauty of the eternal.

These readings teach us that we have a choice. Like the Israelites, we can cling to our blindness; or, like Paul, we can put on our glasses. We can allow God to correct our vision and help us see life – His creation and the people around us – through His eyes.

Prayer:

Holy God, help me see my life and the lives of those around me through Your eyes; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 6 Sunday after Pentecost

1 Samuel 15:34–16:13 - Saul's work for God had ended, but God's work would go on. The Lord had already "sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people" (13:14). God sends Samuel to Bethlehem. There he discovers David, the youngest of the sons of Jesse. It doesn't occur to anyone in the family that this shepherd boy might be a future king. But God sees things differently. In another remarkable statement, Samuel shows his deep awareness of the presence and perception of God: *Mortals look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart* (16:7).

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, (11-13), 14-17 - Paul's confidence was realized by focusing on future conditions... not on the "seen", but the "unseen". To live this way is to live by faith, not by sight. It is to live in light of the ultimate rather than immediate realities (cf. Rom. 8:24-25). A life of faith obeys God's commands despite the hardships that obedience they may produce (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:23-29).

Paul was willing to live this way because Christ was his model. Though possessing divine prerogatives, Jesus willingly became incarnate and followed the path of obedience to the cross (Phil. 2:6-8), dying for all (not just the elect, as some suggest; cf. 1 Tim. 2:6; Heb. 2:9; 1 John 2:2). By faith Paul was identified with Jesus in His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 2:20). And Paul lived with the same selfless abandon the Lord had. Christ's love, which had converted him, now compelled him (cf. 1 John 3:16).

Mark 4:26-34 - It was common for pagan and Jewish farmers alike to seek divine help for their crops. Pagan farmers relied heavily on sacrifices. This parable reminds us that it is God's providence, not the farmer's power that makes the grain grow.

The debate regarding the mustard seed being the smallest seed misses the point of this parable. The emphasis is that despite its smallness... it yields a large shrub. Jesus is applying an image of growth from such a tiny seed (something his audience would connect with) to illustrate that this is how the kingdom of God would be. That which would begin in obscurity would culminate in glory.

How Does Your Garden Grow?

To see with eyes of faith, stand next to a farmer surveying a barren field. He's not seeing tangled clumps of roots and mud waiting to be broken up and tilled. He's not seeing hours of standing in the hot sun, sowing seeds into the ground. He's not seeing weeds to be hoed or bugs to be thwarted. His eyes are already seeing tall stalks of wheat or corn. A farmer looks beyond the surface and sees the potential. God asks us to do the same.

Does your faith feel small? See it through God's eyes. Faith, even the size of a mustard seed, eventually produces an exponential harvest – enough for you and those around you.

Prayer

Merciful God, give me Your steadfast love and grace to both proclaim and cling to Your truth; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 7 Sunday after Pentecost

1 Samuel 17:32-49 - A champion is needed to fight a giant Philistine called Goliath. David volunteers. He goes out to meet Goliath, armed only with faith in the living God — and his shepherd's sling. This is more than a test of bravery. It is a brave declaration that the God of Israel is greater than all other gods. As David says: *The whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's (17:46-47).*

This is God's war! The lad with faith takes on the giant of fear. Goliath stands for all the pride and power of paganism. David and his sling are so puny that victory can only be an act of God.

2 Corinthians 6:1-13 - In the previous chapter, Paul called on us to stop looking at things from a "worldly point of view." Here he sets up a series of contrasts. The carnal (worldly) Christian and Paul's opponents may see him as an imposter, whom they have unmasked. They may dismiss him as poor, sorrowful, broke, and useless. But from God's viewpoint Paul, who has proven his "servant-hood" by his willingness to suffer hardship, is genuine, vitally alive, full of joy, with access to the spiritual resources that make others rich, and thus "possessing everything."

Mark 4:35-41 - Jesus demonstrated His absolute trust in God by sleeping through the storm on Lake Galilee. The disciples mistook Jesus' trust for apathy: "Don't you care?" (4:38). Strangely, their fear is not mentioned until Jesus had quieted the storm (4:40-41). Here faith is courage based on trust in God's care no matter what. The disciples' question, "Who is this?" suggests their awe stemmed from the realization that somehow their Teacher did what only God could do.

Sling Shots and Storm Clouds

There's an old phrase that encourages, "Keep yourself out of harm's way." It's good advice. To the extent we are able, we are to live peaceably – with God, each other, and ourselves. But there are times when danger cannot be avoided. We cross paths with a giant. The clouds darken and the storm becomes ominous. We look at our own resources and find them woefully inadequate. Then, we look to God.

Like Paul, we may find ourselves facing afflictions, hardships, and calamities. But through faith, we can also say, "now is the day of salvation!" Faith gives us the courage to look our giant in the eyes and affirm, "... the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's."

Take a firm hold on faith. Look your giant in the eyes. Don't hide from the storm. Jesus, our Savior, makes mighty the sling shot and speaks peace to the storm.

Prayer

Mighty God, give me courage in Your never failing help and the sure foundation of Your Son; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 8 Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27 - David composed and sang a song in honor of Saul and Jonathan. He expresses hope that the Philistines will not find comfort in Saul's death, then moves on to praise the two men for their skill and bravery in battle (1:21-23, 25, 27), their qualities of character (1:23), and their skill as national leaders (1:24).

David reserves special laments and praises for Jonathan, with whom he had enjoyed a special friendship (1:26). His description of Saul as "gracious" was generous, considering Saul's relentless efforts to kill him (1 Sam. 18-26).

2 Corinthians 8:7-15 - Paul was pleased that the Corinthians had earlier expressed a strong desire to support the church. However, the Corinthians needed to carry their intentions through to completion, "according to your means." This is an important factor in grace giving. Paul said it again. "If the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have."

On the one hand, one need not be a millionaire for his or her contribution to be significant. Even the gifts of those who have little and can give little are acceptable. What God is concerned with is the willingness: the love that motivates the believer to share (cf. Luke 21:1-4).

Mark 5:21-43 - Mark's account of a girl restored to life and a woman healed (5:21-43) is a contrast of faith: a synagogue ruler, a highly respected community member, compared with a now-impoorished woman who lived as an outcast because of her hemorrhage.

The woman "had heard about Jesus" and exemplified faith in daring to touch the fringe of His garment. Her fear of illness and death is surpassed by her awe of the One who had healed her. Jesus' address "Daughter" brought her into relationship with Him based on her saving faith (5:34). This new relationship makes going in God's peace possible.

Jairus demonstrates a faith that defies logic. He trusts Jesus to restore life to his daughter... a faith that trusts God, no matter what.

The Greatness of Grace

On the surface, today's readings have little in common. Look closely, however, and one unifying thread runs through them: God's grace. It is grace that enables David to speak words of praise for Saul, the man who tried repeatedly to kill him. Paul's words demonstrate that equal sacrifice and commitment are acts of grace as well, making gifts both large and small significant in God's economy. Mark's account of Jesus healing the woman with an issue of blood demonstrates not only physical restoration, but also the healing of relationship between the woman and Himself as well as the larger community.

What does this teach us about our own lives?

The heartbeat of God and the lifeblood of our own salvation is grace. When we are wronged by others, grace matters. Whether we are giving to or receiving from others, grace matters. When we are broken and hurting, grace matters. When we are restored and blessed, grace matters. Grace is both the marker of and magnet for our faith in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Holy God, give me grace so I can fully serve you and my neighbor; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 9 Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10 - With Abner and Ish-Bosheth dead, Israel had two major reasons to turn to David. He was a proven military man, a motive that reflects Israel's earlier demand for a king (cf. 1 Sam. 8). But David also was known as God's choice to "shepherd" Israel. At last, Israel's and God's will were in harmony.

The great things that follow David's recognition as king remind us that success can come only when our will is in harmony with the known will of God.

2 Corinthians 12:2-10 - Paul explains that "weaknesses" are a source of boasting. After the apostle received a stunning revelation, being carried to heaven itself (12:1-6), Satan struck him with a "thorn in the flesh." Some scholars think this was a serious and disfiguring illness. Regardless of the nature of the "weakness", Paul prayed earnestly for its removal, but was told "no."

Through this experience Paul learned "weakness" was a special call to rely on the Lord, who delights in showing His strength in weak people (vv. 7-9a). As a result of this insight, Paul gladly exposes his weaknesses, so his successes will be clearly seen as achievements because of Christ's power (vv. 9b-10).

Mark 6:1-13 - When Jesus returned to Nazareth, now as a visiting Rabbi, His neighbors show bitter resentment. *Who does Jesus think He is, anyway?* Their unbelief becomes a barrier that keeps Him from performing miracles there (6:1-6).

However, the mission of Jesus – to reach as many in Israel as possible – is urgent. To accomplish His purpose, He commissions and empowers the Twelve to go preach and heal (vv. 7-13). Because of the importance of this mission, Jesus tells the men not to acquire new equipment or be encumbered with things they do not need.

The Mark of A Leader

We often pray for God to use us – to make us ones who bring about His kingdom here on earth. And yet we resist when God takes us at our word and begins to mold us for leadership. David was destined for greatness; however, he had to spend time living as a fugitive, on the run from Saul. Paul is a cornerstone of God's Church, yet Paul had to live with a debilitating condition that made him weak. Even Jesus' own disciples were sent to proclaim His salvation equipped with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

Only after living in the caves and serving in the military at great personal risk was David ready to become the servant leader of Israel. Only by acknowledging – and accepting – his weakness was Paul able to fully demonstrate leadership in the newly formed church in Corinth. Only in stepping out with nothing did Jesus' disciples gain the privilege of establishing His kingdom here on earth.

When we ask God to use our lives for leadership, we need to be prepared for seasons of hardship. This is most frequently the mark of a leader in God's kingdom.

Prayer

Almighty God, help me know that serving You is demonstrated by serving my neighbor and give me the grace of Your Spirit to serve with faithfulness and love; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 10 Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 - David leads an honor guard to escort the Ark of the Covenant, Israel's most holy object, from its resting place near Kiriath Jearim (1 Sam. 7:1) to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:1-5). But on the way a man named Uzzah innocently touches the ark, and is struck dead! David, angry and afraid, temporarily leaves the ark by the house of a man named Obed-Edom, and goes back to Jerusalem (vv. 6-11). But when God blesses Obed-Edom, David decides to try again. This time Levites carry the ark, as Moses' law demands, and it is brought successfully to Jerusalem (vv. 12-13). David strips off his royal robes and, wearing the simple linen garment of a servant in God's tabernacle, he leads the joyful procession into the city, shouting and singing (vv. 14-19). At home after the celebration David is confronted by a contemptuous Michal, who scorns him for taking off his royal robes to dance and sing like a commoner.

Ephesians 1:3-14 - After brief greetings (1:1-2), Paul launches into a powerful expression of praise for what each Person of the Godhead has done in crafting, accomplishing, and effecting our salvation (vv. 3-14).

Paul emphasizes that in Christ, God "chose us ... before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." The spiritual blessings granted to believers are the work of the Triune Godhead: the Father's electing, the Son's redemptive work, and the Spirit's sealing. God now has made known His purposes, has forgiven our sins, and granted hope to His own.

Mark 6:14-29 - John had been arrested by King Herod (or Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great). John had spoken out against the royal marriage, when Antipas had stolen and married his brother's wife. The wife, now called Herodias, became a powerful and vicious enemy of John the Baptist, just as Jezebel had been of Elijah. Herodias seized her opportunity at Herod's birthday banquet. When Herod offered her daughter a reward for her dancing, she demanded that John's head be cut off and brought to her on a plate. It was a tragic and pointless death, and a warning of what lay ahead for Jesus.

Gathered and Held In Christ

Sometimes in life there are seasons that make no sense. We encounter detours that take us away from our calling and purpose. A crisis hits, and we're sent reeling off course. Like David, we may have right intentions to honor God, only to see our actions result in injury and confusion. There may even be times in life when we witness the death and destruction of a beloved person or dream. Like John's followers, we are left trying to make sense of a senseless and horrific loss.

In these times, Paul's words take on special meaning: "... according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." When we allow Jesus to hold our days and our seasons, we know they are gathered up in Him. Good and bad, meaningful and senseless, earthly and heavenly, Jesus gathers them all, revealing a perfect plan that lasts for eternity.

Prayer

Gracious God, give me wisdom to know Your plans for me and grace to follow You in all my ways; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 11 Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 7:1-14a - David desires to build a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant (7:1-2). God speaks to Nathan the prophet, rejecting David's plan (vv. 3-7). But in the kind of wordplay the Hebrew people love, God promises to build David's "house"—not a residence, but his family line (vv. 8-16). God promises that David's son will succeed him and he will build the temple/house David yearns to provide (v. 12).

Then, in a statement that echoes throughout all time, God promises to maintain David's house/line forever. God will discipline kings in that line who do wrong. But there will come a time when David's throne is "established forever." This great promise, the Davidic Covenant, is echoed by the prophets, and is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, David's Descendant and Lord of an eternal kingdom.

Ephesians 2:11-22 - Anti-Semitism is not new. Two centuries before Christ many cities in Asia and Europe had anti-Jewish riots.

What made the Jews special was their unique relationship with God, through covenant promises given by their forefather Abraham, and the Law given by Moses. These deep-seated differences created a sense of superiority on the part of many Jews, and hostility on the part of many Gentiles.

Jesus' death "put to death" the basis of hostility between Jew and Gentile by providing access to God to both groups through His sacrifice. Not only can the two live in peace now, but they are to live as one.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 - Jesus took His disciples to a secluded place so that they might rest after their labors. As Vance Havner said, "If you don't come apart and rest, you will come apart." Even God's Servant-Son needed time to rest, fellowship with His friends, and find renewal from the Father.

But the overzealous crowds would not leave Him alone. They followed Him to the area near Bethsaida, hoping to see Him perform some miraculous cures (Luke 9:10-11; John 6:1ff). In spite of the interruption to His plans, the Lord welcomed them, taught them the Word, and healed those who were afflicted.

The Miracle of Peace

Most of us are familiar with the pain of being different. Separated. Isolated. Even judged. It's a pain as old as time.

David knew the pain of isolation and judgment in Saul's repeated attempts to kill him. That's why Samuel's account of God settling David in his house and giving him rest from all his enemies are sweet words. Paul's words to the church in Ephesus, reassuring us "he is our peace" and explaining how Christ brings reconciliation with God and man cause our hearts to hope. And Mark's picture of the apostles gathered around Jesus, hearing an invitation to gather for refreshment, stirs a longing in our own souls.

Peace is the miracle that speaks powerfully to people who are all-too-often frantic, frenetic, and disenfranchised. When we live peaceably with God, each other, and ourselves we proclaim the Gospel to a weary and war-torn world.

Prayer

Merciful God, give grace that I can both ask for and obtain Your wisdom and peace, sharing these gifts with my neighbors; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 12 Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 11:1-15 - In his idleness, David starts an affair with the beautiful wife of one of his soldiers. Her name is Bathsheba. Her husband, Uriah the Hittite, is one of David's finest men, a man of great integrity. Bathsheba becomes pregnant. David brings Uriah home from battle and encourages him to spend a few nights with his wife, so that no one will suspect that David is the father of this child. In desperation, David gives Uriah a letter to deliver to his commander, Joab, with instructions that Uriah be sent where the fighting is fiercest and then left to die.

Sin always entices us to cover up our actions. David's lack of self-discipline has resulted in adultery, deceit and murder. With each "cover-up", David thinks he has hidden his crime... but God will soon "un-cover" David's sin.

Ephesians 3:14-21 - Paul addressed his prayer to the Father (3:14). He expressed his aspiration for the saints to be strengthened, grounded, and filled. He asked that they comprehend Christ's love and be filled unto God's fullness (3:16-19).

His confidence in prayer was grounded not in his abilities or his readers', but completely in God's abundant power. Astoundingly he claimed that God can do abundantly more than we can ask or even imagine (3:20). Following these majestic words the apostle concludes with a beautiful doxology (3:21).

John 6:1-21 - The feeding of the five thousand is the one miracle, apart from the resurrection, that occurs in all four of the Gospels. The number was far greater than five thousand, for this figure refers only to men, since women and children were not counted (Matt 14:21). This miracle led the people to try to make Jesus king by force. God's design was not that Jesus manifest Himself as an earthly king but as the Suffering Servant who would give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

As Jesus prayed alone, his disciples were rowing their boat across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum when a storm arose. Jesus appeared to them walking on the water. This was not some flippant show of his power. He had seen their dilemma from the mountain where he was praying and went to their rescue. [Matt. 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52]

The Gift

Imagine the thoughts that must have been in Jesus' mind as He looked with compassion at the crowds following Him up the hillside. They were hungry and had nothing. Jesus took the gift of a single boy – someone's son – blessed and broke it, and had enough to feed thousands.

In His mind, He had to be thinking of another hill. He had to be thinking of another Son who freely gave a gift – one that was broken. And He had to be thinking of us as we receive that gift today – the blessing of His body and blood. He is still feeding. Still providing. Still restoring. He is enough to meet all of our needs.

Prayer

Loving God, give mercy that I may pass through this life while holding onto those gifts which are eternal; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 13 Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 11:26 - 12:13a - “But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord...” (11:27). Though David sought to cover his sins, God reveals his sins through the prophet Nathan’s story of how the rich man takes advantage by requiring the poor man’s pet lamb. David’s transgressions were no longer secret.

The lesson for each of us is: Even our best effort to cover our sins – though it may work for a while – will eventually prove to be ineffective, because God ultimately will expose them, so that He can forgive them.

Ephesians 4:1-16 - Having been united by their faith in Christ, believers should desire to prove themselves worthy of their new condition. They should be at peace with each other (4:1-3), remembering all that they have in common (4:4-6).

When Christ ascended to heaven, he distributed a wealth of spiritual gifts to his followers (4:7-11) to enable them to minister together as his body on earth and to bring each believer to spiritual maturity (4:12-16).

John 6:24-35 - Since Jesus fed the 5,000 from just a little bread and fish, crowds hounded him. They were drawn by the promise of food and the prospect of miracles. Jesus tries to explain that the bread is merely a sign. The ‘true bread from heaven’ is the eternal life that God gives.

Years before, God had given the Israelites manna from heaven. It was a daily miracle, but the food didn’t last and the people eventually died. Now Jesus declares, ‘I am the bread of life’ (6:35). Those who believe in him will never be spiritually hungry and will have eternal life.

Eat Your Fill

Someone wise once said that building spiritual muscle and physical muscle have a lot in common: How well you do depends on which appetite you feed. It takes discipline to eat the vegetables and skip the fried foods. It requires self-control to pick up the fruit and put down the chocolate. When we enjoy too many cookies and not enough carrots, it shows.

Likewise, it takes humility and the strength of the Holy Spirit working in us to embrace the disciplines of prayer, meditation, and God-centered focus. It’s often tempting to fill up on the “spiritual junk food” that feeds instant gratification and self-centered desires. But when we do, we lose the spiritual stamina necessary to run – and win – the race.

In today’s readings, we see in David’s choices the results of feeding only physical desires. Death. Destruction. Separation from God. What a contrast to Jesus’s words! Jesus is our bread of life. When we eat his body and drink his blood – when we feast on him in our hearts – we find strength for this life and the life to come.

Prayer

Ever living God, in your mercy, help me love what is good, feasting on your Word so I may proclaim your goodness; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 14 Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 - David's adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah make it very difficult for him to correct his own sons. They know too much about him. Absalom, in battle becomes entangled in a tree. He was left helpless, but alive. Although David had told his men to "deal gently with Absalom", Joab kills David's son. David is overcome with grief.

David's desire to spare the life of Absalom placed his military men in an impossible dilemma. How could they win the victory for David, and at the same time, deal gently with Absalom? Perhaps David had hoped Absalom could be taken alive and that reconciliation could be made between father and son.

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 - How does righteousness find expression in human relationships?

- 1) *By putting off falsehood and speaking truthfully.* This involves more than not lying. It involves an open sharing of our selves with one another, rejecting deceit.
- 2) *By rejecting the sinful actions anger drives us toward.* Anger that prevents reconciliation does not lead to unity.
- 3) *By rejecting gossip and unwholesome talk.* In our conversation we seek to build others up, not tear them down.
- 4) *By ridding ourselves of bitterness, rage, slander, and every form of malice.* In their place, we are to express kindness and compassion, forgiving each other as God has forgiven us.

John 6:35, 41-51 - Knowing Jesus' earthly family, the Jews were offended by his claims to be the "bread of life" (6:41-42). Jesus responded that only those granted faith by God could understand and respond to him, but those who did respond would find everlasting life (6:43-50).

Prophesying his sacrificial death, Jesus then declared that his very flesh was the bread of life (6:51) and that only by in some way "eating" his flesh and "drinking" his blood could anyone have everlasting life.

What's the Word?

We've all waited anxiously for an expected phone call, a much-anticipated announcement. We know the power those words have to fill our hearts with hope or despair, with joy or with grief. A simple word can have enormous and lasting impact on our lives.

Today's readings underscore the importance of the words we hear and the words we speak. David receives word of the death of his son and finds himself heartbroken. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul stresses the importance of speaking honestly, rejecting gossip, and ridding ourselves of bitterness, rage, slander, and malice. And Jesus instructs, "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me."

What are we hearing? Do the messages we hear and the conversations we engage in reflect God's truth, goodness, and beauty? What are we speaking? Do the words from our mouth bring God's blessing and peace?

Prayer

Almighty God, through your Spirit, help me think, do, and say what is right, that I may proclaim, in word and deed, your goodness; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 15 Sunday after Pentecost

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14 - Solomon requested true wisdom, not just intelligence. The Hebrew concept of wisdom always involves the ability to “distinguish between right and wrong.” God responded with three unconditional and one conditional promises. Solomon was guaranteed wisdom, wealth, and honor. He was promised long life “if you will walk in My ways.” We also are given unconditional promises. Yet, some blessings remain conditional on our obedience.

Ephesians 5:15-20 - As we pursue holiness, we are to be alert, making the most of every opportunity, for we live in difficult days (5:14-17). Rather than indulging fleshly appetites, we should seek the spiritual refreshment available in the fellowship of the church (5:18-21).

John 6:51-58 - Jesus Christ, the true Bread, is that to the soul which bread is to the body, nourishing and supporting spiritual life. Our bodies could live better without food than our souls without Christ. Those who have received this Bread are to be the distributors of it to other hungry souls.

Making A Life vs. Making A Living

We spend so much of our time and energy on making a living. There are bills to pay. Mouths to feed. Obligations to fulfill. In the midst of making a living, it's easy to lose sight of making a life. Today's readings remind us to put these priorities into proper order.

When God gave Solomon permission to ask of Him whatever he wanted, it must have been tempting to worry about keeping his job as king. It must have crossed his mind to think of famine or enemy armies that could plunder his kingdom, leaving him and his people without resources. But Solomon had already learned that these things alone do not make a life. He asked for resources that enabled him to build a life – a legacy – and not merely make a living. In the process, he accomplished both.

We can learn from Solomon. We can focus on spiritual disciplines that bring God's wisdom to bear on our lives. Like Saint Paul's admonition to the Ephesians, we can be careful in how we live, being wise and making the most of time. On our own, these things are impossible. But when we eat the Living Bread, receiving the strength of Christ's body and blood, the Holy Spirit empowers us to love what is good and embrace real, lasting life.

Prayer

Gracious God, through your Son, let my life reflect both your grace and your priorities, producing good fruit and an example of godly living; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 16 Sunday after Pentecost

1 Kings 8:(1,6,10-11), 22-30, 41-43 - All cost and pains are lost on stately structures unless God has been in the work, and if He fails to manifest His glory in them, they are after all but a ruinous heap. A temple without the ark and the glory are like a candlestick without a candle.

Solomon signified the beginning of a new phase in the proceedings by taking up another position, standing before the altar and spreading his hands towards the sky. The introduction to his prayer (22–26) begins by echoing Dt. 7:9, but he speaks of God's covenant faithfulness specifically in relation to David. Taking up God's promise that David's dynasty would never end, he prays that this too would receive fulfillment. At the same time, he acknowledges that the promise is conditional on the conduct of David's descendants.

Ephesians 6:10-20 - Paul made sure believers recognized that as new people who have been granted new life in a new family with new relationships they still would endure spiritual warfare. The closing portion of Paul's letter explained his account of the Christian's conflict with evil forces.

Believers must adorn themselves with the armor of God in order to stand against the devil's schemes. Five defensive weapons are identified: (1) the enabling nature of truth that resists lying and false doctrine; (2) the covering quality of righteousness that resists accusations of conscience and despondency; (3) the stabilizing quality of peace that resists slander and selfishness; (4) the protective ability of faith that resists prayerlessness and doubt; and (5) the encouraging nature of salvation that resists fear and disappointment.

Two offensive weapons are included in the armor of God: (1) the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, and (2) prayer. It is fitting that this prayerful and meditative letter concludes with an exhortation to prayer and a request for prayer

John 6:56-69 - Jesus' dwelling in believers' means that he identifies himself with them. However, their dwelling in him means that they continue to depend on him. Jesus knew from the beginning which disciple would eventually betray Him. At this point many who had followed Jesus ceased to do so. When Jesus asked the Twelve if they too wished to depart, Peter responded for them all: "Lord, to whom shall we go? We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Home

After a long, trying day, there's no better feeling of arriving home safely. Our home provides shelter. Security. A haven. A place where we can be fully ourselves, knowing we are fully accepted and loved. This must describe at least some of how Solomon felt when he saw the Ark of the Covenant – God's very presence – finally resting in the home he had built. God was home.

Through the work of Jesus Christ, we are now that home for God. Our bodies – all that we have and all that we are – serve as the dwelling place of the Almighty. We eat his flesh and drink his blood. In the process, he cleanses and sanctifies us, making us fit to hold his holiness. Like Peter we echo the words, "Lord, to whom shall we go? We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Prayer

Holy God, give grace that I may live in you and you in me so that I may show forth your power; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 17 Sunday after Pentecost

Song of Solomon 2:8-13 - When one falls in love the feeling is like spring. Winter is past, flowers appear, doves “coo,” fig trees begin to show signs of early fruit, and grape vines begin to blossom, emanating an intoxicating fragrance. Everything seems fresh and new. The world is seen from a different perspective, which is how Solomon felt when he was with his beloved.

James 1:17-27 - James admonishes believers not to blame God for temptation in their lives. God only gives “good and perfect” gifts to believers, and does not vary from that principle. It is our desires that are responsible for luring us to disobedience. – He offers three metaphors as to how God’s Word helps us: 1) God’s Word is like a seed that grows into salvation; 2) It is like a mirror that clearly reflects our condition, and; 3) God’s Word is a law that provides freedom.

Finally, James stresses that a true response to God’s Word involves both outward activity and inward control. Ministry to orphans and widows was the outward activity. Separation from the world was evidence of inner control.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 - Jesus is asked to weigh in on a conflicting matter brought about by his disciples’ failure to wash their hands before eating. For the Pharisees and scribe, it was a matter of ritual impurity.

Jesus’ response to the Jewish leaders was twofold: the leaders invalidated God’s laws in order to keep their human traditions; and sin is a matter of the heart, not the diet. In calling His disciples to heed the weightier matters of God’s law, Jesus affirmed God’s Old Testament revelation as the heritage of the church.

Back to Basics

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus quickly brings us back to priorities. The “law keepers” of his day were concerned about the rituals and appearances of holiness. Jesus cuts through all of that and gets to the heart of the matter – literally and figuratively.

The condition of our heart is what God is concerned with. What happens on the outside is a reflection of what’s taking place on the inside. When we both hear and act upon God’s word, our outward actions will reflect an internal holiness. Our focus is more productive when we get back to basics and turn our attention to the heart of the matter.

Prayer

Loving God, create in my heart a love for Your Name and Holiness, bringing good fruit out of my life; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 18 Sunday after Pentecost

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23 - A good name (reputation) is more important than the accumulation of wealth.

Because God created all men and women, each person, despite his or her economic status, is treasured by God and is to be respected (verses 1-2).

The author faithfully depicts the facts of life, whether he approves of them or not. He reminds us that wealth can breed power and preeminence, while poverty often leads to trouble and servitude. Cruelty and injustice practiced on a neighbor will result in calamity, because God pleads the cause of the poor and plunders those who oppress the weak (verses 8-9, 22-23).

James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17 - James reprimands his readers for demonstrating favoritism to the rich who attended their services while ignoring the poor. The partiality the rich displayed was contrary to their own interests, for the rich were actually the oppressors (2:6-7). Such partiality is contrary to God's law (2:8-10). James reminds us that this inconsistency will be judged (2:12-13), and he warns that a faith, merely spoken in kind words to the poor, without offering them help, is not a saving faith (2:14-17).

Mark 7:24-37 - Why is this woman compared to "puppies" under the family table? Jesus' point is that anyone's first concern is to feed his family—and the Jews have been God's chosen people, His special family. The woman is not offended, but delighted. If she is this close to God, then she has a right to the crumbs! How different her attitude is from that of the Pharisees, who are unwilling to say "Lord," or sit down at the table of truth Jesus spreads!

What's In A Name?

Kennedy. Trump. Bin Laden. Hitler. Just say the name and instantly, our minds and hearts are filled with a perception and image of a person's character and ideals. Today's readings point out the importance of having a good name. God's name – and what is associated with it – is no different.

In today's readings, we gain insight into what God wants associated with His name. Mercy. Healing. Reconciliation. Inclusion, regardless of means or wealth. Compassion. These concepts are at the heart of the Gospel because they are the heart of God. As people who bear Christ's name, we also bear the responsibility to live and act in ways that accurately reflect His name to a watching world.

Are we merciful? Do we bring healing to the lives around us? Are we instruments of reconciliation? Do we equally value the rich and the poor? Are we compassionate? Asking these questions will help us live out the name of God in ways that establish His good name in our world.

Prayer

Merciful God, transform my heart to reflect Yours, proclaiming Your Son to a world in need; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

HOLY CROSS

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

Proper 19 Sunday after Pentecost

Proverbs 1:20-33 - God's call to hearts is not a secret matter; His Spirit invites people openly to come to Christ. Wisdom invites all three classes: the simple, the scorner, and the fool (1:22). Sinners choose not to heed the voice of Wisdom by rejecting God's outstretched hand (1:24-25). The result of their refusal to receive the voice of Wisdom ends in destruction. Those who listen and heed Wisdom will be secure (1:33).

James 3:1-12 - The things we say can cause immense damage. Just as a boat is steered by a small rudder, so the tongue can change a whole life and influence the course of history. But who is able to control it? James believes the tongue is an endless source of evil: the means by which cruelty, rage and lies spring from a wicked and devious heart. But Christians should be a source of pure speech: praise, truth, wisdom and encouragement.

Mark 8:27-38 - Most people think that Jesus is a great prophet, but Peter declares, 'You are the Christ.' It is the most momentous statement he will ever make, for the Christ is God's anointed king — the Messiah for whom the Jews hope. However, Peter is not comfortable with Jesus' forecast of pending suffering and death.

Jesus says that those who follow him must share his suffering. They will give up everything for the sake of Jesus and his gospel. They will be disgraced and condemned in the eyes of the world. It may look as though they are wasting their lives — but they will be rewarded with eternal life in the kingdom of God.

Psssst! Listen to This...

There's a reason today's readings point to the power of our words. With carefully chosen and well-placed words, nations have risen and fallen. Leaders have changed and shaped the course of history. On a more personal level, marriages often survive or fail because of the words spouses speak to each other. Children blossom or become stunted as a result of the words spoken into their lives.

As we think about the words we say to – and about – others, we can also ask ourselves about the words we say about ourselves and about God. Not only do our words have the power to affect others, they have lasting impact on how we view our Creator and ourselves. Do we affirm God's grace and forgiveness in our lives, allowing us to try again when we fail? Do we remind ourselves that we are made in God's image and likeness, worthy of dignity and respect?

The words we speak about God, ourselves, and others have eternal impact. It's important that our words reflect truth, goodness, and beauty as these are seeds that bring about a good harvest.

Prayer

Holy God, empower Your Holy Spirit to direct and rule my heart so I may speak Your truth in love; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 20 Sunday after Pentecost

Proverbs 31:10-31 - The book of Proverbs ends with a poem in praise of the perfect woman. It is as though the lady Wisdom of the early chapters has gotten married and is now running a home. She is trustworthy, hard working and far-sighted. She is good at business, clever with her hands and generous to the needy. She looks good, speaks wisely and teaches well. Her secret is that she fears the Lord and the outcome is that her family is proud of her.

James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a - Those who think they would make good teachers must show goodness and humility in their behavior. True wisdom isn't self-centered, bombastic and proud. Those qualities come from the devil. But God gives genuine wisdom, which is selfless, gentle and peaceable.

James stresses that asking from wrong motives leaves us lacking. He then urges his readers to give themselves to God. With God's help we can defy the devil and receive purity and integrity in heart and life. God himself will give us all we need in status and dignity.

Mark 9:30-37 - The disciples ignore Jesus' talk of betrayal and death and give themselves to dreams of power. They hope for the top jobs in God's kingdom when it comes. They argue about which of them is most important.

But Jesus shows them a little child — someone without any power or influence. The greatness of God's kingdom is to be found in putting others first. In Aramaic, the word for 'child' and 'servant' is the same. When we count the weak and powerless as more important than ourselves, we come close to the heart of God.

Take A Seat at the Little Kid's Table

At almost every family gathering, there's a grown-up table and a kids' table. The grown-up table usually has the better decorations, complete with fancy china and linen napkins. If you get a seat at the grown-up table, you've made it big.

In light of today's readings, we might need to rethink where we would find Jesus sitting. He points to a child as the heart of God's kingdom. A child – one who would rather talk about Sponge Bob Square Pants than politics. A kid who prefers a Capri Sun to a cappuccino. Jesus points out that this kid comes closest to reflecting the priorities of God.

Perhaps we need to re-evaluate our seating chart. Maybe, just maybe, a chair at the little kids' table is the best seat in the house.

Prayer

Almighty God, help me to love what You love, choosing heavenly treasures above earthly riches; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 21 Sunday after Pentecost

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10 - Haman's execution is a pure example of poetic justice. It's also an example of an Old Testament law principle found in Deut. 19:19. There it specifies if a witness against (accuser of) another is proven to have lied, "then do to him as he intended to do to his brother." Haman's lies about the Jews were intended to bring about their deaths. It was just that he should die instead.

James 5:13-20 - James urged believers to use prayer in all the seasons of life. In times of affliction Christians are to pray to God for help and strength. In times of blessing believers are to praise God instead of congratulating themselves (5:13b). In instances of critical sickness the sick person was to summon the leaders of the church for prayer. Prayer for the sick could result in either physical healing or spiritual blessing. In times of sin and struggle mutual intercession could promote spiritual victory.

Mark 9:38-50 - Jesus warns his followers that they are responsible for their actions. If they mislead younger believers, or commit any sinful action, they will be punished. It would be better to amputate a hand or foot than use it to do something wrong — and so forfeit a place in God's kingdom. The choice is right or wrong — heaven or hell.

Jesus' picture of hell is based on the valley of Gehenna — the refuse dump where Jerusalem's rubbish is destroyed. Instead of being rotten, Jesus' followers are to have the qualities of salt: tasty, healing and agreeable.

Love On Any Condition

Look at the beauty of James' admonition: Come. Are you suffering? Come. Are you joyful? Come. Are you sick? Come. Are you struggling with sin? Come.

In our human condition, we are often ashamed or embarrassed to present ourselves to God. We want to clean up first and look good. We don't want to admit that we're struggling and need help. We view sickness and disease as a form of defeat and distance ourselves. Just as dangerous, life is ticking along and we somehow believe we need God less.

But Love calls. Christ whispers, "I've seen it all and there is nothing you can show me that will make me love you less. Come. Let me clean your wounds. Come. Let me hold and comfort you. Come. Let me celebrate with you. Come. Let me untangle the mess. Come."

No matter what our condition, Love invites us to come.

Prayer

Gracious God, open my eyes to see Your power displayed through Your mercy and grace; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 22 Sunday after Pentecost

Job 1:1, 2:1-10 - Disappointed that Job remained faithful to God, despite the loss of his children and wealth, and convinced that just a little more suffering will defeat him, Satan asks permission to cause bodily suffering to Job. God permits Satan to afflict Job, as long as the suffering is not fatal.

Job's helpmate is no help. His wife, full of great sorrow herself, is unable to give Job any moral support. Rather, she invites him to share her bitterness toward God.

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12 - Long ago, God spoke through intermediaries; prophets (1:1) and angels (see 2:2). The author of Hebrews boldly declares that God now speaks directly, through his Son, Jesus Christ, who is a part of the Godhead. Jesus is both Creator and Redeemer (1:3) and is at His rightful place at God's right hand (1:3).

God placed the world under our control (2:5-8; see Gen. 1:28). However, because of sin and rebellion, we lost this noble position (2:8; see Gen. 3:6, 17-19). However, there is hope for us, because "we see Jesus" (2:9), who, being made "lower than the angels;" by becoming human (2:14; compare 2:7 and 2:9), has – through his death and resurrection become "a perfect leader" (2:10) and the "High Priest" who is able to completely forgive our sins (2:17-18).

Mark 10:2-16 - Jesus reminds us that marriage is a divine institution. Because this is true, we are obligated to faithfully observe, honor and protect this covenant relationship. The marriage bond, which God ties, is not to be lightly untied.

Though Jesus' disciples were nervous – and irritated – about all the boys and girls clamoring to touch Jesus, our Lord chose to use this moment as a stern reminder to his disciples, and us: The kingdom of God will only be received in our hearts if we manifest the same humble resignation of a little child.

Hard Truths

Truth is sometimes difficult to hear. Today's readings remind us that suffering in life is inevitable. Like Job, trials may come despite living with integrity. In Hebrews, we see that sorrow and suffering happens in a fallen world.

When we suffer, it helps us to remember the ultimate Truth: Jesus took on human flesh, becoming "lower than the angels" with us. He entered our brokenness to give us both comfort and hope – hope that all things will one day be made right through Him.

Prayer

Almighty God, give me grace to bring to You all of life, trusting that You will give more to me than I desire or deserve; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 23 Sunday after Pentecost

Job 23:1-9, 16-17 - “Oh, that I knew where I might find him.” The heart-felt cry of Job comes forth as a longing to be vindicated. If only Job could gain access to God, he will be justified! Job knows that God will not be violent with him, but will listen to his assertion of innocence (6) and acquit him (7). But where is God? Why is He inaccessible?

Although Job longs to meet God, he is desperately aware of God’s absence. However, Job also knows that if he cannot find God, God can find him; “he knows the way that I take” (10). Job is confident that if God chooses to put him to the test, he will come forth as gold, declared innocent (10–11). But God is not acting fairly or legally; *he does whatever he pleases* (13), and that is only for Job’s suffering. Job is fighting in the dark against an unassailable and an inaccessible opponent. However, Job will go on fighting (17).

Hebrews 4:12-16 - The author of Hebrews reminds us that God’s word is trustworthy and full of living power. God’s word is sharper than a two-edged sword, able to cut into our deepest thoughts; exposing us for who we really are.

Returning to the theme of Christ as our High Priest, the writer speaks at some length of the superiority of Christ’s priesthood (4:14–10:18). Because Jesus endured all the temptations we endure, he is fully dependable. We can rely on him to supply every grace we need (see 2:17–18).

Mark 10:17-31 - How is it possible to be so close and yet so far away? The rich young ruler asks Jesus how he can earn salvation. Jesus tells him; however, the possessions of this good man kept him from responding (10:17–22). This sad incident is an object lesson for his disciples – and us: Wealth can keep us from seeing our need for God (10:23–27). Both present blessings and eternal life belong to those who forsake all to follow Christ (10:28–31).

Tyranny of the Dailyness

It is not a coincidence, that Ordinary Time is the longest season of the Church year. True character is seldom revealed in times of celebration. The essence of who we are and what we believe comes through as we struggle with the “tyranny of the dailyness.”

As we battle fatigue from set backs, disappointments, and challenges, we find ourselves commiserating with Job, searching for glimpses of God; wondering where He is. In times of complacency, we catch ourselves identifying with the rich young ruler, hesitant to give up comfort and security in order to follow God.

In the ordinary times of life, God’s Word reveals the truth about our character. More importantly, it shows us our continual need for a Savior who has experienced the “tyranny of the dailyness” and has overcome it through His death and resurrection.

Prayer

Merciful God, make me aware of Your grace that surrounds and guides me, empowering Your good works within me; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 24 Sunday after Pentecost

Job 38:1-7, (34-41) - “Where were you when I made the earth?” God declared that Job had spoken “ignorant words.” He then began a series of rhetorical questions to show Job how little he knew about the world. For one thing, Job knew little about the creation of the world since he had not been there at the time (vss. 4-7).

Job did not know what caused light and darkness (vss.19-20), or what the dimensions of the earth were (38:18), or what caused various weather patterns (38:22-30). He did not comprehend the complexities of astronomy (vss. 31-38). Job’s response to all of this should have been to acknowledge God’s dominion over all (38:33). Though Job did not understand the causes behind these natural phenomena, God spoke to him as one well acquainted with the basic facts of creation and laws of nature.

Hebrews 5:1-10 - God called Christ to serve as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. Just as God appointed Aaron as a high priest to represent people before God, Jesus – as our great High Priest – represents us in God’s very presence.

Because Aaron was surrounded with weakness, he was able to have compassion on other weak, sinful people. Christ also faced hardship, and learned the value of obedience by His commitment to God’s will.

Mark 10:35-45 - An argument has arisen about greatness. James and John want the best seats in the kingdom (v. 37). They see leadership in terms of status and privilege. However, they fail to understand that in the coming days the only throne Jesus is to mount is a wooden one, and the only crown he will receive will be of thorns. The only ones who will be at his right and left will be crucified thieves.

Despite their lack of perception (and ours), Jesus teaches them (and us) that in his Kingdom, greatness is about service and humility. He reminds us that the baptism we are offered is to be buried and to be raised with Christ. The cup Jesus offers is one of suffering.

Follow the Leader

“Pick me! Pick me!” This is a common cry heard on playgrounds everywhere. We want to be first. We want to be noticed. We want to be important. We want to be the leader. We want to be included.

To be a leader in God’s kingdom requires a different cry – one that seldom occurs without suffering and sorrow. *Prepare me. Lead me. Preserve me. Strengthen me. Help me.*

Like James and John, our voices are sometimes too common with those on the playground. As our High Priest, well acquainted with our human weaknesses, Jesus listens with compassion. He is ever-present as trials and sorrows serve to mature our voice until it echoes His own... “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done...”

Prayer

Holy God, pour out Your mercy on me so that I may persevere in good works and deeds; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 25 Sunday after Pentecost

Job 42:1-6, 10-17 - Job's suffering does not contribute any new awareness of God. It does, however, bring Job to a foolish position of challenging God's actions. God's self-revelation deepens Job's relationship with him. Job's suffering, and folly of challenging God, becomes the context into which God brings revelation that opens Job to encounter a deeper and more personal experience with God. With this new insight, Job humbly repents, not because of a sin committed before his suffering, but due to his critical and judgmental attitude toward God.

After the Lord evaluates Job and his friends, Job is restored and his righteous behavior is confirmed. The view of Job's friends—that suffering is always a result of sin—is proven wrong by God's words. Job is not condemned because he had spoken rightly, however he fully recovers from his affliction and lives out his life in good health.

Hebrews 7:23-28 - Aaron's line of priesthood required many members because death prevented them from continuing in office. Although Jesus died, his priesthood continues because his resurrection allows him to live forever. As our High Priest, Jesus knows and helps his people for eternity. Jesus is the perfect accomplishment of all God requires: He is blameless and pure, set apart from sinners, and is exalted above the heavens.

Aaron's priesthood sacrificed an animal as a substitute for sin. Jesus offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin (Heb. 10:10).

Mark 10:46-52 - Mark's section on discipleship concludes as it begins; with the healing of a blind man (10:46–52; compare 8:22–26). Bartimaeus models true discipleship. His plea for help, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (10:47–48), is the cry of a dependent, childlike spirit (see 10:15). He asks Jesus not for a "glory seat" (see 10:37) but to see, which all disciples need perceptive eyes (see 4:12). Throwing aside his cloak, Bartimaeus demonstrates his readiness for mission (see 6:9). Following Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, he accepts the way of his suffering Lord. Finally, Jesus has a disciple who could see.

Open Your Eyes

As we journey through Ordinary Time, it's easy to become blinded by the dust, the sweat, and the heat of the day. Our eyes strain to see the destination on the horizon. Our sight grows dim and our souls can despair.

Hope can be found in today's reading from Mark. Bartimaeus doesn't let his blindness or the voices of the naysayers keep him from calling out to Jesus. And Jesus doesn't let Bartimaeus' affliction keep Him from answering this man's call. He not only answers, He restores his sight; calling him to renewed action in the simple word, "Go."

In seasons when our sight grows dim, Jesus is waiting to restore our vision. In the presence of Jesus, we see clearly again. We hear His voice answering our prayer and sending us back on our way with the word, "Go."

Prayer

Gracious God, renew in me your gifts of faith and hope, that I may love Your commands and see clearly Your purpose; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 26 Sunday after Pentecost

Ruth 1:1-18 - When a person marries, it is a common understanding that you do not just marry your bride or groom: *You marry their family as well.* When we take God for our Father, we take His people for our people; even though they may be poor and despised.

Ruth understands: To forsake the family of God and return to the “people of Moab” will ultimately sever communion with God.

Hebrews 9:11-14 - Under the old covenant, a provision to remove external pollution (all that defiled a person) was available through animal sacrifices and other familiar rituals (9:6-10). However, under the new covenant, Jesus freely surrendered His life to God as the ultimate sacrifice for sin. Unlike the old covenant that offered temporary relief, Jesus’ sacrifice not only cleanses us from all sin, His perfect work purifies our conscience from guilt, which inspires holy living.

Mark 12:28-34 - The Sadducees did not believe in the “afterlife” (12:18-23). However, attempting to catch Jesus off guard, they ask a hypothetical question regarding life after death. Jesus points out that their root problem is ignorance of Scripture and of God’s power (12:24-27). Stumped by Jesus’ response, a scribe then asks Jesus: What laws are the most important ones to keep.

Jesus brilliantly and precisely cuts through all of the confusion surrounding the magnitude of details associated with “law-keeping.” He condenses it to two things: Love God and love others.

Live So Others May Learn

Some say, we tend to model what we observe. Children notice the behavior of adults and – over time – reflect similar conduct. Today’s Scriptures reveal adults also learn through observation.

Naomi’s example compels Ruth to embrace a different way of living. For Ruth, the norm of a patriarchal society requires a widow – upon the death of her husband – to rely upon the mercy of her husband’s family. However, Ruth’s observation of her mother-in-law’s love (*and the God she loved*), constrains her to abandon her known security. Because of her courageous decision, Ruth finds her place among God’s people and the lineage of Christ.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus reminds us that we are to *love God and love others*. Do we live in a way that others are intrigued and compelled to know our God? Like Naomi, our love of God becomes an irresistible influence for others to find their place among God’s people.

Prayer

Merciful God, gift to me Your Holy Spirit; empower me to live a life pleasing to You and a beacon to others; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 27 Sunday after Pentecost

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17 - In Old Testament times, parents arranged their children's marriage. Although, Boaz had been unusually kind to Ruth, he had not made any movement toward a marriage proposal. Naomi takes steps to find a home and security for Ruth. Ruth's obedience results in marriage. God rewards the couple by giving them the child Obed. The women of the city praise God, and recognize that Obed would sustain Naomi by becoming heir to Elimelech's property.

Ruth's faithfulness (and God's), result in the fulfillment of the promises of the patriarchs through David – and his greater Son – Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1).

Hebrews 9:24-28 - By his supreme sacrifice for sin, Jesus enters into heaven to represent us before God. Our salvation will be fully consummated when Jesus reappears from the "heavenly sanctuary," when he brings the full experience of salvation to those who are waiting for him (27-28).

Mark 12:38-44 - Jesus denounces using religion to advance one's status, or taking advantage of others (12:38-40). As Jesus sees a widow place two coins (worth a penny) into the treasury as her gift to God, he calls his disciples and tells them: the poor widow had given more than everyone, because she gave out of her poverty, rather than her abundance.

The Outsiders

We love to root for the underdog. We cheer when the "already-written-off" team comes from behind to win it all. That's good. In fact, that's godly! Today's readings tell us why.

In the Book of Ruth, we learn Naomi is a three-time loser in the eyes of her society. She has lost her husband and her two sons. Society has written her off. However, God has a different plan. Through Ruth's marriage and resulting son, Naomi once again has access to the resources of her late husband's property. Because of God's faithfulness, Naomi beats the odds.

God's scale of economy favors the outsiders. Jesus is unimpressed with "important" people, or their wealth. However, the penny of an elderly, destitute widow is a gift so rich, he calls his disciples together and asks them to pay attention to what she has done.

When we feel that life has written us off, that we are losing and can't find our way back, remember: **God loves the underdog!**

Prayer

Almighty God, remind me that I am Your child and give me hope that I will one day be made like You, victorious over sin and alive in Your presence for eternity; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Proper 28 Sunday after Pentecost

1 Samuel 2:1-10 - Hannah's prayer is a song of praise about the incomparability of God. Because of God's greatness, there is no room for arrogance, only humility (2:3). She expresses her joy in song, celebrating God's righteousness and sovereignty.

Hannah's example of humble submission to God's way continues to be an essential quality for God's people today.

Hebrews 10:11-14, (15-18), 19-25 - The author of Hebrews underscores the confidence we have because of Christ's perfect and complete forgiveness. Because of this new covenant, God's law is in our heart. Three things become clear: 1) Because of Christ's perfect work, we have confidence to approach God with complete assurance (10:19-22). 2) We are to hold fast to our confession based on God's faithfulness (10:23). 3) We are encouraged to love and serve God and others when we regularly meet together and share our faith (10:24-25).

Mark 13:1-8 - Theologians hotly debate Jesus' teaching on the destruction of the temple/Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of man recorded in Mark 13. Despite the varying interpretations of timing surrounding Christ's return, Jesus emphasizes two clear warnings: 1) be aware of those who will deceive us, seeking to lead us astray (13:5), and 2) be prepared for Christ's return.

Asking the Right Questions

We spend much of life looking for answers. We want to make sense of our lives and the world around us. Today's readings show us the importance of asking the right questions.

The description of Hannah's sorrow is heartbreaking. Ridiculed because of her barrenness (1 Sam. 1:6), she longs for a child that will legitimize her standing in her home and society. The obvious question for Hanna is, "why?" However, she chooses to ask God to remember her with favor. God quickly answers her.

In the Gospel reading, the disciples ask Jesus when the destruction of Jerusalem will occur. Jesus redirects them by emphasizing the importance of being on guard against deception. His response reveals that the appropriate question is not one of timing, but of preparation. **When** the Son of Man returns is secondary to **how** we can be ready to meet Him when He appears.

Life, at times, is confusing. Events can leave us questioning God and ourselves. When we find we have more questions than answers, it's a good thing to prayerfully consider asking the right ones.

Prayer

Holy God, give me Your wisdom to learn from and apply Your Word so I may discern Your Holy Spirit working in and through my life; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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

Reign of Christ - Proper 29

2 Samuel 23:1-7 - In his final words to his people, David describes God's ideal king (23:3-4). He notes God's faithfulness to him, in spite of his failings (23:5); and, he underscores the importance of dealing with rebellion (23:6-7).

David reflects the beauty of reigning with righteousness and in the fear of God, and is confident that his royal line will continue.

Revelation 1:4b-8 - Written to "the seven churches" of the Roman province of Asia, John's work is a "revelation" of "what must soon take place." As elder, or bishop, of Ephesus, the apostle John was responsible for these churches. Given to John by Jesus Christ, it is a message committed by God to the Lord to show to His "servants."

The theme of John's work is clear: the Lord God, the Almighty One Himself, has guaranteed the final vindication of the crucified Jesus before all the earth. The victory of Christ is assured. His people will rejoice in their final deliverance, but those who have rejected Him will mourn His coming, for it will mean judgment for them.

John 18:33-37 - Jesus' kingdom is not a military or political force. This concept was difficult for his audience to comprehend. Why call it a "kingdom" if it was nonpolitical? Jesus states that his authority is not of human origin, and by implication suggests that he is not a threat to the Roman authority, and that there is no place for the use of force in his kingdom.

The Last Word

Today's Old Testament reading contains King David's last words. The disciple John, elderly and in exile, writes his final words in his Revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus, facing imminent crucifixion and death, speaks some of his last words in today's Gospel reading. "Last words" are important.

David speaks of an everlasting covenant where all is secure. John writes of grace and peace from the One who loves us and frees us of sin by His blood. Jesus speaks of a kingdom not of this earth, a kingdom where God wins! These words are important.

However, beyond our last words, as important as they are, God's Word remains eternal, immortal, and invincible. In the words of Saint John, Jesus is the beginning and the end, the One who is, and who was, and who is to come.

When we run out of words, and there is nothing more to say, we take comfort in the knowledge that God gets the **final word** concerning all things.

Prayer

Ever-living God, give me Your vision to see Your Son having final dominion and Lordship over my life and this world; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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